



A Fabrication: and other stories

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A Fabrication

He began to speak as if he knew what was on my mind.

"In my land we have no water and so we must manufacture it. In other lands, lands that I have been to, they have artesian wells and springs that deliver water unasked from the mountains and the soil. The people in those lands speak of the great joy in filling an earthen pot with this water and letting it engorge their mouths. They do this and then forget about its pleasantness. Do you know a people such as this?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes I do."

His eyes snapped up at mine and then fell back down into a gaze aimed at his unseen feet, which were silent in the puddle of shadow soaking the floor of the cabin. I sat down by the fire and pulled off my boots, slowly, carefully trying to keep the skin on the backs of my heels from coming off with them. My skis were outside. I put the wool socks and the boots in front of the fire and entertained a prick of concern over their smell. I dropped the notion; we weren't among women.

I had been expecting to find Gordon at the cabin. There were tracks leading in and smoke from the cabin's chimney was visible from a good distance. We had skied this trail four years in a row and had never found the cabin occupied. I spent the last half hour of the trail considering this possibility.

He had probably decided to let his intern finish the proposal after all. It would be like him to drive out here a few hours ahead of me and push hard to the cabin. Gordon liked to surprise people. It was no stretch of the imagination to picture him sitting in front of the stone fireplace, trying to hide his shortness of breath, acting as if he'd been there for hours waiting for my arrival. My hopes were up, not too different from the way both of us would imagine finding women at the cabin in years past.

But only the old man was present. He looked down at his feet, his hands were on his knees. His skin was tattooed with black lines of shadow that paralleled the curvature of his wrinkles, which were visible in the firelight only as oak-colored ridges. I had the impression that he would not exist without them.

I emptied the contents of my backpack onto the floor of the cabin in a rough manner meant to disguise my uneasiness. I paid attention to my gear. There is something about men who stare at their feet that makes communication uncomfortable.

"How was the snow on your way up?" he asked. I wondered if he hadn't seen it for himself or if he was just making conversation. After his initial greeting, however, I appreciated the straightforward question.

"Icy... and windy... too windy."

"Not a very good day for you then," he said, in such a way as to make absolutely no comparison between his day and mine. It wasn't a good day for me but I felt that it should have been. There is a list of requirements for good days but I don't know where that list is. The old man dropped the small talk, "These people with the wells, when I watched them drink from clay pots on a day with a killing heat, I saw abandon. They get such a great pleasure from this tasteless, odorless, dead thing. And then they leave it at the well with forgetfulness. My people, in my land, have to manufacture our water and so it is a different thing."

The roof of the cabin strained against the walls to take flight in the wind outside. The walls were winning but the wind, I knew, was turning the snow into ice. The morning run would be difficult.

"Much of our time goes into this manufacture. It is not something that we like to do but it is something that we must do in order to survive. My people do not know the unattached joy of drinking from clay pots on hot days directly. This we also must manufacture."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about but he didn't appear to be expecting me to. I unrolled my sleeping bag on the cot in the corner and stripped down to my thermal underwear. My muscles hurt. I can't say that they ached because aching suggests a romantic component. My muscles were in no mood to be martyrs for experience.

"The dark side to knowing how something works is seeing how trivial it is. Triviality does not support the illusions of those who see the truth. In my land, people boast of their anticipation for the water as they spread out the giant plastic sheets in the sun. There is nothing romantic about the stinging sweat that drips into their eyes and stings like nettles do. Some fall cold to the ground in the heat, without sweat to sting their eyes. These people want to die. Replacements come to fill the vacated places on the sheets. They talk of their fallen compatriot's devotion to the manufacture of water, a devotion which the replacements do not feel themselves. The fallen want to die and care nothing for the water which is a tasteless, odorless, and dead thing.

"Some people in some lands have wells and springs. For them water is a thing that can be appreciated directly. They neither dream about it nor remember it. Because of this, they are more truthful with water than we will ever be. For us, water is a fabrication."

I was very tired but the man continued to talk. His feet, along with all things in the cabin that touched the ground, were lost in the puddle of shadow which grew as the fire dimmed. The room was bottomless and things floated. I wished the man would be quiet and let me sleep. If I wasn't so tired I would have been interested, but tonight was not the ideal time.

"When the reservoirs are again filled at the end of the week the men can think of nothing but the water and how it will quench them. When the time for drinking comes even the fallen ones who have recovered come out to drink. They talk about their devotion to the manufacture of water and their willingness to fall again if necessary."

The old man seemed intent on finishing his story. I listened like you listen to crazy people on the bus. I thought about how I would describe this old man to Gordon.

"The cups get passed around and every man takes for himself a portion of water that he drinks. The potential contained in that liquid tumbling toward your throat is like this snow that you have that comes falling to the ground in so many ways that a person could spend a lifetime counting them. It is the memory of all the things you believe you have done. Then it canvasses your tongue and you know that it is a tasteless, odorless, and dead thing and nothing more. You see that the others have finished their water and you let out what you hope is a sigh of completion, satisfaction because you don't want your naked truth to ruin the beautiful construction of the water for the others. It is your secret and you keep it well.

"Two days later, the task of making water must be renewed. On this day, the men wake in the morning and are tired and would like to remain in their beds. The water is a beautiful memory and a glorious hope. They wake because of it. This tasteless, odorless, and dead thing is their life."

I looked at the man and was surprised to see his eyes staring at me. For the first time that evening he looked like he expected me to say something. "Interesting," was the best I could come up with.

"Soon, in retrospect, you will understand what I have told you. But then it will be too late. Go to sleep." He took his own advice and curled up on his side. The puddle of shadow had crept up the walls and I saw nothing.

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When I woke up, the man was still there, even though I expected him not to be. He was asleep on his side and he wore a pair of wool socks on his feet which poked out from underneath his blankets. I dressed quietly and stepped outside into the snow. I noticed the old man's skis leaning against the cabin. They were a newer model than mine. I put on my skis and began kicking across the meadow toward the east trail. I listened to the soft scraping of my skis and felt my muscles ache. I thought about the remarkable people you meet in the wilderness and began crafting my memory. The snow was still lousy.

