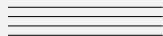


M O U N T   A U B U R N  
S T R E E T



J O H N   C R O W L E Y

Harry Watroba kept a lookout for signs that he was transitioning into old age. For instance, he had come to notice how, like a cheerful oldster, he took increasing satisfaction in tidying, in small-job completion, in preparation and storage, in refreshment of the spaces around him. Shaping up the last redoubt? It didn't seem so, but certainly he was becoming more like the ant than the grasshopper he'd been in youth. Also he was growing more miserly, a sign of age in many cultures, as he knew: the slippers counting over his coins. Right now he was scrubbing the accumulated calcium and minerals from an old stainless-steel teakettle that had become so coated with thick white stuff the water could hardly come out. He'd had to find a thin sharp thing (an ancient silver nut pick, in the end) with which to poke down through the stubby spout and clear the holes that the water would, or rather wouldn't, pour out of; scrape with a green scrubbie the interior, and – as long as he was at it – the greasy and water-spotted exterior too. The water in this place he'd come to live in was phenomenally hard. The kettle belonged to the place, not to Harry.

Harry's own kettle, an even older and more battered one, had

been lost forever when Harry's house burned down, or up – Harry pondered the difference, what made one preposition preferable to the other. And *lost*: the catastrophe had given him many reasons to consider the various and differing occasions for that word. *I lost my wife*, we say, though (excepting the case of a separation at a mall or in a crowd) we know just where she is. The *lost* in *I lost my way* seems to be a rather different word than it is in, say, *I lost my hat*, or in *I lost that fight*.

Another thing Harry had lost in the fire was the nearly complete draft of a major revision and updating of his popular (even briefly best-selling) book *A Rhetoric for Everyone*. He had certainly lost the book, even though he knew where the scorched remains of the pages and the sturdy binder that had held them were: they were with his library, down in the wetted ash and blackened lumber of his former office in the nice Colonial Revival house in the hill town where he had lived for decades. He'd lost the computer on which it was almost done being typed, and the disks on which several drafts were stored, and those also on which it was backed up, and he knew where those were too. Because of the fire he had also lost, different sense, his wife Mila: she blamed him (justly enough) for the fire, and had moved in with her mother in a nearby city. In various losings then, his home, his book, his occupation, his wife, his way, his future, and his (weirdly long-standing) innocence.

The old teakettle now shone, glowing like an athlete after exercise. The dent on one side made it all the more appealing: refreshed and ready, but old and reliable too. *Baraka*: long ago Mila had told him this Arabic word meant “the holiness human things acquire through long use.” Only recently had it occurred to him to look this up and confirm she was right, and she wasn't. Which left a gap in the language, for surely a word for the condition he'd thought *baraka* described was necessary and gratifying.

He put the kettle back on the stovetop where it resided.

For a couple of months after the conflagration Harry'd moved in with his daughter Hope and her daughter Muriel, in the spare room, feeling a weird sense of privileged stasis, like a soul in the quiet forecourt of a not-yet-determined afterlife. That couldn't continue, and without making an actual decision, or to avoid mak-

ing one, Harry had rented this small and uncertain-looking little house beside a stretch of highway, a town away from his old home. Despite doing not much of anything he had somehow managed to accumulate a large number of belongings in the time he lived with Hope and Muriel. Clothes of course, to replace the lost contents of his closets; Old Navy mostly, as he felt guilty about spending more than necessary of the diminishing savings that were both his and Mila's. Sales at Old Navy astonished him: jeans and shirts and cotton sweaters with prices that seemed to hark back to Harry's youth, thence reduced to next to nothing, buy one get one free. Hope had at length loaded all this and the rescued books and papers and winter boots, the laundry and a little radio, into the Subaru and trucked it up on a sunny Tuesday when she had a late shift at the hospital and her daughter Muriel was in school.

She stood on the threshold now, looking in. "Why didn't you go the whole distance and just move into a damn trailer?"

"Actually I looked at a few," Harry said. "Immobile homes."

She crossed her arms before her.

"Furnished," Harry pointed out. "A deck." He was able to show her the whole place from the doorway, which she seemed reluctant to pass through. "A river. Just there."

