

How It Happens

We are wary of the sudden. It's a human condition. I've seen it everywhere, we all have: caution at the street curb, palm readers, life jackets. We want to avoid that unknown twist, or foresee it, or at least feel ready. And when something comes up that way, without the least bit of expectation, we're likely to distrust it. Which is partly how my marriage ended so long ago – that is, in addition to all of the causes that I'm sure will always remain a mystery. Sudden is a problem for humans because life is, on balance, entirely mysterious to us. It seems that anything can happen. So when that horrendous stench began, seemingly all at once, on a Sunday afternoon in the early summer of my novice life as a married man, Jane and I didn't think it could mean anything good.

It hadn't been there at all that morning before we'd left for a short walk into town, a little

browsing in the bookstore and then brunch. Wandering lazily through the aisles of books – setting off to explore our particular interests alone but together – was the kind of thing that made us feel married. It was our first stab at adult life, and this was the way we imagined grown Midwesterners (the agnostic sort) spent their Sundays. It was also, in retrospect, one of the good kinds of things we tried to do with our marriage early on: devise methods to define what being married was. Not that it was as concerted or specific an effort as that might sound – just a basic urge to create a life that could confirm we were, indeed, a couple. Which sounds simple, except to those who have been married. And, to tell the truth, some people do make it simple. Or try. I suppose it's what children can bring to a marriage: perpetual common ground. But we never got that far.

Although we might have. The year before it ended, we tried for seven or eight months to light the genetic torch inside of Jane. No luck. I'd like to say it wouldn't have changed anything, not ultimately. It is unpleasant to imagine that my destiny was shaped by the factors determining when and how my wife and I chose to have intercourse during that time. Of course, the beginnings of all our destinies are subject to exactly that category of conditions. Yes, a baby might have changed everything. But children were nowhere near our minds during that Sunday afternoon in 1979, a June when we were not yet thirty. It was a time when birth control pills were our dear friends and sex was had for any reason but a good one.

We had made love in the morning. Early, with the sounds of Charles Kuralt enunciating low tones from the T.V. that Jane had turned on while I percolated coffee. The mugs sat in the sun on the windowsill, the coffee grew cold, and we writhed in the drowsy language of intimacy. It had begun as that kind of morning.

And our excursion into town was good. We didn't buy any books, although I spent a long time fondling something about Edward R. Murrow. (I was a reporter then – a brief career diversion that taught me journalism pays absolutely squat.) At the bright cafe, I made my

way happily through a stack of pancakes and too much bacon. Jane liked the fresh fruit and almost ordered a piece of pie when the waitress brought us our check.

On the walk home we passed through the fragrant arena of something in bloom. I should be able to say what it was, but I don't know anything about flowers. It was the smell of pure sugar, so sweet you could feel it crystallize in your lungs. At first notice of the scent, we stopped and mentioned a garden we would someday have, but wouldn't. Jane knew something about planting, having grown up at a place you might call a nursery. It wasn't what her father really did – he was a sort of country lawyer – but they lived on several acres and he hired people to help manage some small orchards on the land. During her senior year in high school, her father died (massive coronary) and she delayed college to assist her mother with family affairs. This included helping to oversee the nursery for a time. I think now that somewhere in the corner of her mind she fantasized about us going back to her old home, buying up a few nearby estates and unleashing her father's orchards over the whole bucolic spread. In the end, I don't think she could have imagined anything better than that.

When we came upon the actual blooms, Jane

leaned half over into the foreign yard and spoke slowly, with her eyes closed. “This reminds me. Reminds me, reminds me—”

“What?” My hands were in my pockets.

“Oh, this is something, this smell, something I remember.”

“A place?”

“No. No, something that happened. Somewhere specific.”

“Specific in time.”

“Yeah. Like,” she stood and tilted her head to the sky. “Oh, what? What is it?”

I closed my eyes and tried to let a memory come to me. Nothing revealed itself.

Then she was walking again, her rapture suddenly doused. “Humans must’ve needed to smell things to remember them. Once upon a time. It must’ve been important,” she said.

Jane’s hair was long and dark and very straight. It caught easily in the wind and at that moment some strands floated out lightly behind her.

“That seems logical. I’d say that’s right,” I nodded and took one last honeyed breath before we walked out of its reach.

“But you’d have to be better at it than I am, I guess.” she said. “To be any use.”

“You’d get better with practice. I mean, they would’ve been doing it all the time.”

“Maybe we are too. Maybe we just don’t pay any attention.” And with this she threw me a *betcha weren’t thinkin’ that* squint, accompanied by a raised Mr. Spock brow.

“Anything’s possible.” I smiled and she skipped ahead of me, narrowly avoiding a biker who came speeding around the corner and jumped the edge of the curb. I thought I should admonish the biker, but he was by so fast I couldn’t even manage a gesture.

The rest of the walk was uneventful. We greeted a dog in the yard a few houses down from our apartment, prying our fingers through the narrow openings of the wood fence and feeling the cold of his nose. When we reached the stairs that led up to our front door, I paused to divert myself to the mailbox.

