Signal to Noise

by C. P. Boyko

He was seducing one of his competitors' wives when the deputy prodded him through the bars with a lawn dart. Instantly J. Jerome Singleton was on his feet, denying by his posture that he had ever been asleep. "Good," he grumbled, "now maybe we can get some goddamn thing straightened out around here." He smoothed the creases from his yellow sport coat, straightened his red tie, and dragged a comb back through his hair. He was appalled to discover that a fuzzy ruff had formed at the back of his head, as happened when he had been a few weeks without a haircut. His joints popped audibly; flashes of pain startled him, scurrying through his body like vermin through underbrush. I must be ill, he thought; I'm too young to feel this old. In fact, he was seventy.

From some obscure principle of pride or self-preservation, he avoided looking around him or at the two men who escorted him down a hall and outside to a parking lot where a white van was idling in the blue glow of dawn. He did not remember where he was; and though his eyeglasses were in his breast pocket (his right arm was numb from lying on his side in an unnatural position to protect them), he did not, for some reason, put them on.

The men jangled as they walked. Janitors or caretakers, he surmised: only the lowliest of employees carried keys or tools. Powerful men travelled light. He remembered a day in New York when he had lost his wallet, and how it hadn't mattered: doors were still held open for him, bills were still signed. Of course they were. A man's power comes not from any piece of paper, but flows forth from his

status, his reputation, his very identity. The president of the railroad needs no ticket to ride.

He patted his pockets now for his wallet, his glasses, his comb—tickets he probably would not need, but was nevertheless glad to have.

Something about a train ride threatened to remind him of something—something unpleasant. Something about New York; something about Katy ... Like a boy who swings his bat once, misses, and declares that baseball is for sissies, Singleton rummaged for the memory for exactly one second, then gave up.

The janitors put him up front and sat on either side of him, handling him with ironic deference, like an expensive package that they resented having to deliver. Apparently they were intimidated by him, without knowing exactly who he was. They did not work for him, then. They must be the competition's janitors. So he had been sent for.

"Let's get something goddamn straight," said Singleton. "I've got no gripe with you two. You're just doing your job. A man's got to follow orders. Man who doesn't follow orders—hell, I'm the first to see he gets thrown out on his ass, and forget the pension." He did not like being between them like this; he liked to face the man he was talking to, liked to look him in the eye. "You boys doing your job, doing a good job. All right. I'll tell your head honcho that myself. But," he said, grasping about for something to criticize, something that would explain his irritation and unease. Just then the van hit a pothole in the road, giving him the impetus he needed; he went on, shaking his finger at each of them in turn, "It's this goddamn approach that's all goddamn wrong. Ain't no way to do business. Waking a man in his—" He shied from that thought. "No class, no respect, no goddamn consideration," he concluded.

His escorts had been warned by the deputy that this little old man could be violent and was surprisingly tough. They therefore de-

cided (with perhaps dubious psychology) that the best way to avoid provoking him was to avoid talking to him altogether. So, as they piloted him through the gauzy morning to their headquarters, they chatted instead about baseball stats.

Luckily, Singleton was too puzzled to become properly offended. Like any good American, he followed the game religiously; indeed, he had once come very close to successfully buying a major league franchise. But he recognized none of the players' names they mentioned. They must have been following the goddamn farm teams.

Years later, the story as Douglas Singleton told it to himself was that his father had left them no choice; that, in the words of the commitment papers, he had become a danger to himself and to others; that he needed help.

At the time, however, the story seemed to be less about his father than about the factory. The year-ends had come back and things were worse than they'd predicted. Brockmighton was threatening to pull out, and Douglas thought him capable of dumping his shares at a loss out of spite. If that happened, the bottom would fall out—that would be the end. Meanwhile, secretary number three had handed in her resignation for no good reason; that runt Patterson was inciting the union again for no good reason; and the sesame seed people had decided to jack up their prices, for absolutely no good reason—just because the old contract had expired; just because they could.

And now, on top of everything, his father thought it was a good time to go mad. After fifteen years of yawning through board meetings and drooling harmlessly onto his blotter, J. Jerome had suddenly decided that he was the only man who could turn things around. He began coming to the factory on Fridays, hanging around the assembly lines, and placing mysterious long-distance phone calls from be-

hind closed doors—through which his rapid, haranguing bellow could nevertheless be heard. He was working on a plan, one of his big ideas. All Douglas had been able to discover was that it involved the purchase of one hundred and fifty thousand barrels of sheep dip.

"Sheep dip?" asked Bennett, the factory's lawyer. "What the hell's he going to do with a hundred and fifty thousand barrels of sheep dip?"

Because Singleton senior, who had founded Singular Soda Crackers forty years ago, had never technically resigned as president, Bennett knew that any deal he entered into with the sheep-dip people would probably be upheld in court. The lawyer had great respect for the law; and if the law was on Jerome Singleton's side in this matter, he secretly felt that right and reason must be on his side too.

"Who the hell knows what he's going to do with it!," Douglas screamed. "He's out of his fucking mind!"

Bennett said thoughtfully, "Of course, if that were really true, things might look a little different ..." And he went on to describe, in the neutral tone of a professional offering a footnote of only professional interest, the view the law took of the mentally deranged.

So it happened that Douglas visited a psychiatrist.

"The thing you must, I think, keep in mind," he began, "is that my father has always been a difficult man to get along with ..."

In that time and in that part of the world, it was possible to commit a person to a psychiatric institution without their permission—indeed, without their knowledge—if two family members and a psychiatrist could agree that commitment was desirable. Conveniently, the law did not stipulate that the psychiatrist must observe the allegedly deranged individual in person; and while a few guns-for-hire may have made a comfortable career of signing every commitment request sent their way by lawyer friends acting on behalf of rich clients, most psychiatrists, in that time and in that part of the world, were more scrupulous.

Dr. Preston was a man of scruples. It was his own policy, entirely self-imposed, to only sign commitment papers after a half-hour interview with the lunatic—or, when this could not be arranged, a *one-hour* interview with a member of their family. Because Douglas Singleton was well-dressed, well-spoken, and had an honest face, Dr. Preston agreed to waive the direct interview with the father, who in any case could not just then be located.