An Unhappy Thing

"I'm going to have to get those from the warehouse," Mr. Foley lied.

"How long will that take?"

"I'll send Adam. Have them for you when you get back from lunch."

As Mr. Foley expected, Bill was annoyed, but not suspicious. He had lived in town for seven years and had never stepped into Mr. Foley's shop. Most people in the town hunted game of one sort or another but Bill had never taken it up. Preferred lawyering and the cinema as diversions, he had said once when asked about it.

Mr. Foley didn't know exactly why he lied. He wanted to stall for time, but he wasn't sure what to do with it. There was just something wrong about Bill's enthusiasm. Mr. Foley had seen that sort of thing before.

"And you're sure those will do the trick? I want to do this right." Bill said, eagerly.

"They'll do the trick all right." Mr. Foley said. His words were hesitant.

"Lovely. I'll be back in an hour."

Why is he so damned excited, Mr. Foley wondered as the screen door slapped closed behind Bill. What's wrong with him?

"I need some shotgun shells," is what Bill had said when he walked into the shop. "Twelve-gauge." His words were jocular.

"Are you going after ducks this season?" Mr. Foley knew that it was only a matter of time before even the most citified of the newcomers took up hunting.

"No. No need for that."

"Oh. What kind of load then?"

"Excuse me?"

"What are you going to be shooting at?" Mr. Foley asked, trying a different tack.

"Oh, I see." His smile dimmed briefly then flared back. "A dog."

Mr. Foley's eyebrows settled over his eyes and his lips sucked in slightly at the line where they met.

"He's rabid. Killed one of my chickens," Bill said.

"You ought to have Carol at the Humane Society round him up. They're equipped for that kind of thing."

"I thought about that but I'd just as soon do it. It's no problem really."

No problem? Mr. Foley thought. Have you ever killed anything? What sort of a thing was that for a man to say, that it was no problem to kill a dog?

"Are you sure he's rabid? A dog don't have to be sick to go after chickens."

"I saw him do it. He was wild. Has to be, there's no other explanation."

"Well, you'll need buckshot," Mr. Foley had said. "But I don't have any in stock."

Mr. Foley decided to call Carol. "Hey Carol, this is Ed," he said when she answered.

"Hey Ed. What can I do for you?" Her words didn't sound forced. Mr. Foley had gotten into an argument with Carol the last time they had spoken. She, also, didn't hunt.

"Have you heard anything about a rabid dog out by Glenn Station?"

"No. Cory's got a couple of Black Labs he lets run around his property but I haven't had any reports. Why?"

"Well, Bill Jensen came into my shop today looking to buy some shotgun shells. Says he has to shoot a rabid dog that killed one of his chickens."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I am too, but I don't think Bill is."

"Come again?"

"I said I don't think Bill is too sorry about it. He seemed almost happy about it in fact." He wasn't sure where he was going with this. He didn't know what he wanted Carol to say or do. What could either of them do really? If the dog was rabid it would have to be killed. There had just been something disturbing about Bill standing there grinning and saying he was going to go shoot a dog. It didn't feel right. You weren't supposed to grin when you had to do things like that. It was supposed to make you feel sick.

"Maybe he's just trying to show some ruggedness. Wants to prove his self-sufficiency. People still call him City Slicker you know. He's been here how many years and people still won't let him alone." Mr. Foley knew she was right. Carol, of all people, knew what that was like. In addition to running the Humane Society she was something of an anti-hunting activist. She marked the beginning of each season with a flyer campaign and had tried on two occasions to put forward a petition for reducing the number of deer tags issued. She was unpopular because of her views but could get away with them because she had been born there.

"I told him he should let you handle it but he said he was happy to do it. Said it was no problem. I got the feeling that he actually was happy to do it."

"If the dog's rabid then it's a necessary thing. You wouldn't call me to take care of it right?"

"No, I wouldn't. But I wouldn't be happy about it either. It's not necessary to enjoy it."

"Ed, people don't always act the way we want them to. If he changes his mind have him give me a call."

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Carol," he said, and hung up the phone.

Mr. Foley didn't know what to do. He could refuse to sell Bill the shotgun shells. But Bill wasn't doing anything wrong with them. It's a matter of style, he thought. And that made all the difference. He decided to call Cory.

He found the number in the phone book. "Hello," it was Cory's wife.

"This is Ed Fowler at Sargent's, is Cory in?"

"No Mr. Fowler, he's at a site. You can get him on his cell, do you want the number?"

He wrote the number in the top margin of the phone book and redialed. "Yeah?" it was Cory.

"This is Ed Fowler at Sargent's. I'm calling because one of your neighbors says there's been a rabid dog attacking his chickens. I was wondering if it might be one of yours."

"Who says my dogs is attacking their chickens?"

"No one has said it was your dogs."

"Both my dogs is kept in their pens when I'm not home."

"Okay. Sorry to bother you." He'd get nowhere with Cory.

"Don't mention it."

"Asshole," Mr. Foley said to the disconnected phone. He'd just have to sell bill the shells then and wash his hands of the affair. What else could he do? It wasn't right though. Seeing a man happy to kill is the kind of thing that stays with a person. Makes him sick. Makes him forget that there are good things like the way the light that shines through the cracks in the barn turns from white to yellow just before dinner time. How can anyone be good when a person can kill a dog while smiling?

It would do no good to refuse him the shells. There were a dozen other places he could get them. It would just mean passing the burden on to the next guy. He had been chosen to deal with it and he would. Wasn't that how he'd justified it to himself before? As long as you didn't enjoy it then it didn't matter what the others did. They were they and you were you. Be a part of it because you have to but don't enjoy it, never buy into it wholly. Let them be mean and nasty. Let them makes jokes and laugh.

Cory would have been good at it, he thought, but not Bill. Guys like him weren't supposed to enjoy it.

He pulled out a box of shells and placed it on the counter and waited.

Bill was whistling when he came in and Mr. Foley wanted to hit him. "Is that them?" Bill asked, pointing at the box on the counter.

