

Worsted

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1

Early on, people were already saying I was one of the ones who listen. Yvette was another of the ones a little too often unwanted, and I had to feel bad for her, because in the city she'd now moved to, people looked too much like people in the city she'd just fled. Not in the overall mass, she explained, but in the individual, up-close nose and elbows, in the bolder and bolder organization of their hair. It was a misfortune to come face to face with people who stopped just short of being a ringer for your mother, or the supervisor you'd reported to, or your favorite screwball waitress at the pasta place, even some girl you'd dumped because of something ungovernable in her budget. Worse, what good did it do you to cut them dead when they had no notions of who you even were? You might as well have smiled at them even more outstrangeningly. So in due course she moved back to the first city, but people who should have now looked familiar and welcoming were instead looking incompletely distinguishable, stupidly diffuse in everybody else.

"Level with me," she said. She'd been staring first at my fingers, then at the motion in my knees. "Were we together? Or you're here to tell me we've never been apart?"

2

I'd often been married, granted. It even looks that way on paper. One wife put it plainly, so I might as well just go right ahead and quote her: "As a fraction of language, *wife* looks and sounds just a little too sure of what it's meant to be meaning. It's got too much of a hold on its meaning for its own good. *Husband* doesn't even sound as if it's fit to refer to a person. It sounds like something extra you have to put on just because you've been told to, even though you feel you're already fully dressed."

I remember the first wedding I ever went to. The priest sat down next to me at the reception. This was at some fire hall. Champagne was poured, and I offered this priest my

tinkling little portion. He enjoyed calling it a fluteful. I had a side view of him and saw all the fine hair fuzzing over his ears. “Mark my words, this’ll be a marriage that’ll carry,” he said. There was boastfulness and leftover ceremony in his voice. He kept talking about the couple—the couple this, the couple that. “Count again,” I said.

Once in a while, though, things should change—if not exactly for the better, then at least for the sake of something else. A wife was in rehab at a new place in a river town, and I drove over there on Family Day. For the most part, the staff kept things moving festively along. This wife and I met with a counselor with a legal pad on her knee. The counselor had some homewrecking music on in the background, with the volume low. She seemed to need to know a lot about me but conducted herself without much curiosity. A few days later, I was ordering supper in a diner—my life was finished—and it was one of those Pennsylvania Dutch places, called, I believe, the Distelfink, where you get your money’s worth, where they make sure you get your fill. Even after you feel you’ve finished ordering as much as you can possibly handle, the waitress comes back and says, “You’re entitled to another vegetable.” I watched the busboy clearing neighboring tables. I told him he might as well take my place mat too while he was at it. The place mat was entitled *Brain Teasers*, and at the center of it was a cartoon drawing of a smiling, large-jawed, wax-mustached, chef’s-hatted chef scratching his chin, and arrayed around him was an aggrievement of puzzles, mazes, scrambled-word games, illustrated riddles. None of these had held any interest for me. The busboy was a towheaded, rangy kid in a white short-sleeved shirt. An ID bracelet with huge links was sliding up and down his arm as he took the place mat away and added it to accruing crud in a plastic bin. Things looked simple enough the way he did them. But the trouble I’ve always had with getting rid of anything—with taking out trash in general—has nothing to do with the location of the Dumpster itself (at the edge of the parking lot of the apartment house) or with the requirement to bag the trash securely in thirty-gallon bags (the lease has much to say—two obese paragraphs—on this score). My trouble is with the open-endedness of the disposal process itself—the untransactedness of the transaction. Because unless I’m completely missing the boat here, all that happens is this: you bag the trash and carry it out to the Dumpster, and once a week it gets hauled, along with everyone else’s bags, to a dump or a recycling plant, and that’s it. At no point do I get a sense of there being anyone, any one actual person, on the receiving end who acknowledges the arrival of any one particular piece of trash in any one particular bag—anybody, in short, who actually bothers to take it out and look at what it might be and register the fact that somebody has had to get rid of something. This is where my concern arises. This is where the trouble starts. Because with certain things you throw out, you don’t necessarily want them to just disappear. You want them out of your way, for certain. But what you really want to do is to put them in the way of somebody else. Because you

can't be too sure that anything is out of your hands for good until you have proof, even a guarantee, that it has found its way into somebody else's hands, the hands of somebody who cannot help knowing what he has on his hands, because it's right there. The hands are the important part, gloves or not. Without the hands, nothing has even begun.