“Not today,” Jane hollered on her way up.

“Sunday. Remember?”

I had, but was on auto-pilot, driven by the daily curiosity of what awaits. “Right. Today, we don’t exist.”

Which is, in fact, how I now view that entire small space of history in the waning 1970’s: a gentle lag time in human existence. As far as I remember, the whole of my life – and the country, it seemed – succumbed to a state of time-bent inertia during those few years. It was a century of Sundays. Even if I believed that something worth wanting laid wait in the mail, nothing did. I was no one to the world then, but too naive to appreciate the joys of such anonymity.

Upstairs Jane had left the door open behind her, so that the stench hit me even before I stepped inside.

“What is that?” Jane squeezed out her words in a way that expressed extreme displeasure.

I stopped in the doorway and inhaled deeply. It was repulsive, but totally unfamiliar. A sweet rot layered above an earthy fetid base. And something that almost smelled like stale fuel.

“Check the fridge,” I said, knowing full well

that nothing could have rotted like that since the morning.

“No,” Jane was down the hall near the bedroom where we’d left the sliding door open and the screen door locked. “It’s coming from back here. From outside.”

I heard the skimming of metal along a plastic runner, then Jane’s steps onto the back deck. I followed, catching pockets of the stench on the breeze that blew in. Outside we could see the yard a floor below and over the surrounding fence to some of the adjacent homes. There was no obvious evidence of a source.

“My god,” Jane said. She held her hand over her nose and mouth, muffling her words. “It’s terrible. It’s completely putrid.”

I took in another deep breath, trying to detect something familiar. I gagged. “Something died.”

“What?” She was now actually holding her nose closed with her fingers. “What do you think it is?” Her pinched clown voice made the situation seem suddenly comic.

“I don’t know. What, a raccoon maybe? Weren’t raccoons fighting out here a few nights ago?”

“Those were cats. You think it’s a cat?”

And that was our first thought, a dead cat.

“Do cats kill each other?” I asked, and felt a little stupid for it, but had never owned a cat then.

Jane took her fingers from her nose. “Not on purpose. But it could happen. Go look.” She pointed down into the yard. “Oh gosh, what if it’s their cat?” Jane nodded downstairs.

I remembered that the cat fighting we’d heard lately was between the neighbor’s cat below us and some local feline of undetermined origins. Our neighbors beneath were nasty, unhappy people. They complained about everything, hated us and had avoided eye contact for over a year. I’d heard him more than once threatening the foreign cat with bodily harm if it didn’t leave his aging Siamese alone. “Maybe he killed that other cat.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “This is not an episode of ‘Quincy.’ Come on, go check. I don’t wanna have to tell them if their cat’s dead.”

“Neither do I.”

“You’re the man.” She said this as if it meant something.

“Fine,” I said and started down the stairs.

The thing was, once I stepped into the grass, I couldn’t really tell *where* the smell was coming from. It permeated the whole yard, seemed to blow in from all directions. In the corner of our fenced-in space, there stood a small utility building with a laundry room and some storage closets. I poked around its edges and peered into the dryer vent that exited one side of the structure. Nothing. Nothing but the stench that pressed up into my nostrils with an unforgiving persistence.

“I can’t tell,” I yelled. “Come down and see what you think.”

“You’re lying. You found something. It’s gross isn’t it?” She had taken on the pose of a distrusting younger sister.

“Seriously. I haven’t got a clue,” I pulled my shirt up over my nose. “But it’s awful.”

“I don’t think I’m coming down.”

And she probably wouldn’t have, except for what I found next. In a narrow alley of bare mud between the utility hut and one side of the fence was a fresh pile of dirt. I hadn’t noticed it before, but I also didn’t have much cause to

be looking around there with any frequency. Neither was it the case that the stench seemed to be coming from the pile in any particular way. Still, it looked suspicious.

“Okay. Well,” I realized she couldn’t hear me and raised my voice. “Well, this might be something. You’d better look.”

I gestured her toward me and, after a pause, she ambled down the stairs in quick small hops. Now that there was something to look at, Jane couldn’t resist.

“Is it bad? Do I want to see?” she asked as she drew closer to the fence.

“There’s really nothing, except what it might be.”

Jane looked puzzled and reached out to grab my elbow in her hand before leaning her head around the corner of the building. Her brown eyes fixed on the loose, cluttered pyramid of earth. “What’s under there?”

“A cat?”

“Did you look?”

“No, I didn’t look. I’ve just been standing here.

I told you he killed that cat.”

“He did not. It’s probably just—garbage.” She waved her hand in front of her face.

I laughed a little at the image of our neighbor burying garbage behind the building in the dark by flashlight. “Okay, that’s absurd. It’s not garbage. For one, garbage wouldn’t smell like this. It’s a cat. He killed that cat.” I was fairly sure of it. I could even imagine remembering the sound of a shovel whacking something, a tinny reverb late last night.

“Now you’re absurd. It’s probably exactly what it is. A pile of dirt. It has nothing to do with this smell,” she said, covering her mouth again.

