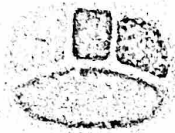


commcomm



Tuesday morning Jillian from Disasters calls. Apparently an airman named Loolerton has poisoned a shitload of beavers. I say we don't kill beavers, we harvest them, because otherwise they nibble through our Pollution Control Devices (PCDs) and polluted water flows out of our Retention Area and into the Eisenhower Memorial Wetland, killing beavers.

"That makes sense," says Jillian, and hangs up.

The press has a field day. AIR FORCE KILLS BEAVERS TO SAVE BEAVERS, says one headline. MURDERED BEAVERS SPEAK OF AIR FORCE CRUELTY, says another.

"We may want to PIDS this," Mr. Rimney says.

I check the files: There's a circa-1984 tortoise-related PIDS from a base in Oklahoma. There's a wild-horse-related PIDS from North Dakota. Also

useful is a Clinton-era PIDS concerning the inadvertent destruction of a dove breeding ground.

From these I glean an approach: I *admit* we harvested the beavers. I *concede* the innocence and creativity of beavers. I *explain* the harvesting as a regrettable part of an ongoing effort to prevent Pollution Events from impacting the Ottowattamie. Finally, I *pledge* we will find a way to preserve our PCDS without, in the future, harming beavers. We are, I say, considering transplanting the beaver population to an innovative Beaver Habitat, to be installed upstream of the Retention Area.

I put it into PowerPoint. Rimney comes back from Break and reads it.

"All hail to the king of PIDS," he says.

I call Ed at the paper; Jason, Heather, and Randall at News-Ten, ActionSeven, and NewsTeamTwo, respectively; then Larry from Facilities, have him reserve the Farragut Auditorium for Wednesday night, and just like that I've got a fully executable PIDS and can go joyfully home to my wife and our crazy energized loving kids.

Just kidding.

I wish.

I walk between Mom and Dad into the kitchen, make those frozen mini-steaks called SmallCows. You microwave them or pull out their ThermoTab. When you pull the ThermoTab, something chemical happens and the SmallCows heat up. I microwave. Unfortunately the ThermoTab erupts and when I

take the SmallCows out they're coated with a green fibrous liquid. So I make Ramen.

"You don't hate the Latvians, do you?" Dad says to me.

"It was not all Latvians done it," Mom says.

I turn on Tape Nine, *Omission/Partial Omission*. When sadness-inducing events occur, the guy says, invoke your Designated Substitute Thoughtstream. Your DST might be a man falling off a cliff but being caught by a group of good friends. It might be a bowl of steaming soup, if one likes soup. It might be something as distractive/mechanical as walking along a row of cans, kicking them down.

"And don't even hate them two," Mom says. "They was just babies."

"They did not do that because they was Latvian," says Dad. "They did it because of they had poverty and anger."

"What the hell," says Mom. "Everything turned out good."

My DST is tapping a thin rock wall with a hammer. When that wall cracks, there's another underneath. When that wall cracks, there's another underneath.

"You hungry?" Mom says to Dad.

"Never hungry anymore," he says.

"Me too," she says. "Plus I never pee."

"Something's off but I don't know what," Dad says.

When that wall cracks, there's another underneath.

"Almost time," Mom says to me, her voice suddenly nervous. "Go upstairs."

I go up to my room, watch some World Series, practice my PIDS in front of the mirror.

What's going on down there I don't watch anymore: Mom's on the landing in her pajamas, calling Dad's name, a little testy. Then she takes a bullet in the neck, her hands fly up, she rolls the rest of the way down, my poor round Ma. Dad comes up from the basement in his gimpy comic trot, concerned, takes a bullet in the chest, drops to his knees, takes one in the head, and that's that.

Then they do it again, over and over, all night long.

Finally it's morning. I go down, have a bagel.

Our house has this turret you can't get into from inside. You have to go outside and use a ladder. There's nothing up there but bird droppings and a Nixon-era plastic Santa with a peace sign scratched into his toy bag. That's where they go during the day. I climbed up once, then never again: jaws hanging open, blank stares, the two of them sitting against the wall, insulation in their hair, holding hands.

"Have a good one," I shout at the turret as I leave for work. Which I know is dumb, but still.

When I get to work, Elliot Giff from Safety's standing in the Outer Hall. Giff's a GS-9 with pink glasses and an immense underchin that makes up a good third of the length of his face.

"Got this smell-related call?" he says.

We step in. There's definitely a smell. Like a mildew/dirt/decomposition thing.

"We have a ventilation problem," Rimney says stiffly.

"No lie," Giff says. "Smells like something crawled inside the wall and died. That happened to my aunt."



"Your aunt crawled inside a wall and died," Rimney says.

"No, a rat," says Giff. "Finally she had to hire a Puerto Rican fellow to drill a hole in her wall. Maybe you should do that."

"Hire a Puerto Rican fellow to drill a hole in your aunt's wall," Rimney says.