Hope went to her car and pulled stuff out, shopping bags and boxes; Harry came to help. "How long's this supposed to last you?"

"I can't say, how long," Harry said. "The insurance company is havoring." Good old Scots word, related to *hovering*, meaning something between pausing in uncertainty and dithering. The insurance company had been alerted to the presence of possibly flammable materials stored in the basement, the proximate cause of the fire, and no funds from the policy had yet been seen. Harry and Mila were still paying the mortgage on the place, which didn't leave much for alternate digs.

*Flammable* things had formerly been called *inflammable*, till warnings and tags became so common in the world that the ambiguity in that prefix became a problem. (Harry'd discussed it in Section 20 of his book, "Affix a Prefix.") The opposite of the old *inflammable* had been *uninflammable*; it was uncertain, now, what the opposite of *flammable* could be – *nonflammable*, probably. But really, who needed a warning that something would not catch fire?

“So are you going to get a new computer? Can you get online here?”

“Dial-up,” Harry said, with a smile that he could tell from Hope’s face was deeply annoying to her. A large truck just then going past the house on the road could be felt as well as heard. That was a drawback; Hope indicated it with a thumb, saying nothing. Harry shrugged, nodded in assent.

“All right,” she said, fishing for her keys. “I gotta go.”

“Tell Muriel I live by a river.”

“She misses you.” She kissed her father’s cheek.

That had been a dreary day in late autumn. The place was a little nicer now, due mostly to the melting of the filthy snow around it and the soft pour of sun throughout a longer day, but not much. Harry didn’t mind it, could stand even the mildewed davenport and finger-grimed television and all the other signs of terminal impoverishment. He did, though, find himself tucking his arms and knees into a fetal ball in the lumpy bed at night, child or pup trying to comfort itself. And when he was here all day, nothing to do, he had to go out, every hour or two through the day, and sit in the aluminum lawn chair a while and look at the little river or stream or creek (he hadn’t learned its name, or even if it had one). On this mild April day wearing a beret and overcoat, his gloved hands crossed.

Inconceivable as it seemed he would have to bestir himself. He might cease moving altogether if he didn’t.

It wasn’t quite true that Harry had lost everything connected to the new draft of *A Rhetoric for Everyone*. He possessed a large folder of notes and scraps of paper with queries to follow up on, photocopied book and magazine pages on which he had circled examples of this or that notion, and many complete pages of early drafts, a heap of disordered stuff that had tended to travel with him in his old shoulder bag; that’s where it was the day of the fire, in the bag on the passenger seat of his Oldsmobile station wagon, when he’d come up the hill to his house smelling the awful wet-cigarette-butt smell of a fire just put out. That it was all he now had of the book made it worse, in some ways, than nothing; but he did have it. He planned to start in on transposing it to a single document, and cutting and pasting that document into the begin-

ning of some sort of draft. He thought of Carlyle rewriting his entire history of the French Revolution after John Stuart Mill's maid used the only manuscript to start fires in the fireplaces. There was no lack of such tales. No one would care to hear his.

What had kept him from beginning was the horror of typing it all into the computer. He could not have dreamed, not in detail, that such a thing as a personal computer with word processor would come into being when as a young man he had hunched sweating and swearing over his Royal Standard, punching at keys with two fingers (the index of the left, the medicus of the right, for no reason he knew). His machine had forever needed and never got a cleaning and oiling, which would have reduced his toil somewhat. No more than most men of his age and time, even those who earned their living by writing, had Harry ever tried to learn to type for real, any more than he'd learned to sew. What he could imagine was one day being rich enough to deliver his work, typed on smudgy erasable paper, interlined, overwritten, cut up and taped together, to a real typist, to be returned to him perfect and clean.