Fortunately, the facts, gently and deftly extracted in under sixty minutes from the son, spoke for themselves. "Difficult to get along with." "Eccentric," "arrogant," "sure of himself." A "risk-taker," a "fast talker," a "bully." "Bossy," "unrealistic," "suspicious." "Irrational," "naive," "restless," "sloppy," "irritable." It was from such crude ore as this that the clinician refined his hard, gleaming, diagnostic labels: J. Jerome Singleton, he concluded, was *impulsive*, *overtalkative*, *overactive*, *antisocial*, *hostile*, *mendacious*, *agitated*, and *paranoid*; he suffered from *inflated self-regard*, *monomania*, *flights of fancy*, *loose associations*, and *emotional lability*. As for the one hundred and fifty thousand barrels of sheep dip that the old man was at that moment trying to buy in New York City with his grandchildren's inheritance—well! Dr. Preston doubted that he would ever encounter a more perfect illustration of *delusions of grandeur*. Sixty-three minutes after Douglas Singleton had entered his office, the doctor inscribed his diagnosis on the commitment forms—"mania with intermittent depressive features"—and signed his name with a solemn, sympathetic, and (because of those three extra minutes) more than usually confident flourish.

Douglas was stunned. He had heard the term "manic depression" before, but, like "syphilis" or "elephantiasis" or "homicidal psychopathy," he had never applied it to any living person of his acquaintance. And this, what his father had, was apparently even worse. Not knowing that the doctor's roundabout diction had been cultivated to avoid needless professional squabbles over terminology,

Douglas saw in the wordy diagnosis the embarrassed periphrasis of the doomsayer: A man might survive a heart attack, but never a "cardiac infarct." That word "mania," too, shocked him as "manic" never could have, for it revealed more clearly the horrible truth: A manic person, one suffering from mania, was a *maniac.*

Douglas was stunned—and moved. All his guilt evaporated. His father needed help.

To Germaine Singleton, "finding help" for Jerome meant finding for him a "retirement" or "care" home—in other words, a place for him to die. She was relieved that Doug had seen what she had seen—that Jerome was cracking up—but even more relieved to realize that Doug did not expect *her* to nurse Jerome through his dying.

Some part of her still believed that marriage entailed such obligations, even when the marriage had not been a happy one. Her grandmother had nursed *her* husband through eight years of consumption, and Jerome's mother had nursed *her* husband through what had probably been but which no one would call prostate cancer.

Five years ago, Germaine had nursed her own mother through an even more catastrophic deterioration. Celine's mind had crumbled like a stale cake months before her body started to fail. In her senility she became flamboyant and maudlin, as if she were patterning her dissolution after that of a drunk from a radio play. She wept, raged, smashed things, then became lugubrious and childishly stubborn, refusing to do anything but sit on the floor and sulk. At a later stage she became bizarrely and violently anti-religious: she berated the poor Anglican minister in the street, smashed two of the Catholic church's stained glass windows, and tore the arms off crucifixes and planted them in the garden like tomato stakes. One time Germaine tracked her down in the cemetery, barefoot and bareheaded in the

rain, babbling to herself and weaving wreaths of dead flowers. Another time—one of the worst—she discovered her in the cellar, completely naked, filling jars with her own feces. (Weeks later, when Celine was in one of her communicative periods, she revealed that she had been trying to disprove the existence of the soul: if her output, she reasoned, equaled her input, then none of what she consumed could be going to the nourishment of her spirit.)

Germaine could not go through that again. As far as she was concerned, she had done her duty once, and once was enough.

She should by rights have been the first to die. It was only fair. After all the times Jerome had left her, it should have been her turn to leave him; after all the times she had taken care of him, it should have been his turn to care for her.

But of course it could never have happened that way. He would never feed her, dress her, clean her. Had she been the one to fall ill, he would not have stuck around. He would have run off again, and the responsibility would have fallen to Katy or one of the boys. Yes, J. Jerome Singleton was a great one for running away. He was doing it again, now. He was leaving her again, one last time.

It had been amusing at first, watching him grasp at ad hoc excuses for his little confusions. When she caught him removing his socks in the middle of the day, it was because his feet were hot. When she found him sitting in the car in the garage, it was because he needed tobacco from the store. (It was ten years since he'd given up chewing, fifteen years since he'd driven a vehicle, and more than that since he'd visited a shop.) When he lost his bearings or failed to understand what was going on around him, he blamed his eyes or the poor light. When he handed her the telephone in dismay, it was not because he had forgotten to whom he was talking, or why, but because the goddamn receiver wasn't working, or because the idiot caller refused to speak up. To abet these excuses, he stopped wearing his hearing aid and his eyeglasses—claiming, of course, that they

were uncomfortable, ineffective, broken, wrong.

All this had been more or less entertaining. But one day she had come upon him in Doug's room, standing at the window, eyes unseeing, hands trembling with anxiety or frustration—reminding her exactly of the stray cat she'd once found cowering and hissing in the pantry: having wandered in somehow from the street, it had not known how to get back out.

She had spoken his name, twice. He had looked at her like she was a porter or a maid: impatiently, and without recognition.

He was leaving her, a bit at a time. That was just like him, too. He could never make a clean break. He would leave this life the way he'd left his marriage: trying not to burn any bridges, so that he could return if he didn't like what he found out there in the world.

Well, he had never left a note or made a speech any other time he had run off; so why should she be given the satisfaction of a proper goodbye this time?

Actually, that wasn't quite true. The time he was in the hospital, seven or eight years ago, for a polyp on his lung, he had thought he was dying. She got her deathbed farewell then. Breathing laboriously, looking small and pale and very sorry for himself, he confessed to her that he had never really loved any woman, that he was simply not capable of it. He said he was sorry.

That was it. That was his idea of making amends, of tying up loose ends: telling her he'd never loved her. What a burden that secret must have been to him all these years; how happy he must have been to finally get it off his chest! Shriven, he collapsed back onto the bed and ... fell asleep.

She called that dying badly. A good death was one that gave others as little trouble and sadness as possible. Reassuring lies whispered through teeth clenched in agony—that was her idea of dying well. Jerome Singleton had died a bad, selfish, inconsiderate death. But again, why should it have been otherwise? He had lived a bad,

selfish, inconsiderate life.

He had loved no one; he had cared for no one. He never would care for, or take care of, anyone but himself.

And if he wouldn't have done it for her, why should she do it now for him? Why should anyone have to care for someone who would not care for them?

