201 Short Stories Summer Packet

"A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies . . . The man who never reads lives only one."
– George R.R. Martin

FICTION JULY 2, 2018 ISSUE

THE FIRST WORLD

By Joseph O'Neill

June 25, 2018

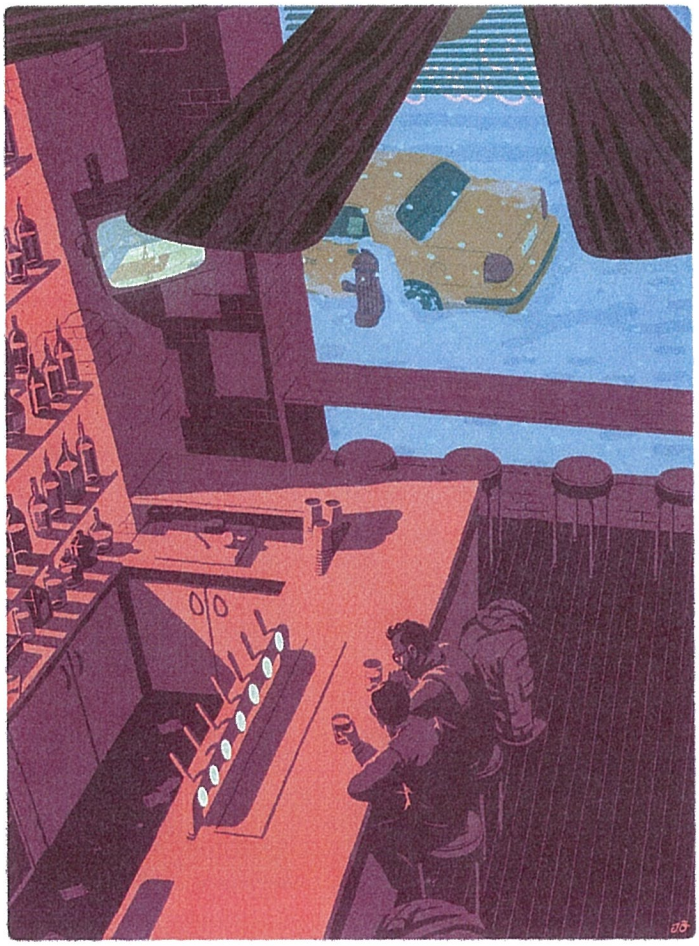

Illustration by Jeff Östberg

Audio: *Joseph O'Neill reads.*

y marriage came to an end, with consequences that were almost all beyond my powers of anticipation.

One such consequence was that a series of men confided in me about their marriages past or present. These weren't my old buddies—my old buddies suddenly viewed me with a kind of fear. These were guys with whom I'd had friendly but arm's-length dealings: a father at my kids' school; the contractor who was painting my new place; or, to take an astounding case, my dermatologist. Previously his opinions had been restricted to the perils of moles; now he opened up, unprompted, on the pros and cons of monogamy as he'd experienced them. Either these men had heard about my new situation or something about me, some post-apocalyptic air, had led them to sniff it out.

With established friends, my habit was to keep dark marital details to myself. This reticence was intended to protect my reputation, not that of the former spouse. It isn't estimable to air dirty linen. With my newfound brethren, though, I could say what I liked, as could they. Terrible revelations were batted back and forth in a spirit of rueful one-upmanship. I will not forget one fellow, a cheerful and suffering soul who dodged me ever after, making the confession that when his wife got cancer he'd found himself hoping that she would not survive. (She lived. They're still married, as far as I know. By God I wish them well.) Even so, truly intimate disclosures were rare. We dealt in war stories and most of all we dealt in theories—in garrulous, alcoholized attempts to formulate generally applicable propositions about happiness, about mankind versus womankind, about litigation, about anything that might help us understand the world or at least make us feel less flummoxed by it. If I discovered a useful law of living, I can't remember it. The theorists and the warriors vanished forever, save one—Arty. Arty resurfaced.

I was on Ninth Avenue one evening, en route to the subway station. It was late December. Cars bound for the Lincoln Tunnel were backed up and brilliant; a grand artificial star hung over the intersection. A crowd of us was poised to cross the street when Arty appeared at my side. He said, "Is that who I think it is?"

It was a romantic encounter, you could say, and in the emotion of the moment Arty blurted out, "Let's you and I grab a drink—right now," and I said, "Let's do it." In a significant tone I added, "Let me first get the all-clear."

My wife—we're not married, but that's what I like to call her—was at home with our four-year-old son. I texted her. I showed Arty her response.

" 'Enjoy!' " he read out. With a grave and direct look, he punched me on the shoulder.

Our catastrophic, weirdly euphoric conferences are now almost a decade behind us. It turns out, however, that an advisory ethos still prevails between me and Arty. We've barely taken our seats at the bar when he says, "All is well, my friend, all is well. Life goes on. But there's something I'd like your opinion on."

He has a situation on his hands. It concerns Gladys, the former nanny of his two girls.

I befriended Arty when he was a near-client of the company I used to work for, which dealt in educational software. I got to hear a lot about his kids and his ex. Gladys rings no bells.

"Go on," I say.

Gladys looked after Arty's girls from when they were newborns until both were in elementary school. Seven years, in all. Over the course of those years she bottle-fed them, changed their diapers, dressed them, cooked for them, let them eat her lunch, picked them up from preschool and kindergarten, sang to them, reprimanded them, got worn out by them. She gave them love, is what it comes down to, Arty tells me. Then she left. The kids didn't need a nanny anymore. Also, Gladys was pushing sixty and had bad knees: she needed to work with younger, less wayward charges. So she took a job in Chelsea, working for a couple with a baby girl, Billie. It was during the Chelsea job that Arty got divorced and Gladys lost her husband, Roy. Gladys stayed in touch with Arty, dropping by maybe once a year to see Arty's girls when they were over at his place. The girls' mother—

"Paloma, right?"