"I like how you're funny," Giff says. "There's joy in that."

Giff's in the ChristLife Reenactors. During the reenactments they eat only dates and drink only grape juice out of period-authentic flasks. He says this weekend's reenactment was on the hill determined to be the most topographically similar to Calvary in the entire Northeast. I ask who he did. He says the guy who lent Christ his mule on Palm Sunday. Rimney says it's just like Giff to let an unemployed Jew borrow his ass.

"You're certainly not hurting me with that kind of talk," Giff says.

"I suppose I'm hurting Christ," says Rimney.

"Not hardly," says Giff.

On Rimney's desk is a photo of Mrs. Rimney before the stroke: braless in a tank top, hair to her waist, holding a walking stick. In the photo, Rimney's wearing a bandanna, pretending to toke something. Since the stroke he works his nine or ten, gets groceries, goes home, cooks, bathes Val, does the dishes, goes to bed.

My feeling is, no wonder he's mean.

Giff starts to leave, then doubles back.

"You and your wife are in the prayers of me and our church," he says to Rimney. "Despite of what you may think of me."

"You're in my prayers too," says Rimney. "I'm always pray-

ing you stop being so sanctimonious and miraculously get less full of shit."

Giff leaves, not doubling back this time.

Rimney hasn't liked Giff since the day Giff suggested Rimney could cure Mrs. Rimney if only he'd elevate his prayerfulness.

"All right," Rimney says. "Who called him?"

Mrs. Gregg bursts into tears and runs to the Ladies'.

"I don't get why all the drama," says Rimney.

"Hello, the base is closing in six months," says Jonkins.

"Older individuals like Mrs. G. are less amenable to quick abrupt changes," says Verblin.

When Closure was first announced I found Mrs. G. crying in the Outer Hall. What about Little Bill, she said? Little Bill just bought a house. What about Amber, pregnant with twins, and her husband Goose, drunk every night at The Twit? What about Nancy and Vendra, what about Jonkins and Al? There's not a job to be had in town, she said, where are all these sweet people supposed to go?

I've sent out over thirty résumés, been store to store, chatted up Dad's old friends. Even our grocery's half-closed. What used to be Produce is walled off with plywood. On the plywood is a sign: "If We Don't Have It, Sorry."

CommComm's been offered a Group Transfer to NAIVAC Omaha. But Mom and Dad aren't allowed into the yard, much less to Omaha. And when I'm not around, they get agitated. I went to Albany last March for a seminar and they basically trashed the place. Which couldn't have been easy. To even disturb a drape for them is a big deal. I walked in and Mom was

trying to tip over the coffee table by flying through it on her knees, and Dad was inside the couch, trying to weaken the springs via repetitive fast spinning. They didn't mean to but were compelled. Even as they were flying/spinning they were apologizing profusely.

"Plus it really does stink in here," says Little Bill.

"Who all is getting a headache raise your hand," says Jonkins.

"Oh, all right," says Rimney, then goes into my cubicle and calls Odors. He asks why they can't get over immediately. How many odors do they have exactly? Has the entire base suddenly gone smelly?

I walk in and he's not talking into the phone, just tapping it against his leg.

He winks at me and asks loudly how Odors would like to try coordinating Community Communications while developing a splitting headache in a room that smells like ass.

All afternoon it stinks. At five Rimney says let's hope for the best overnight and wear scuba gear in tomorrow, except for Jonkins, who, in terms of Jonkins, they probably don't make scuba gear that humongous.

"I cannot believe you just said that," says Jonkins.

"Learn to take a joke," Rimney says, and slams into his office.

I walk out with Jonkins and Mrs. Gregg. The big flag over the Dirksen excavation is snapping in the wind, bright yellow leaves zipping past as if weighted.

"I hate him," says Jonkins.

"I feel so bad for his wife," says Mrs. Gregg.

"First you have to live with him, then you have a stroke?" says Jonkins.

"And then you still have to live with him?" says Mrs. Gregg.

The Dirksen Center for Terror is the town's great hope. If transferred to the Dirksen you keep your benefits and years accrued and your salary goes up because you're Homeland Security instead of Air Force. We've all submitted our Requests-for-Transfer and our Self-Assessment-Worksheets and now we're just waiting to hear.

Except Rimney. Rimney heard right away. Rimney knows somebody who knows somebody. He was immediately certified Highly Proficient and is Dirksen-bound, which, possibly, is another reason everybody hates him.

My feeling is, good for him. If he went to Omaha, imagine the work. He and Val have a routine here, contacts, a special van, a custom mechanical bed. Imagine having to pick up and start over somewhere else.

"Home, home, home," says Mrs. Gregg.

"PIDS, PIDS, PIDS," I say.

"Oh, you poor thing," says Mrs. Gregg.

"If I had to stand up in front of all those people," says Jonkins, "I'd put a bullet in my head."

Then there's a long silence.

"Shit man, sorry," he says to me.