“But, my god, whatever this is, it can’t be good. Something’s rotted all to hell. Something’s being eaten alive.”

Jane had gone into hyperbole, and it was part of her charm. She was an artist. Or dreaming of being one. Which meant she’d arranged to set up an old, unused mobile classroom as a temporary studio while she worked a paying job as an art teacher at that same elementary school. So, as an artist, she was prone to exaggeration, likely to bring everything into an unnecessarily dramatic context. She labored in mysteries that were grand and unsolvable. I

preferred the concrete noir plot lines that rely on malice and flesh pleasures as their basis for cause and effect. But both our perspectives led us to believe that something foul was at play.

“Where did this come from? How could it just appear like this?” Jane asked, looking at me as if I might have some answers.

I shrugged. I wanted to dig up the pile, but knew Jane wouldn’t go for it. I thought I might come out later that night with a shovel. But I worried about getting caught by the neighbor; I couldn’t imagine that being a pleasant scene. My curiosity was festering.

“Let’s dig it up,” I said and immediately felt I’d said it too enthusiastically.

Jane dropped her shoulders and tilted her head forward. “No. But I knew you were going to say that.”

“Why not?” But I knew why not; it just wasn’t the thing you did. “Okay, but if we don’t see that other cat around—”

“What.”

“Well, the smell’s just gonna get worse ‘til we get it out of here.”

“There’s no cat. Seriously. We need to find what this is from.” She shook her head. “I’m going upstairs to close the windows. Ugh. We’ll have to turn on the air.”

Jane made a quick pirouette and darted up the steps. I watched her close the sliding door, then I edged closer to the mound of earth. A few bugs squirmed near the top of the pile and a trail of ants wiggled along one edge of the mud base. There was no special attention paid to the mound by flies or other carrion-seekers. I began to think that it was probably just a pile of dirt. We’d buried our dog once when I was a kid and it didn’t smell like this, not as I could remember.

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That night something happened that has rarely ever occurred, before or since: I couldn’t sleep. There are people called insomniacs; I know this. But they are creatures as foreign to me as the poison-breathing eels and tubes that clutter the vents along the bottom of the sea. In fact, the late of the night is in some ways like the ocean in my life – mostly dark and unexplored, despite its obvious presence in the world. I’ve always found its shapelessness discomfiting. There have never been any common strings tying together those nights

that I have gone sleepless. Once, in college, I'd come down with bronchitis and was too lazy to pick up any medicine. Once I'd stayed up with Jane after going to a party in Chicago with a few of her painter friends and we'd seen the sun rise over Lake Michigan. A couple times, some years after everything here, I'd worked all night in the weeks following the start of my printing business. And there had been this – the least obvious situation of them all, although looking back one might say just the opposite. The one to say such a thing, however, would be a person more like Jane than myself. From today's perspective she might say that there was no way the universe could hide what had happened from our subconscious. And she might add that my sleeplessness was evidence that I was more sensitive to such things than I might admit. That was one of the things she did. Jane loved me and chose me because of my desire to see things concretely, in an affirmative but earth-bound way. I was her final relief from the intriguing but unsturdy drifters that she had wandered between in her younger years – poets, actors and sculptors who may or may not have eventually fulfilled their callings. Nonetheless, she was always trying (or hoping, maybe) to inject in me some of that dreaminess, to unearth a hidden wish to believe in the unexplainable. But I do not. I do not believe in religion or astrology or psychic abilities – all

of which I consider to contain the same degree of veracity. I am a printer who was for a while a photo archivist and, briefly, a newspaper man. I am a maker and keeper of some parts of the public record of things. It is how I sleep. Because I know I am just a creature that needs to rest, and will do so in order to go about the business of taking my small place in the world. But on this night, that did not seem enough.

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A day that follows sleeplessness can become like a conscious afterlife. And on that Monday I felt like a ghost who had returned to dreamily relive a long moment from his past. I left the apartment early, driving to the newspaper offices as if I were settling back into a far gone habit, remembering by way of forgetting, muscle memory assuming the temporarily permanent routines of an ancient existence. I wondered if it might be the kind of feeling that Jane had while painting. It reminded me of how she sometimes described her experience: not always knowing why she made the strokes the way she did, but feeling them come from inside her anyway – like the impulse had been created when she wasn't looking. Which usually just sounded like a lot of *artspeak* to me, evidence that the creative process was more intuitive than explainable.

Jane's exact words had once been: "Art, I think, is just an expression of habit. Habits of the mind, the things that are so much a part of us we forget they're here." She'd actually spent a whole night coming up with the words. They were part of some introductory remarks for a summer art seminar that she'd agreed to conduct at the public library. I'd liked the way it sounded when she spoke the words aloud among the hushed stacks of books, as if she'd come up with them right on the spot – inspired to eloquent insights by the presence of so many art-thirsting strangers under one roof. But I told her I'd never really understood it. Still don't, not really. It's the kind of response that must've sounded flippant in the Jane and I days, but now should be read for exactly what it is: an honest concession to life's ultimate unknowingness.

