

What Happened Was

I was at the filling station. A dirty man with a red gas can approached me. He was wearing a suit coat and tie, tie to his sternum, coat to his elbows.

"You have a dollar, sir?" he said. "I was on my way to my sister's wedding.... I stopped to swim in the rivers.... They took my wallet...." That's the way he spoke, in ellipses.

I had a dollar to give him, and I would in just a minute, but I was bored. I was bored so much back then—work and home and stare at my hands.

"Which rivers?" I asked. "Are there rivers close by?"

The question pulled him from his miasma, eyes floating down from the sky.

"Two of them...." He pushed his hands together into a joining point. "Just back there." He gestured across a football field to where, indeed, two lines of trees angled and merged. "But I wouldn't go back there.... Boys with cigarettes...."

I pulled a five from my pocket and handed it to him. "Tell me," I said. "Your sister? When is she expecting you?"

"Tonight. The rehearsal, the fitting...."

"Fitting?"

He threw back his head and laughed, all the lines of his face pointing to his lips.

"You expect me to attend a wedding in this?"

He wandered away, dodging the traffic that flowed between him and the football field. I paid for my gas and got in the car. I spent a moment looking at my hands and then started the engine.

At home, the kids were digging a hole in the backyard.

"What's up?" I said.

Harvey turned around and held up the dead bird in his palms.

"Okay, guys."

I drew a bath and settled in. You want me to tell you how I felt? Well, here's what happened: I thought about the man with the gas can. I thought about the two rivers that join. I thought about the dead bird my kids had buried. I thought about my wife coming in and slipping into the water with me. I felt okay. A decision was being made. Love was pulling hard against freedom. Back then, there was so much love.

Evangelic

I said to that man, You know, your hair is like windows caught in the sunset and your eyes like the purple extracted from snow. He blushed a little and turned away. Well, that's nice, he said, thank you, but I have to tell you, I'm married, and I'm straight. I laughed a long time, big and rolling to put him at ease, and said, Well sure, me too. It's just that I'm a religious man and when I see another put together like you, liked he'd been held by the feet and dipped in the sun, I get reverent for the works of God. He eyed me then, the sharpest corner of his eye, and drew his arms across his heart. Oh, he answered, I've never taken much to God, to any of that, begotten sons and apocalypse. Science—I'm a mathematician. I nodded, feeling a red wave opening in my chest. A mathematician! I said. Well what do you know, the Measure of creation. He shook his head. Science, he answered, the weight of matter, the angle of the pole star. Yes, I told him. The weight of the Rose, the triangle of God's sight.

He scowled, tasting something ugly on his tongue. All right, he said. Okay, friend, that's quite enough; I've got to go. He grinned. I've got a woman waiting, if you want to know. A woman, not my wife, and I'm going to meet that woman, right now, and make love to her, devour her with my hands and my eyes. Yes, I said, and he nodded. That's what I'm about to do, she's waiting for me, that's the kind of man I am. I'm proud of it, he said. And ashamed too. And I'm not about to change. Not for you, for my wife, not ever.

I watched him give this speech, the blood in his ears and throat, the purple darkening in the meadows of his eyes. I watched, and as I witnessed, the red wave overtook me, a forest of red in the sky. I fell to the floor, and I began to shake, my head knocking the wood, my tongue curled and spitting. I writhed like a worm at his feet, and I sang, mouthing gibberish.

And when my eyes rolled open to look up at him, I saw a smile. I did. He smiled at me, his face shining. And he raised one hand in the air, cold and white and long, as if he were going to strike me. But he bent forward instead and he lay that hand at the crown of my head. And as he did, I saw the fireworks of forgiveness, the smoke and water of absolution. And I said to him, my mouth in flames, Thank you, thank you, oh God, thank you. And he closed his eyes at that and he held his breath. I don't know who you think I am, he said, I don't know who you think will save you. And at that I stood and shouted, You'll save us all!

Letters

I was in a dead room of wooden walls and floors. Outside the window was a dead forest, the leaves glowing green in the dead light. The birds were dusty with sun.

I turned to the desk against the wall. The varnish was nicked and cut. At rest on the sheet of green blotter was the iron typewriter. Each of its thin fingers was tipped with a B or Q or W, its own unique whorl.

I began the letter:

"Dear, Sylvie: I have many things to tell you, about our child, her growing teeth and hair, our garden, the dry soil shot with grass and weeds, our old, yellow car...."

I stopped there, unrolled the paper and added it to the pile of letters, all more or less the same—dry and sweet and broken.

I decided to walk in the forest. I found my stick and headed through the dusky tunnel the trees and red brush made. I saw a snake and a toad, both ochre and bluish, among the leaves. Both were still as I touched their flaking skin.

I walked until I was thirsty and tired and found a wide rock to sit on. I took a drink from my bottle. The cool shock was nice against my throat, but it opened something, and I wept.

I sat on the rock until I felt drowsy. The leaves clicked in the breeze and put me into a state. I began to hear voices, men warning, women rising occasionally to quell them. They frightened me, but I couldn't make them quit. It was their forest, marked in their stones, and I was just a tired man with a damp chest.

I plodded back through the woods. I unlatched my door and entered the room. There was the desk and the typewriter, and my girl, Genevieve, in the chair. She had my letters in her small-girl hands. I wanted to take them from her, protect her, but she's stronger than me. I sat on my bed and waited for her to finish. As she turned the pages,

she whispered what she read. Her voice was much like her mother's, but much like my own.

Mirror of Chance

They were kissing in the sand when a wave ran up the beach. Before his lips left hers, they were floating in a column of cold water. The wave receded and dragged them, their yellow lab, and their picnic out to sea. While he rose to the top, she sank, fading among the silt and strands of kelp. He broke water, sputtering, in time to see his dog and a sea lion regard each other from the crests of parallel swells. The lab, and then the sea lion, began to bark. He between them—frightened, lungs filled with water, wife nowhere to be seen—became referee in the mirror of chance.