The Farragut's full. *I admit, concede, explain, and pledge.* During the Q&A, somebody says if the base is closing, why spend big bucks on a Beaver Habitat? I say because the Air Force is com-

mitted to ensuring that, post-Closure, all Air Force sites remain environmentally viable, prioritizing species health and a diverse life-form mix.

Afterward Rimney's back by the snacks. He says is there anything I can't pids? I say probably not. I've pidsed sexual-harassment cases, a cracked hazardous waste incinerator, half a dozen jet-fuel spills. I pidsed it when General Lemaster admitted being gay, retracted his admission, then retracted his retraction, all in the same day, before vanishing for a week with one of his high school daughter's girlfriends.

"You might have noticed earlier that I was not actually calling Odors," Rimney says.

"I did notice that," I say.

"Thing I like about you, you're a guy who understands life gets complicated," he says. "Got a minute? I need to show you something."

I follow him back to CommComm. Which still stinks. I follow him into the copier closet, which stinks even worse.

In the closet is something big, in bubble-wrap.

"Note to self," he says. "Bubble-wrap? Not smell-preventing."

He slits open the bubble-wrap. Inside is this giant dirt clod. Sticking out of the clod is a shoe. In the shoe is a foot, a rotted foot, in a rotted sock.

"I don't get it," I say.

"Found down in the Dirksen excavation," he says. "Thought I could stash them in here a few days, but phew. Can you believe it?"

He slits open a second bubble-wrap package. There's another

guy, not enclodded, cringed up, in shredded pants, looking like he's been dipped in mustard. This one's small, like a jockey.

"They look old-timey to me," Rimney says.

They do look old-timey. Their shoes are big crude shoes with big crude nails.

"So you see our issue," he says. "Dirksen-wise."

I don't. But then I do.

The Racquetball Facility was scrapped due to someone found an Oneida nosering portion on the site. Likewise the proposed Motor Pool Improvement, on account of a shard of Colonial crockery.

If a pottery shard or partial nosering can scrap a project, think what a couple Potentially Historical corpses/mummies will do.

"Who else knows?" I say.

"The contractor," Rimney says. "Rick Granis. You know Rick?"

I've known Rick since kindergarten. I remember how mad he'd get if anyone called his blanket anything but his binkie. Now he's got an Escalade and a summer house on Otissic Lake.

"But Rick's cool with it," he says. "He'll do whatever."

He shows me Rick's Daily Historical-Resource Assessment Worksheet. Under "Non-Historical Detritus," Rick's written: "Two contemp soda bottles, one contemp flange." Under "Evidence of Pre-Existing Historical/Cultural Presence," he's written: "Not that I know of."

Rimney says a guy like me, master of the public presentation aspect, could be a great fit at the Dirksen. As I may know,



he knows somebody who knows somebody. Do I find the idea of Terror work at all compelling?

I say sure, yes, of course.

He says, thing is, they're just bodies. The earth is full of bodies. Under every building in the world, if you dig deep enough, is probably a body. From the looks of it, someone just dumped these poor guys into a mass grave. They're not dressed up, no coffins, no dusty pathetic flower remains, no prayer cards.

I say I'm not sure I totally follow.

He says he's thinking a respectful reburial, somewhere they won't be found, that won't fuck up the Dirksen.

"And tell the truth," he says, "I could use some help."

I think of Tape Four, *Living the Now*. What is the Now Situation? How can I pull the pearl from the burning oyster? How can the "drowning boy" be saved? I do an Actual Harm Analysis. Who would a reburial hurt? The mummy guys? They're past hurt. Who would it help? Rimney, Val Rimney, all future Dirksen employees.

Me.

Mom, Dad.

Dad worked thirty years at Gallup Chain, with his dad. Then they discontinued Automotive. Only Bike remained. A week after his layoff, Grandpa died. Day of the wake, Dad got laid off too. Month later, we found out Jean was sick. Jean was my sister, who died at eight. Her last wish was Disneyland. But money was tight. Toward the end Dad borrowed money from Leo, the brother he hated. But Jean was too sick to travel. So Dad had an Army friend from Barstow film all of Disney on a

Super-8. The guy walked the whole place. Jean watched it and watched it. Dad was one of these auto-optimists. To hear him tell it, we'd won an incredible last-minute victory. Hadn't we? Wasn't it something, that we could give Jeanie such a wonderful opportunity?

By then Jean had been distilled down to like pure honesty.

"I do wish I could have gone, though," she said.

"Well, we practically did," Dad said, looking panicked.

"No, but I wish we really did," she said.

After Jean died, we kept her room intact, did a birthday thing for her every year, started constantly expecting the worst. I'd come home from a high school party and Mom would be sitting there with her rosary, mumbling, praying for my safe return. Even a dropped shopping bag, a broken jar of Prego, would send them into a funk, like: Doom, doom, of course, isn't this the way it always goes for us?

Eight years later came the night of the Latvians.

So a little decent luck for Mom and Dad doesn't seem like too much to ask.

"About this job thing," I say.