On those rare occasions, however, when I suspected that an experience might provide me a hint of Jane's inner theater, it made me feel closer to her, more involved in who she really was. So while my body enacted its ritual daily motions that morning – finding its hands on the coins I exchanged for a cup of coffee, executing forward steps in a practiced pattern of diagonal across blacktop and right angles over sidewalk – I found myself fantasizing of Jane. The thought of being inside her mind

merged salaciously with the desire to be inside her body. It is one of youth's great irrepressible pleasures: the conjuration of sex through the merest implications.

I wasn't much use that morning. The only real work I even attempted was transcribing some notes from an interview with the head of a local planning commission. He'd been trying to build support for a radical plan to rezone large swaths of agricultural lands that bordered the edges of town. It would turn out to be a futile attempt to implement a sound, forward-thinking policy of "managed growth" – something that the locals believed would merely encourage the unholy destruction of a place they liked perfectly well exactly how it was. They did not seem to understand at the time that such growth was an inevitability, that Chicago would unburden its bulbous population into the adjacent landscapes with such determined force that nothing could stop it. In the modern American world, growth and progress are entities that move ahead with the same kind of nonchalant forward effort as time itself. Just more proof of the forces propelling us inexorably toward an end we are not seeking.

These, however, were not the kind of thoughts I wanted on that particular Monday morning; my mind frequently drifted to the

idea of meeting Jane at home over lunch and erasing the doomed aftertaste of my sleepless night with a devious midday romp. My early afternoon schedule of interviews and photo commitments was oddly vacant (for reasons that had slipped my mind on that morning, but would soon make themselves known again) and I would have more than enough time to affect a genuine disengagement from my darkening mood. It seemed like a very good idea.

I called Jane an hour before noon to schedule our tryst, trying to ensure that I wouldn't further submarine my day with the disappointment of expectation arriving at an empty apartment. The initial returns on my suggestion were not promising – a few comments about “not being available by appointment” and a facetious inquiry regarding whether or not I intended to leave any money on the nightstand. Apparently Jane was not in a good mood either. She complained that the smell had gotten worse and she hated having the windows closed on such a beautiful summer day. She also asked what I had been doing all night, maybe hoping to find something there that might automatically disqualify my idea and remand me to temporary marital-privilege probation. But she found nothing prosecutable about my sleeplessness and agreed that it might be fun to pretend we were honeymooning again.

For all intents and purposes, of course, we were still in our “honeymoon” phase. But one of life's more prominent illusions is that the early years of a marriage resemble in any way what marriage actually becomes, so like most young couples we were given to playing like the whole thing had become old hat already. Thus our intimate encounter over that lunch hour would be perceived as the revival of a memory that we were, in fact, actually at that moment living.

At 11:58 I checked my watch, pushed my notebook to the corner of the desk, tossed an empty styrofoam coffee cup into the trash basket, and then quietly began making my way to a side exit that opened into the alley. The exit was tucked in the back of the paper's layout room and on my way out I passed Stacey Coulter, a dangerously attractive and playful recent graduate who had infused our little weekly with a much-needed dose of design sense during the sixth months since she had been hired. She had also in that time become an irresistible distraction for most of the paper's married men (which included every male on the small staff, except for the part-time entertainment reporter whom rumor defined as gay, never confirmed). To my credit, I had stayed clear of any obvious flirtatious overtures toward Stacey, but this only served to create the foundation for a relationship in which I would

become her in-house confidante. Men who have not been blessed with *you want to fuck me even though you hate me* good looks know that the role of confidante is the clearest path to any sexual engagement with illicit overtones. It was a strategy that I no longer employed consciously, but that nonetheless had become in many ways my de facto persona with any attractive woman whom I could not simply choose to avoid. The problem being, of course, that all men in the presence of a beautiful woman want to be liked, can't help but rely on whatever tools they have to achieve this goal, and sometimes end up with more success in the matter than they are aptly prepared to handle. Women have this problem too, but when a man receives the unexpected attentions of a woman he tends to respond with the kind of overly enthusiastic appetite that quickly short circuits the whole process. Men make poor objects of desire, since their own desire typically outshines the lust of whoever is pining for them.

I never did sleep with Stacey, but she would eventually become an issue anyway. The situation grew into the kind of problem that starts when you're on your way out of the office to rendezvous with your wife and are caught slinking to a side exit, leading to a coy admission of your destination (nothing is more attractive to a young woman than a man's desire

for his own wife) and creating the first entry into a relationship that now includes a kind of *just between you and me* intimacy that can only mean trouble. If I could give just one piece of advice to young men embarking on a lifelong journey of monogamous commitment, it would be to avoid these sorts of interactions as if they were an unstable nuclear device that has just appeared in the middle of your living room. Don't touch it, don't go near it, don't even entertain the thought that you can somehow diffuse it with your meager store of technical skills. If you have to, move out of the house and leave the device behind to annihilate the next owner. The bomb is destined to go off and your goal should be simply to avoid becoming one of its victims. I have been irradiated on more than one occasion in a futile attempt to choose between cutting the green wire or the red one. They both result in a mushroom cloud. Few things are more embarrassing than the blatant self-aware stupidity bred by youth and maleness, nothing more revealing of the silly gene-spurred animals that we are. But at least on that day, those troubles had barely begun.

