

Black Ink

by C. P. Boyko

I

The study was in disarray. Papers and cards, bills and folders, were scattered across the floor. The drawers of the filing cabinet—which my father had never seen unlocked—were hanging open. Books, which he'd never been allowed to touch, were splayed on every surface. And at the centre of the room, the trash can lay on its side, spilling charred debris onto my grandmother's Persian rug.

No one had been in here since the night of the accident. It looked like a crime scene. At this thought my father felt a spasm of what he supposed was grief—as though Lloyd, my grandfather, were already dead.

The tang of ash and whatever chemical snow the firefighters had doused the curtains with still hung in the air. This, at least, gave him some place to begin. Almost gratefully he crossed to the window and, pulling the sleeve of his sweater over his hand, tugged on the bladelike lever until it moved. A nearly visible current of cold autumn air came pouring in, like a leak sprung in the hull of a ship.

He brushed some white dust from one curtain, then realized they'd all have to be taken down and replaced anyway. He picked up a pen from the blotter and returned it to the mug that held the others. He returned the phone receiver to its cradle. He righted Lloyd's chair. Then he bent down, reached for the trash can, and paused.

Photographs. Lloyd had been burning photographs.

Most of them had been destroyed. Those not consumed by flame had been wilted by heat or tarnished by smoke. But they had clearly been photographs. My father got down on his knees, upturned the can, and began raking through the detritus with his fingers.

There were only two survivors. In the first photo was a man with a

round, puppy-dog head, black beady eyes scowling out from beneath bristling eyebrows. He looked surprised but scornful, like a nocturnal predator encountered at midday. My father didn't recognize him.

He did recognize the woman in the other photograph—or at least he recognized her features. The hexagonal face like a faceted stone. The lips pressed together in suppressed amusement. The impatient eyes.

It was his mother. In the photo she must have been no more than twenty years old.

He slipped the singed photograph into his pocket.

Then he swept the blackened fragments into a garbage bag and, with belated guilt, delicately rolled up my grandmother's rug and carried it out into the backyard. He shook it out and hung it over one of the espaliers marking the entrance to her garden.

The garden had once been lush enough—or he small enough—that he could hide indefinitely, undetected, undetectable, among its maze of roots and branches. Now it was gone to seed, overgrown with brown weeds, like a living midden, a self-refreshing compost heap.

When had he last been out here? When had anyone? The funeral?

The morning sun was diluted, smeared across the sky by a haze of cloud. He went back inside.

My grandfather was asleep in front of the television. His face had gone slack and stupid—like an insolent teenager's, thought my father.

Neil gathered up the papers without looking at them, like a student snatching up his notes before the wind could carry them away, and shoved them inside the top drawer of the filing cabinet. He would help tidy, but it was not, he decided, his responsibility to put all this back in order. Let his father clean up the mess he'd made. Or Deanna.

I'm here every day, she'd said at the hospital. I'm here every day while you're off somewhere living your own life.

Off in Winnipeg living my life. I live in Winnipeg.

You know what I mean.

But he didn't. What did she mean by *here*? Not the house, obviously. If she came every day, the house could never have gotten like this. There would not be garbage bags piling up on the curb. The mail would not have gone unopened. Their father's bedsheets would not reek of urine. His pills would not be mixed together in a pickle jar in the fridge. The study would not look like it had been ransacked, the drawers of the filing cabinet left hanging open . . .

The second drawer, he saw, was full of books. Little hardcover books, all sizes and colours, none of them labelled. His first thought was that they were ledgers or bankbooks, memorabilia of Pembroke (later, briefly, Pembroke & Son) Signage Co. But inside there were no columns, no numbers or figures, only line after line and page after page of loose, slanted handwriting. He riffled through the notebooks impatiently, almost resentfully, his eyes conscientiously unfocused, sensing but reluctant to confirm that here was something else he would have to take care of, another mess he would have to set in order.