But then that modern miracle had come to pass, and now typing was a world easier though still not exactly swift or pleasant, not for him, and the luxury of that long-imagined typist was unjustifiable. After much indecision he had brought home a computer to replace the deformed and dead one at the old house. Unlike that one, this one came to him used, or pre-owned, but like a good but aging servant dismissed and thrown on the job market it was surely capable of handling the new additions to or *upgrade* of his book, as the agreed-upon term was. It'd come from the shop to which the university students and their thriftier or more poorly paid instructors went, where ancient and less-ancient drives, monitors, laptops, and printers were piled like old clothes at the Salvation Army. Harry actually loved computers, and knew enough about them to pick the correct components, but he had to fight a tendency toward nostalgia and not buy a system redolent of his first encounters with the phenomenon. A final choice had taken him several visits, but now it was set up and awaiting him in his front room, before it a maple kitchen chair with a knitted seat-cover. Two years before, all machines made such as this one was, from grand data centers on windswept prairies to the innards of

digital clocks, had been thought to be at risk of stopping dead — their systems could not, it was said, understand dates past 1999. Y2K was the neat designation for this catastrophe, which had passed with no harm done, as Harry out of an inherent optimism had supposed it would.

Faced with typing up the mass of notes and snippets of print-outs and loose papers, WordPerfect or no, Harry had been driven to an additional purchase he thought he might regret. And now from the back deck where he sat he heard the arrival of the UPS truck, and the drop of a delivery onto his miniature front porch. He knew what it was. It wasn't a gift. It wasn't a master-key or an arcanum. It was one of those conveniences that promise you can increase your work output for no increase in effort, and present this as an opportunity, even a delight.

*Dragon Naturally Speaking* it was called. How had it come by such a name? Harry was reminded of the weird literal translations that used to appear on old Chinese menus. Why not *Dragon Speaking Naturally*? Harry the Dragon collected the package from the porch, opened it and drew out the product within. He smelled the sharp odor of its newness, and touched the sheen of the cellophane that covered its box, which was likely not actual cellophane but a modern successor.

The usual stack of floppy disks, which held the program, were half the size of the old floppies and encased in stiff plastic, but still and likely forever to be called “floppy.” A pleasant half-hour was spent installing these. A headset, like those used by telemarketers and 911 operators, went over the head and pointed a small microphone at the mouth. Feeling faintly silly, Harry pressed the wire loop into his grizzled hair and discovered that there was on his new old computer a place to plug it in, naturally.

Things got curiouser: in order to train the program to understand his peculiar, that is particular, speech (“Adjectives on the Move,” Section 21), the training manual instructed him to read passages from *Alice in Wonderland* in a distinct yet relaxed and natural voice as they appeared before him on the screen. Fine. When that process was done, the promise was that he would be able to read aloud the notes, bits, examples, vocabulary, hints, wonderments, and fun facts from his notebooks as effortlessly as a lawyer reading a will to a roomful of descendants.

Having at length (his computer proved less trainable than Harry had expected) been certified, his particularities processed, Harry tried out a few simple sentences of his own. “Perfection of form is the most perfect content,” he said aloud to program-and-computer – a phrase he’d actually once written in his nicest hand on the bathroom wall of some john somewhere. He watched as it produced a sentence not resembling his very much. He tried again. *Defection affirms the nosed turf at contend.* He tried again, and then again. *Puff action of form is the mows Purvis condemned.* There was of course a way to tidy up the natural errors the poor thing made, but having to do that made the speaking not a bit more easeful than simply typing as fast and as well as he could. Harry thought of Henry James dictating his serpentine sentences to a typist, who probably did far better than the Dragon. She had been, of course, a human.

Harry disengaged from the headset and went to take a nap.

Like a toddler in a talkative family, the Dragon did learn, and on a rising curve – getting better faster every day. The nonsense that persisted, like a toddler’s, could be amusing: the program always took a guess, no matter how odd; it never just ran a line of question marks or X’s. Harry decided that it, or he, had passed the tests, pulling a C+ or B– anyway, and on a bright and hopeful summer morning he chose a section from his notebook pages to dictate.

These were some little puzzles that would go into the section “Text and Context,” showing that dictionaries could not finally settle questions of meaning, that words were simply too cunning for that, and without losing the definiteness of their definitions, could alter to match their surroundings in the same way the fabled chameleon does. Two related stories were presented, and the reader was to come up with two words to fill the blanks in the summation that followed each story, in one order after the first story, and the reverse order after the second.

Harry began reading the first of the puzzles aloud. Headings and explications he’d add later, when he’d composed them.