"Yeah," Arty says, and I can tell, or maybe I'm imagining, that he's disinclined to repeat the name.

—the girls' mother had cut off contact with Gladys. Gladys's calls and messages to her had gone unanswered.

Arty is expecting me to respond with sympathetic disapproval. I don't respond at all, however. I'm out of practice. Another way to put it might be: I don't want to hear any more stories about rotten behavior or the battle of the sexes or the woe that is marriage. I've moved on. These days I'm all about love's triumph, adversity overcome, the peak scaled, the clarity after the rain.

"Anyway," Arty says. Not long after Arty's divorce, Gladys rang him and asked for a loan—five hundred dollars. "Now, this is a careful, churchgoing woman making twenty bucks an hour, minimum. So I say to her, Gladys, you're short of money? She tells me it's the doctors' bills for Roy. So listen to this: Roy went to the hospital in Brooklyn. He felt sick. They performed some kind of procedure right away and he died under the knife. Sixty-six years of age. A quality guy, by the way. Always had a twinkle in his eye. A carpenter. Then they sent Gladys a bill for a hundred and ten grand."

"Goddam fucking assholes," I say.

"Gladys told me nothing about the bill at the time," Arty says. "Turns out she agreed to a payment plan with the hospital—two hundred and fourteen bucks a month. She tells me she's been paying it for almost two years. I say to her, Gladys, you should have spoken to me about this. This is nuts. This can't go on. They should be paying you for what they did to Roy, not the other way around. But Gladys is waiting for her citizenship application to go through, she's scared of the immigration authorities and she doesn't want to make trouble. So boom—there goes her retirement money."

"Gladys is from where?"

"Trinidad," Arty says. "I lend her the five hundred. I'm not going to see it again, but whatever."

I think I can tell where this is going. "She doesn't have children to help her?"

Arty shakes his head. Gladys has a son, Benjamin, who's in his forties but has never had what you'd call a career. His wife is in the military, so they keep being moved between dead-end Army towns—in Texas, in North Carolina, in New York—and the wife keeps being posted overseas, and basically Benjamin has been the main hands-on parent of their child, a girl. "I went to their wedding," Arty says. "Out in Flatbush. At this Jamaican church." Arty says very intently, "I thought Jamaicans were

all about carnivals and ganja. I was expecting a party. But this was like a funeral." He relates that the minister, the proprietor of the church, began the service by criticizing the congregation for being late. " 'Tardiness,' he called it," Arty says. "Tardiness this, tardiness that." The minister lectured on this subject for an amazingly long time and with an amazing anger, scolding and admonishing and tyrannizing everybody. "I'm looking around to catch someone's eye—you know, maybe raise an eyebrow—but they're all just looking straight ahead with these blank faces. They're scared. They're frozen with fear."

Here I want to interrupt him. I want to talk about myself. I have a whole little riff ready to go. Speaking of nannies, I'd like to say to Arty, I'm a dad all over again, which means I'm back on the school run—which means that every morning I'm reliving the nightmare of failing to put names to faces, and sometimes even faces to functions. I recognize people but can't properly identify them, these caregivers, moms, dads, receptionists, teachers, and children who have every right and expectation to be identifiable. They call me by my name and my little boy by his—and I can't reciprocate, no matter how much I'd like to. If there is one thing that's held me back in life, I want to suggest to Arty, if I have an Achilles' heel, if I have a chink in my armor, it's this inability to hold on to names and even, increasingly, faces. It was a real stroke of luck (I'd keep this to myself, of course) that Arty, let alone Paloma, emerged from the fog, or the deep, or the forest, or wherever it is everybody has gone.

"Money," I say to Arty. "The minister wasn't happy with his fee. So everybody being late made him really mad."

Arty points a finger at me, as if he's very impressed by what I just said. He continues, "When Christmas came around, I gave Gladys another couple of hundred bucks. Not the biggest deal, but not nothing, either."

Then things began to look up for Gladys. Her citizenship came through, and, when her Chelsea job ended, she felt it was time to retire. She'd turned sixty-five and couldn't take another New York City winter. She decided to go back to Trinidad, where she hadn't lived for thirty years.

"Trinidad is where, exactly?"

Arty seems not to have heard me. "So this is what I do," he says. "I've got some cash in a savings account from when we sold that shack on the Shore. Eighteen thousand. I give Gladys a retirement gift of two thousand dollars. As a thank-you and a goodbye and a good luck and a have a nice life. She's got two brothers down there who're well-to-do, she's got her Social Security, it is what it is. I've done my bit."

I want to go home. But Arty bought the first round of beers and might feel stiffed if I took off. Two more, I signal to the bartender, and I extract some bills from a buttock pocket.

To repeat: I took the cash from my pocket—I didn't take it from my wallet. I had lost my wallet. It happened like this. We were eating out. Our little son fell asleep in the restaurant and it was my job to shoulder him out of there, fast. We had a Via ride arriving, three blocks away, in two minutes. We had to move. That's when the loss undoubtedly occurred: in the course of scrambling together our stuff—coats, kids' books, credit-card receipt, earbuds, scarves, bags, phones, an umbrella—and then hurrying through the rainy and ravening night. The loss did not occur in the restaurant itself—I called them afterward; they'd found nothing—but the conditions of the loss were organized there. Nor did I lose my wallet in the Via. I called the driver the next day and, after the trusty fellow had finally got out of bed in the late afternoon and gone down to his vehicle and reportedly looked around under the seats, I drew a blank. No—my wallet and I became separated either en route to the Via, in the whistling dark, or during the hike from the Via to our front door, a relatively illumined undertaking over a single curb and fifteen feet of sidewalk but one nonetheless involving the same chaos of moving items and bodies from A to B and steaming ahead as quickly as possible and getting out of the rain and into our building A.S.A.P. That is what careful reconstruction of the events established.