When I arrived at the doorway of my apartment, vague cross sections of the unexplained offending odor washed by in the air. Some parts of the scent had now become familiar, but it still remained an unidentifiable

whole. The door was unlocked and I wondered what the odds were in this world that we might someday become the victim of a violent intruder. Then it struck me as funny that we would choose to barricade ourselves in our homes as we do; I conjured an aerial image of a crowded community, each tiny unit locked steadfastly away from all of the others, all the inhabitants in constant fear of what might be done to us.

Inside Jane was playing a Joni Mitchell album and I could hear her washing the previous night's dishes in the sink.

"Has my home just been invaded by a stranger?" Jane asked, her voice meshing between the sound of running water and Joni's sweet melody.

"I was just thinking that, actually," I said.

Jane turned off the water and appeared from around the corner, drying her hands with a dish towel. "What, are you a stranger?"

"No, I was wondering if that was possible here. An intruder, someone with ill will choosing us as his destination."

Jane contorted her face into an expression of minor disgust. "That's a creepy thought."

"Not like I think it's gonna happen," I realized that this line of discussion was a quick way to drain the optimism from our impending sexual encounter and possibly risked derailing the notion altogether. "I was just, anyway – let's forget I said that. I'm already on to other things." I shuffled over to her, slid my hands along her waist and leaned in to gently kiss the front of her neck.

"Right, other things. Well, my appointment book has 'other things' scheduled for 12:30. You're a little early. Might want to grab a magazine." Although this was a barb intended to remind me of the set-up's tenuous nature, she said it with a kind of giddiness.

"I'll pay extra?" It was a dangerous comment, but I have to admit to somewhat enjoying the imaginary notion of our sex being played out as a transaction. Maybe seeing it as merely an acceptable expression of desire and maybe recognizing that she was the one who had introduced the conceit, Jane was willing to keep the game going.

"You really want trouble, don't you?"

"Yes?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Aren't those good words

sometimes?” She whispered the last part into my ear.

“Yes.”

She tucked the dish towel into my front pocket and began to unbuckle my belt. “Yes,” she whispered again. I felt her cheek brush alongside my face like a soft green leaf and I took in a deep breath of anticipatory lust. “Maybe we should—”

Jane didn’t finish the sentence. Her half-completed thought marked the juncture in that day when sex became an impossibility, a fact that was set into motion at that particular moment by an unexpected knock on our door.

Jane removed her hand from my belt and pulled back to give me a confused look straight in the eye. “Am I not the only one on your schedule this afternoon?”

I wanted to immediately make clear that this was not an interruption that I should be held accountable for, but that too would soon become impossible. I raised my finger to my lips to suggest silence, then whispered, “Don’t look at me. Give it a minute, they’ll go away.”

But they knocked again and Jane shook her

head disapprovingly. “No, come on, now I want to know who it is.”

“Fine, but I’m getting rid of them,” I said.

When I opened the door, however, to find Carl Albright looming ominously outside our entrance – the full girth of his mid-50’s former-football-player colossus taking up most of the door frame – a few of my day’s fuzzy-minded mysteries quickly started coming into focus. The hole in my afternoon schedule had not, in fact, been a happy coincidence. It was something I’d done specifically to clear space so I could meet with Carl over lunch to discuss the possibility of purchasing my first-ever life insurance policy. It was an appointment I’d made two weeks before – after failing to successfully refuse an invitation to join my editor, Jay, at lunch with some local Chamber of Commerce leaders. Worse than just a dull, overbearing gathering of men whose attitudes and disposition I’d once liked to categorize as *pre-Vietnam*, it had devolved into a two-drink minimum afternoon campaign to recruit me into the fold of upstanding community alpha males. It is the kind of community that, in the many years since, I have reluctantly joined, albeit purely for business purposes and done without a hint of the self-importance that even my *post-Vietnam* colleagues now imbue

such matters with. In contemporary parlance, you could say it has merely been a networking decision. But at my lunch with Jay and Carl and all of the other now nameless middle-agers who I believed sought to transform me, I was a hesitant candidate who found a temporary way out of the whole mess by promising to sit down with Carl to determine a sound avenue for securing the future of my family.