She would do it for her children, of course. If the obligations of a wife were sometimes conditional, those of a mother were not. And if there was one key theme to her self-story, it was that she was a good mother. It was a mother's job to care for her children—not vice versa. She had been a good mother; she would not let death undo that. She would not be babied by her babies. If it had to happen, if she was doomed to fall apart like her mother and her grandfather before her, let it happen among strangers. If she could not die with dignity, at least, please God, let her die quietly and anonymously, somewhere out of sight, out of mind. Let someone else take care of her.

Now, hopefully, a precedent was being set. If Douglas agreed that none of them, none of the family, should have to take care of Jerome, then perhaps he would, when the time came, do the same for her: "find help" for her; find a place for her to die.

"What day is it?" asked the man behind the desk, as if he knew, but couldn't, just at the moment, remember.

Singleton, circling the chair he had been offered, said (because he did not know), "Never mind what goddamn day it is. It's tomorrow in Japan and we're twiddling our thumbs in Memphis and cooling our heels in Atlantic City like a bunch of goddamn greenhorns."

The man behind the desk squeezed his nose thoughtfully. "And what month are we in now?"

"Look," said Singleton, alighting briefly on the edge of the chair and looking the man first in one eye, then the other, "I don't want to get in your way here, but then you've got to not get in mine, neither. Man can't scratch his own back. Those goddamn cornpones brought me to the wrong office, you hear what I'm saying?" He indicated that the room they were in was too small to belong to anyone important by shaking his arms at the walls, like an epileptic on the verge of a fit warning bystanders to stay back. "I'm here to see the big cheese, the man in charge, *your boss*. Understand?"

The nose of the man behind the desk was soft and porous. When he squeezed it, it took some time for it to return to its normal shape and size. "Could it be ... May, for instance?"

"Talk to me about time," sneered Singleton, resuming his pacing, "when time's wasting. Ten thousand dollars a day!" he roared. "That's a thousand dollars every one hundred forty-four minutes you're costing me," he said, making calculations on his fingers, "that's five hundred every seventy-two, nearly a hundred dollars every fif-goddamn-teen minutes and we're standing around here like a couple of monkeys at a movie show."

The man behind the desk squeezed his nose and listened to the crackling it produced in his ear as it reinflated. On the sheet of paper in front of him he wrote, *Sensorium impaired*. When the old man ran out of breath, he asked casually, "Have you ever had syphilis?"

Singleton stopped mid-stride. His hands gripped and shook fistfuls of empty air like a pair of ravens grappling with garbage. A cloud of rage engulfed him.

Two minutes later, the man behind the desk, who was the resident in charge of morning admissions that day, wiped Singleton's spittle from the back of his hand and wrote on the form, in the blank provided for syphilis, *Undetermined.* A few more strokes of the pen were enough to bring the interview to a conclusion. One stroke ratified the referring doctor's diagnosis (the resident thought of the

manic-depressives that came in as "the loud ones," and Singleton certainly fit that description); other strokes prescribed what Singleton would eat, where he would sleep, what drugs he would swallow or be injected with, and to a large extent how he would be treated for the next several weeks or months of his life. After the new intake had been led away, still uttering imprecations, the resident went to the toilet and washed his hands vigorously—in defiance of the doomed and self-pitying part of him that said it was futile, it was too late, he'd already caught another cold. The colds that you caught in the nuthouse were not like normal colds. They were worse. They were more like flus than ordinary colds. He didn't know why, but crazy people just got sicker than regular people.

Singleton's belief, that he had been brought here by a competitor to make some business deal, had never had much more substance than a dream recalled a few minutes after waking. The strange gift-giving ceremony of the fat man in the shower cap could not be reconciled with that belief—and so the dream faded. No alternative hypothesis came to mind, however, for this scene was quite unlike any other in his experience.

"This is the only towel you get," said the clothes-room attendant, shaking a swatch of cloth the length of his forearm in Singleton's face like a penalty flag. Singleton tried to snatch it from him, but the man had more to say. "So don't *lose* it," he concluded. Then he relinquished the prize with a huff of resignation, as if he knew for a fact that his warning had fallen on deaf ears, that Singleton was going to burn or tear or bury the towel as soon as he was out of sight. "Well, let's see what you have in your pockets."

This struck Singleton as a good idea. By showing his tickets, he could perhaps figure out what train he was on.

The clothes-room attendant took his job seriously. Because it was his duty to confiscate all potentially dangerous items, he felt that the safety of the hospital depended on him. Because the safety of the hospital depended on him, he felt entitled to more than the starvation wage the hospital paid its attendants. To bring his salary more in line with his responsibility, he confiscated each week a few items that would, perhaps, have made dubious weapons (although, to be sure, a watch chain can, in a pinch, be used as a garrote; some cigarette cases have rather sharp corners; and even a cufflink would not feel so nice stabbed into your eye). Because he stole from the patients, he felt tenderly and paternal towards them. Because he felt a little guilty, he did his job well.

So he applied himself to the matter of Singleton's eyeglasses and hearing aid with the same fastidious deliberation he brought to more dangerous or profitable items. It was his general policy to let anyone who came in the front door wearing glasses keep them—reasoning that, if they had managed to get around in the world without losing or breaking them, they could probably be trusted to preserve them in the more circumscribed world of the hospital. Singleton, however, kept putting his glasses on and taking them off, so the clothes-room attendant did not know if the general policy pertained. Finally, recalling that three of his intakes had smashed their glasses already that month, he decided, somewhat vindictively, to commandeer these. To avoid a dispute, he reassured Singleton that he would not miss them because nothing visibly interesting ever happened here anyway. He kept the hearing aid too, because it was fragile and presumably expensive (though not, he thought, pawnable), and because he could not imagine where the old man would get replacement batteries for it. Yes, it would be better to save the hearing aid for special occasions, such as visits, or Christmas. In any case, Singleton apparently had one good ear, and that was more than some people could say. He also took Singleton's sport coat, tie, shoes, and suspenders.

He let him keep the comb.

Singleton was too bemused to protest. He had found in his left front trousers pocket not his wallet, but a wad of newspaper folded to look like a wallet.

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When her brother called, Katherine was either having a midlife crisis or an affair.

The man she was in love with (if she was in love with him) was nearly young enough to be half her age. He also was obnoxious and emotionally fragile, already had a girlfriend, and happened to be one of her husband's graduate students.