Gradually, inevitably, his eyes began to catch on isolated words and phrases—

. . . *qualitatively* . . .

. . . *bloody awful* . . .

. . . *show up till 7:30* . . .

. . . *troop of morons* . . .

. . . *LOVE HER or anything* . . .

—and the nature of what he was looking at began to sink in.

II

My mother was the light sleeper but my father's side of the bed was closer to the phone.

What's happened? my mother whispered. A disaster film was playing on the screen behind her eyes, images of disease and dismemberment flickering one after another at mercifully subliminal speed. It was past 3 a.m.

Who is it? she asked.

Irritated, my father frowned and shook his head. My mother, taking this as confirmation of her worst fears, leaped out of bed and hurried downstairs.

On the phone my aunt Deanna said, I can't deal with him.

What's happened? What's he done now?

Downstairs, my mother knocked on my door, then let herself in. But I was not in my room.

She picked up the phone in the kitchen and said, Is he all right?

He's in the hospital, said my aunt.

Oh God.

Peggy, said my father, it's not Andy. It's my dad.

She began to say Oh thank God, but stopped herself.

Lloyd? she asked. Is he . . . all right?

Neil, said my aunt, it's you he wants to see.

In one bed, a man was chewing and sucking on his lips like they were beef jerky. In another, a patient was pulling at his ear as though trying to bring it into his field of view. Only my grandfather seemed indifferent to the state of his body, and indeed everything else. He lay on his back, scowling at the ceiling, his lips moving silently.

Hi, Dad.

Lloyd's lips stopped moving. What did she tell you?

The nurse?

Lloyd glared at him for a moment, as though unable to grasp the extent of his ignorance. Your sister.

I haven't seen her yet. I just got in. I came from the airport.

Did she tell you this was all Mossbank's fault? She didn't, did she. Of course she didn't. She wouldn't.

There was a chair at the foot of the bed. Neil dropped into it. Hospitals always made him feel sick.

All I heard was there was a fire. I heard you hurt your knee. I came to see you. How are you feeling?

Lloyd dismissed this question with a shudder of his shoulders. The

lights were out again, you know. The power. These municipal . . . He lifted a hand as though searching for something in the air. After a moment he let it drop, not, apparently, in frustration, but disgust, as though casting away what he'd found. That Mossbank woman watches windows like they're television sets. Sees a little flame in my study and thinks the bloody house is on fire. Calls the goddamn fire department.

And what about your knee?

You have to speak up. He said it like a jail sentence, a *memento mori*: *there will come a day when you will have to speak up*. I'm not a bloody lip-reader.

WHY WERE THERE FLAMES IN YOUR STUDY? Neil half-shouted.

Lloyd grimaced. All a sudden there's a goddamn midway carnival flashing outside my window, then a dozen men in my house, shouting and thumping up the stairs. Christ, I thought I was being robbed. He narrowed his eyes at Neil as though in anticipation of some rebuttal. You read about these things, you know. Looting during blackouts. It's not at all uncommon. They should lock that woman up. Menace to society. Put her in a place like this. They wouldn't even give me my own room, he said loudly, as though accusing his roommates of conspiring against his privacy.

What was—WHAT WAS BURNING?

Having to shout made Neil feel self-conscious—blustering, clumsy, insincere, like a robot or a bureaucrat, a billboard or a warning label. It was impossible to have a genuine conversation at maximum volume.

Lloyd shook his head, but distractedly, as though addressing his own thoughts. Didn't even ring the doorbell. Didn't even knock. No better than Mossbank, going off half-cocked like some kind of . . . bloody . . . He lifted his hand, dropped it, shook his head. Scared the hell out of me, he muttered. Fell out of my goddamn chair. Bashed the holy bejesus out of my knee. Knocked over the trash can. That's why the curtains caught. He made a sound in his throat almost like a drawn-out chuckle. They went up like a, like a, like a . . . He faded to silence, then shouted, I should sue the bastards. Scaring the hell . . . Barging in like . . . Didn't even ring the doorbell.