"That's them. Have you ever shot an animal before?" Bill looked embarrassed again. "Because if you don't do it right, you'll cause the animal a lot of pain. And even if you manage it right, it will be an ugly scene. The insides smell awful, you know." He wasn't going to let Bill get himself into this blindly. It was too easy to realize the significance of things only after you'd done them and Mr. Foley could see that Bill had no idea of the messiness of such business.

"You don't need to tell me how to..."

"Shoot it in the head," Mr. Foley interrupted. "And if you miss, shoot it again. Don't get soft at the last minute. That's what people do, they see the pain and hear the cries and they change their minds. Don't do that; it's cruel."

"No worries about that, It's just a dog. I've never even owned one." If Mr. Foley had been younger, mentally younger, not physically younger, he would have flattened Bill's nose. But he knew that wouldn't do any good. Bill was so clueless that he was innocent and wicked at the same time. There was a chance, Mr. Foley thought, that Bill would shoot the dog and go right on whistling in his ignorance. He might even forget all about the incident until one day when he was old and then it would hit him like a sack of rotten potatoes. And the worst part for him will be that he didn't know what he was doing. It is always more tragic to do a horrible thing by mistake.

The phone rang and Mr. Foley answered it. Normally he didn't answer the phone when he was dealing with a customer, he thought it rude, but he was not ready to hand over the shells. "Hello," he said.

"Is it Bill Jensen that says my dogs is killing his pet chickens?" It was Cory.

Mr. Foley was not the sort that liked to talk about other people's business. The town was too small for that. But he was in a predicament. He certainly wasn't going to mention Bill at all, even if he had accused Cory's dogs, which he hadn't. But with Bill standing right there it was impossible to discuss the matter at all without alerting him to Cory's anger.

"No. It wasn't."

"Well who was it then?"

"I can't tell you. Goodbye." Mr. Foley hung up the phone.

"How much do I owe you for the shells?" Bill asked.

Mr. Foley could see that Bill had some pizza sauce crusted on his shirt—just a small dot of it near the point of the collar. He wondered what Bill would wear when he shot the dog. He had never seen him in anything but slacks and a white button down shirt with gold cuff links. He couldn't imagine killing anything while wearing cuff links.

"I'll tell you what," Mr. Foley said. "If you want, I'll come out this afternoon and take care of the dog. I've done it before. No need for it to be on your hands."

Bill looked to Mr. Foley like someone had just taken his candy away. "Thanks for the offer Mr. Foley, but I'm looking forward to doing this myself. I wish I could explain."

"You think it will make you feel alive."

"Yes, something like that. It's something I need to experience, I think."

"You won't feel that way afterward."

"How much do I owe you, Mr. Foley?" He was irritated.

"Nothing. I can't take your money."

"But Mr.Fol..."

"They're free or you can't have them."

"Well... thank you, I suppose." He picked up the box reluctantly. He nodded his head once and took three steps backward before turning around to go.

He was halfway out the door when Mr. Foley asked, "Bill. What kind of dog is it?"

"A Black Lab, Mr. Foley."

The screen door slapped closed and Mr. Foley sat on his wooden stool. He thought about the afternoon light, waiting for it to turn yellow.

Unpleasant Evening

Maggie's cooking was never particularly good, but John had spent the day working and the meal went down with civilized dignity. In fact, his entire day had gone down in similar style. It was one of the rare days that saw him meet responsibility head-on. Today, the hours were not slippery and he caught them. His knees ached, his eyelids were heavy and his mind wearily begged for sleep, but Maggie's potatoes tasted better than they had in a long time and his day had not gone unused.

"Those were some fine potatoes Maggie," he said.

"Thank you, John." She smiled at him, momentarily lost in the focus of his complement. She knew, of course, that her cooking was never very good but his generous compliment meant much more to her because of that. He could be so kind, at times.

"I'm going to go wash up." He stood up from the table and said again: "Those were some mighty fine potatoes Maggie."

"John, tonight... could you read me a story?"

"All right, Maggie. I'll read you a story tonight."

As he walked away, Maggie felt like she'd die if the night ever ended. She felt like she did when, as a little girl, she would spend hours in the backyard in Arizona with her father, watching the stars. He would tell her the names of the planets and would let her operate the mechanisms of his telescope. He had spent hours in the garage building that wonderful instrument. Even though she was only seven at the time, she could see the pride beaming in his eyes the night they set it up in the dusty backyard and saw, in crisp focus, the Moon with all of its pocks and valleys for the first time. The night held for her the magic of possibility. During the day there were no stars.

To John, it was an amazing thing how a story, told with such an unrefined voice as his, could bring complete joy to Maggie. He regretted not reading to her more often. The truth was, she could not read much more than her own name. She said she used to know how to read and that she knew all about the solar system because her Dad had taken her there many times. He loved her but sometimes her crazy talk got to him. Her mother had been crazy.

He washed his hands and face in the cool water. "What a lovely night," he said to himself. He looked out across the canyon and mused lightly on the past like a man who felt at peace with his situation. You certainly have come along way, he thought to himself. The Mediterranean air was beginning to chill as the night came to call. The dense air

carried the sound of traffic from the freeways with vigor but he could tell most of the rush-hour had subsided. The sounds he heard were those of fast moving cars, anxious to get home.

Inside, Maggie was sitting in the old wooden rocking chair, nested under a crocheted blanket. Her skin looked smooth under the glow of the light and she smiled at John as he walked in. He could tell that she was doing her best to remain patient. Like an excited child she rocked back and forth, projecting a grin that warmed his heart. He would not make her wait.

From the shelf he pulled down a dog eared copy of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. He leafed through the pages slowly, his brow wrinkled with supposed consternation as he pretended to select a passage from which to begin. He began: "In the hills of Mexico's great desert there lived a man named Edward Toomey. He was not a Mexican, as would be expected from his name, but he spoke Mexican and he raised chickens and cattle like the other Mexicans in the area.