But it had been such a long time since any man had given her the unambiguous compliment of his desire; and the reminder that she was still a sexual being, a bundle of nerves still capable of becoming excited and exciting other bundles of nerves, had been as poignant as a glimpse of a forgotten self in an old high school photo.

Her heart had only started thudding after Elroy left the bathroom that night of the party, but it had not stopped thudding since. She was a wreck; anything was possible. She was going to smash everything, throw everything away, for a fuck. Was she?

Yesterday she had finally called him. He hadn't even given her a chance to offer the pathetic, flimsy cover story she had prepared (shopping, errands, lunch?). He had cut her off, affably enough, saying that he was "with people" and would see her soon. (The affability was somehow worse than curtness, which would at least have acknowledged the impropriety of her call, and what it signified.) To the interpretation of those two minutes of words she brought all the flailing, anguished creativity she had brought to her reading of Restoration poetry, twenty years earlier, when she'd needed to churn out another essay. For twenty-four hours she churned out brilliant

hypotheses, each of which, in the moment she considered it, was absolutely convincing. He wanted her—yes. He loathed her—correct. He had been drunk that night, didn't remember groping her in the bathroom—unquestionably. Everything was possible.

She was still producing hypotheses when Doug called to tell her about Jerome.

The incongruity struck her like an affront. She felt as if, on page 500 of an 800-page novel that she was engrossed in, the author had suddenly embarked on a completely new story or introduced a completely new character without even so much as a paragraph break to announce the divagation.

She agreed (too readily) that their father was crazy, but scoffed at Doug's claim that she was his favorite, and denied that she could do anything to help. She wanted nothing to do with any scheme to clap anyone in a nuthouse—not even J. Jerome.

(Years later, long after Elroy had vanished from her self-story, this was the version of events she clung to: she told herself that she had told her brother that she washed her hands of the whole matter.)

But that night she was ruffled. Three hours later, when the phone rang again, she did not even pick up. She was thinking about her father.

The words "manic-depressive" sank into her like a stain setting into a tablecloth. Disparate parts of herself came together; old beliefs and memories reorganized themselves around this magical phrase like iron filings around a magnet. Before now, she had had to rely, when telling the story of her father, on homely psychologisms like "abrasive," "unreliable," "arrogant," "obnoxious," "inconsiderate," "sexist," "self-absorbed," "hard to get along with." Now she saw how all these traits could be—in fact, *had been* all along—subsumed under the one precise, unemotional, clinical term. The reason no one had ever been able to get along with goddamn J. Jerome Singleton was that he was crazy—really, honestly crazy.

Take for instance that preposterous family myth that she had been his favorite. All her brothers remembered were the times he had shown an interest in her, the times he called her from the road, the times he inveigled her into coming to Chicago, Boston, New York on the train to visit him. What they forgot, or had never seen, was how quickly Jerome's fatherly moods passed, how often she would find herself alone on some empty station platform or cooling her heels in some extravagant hotel room, a thirteen-year-old girl left to her own devices in a huge alien city. If he never invited Doug or Aaron or Tom, he also never abandoned them.

She had never understood these sudden inexplicable changes of heart of his. So many years she had wasted, trying to figure out if her father loved her, hated her, or was simply indifferent. Now at last she saw that all of these had been true—in succession. "Manic depression" suggested to her exactly this changeability, this oscillation between extremes. It made sense. Her father was a manic-depressive. She heard herself saying it, wryly or matter-of-factly, but always without self-pity: *My father was a manic-depressive. He hugged me and pushed me away. He called me to him, then ran off. He gave me a piano but left the lessons to me; and he never came to the recitals. (He bought Tom a car, but only after he'd enrolled Tom in a mechanic's course!) When I wanted to build a kite, he ordered the kit, lent me his tools and his workshop (which the boys weren't allowed to use—too dangerous!); then, on the day we were supposed to launch it, he disappeared. That is how I see him: encouraging me, even running alongside me; then, suddenly, gone. And I am alone, left holding the string. I was his favorite, and he didn't give a damn about me. He was fickle. He was flighty. He was manic-depressive.*

The ringing phone brought her out of her reverie, but she did not pick up. Instead she went for a walk. On West 68th she saw an old man in a bright green sport coat coming towards her, rubbing his hands and grimacing with self-importance, his tongue between his

teeth—and she was thrown back thirty years to the day she'd crossed the street to avoid him.

She was on her way to school; she didn't know he was back in town; he hadn't been home in months. For some reason, she pretended she didn't see him. She crossed the street. She was twelve and she had snubbed her own father.

At least, she'd always assumed she had. Now she saw another possibility: she had been scared of him. And she had been right to be scared. For he was crazy. He had always been crazy.

But the man on West 68th Street was not her father. In fact, he was not even holding his tongue between his teeth; he just had large lips.

When she got home she took the phone off the hook. Elroy seemed as trivial as a nightmare on waking. Subsumed by her past, she could not remember how any part of him connected to any part of her.

But the next morning, with two days before Carl was due to return, she put the receiver back on the cradle, telling herself that she was not committing herself to anything.

Singleton did not know where he was or who these people were, but he could see that they were only doing their jobs. He understood that he had been gripped by the cogs of some vast machine, that he was passing through the works of some immense bureaucracy; and his admiration for large, inexorable organizations (which reminded him of his factories), coupled with his dread of having his memory lapses detected, persuaded him to keep quiet for the time being. For about twenty-four hours he let himself be carried along like a cracker on a conveyer belt. Then character reasserted itself.

Identity is memory; and if we believe the latest theories of the

psychologists, memory is stored in the connections between brain cells. Thus, for a memory to become established, to become part of ourselves, it must find connections to other parts of ourselves. New thoughts, new experiences, new ideas must find echoes already in us, if they are to be entertained, felt, or believed. This takes time. New memories establish themselves slowly, like spreading stains—or like strangers settling in to a new town.

This is why, as we age and our minds deteriorate, new experience loses its capacity to impress itself on us, and why our distant youth begins to seem more vivid than what we did yesterday, last week, or last year. Old memories are like tomato plants: they have many roots.