*I owned a pair of rare 1937 Bugatti Type 57S roadsters, he read aloud. They cost a fortune. One of them I never drove. But in the second one I tooled around the neighborhood, enjoying the stares –*

*until I flew through a stop sign and tangled with a lowly SUV. The Bugatti was totaled.*

Well done, Dragon! Harry had only a few corrections (*boo got he*) to make. He inserted the fill-in-the-blanks sentence by hand:

*My \_\_\_\_\_ car was no longer \_\_\_\_\_.*

Then the second story:

*The other Type 57S lived in my heated garage after that, and I watched its market value rise – that is, until the latest market downturn. It rapidly become nearly worthless, as did the garage, the heavily mortgaged house, and the stocks I had bought on margin. In order to avoid bankruptcy I had to sell everything at fire-sale prices, and the Bugatti, no less precious than it had been, went for a song.*

*My \_\_\_\_\_ car was no longer \_\_\_\_\_.*

Mila had shown no interest in this riddle, as she had in some other games that he produced for the book. Why did he want to write stories about expensive sports cars, especially imaginary ones? A lawyer, she was invested in the ways in which words had power and did things in the world; toying with them just for the fun of it, or even to uncover their interesting innards, was to her a habit of Harry's not much different from his constant sing-humming bits from classical music or jazz standards.

"You never *finish*," she said once in impatience. "You just do your little diddle-diddle-doo and then nothing. There's no conclusion. No closure."

"I do the theme," Harry'd replied. "I can't whistle-hum the whole symphony."

"Just don't do it then," she said. "Do something with a payoff. Or don't do it."

Mila. God how long he'd loved her.

As he thought this, sitting in a house where she was not, a new switch-the-words puzzle occurred to him. Unwilling to draft it in speech (though that was advertised on the Dragon box as possible) he removed his headset and turned away from the screen, took a pencil and a pad and balanced it on his knee to scribble.

*My place of residence, he wrote at speed, where I have lived for many years, has been terribly damaged in a fire, and all my books, cherished memorabilia, old kitchenware, and inherited furniture, lost. It could be rebuilt perhaps, but to me it could not ever be the same.*



*My \_\_\_\_\_ is no longer a \_\_\_\_\_.*

Then:

*I sought shelter, and eventually found a space under a bridge. I have been welcomed and taken in by the others there, who are very kind. I have laid out blankets and set up a camp stove. I never would have thought I could live this way, but I find I can, and have not lately thought of moving on.*

*My \_\_\_\_\_ is no longer a \_\_\_\_\_.*

For a moment, pen in hand, Harry felt a shame so profound and thoroughgoing that it seemed to draw into his soul all the embarrassments and lacks of his life, his cowardice, his unwarranted self-reliance, his pride.

He turned back to the screen. There was a word typed there that he had not entered.

*woman*

He regarded it in bafflement. He lifted a finger to erase it, or to type something else, as a test; but felt suddenly immobilized. Another word typed itself as he looked:

*womb*

What glitch in the program could possibly. He reached to turn it off. Another word appearing on the screen stopped him:

*woe*

A shiver passed over Harry. If his wife, or his dead mother, were speaking arcane words to him through the machine, or over the dial-up web, should he reply? What could he say? He laughed aloud in mystified awe. For a time he waited to see if further messages would be sent. None came.

He ought to get out now, he thought, staring, and go for a walk. Yes he should.

He nearly tipped over his chair as he rose. Sought his jacket and hat, thinking *What on earth?* and also that maybe he should save his work, and its work also. He might need the evidence. Pausing before the computer, jacket half on: yes, the words were there, none added, none erased. He powered down, but not off. Let it be.

The otherwise rather charmless small town where Harry had rented his house was blessed with Wordsworthian walks, climbs, views. Like all such New England places its old fields and farms

were becoming reforested (were reforesting?), but still there were broad meadows and hedgerows, ponds and wetlands; grand old maples on their last legs marched along the quiet roads, left alone by the first settlers so as to shade the way after they had cut and sold or used the others. Harry, walking upward through the dense pools of shadow these cast, looking out to far hills pale with sun, thought not for the first time that landscape painters must be the happiest of people, with a job that could only bring peace and delight. He felt a vast gratitude that he had been allowed to experience this, all this, the world, the air, the wonderful gatherings of five senses.