"I will absolutely make it happen," he says.

The way we do it is, we carry them one at a time out to his special van. He's got a lift in there for Val. Not that we need the lift. These guys are super-light. Then we drive out to the forest behind Missions. We dig a hole, which is not easy, due to roots. I go in, he hands them down very gentle. They're so stiff and dry it's hard to believe they can still smell.

We backfill, kick some leaves around, drag over a small fallen tree.

"You okay?" he says. "You look a little freaked."

I ask should we maybe say a prayer.

"Go ahead," he says. "My feeling is, these guys have been gone so long they're either with Him or not. If there even is a Him. Might be real, might not. To me, what's real? Val. When I get home tonight, there she'll be, waiting. Hasn't eaten yet, needs her bath. Been by herself the whole day. That, to me? Is real."

I say a prayer, lift my head when done.

"I thank you, Val thanks you," he says.

In the van I do a Bad Feelings Acknowledgment re the re-burial. I visualize my Useless Guilt as a pack of black dogs. I open the gate, throw out the Acknowledgment Meat. Pursuing the Meat, the black dogs disappear over a cliff, turning into crows (i.e., Neutral/Non-Guilty Energy), which then fly away, feeling Assuaged.

Back at CommComm we wash off the shovels, Pine-Sol the copier closet, throw open the windows, check e-mail while the place airs out.

Next morning the stink is gone. The office just smells massively like Pine-Sol. Giff comes in around eleven, big bandage on his humongous underchin.

"Hey, smells super in here today," he says. "Praise the Lord for that, right? And all things."

"What happened to your chin?" says Rimney. "Zonk it on a pew while speaking in tongues?"

"We don't speak in tongues," says Giff. "I was just shaving."

"Interesting," Rimney says. "Goodbye."

"Not goodbye," says Giff. "I have to do my Situational Follow-Up. What in your view is the reason for the discontinued nature of that crappo smell you all previously had?"

"A miracle," says Rimney. "Christ came down with some Pine-Sol."

"I don't really go for that kind of talk," says Giff.

"Why not pray I stop?" says Rimney. "See if it works."

"Let me tell you a like parable," Giff says. "This one girl in our church? Had this, like, perma-smile? Due to something? And her husband, who was non-church, was always having to explain that she wasn't really super-happy, it was just her malady. It was like the happier she looked, the madder he got. Then he came to our church, guess what happened?"

"She was miraculously cured and he was miraculously suddenly not angry," says Rimney. "God reached down and fixed them both, while all over the world people who didn't come to your church remained in misery, weeping."

"Well, no," says Giff.

"And that's not technically a parable," says Verblin.

"See, but you're what happens when man stays merely on his own plane," says Giff. "Man is made bitter. Look, I'm not claiming I'm not human and don't struggle. Heck, I'm as human as you. Only I struggle, when I struggle, with the help of Him that knows no struggle. Which is why sometimes I maybe seem so composed or, you might say, together. Everyone in our church has that same calm. It's not just me. It's just Him, is how we say it."

"How calm would you stay if I broke your neck?" says Rimney.

"Ron, honestly," Jonkins says.

"Quiet, Tim," Rimney says to Jonkins. "If we listen closely, we may hear the call of the North American extremist loony."

"Maybe you're the extremist due to you think you somehow created your own self," says Giff.

"Enough, this is a place of business," says Rimney.

Then Milton Gelton comes in. Gelton's a GS-5 in Manual Site Aesthetics Improvement. He roams the base picking up trash with a sharp stick. When he finds a dead animal, he calls Animals. When he finds a car battery, he calls Environmental.

"Want to see something freaky?" he says, holding out his bucket. "Found behind Missions?"

In the bucket is a yellow-black human hand.

"Is that a real actual hand of someone?" says Amber.

"At first I thought glove," Gelton says. "But no. See? No hand-hole. Just solid."

He pokes the hand with a pen to demonstrate the absence of hand-hole.

"You know what else I'm noting as weird?" Giff says. "In terms of that former smell? I can all of a sudden smell it again."

He sniffs his way down to the bucket.

"Yoinks, similar," he says.

"I doubt this is a Safety issue," says Rimney.

"I disagree," says Giff. "This hand seems like it might be the key to our Possible Source of your Negative Odor. Milton, can you show me the exact locale where you found this at?"

Out they go. Rimney calls me in. How the hell did we drop that fucker? Jesus, what else did we drop? This is not funny, he says, do I realize we could go to jail for this? We knowingly altered a Probable Historical Site. At the very least, we'll catch hell in the press. As for the Dirksen, this gets out, goodbye Dirksen.

I eat lunch in the Eating Area. Little Bill's telling about his trip to Omaha. He stayed at a MinTel. The rooms are closet-sized. They like slide you in. You're allowed two Slide-Outs a night. After that it's three dollars a Slide-Out.

Rimney comes out, says he's got to run home. Val's having leg cramps. When she has leg cramps, the only thing that works is hot washrags. He's got a special pasta pot and two sets of washrags, one blue, one white. One set goes on her legs while the other set heats.