Sometimes this trend is more pronounced; sometimes it is quite catastrophic. Sometimes the last year, or the last five or ten or twenty years of our lives, evaporate altogether, while the rain of new experience, of present day-to-day existence, dwindles to a faint drizzle, which scarcely dimples the face of the water; and, with so little downward force to oppose them, the deepest currents rise to the surface. Then the past grips us, while the present becomes shadowy and unreal. When today's events do manage to pierce the bubbling upsurge of ages past, they reach us faintly, as if from a great distance, and often in isolation, untethered to other memories—just the way, in fact, that memories of our distant childhood reach most of us in midlife. This curious inversion sometimes leads to the mistaken belief that the recent past is ancient history, and vice versa.

This explains, for example, why Singleton wrongly placed the memory of his missing wallet in the distant past, when in fact it had occurred only a few days earlier. But it also explains why, fifteen years after Singleton had returned home to his family, fifteen years after he had retired from the active life of a manufacturing magnate, he began suddenly to revert to his former self. As he forgot where he was and what he was supposed to be doing, he could only remind

himself *who* he was. That information was stored deep.

J. Jerome Singleton was a great man, a rich man, a powerful man, a captain of industry. He was a force to be reckoned with. His name was known. He was somebody, goddamn it. Events depended on him. People were waiting for him. He was needed elsewhere. He did not belong here.

Alvin had caught sunstroke on the beach and wandered into a well-to-do neighborhood where his odd behavior was interpreted as ravening drunkenness probably compounded by insanity. He had fully recovered within twenty-four hours, but within twenty-four hours he was in the asylum. Now he had to wait the minimum ninety days to get out, like everyone else.

Scott's wife had caught him masturbating. Without a word, she'd left the house for a week; when she came back, she suggested, in her clear unabashed schoolteacher's voice, that it was her opinion and the opinion of her closest friends that he was mortally oversexed, and that what was obviously called for was a long rest far away from everyone who knew him, and her. He had been too embarrassed to argue; secretly he agreed; his mother had caught him masturbating once, too, and had whipped him, and wept.

Syed drank too much. He didn't even like drinking, really. When he drank he was outgoing but stupid. When he was sober he was clever but shy. He was lonely, so he drank. Every few months he was clapped in here when the little glowing cellophane creatures made their reappearance. He knew, when he was sober, that they were hallucinations brought on by D.T.; but at the moment they appeared, they were more real, more obviously independent of his perception of them, than any other thing he had ever seen. More than their grotesque appearance or the insulting things they said, it was the aw-

ful intensity of their existence that terrified him.

Cliff felt an exhausted tightness in his belly one day which he could not explain. It felt as if he had just done two hundred sit-ups, or vomited all night. It felt, he decided, like guilt. He wracked his brain for possible causes, scouring his past for every error, mistake, and sin he had ever committed. Each transgression, in the moment that he considered it, seemed more than adequate. The pain in his guts got worse, and with it the conviction of his loathsomeness. Now all he could do was hold himself and sob broken apologies as he recalled each evil afresh.

Baltazar, who was thirteen, suffered from night terrors, which did not cause him much worry (because he did not remember them) but troubled his parents enough to send him away to be cured. In the asylum, however, his screams troubled his roommates—strange grown men with angry faces who were too embroiled in their own nightmares to feel sympathy. Instead of bringing him glasses of chilled apple juice like his parents did, they shouted at him to shut up, or else. The problem worsened. Baltazar grew to hate himself for what he could not control; and rather than wait for the thrashing he deserved and which was constantly being threatened, he actively pursued his punishment, insulting and irritating the men relentlessly until they struck him.

Digby treated strangers like they were old friends.

Claude had lost his wife in a car accident.

Immanuel felt ashamed. Most of the time he was able to hide his shame from others behind a façade of aloof derision. But recently he had begun to have a recurring nightmare which kept him from sleep. He lost his welding job, and a finger, before checking himself in to the asylum for the paraldehyde that clouded his waking mind and took some of the bite out of his dreams. Years later, he remembered nothing of the hospital, could recall none of the staff or his fellow patients. For him, those three months were simply the time of the bad

dream. In the dream he was very ill, but could not stay home. He had to go out; something had to be done; someone was waiting for him. Then it happened. Always, inevitably, in some crowded public place—in the street, at school, on the train, at his mother's shop—the worst possible thing happened: he was sick; he vomited. A hundred people turned to look with disgust at the mess he had made. He was so horrified, so ashamed, that the only thing he could do, each and every time, was get down on his knees and try desperately to lick it back up, scoop it into his mouth and swallow it again.

But everyone has a story. Life as we know it is less like a cohesive novel than an anthology of unrelated short stories whose protagonists, caught up in the development of their own individual plots, take no notice of one another. Novels, unlike collections of stories, promote the illusion that humans are not completely, or not always, incarcerated in their own concerns—that it is sometimes possible for our storylines to intersect, or even merge. Perhaps that is why people prefer novels to short stories: escapism.

All Singleton knew was that he was in the wrong place. All he saw around him were broken, inferior animals: a man placing chess pieces on the keys of the piano while working the pedals with his feet; a man lying under a table, shaking his legs in the air like they were full of bedbugs; a man sitting in a trash can chatting amiably to God, chuckling appreciatively at His replies, saying "Thank You, thank You, I'm glad You feel that way"; one man howling with frustration when another told him, with obvious malice, that it was Tuesday; one man stroking another's head till he fell asleep; a man kicking a boy of thirteen, who laughed a brittle, bitter laugh and chased after the man for more; a man wrapping himself from head to toe in countless colorful scarves; a tall, wilted man spinning slowly in a circle; a birdlike, fidgety young man whose wet brown eyes were like two separate living entities in the dead mask of his face; a man whose huge, grinning face looked like something carved out of wood

to scare a child; a man bawling like a child, and gasping, again and again, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to"; another who moved his hands over his body in an elaborate sequence repeated precisely and endlessly, and who could say nothing but "Cars need to eat too," over and over.

Perhaps most appallingly, there were at least a dozen men who behaved perfectly normally, playing cards, reading, smoking, or writing letters—and implying by their normalcy that there was nothing abnormal, nothing even unusual, about the behavior going on around them.

When the orderly at the end of the hall, whose name was Brian, saw Singleton coming, his heart sank. He did not like getting into tussles with the patients, whom he believed were too mixed-up to know what they were doing. He felt sorry for them—almost as sorry for them living here as he felt sorry for himself working here. Clearly the last thing any of them needed was an ass-whooping; but sometimes they left him no choice. They always picked on him—him, the biggest guy in the place! That's how mixed-up they were.