He hadn't reached the top of the rise when he had to stop. A pain across his breastbone, or maybe his back, hard to say. This familiar pain he attributed to a pulled muscle in the chest area caused by moving things into and out of his rental. Certainly it would get better, he told his daughter and wife, and both urged him to just go get it checked out; but Harry, as a doctor's son, had an antipathy to bringing trivial complaints to Dr. Beha, a good man but (like Harry's father) seeming to enjoy being cheerfully dismissive. *It's not a pulled muscle, Harry*, Mila told him over the phone. *It's angina! My mother just got diagnosed with it! Will you please just listen?* And he said he would.

The pain had sharply worsened. The top of the rise seemed far away suddenly, and Harry had broken out in sweat. Nausea flooded him. He stopped by a mailbox, and put his hand on it to stay standing. After a moment the door of the house to which the mailbox belonged opened and a woman hurried toward him, wiping her hands on her jeans, a gesture somehow betokening help and mercy. This good neighbor, whose husband had died of — but there she'd stopped her relation — took him in her truck to the ER at the nearest hospital, Harry alternately trying to breathe and to read the colorful prayer stuck to the dashboard. Though doubtful, at his insistence she dropped him off at the wide doors, still walking at least, waving her good-bye.

First an EKG was done, inconclusive but not good. Blood tests showed he had not had a heart attack, not precisely anyway. A stress test, quickly aborted when Harry began to exhibit danger signs. An angiogram, showing multiple blockages in Harry's coro-

nary arteries. But, but (he complained to no one, there being no one to complain to) he'd taken his statins faithfully, he'd cut down on fats, he walked often. Pretty often. His carotid artery when last tested was clean as a whistle – that was the term used. But like characters in Wonderland, the doctors and staff behaved as though there was nothing surprising at all about Harry's having fallen into this hole and down among them, and went on talking sense to him that sounded as strange to him as nonsense. He was put to bed and scheduled for a double bypass as soon as a room opened up. Mila was called, Dr. Beha (who had privileges here) looked in on him and made mild jokes, his insurance thank God was in force, Mila and Hope arrived and stayed by him. And clothed in a backless johnny printed with violets, holding their warm hands, before nightfall Harry went meekly into oblivion.

What meaning relates anesthetic to aesthetic? His Greek professor had long ago posed that question, which ended up in Harry's burned book. What relates cosmic to cosmetic? Mila told him that these were his first muddied remarks after arising from the depths. He didn't believe her. Sitting with him in his semi-private room (that is, nonexclusive or shared; Harry made a mental note he soon would lose) she related this funny positively true fact to the man in the other bed, who made no reply.

When she was gone, though, the man lifted his unshaven face to Harry.

"Anesthetics," he said.

"Yes," Harry said,

"There's horror stories," his roommate whispered, seeming to be one himself, as yet untold. "People waking up in the middle of their operations, not enough gas, looking up at this crew with their hands in your innards."

"Not possible," Harry said. Speech hurt.

"I'm telling you," the other said. "It's because the gas is so toxic that they want to use as little as possible. They take a chance on the minimum. So people are waking up, experiencing their operations, all the pain, but just unable to speak. Frozen."

"We'd know," Harry said. "They'd tell."

"They give you this stuff so if it happens you won't remember.

Sometimes it's called Versed. Other names. Wipes the memory. But here's the problem: you do remember. If you try. It's like remembering a dream. One little hint, and it all comes back."

Versed. Pronounced as two syllables. The anesthetist had explained it to him and to Mila, and Hope restated it. Drug names fascinated Harry; they were Joycean mashups or Lewis Carroll portmanteau words, sometimes suggestive of their claimed effects (Librium) and sometimes merely pretty or forceful-sounding, but often retaining some vestige of their chemical composition. The path to the right name, he knew, was fraught. His father, a doctor, had told him of a tranquilizer named with the common *-ol* ending that came near to being marketed before somebody finally said it aloud. It was called Damitol.

Versed was also called something less handy, what was it, lovely and mysterious, the doctor had said the name. Bedazzling. Midazolam! Me bedazzled, sawn open, safe from self-knowing.