With Rimney gone, discipline erodes. Out the window I see Verblin sort of mincing to his car. A yardstick slides out of his pants. When he stoops to get the yardstick, a printer cartridge drops out of his coat. When he bends to pick up the cartridge, his hat falls off, revealing a box of staples.

At three Ms. Durrell from Environmental calls. Do we have any more of those dioxin coloring books? Do I know what she means? It's not a new spill, just reawakened concern over an old spill. I know what she means. She means *Donnie Dioxin: Badly Misunderstood But Actually Quite Useful Under Correct Usage Conditions*.

I'm in Storage looking for the books when my cell rings.

"Glad I caught you," Rimney says stiffly. "Can you come



out to Missions? I swung by on the way back and boy oh boy, did Elliot ever find something amazing.”

“Is he standing right there?” I say.

“Okay, see you soon,” he says, and hangs up.

I park by the Sputnik-era jet-on-a-pedestal. The fake pilot’s head is facing backward and a twig’s been driven up his nose. Across the fuselage some kid’s painted, “This thing looks like my penis if my penis has wings.”

It starts to flurry. Giff’s been at the grave with a shovel. So far it’s just the top of the jockey’s head sticking out, and part of the enclosed guy’s foot.

“Wow,” I say.

“Wow is correct,” says Rimney.

“Thanks be to Scouts,” Giff says. “See? Footprints galore. Plus tire tracks. To me? It’s like a mystery or one of those deals where there’s more than meeting the eyes. Because where did these fellows come from? Who put them here? Why did your office smell so bad, in an off way similar to that gross way that hand smelled? In my logic? I ask, Where locally is somewhere deep that’s recently been unearthed or dug into? What I realized? The Dirksen. That is deep, that is new. What do you think? I’ll get with Historical tomorrow, see what used to be where the Dirksen is at now.”

I helped Rimney get Val home from the hospital after the stroke, watched the two of them burst into tears at the sight of her mechanical bed.

He looks worse than that now.

"Fuck it, I'm going to tell him, trust him, what do you think?" he says.

My feeling is no no no. Giff's not exactly King of Sense of Humor. Last year I was the only non-church person at his Christmas party. The big issue was, somebody on Giff's wife's side had sent their baby a stuffed DevilChild From Hell. The DevilChild starts each episode as a kindly angel with a lisp. Then something makes him mad and he morphs into a demon and starts speaking with an Eastern European accent while running around stabbing uptight people in the butt with a red-hot prod.

"As for me and my house, this little guy has no place here," Giff had said. "Although Cyndi apparently feels otherwise."

Cyndi I would describe as pretty but flinchy.

"Andy doesn't see it as the devil," she said. "He just likes it."

"Well, I do see it as the devil," Giff said. "And I don't like it. And here in this house, a certain book tells us the role of the father/husband. Am I right?"

"I guess so," she said.

"You guessing so, like Pastor Mike says, is symptomatic of your having an imperfect understanding of what the Lord has in mind for our family, though," he said. "Right? Right, Pastor Mike?"

"Well, it's certainly true that a family can only have one head," said a guy in a Snoopy sweater who I guessed was Father Mike.

"Okay, tough guy," Cyndi said to Giff, and stomped off, ringing the tree ornaments.

I can see Giff's wheels turning. Or trying to. He's not the brightest. I once watched him spend ten minutes trying to make a copy on a copier in the Outer Hall that was unplugged and ready for Disposal.

"Wait, are you saying you guys did this?" he says.

Rimney says Giff has a wife, Giff has a baby, would a transfer to the Dirksen be of interest? Maybe Giff's aware that he, Rimney, knows somebody who knows somebody?

"Oh my gosh, you guys did do it," Giff says.

He lets the shovel fall and walks toward the woods, as if so shocked he has to seek relief in the beauty of nature. Out in the woods are three crushed toilets. Every tenth bush or so has a red tag on it, I have no idea why.

"All's I can say is wow," Giff says.

"They're dead, man," Rimney says. "What do you care?"

"Yes, but who was it shaped these fellows?" says Giff. "You? Me? Look, I'm going to speak frank. I think I see what's going on here. Both you guys took recent hard hits. One had a wife with a stroke, the other a great tragic loss of their parents. So you got confused, made a bad call. But He redeemeth, if only we open our hearts. Know how I know? It happened to me. I also took a hard hit this year. Because guess what? In terms of my wife? I'm just going to say it. Our baby is not my baby. Cyndi had a slip-up with this friend of ours, Kyle. I found out just before Christmas, which was why I was such a fart at our party. That put me in a total funk—we were like match and gas. I was so mad there was a darkness upon me. Poor thing had bruises all up her arms, due to I started pinching her. In her sleep, or sometimes I would get so mad and just come up

quick and do it. Then January tenth, I'd had enough and I prayed, I said, 'Lord I am way too small, please take me up into You, I don't want to do this anymore.' And He did it. I dropped as if shot. And when I woke? My heart was changed. All glory goes to Him. I mean it was a literal release in my chest. All my hate about the baby was gone and all of a sudden Andy was just my son for real."