"You best get your ass back in the dayroom now, Signalton," Brian suggested.

"Forgot something, can't find my keys," Singleton said, making impatient shooing gestures, "so if you'll excuse me for a moment while I—well, man, are you deaf or just stupid? Get out of my way."

"I think probably you best just go on back now, Signalton."

"My name is Singleton goddamn it, J. Jerome Singleton Singleton *Sing-gull-ton*, and you're costing me ten thousand dollars a day!"

"It says Signalton on your forms," Brian said (truthfully), hoping to deflect the old man with trivia.

"Don't you think I know my own name! If you don't let me out

that door right this very minute, so help me God I will rip your tonsils out and mail them to your widow. I will—I will eat your *boss*."

"I sure would if I could," Brian said softly, "but you've been here long enough now I guess to know it ain't up to me. Only ones that got a grounds pass are allowed out in the afternoon. So come on now, Signalton, why don't you just ..."

Singleton heard not a word of this. Because he was a loud man himself, calm or soft speech always struck him like a sanctimonious reprimand. This man was *defying him.* Anger flooded through his body like a toxin; it became an audible buzz in his ears. He squeezed his fists till his arms shook. Then he lowered his head and rammed the man in the belly.

For a moment, as the world tilted, he saw the door at the end of the hall swing open, and he saw himself emerge once again, through the sheer force of his will, triumphant.

The paraldehyde they poured down his throat unmoored him; he drifted through scenes half dream, half memory.

"You want to know my secret?" he asked the fawning elevator operator. "Always double down on aces. Put the money you make back into the business right away—that's the only way it'll grow. It takes backbone, a little fire in the belly, but you can't be afraid to let your balls dangle. Take it from me." He gave the boy a five-spot.

He looked at it coldly. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Don't ask me—never saw it before in my life. Guess you found it on the sidewalk or in one of your pockets or something."

The inspections agent continued to stare at the envelope, as if it might move.

"These goddamn peas now," Singleton sighed. "These goddamn stalks and stems—let me tell you, I fired the sonofabitch let those

through. You want to know my opinion, it was Hardy sent that sonofabitch my way. Goddamn agricultural sabotage is what it is—if we're calling a spade a spade. I grow A-grade peas—ask anyone in the county. Come back to the farm, take another look at those peas—that's all I ask. There's a man. Say, you reading this?"

FINGERS FOUND IN PICKLE FACTORY.

The reporter whistled dubiously. "Who saw the finger?"

Singleton slid the piece of paper with the Pole woman's name and address across the table. "You treat her gently now. She don't speak English too good and they threw her out of her job and she doesn't want her name in your goddamn scandal-rag. But she wants to do her duty, wants people to know what's going on in those factories, wants the truth out. And I'm sure she wouldn't say no to a little vig on publication neither."

"What's the matter, can't find a place for her at your—"

Singleton shook an index finger in the reporter's smug face. "You keep me and my factory well out of it, you understand? I know Dallas Cullins and I know who your father is and I know my way around a goddamn libel suit, let me tell you."

The retraction was printed a week later and seven pages deeper. Too little, too late: he'd already won the government contract.

"A good story doesn't die," he told the trashy torch singer. "Once it's told, you can't untell it. Mrs. O'Leary's cow didn't start the Great Chicago Fire!"

"I heard that one before," she said, drunkenly determined to not be impressed.

"But a thing takes on a life of its own. The truth never stood in the way of a good story. Course, that's the *problem* with the world. You can't *change* nothing, all you can do is print goddamn retractions and corrections and addendums and— You come into the world like an immigrant after an election: the government's already in place, all you can do ... all you can do is respond to its stupidities.

They decide the agenda, *they* the ones choose the game, all you can do is bicker over the rules ..."

"Shucks now, angel, what's the matter?"

He slapped her hand away. "Goddamn it, don't *fuss*. One thing I hate is being fussed over by a woman."

That stupid comment about immigrants! He had to be drunk. When she touched his hair again, he threw his glass at the wall, missing the piano player's head by inches. They threw him out.

He cackled and whooped in the night air. He didn't need them. He didn't need anyone. He was his own man. He'd made himself out of nothing, less than nothing. Goddamn them all. Goddamn *her.* Those twisted teeth, those idiotic peasant's costumes spattered with flour ... Always fussing over him in that ignorant immigrant's accent ... Too stupid to know the difference between a boy's name and a girl's name ... He'd overcome all that. He was as American as goddamn baseball. "I almost owned a Major League Baseball franchise!" he roared. "But they wouldn't take my goddamn bid 'cause I don't belong to a *club*, I never been to a *university*, I don't wear a little *ring. I* made a fortune without any of their advantages! Aw goddamn it, sweetie-pie, you're getting mustard all over my good slacks."

"Gimme some more napkins, pa, huh?"

Her hands, coated in orange soda, shimmered in the sun like lizard skin. She was the most beautiful perfect little creature that had ever existed. His heart was suffocating him; he jumped to his feet and opened his mouth like a bird bursting into song: "Goddamn you to hell you lousy sonofabitch Ruth, scratch your ass if you're going to scratch your ass but step up to the plate and *swing* if you're going to *goddamn swing goddamn it!*"

Germaine turned to the man seated opposite. "What business are you in, Mr. Hencks?"

Singleton simpered apologetically: *Women!*

"I am a musician," the man said stiffly.

Singleton upgraded their tickets. When Germaine quailed at the cost, he bellowed, "The world takes you at your own estimation and I will not fraternize with artsy-fartsy goddamn riff-raff!"

In the dining car they were seated next to the owner of a Milwaukee steel mill. He told the man (because the world takes you at your own estimation) that he was in manufacturing. He patted Germaine's distended belly and said, "My wife too." He laughed in her scowling face. "As you can see, she manufactures her own unhappiness."

The steel mill owner chuckled. His wife—or daughter—smiled.

"Not everything," Singleton told her. "Not quite everything—only *just about*. Sure there are things I can't do. For instance, I ain't cut out for television—there's a fact. A man must accept his limitations or this world of limitations won't accept him. My genius is basically for deal-making. I'm an idea man, a conceptualizer. I invented price ranges, did you know that? Same exact product, different packaging, three prices. Because there's those who always buy the cheapest product—they think they're being thrifty; then there's those who always buy the most expensive product—they think they're getting quality; and then there's everybody else—they don't want to be ripped off, but they don't want to eat shit, either. Tell me, your husband ever talk to you like this?"