Part of the problem was my new winter coat. This coat is from Sweden. It is made for the Gulf of Bothnia and the alleyways of Jokkmokk and the lethal zephyrs of Njörðr. Its core purpose is to limit the extreme and dangerous thermal differential between being indoors and being outdoors in a polar climate zone. The coat must be, and is, a kind of wearable house. This presumably explains why it has fifteen pockets. I need only three pockets—four, at most—and I rely precisely on a scarcity of vestimentary storage options to keep track of the three things that I must have on me at all times:

wallet, phone, keys. With few pockets, you have almost no option but to repetitively stow your essentials in the same places. The action becomes systematic and dependable. With a surfeit of pockets—of pouches, cavities, and receptacles—you end up stowing things variably and in effect can mislay things on your person; not to mention that it's harder to find or discern a pocketed article in a coat that has Nordic quantities of stuffing. Patting yourself down to check that you have everything becomes impractical, unless you want to fumble around like an old fool. Basically, if you're wearing this particular coat and you're in a rush, you're in trouble.

Gladys moved to Trinidad, to the town of San Juan. She settled in a two-bedroom, one-story house that had been split in half to accommodate a tenant. Unfortunately for Gladys, the tenant's rent went to her two brothers in repayment of the expenses they'd incurred in buying and fixing up the house for Gladys. The brothers ran a construction business and resided as bachelors in a nearby house that had a small swimming pool. There was no prospect of them ever waiving their right to the tenant's rent. For income, Gladys had her Social Security.

About a month after Gladys left for Trinidad, she rang Arty and asked for a loan of two thousand dollars.

Arty didn't ask why she needed the loan. Everybody needs two grand, was his thinking. Why should Gladys be any different? She probably needed fifty grand. Life in Trinidad was expensive. No. 1, it was an island. No. 2, it wasn't the Third World, where ten bucks kept you going for a week. Excluding Mickey Mouse islands, which country had the third-highest G.D.P. per capita in the Americas? Correct: the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Because of oil and gas. At the same time, according to Arty, it wasn't the First World, either. Public transportation, health care, social services —those kinds of things barely existed. Trinidad was wealthy and modern enough to make things expensive but not poor and traditional enough to make things cheap.

Arty in any case didn't like to discuss economics or budgeting with Gladys. If you talked with her long enough you'd catch glimpses of this conception of God as this King Midas figure who would make you rich if you gave enough of your money to your church. The more you gave away, the richer you'd get. She also had an unrealistic idea, Arty believed, about how much money he had. The person with the big bucks, including a chunk of Arty's money, was Paloma. Paloma was the one with the

money-making career and the inherited wealth and the child support. But Gladys perceived Arty in terms of his pre-divorce finances and circumstances, even though she'd visited Arty at his Union City apartment, which had once belonged to his parents; and surely she understood that being a public-school vice-principal wasn't exactly hitting the jackpot.

Anyhow: Arty didn't have another two K to give Gladys. Well, to be accurate, he did—if he'd written the check, the bank would have honored it. But what was he making back then? Ninety-seven? Ninety-eight? Pretty much what he was making today. Now, it was a good living, sure—but it didn't put him in the philanthropist bracket. It didn't exactly put him on easy street. The child support ate up about a third of his income, and then he had to take care of co-op dues, property taxes, commuting costs, utilities, car-lease installments, day-to-day parental expenses, and all the other outflows and overheads that never let up and never lessen. That light at the end of the tunnel? That was the approaching express train of college fees for two daughters.

He had an idea. The idea was this: he would put together a consortium of Gladys's old families and get each one to set aside a small, reasonable amount—fifty to a hundred bucks a month, say, whatever they were comfortable with—and pay it into Gladys's retirement fund. It would make no real difference to anyone's life except Gladys's.

Arty was quite excited by this idea. He contacted Gladys's most recent employers, the Chelsea people. They were straightforwardly rich—richer than Arty, that was for sure. He'd heard all about their loft on Fifteenth Street and their place in the Hamptons. The father worked for a bank, the mother for some kind of fashion enterprise; and they had only the one child to provide for, the aforementioned Billie, a photograph of whom Gladys carried in her purse.

He spoke with Billie's mother, Gertie. It was their first conversation since the phone call, six years before, when he'd recommended Gladys to her. Gertie joyfully exclaimed how great it was to hear Gladys's name again, as if Gladys had been gone for years and not for a few months. Gertie told Arty how wonderful Gladys was, as if this were news to Arty, and said how much Billie longed to send Gladys a postcard, as if there were some law stopping her. When Arty got around to the subject of the consortium, Gertie said that they would do what they could, of course, but their budget was a dumpster fire. The theme of the budget was one she came back to more than once. Arty said, Great, that's great, thank you, as if Gertie were at that very moment putting her hand in her pocket.

Afterward he texted her Gladys's phone number and address in Trinidad so that they could get back in touch.

Arty next rang the couple that had preceded him and Paloma as Gladys's bosses. He spoke first to the husband, who seemed bewildered. Wait a minute, this guy said to Arty, and the wife took the phone. Arty remembered the wife from her recommendation. On that occasion she'd spoken warmly of Gladys, who not only had worked for the family as a nanny but had lived with them at their Westchester home and done housekeeping work. She had described Gladys as, quote, one of the family, even though—as Arty discovered—she couldn't say which of the islands Gladys was from. This couple was rich, too, but they'd paid Gladys off the books, even after she got her green card. It wasn't until Gladys started working for Arty and Paloma that she, in her early fifties, finally began to pay Social Security taxes and accrue the benefit thereof.

The Westchester former employer told Arty right away that they couldn't help Gladys.