"Nice story," says Rimney.

"It's not a story, it happened to me for real in my life," says Giff. "Point is? I had it in me to grow. We all do! I'm not all good, but there's a good part of me. My fire may be tiny, but it's a fire just the same. See what I mean? Same like you. Do you know that good part? Have you met it, that part of you that is all about Truth, that is called, in how we would say it, your Christ-portion? My Christ-portion knew that pinching was wrong. How does your Christ-portion feel about this sneaky burial thingie? I mean honestly. In a perfect world, is that what you would have chose to do?"

This catches me a little off guard.

"Is this where I go into a seizure and you heal me by stroking my dick?" Rimney says.

Giff blinks at this, turns to me.

"Think these things up in your heart," he says softly. "Treature them around, see what it is. Then be in touch, come to our church if you want. I am hopeful that you will come to your Truth."

Suddenly my eyes tear up.

And I don't even know why.

"This is about my wife, jackass," says Rimney.

"Do what's right, come what may," Giff says. "That's what it says on all our softball sweatshirts, and I believe it. And on the back? 'Say No Thanks To Mr. Mere Expedience.' Good words for you, friend."

Rimney's big. Once when mad he smacked the overhang on the way to Vending and there's still a handprint up there. Once he picked up one end of the photocopier so Mrs. Gregg could find her earring, and a call came in and he had this big long conversation with Benefits while still holding up the copier.

"Cross me on this, you'll regret it," he says.

"Get thee behind me," says Giff.

So, a little tense.

My phone rings. Ms. Durrell again. She's got a small vocal outraged group coming at four to eat her alive. Where the hell am I? Those dioxin books? Had something to do with a donkey, Donkey Dioxin, Who Got the Job Done? Or it was possibly an ape or possum or some such shit? She remembers a scene at the end with some grateful villagers, where the ape/possum/donkey/whatever gave the kids a ride, and also the thing came with a CD?

"Go," Rimney says. "Elliot and I will work this out."

By the time I get the books out of Storage and over to Environmental it's after five.

I clock out, race home through our wincing little town. Some drunks outside The Twit are heaving slushballs up at the laughing neon Twit. Blockbuster has a new program of identifying all videos as either Artsy or Regular. Two beautiful girls in heels struggle down to the banks of the Ottowattamie,

holding each other up. Why are they going down there? It's dusk and that part of the river's just mud and an old barge.

I wish I could ask them but I don't have time. When I'm late Mom and Dad race around shouting, Where Where Where? It always ends in this bitter mutual crying. It's just one of their things. Like when it rains, they go up to the ceiling and lie there facing up. Like when feeling affectionate, they run full-speed toward each other and pass through, moaning/laughing.

The night of the Latvians I was out with Cleo from Vehicles. We went parking, watched some visiting Warthogs practice their night-firing. Things heated up. She had a room on the side of a house, wobbly wooden stairs leading up. Did I call, say I'd be late, say I might not be back at all? No I did not. Next morning I came home, found the house taped off. For the body locations, the cops didn't use chalk. There was just a piece of loose-leaf on the stairs labeled "Deceased Female" and one on the kitchen floor labeled "Deceased Male."

I tell myself: If I'd been home, I'd be dead too. The Latvians had guns. They came in quick, on crack, so whacked-out they forget to even steal anything.

Still. Mom's sciatica was acting up. She'd just had two teeth pulled. At the end, on the steps, on her back, she kept calling my name, as in: Where is he? Did they get him too? Next day, on the landing, I found the little cotton swab the dentist had left in her mouth.

So if they want me home right after work, I'm home right after work.



They're standing at the kitchen window, looking out at the old ball-bearing plant. All my childhood, discarded imperfect ball bearings rolled down the hill into our yard. When the plant closed, a lathe came sliding down, like a foot a day, until it hit an oak.

"Snowing like a mother," Dad says.

"Pretty but we can't go out," says Mom.

"Too old, I guess," Dad says sadly.

"Or something," says Mom.

I set three places. They spend the whole dinner as usual, trying to pick up their forks. Afterward they crowd under the floor lamp, the best part of their night. When they stand in direct heat it doesn't make them warmer, just makes them vividly remember their childhoods.

"Smell of melted caramel," Mom says.

"The way I felt first time I seen a Dodger uniform in color," says Dad.

Dad asks me to turn up the dimmer, and I do, and the info starts coming too fast for grammar.

"Working with beets purple hands Mother finds that funny," says Mom.

"Noting my boner against ticking car, Mr. Klemm gives look of you-are-rubbing-your-boner, mixed sense of shame/pride, rained so hard flooded gutters, rat wound up in the dog bowl," says Dad.

They step out of the light, shake it off.

"He's always talking about boners," says Mom.