"It was said amongst his neighbors that he had once been a railroad tycoon in the United States of America. He was richer than any of the great kings, they would say. He enjoyed the finest cigars, the best wine, and the most beautiful ladies. There was nothing he wanted that he could not have. One day, he was buying some Walkinshaw whiskey in the lesser district of town. Walkinshaw's was awful putrid stuff, but Edward Toomey, it was told, came from humble beginnings and Walkinshaw's was his only remaining link with his past. Walking out of the liquor store his eyes fell upon the radiance of a beautiful girl. Her features were distinctly Spanish in origin and not the slightest trace of Indian could be seen in her dark eyes. The truth of the matter was, she was the most beautiful maiden ever to have existed and Edward Toomey was instantly stricken with love for her.

"Thus began an extended courtship between the two prospective lovers. It became apparent, that the maiden's supreme desire was to return to her native Mexico and live the simple farmer's life. Mr. Toomey was so in love with her that he began making arrangements straight away. Finally, the day had come for their departure and Mr. Toomey was to meet his maiden at the train station. At five 'o clock they would depart for Sonora, Mexico and begin a new life together.

"At four thirty Mr. Toomey began to wonder curiously where his maiden was. At four forty-five, he began to pace. By ten till, his tycoon nature returned to him with a vengeance and his anger toward the maiden swelled to locomotive proportions. At five 'o clock, the stubborn

temper that had netted him his riches, took control of his heart and he boarded the train, determined to carry out his plans without her.

"That, it is said, was how the Yanque ended up a poor farmer in Mexico. The end."

John folded the book closed and placed it back on the shelf. Maggie, he saw, was asleep in the chair, her small frame curled up between the wooden arms of the rocker. gently, he picked her up and placed her into the bed, making sure her feet were covered with blankets. She hardly stirred as this was done.

He undressed and moved into the bed with her. she sensed his arrival in her dazed half-sleep and nuzzled her nose into his chest and sighed softly. He laid there for some time, staring up at the green ceiling, listening to the crickets outside. Transparently, the chirp of the insects faded into music and then into the sound of running water. Sleep overcame him and was almost in control when a sharp cracking noise shot through the upper end of the canyon. John became instantly awake and reached for a machine gun that wasn't there. In a panic of confusion he jumped from the bed and pulled on his pants. Maggie pulled at him, thinking he was having another one of his nightmares.

At that moment, with John standing in his pants and Maggie nakedly groping for his hand, all hell broke loose. The rapid sound of snapping branches approached them sounding like a lion breaking telephone poles. Yelling could be heard farther up the canyon and before John could get his boots on the crazy man was in their kitchen.

His head was completely hairless and he wore the light blue pajamas of a man who should not be free to roam about. John picked up his machete and slashed it back and forth in the air in front of him. "Get the fuck out of here," he yelled furiously. Maggie cowered under the crocheted blanket, shivering uncontrollably. The crazy man sprung back like a frightened animal. He stepped back again and tripped over a root. He fell into the water and thrashed violently. Regaining his footing he turned toward the canyon mouth and charged through the brush. As soon as he was gone, three men with flashlights emerged. They looked around, momentarily confused as they stood in John's kitchen.

"Which way did he go?" one of them demanded.

"That way," John said, pointing in the only direction the man could have gone.

They hesitated for a moment, then charged into the bushes after the crazy man. The snapping noises became more distant and John watched

the whimsical play of their flashlight beams dance in the trough of the canyon. When he was satisfied that they were gone he went back inside.

The crocheted blanket shivered intermittently as Maggie did her best to remain silent. John put a consoling hand on her back and she screamed and lashed out with her fist. He pulled back, avoiding her blow.

"Calm down Maggie. It's me, John. Everything's all right."

She continued to shake, even as he held her in his arms. When an hour had passed and the night was quiet, she settled down. They both lay silent, each warming the other, each knowing what would come next. The jackhammer sound of a diesel's Jake brake cut the silence and Maggie began shivering again.

"The police will be here tomorrow," he said.

"I know."

"Just try to relax and get some sleep."

The next morning was preceded by the sounds of birds going about their business. John and Maggie began their day apprehensively. He washed up and put on his clothes, she began to prepare breakfast. Both of them moved without conviction. One would think that it was the last day of the Earth's existence, only instead of treating it with the gusto of a last hurrah, they shielded themselves with indifference and resignation.

At nine 'o clock, John heard the telltale sound of a two-way radio. The police were on their way to make a report. They showed up as a pair like they always do. One of them was average size with puffy cheeks and bored eyes. The other one was tall and lean, big but intelligent looking.

"It's a nice place you've got here," the tall one said. John noted a respectful tone in the man's voice. "Been living here long?"

"About six months," John said matter-of-factly.

"I heard you had quite a scare last night with that escapee."

"Was he from the hospital?"

"yeah. Slipped out an open window." The tall one looked back at his partner.

Here it comes, John thought.

"I suppose you know why we're here?"

"Yeah. I sure do."

"Listen, there's plenty of room at the shelter right now. They can put you up no problem." The tall one looked around the camp and couldn't help but admire the work. Palm branches had been carefully cut and placed around the perimeter, forming a low fence. Against the east side of the canyon a lean-to structure had been built from sticks and palm

fronds. He has probably built all this with that machete, the tall one thought.

Just then Maggie stepped out from the lean-to. The tall one felt like an unconscionable intruder.

"Come on," the tall police officer said. "I won't use the handcuffs if you don't make me. The shelters only about ten minutes from here. If we hurry I can get you there in time for breakfast."

It was the best he could do.

Afternoon Misunderstanding

"How does a person end up like that?" his friend asked. There was no sympathy in his question, only a veneer of academic observation that neutered his anger and corrupted itself.

George hated his friend just then. He hated him completely. It was an odd emotion to feel too on such a pleasant afternoon. Without answering, he sipped his coffee which was now just cool enough to taste and he watched Central Walk vibrate with students angling for jobs and contacts. Higher learning had become all award and no contest. But he didn't hate those conniving beasts because there they were, out in the open dressed in neck ties and heeled shoes, boasting of every good intention that they have ever had. But the old man in the electric wheelchair was an odd case, and George held him in the highest regard even though they'd never met.