Didn't even *knock*. No bloody better than Mossbank. Coming into my home. What did *she* tell you?

Neil looked up. Who—Deanna?

Lloyd shook his head. I want to go home. I have work to do. I have to get my affairs in order.

He sounds, thought my father, *just like Andrew*.

He found Deanna in the cafeteria. She was the only person he knew, besides their mother, who sat facing the wall when alone at a table.

Well? She was too large to cross her arms, but in her voice they were crossed.

I don't know. In a tone almost of apology, he said, He seems much the same.

Well, yes, Deanna said, he'd do that for you. Pull himself together. Wouldn't he.

Neil tried a conciliatory tack. His hearing does seem worse.

That's ninety per cent not wanting to listen. Ignoring you. Forgetting you're there. No, not even that. Not wanting to remember you're there. Not being able to be bothered. Believe me.

On the phone, the way you . . . I got the impression . . .

He set the house on fire, Neil.

He set some curtains on fire.

Oh, I guess curtains aren't part of the house.

She'd had something with gravy. Her plate glistened, pearls of grease glowing like television pixels under the harsh hospital lights.

It was an accident.

I was here. You weren't.

It was like they were teenagers again. Whenever he said something she didn't agree with, something she did not like, she retreated into asseveration. *I am right. You are wrong*. If he kept pushing she'd get shrill and defensive. But he couldn't help it.

You were there, he said with dull incredulity. The night of—

I was *here*. I saw him. He was incoherent. His thoughts were disjointed. It sounded like a word she'd borrowed from her husband, the psychiatrist, the psychologist, whatever he was.

Obviously he hasn't been quite right since the funeral, but that's hardly

—
He was raving. He's still raving. You just don't want to listen. You're like *him*.

Neil leaned back in his chair and put his hands in his pockets. I guess I don't see it.

Go to the house. Wait till you see the house, she said, and showed him her teeth.

III

... one of those shy girls who hold themselves perfectly vertical when they walk, like a snorkel skimming across a lake. I'd like to make her buckle and sway like seaweed, flop about on the floor like a fish out of water . . .

. . . never thought I'd miss the war. But it's so. Especially the parts when the good guys were losing. Then it seemed like everyone felt as lousy as I did, which of course made me feel quite good . . .

. . . older, now almost archaic meaning of make love must certainly be the more accurate. That early, chaste phase of flirtation and flat-tery, when the thought of putting your hand on her knee still makes you drunk with lust and terror. This is when love is being made, surely—and not later, when you're finally permitted to post your letter . . .

. . . pompous windbag who verbosely criticizes the inadequacy of language to preserve the every shade and hue of his genius. All I mean is that all our words are dyed. Every utterance is a brush that

paints the utterer. You can't say anything about anything without saying something about yourself. That's what I hate about language. It betrays you . . .

. . . flushed with pleasure at recalling how last night I made her laugh. Then I thought: Shouldn't I prefer it the other way around? Wouldn't it be nice, for a change, to recall how she made me laugh? . . .

Neil stopped reading. As though to catch his breath, he shifted his attention from the meaning of the words to the words themselves.

The ink was blue, though not always the same blue. Some of the pens used had left the pages sprinkled with splotches. The handwriting leaned heavily to the right, as though marching into a strong wind; its loops and strokes looked like so many toeholds put down for traction. Dashes and ellipses were preferred to paragraph breaks, as though to conserve paper, which made it difficult to know where one entry ended and another began. Some were separated by dates, but the year was never indicated. The notebook itself was brown and brittle; the corners of its cardboard cover were frayed. Some of the books were in better shape, their pages less yellowed. But the oldest here, he thought, might have been forty years old. More.