"Having a boner is a great privilege," says Dad.

"You had your share," says Mom.

"I should say so," says Dad. "And will continue to, I hope, until the day I die."

Having said "die," Dad blinks. Whenever we see a murder on TV, they cover their eyes. Whenever a car backfires, I have to coax them out from under the couch. Once a bird died on the sill and they spent the entire day in the pantry.

"Until the day you die," Mom says, as if trying to figure out what the words mean.

Before they can ask any questions, I go outside and shovel.

From all over town comes the sound of snowplows, the scraping plus the beeping they do when reversing. The moon's up, full, with halo. My phone rings in my parka pocket.

"We have a situation," Rimney says. "Can you step outside?"

"I am outside," I say.

"Oh, there you are," he says.

The special van's coming slowly up the street.

"New plan," he says, still on the phone, parking now. "What's done is done. We can save the Dirksen or lose it. Minimize the damage or maximize."

He gets out, leads me around to the sliding door.

You didn't, I think. You did not dig those poor guys up again. Does he think Historical is stupid? Does he think Historical, getting a report of mummies, finding only a recently filled hole, is going to think, Oh Giff, very funny, you crack us up?

"Not the mummies," I say.

"I wish," he says, and throws open the door.

Lying there is Giff, fingers clenched like he's trying to cling to a ledge, poor pink glasses hanging off one ear.

I take a step back, trip on the curb, sit in a drift.

"We took a walk, things got out of hand," he says. "Shit, shit, shit. I tried to reason with him but he started giving me all his Christian crap. Something snapped, honestly. It just got away from me. You've probably had that happen?"

"You killed him?" I say.

"An unfortunate thing transpired, after which he died, yes," Rimney says.

Thrown in there with Giff is a big rock, partly wrapped in bloody paper towels.

I ask did he call the police. He says if he planned on calling the police, would he have thrown Giff in back of the freaking van? He says we've got to think pragmatic. He did it, he fucked up, he knows that, he'll be paying for it the rest of his life, but no way is Val paying for it. If he goes to jail, what happens to Val? A state home? No no no, he says. Dead is dead, he can't change that. Why kill Val as well?

"What do we do with this guy?" he says. "Think, think."

"We?" I say. "You."

"Oh God, oh shit," he says. "I can't believe I killed somebody. Me, I did it. Jesus, wow. Okay. Okay."

Snow's blowing in over Giff, melting on his glasses, clumping up between his pants and bare leg.

"You know Val, you like Val, right?" Rimney says.

I do like Val. I remember her at Mom and Dad's funeral, in

her wheelchair. She had Rimney lift one of her hands to my arm, did this sad little pat pat pat.

"Because here's the thing," Rimney says. "Dirksen-wise? You're all set. I submitted my rec. It's in the system. Right? Why not take it? Prosper, get a little something for yourself, find a wife, make some babies. The world's shit on you enough, right? You did not do this, I did. I shouldn't have come here. How about pretend I didn't?"

I stand up, start to do a Moral Benefit Eval, then think, No, no way, do not even think about doing that stupid shit now.

The bandage on Giff's underchin flips up, showing his shaving scar.

"Because who was he?" says Rimney. "Who was he really? Was he worth a Val? Was he even a person? He, to me? Was just a dumb-idea factory. That's it."

Poor Giff, I think. Poor Giff's wife, poor Giff's baby.

Poor Val.

Poor everybody.

"Don't fuck me on this," Rimney says. "Are you going to fuck me on this? You are, aren't you? Fine. Fine then."

He turns away, slams the van door shut, emits this weird little throat sound, like he can't live with what he's done and would like to end it all, only can't, because ending it all would make him even more of a shit.

"I feel I'm in a nightmare," he says.

Then he crashes the Giff-rock into my head. I can't believe it. Down I go. He swung so hard he's sitting down too. For a second we both sit there, like playing cards or some-

thing. I push off against his face, crawl across the yard, get inside, bolt the door.

"I don't like that," says Dad, all frantic. "I did not like seeing that."

"People should not," Mom says. "That is not a proper way."

When terrified they do this thing where they flicker from Point A to Point B with no interim movement. Mom's in the foyer, then in the kitchen, then at the top of the stairs.

"You better get to the hospital," Dad says.

"Take this poor kid with you," Mom says.

"He just suddenly showed up," Dad says.

Somebody's on the couch. It takes me a second to recognize him.

Giff.

Or something like Giff: fish-pale, naked, bloody dent in his head, squinting, holding his glasses in one hand.

"Whoa," he says. "Is this ever not how I expected it would be like."

"What what would be like?" says Dad.

"Death and all?" he says.

Dad flickers on and off: smiling in his chair, running in place, kneeling near the magazine rack.

"You ain't dead, pal, you're just naked," says Dad.

"Naked, plus somebody blammed you in the head," says Mom.

"Do they not know?" says Giff.