3

There was a time deep in my forties when the people who handed me my change in the stores would offer me bills that were mostly torn. They must have sized me up as a person who accepts without protest. They dealt the bills forward from the bottom of their register drawers. I would take the things home and had to find somewhere to hide them. I often settled for the mouths of the castaway cordovan loafers I kept on the floor in shoddily cobbled mockery of my life.

Then something came over me a couple of nights ago. It was that funny feeling again—the conviction that comes from having had too much dumb luck in the very year set aside for backing out of life. I walked downstairs (though this time not taking my time) and got into my car. I drove to a home improvement store and bought a nice piece of lumber—a big shrink-wrapped slab of plywood. I brought it back to the building and hefted it through the lobby and up the stairs (there's an elevator, but I never use it) and into my apartment and set it down atop some plastic crates stacked two high. Okay, there, I've got a table now, OK?—that's as much as what I must have been telling myself. I sat down on the floor beneath the table. The minute the evening rates went into effect, he called. He said he had a hamburger story to tell and a grocery-store story. I had a hamburger story, too, but he told me to make it quick because he wanted to go to bed. My hamburger story required some background, because it was actually two stories—one about that day, and one about the day before, both involving the same burger asylum and the same counterdamsel who, both times, was on break and sitting at a booth, but who came into the picture, by her own doing, on both occasions. The man wanted me to describe her, but I was in no mood to go into bodily specifics or deification. This displeased him. His girlfriend had gone away for ten days “to think some more,” he said. He said she'd been calling him overcontained, emotionally finite, untrustable, lumpily aloof, too picky about the things he'd taken to keeping under his pillow. He wanted to know what I was wearing, and I lied. He must have known I was lying, because he said, “That's why you'll always be living alone,” then hung up. It had all been on his bill anyway. He always spoke in an overrenunciatory, speech-teacherly way that could be hard to take when he was in the wrong. I turned off the ringer. I got up off the floor and arranged a few things—the batchlet of hospital-patient bracelets I couldn't stop collecting, snippets of necklaces that had long since run their course—atop my new table. At some point I walked to the kitchen and started boiling water in the big

pot I'd bought a month or so back. This was the first time I'd tried to use it. The boiling water was going to be for egg noodles, evidently. I couldn't go through with it. The next night, it started on my bill and after a few minutes switched over to his. He insisted we limit things to hamburger stories from this point forward. His new stories involved novel ways to make himself look uneasy when going to places like that, as if he were forced by circumstances to eat there now. I told him I already missed talking about other things. He told me to shut up. I defied him and resorted to endearments. He hung up. He was never big on getting together (he kept saying we lived so far apart), but we had met up one summer at a suitable lake that had a boardwalk (few lakes around here do) and at one point were sharing a large cone of French fries I'd been the one to pay for. I believe I was the one holding the cone. In those days he still smoked. He had a cigarette in one hand. He very deliberately but very casually jabbed the burning end of it into my palm. He said, "I can't eat and smoke at the same time. Don't keep expecting me to." He always had it pretty good. He'd worked in Human Resources for years. All he had to do was teach new hires the easy way they could tell the difference between the professionals, the paraprofessionals, and the people on staff without once ever needing to ask. There was a simple trick to it, he'd assure them. He'd have them looking at drawings of all three walks of life, and from the drawings he went on to portraits in oil, altarpieces, carvings, tapestries, watercolors, acrylics, double-exposure photographs, overhead-projector transparencies, slides, videocassettes, eight-millimeter film reels of cherishably garish coloration, charcoal sketches, gouaches, otherwise unclassifiable works on paper, one-offs and one-of-a-kinds (he insisted there was a difference). He'd tell every new hire she was a quick study, butter her up, then send her out into the corridor to fall flat on her face.