He fished another notebook out of the drawer, split it open at random, and read:

Sep 21. A very foolish and irritating woman came into the shop today and tried to persuade me that the plural form of the English noun flower should have an apostrophe. I launched briskly into a free tutorial on the possessive and elliptical functions of the apostrophe. But I want it to look like that was all she would say, again and again, like a Victrola caught in a groove. Instead of hitting her in the face or ear or about the neck as any rational person would do, I told her that we were having a special sale on quotation marks used for emphasis, and offered to set off the word Best in this fashion for no

extra charge.—That one should have to work in order merely to live, of all things, strikes me as a very dubious arrangement indeed. Like paying a tax on tax or tipping your executioner. I can't quite believe that on top of all the odious tasks I daily perform—waking, washing, shaving (“A daily plague, which in the aggregate / May average on the whole with parturition”), dressing, eating food, suffering fools, i.e. (make that e.g.) smiling and nodding and not hitting their faces while appearing to pay attention to the foolishness that comes out of them. On top of all this extravagant altruism, does it not seem outrageous that the world also expects me to work? That is, to do things I do not like in exchange for money, which I do not even like, since all it's good for is paying for things, things I do not even like, things like soap and clothes and food, things that I require in order to stay living, which I do not even like, necessitating as it does other things I do not like, things like having to work for my father—who I do not like—making and selling signs to people I do not like who are wanting to advertise the things I do not like in a language that they do not even understand.

A dash and a date separated this from what followed.

—Sep 23. The double meaning of the word like. We only like that which is like us, that which we are like—? I like those who like like I do. More to the point, dislike those who dislike unlike me.—And what about girls? They're not like us, are they? They like unlike us, don't they? And yet we like them, or act like we do. Act like we like what they like.—True too of literature: we like what we're like. Why do we read? Not for truth and beauty, but the opposite: for lies and ugliness, for reflections of ourselves. For glimpses that would make us less forlorn. For reminders that others read literature too, for evidence that we're not the only ones who sometimes feel like we're the only ones who feel like this. The good poem says something we wish we'd said, or wish we'd said first, or wish we could say

better. Emerson (that raging twit) put it passably well: In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

The following was given a line of its own.

One should not look in a girl for what can only be found in a poem
—nor vice versa.

His neck was cramped. There was a pain in his shoulder. How long had he been reading? Sunlight had begun to seep from the sky. The room had grown frigid.

He closed the window, turned on a lamp. Downstairs the television clucked and gobbled.

Dad? he called. LLOYD?

There was no reply.

He picked a new notebook out of the filing cabinet—green, this one, and ratty. He peeled back the book's cover, pulled towards him his father's chair, and was already halfway down the first page before he sat down.

May 17. Last night G. visited me in my bedroom, which made me happy, and we listened to my new radio box, which did not. The programme being aired (aired out more like it) was a specimen of what is called a radio play. One might think the inherent limitations of this format would rather constrain the action. Oh ho no. The radio playwright has heroically surmounted this challenge. How has he done that? Quite simple really. If someone does something with their body, someone will comment on it with their voice. Thus if a character walks across the room: Excuse me while I walk across this room old chap. If a character picks up a glass of sherry:—What's this then? —Why, it looks like a glass of sherry, Sergeant Bowles.—What's it doing here, blast it?—It appears to be being picked up by you,

Sergeant.—So it is, Collins. So it is.—Say what you will about the radio playwright, he cannot be accused of leaving too much to the imagination. To paraphrase one of Grete's grumpy old syphilitic countrymen: If Nature had intended Man to think, she would not have given him radios.

The name had been crossed out, as though to conceal her identity—from whom? The ink was darker, fresher, almost black. It looked like some conscientious editor had gone back through these entries at a much later date, striking out the errors. And yet the name was still legible: Grete.

It was his mother's name.