Jane hated Carl. Although they'd never officially met, she knew him as the city council member who had recently led a successful effort to deny a permit for a *No Nukes* rally that a group of local peaceniks had tried scheduling for the Sunday before Memorial Day. Jane had been part of a small but boisterous crowd who protested the decision at the previous month's council meeting and no doubt recognized Carl the moment I opened the door. For his part, I'm sure Carl never had a clue that Jane had been among his detractors. Men like Carl typically see the opposition as a faceless mass of naive insanity and encountering any of them as individuals is antithetic to how they perceive such forces in the world. From the subtle look on Carl's face when his view crossed the threshold of our door to Jane's presence in the background, I would guess that his first thought upon seeing her was that he wished he was still young enough to be getting some of that

for himself. A couple of years after Jane's and my divorce, Carl actually expressed just such a sentiment to me; I was drunk and bitter enough at the time to admit in response that I'd never really liked him and hoped he would someday go fuck himself until he was blue in the face. It was one of the last conversations I had with any of the local *pre-Vietnam* alpha males before moving permanently out west.

On this day Carl was dressed surprisingly sporty, in nice slacks and a polo shirt instead of the uniform suit and tie I'd usually find him in. Maybe he'd even been golfing that morning.

He greeted me with the convincing grin of an insurance salesman. "Paul!" he bellowed and reached out a course, thick hand that I shook grimly as he moved his glance back to Jane. "So, this is the little lady that you've been hiding from us. Well, we're gonna set her right up for you."

"Are you?" Jane asked in a stern tone that probably caught Carl a little off-guard.

He then leaned over to me in a stagy way that pretended he was making a comment in hidden confidence. "Don't worry, I won't let on that you might be more valuable to her dead than alive." Carl chuckled and gave me a nudge to

imply that this was just jolly, common, life-insurance joshing. He might have even believed (mistakenly) that this was part of his solid technique for making people comfortable with the idea of him selling them something that promised the inevitability one's own death.

"How's that?" Jane asked, now in full stealth combat mode, happy to make me squirm with the thought that she might choose to blow my cover at any whim.

"Uh-oh," Carl said, still smiling stupidly as he tried to find his footing on what he now sensed was unexpectedly rocky terrain. "I think she's onto us." Then he laughed again, hoping something I suppose, although I wasn't sure exactly what.

These days I would do everything I could to put at ease a man like Carl in a spot like that. These days I'm a lot more like Carl than who I was then, and I understand that all he probably wanted was to get in, make the sale and get out. It's obvious to me now that he had no interest really in who we were or what we believed. He didn't want to transform me into anyone. And if he'd known the extent of our differences he probably would've just chosen to go elsewhere with his war stories, football tales and promises of security. He'd simply misinterpreted who

I was and I never gave him much reason to think of me otherwise. In retrospect, I feel a little guilty about the way I condescended to him, but at the moment my main concern was making Jane understand that I hadn't been consorting with the enemy.

In a panic, I offered my opening salvo. "Carl, oh gosh, I was supposed to meet you at my office, wasn't I?" This was a lie. I'd tried convincing him of that originally, but he said he preferred meeting at our place. I thought it was his way of deftly inserting himself into my personal life, thus initiating the first stage of transforming me: colonization. I now assume he merely thought that this was the best environment for closing a sale.

Carl seemed to believe my confusion for a moment, then likely realized he had stumbled near somewhere that might explain the oddness he'd sensed. Being a more generous man than I at the time, he quickly figured to play along.

"Right," he said. "Went by there actually." He winked at me – something I'm sure Jane saw. "Jay thought maybe you had the days mixed up. He suggested it wouldn't hurt to come out here, twist your arm, haul you away for a long lunch." He blazed a smile over my shoulder in Jane's direction. "With your permission, of course."

I didn't turn around to see, but I knew at that point that Jane had fired up her own killer grin.

"I'd love to hear what you've got going on. We can all sit outside on the deck," she said, undoubtedly pleased with this sudden opportunity to wreak unencumbered mischief.

But she never got to make her next move.

"Pardon," Carl had stopped listening and moved on to an entirely different moment – one that he immediately weighted with a sober seriousness. "Do you smell that?"

In my minor distress I hadn't noticed how the scent had already poured in from outside and begun to collect around the doorway. Once it came to my attention, I was surprised that Carl hadn't said anything about it straight away. But we were really smelling it now.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "It's awful. Just came out of nowhere yesterday. Don't know what the hell it is."

"Don't know? For heaven sakes, something's dead. Where's it coming from?" Carl said this with absolute authority and then strode into the apartment like an army general. "Is that coming from out back?" He pointed. Jane opened her

mouth but Carl started again, "Door back here?"

Suddenly Jane relaxed her pose, easing her shoulders and softening her face as she answered Carl's questions. "We thought something was dead out there. We'd said so. But we couldn't find anything." She led him to the bedroom in the back and slid open the glass door, allowing the full force of the stench to reel inside.

"Well," I said, "I found a pile of dirt."

"Dirt? Jesus, this isn't dirt." Carl waved his hand in front of his face as he stepped out flush into the sun; Jane and I followed. "Folks, one of your neighbors has up and died. I almost guarantee it. Don't you know the smell of death?" Not waiting for an answer, Carl marched down the stairs.

"You think this is a person, a someone?" I asked, realizing that I hadn't much considered the idea of someone's life being tied to the smell.

Carl was now hollering up from the yard. "Paul, have you got a ladder down here? Somethin' I could get over this fence with?" He was pointing to the seven foot high wood slat fence

at the back of the yard, the one that stood adjacent to our mysterious pile.