"What makes you think I was ever married?"

"You're a hoot and a holler, doll. I like you. Who was your father?"

"Perhaps," she said, "we should discuss terms."

"To be honest with you," he said, circling the chair he had been offered, "I don't like mixing business with women."

"Neither do I."

"I *like* women, you see. But business—business is brutal. I like my business competitors to be men. I like my chicken to have bones

in it."

"Not everyone you make a deal with is your competitor, Mr. Singleton. There is such a thing as a mutually beneficial—"

"Men pay lip service to that idea too, but let me tell you something, sweet pea: it's just the polite ceremony around the duel. The aim in business is always to shoot the other guy before he shoots you."

"Your people don't want me to sell to you," she said. "Neither do my people."

"But you—you don't like being told what to do, do you? Sure—I know your type. I can read a woman like a billboard. Bill-*broads*, I call 'em. Heh—you like that?"

She stood by the open door and said, "I'll call you when I've made up my mind."

"I get it. You want to talk it over with your accountant, your manager, your brain trust—the *boys*. I understand."

"What hotel can I reach you at, Mr. Singleton?"

He could not remember. "Never mind," he said. "Never you mind. Maybe *I'll* call *you*, angel. Yeah, maybe I will. Maybe I will and maybe I won't. Never mind."

He wasn't licked yet, goddamn it; he still had a few tricks up his sleeve; they weren't going to farm him out to the minor leagues yet, goddamn it.

She had been weak. He would be strong.

The chairs in this house had cushions on the seats and the cushions had dust on them. In this house, everyone whispered.

The boy he was playing with kicked him in the leg. "Ha ha, you're hurt!"

"No I'm not," he spluttered in rage and incomprehension. "*You* are!"—and he kicked the boy as hard as he could. The boy's mother yelled at his mother, but it didn't matter: he'd made the boy cry. Jan was happy. Jan was strong.

"What do you want a hundred and fifty thousand barrels of sheep dip *for,* anyway?"

"You think I'm going to tell *you*?" he screamed.

The train was moving so slow, he half expected water to come pouring in when he opened the window.

"Would you mind terribly closing that, please? The smoke ..."

"Goddamn it, a little coal dust never killed no one." He stuck his head out the window and gulped wind. The little old couple excused themselves to the dining car.

"They call me eccentric," Singleton said, "but goddamn it, it ain't me—it's the times that're *un*eccentric. We used to ride cable cars hanging upside down from the straps—nothing to it. We used to sing 'Oh, Lady Be Good' in the street—and no one blinked. We drank gin neat from iced melons and made egg-nog in June—big deal! We rode from New York to Milwaukee in the dead of winter with the windows all open wide—just to make the gin taste warmer, goddamn it."

Each of these moments came to his mind as clearly as the faces of his grandchildren.

The manager informed him that the matter of his bill had been satisfactorily resolved—and that there was a telephone call waiting for him.

"Of course it has," Singleton said irritably, mistaking the man for a bumptious bellboy. "I told you it would be."

"The call, I gather, is of an urgent nature."

Singleton rubbed his hands together. But it was not the baroness; it was little Dougie.

"You've got to come home, Dad. It's Kate."

What was she doing back there? Why wasn't she in New York? She'd escaped all that, like he never could—so why had she let them drag her back? Something must be terribly wrong.

Doug and Germaine were waiting for him at the station. He was

shocked by how old they looked. They walked him to the car, their faces as solemn and flaccid as those of board members.

"What for the love of God is going on here? Why are you behaving like two goddamn robots? Where is she?"

"She's at home," was all they would say.

But she was not. Instead, waiting for him, in the house that he had helped design and paid cash money to be built, were the deputy and the sheriff.

"It's best if you don't make a fuss here, Jerome, but just come along with us now."

Their moist eyes and embarrassed posture gave them away: Katy was dead.

"What the fuck is going on out here?" said a voice pained with bewilderment. It belonged to a man with a neck as thick as his head, which protruded from his beige uniform like a big pink pencil eraser. The face had a disrespectful expression on it.

Singleton said, "You watch who the hell you think you're talking to, goddamn it."

The orderly, who was known in the hospital as Bullneck, opened his mouth. His scalp began to tingle. With a heroic, indeed angelic effort, he closed his mouth. This man was a new intake.

"Get back to bed," he stuttered at last. "And don't let me catch you out here making that bloody racket again."

Singleton began to vibrate. "How *dare* you—"

It was Bullneck's belief that, since the patients of the asylum had something wrong with their heads, the best way to correct their behavior was to hit them in the head, the way you might slap a fuzzy television.

Singleton had never been sucker-punched in his life. Instinctively

he reared back and kicked the man in the shin as hard as he could.

Bullneck's screams soon brought assistance, as well as onlookers. When the orderlies had pinned Singleton's writhing body to the floor, Bullneck asked, "Now are you going to shut up or do I have to really hurt you?"

Singleton choked on his hatred. "Goddamn you to hell you goddamn sonofabitches!"

Bullneck slapped Singleton's face as hard as he had ever allowed himself to slap any patient's face. "I *said*, are you going to shut up or —"

"By all the gods in heaven you'll pay for this you goddamn dirty whoring sonofa—"

Bullneck clapped his hand over Singleton's mouth and squeezed.

(Years later, he would remember none of this. He would recall the poor wages, the snooty doctors, the terrible working conditions, and the patients who spat on him; and he would admit that there were times when he had lost his temper. But he would not recall wanting to kill this old man who would not shut up; he would not recall how earnestly he had tried to crush his face in his fist. It was a moment that did not fit into his self-story—for he was not, he believed, a cruel or violent man.)

"There's only one God in heaven," he said, and squeezed.

Singleton bit his hand.