Arty had already contacted Paloma, by e-mail. Paloma didn't answer—which was no surprise; there was still a lot of hostility there—but Arty figured that after a separation of four years his ex-wife, who almost certainly had hundreds of thousands in her checking account, might have got to the point where she could reach out to Gladys even though the request to do so had come from him.

Nobody, not even Billie, reached out to Gladys. It fell to Arty to deposit five hundred dollars in her Chase checking account.

Arty had a hard time believing that people could be that compassionless. There had to have been some mistake. He took one last crack at Gertie. This time Gertie responded very coldly. She told Arty that she didn't appreciate being harassed. How she and Gladys managed their affairs was none of his business. She warned him that if he phoned again there would be repercussions.

That was five years ago.

Without consulting me, I'd even say surreptitiously, Arty has bought a third round of beers.

"Whoa," I say.

"Last drink," Arty says.

I make a show of scratching my face doubtfully.

"I'm nearly done," Arty says. "Just hear me out."

At last I recall Arty's divorce. Yes—it had involved him being involved with a colleague at the school. It was a love affair. He was very insistent on calling it that—a love affair. That's all I remember about the whole episode.

Arty is grayer these days, a little heavier, too, but otherwise he makes the same impression: bothered, uprooted, in a jam. I wouldn't say that I'm worried about Arty, because I don't feel close enough to him to worry; but I'm definitely suspecting that all is not as well as Arty claims. It is my practice to divide humanity along Orbisonian lines: the lonely and the not so lonely. Arty, I sense, falls on the wrong side of the division.

"O.K.," I say. "Talk to me."

For five years after Gladys moved to Trinidad, she and Arty continued to speak on the phone: she'd call him, he'd tell her to hang up, and he would call back. She would ask after the two girls, whom—this disconcerted Arty—she began to refer to as her granddaughters. They weren't Gladys's granddaughters. They were her former charges, yes, and there was an important bond there. But it wasn't a grandmother's bond.

Arty felt manipulated—but so what? Just because Gladys was a little manipulative didn't extinguish the fact that she was a worthy person for whom Arty had a lot of respect and affection. By nature she was a giver, not a taker. She was a provider. That was the injustice of the situation: that his and Gladys's relationship had been contaminated by financial considerations, that Gladys's true nature had been falsified by her material circumstances. This wasn't Gladys's fault. She had done hard, valuable work all her life only to discover that retirement, in the advertised sense of putting your feet up and smelling the roses, was beyond her reach. Did Gladys want to be manipulative? Of course not. She wanted to survive.

To boost her income, she took a job in San Juan, as the domestic help for an elderly man, cooking for him and keeping the house straight. For this she got compensation of three U.S. dollars an hour, out of which she had to pay a friend to drive her to work and back. So she was working longer hours than

ever for less pay than ever. The old gentleman died after a year or two and that source of income dried up. She was back on Social Security only.

Then her Social Security payments suddenly got smaller—went from six hundred and thirty-seven dollars a month to five hundred and fifteen. Arty looked into it and found that the deduction wasn't an error but a charge for Medicare. A hundred and twenty-two bucks a month might not sound like a fortune, but it was nineteen per cent of Gladys's income. As it was, she incurred significant costs to make use of Medicare: during her yearly trip to the U.S. to visit Benjamin and his family, she had to fit in a detour to New York just to see her doctor.

Before her first such trip, Arty asked Gladys what she was doing about her plane ticket. She told Arty that she knew a guy from church (her new church, in Trinidad) who worked at the airport and that this guy could get her a special deal. How much? Arty asked. Eleven hundred dollars, Gladys said. Arty told her to stand by. He went online and instantly found a round-trip ticket from Port of Spain to New York for three hundred and twenty-seven dollars. He bought Gladys the ticket then and there.

From that moment on, Arty was on the hook for Gladys's plane tickets. It added up. It really did. And it was emotionally trying. The cheap flights that Arty bought usually involved a transfer in Miami or Houston, and Gladys let it be known that she found the stopovers arduous. Because the difference between a non-stop flight and a direct flight could easily be a couple of hundred bucks, Arty had to disappoint her. Likewise, Gladys had preferences about her days of travel, but again Arty could not always accommodate her, because a Tuesday flight was cheaper than a Sunday one, as was a flight that landed late at night rather than at a reasonable hour. And Gladys, who soon enough became an experienced flier, made it a standard request to ask for a special meal and wheelchair assistance—very doable, yes, but it felt demanding to Arty.

Arty would forward the e-tickets to Gladys's brothers' company, which had an e-mail address. The brothers never thanked Arty, not that Arty was looking for thanks. In all candor, he had a low opinion of the brothers. They lived in comfort right up the hill from Gladys, yet there was no

evidence that they took care of their sister, who had spoken very warmly of them when she lived in America but now never mentioned them. The brothers saw themselves as very devout Christians. If there was one thing Arty had learned, it was that faith cannot conceal character. The brothers could go to church as often as they liked, but in Arty's book they just weren't kind people.

Nor was Gladys made to feel especially welcome at Benjamin's home, where the daughter-in-law, the soldier, ruled; and when Gladys came to New York to see her doctor it was always a struggle to find a place to stay. Her church friends had no room at the inn, or, if they did, they would charge Gladys for the use of a bedroom for a few days. In the end, Arty felt he had no option but to host Gladys at his apartment, even though there was only one bathroom and it was chronically occupied by the girls, who were teen-agers now and opposed to Gladys staying with them, as she did, for about a week, during which time Arty would sleep on the sofa and count down the days until he could get a good night's rest and not have to worry about walking around his own home in a state of undress or, horror of horrors, encountering Gladys in a state of undress.

What it came down to, per Arty, was that somehow or other he found himself with another dependent. Gladys was seventy years of age. She was in good health. Not to be morbid about it, but her father had lived to be ninety-nine. Arty was looking at another quarter century of supporting Gladys. He'd be in his seventies before he got out from under this burden, assuming he lived that long.