4

My life reeks of other people, least of all me. There was my mother, for one, and there must have been a biographical side to her life, no doubt, though nobody had ever thought to take notes. You were left to assume that certain qualities, tics, and anything plausibly endearably about her would later be attributed to somebody hardly her better.

But I have yet to come across an entirely satisfactory explanation for homosexuality, or even a heartfelt argument against that year—it was almost a year—when I was living with a groggily scholarly older man who had long ago failed at both asceticism and lechery. He did not want me to work (he wanted me staying put at home, daintily abed; he wanted me to draw, or at least try drawing, or at least think about how he might one day need to be drawn a little less down in the dumps), and here the poor guy had yet to find out that I had all along been overdoing it with a scathingly blond, preachy, deep-skirted woman who was married and often carried a basketed child with her when she sneaked by to

visit—a child on the tinier side, a blighting child whose tininess required the woman to straighten me out (tiresomely!) on every last difference between *tot* and *tyke*. To this day, I restrict how I feel about her—I set limits, and then I cheat. It’s darker in a room that has people in it than in one that doesn’t.

Then later a marriage in which the two of us finally had a washer and dryer all to ourselves, but my own clothes I drove to a coin laundry down the road. I’d introduce whatever I’d worn—my underwraps, my most companionable pants—into one of the deep commercial drums and let the things confuse themselves with tendencies, valences, still active in the afterpresence of earlier users—anything to get my life elemented more densely. I’d engage whichever dryer had a spent fabric-softener strip left welcomingly behind or, better yet, scraps and tinied fractions of dried tissues, sometimes entire pairs of knee-highs or a shrunken, shriveled, stoop-shouldered housecoat. I’d play my load out on top of everything already vital in there. When the drying stopped, I’d peer through the glass at how my things had disposed themselves into unfamiliarizing drifts, open the door, pull somebody’s left-behind blouse over whatever else I had on and let a life come down on me hard.

Worse, there’s a coupon supplement in the local paper again, and there’s an ad for one of those places where you can rent furniture, appliances, dinette sets, entertainment setups. It’s only the picture on the front I’m concerned about—the picture of what the place looks like inside. There’s much too much of an oversuchness to this picture. I count seventeen people: four customer service associates (in white shirts, blue ties) and thirteen cleanest-cut customers trying out chairs and mattresses, monkeying with the controls on the TVs, peering into a clothes dryer whose door is open partway, bending forward to fill out forms on a coffee table. These are people on the verge of renting things, and that’s their own business. I’m all for letting people do as they please. Thing is, though, there’s a clothes basket in front of the dryer—a red plastic number. And it so happens that I own no such thing, even though by this point, I’ve got a certain amount of my clothes back again. They’ve been piling up and mattering. So my question is whether the basket in the picture was just a nice touch, making it a display item only, or whether you can go on in and rent just the basket. If it’s the latter case, I see myself in the picture. Not literally, but actually. Nobody in the picture looks anything like me, but I can see myself in there, renting the basket in front of the dryer. I see myself stooping over to pick the thing up. The people in the picture are in their lives, whether they’re actors or models or just regular people who’ve had to settle for the day-to-day daredevilry of getting up and getting dressed. They’re in their lives and they’re in the picture at the same time. But not me. I’m in the picture, but I’m not in my life. I can’t manage both.

5

The day had come. Or at least the sun had come out. On the parking lot I ran into a woman I knew from a former marriage of her husband's. Her features looked a little different. The lower half of her face barely made it up to the upper half anymore. I must have said something courteous enough to her. She must have said something enough in return.

In other words, I asked her, I never should have been parented by or have married or even befriended or been a party to the births of or pursued any of the enmity of the people I had in fact had?

I waited.

I looked at her mouth. It looked definite on her.

"I want an answer," I said.

Neither of us could get one thing to stand for another.

I waited some more.