G. I need hardly add seemed not to have disliked it as much as I disliked it, which is to say not nearly enough. In her defence however I suppose her English is not so very good as mine is good. And since, in lieu of speaking succinctly, the radio voices spoke quite quickly, I suppose all her intelligence and attention, which might otherwise have been channeled into incisive aesthetic criticism, had to be dedicated to simply parsing meaning, ~~or rather divided between doing that . . .~~

Here, nearly half a page had been blacked out. Neil pulled himself up to his father's desk and laid the notebook flat beneath the lamp.

or rather divided between doing that on the one hand and fending off my gently persistent attempts to remove her brassiere on the other.—She does this differently than other girls, by the way. Instead of accusing me of not really loving her, of being only interested in THAT (by which they presumably mean that repertoire of things I could do to them with their brassieres off), G. simply locks my off-fending hand in her claws, smiles firmly but mysteriously, and stares off over my shoulder or out the window, half dreamily, as though intent on enjoying the sounds coming out of the Broadspcak, and al-

most half wistfully, as though counting the days until that time when she will no longer have to resist. Or so I'd like to think. In fact . . .

There, mid-sentence, the censorship ended. The text went on unconcealed.

~~In fact~~ I rarely know what goes on in her head. This is not just the difficulty inherent in making sense of the motives or rationales underlying the capricious behaviour of that elusive creature, the female. That mystery, I often think, is due to an absence of something (call it sense); this mystery, on the other hand, is due to an abundance. More goes on behind G.'s eyes—those TruVue stereoscope eyes with their illusory shifting depths, those many-faceted eyes of agate and topaz and jasper (SORRY)—more goes on behind them than she will or can say. Not that I think her mystery is due entirely to the language barrier, the perplexity introduced into our conversations by her constant stream of adorable neologisms and malapropisms. Some of these are quite delightful, actually. Her shadow she calls a me-hole, a me-shaped hole. Her tear glands are crying ducks. To respond in kind is to do something tic for tac. She pronounces mango—they had some in at Landmann's last week—like it's a Dear John letter: Man, go. When I do not want to go out away from the warmth and comfort of my bedroom, she accuses me of having Michelangelo legs, presumably meaning they are painted on. Her English, I might add, though not as good as my English, is inestimably superior to my German. I have to date learned three words. Schnee, which sounds to me more snow-like, whiter and softer and more frozen, than our wet, colourless snow. Gloves are Handschuhe, or hand-shoes. An airplane is if I'm not mistaken a Flugzeug, or flying stuff. Yes, German is unquestionably G.'s language.—And let it also be said for the record, let it be written in posterity's register, that her accent, which she feels acutely embarrassed by, ~~gives me an erection~~. She says German is harsh. I'd prefer earthy. Consider our W versus their V: White is what I would wear were I to wed. White is

what I would wear were I to wed. W is wishy-washy, V is vivacious. W is the burbling of water, V is the buzz of electricity. German is broader, sturdier, has a lower centre of gravity, is more like a pyramid than the redbrick block of flats that is English. Take Yeah versus Ja. Our short A is closer to a short E, theirs to a short O. Ours is higher, theirs lower, theirs deeper, ours shallower. Yeah sounds like maybe. Ja sounds like indisputably. German is the language of the syllogism. Everything G. says in her mother tongue sounds like an a priori dictum from Kant. Everything she says in mine sounds like a Nobel Prize—winning physicist innocently repeating back a filthy limerick to a rabble of mischievous schoolboys. I tell her she must never lose her accent. She thinks I am—

I see you're getting a lot done.

Neil's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't heard the car, hadn't heard the door, hadn't heard her come up the stairs. To conceal his surprise he waited a moment before turning around.

Just going through some of this junk, he said in what he hoped was a casual, half-bored drawl.

Deanna gave him a look that he'd often seen on her face: the one that announced that she could say a lot more, but because others might not much care for what she had to say, she would, out of consideration for them, resist the temptation to say it—for now.

The nurse is here, she said at last.

Oh? He stood and stretched. Where is she?

Without quite rolling her eyes, she lifted her gaze heavenward, pityingly. *He*, she said, giving the *h* a ferocious emphasis, is downstairs watching cartoons with our father.