What was he to do?

I swallow what's left of my pale ale. It's almost eight o'clock. I really have to be on my way. "You need to go easy on yourself," I tell my former comrade as I get to my feet. "You didn't create this situation. You do what you can for this lady, but that's it. You can't change the facts of life."

With some pleasure, I put on my new coat—my parka, as I should call it. It is so warm and snug that I actually look forward to cold days.

"But the thing is," Arty says, "the thing is, at the end of the day I'm not even talking about the money."

"I know," I tell him.

"Tomorrow I'm going to put a couple of hundred bucks in her bank account," Arty says. "You know what? I'm going to do it with pleasure. It's Christmas, goddammit. But she's going to spend the day alone. She's going to go to church, then go back home, back to her little yard, and watch the TV that's in the yard, and then go inside and watch the TV that's inside. She's going to eat something all by herself. When I call her, she's going to sound in good spirits, but behind it all she'll be suffering. This is a gregarious person. This is a jolly, laughing personality. You'd really warm to her if you met her. And she's going to be all alone for Christmas."

"She's lucky to have you," I say. I'm checking my pockets: my phone is in my zippered left breast pocket and my keys are in my zippered right breast pocket. My wad is in my pants pocket. Do I have my gloves? I do.

"What she really needs, of course, is a companion. I've said to her, straight out, Gladys, can't you find a man to love? But she can't. She misses Roy too much. And, after all that time in America, the local guys aren't to her taste. Too rough, too frivolous, always trying to figure out how much money she has. You could say, Well, maybe she should climb down off her high horse. Maybe she should compromise. But that wouldn't be a fair way to look at it. The thing about Gladys—"

I slap Arty on the shoulder. "I'm hitting the dusty trail."

"Have you heard," Arty says to me, dismounting his barstool, "of the Saharan dust phenomenon? Every spring, these huge clouds of dust from the Sahara blow all the way across the Atlantic to Trinidad. Some years worse than others. I never knew about it until Gladys told me. She has asthma. The dust plays havoc with her breathing. She—"

I hug Arty. "Take care," I say to him, and when I turn away he is still saying stuff. Unless something improbable should happen, these are our adieux.

It was a splendidly chilly evening. All was calm: the cars and buses had returned thousands of workers to homes in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the theatregoers and the diners were contentedly watching shows or eating in restaurants. New York was semi-deserted and suspenseful. I decided to walk the thirty blocks home.

I pulled my fur-lined hood over my head. This parka's cowl is extensive. Through it, one views the world as if from within a cave; and the world is more spectacular and unscientific. So it proved that night—when so many hooded souls walked the streets that one might have thought that an enigmatic, long-hidden order of friars had at last made itself known. At Forty-second Street, snow began to fall in large handsome flakes, each one conveying a small white light to the earth. The falling from the sky of ice crystals is the product of natural rules; but numinous causes and compossibilities now suggested themselves. When the wind forced me to bow my head toward the whitening sidewalk, I fell into an entranced contemplation of the footprints people had trodden into the new snow. I had never been conscious of the remarkable patterns that a shod human makes. I saw that each set of feet left an idiosyncratic, treasurable trace, my own feet included: with every step I took, a boot stamped into snow densely grouped oblongs and polygons, fragments of spirals, and, at the center of all these figures, seemingly exerting an orchestrating or centripetal force, a star. I love our northern snow, and I especially love the brief duration of the soonest, whitest accumulations, when even the frailest branch amasses a matching white branch and the eye is briefly granted, gratis, an immanent element that is wonderful and, on this particular night, appeared to me as nothing less than a sign from a further and better dimension of being. I ecstatically strode home in the storm. An Amundsen, I was received at the front door with cheers.

I took my son to bed; I read to him from the "Frog and Toad" series; and after lights-out we discussed what was on his mind, which is always filled with beautiful misconceptions. Then he was asleep.

Downstairs, my wife was at the kitchen table, unpacking ordered-in Vietnamese food. As we started eating, I asked her if anything had come for me in the mail. It had not, she said with amusement.

My query was amusing because it related to my wallet. It had been missing for three weeks now. During that time I'd desisted not only from buying a new wallet but even from cancelling or replacing my credit cards and my driver's license and my health-insurance card. My reasoning was that I'd lost a wallet three times previously and twice strangers of good faith had mailed the thing back to me. (The third wallet had disappeared for good, without skulduggery.) As long as nobody was fraudulently using my credit cards—and nobody was—there was a good chance that my wallet and I would be reunited. Obviously, at a certain point that likelihood grew smaller. I'd told my wife I would give it two weeks. That seemed reasonable to me. When two weeks had gone by, I granted the unknown

party or parties who might have found my wallet a one-week extension. It was the holiday season, after all. People were unusually busy, and the U.S. Postal Service was busiest of all.

The one-week extension expired that night, as we both knew.

"Well?" she said. "What are you going to do?"

The pho was warm and delicious. I shared this fact with my wife. Regarding the wallet, I told her that I'd wait a little longer. The world would return it. ♦

Published in the print edition of the July 2, 2018, issue.