I give him a look, like, Please don't. We're just enjoying a little extra time. I'm listening to their childhood stories, play-

ing records from their courtship days, staring at them when they're not looking, telling them how good they were with me and Jean, how safe we always felt.

"Don't you love them?" Giff says.

I remember them outside the funeral home the day we buried Jean, Mom holding Dad up, Dad trying to sit on a hydrant, wearing his lapel button, his lapel photo-button of little smiling Jean.

"Then better tell them," Giff says. "Before it's too late. Because watch."

He stands, kind of shaky, hobbles over, breathes in my face.

Turns out when the recently dead breathe in your face they show you the future.

I see Mom and Dad trapped here forever, reënacting their deaths night after night, more agitated every year, finally to the point of insanity, until, in their insanity, all they can do is rip continually at each other's flesh, like angry birds, for all eternity.

I tell them.

"Very funny," says Mom.

"Cut it out," Dad says.

"We're a little sad sometimes," says Mom. "But we definitely ain't dead."

"Are we?" Dad says.

Then they get quiet.

"Holy crap," Dad says.

Suddenly they seem to be hearing something from far away.



"Jeez, that's better," says Dad.

"Feels super," Mom says.

"Like you had a terrible crick and then it went away," Dad says.

"Like your dirty dress you had on for the big party all of a sudden got clean," says Mom.

They smile, step through the wall, vanish in two little sudden blurps of light.

Giff's pale and bent, glowing/shimmering, taller than in life, a weird breeze in his hair that seems to be coming from many directions at once.

"There is a glory, but not like how I thought," he says. "I had it all wrong. Mostly wrong. Like my mind was this little basket, big flood pouring in, but all I got was this hint of greater water?"

"You were always a nice person," I say.

"No, I was not," he says. "Forced my little mini-views down everybody's throat. Pinched my wife! And now it's so sad. Because know what he did? Rimney? Typed her a note, like it was from me, saying I was leaving, due to I didn't love her, due to that Kyle thing. But that is so not true! I loved her all through that. But now, rest of her life, she's going to be thinking that of me, that I left her and the baby, when we were just getting over that pinching thing."

His eyes fill with tears and his hair stops blowing and he crushes his pink glasses in his hand.

"Go see her," I say. "Tell her the truth."

"Can't," he says. "You just get one."

"One what?" I say.

"Visitation or whatever?" he says.

I think: So why'd you come here?

He just smiles, kind of sad.

Then the front window implodes and Rimney climbs through with a tire iron.

"It's going to happen now," Giff says.

And it does. It takes two swings. It doesn't hurt, really, but it's scary, because it's happening to me, me, me, me, the good boy in school, the boy who felt lilacs were his special flower, the boy who, when poor Jean was going, used to sneak off to cry in the closet.

Going, there's an explosion of what I can only call truth-energy-flood. I can't exactly convey it, because you're still in that living-limited state, so lucky/unlucky, capable of smelling rain, rubbing palm against palm, having some new recently met someone suddenly brighten upon seeing you.

Rimney staggers to the door, unbolts it, stands looking out.

I pass through him and see that even now all his thoughts are of Val, desperate loving frightened thoughts of how best to keep her safe.

Giff and I cross the yard hand in hand, although like fifteen feet apart. Where are we going? I have no idea. But we're going there fast, so fast we're basically skimming along Trowman Street, getting simultaneously bigger/lighter, and then we're flying, over Kmart/Costco Plaza, over the width of Wand Lake, over the entire hilly area north of town.

Below us now is Giff's house: snow on the roof, all the lights on, pond behind it, moon in the pond.

Giff says/thinks: Will you?

And I say/think: I will.

She's at the table doing bills, red-eyed, the note at her feet, on the floor. She sees me and drops her pen. Am I naked, am I pale, is my hair blowing? Yes and yes and yes. I put one bare foot on the note.

A lie, I say. Elliot's dead, sends his love. Rimney did it. Rimney. Say it.

Rimney, she says.

That's all the chance I get. The thing that keeps us flying sucks me out of the house. But as I go I see her face.

Rejoining Giff on high I show him her face. He is glad, and now can go.

We both can go.

We go.

Snow passes through us, gulls pass through us. Tens of towns, hundreds of towns stream by below, and we hear their prayers, grievances, their million signals of loss. Secret doubts shoot up like tracers, we sample them as we fly through: a woman with a too-big nose, a man who hasn't closed a sale in months, a kid who's worn the same stained shirt three days straight, two sisters worried about a third who keeps saying she wants to die. All this time we grow in size, in love, the distinction between Giff and me diminishing, and my last thought before we join something I can only describe as Nothing-Is-Excluded is, Giff, Giff, please explain, what made you come back for me?

He doesn't have to speak, I just know, his math emanating from inside me now: Not coming back, he would only have saved himself. Coming back, he saved Mom, Dad, me. Going to see Cyndi, I saved him.

And in this way, more were freed.

That is why I came back. I was wrong in life, limited, shrank everything down to my size, and yet, in the end, there was something light-craving within me, which sent me back, and saved me.