"It's sad to see him down there every year, handing out resumes. Does he actually think they believe he's doing it for his son?"

"Of course he doesn't," George said. "But he knows how the game works. He knows everyone else lies. He just figured it out too late, perhaps, and now it's the best lie he can force himself to tell."

"Well he ought to hire some grad student to pass them out for him. He might net some interviews that way and people would feel too guilty to not give him a chance even if they knew they'd been duped. It's the only way he can compete with those bastards down there. Each one of them would chew up their own parents if it meant success."

"He's too honest for that," George said. "And he doesn't appear to have your knack for chewing." He felt unnaturally calm. The sun was out and the breeze was gentle enough to ward off any stifling heat but did not disturb the napkins lying unanchored on the table. George had an opinion on most things and he considered his feelings to be important, significant even. But today they were playthings and he was curiously experiencing them as amusements. Melancholy giddiness born of resignation, is how he would have described it, and he wondered if he was really as different and isolated as he felt. Or did everyone walk around feeling alone and unlike everyone else?

"Why does he make you angry?" George asked.

"He doesn't make me angry."

"That's bullshit. He makes those kids down there angry too. I've heard them talk and none of them seems to know why but he does. You're a lot older than those kids, you should know what makes you angry."

George's friend did not answer but this was fine because they had known each other for more than twenty years. George had fallen into the friendship from a ledge of convenience and he imagined they were like two components that weren't designed to go together. But they had been put together anyway and though the combination never functioned in a productive way, their most ill-fitted shapes had long since been worn down to smooth nubs so that they now formed a uselessly benign machine. George thought of his wife and wondered if she had been shaped to fit him or if her parts were just more malleable with the addition of love. Was changing shape any better than wearing down? George thought it was interesting how many questions came clattering out like crabs from wet rocks when he didn't care about the answers and he thought that if his friend could admit his anger toward the old man, then the machine of their friendship would have produced something of value. But he didn't think it likely. He had no hopes for it or for anything else, which again, he thought was odd and amusing. Instead he watched the old man scoot along.

Appearance, George knew, was important and the old man did not look like a recluse. He was well-dressed in a brown suit that fit the slumped curve of his shoulders with a tailor's precision. The fabric looked like polyester, the kind that glints slightly in sunlight and has a perfect weave of small squares with no randomness. It was out of date and in that way it fit the man. His hair was robust, a rich, imperfect brown, and it seemed not to have yielded an inch to the enemy of time and to George this was an important fact. George would have been happy to think it symbolized a vitality in the old man and that was why he thought it to be important but that wasn't why. The old man's hair was important only because if it had been thinned and receding, then the old man would be less worthy of sympathy. Nobody cares about creepy looking people.

"I don't see how saying they're for his son is any more honest than hiring a graduate student. In fact, I would argue that he has already been corrupted by the lie and so to not fully capitalize on it is either laziness or self delusion," George's friend said.

"So why don't you then?"

"Pardon me?"

"Never mind." George gulped his coffee and watched as a crow pecked at something on the ground. The crow was engaged by the something but it was also eying the approaching old man who was slowly wheeling himself closer.

"I don't get you."

"I know," George said. He took another, larger, gulp of coffee. "Saying they're for his son isn't a ploy he's using to land a job; that he wants honestly. The lie is his way of letting them off the hook."

"Who off the hook?"

"The job fair workers. He tells them the resumes are for his son and that gives them room to interact with the old man in a dignified way. It puts him in the category that they expect. It's humanitarian." George smiled wryly over the last bit and wondered how much of that he believed. "I empathize with the old man, you know. It's a gossamer wall between he and I."

"If that's true then your wall is made of spider thread and is tougher than it looks. You're a lot more like me than you are him and I don't feel any empathy with the man. Sometimes I think I'm the only one here being honest."

"I think you should tell me why the old man makes you angry. There's nothing in our friendship to lose."

"He doesn't make me angry."

But George thought he saw anger and hated his friend for the lie.

Segue

He didn't want to be comfortable but he had no reason to be standing outside in that storm. It was a dry storm but storms in Phoenix are brutish. The air fills with dust, particles so small they get deep inside your lungs where it is difficult to cough them out. Heat lightning flashes sideways during these storms and the skin bristles because of it.

In the cafeteria the window bowed with each gust. Jim watched the steam curl up from his coffee and flinched slightly as the window shook. He sat very close to the window. It was a circular room and he sat at the periphery. Most people sat in the center but Jim preferred the periphery. Especially on days like these.

Today he was not the only person sitting alone. Four tables away, also next to the window, a girl sat staring at the storm. She did not have the pretense of coffee or tea. He thought about walking over to her table to see what she was about. He would say something like, "Hey, the least you could do is have a cup of coffee in front of you so that the others won't think you're strange."

Perhaps she would say, "It doesn't particularly concern me."

"The people?"

"The storm."

"Why should it concern you?"

"Because I'm here, behind this glass, where it's comfortable."

"Do you want to be uncomfortable?"

"Of course not. I just wish that I had no choice."

"And this doesn't concern you?"

"Not at the moment. Why were you sitting over there by yourself?"

"I was thinking about South America."

"Are you a geography major?"

"No. Someday I will ride a motorcycle to South America and I like to think about that when the storms blow in."

"Does that concern you?"

"Does what concern me?"

"The way that you sit in here when the storms blow in?"

"Not at the moment. I'm just biding time."

"I am very sorry to hear that."

His coffee continued to steam and he took a careful sip. It was almost cool enough to taste. The window shook again and outside on the circular lawn he watched as a blue and white plywood election sign rolled past, corner to corner to corner. It was moving fast and it looked heavy.

He tried to think about trail-worn Kawasaki's and not about the money he had wasted and the people he had let down. One of these days, he thought, something foolish will happen. He wished someone would come up to him at the table and say, "Why are you sitting here alone, staring out at the storm?"

And he would say, "Because I am missing the things I would most like to do and because I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I am afraid of letting my dreams get away."