My father had expected scrubs or a white lab coat, but the man wore a V-neck sweater and khakis. He looked more like an amateur golfer than a nurse. He sat on the couch, as far as possible from my grandfather, staring

at the television with skittish anxiety, like a suitor who'd run out of innocent things to say. He leapt to his feet when my father cleared his throat.

Hi, Neil Merchison.

My father thought he'd been misinformed. Actually, it's—

His name's Neil too, my aunt explained, possibly addressing herself to both men.

Right, said my father. Of course. Pembroke. Neil Pembroke.

They shook hands. The nurse's plump hand felt clammy, like something that had been growing in a cellar.

The other man giggled nervously. Great Neils think alike.

Slowly their gazes settled on Lloyd, who was looking at the television screen like it was something he was going to have to eat.

Perhaps we could move ourselves into another room for a bit, suggested the nurse, and talk in another room.

I'm not a baby, grumbled my grandfather. I know how to spell.

The nurse simpered. Well, perhaps then we could turn that TV off for a bit, if nobody minds too terribly much?

Lloyd said nothing.

Deanna strode purposefully forward and, with an air of righteous self-restraint, like a parent swatting a misbehaving child, switched it off.

That's better, said the nurse, then said nothing for a long time.

We'll clean the place up, Deanna reassured the nurse. Neil and I. So that's something you don't . . .

I was actually just in the middle of that, said my father.

What I usually do is start things out by coming four times a day, said the nurse. Once in the morning—for *breakfast*—once around midday—for *lunch*—once in the evening—for *supper*—and once at night, just before bedtime. For my grandfather's benefit, presumably, he pronounced the meals like they were items on a menu; *bedtime* he half-whispered. And from there, depending on your father's needs, we can do some fine-tuning. Though perhaps for the first week or two, due to the state of that knee—

My sister and I are in some disagreement about that.

Oh.

About our father's needs.

Oh?

Neil.

I don't think he needs a nurse.

I don't need a goddamn *nurse*, said my grandfather. What I *need* . . . He frowned, looked away.

Neil, we've been over this.

You've been over this. I've hardly begun to take it all in.

Whose fault is that? If you're never around. Never here to see what I see, what Eric sees, what anybody—

That man Eric is a damn fool, said my grandfather complacently.

That—my father began to say *is proof that he's in his right mind*, but stopped himself. Instead he turned to the nurse. We still have some discussing to do, as you can see.

We've discussed it to *death*. Who's going to stay with him? He can't walk. He can't get up or down the stairs. He can't fix himself anything to eat. You have to fly back, *I* can't afford to take any more days off work. Who's going to help him? Who's going to stay with him?

The nurse Neil was looking anxious and skittish again. Well, should I perhaps maybe leave you my number, and then we, if you, depending . . .

My aunt gave him a black look. You already *gave* me your number.

I can walk, muttered Lloyd. My legs aren't painted on.

My father looked at him. I'll stay, he said at last.

At which point Lloyd said—perhaps to my father, perhaps to no one at all, but with undeniable feeling—You're a goddamn ignorant fool.

My father nodded wearily, and, from force of habit, replied under his breath, Fuck you too, Lloyd.

But at that, with the rote articulation of those words, all the old anger and resentment and defiance arose within him, and suddenly all the questions that he'd been wanting to ask him—What did you do in the war? How did you and mother meet? Why did she never speak German? Why did you, why did we, never learn it? When did you stop finding solace in poetry? What happened to *Pembroke and Son*? If you loathed going to work so

much, why were you never home? What did *your* father do to make you hate him? Why didn't you ever tell us about yourself? Why did you pour it all into notebooks? Who were you? Where did he go?—all those questions vanished from my father's mind.