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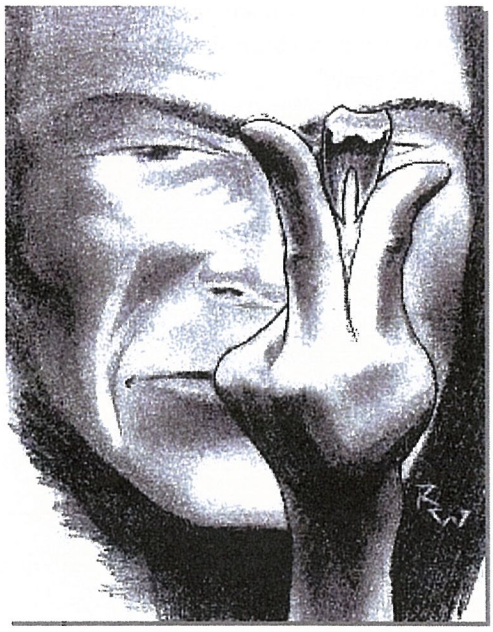
More: Nannies Good Samaritans New York City Trinidad Caregivers Marriage Families Domestic Workers

One Of These Days

Gabriel García Márquez

Flash Fiction



Monday dawned warm and rainless. Aurelio Escovar, a dentist without a degree, and a very early riser, opened his office at six. He took some false teeth, still mounted in their plaster mold, out of the glass case and put on the table a fistful of instruments which he arranged in size order, as if they were on display. He wore a collarless striped shirt, closed at the neck with a golden stud, and pants held up by suspenders He was erect and skinny, with a look that rarely corresponded to the situation, the way deaf people have of looking.

When he had things arranged on the table, he pulled the drill toward the dental chair and sat down to polish the false teeth. He seemed not to be thinking about what he was doing, but worked steadily, pumping the drill with his feet, even when he didn't need it.

After eight he stopped for a while to look at the sky through the window, and he saw two pensive buzzards who were drying themselves in the sun on the ridgepole of the house next door. He went on working with the idea that before lunch it would rain again. The shrill voice of his eleven-year-old son interrupted his concentration.

"Papa."

"What?"

"The Mayor wants to know if you'll pull his tooth."

"Tell him I'm not here."

He was polishing a gold tooth. He held it at arm's length, and examined it with his eyes half closed. His son shouted again from the little waiting room.

"He says you are, too, because he can hear you."

The dentist kept examining the tooth. Only when he had put it on the table with the finished work did he say:

"So much the better."

He operated the drill again. He took several pieces of a bridge out of a cardboard box where he kept the things he still had to do and began to polish the gold.

"Papa."

"What?"

He still hadn't changed his expression.

"He says if you don't take out his tooth, he'll shoot you."

Without hurrying, with an extremely tranquil movement, he stopped pedaling the drill, pushed it away from the chair, and pulled the lower drawer of the table all the way out. There was a revolver. "O.K.," he said. "Tell him to come and shoot me."

He rolled the chair over opposite the door, his hand resting on the edge of the drawer. The Mayor appeared at the door. He had shaved the left side of his face, but the other side, swollen and in pain, had a five-day-old beard.

The dentist saw many nights of desperation in his dull eyes. He closed the drawer with his fingertips and said softly:

"Sit down."

"Good morning," said the Mayor.

"Morning," said the dentist.

While the instruments were boiling, the Mayor leaned his skull on the headrest of the chair and felt better. His breath was icy. It was a poor office: an old wooden chair, the pedal drill, a glass case with ceramic bottles. Opposite the chair was a window with a shoulder-high cloth curtain. When he felt the dentist approach, the Mayor braced his heels and opened his mouth.

Aurelio Escovar turned his head toward the light. After inspecting the infected tooth, he closed the Mayor's jaw with a cautious pressure of his fingers.

"It has to be without anesthesia," he said.

"Why?"

"Because you have an abscess."

The Mayor looked him in the eye. "All right," he said, and tried to smile. The dentist did not return the smile. He brought the basin of sterilized instruments to the worktable and took them out of the water with a pair of cold tweezers, still without hurrying. Then he pushed the spittoon with the tip of his shoe, and went to wash his hands in the washbasin. He did all this without looking at the Mayor. But the Mayor didn't take his eyes off him.

It was a lower wisdom tooth. The dentist spread his feet and grasped the tooth with the hot forceps. The Mayor seized the arms of the chair, braced his feet with all his strength, and felt an icy void in his kidneys, but didn't make a sound. The dentist moved only his wrist. Without rancor, rather with a bitter tenderness, he said:

"Now you'll pay for our twenty dead men."

The Mayor felt the crunch of bones in his jaw, and his eyes filled with tears. But he didn't breathe until he felt the tooth come out. Then he saw it through his tears. It seemed so foreign to his pain that he failed to understand his torture of the five previous nights.

Bent over the spittoon, sweating, panting, he unbuttoned his tunic and reached for the handkerchief in his pants pocket. The dentist gave him a clean cloth.

"Dry your tears," he said.

The Mayor did. He was trembling. While the dentist washed his hands, he saw the crumbling ceiling and a dusty spider web with spider's eggs and dead insects. The dentist returned, drying his hands. "Go to bed," he said, "and gargle with salt water." The Mayor stood up, said goodbye with a casual military salute, and walked toward the door, stretching his legs, without buttoning up his tunic.

"Send the bill," he said.

"To you or the town?"

The Mayor didn't look at him. He closed the door and said through the screen:

"It's the same damn thing."

Gabriel García Márquez

This story was published as Classic Flash #7 on Flash Fiction Online (flashfictiononline.com).

From Wikipedia: Gabriel José de la Concordia García Márquez (born March 6, 1927[1]) is a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter and journalist. García Márquez, familiarly known as "Gabo" in his native country, is one of Latin America's most famous writers. He is considered one of the most significant authors of the 20th century, and in 1982 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. In his early years he was strongly influenced by his grandfather who raised him. As he grew, he pursued a highly self-directed education that resulted in his quitting law school in order to begin a career in journalism. Early in this career he demonstrated he had no inhibitions to be critical of politics within Colombia and beyond. In 1958, he married Mercedes Barcha and they have since had two sons together.

He started out as a journalist, and has written many acclaimed non-fiction works, and short stories, but is best-known for his novels, such as One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) and Love in the Time of Cholera (1985). He has achieved significant critical acclaim and widespread commercial success, most notably for popularizing a literary style labeled as magical realism in which he uses certain magical elements and events in order to explain real experiences. Some of his works take place in a fictional village called Macondo, and most of them express the theme of solitude.