"So you sit here alone to keep hold of your dreams?"

"I sit here alone hoping they will smell blood and try to keep hold of me."

"I do not think dreams are that predatory."

"Nor do I."

The coffee no longer steamed and he drank most of it. In the center of the room sat a new crowd. A girl with long blond hair was leaning in very close and making assertive gestures while her friend expressed shock. Someone had turned on the wall-mounted television and two people sat staring at it, expertly guiding macaroni into their mouths without missing.

The window no longer shook and there was no trace of the blue sign outside on the lawn. He finished his coffee and noticed that the girl four tables away had already left.

The Ride

In the blackness—almost pitch and total blackness, for a quiet storm lived in the sky and masked the stars—a yellow glow could be seen on the quiet beach. Tiny pinholes glowed brightly and when the wind gusted, the fire in the old washing machine tub flared up and revealed the dim, rough features of a palm-frond cabana overhead. An arm reached out from the blackness to put a small log on the fire and to disturb its embers with a stick.

The figure, only an arm, and the fire, brilliant pinpoints of light, and the dim cabana that somehow gave the impression of safety in the blackness—this scene—looked very small from outside the camp, like a postage-stamp painting surrounded by black matte.

There were five others, but all of them slept heavily after the day's ride to Puertocitos, almost fifty miles, and in the blackness and their slumber they did not exist five feet from themselves.

Nick did not feel hidden. He clung to the fire for comfort and warmth, with the cabana at his back. It was a precarious battle, as he imagined it, between the blackness and his fire. The night was a giant spinning wagon wheel and he, with his fire, was the center of it. As it spun, invisible and unstoppable in the blackness, all attention flew unnaturally inward toward the center and this he disliked very much. But he continued feeding the fire and he clung to it because it offered the protection of an outpost rather than the protection of camouflage that the others enjoyed. Tonight he was an outpost and he waited. He fed the fire and waited with a small but potent jealousy.

And he listened intently, almost creatively, for the sound of a motorcycle engine. He watched for a headlight too but it was difficult to see anything outside the protective bath of firelight. He heard a coyote scratching around the brush beyond the light and he did not hear the other seven coyotes that moved around the camp. Twice he thought he heard an engine in the distance, very far away, but these came to nothing and after each false hope he stirred the fire and continued to wait.

Behind him, the Sea of Cortes inched eastward with the lowering of the tide, leaving a gentle slope of wet sand. The soft clapping of the waves had stopped some time ago—when, he wasn't sure—and a pang of sadness passed through him as if he had returned from work to find a visiting friend gone without saying goodbye. He hated being surprised by changes of state. They unsettled him and made him frantic. So he stirred the embers with his stick, his arm reaching out from the

blackness, and tried to pay better attention to the wind, to the time, and to the sea—hoping to catch that moment when they changed and became something new.

The wind gusted strongly and the brightened flames revealed his eyes even from outside the camp. It was a very cold wind. He looked up and remembered the storm that hid the stars. The black clouds moved from the west and he wondered how long ago they had passed over his friend. They were dark but had spent themselves crossing the mountains and he did not worry about rain. He looked again to the west toward the mountains which were also lost in the blackness.

And there, distinctly, he saw a single headlight weaving its way down the invisible slope. It vibrated suspended in the air. The frenetic vibration of the headlight was the only sign that it was a thing of the land and not the sky and it looked like a record needle, buzzing as it traced the contour of a topography only it knew.

Its clarity and definition amazed him. The other things he thought may have been the headlight faded in comparison. There was no doubting what this thing was. It was distinct from the possibilities his mind had created and this distinction was reassuring. Some of the gloom lifted and his outpost began to shed its melancholy husk.

A new kind of self consciousness overcame him. His social anxiety, a natural and moderate strain, stole away the more powerful and maddening internal anxieties. But with the headlight still far away, he was alone, and this new tension was too distant to be real. He was at peace. Engaged and abstracted, he felt as if he were riding the crest of change itself.

The headlight descended from its mountain perch and he began to hear the sound of the motorcycle's engine. It surged with power then let up, surged, let up, repeatedly, a distant groaning, possessing only a thin trace of reality... like the recollection of a song.

No longer steeled to wait perpetually, he climbed from the dirt of his internal thoughts and from the monotonous routine of physical motion. He picked up his stick and stirred the embers with a different motion than before. The outpost was now ruled by a mood of restrained anticipation. He felt this waking up, not from a sleep, but from a pause. He was conscious of it and he liked the feeling very much. He wished to live in it perpetually.

The thumping growl of the motorcycle grew louder and more detailed. He could now hear the high-pitched noises of the chain slapping its guides when it shifted gears. He could hear the burbling sound as the

engine backfired under compression braking. The detail in the sound grew finer and the picture in his mind became clearer. He now lived in two places and, as if at the edge of sleep, he became lost in both. He fed another log to the fire and as its glow increased he felt its warmth while also feeling the protective and crusty feeling of motorcycle gear. The thick, knee-high boots that were clunky in the normal world but responsive and perfect in the harsh environment of machinery and speed. He saw the narrow beam of the headlight that created a tunnel through the darkness, making the shadows at the edges vibrate and giving the impression of riding under the ocean. He felt the subtle zooming of awareness that made a person aware then unaware then aware again of the protective casing of helmet, goggles, gloves, boots and clothing; one moment you were piloting a robot from deep within and the next, when the boundaries of your skill were close, the shell disappeared and it took your body with it and you were nothing but a pair of eyes speeding through the desert.

He suddenly became scared that his imagination added much more to life than was actually there. This fear passed but it did not disappear.

The motorcycle approached loudly and stopped next to the cabana. Jim killed the engine and the new silence made the small sounds louder and distinct. The headlight died as a contracting circle of light, and Nick remained sitting by the fire.

"I could see the fire from the mountain," Jim said. "It looked nice." He took off his helmet and flicked the fasteners of his boots loose.

The motorcycle's engine clicked and popped as it cooled. Nick could smell the sweet smell of the castor bean oil that had been mixed with the fuel.

"Everyone else is asleep," Nick said.