What came flooding in to replace them was the crushing anxiety at being so far from home, so far from his office, while his business, his livelihood, was being methodically dismantled by lawyers. They had an entire law firm at their disposal; my father had Troy Mackey, who looked like he cut his own hair. They advertised in *The Economist*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Popular Mechanics*; my father, who could not afford a sixteenth of a page in the yellow pages, or even *The Winnipeg Free Press*, had to rely on bulk e-mail. They had offices in New York, Geneva, Taipei; most days he answered the phone himself. They boasted a product line of thousands, but did not, in fact, make the one item he manufactured and sold. They—they—were suing him—him—because the name of his company was, in the opinion of their lawyers, too much like theirs.

It happens all the time, Troy Mackey had told him, as though this would cheer him up. Big fish eats the little fish. Or in this case, big fish sues the little fish for trademark infringement.

His life was a speck of plankton passing through some whale's baleen and here he was, standing in his senile father's living room, preparing to lug him all around the house, cook his meals, clean out his basement, wipe his ass? Fuck you too, Lloyd.

You'll stay? My aunt was incredulous. *You're going to cancel your flight? You're going to—*

No, he said. Of course not. *You're right.* He nodded at his sister. *You're right. You should know. You've been here.* To the nurse he said, *We'll work something out.*

Then my father excused himself and went upstairs to use the phone.

Or maybe he used the one in the kitchen. I don't know. A lot of this is, perforce, speculation.

Yeah?

Andrew.

Dad.

We're not saying hello these days?

No. I don't know.

Look, I'm not trying to be a hardass here, but the thing is, as you know, sometimes I have to give clients my home number. "Yeah" doesn't sound very professional, does it?

Good afternoon, you've reached the home and private residence of Neil Pembroke, president of Springtek Electronics, how may I direct your call. Better?

Is your mother there?

I don't know.

Do you think you could find out?

Okay.

My father waited a minute. Andrew?

Yeah?

You're still there.

Yeah?

Are you going to go get your mother?

Right. Sorry. Is it *urgent*?

I'm calling long distance.

From the hotel?

I'm not staying in a hotel.

What, you don't stay in hotels anymore? Where are you, anyway?

It's not a business trip. I'm at Grandpa's. I'm staying at Eric and—No, I don't know, I'm not staying anywhere, I'm coming home—look, could I *please* speak to your mother?

So, what, Grandpa or Deanna or wherever you're calling from doesn't have a phone plan? What are you doing *there* anyway?

That's not the point. Your grandfather's sick. *Andrew*—

Okay, shit, *sorry*. You guys never tell me *anything*.

My father took a breath. I'm sorry. Your grandfather, if you must

know . . . Andrew?

But I was gone.

He waited. A minute, two. As his annoyance began to well up, a memory flashed through his mind. Walking home to our old house from the grocery store. He and my mother burdened with paper bags, leaving me, four or five years old, free to dash a few daring steps ahead—how far could I get without being reprimanded, without being called back?—before turning to wait impatiently for them to catch up. My mother gasping, dropping one of her bags, and then, in trying to catch it, dropping the other. Milk everywhere. A jar of pickles rolling away down the sidewalk. *Goddamn it, Peggy.* But then he saw what she—and I—had seen. Smoke. Thick, snowy, white clumps of cotton-candy spilling out of our kitchen window and into the sky. As soft, as innocent, as irresistible as falling snow.

Already the boy—what on earth was he thinking?—was running towards the front door. And the father was screaming, screaming the boy's name at the top of his lungs—screaming as though with hatred, as though he would certainly kill the kid if ever he got his hands on him.

But that was wrong. Something was wrong.

We'd never had a fire. There was no old house.

Then a detail corrected itself in my father's mind. The man, the boy's father, had not said *Goddamn it, Peggy.* He'd said, *Goddamn it, Grete.*

My mother picked up the phone. Neil? Will you talk to your son? I can't deal with him.

My father discovered he had nothing to say.

IV

It is sometimes said of good men that they died too soon.

The priest, a short sleek man who gave the impression of having been groomed entirely by cat's tongue, paused and frowned. For nearly a minute he stood considering the accuracy of this statement. Deciding at last that it would have to do, he went on, but no less haltingly, moving over the words of his sermon like they were nails or hot coals.