Brothers and Sisters Around the World

By Andrea Lee

"I took them around the point toward Dzamandzar," Michel tells me. "Those two little whores. Just ten minutes. They asked me for a ride when I was down on the beach bailing out the Zodiac. It was rough and I went too fast on purpose. You should have seen their titties bounce!"

He tells me this in French, but with a carefree lewdness that could be Roman. He is, in fact, half Italian, product of the officially French no man's land where the Ligurian Alps touch the Massif Central. In love, like so many of his Mediterranean compatriots, with boats, with hot blue seas, with dusky women, with the steamy belt of tropics that girdles the earth. We live above Cannes, in Mougins, where it is always sunny, but on vacation we travel the world to get hotter and wilder. Islands are what Michel prefers: in Asia, Oceania, Africa, the Caribbean, it doesn't matter. Any place where the people are the color of different grades of coffee, and mangoes plop in mushy heaps on the ground, and the reef fish are brilliant as a box of new crayons. On vacation Michel sheds his manicured ad-man image and with innocent glee sets about turning himself into a Eurotrash version of Tarzan. Bronzed muscles well in evidence, shark's tooth on a leather thong, fishing knife stuck into the waist of a threadbare pareu, and a wispy sun-streaked ponytail that he tends painstakingly along with a chin crop of Hollywood stubble.

He loves me for a number of wrong reasons connected with his dreams of hot islands. It makes no difference to him that I grew up in Massachusetts, wearing L. L. Bean boots more often than sandals; after eight years of marriage, he doesn't seem to see that what gives strength to the spine of an American black woman, however exotic she appears, is a steely Protestant core. A core that in its absolutism is curiously cold and Nordic. The fact is that I'm not crazy about the tropics, but Michel doesn't want to acknowledge that. Mysteriously,

we continue to get along. In fact, our marriage is surprisingly robust, though at the time of our wedding, my mother, my sister, and my girlfriends all gave it a year. I sometimes think the secret is that we don't know each other and never will. Both of us are lazy by nature, and that makes it convenient to hang on to the fantasies we conjured up back when we met in Milan: mine of the French gentleman-adventurer, and his of a pliant black goddess whose feelings accord with his. It's no surprise to me when Michel tries to share the ribald thoughts that run through the labyrinth of his Roman Catholic mind. He doubtless thought that I would get a kick out of hearing about his boat ride with a pair of African sluts.

Those girls have been sitting around watching us from under the mango tree since the day we rolled up from the airport to spend August in the house we borrowed from our friend Jean-Claude. Michel was driving Jean-Claude's car, a Citroën so rump-sprung from the unpaved roads that it moves like a tractor. Our four-year-old son, Lele, can drag his sneakers in red dust through the holes in the floor. The car smells of failure, like the house, which is built on an island off the northern coast of Madagascar, on a beach where a wide scalloped bay spreads like two blue wings, melting into the sky and the wild archipelago of lemur islands beyond. Behind the garden stretch fields of sugar cane and groves of silvery, arthritic-looking ylang-ylang trees, whose flowers lend a tang of Africa to French perfume.

The house is low and long around a grandiose veranda, and was once whitewashed into an emblem of colonial vainglory; now the walls are the indeterminate color of damp, and the thinning palm thatch on the roof swarms with mice and geckos. It has a queenly housekeeper named Hadijah, whose perfect *pommes frites* and plates of crudités, like the dead bidet and dried-up tubes of Bain de Soleil in the bathroom, are monuments to Jean-Claude's ex-wife, who went back to Toulon after seeing a series of projects—a frozen-fish plant, a perfume company, a small luxury hotel—swallowed up in the calm fireworks of the sunsets. Madagascar is the perfect place for a white fool to lose his money, Michel says. He and I enjoy the scent of dissolution in our borrowed house, fuck inventively in the big

mildewed ironwood bed, sit in happiness in the sad, bottomed-out canvas chairs on the veranda after a day of spear-fishing, watching our son race in and out of herds of humpbacked zebu cattle on the beach.

The only problem for me has been those girls. They're not really whores, just local girls who dance at Bar Kariboo on Thursday nights and hang around the few French and Italian tourists, hoping to trade sex for a T-shirt, a hair clip. They don't know to want Ray-Bans yet; this is not the Caribbean.

I'm used to the women from the Comoros Islands who crowd onto the beach near the house, dressed up in gold bangles and earrings and their best lace-trimmed blouses. They clap and sing in circles for hours, jumping up to dance in pairs, wagging their backsides in tiny precise jerks, laughing and flashing gold teeth. They wrap themselves up in their good time in a way that intimidates me. And I've come to an understanding with the older women of the village, who come by to bring us our morning ration of zebu milk (we drink it boiled in coffee) or to barter with *rideaux Richelieu*, the beautiful muslin cutwork curtains that they embroider. They are intensely curious about me, l'*Américaine*, who looks not unlike one of them, but who dresses and speaks and acts like a foreign madame, and is clearly married to the white man, not just a casual concubine. They ask me for medicine, and if I weren't careful they would clean out my supply of Advil and Bimaxin. They go crazy over Lele, whom they call "*bébé métis*"—the mixed baby. I want to know all about them, their still eyes, their faces of varying colors that show both African and Indonesian blood, as I want to know everything about this primeval chunk of Africa floating in the Indian Ocean, with its bottle-shaped baobabs and strange tinkling music, the *sega*, which is said to carry traces of tunes from Irish sailors.

But the girls squatting under the mango tree stare hard at me whenever I sit out on the beach or walk down to the water to swim. Then they make loud comments in Malagasy, and burst out laughing. It's juvenile behavior, and I can't help sinking right down to their

level and getting provoked. They're probably about eighteen years old, both good-looking; one with a flat brown face and the long straight shining hair that makes some Madagascar women resemble Polynesians; the other darker, with the tiny features that belong to the coastal people called Merina, and a pile of kinky hair tinted reddish. Both are big-titted, as Michel pointed out, the merchandise spilling out of a pair of Nouvelles Frontières T-shirts that they must have got from a tour-group leader. Some days they have designs painted on their faces in yellow sulfur clay. They stare at me, and guffaw and stretch and give their breasts a competitive shake. Sometimes they hoot softly or whistle when I appear.