Jim checked that the motorcycle was securely leaned against the cabana and then hung his helmet from the handlebars. He was covered in mud that had dried and cracked where his limbs bent. He had a ring of mud around his face that had gotten in through the gap between his helmet and goggles. His eyes were mute with tiredness. Directly, but slowly, he walked over to the fire and sat down in one of the empty chairs.

The motorcycle engine popped again, a quiet, high-pitched and metallic pop that sounded like a grasshopper jumping in a tin can.

Nick wanted to ask him, but he waited.

Jim stared at his boots, his eyes still tired, and the light from the fire made the ring of mud on his face alive with shadow. Nick looked down

into the fire and stirred it slowly with his stick. The flames soothed and warmed his muscles but burned where the skin and bone were close. He watched the flames dance as they did this.

"You know. I'm glad they're asleep," Jim said. "When I left I kept imagining coming back to a big party. But to tell you the truth, I don't even want a beer right now."

He didn't seem finished, so Nick remained silent.

"It's weird, but I think I only went because of you. I didn't want to do it at first. I would have pretended not to hear them, but you being there made me feel guilty."

"I really wanted to be the one to go," Nick said.

"I know." Jim looked back down at his boots. "I didn't want to steal anything from you. I just didn't think of it then."

"I know."

"So don't be mad."

"I'm not."

Jim realized he hadn't conveyed the important news. Nick sat listening like a king to a messenger who has taken the offer of a meal before delivering his message. Jim was too tired to cultivate suspense. "I got the medicine there," he said.

"In time?"

"I think so. She was still alive."

"Was the road bad?"

"Yeah."

But Jim wasn't so sure that it really had been bad. It had felt bad. The mud and the rocks had changed. Challenge had become worry. He didn't think of this in words, but he was fearful of this new thing. It wasn't confidence that had died in him. Ambivalence perhaps, but not confidence.

The wind blew cold again and Nick reached for a log, pausing to look at Jim before putting it on the fire. He looked tired but not sleepy. "You're a better rider. It was better that you went," Nick said.

"That's a hard thing to say." It may have been true but the words hurt him. They did damage. All of them, when they rode together, believed they were the best rider. And they protected this belief by cladding it in overblown confidence. It was a reactive kind of armor that shielded their egos by exploding out with its own force to counteract any inequalities before they reached soft and tender tissue. They taunted each other with insults and protected themselves with boasts. But these attacks and defenses were rarely specific. The arguments were never meant to be won.

Victory under such a system meant loss for them all. Meaningless aggression was the base of their friendship. It was ritualized warfare that maintained a balance between egos. For Jim, that ritual had become tinged with the poison of trivia, but his protected tissue was still too tender for the truth.

"No. It's easy to say." Nick said.

"For you. That's why we never liked you much." Jim grinned slightly, cracking the ring of mud around his mouth. He would never be comfortable in this other, truthful, place; he was a religious person deep down. "I'm glad they're all asleep right now. But tomorrow I'll want a beer and some running around and that will be enough. I thought for a while that it wouldn't be enough anymore, but now I'm feeling my old self coming back."

"You're not talking like your old self."

"I just saved a lady's life for fuck's sake. I'm allowed to act like a philosophizing fairy for a bit. It's temporary, cut me some slack."

They both stared at the fire but the mood was not somber; they had forgotten the dying woman. She had been saved or not saved. She had gotten her medicine, probably in time. They both went back to having the luxury of probably, where probably was as good as certainty.

"You know what I did after I gave them the pills?"

"What?"

"The first thing I did, didn't even say anything else. I ran out the door and pissed behind their house." He wanted to describe the strangeness he felt at that moment but he couldn't. Standing on a hillside in the dark, peeing by a stranger's house while inside a woman might be dying. It was like discovering someone putting rabbit ears over his head in a snapshot that was supposed to be serious. He wasn't sure if he was angry or amused. And it brought back the part of him that would have been able to stop whenever he felt like it to go to the bathroom, a part of himself he had begun to miss.

"It's weird how common things become absurd next to serious things," Nick said.

"It's like what happens when you say a word over and over again except with life. All the meaning just goes away. I felt giddy instead of scared. I think I should be scared by that?"

"Probably. Maybe it's a defense. When we stumble on the meaningless underpinnings, our brains fill with some giddiness-inducing chemical and we act like dumb chickens and say, 'Wow! What a weird life, cool,' and leave it at that. Does it make you feel any different?"

"What, giddiness?"

"No, saving someone's life."

"Not really. It just makes me feel tired. And giddy," a smile peeked through the crumbling-stoic mud of Jim's face. "It doesn't even feel like it was me that did it."

They both stared at the fire without speaking. Nick looked up at Jim but didn't see anything different about him. As the last log burned down, Jim stood up. "I'm going to bed," he said.

"Goodnight. I'll put the fire out."

"You know. I wish I could tell you the whole thing felt more important somehow. But it didn't."

In the blackness Nick heard a tent zip shut. He sat, watching the flame die, wondering if the ride would have felt important to him.

Ned the Automator

Dear Grandmother Barton,

My name is Ned, Ned Barton. I am your grandson, son of roger, who you obviously have communicated with before. I met you once, when I was five at a family gathering we had at a park near a river. That is as much detail as I remember—I apologize for my five-year-old's memory—though I do recall talking with you.

I'm not exactly sure how to tell you this in a way that will make sense, but, well, this is the first time I have written you, ever. Don't worry, I'm not on drugs. I know you get a letter from me on all your birthdays and at Christmas. I know that sometimes you have even gotten calls from me on your answering machine, but none of those were actually me. This letter is me, though. Ned, your grandson.

I may not be on drugs but I am in jail. I haven't been officially convicted of anything yet, but I thought that, perhaps, my arrest would make the papers, even all the way out east where you are, and I wanted you to know what it's all about.

I'm sure you know that I worked for a company called Streamline Communications. It's in the profile so I assume you've heard a little bit about my job from the family, perhaps from myself, even. But I'm sure it has all been vague allusions to some complicated occupation. Let me tell you about my job.