And it is sometimes said of evil men that they died too late. Now, this may be true for the world. But for the man himself the opposite is closer to the truth. The good man, destined for heavenly bliss, might justifiably resent having been so long waylaid. The evil man, on the other hand, from his very different vantage point, must certainly lament his not having been given a little more time to repent.

We are all, in our hearts, that evil man. What is it that St. Augustine says? “Give me chastity and continence—but not yet.” We will make amends—tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, the day after. If not soon, eventually. Before we die, certainly. We are all, in our hearts, secretly planning our deathbed redemption. Even those of us who do not believe. What harm, after all, in a little last-minute apology—just in case?

To some of us this may not seem quite right. Should it be possible, should it be *allowed*, that a single act of contrition wipes out an entire life of sin—provided only that it comes last? No, something about this seems not quite “on the level.” We may even secretly hope that God has the good sense not to forgive such scoundrels.

The congregation shuffled in their seats.

And what of the opposite? What of the righteous man who, on his deathbed, renounces his righteousness? What if your first sin is also the last thing you ever do? Should a bad end blot out a good life?

My father wondered what the priest knew, what he had heard. The death certificate was noncommittal. The obituary was brief, gave nothing away.

Had he, somehow, heard about the fire? Had Deanna, perhaps, told him something about disjointed thoughts? Had someone whispered that my grandfather had been found by his nurse at the bottom of the stairs? But the knee, the bad knee, that was surely the knee’s fault, everyone agreed . . .

Or could he be referring obliquely to the will, which had caused my aunt and her husband such consternation? *We’ll fight it*—those had been Eric’s first words. *I can’t believe he’d do this to us* were Deanna’s. He can’t, Eric had assured her. My father, who hadn’t needed Troy Mackey to tell him the will wasn’t worth the paper it was scribbled on, had said nothing.

One thing was certain. The priest was not talking about the notebooks. My father had told no one about them. And he never would.

The call, this time, had come in the middle of the afternoon.

The flight was the same outrageous price.

The study was immaculate. Books on the shelves. New curtains drawn tight. The trash can tucked under the desk. The filing cabinet locked. The key nowhere to be found.

My father had gone across the street and borrowed a crowbar from Delbert Mossbank.

The drawers were empty. The notebooks gone. Everything—gone.

Here on earth, the priest went on, we live in time. Because we live in time, because we forget, because today has never been seen to follow tomorrow, nor yesterday to follow today, we attribute special significance to the next thing, the newest thing. What comes later is better. *Modern* is a compliment; *antique* a slur. The word *evolution*—which means only change, after all—has become synonymous with *improvement*. What comes later is better, and what comes last is best of all.

In this world, last things are hallowed. Last things are holy. That which can be followed by nothing can be replaced by nothing, can be improved upon by nothing, can be rendered obsolete by nothing. Last words, last acts, they go on echoing long after they are uttered, like the twelfth peal of the midday bell lingering in the silence that follows. What comes last, lasts.

This is, in our hearts, what all of us believe. Trapped as we are in time, we can't imagine it being otherwise.

But God is not trapped in time. To God, yesterday and tomorrow are as today. God takes the entire span of our lives in at a glance, as it were. Nothing is missed. Nothing is lost. Nothing is forgotten. The record of our lives is written, as it were, in permanent ink. The evil we do, have done, or will do, is not erased by the good. But nor is the good blackened by the evil.

Every second counts. A moment weighs the same no matter where it falls. Our last days mean as much as all our others—but no more. I hope, and here the priest struggled mightily to find the right words, that this thought . . . may prove to be of some comfort, to some of you, here today. Amen.

Jesus Christ, Dad, I hissed, pull yourself together.

And, just like that, my father stopped. He wiped his eyes and was instantly calm—sombre, but calm. No trace of tears. No sign that he'd just been weeping. No sign that he'd ever wept at all.