There arose then, like a warning or truth swimming up from the dark pool within the Magic Eight Ball, a memory. A memory he should not have been able to make. Not of the surgical table, the bloodstained gowns, but after, as he lay blind and immobile on the respirator in a no-world. He had heard a voice – Mila's. Speaking to someone, who, his doctor or some doctor or nurse. They were talking about *shutting him down*: were those the words? *Well he wouldn't want to live if he wasn't fully okay*. She was prepared, he had heard her say; he'd had a good life and she was ready to say good-bye. And she was – he heard this clearly – his healthcare proxy.

He sprang to alertness, eyes wide in the semi-dark, beside his harshly breathing roommate. A dream? Opiate hallucination? He didn't know. For a long while he lay still, experiencing it again and again, with a deep thrill of horror each time. His monitor surveyed him, unalarmed. At last he slept.

"Harry," Mila said to him, when next day he asked her, tell me the truth, had she said those things to the doctor? "Harry, how could I have? How could you think it? You weren't even in that much trouble."

"Well I thought. I mean I thought I remembered."

She leaned over him where he lay, and smoothed his unkempt

hair. "I love you, Harry, you dope. Maybe I also can't stand you. But I don't want you dead."

"Good to know," he said, all he could say.

He was only in the hospital a couple of days, which amazed him. They wanted him up, they wanted him walking, they wanted him out. His roomie remained in bed, suffering something worse than he had. Harry, resting from a trudge around the ward, exchanged a few words with him; they named their residences, this man's in Boston originally.

"Here's a Boston riddle," Harry said. "Why is life like Mount Auburn Street?"

"I know this," the other said. "I've heard it."

"Because," Harry said, unwilling to leave it unsaid, "it begins at a hospital and ends at a cemetery."

The man mulled, lips moving as though tasting a tidbit. "Funny," he said. "It's not true, though."

"Not true?" Harry turned carefully to look at him. "That life doesn't begin in a cemetery, or end in a, I mean the other way around?"

"No no," said his friend. "It's not true of Mount Auburn Street."

"No?"

"One end is up way past the Mount Auburn Hospital, toward Harvard Square. Mount Auburn Cemetery's not far down. A few blocks. The street goes on after that."

"And where does it end?"

The man gazed upward, his pain seeming for a moment mitigated by the effort of speculation. "A long ways," he said. "I think it goes as far as the river, and ends there. The Charles. I think. I bet."

Harry seemed to see dark water flowing, stone riparian works, a far side where maybe lights were lit. He was near sleep. "So life isn't like Mount Auburn Street," he said. "But still, is Mount Auburn Street like life?"

But his roommate was now once again actually asleep, or dead, and answer came there none.

Harry, discharged, couldn't return to his shack by the river: his wife and daughter were clear about that. For one thing, he wasn't

allowed to drive for several weeks, and for the first of those weeks even had to sit in the back seat of whatever car ferried him here and there. But why? Well, said the Physician's Assistant – a new healthcare-provider role which Harry confused with the similar but different Nurse Practitioner – just suppose you were to get into an accident. Your airbag might deploy, and smack you right in the chest, and break your breastbone open again, which would be . . . well, it would be very bad.

Mila took him to her mother's huge old house in the city, smelling of cleaning products and boiled vegetables, the home she'd escaped from years before and from which her mother refused to move now when she was at last alone in possession. Harry through the calm of painkillers could feel clearly Mila's sense of purgatorial impatience at being there and with them.

When his awful wound had healed sufficiently, Harry was signed up for Cardiac Rehab. It wasn't optional. He was to report every other morning at a space in the large city hospital with other heart-procedure survivors, better or worse off than he, and walk treadmills and do other things while hooked up to recording devices that would track heart rate and blood pressure, with nurses or overseers ready to take him off if he began to fail or fibrillate. All right. There was no place Harry hated more than a gym, which this sounded very much like, where he would take his place amid a crowd of wounded or fading old men, what fun.

"Fun," he said to Hope on the phone.

"Fun!" he heard Muriel cry from Hope's side.