I was an Automator. Streamline Communications, you see, is in the business of automating communication between people and organizations. The company started out as a greeting card service. You logged online, gave our system a few key points, marked birthdays, anniversaries, any important event and important people down in our calendar, and the system would make sure that they got a greeting card, personalized to a small degree, on the proper occasion. That was back in 1998, before I was with the company, of course, and most of our clients at that time were corporate clients. We sent out cards and thank-you notes for CEOs, salesmen, those kinds of people. The service really took off. Soon, so many people were using the system that most people just assumed that whenever they got a card or a thank-you note in the mail, that it had been generated by a computer. Here's the part that always fascinated me: even after it became well known this was going on, clients kept signing up and renewing their contracts. It became just another defacto standard in the business world, like having a telephone. Everyone knew it was insincere, but to not do it would be worse.

Around that time a few other companies entered the market. Now the game became who could outdo the other in terms of complexity and personalization. Personalization, in fact, became all the rage. I can't even begin to describe to you how sophisticated it has all become, except to say, again, that none of the letters you have ever received from me were written by a human being.

And even before Streamline Communications launched their service, the CRM industry—that's Customer Relations Management—was already in full-swing. Hotels were early adopters. You'd check into a Hilton, any Hilton in the world, and if you'd asked for three pillow mints the last time you were there, then sure enough, you'd have three mints on your next visit without even having to ask. The Hilton's database was particularly impressive for its day. It would give the desk clerk key points about the circumstances of your last trip so that as you checked in, the clerk could follow up about whatever it was you were doing the last time you stayed at a Hilton. "Did you ever manage to get tickets to that play Mr. Dalton?" for example. The odd thing was, this was a global database, so even if you had been searching for theater tickets in New York, the San Francisco desk clerk would remember it as if he had been there in New York himself. This didn't upset people or throw them off because, well, people don't have great memories. Most people just liked the fact that someone remembered them, that makes people feel important, even if they themselves couldn't remember the specific conversation. Streamline Communications did the same thing, CRM, but we did it with correspondence: cards, letters, email, phone calls (though only via answering machine, we're still not sophisticated enough for real-time conversation.)

Naturally, it wasn't long before our corporate customers were adding their own family to their lists of recipients. Correspondence takes time, which many of our customers just don't have. And like I said, with other companies now in the mix, the product was becoming very sophisticated. But things got really weird when SC came out with an advanced product they called Full-Duplex Relationship Manager, FDRM. One of the downsides to our automated service was the increased volume of reply communications. That's where FDRM came in. When you signed up, you got an email address, a physical mailing address, and a voice-mail number. Any time a person responded to one of your automated messages, their response would automatically be routed through our system. Our algorithms would pick out the key points, store temporally important events like mergers, promotions, marriages, even deaths, and create a unique history in the database for every communication stream.

With this information, our system could then reply with an individually-tailored message that was not only timely, but relevant. Our own corporate research estimated that these closed-loop, totally computer-generated message cycles account for more than 72% of corporate communication. It's scary how widespread this practice is. We even have, and I'm ashamed to admit having used it myself all this time, a system designed specifically for old people. It's marketed as a sort of humanitarian service, a make-the-old-folk-feel-remembered type of thing.

Let me give you a few details about my job, then. I'm an Automator as I said. All that really means is that I make sure one of our nodes is running properly. We have 224 nodes, each of which has five Automators that work in shifts. It pays very well but the work is kind of grim. At first it was a perverse kind of thrill because what an Automator does is deal with the anomalies, the topics that have been deemed too sensitive or complicated for our algorithms. The code is quite sophisticated, but some things it doesn't do too well with yet, so it flags it for Automator attention. That means that most of my day was spent trafficking in death notes (they don't tell you that when you're hired.) Death was a sensitive topic, too sensitive to trust entirely to the code, so we would add a few lines here, edit an inappropriate phrase there. Most of my day was spent writing sentences like, "No one will miss him more than I will, he was a friend and one fo the best fisherman I've ever cast a line with." Spelling errors were part of the trick, though the code would sprinkle those in from time to time as well, to make it seem more authentic.

In my node alone we handled 423,000 communication streams. Those are FDRM streams too, so that's approximately 846,000 people, though some streams consist of more than two users, we handled a lot of group accounts. Each node is about the same size, so that means that Streamline Communications effectively created entire conversation loops for roughly 189,504,000 people globally. And that's just our company. None of the companies release user data, so it's hard to say just how much human interaction is managed in this way. It's mind-boggling. I worked there for twelve years before I really even thought about what that means. It saves time but for what? It means that grandma will be remembered, but by who? When was the last time you were grateful that your thermostat remembered to keep your house at 72 degrees Fahrenheit while you were away? Probably never. I hope never. Last week I realized that that's all Streamline Communications is, a big talking thermostat, a toxic sludge that had gummed up one of the traits that makes humans such fascinating creatures, the way we interact. So I set fire to

my node. I came to work with five gallons of ethanol and I lit the place on fire. The sprinklers put it out almost immediately. Security arrested me, the communication loops remain closed, I'm in jail.

But I've written you. Maybe this can be the beginning of something great for me? For us. I feel that even though I'm locked up, that a whole new world has just opened up to me. So Grandma Barton, or can I call you Mary, tell me all the things I've missed.

With love and apology,

Ned Barton

P.S. Don't reply to my former address as that was my automated inbox. Instead, please send your reply to:

Ned Barton

c/o Petaluma County Federal Prison

P.O. Box 3451

Warsaw, KY 89564

My Dearest Ned,

It is so sad to hear of you in jail. I have never been, but when life gives you lemons, you must make lemonde. You have always been a grandson to me. I am comfrted that you have a fire in your new place. Sorry for such a short note in response to your long letter. I always wish there was more time.

Love,

Mary Barton

From the same author on Feedbooks

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A segue. A short story about a transitional moment.

Ned the Automator (2008)

In a world where relationships have been automated, only Ned Barton has the nerve to set fire to the nerve center -- and the heart to write a letter to his grandma.

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