I was not enamored with the thought of Carl hopping the fence into our neighbors' back lawn. The home behind us belonged to a young couple about Jane's and my age, although they were both already successful professionals and had acquired more of the standard trappings of an adult life. I didn't think they'd have much cause to be keeping any dead people around. "Carl, maybe you oughta check out that pile back there first. I really think it might just be a cat. Behind the building."

Jane exhaled loudly. "Paul," she began, then waited until my eyes were locked with hers, "just get him the step ladder from the storage, will you?"

"Jane—"

She yelled down into the yard, "We've got a ladder down there. He can get it." Jane turned back over to me and glared. "You invited him."

Without much choice, I reluctantly strode down the stairs and extracted a metal ladder from our storage unit. Carl stood anxiously in the middle of the grass and took the ladder from my hands as soon as I reached him. As

he carried it to the edge of the fence I tried to draw his attention to the mud alley where the pile resided.

"Did you check this over here? I think something's buried—" I started to point toward the alley, but when my eyes cleared the corner of the building I noticed that the pile was gone. In its place was a small circle of loosely-packed dirt that sat even with the surface of the ground.

Carl opened the ladder and jammed its legs hard into the grass. "Can you come here and steady this for me? Who lives back here?" He placed his feet on the first step of the ladder and peered over the fence.

I stood still for a second, mystified by the pile's disappearance, then walked over to Carl and grabbed hold of the ladder. "Umm, Kendall, Mike and Lisa. He's a lawyer in the city. They're young."

"Hmm. Don't know 'em," Carl took two more steps up the ladder.

"Be careful!" Jane yelled, leaning against the deck railing above. "Should I call someone?"

Carl turned at the waist and looked up at

Jane, “Probably. Let me get over here first. But I’m afraid we’ve got something bad.” He turned back to face the Kendalls’ yard, finished ascending the ladder and then straddled the wooden boards.

As Carl awkwardly tried to manage his decent beyond my view on the other side of the fence, I imagined him for the first time as a young hulking man, dressed in fatigues, a rifle and ammunition strapped to his torso, heaving himself over a stone wall somewhere in the heart of 1940’s France. Then I heard a thud in the hidden grass.

“Goddamnit!” It was Carl on the other side of the fence.

“You okay?” I asked, the sight of young Carl now replaced with the image of old Carl crumpled in a heap above a twisted ankle.

“Fine,” I heard him stand and then the wood creak as he leaned into the fence. “I’m fine. There any kids over here?”

“No, just Mike and Lisa,” I said as I took a few steps up the ladder and looked over into their yard.

“Paul,” Jane was yelling again from above. “Paul, why don’t you just stay over here.”

Despite my increasing curiosity, I had no intention of involving myself in what I believed was a blatant and unwarranted invasion of our neighbors’ privacy. I simply wanted a better view. “Don’t worry. I’m just checking on Carl.”

Carl looked up at me dismissively, “I’m fine.” He took in a deep breath through his nose, then winced. “Oh Lord, somebody’s dead here. You say they’re young?”

For the first time since encountering the stench, it began to mean something to me, to take on a persona beyond its ambiguous component parts. I had an impulse to vomit, but barely kept it at bay. “Our age,” I said, “mine.”

Carl shook his head, then pulled out a handkerchief to cover his mouth and nose. “Just stay there,” he said as he began stepping slowly toward the French doors that I knew led into Mike and Lisa’s kitchen.

Sometimes at night during the months after we’d first moved in and before I’d quit smoking, I’d stand out on our deck having a cigarette, peering out over the fence. And sometimes when their lights were on in the kitchen I could see through their windows and the glass panes of the French doors and watch them go about some mundane business together. I have always

been a shameless peeping tom and take great pleasure in the fascination that other people's lives seem to engender. I find, however, that sexual acts and other more obvious voyeuristic fare are far less compelling than your average forgettable daily behavior. I believe that watching someone clean their kitchen can be far more revealing than any moment of ecstasy. Sometimes I would watch one of them pull the trash basket from under the sink, yank out the bag, open the drawer beside the cutting board to grab a twist-tie, fasten the bag at the top, then drag it out those French doors and drop it into the garbage can behind the garage. Sometimes I would see her interrupt him making a sandwich, sit him down at the counter, then finish making the sandwich for him. It seemed to be a little game they played. And I must confess to often experiencing that predictable *grass is always greener* longing when peering through those windows across the fence. Although I could not explain exactly why, except to say that maybe because pain and suffering usually develop as internal, solitary burdens, we are more likely to perceive them in ourselves than others.

When Carl pulled open the unlocked French doors, the force of the smell made him draw his head back. He stepped forward and opened the door to a room beside the kitchen, a place that

I had never seen inside and never would.

Carl's voice was a little muffled and distant, but its gravity could still be easily sensed. "No. Oh, dear Lord. Oh Jesus." He turned around and slowly surveyed the kitchen, his hand still holding the handkerchief in front of his mouth. "Paul. Paul, tell your wife to call the police. He's really done it over here."