"She's so affirmative," Hope said. "It's amazing. Dad, just tell me you'll go."

"It's *fun!*" Muriel shouted into the receiver, her mother laughing and trying to retain the phone, Harry could hear it.

"Not fun," Harry said. "Toiling in the Devil's pit is fun. Being drafted into the Soviet army and doing jumping jacks for years is fun. This is not fun." But he went. The hospital was only blocks from his (incipiently, putatively) ex-mother-in-law's house.

The first morning was Intake. Harry waited for his turn on a long bench outside the door, able to observe the walkers to nowhere, slow and slower, hung with recording devices, underarms of their athletic wear glistening with sweat.

His turn was called. He entered Intake's miniature office and sat.

"So let's see, Watroba?"

"Yes."

Intake shuffled files, opened one, then another. "And let's see, you're here after an incident where your pants caught on fire?" He regarded Harry without judgment. A strange moment of immobile silence fell, in which Harry doubted reality.

"What? No," he said. "No, not."

Intake looked again at the file he held. "Watroba," he said. "Stanley. Fifty-nine years old. SS number . . ."

"No," said Harry. "Harold. Not Stanley. Sixty-one."

"Oh right." He put down the folder and picked up another without apology. "Here we are. Double bypass."

"Yes."

"It's a common enough name," Intake said. "Around here."

"Around here," Harry said.

Intake went on talking, explaining things about hearts and arteries that Harry knew, and describing his own healthy outdoor practices (tracking, though not in any way harming, game and other animals). Harry, caught in an ontological twist, could listen and respond well enough, while also being elsewhere and other-when.

Pants on fire. It had been in D.C., where he'd gone with Mila, who was to be interviewed for a government job. He was proud of her even if he didn't very much want her to want to have a government job. Strong legs in glossy stockings, a real attaché case and a smart black suit. They'd got off the train, and Harry was hunting for something in a pants pocket, not finding it, and giving up just when a pointing passerby cried out and then Mila too. Harry's pocket was smoking. In fact, as he later remembered it — though he couldn't now be sure the physics would work — his pocket was showing pale yellow flame. He beat it out in a moment. But Mila's look in that moment he couldn't extinguish: wonder, horror, disbelief, and then less nameable faces too, coming and going as Harry checked for burns and attempted nonchalance.

Liar liar.

"So you understand the regimen," Intake said.

He brought himself around, reviewed what he remembered of what had just been said, and said yes he understood. He didn't, however, understand the mystically unlikely coincidence that put

his namesake and fellow pants-burner here. It seemed another puzzle set him, whose terms he couldn't grasp, whose answer didn't exist.

It turned out Stanley wasn't in cardiac rehab, not anyway in Harry's class. Once having been wired up each morning and gotten under way with the others, walking steadily to nowhere all covered in dots like Lazarus's sores, he thought about it. Which one would be taken, suddenly, at the machine, and be hustled away by the attendants? Would the rest of them walk on and on?

Harry hadn't ever been particularly afraid of death, and now he was. Not all the time and not seriously so far, but alone in the dark of night sometimes sharply. What exactly does that mean, "afraid of death"? It didn't mean afraid of being dead, or afraid of Judgment or what would happen next, the strangely named Afterlife (Hugo's *grand peut'être*, the Big Maybe). None of that did he find alarming. No, it was the process itself, the approach to the dark door, the feeling as of being unwillingly put on the scariest ride at the fun fair. Would he funk? He was afraid of being afraid, afraid of an unseaming fear gripping him at the arrival of it. He worried about being taken suddenly by unmistakable symptoms in a public place, knowing he was doomed and seized by terror while blank-faced bystanders looked on, glad it wasn't them. He didn't know if he was brave enough to die, solid enough as a soul or as a man to face it.

And instead it had only snuck up beside him and whispered in his ear. The doctor knew what it was, though. The Fellow in the Bright Nightgown, as W. C. Fields named him. Harry had simply come upon a flaw or trap, a *gin* they'd have said long ago, that had been lying in wait within him, growing more dangerous as the years passed, while he went on in ignorance, *willed* ignorance or at least an unwillingness to look deeply. He had been thinking of his *cardiac event* and all that had succeeded it as a portal that he had come to and passed through in some agony and much doubt. But it hadn't been a portal, certainly not a portal to somewhere new. It was where he'd been all along, only he hadn't known it. The technical medical term, Harry supposed, was *fool's paradise*.