He'd thought he knew what dying was: dying of malaria in that stifling thatch hut in Peru; freezing to death that night in a Minnesota cornfield; awaiting the imminent explosion of Hardy's bullet cutting into his chest; drowning in the anonymous Atlantic after falling overboard like a goddamn fool; dying of an old, broken lung in a barren hospital room. But he'd been wrong. None of those were dying. Dy-

ing was this flailing panicked fight, this all-out war against death. He could not breathe—he was a sucking lung submerged in the ocean. Every nerve in every tissue of his body screamed like a firecracker—every cell within him burned with life, fought against death—he had within him a dying animal, a wild thrashing shrieking rodent—he kicked, punched, clawed at their faces, whipped his head from side to side, gnashed his teeth—an arm as strong as the bole of a tree snapped the cartilage in his neck like a dry wishbone—hatred, indistinguishable from the will to live, seared his veins—they were killing him—*the goddamn sonofabitches were killing him*—

He bought her an ice cream cone. "Thanks, pop," she said sarcastically. He tousled her hair sarcastically. They went into their funny-walk routine. The passersby gaped. They were the show; everyone else was just onlookers, just passersby.

"And that of course," he said, "is the famous Waldorf Astoria where maybe you'll stay someday, huh."

"I won't need to," she said, slipping comfortably into their future-making patter, "I'll own an apartment across the street, right there."

"What," he said, aghast, "you won't own the whole building?"

"I *do* live here, Dad," she said. She was old now. "Remember?"

He didn't want to remember.

"Dad, it wasn't me. It was you." She huffed a sigh—she was thirteen now, fourteen. "*You're* the one dying."

He threw back his head and his shoulders and quickened his pace. She had to jog to catch up.

"Then why does your age keep flimflamming around like that?" he demanded.

She explained it to him. He was reviewing his life one last time

before leaving it. His life, as they said, was flashing before his eyes.

His bruised, burning, straitjacketed body told him that she was telling the truth. He let out three quick sobs—thinking of his patents, his factories, his grandchildren. "I'm not leaving nothing," he said.

She wouldn't meet his gaze.

"You might not have to leave *everything* behind," she said at last.

She explained it to him.

Everyone was against Dr. Ngi. They didn't like him because he was new, because he was short, and because he was foreign.

They had liked Dr. Kenneally, his predecessor, well enough. His approach to administration had been, for forty-two years, that of a man about to retire: he didn't attend rounds, didn't like reading incident reports, didn't insist on proper stock-taking of the medicine room, and commandeered all the meat for his staff. Of course they liked him.

Dr. Ngi, on the other hand, was young, and subject to the belief that bad situations can sometimes be ameliorated. He was trying to make the asylum into a hospital—a place where the ill might actually, once in awhile, recuperate. This made him unpopular.

The latest controversy was his no-television policy. The nurses and orderlies hardly cared what the patients did—what horrors they observed, what trash they took into their brains—so long as they kept quiet. The television kept them quiet. According to the nurses, and even now some of the doctors, the dayrooms had become much noisier and more violent since the TV ban. But Dr. Ngi simply could not believe that murder mysteries and garish news reports of fires, plane crashes, and natural disasters were conducive to the mental health of his inmates. Perhaps a person had to get worse before they

would get better. But he could hardly argue this to his beleaguered, volatile staff. Instead, to placate them, and not always because he thought it was in the best interest of the patient, he authorized each day more of the requests that came his way for paraldehyde, veronal, insulin, and isolation.

On top of all his other worries, Dr. Ngi made a point of seeing patients personally. He did not have the time, but it was one more area in which he was determined to outshine the repugnant, beloved Dr. K.

He sent the sobbing man away with a grounds pass, and called in the next.

"I guess you're the one I've been waiting for," said the old man as soon as the door was opened to him, nodding with approval at Dr. Ngi's open report book. "Katy told me there'd be someone to take down the things I've been holding on to. Well, I've been thinking it all over for I don't know how many days, and let me tell you it hasn't been easy, a lifetime is a long time and I don't know how much longer I could have remembered some of this, but if you're going to get it all down there in your book now then I guess maybe I can start letting some of it go. I hope there'll be enough time."

Dr. Ngi, whose English was functional but largely devoid of idioms, did not fare well with fast talkers. He nodded seriously, matching the patient's expression, gestured to the chair, and consulted the man's file.

"My mother was not a bad woman but she was weak," said Singleton, circling the chair he had been offered. "I've left behind many things about her but I don't want to forget it all. She was always kind to me, it must be said. Those *sarmale* she used to make— No, goddamn it. Let me start with the important things. The companies I started and the money I made, all that was well and good but the best thing I ever made, because I made her make herself, was Katy. She never understood that. She always got me all wrong. Well, all

right, maybe that was the price I paid, but let me get it straight for the record. She thought I told her she could do what she liked—that I didn't give a damn. But what I tried to tell her was, Do what you *want*. Make the world be the world you want to have around you. Goddamn it, I had to show the boys what to do each step of the way because they didn't have the mettle, I had to give Doug the cracker factory because he couldn't have done anything else, but I always tried to get Katy to surprise us, because she had it in her. I wanted her to be *like* me by *not* being like me—by not being like *her* old man, either. When she was twelve—and get this down, because this is what I want to save, more than anything else. When she was twelve, I came home on the train ..."

But Dr. Ngi had stopped listening. He wrote in his careful hand, visualizing the correct spelling of each word before putting it down, and avoiding all those troublesome pronouns: *Greatly agitated. Flights of fancy. Loose associations. Logorrhea.*

Two weeks earlier, in the weekly team meeting which Dr. Ngi himself had initiated, Dr. Alban and Dr. Niederwaldt had criticized him, in front of everyone, for mistaking an "obvious case" of manic depression for schizophrenia. Well, they would find no fault with his diagnosis this time; here was a textbook case. With defiant pride he wrote out the words: *Schizophrenia, with paranoiac features.* Then, while the patient talked on, he filled out a chit for thirty days of insulin shock therapy, to be repeated in forty-five days if necessary.

⋆

The sheep-dip baroness allowed herself to be talked into selling to Singular Soda Crackers a token ten thousand barrels of sheep dip—which Douglas Singleton, who did not know what to do with them, did not insist be delivered.

Germaine Singleton, on visiting day several weeks later, was de-

lighted to see how calm and quiet Jerome had become. Though she was somewhat discomfited by the bars on the windows and confused by the youth of some of the guests, she liked that the doctors here were mostly foreigners and that the nurses were mostly fat, ugly, ill-bred, and discourteous. The thought of dying badly in a place like this gave her an anticipatory thrill of spite.

Years later, when her father finally passed away, Katherine Osbret, née Singleton, surprised herself by weeping at the funeral.

Everyone was surprised by the will—by just how much he had left behind.