"What's he saying?" Jane hollered. "What's wrong over there?"

I started moving to the top of the ladder, and didn't turn to face Jane. "Call the police. Carl said you should call the police."

"Paul!" Carl had stepped back outside and stood in front of the open French doors. "Just stay there! Cops aren't gonna want anybody else over here. You should wait for them in the street."

"What's over there? Who is it?" I asked, hoping the answers might be something other than the obvious.

"It's both of them Paul. Looks like he's done it to them both. This was a sick man over here, sick man. Poor woman."

I turned around and looked up at the deck,

but Jane had already gone inside. I directed an empty stare to our moundless mud alley.

“Paul,” Carl barked, “don’t make this out to be more than it is. Man’s killed his wife. A coward. Then he finished things up like one. But you don’t need to make this look too tawdry in the paper, that wouldn’t serve anything.”

I hadn’t, in fact, even thought of it as news – maybe proof that I wasn’t born much of a reporter. But there was no way I would be the one to write about it, and in the end I never even read the story we printed.

“You listening? You make sure this gets done with some tact.” Carl shook his head. “These things just happen. That’s the world these days. Damned inferno.”

~

I don’t know how it happens that a seemingly regular man chooses to murder his wife and himself. I didn’t know much about Mike before their deaths and nothing that was discovered through investigating the matter seemed to suggest he would one day make such a decision. By all appearances, including the ones I glimpsed secretly through their windows, he and Lisa were an unimpressively

normal and content couple. For a long while I held an unspoken belief that the violence had actually been perpetrated by someone else, a stranger maybe, and that they’d covered it up by arranging the scene like a murder-suicide. I’d even wondered if our phantom pile had temporarily stored hidden evidence, which didn’t make much sense but nonetheless conjured images of that same violent intruder pilfering the fresh mound in our dark yard as I sat awake sleepless in the middle of the night. But I certainly didn’t share any of these thoughts with Jane, fearing she might never shake the idea (however implausible) that we could just as easily have been the victims of my imaginary criminal.

What I should have feared is another thought that we never shared: how close were we to becoming those same doomed neighbors? In the years after our horrific discovery, which would become the years before our divorce, it seemed that Jane and I lived in utter terror of asking the question aloud, as if offering the idea out into the spoken world would give it life or somehow introduce it into the dangerous universe of the possible. I think the question’s silent weight in a way disfigured us, shaped us each into a person who might be hiding someone else beneath their skin. I do know that there is a long list of more concrete causes

for the dissolution of our life together, but my regret is large enough to fill any number of locations in my past.

And this regret comes quite simply from the fact that I desperately wish I'd never lost Jane. It is a sorrow that was only amplified by some of the events that followed our divorce. First, Jane remarried – rather quickly – to a man, Andrew Shelton, whom I barely knew, and did not ever seek to learn much about. Then, not more than a few years after remarrying, Jane died. It was a simple one-car accident that ended in a steep ditch. She was alone. She may have fallen asleep, no one knows. In the months after her death, I could not contain my grief. I felt immeasurable guilt and loss over not having spent the last years of her life with her. I was haunted by scenes I pictured of Jane in some foreign kitchen, washing dishes without me, maybe going her entire night without even a thought of me crossing her mind. I imagined a thousand magical ways to return to my past and participate again in any moment that I had been in her presence. And I could not, of course, help but think about how she might still be alive if we had somehow salvaged our life together. Eventually, however, I moved out west, let these thoughts go, and replaced them with a lesser sadness – one that laments grief's absence, because it was the final connective

tissue between you and what was lost.

Although I have never remarried, my existence now is not a morbid or lonely one. I have had a few other women pass intimately through my life and there are many people whom I care deeply about, but I've chosen to keep my time with Jane a secret from them all. Since moving west, I have never told anyone about those couple of days or their disturbing conclusion. That former man is now who hides beneath my skin. I like to think of those memories as my *Alzheimer days*. When my mother was near death with Alzheimer's, she seemed to exist exclusively in a world from her far gone past. Who she saw us as, the places she described, even the smells she claimed to notice all unwound out of memories that she had stored away while still a young woman. I would often listen to her recite the same tales over and again – as if I were a stranger each time – nostalgic amber recollections of her early marriage and what it was to fall in love. My hope is that my faulty genes will someday do me that same favor. Someday I hope to be a weak-legged old man, propped in a comfortable chair, hallucinating scenes from a century that has since faded darkly away. I'm in no particular hurry to arrive there, but if I'm lucky enough to avoid an unexpected end and wander into the luxury of a natural demise, I

hope such a gift awaits me. I want perplexed nurses and confused old friends listening as I paint the sight of Jane in bed asleep beside me, my young self sitting up switching channels by hand, watching late-night reruns of long gone shows. I want them to wonder if they should be smelling something too. I hope there is utter bewilderment over where I might be, what life I could possibly be recounting. I want to have no idea that this world is only an illusion.