"Harry," Mila said to him. He was propped up on pillows in the living room, on a large plush sofa. "The insurance agent called. They've decided to pay. Just about the settlement I expected."



“Oh God.”

“It took some maneuvering,” Mila said, almost tenderly. She pushed Harry’s pillow up behind him, and moved a coffee cup out of danger. Wife, nurse, handmaid, lawyer. A dense rush of painful gratitude possessed him.

“So you’ve got to start thinking about what next,” Mila said.

“Yes.”

“I mean really thinking.”

“Are *you* thinking?” Harry asked. “I mean, I’d like to know what you’re thinking.”

Mila regarded him, seeming to be thinking many things. Following the fire she had announced (if that could be the word for her rageful flinging of reproach) that she wanted a divorce. He remembered how she had talked to the doctor about pulling the plug. No that had been a false memory.

“Let’s start small,” she said. That was a tactic learned from his Pay Attention! program, and passed to her. “What are you going to do right now?”

“Go back to my house, I mean the place there you saw.”

“I’ve never seen it.”

That must be true, Harry thought. Her face at the window, her hand shielding the sunlight to peer through the dirt? Not true.

“But Harry. You can’t live there. You have to think.”

When at last he was allowed to drive the Oldsmobile by himself, summer was nearly over. He almost drove past his place by the river; it seemed further enfeebled, invisible. The door resisted him, swollen like an old joint. Inside, mouse turds littered the drainboard; a lovely bloom of white mold covered the unremoved food scraps. Harry flung open the windows, cleaned up what could be cleaned – the place had long since reached that point of equanimity between old dirt and new cleansing that could not now be altered.

The computer sat where it had, the stack of floppies still beside it. It hadn’t actually been shut off on the summer day when Harry hadn’t returned. He pressed its start button. Even as he was remembering what he would see – the mystic information he had left there – it swam into focus. *Woman. Womb. Woe.*

He had been to the other side, had returned alive and chas-

tened, and this problem was still set for him. Very carefully he sat on the kitchen chair, not taking his eyes from the screen. He moved to take up, but then didn't touch, the Dragon headset still plugged in. There was a tiny light on it, he saw now, amber when he noticed it, then turning green. On.

One of the day's number of gravel trucks approached – Harry could tell by now that's what it was – and rushed by, its sound cresting as it passed, then falling to low and soft as it went away. The Doppler effect, wasn't that the name?

A new word had appeared on the screen:

*wound*

Harry pressed his hand to his chest, as he did now a hundred times a day, querying or comforting. Wound. He would have pondered this word too in spooked ignorance, but it was just then, in a moment of transformed understanding – as though his shirt had been put on backward and now was suddenly righted – that Harry got it. He picked up the Dragon headset and pointed it toward the open window and the road. Another truck went by the house. Another word:

*well*

He laughed aloud. Two other trucks rolled by in quick succession. *Well well* averred the Dragon.

What it was – if only every miracle were so susceptible of explanation! – was the whoosh of a truck's going by being picked up by the microphone; and because, as Harry had learned, the program was incapable of displaying a sound except as an English word, it produced the best one it could.

He sat a long time before the screen. "Well," he said. All will be well. All manner of thing will be well. Was it only his imagination (of course it was only his imagination) that the computer looked a little diminished, abashed and apologetic?

He would have to remove his fractious Dragon friend and put it away; it hadn't really done nor ever would do what it promised. He unplugged the mike. He should call Mila, he thought, and tell her this story, how he had been spoken to as by a Ouija board, spoken to about her, and himself. *Mila we have to talk.*

He turned off the machine, matter unsaved, and went into the sad sitting room with its ragged rag rug and its humble linoleum.

Yet the day was beautiful, darling September, his favorite month, and smiling so sweetly. For a time yet the windows could remain still open; smell of sun-heated hay, or dried leaves, from somewhere. All will be well. On an impulse – an impulse he'd remember, looking back – Harry picked up the remote and turned on the television.