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Today Is Another Day in Which We Do Not Hot-Tar Roofs

Seth Sawyers

It's another day and our wife tip-toes in saying, Mister, it's eight. We roll over. A half-hour later, less quietly than before, she announces the new time and we roll over again. A half-hour after that she bangs closed a drawer, throws open the curtains, and we are up. She is patient with us. We brush our teeth, walk into the other bedroom, and we are at work.

On our slim, dense box that is both a wonder and a curse, we scan all the messages people in St. Louis and San Diego have sent us here in Baltimore. We are on the lookout for exclamation points, for anything in bold, anything in all caps. We see that we have Mary's weekly meeting before lunch. We drink a first cup of coffee.

Then we open a new window within our slim, dense box. We read about the overnight terrible thing or we read about the team we like or else we play the game we've been playing for months but which sounds silly when you talk about it out loud. On this day, we read an article about a cigar-shaped space rock that has whizzed by and though scientists don't know for sure, a Harvard professor thinks this is the first piece of rock we've ever seen that's come from outside our solar system, and moreover there's at least a chance that this piece of rock could have been the burned-out hull of some alien civilization's spacecraft and that just maybe it was checking us out. The world is so full of remarkable things that it makes us want to scream or cry or scrape or jump.

But there's the matter of Mary's conference call in twenty minutes, which will be concerned with what everyone's been doing on their slim, dense boxes. Nope, fourteen minutes. Our hair is greasy. We take a quick shower, run a razor along the edges of what we're calling a beard, and comb our wet hair, which we hope will miraculously dry in the three minutes before Mary's conference call. It does not.

We click on an underlined jumble of letters and numbers and up pops a new window. There they are, the eleven other faces who do the same kind of work that we do. It's raining in some of their neighborhoods, but not all of them. Usually, at this particular time of the week, we're fourteen, but one of us is still on maternity leave, and another is visiting Texas again. We slip in our cheap white earbuds. Hello, how is everyone doing, someone says, and we're just waiting on Mary, and then it's we'll begin in a minute, and thanks for your patience.

In that minute, eleven sets of eyes blink, jaws chew the last of the granola bar or gum that's lost its flavor, our faces white-blue and aglow, it strikes us. Way back when we first heard about the Internet, we thought: It'll be like an enormous encyclopedia, but instead of the entry for, say, Mars being just a single page, on the Internet it'll go for as long as it needs. Longer, actually. Pages and pages on Mars, and also everything else, too. And that, in a way, is exactly what's happened. The Internet is a giant encyclopedia but also almost everything else, too, except for a hamburger. The Internet is not a hamburger, nor the feeling of a cold nose warming against your cheek, nor is it the act of applying hot tar to a roof.

Instead, the Internet is a Wednesday during which we will not drive a car, will not leave the house, will not smell another person who is not our wife. The Internet, as it comes to us on these slim, dense boxes that are a blessing but also a curse, is us, sitting cross-legged on a not-odorless comforter atop a spare bed, a collared shirt and clean-if-wet hair up top, cut-off jean shorts down below. The internet is a kitchen a few steps away even though we are always hungry or else we have eaten a yogurt of a variety we do not prefer, and some walnut pieces from abag, and three and a half stale dill-and-sea-salt Triscuits. The internet means that if we are sweating, something has gone wrong.

The Internet means we will not hurt our hands, our backs, the sharp front edges of our shins. It means we will hate, if only briefly, and for the hundredth time, because of an email worded in a particularly infuriating way from the senior legal analyst who lives in Michigan. The Internet will make us feel bad about ourselves, and make us wonder why we are not working on the novel or kissing a child or using our sleeve to wipe the snot from our nose during a long, slow run around the reservoir where we sometimes see red-tailed hawks and, once, way up on a standing dead tree, an oriole. It's true: we could be having sex right now. We could be shooting a gun. We could be napping and drooling at the same time. We could be reading a book of poetry, given to us by a friend who has died, that fo

r nine years has sat on the second shelf from the bottom, the red-spined book with the title that is all prepositions, and which we've always suspected would, in some warm little way, change our life.

Mary's later than usual, so now we're drinking from our second cup of coffee. We can see ourselves on the screen of the slim, dense box, and our hair is still a little wet. Probably no one cares, but they notice. Maybe they think we're not doing a good enough job. Maybe they think we're a little wild, that we don't give a fuck. But they'd be wrong. We do give a fuck because we don't want to be pointed at, to be shown to be less than satisfactory. We experience guilt. We experience many emotions up here in the other bedroom, and some of them are suitable for the work that we do while others are not. Mary is joining in a minute, someone says. Thanks for your patience.

Now we're on mute and we're waiting for the knock on the door, or for someone to leave a voicemail. Now we're sad about nothing we can identify. Now we're not feeling well in our stomachs. Now we're worried. Now we're just recently in love or, more likely, out of it, and terribly. We should call our mothers. We should see more live music. We smoked a cigarette the other night.

We're tired, for sure, and we're bored. We're scared of not doing good enough to keep getting paid to do this, with these slim, dense boxes. We're behind on emails. We're anxious and we don't know why. We have not used our muscles enough. We want to try the new thing. We want to be told we're funny, that everyone loves us, that our wife will never die.

We're all looking at Mary's face now. She's smiling. She's not so bad, Mary. We like her. It could be a lot worse than Mary. Sorry to keep you waiting, she says. That's OK, we all say. She's missed us, she says, and thanks for your patience.

And you, how's it going for you, Mary asks, and I say: It's been tough, but doing my best. I know you have been, she says. I know. And then, in Charlotte, or maybe it's outside of Charlotte, she smiles, and I sneeze. Bless you, someone in Maine says, and just then, I love her, the woman in Maine. Does she, up there in the pines, prefer the full form of her name, or the shortened? I've never asked.

Mary's got the spreadsheet open that we're all going to be looking at. After this call, I'm going to open that book of poetry. I'm going to try to open that book. I'd like to. I'm going to do it this time, for real, right after this call. Right after.

Seth Sawyers's writing has appeared in *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Phoebe*, *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *Salon*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Sports Illustrated*, and elsewhere. He has been awarded scholarships or residencies from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, Writers@Work, and VCCA, and was a 2019 Maryland Individual Artist Award winner. He lives in Baltimore with his wife.