My policy has been to ignore them, but today they've taken a step ahead, got a rise, however ironic, out of my man. It's a little triumph. I didn't see the Zodiac ride, but through the bathroom window I saw them come back. I was shaving my legs—waxing never lasts long enough in the tropics. Squealing and laughing, they floundered out of the rubber dinghy, patting their hair, settling their T-shirts, retying the cloth around their waists. One of them blew her nose through her fingers into the shallow water. The other said something to Michel, and he laughed and patted her on the backside. Then, arrogantly as two Cleopatras, they strode across the hot sand and took up their crouch under the mango tree. A pair of brown netsuke. Waiting for my move.

So, finally, I act. Michel comes sauntering inside to tell me, and after he tells me I make a scene. He's completely taken aback; he's gotten spoiled since we've been married, used to my American cool, which can seem even cooler than French nonchalance. He thought I was going to react the way I used to when I was still modelling and he used to flirt with some of the girls I was working with, some of the bimbos who weren't serious about their careers. That is, that I was going to chuckle, display complicity, even excitement. Instead I yell, say he's damaged my prestige among the locals, say that things are different here. The words seem to be flowing up into my mouth from the ground beneath my feet. He's so surprised that he just stands there with his blue eyes round and his mouth a small "o" in the midst of that Indiana Jones stubble.

Exhalation

by TED CHIANG

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

PUBLISHED IN APR. 2014 (ISSUE 47) | 6552 WORDS

It has long been said that air (which others call argon) is the source of life. This is not in fact the case, and I engrave these words to describe how I came to understand the true source of life and, as a corollary, the means by which life will one day end.

For most of history, the proposition that we drew life from air was so obvious that there was no need to assert it. Every day we consume two lungs heavy with air; every day we remove the empty ones from our chest and replace them with full ones. If a person is careless and lets his air level run too low, he feels the heaviness of his limbs and the growing need for replenishment. It is exceedingly rare that a person is unable to get at least one replacement lung before his installed pair runs empty; on those unfortunate occasions where this has happened—when a person is trapped and unable to move, with no one nearby to assist him—he dies within seconds of his air running out.

But in the normal course of life, our need for air is far from our thoughts, and indeed many would say that satisfying that need is the least important part of going to the filling stations. For the filling stations are the primary venue for social conversation, the places from

which we draw emotional sustenance as well as physical. We all keep spare sets of full lungs in our homes, but when one is alone, the act of opening one's chest and replacing one's lungs can seem little better than a chore. In the company of others, however, it becomes a communal activity, a shared pleasure.

If one is exceedingly busy, or feeling unsociable, one might simply pick up a pair of full lungs, install them, and leave one's emptied lungs on the other side of the room. If one has a few minutes to spare, it's simple courtesy to connect the empty lungs to an air dispenser and refill them for the next person. But by far the most common practice is to linger and enjoy the company of others, to discuss the news of the day with friends or acquaintances and, in passing, offer newly filled lungs to one's interlocutor. While this perhaps does not constitute air sharing in the strictest sense, there is camaraderie derived from the awareness that all our air comes from the same source, for the dispensers are but the exposed terminals of pipes extending from the reservoir of air deep underground, the great lung of the world, the source of all our nourishment.

Many lungs are returned to the same filling station the next day, but just as many circulate to other stations when people visit neighboring districts; the lungs are all identical in appearance, smooth cylinders of aluminum, so one cannot tell whether a given lung has always stayed close to home or whether it has traveled long distances. And just as lungs are passed between persons and districts, so are news and gossip. In this way one can receive news from remote districts, even those at the very edge of the world, without needing to leave home, although I myself enjoy traveling. I have journeyed all the way to the

edge of the world, and seen the solid chromium wall that extends from the ground up into the infinite sky.

It was at one of the filling stations that I first heard the rumors that prompted my investigation and led to my eventual enlightenment. It began innocently enough, with a remark from our district's public crier. At noon of the first day of every year, it is traditional for the crier to recite a passage of verse, an ode composed long ago for this annual celebration, which takes exactly one hour to deliver. The crier mentioned that on his most recent performance, the turret clock struck the hour before he had finished, something that had never happened before. Another person remarked that this was a coincidence, because he had just returned from a nearby district where the public crier had complained of the same incongruity.

No one gave the matter much thought beyond the simple acknowledgement that seemed warranted. It was only some days later, when there arrived word of a similar deviation between the crier and the clock of a third district, that the suggestion was made that these discrepancies might be evidence of a defect in the mechanism common to all the turret clocks, albeit a curious one to cause the clocks to run faster rather than slower. Horologists investigated the turret clocks in question, but on inspection they could discern no imperfection. In fact, when compared against the timepieces normally employed for such calibration purposes, the turret clocks were all found to have resumed keeping perfect time.

I myself found the question somewhat intriguing, but I was too focused on my own studies to devote much thought to other matters. I

was and am a student of anatomy, and to provide context for my subsequent actions, I now offer a brief account of my relationship with the field.

Death is uncommon, fortunately, because we are durable and fatal mishaps are rare, but it makes difficult the study of anatomy, especially since many of the accidents serious enough to cause death leave the deceased's remains too damaged for study. If lungs are ruptured when full, the explosive force can tear a body asunder, ripping the titanium as easily as if it were tin. In the past, anatomists focused their attention on the limbs, which were the most likely to survive intact. During the very first anatomy lecture I attended a century ago, the lecturer showed us a severed arm, the casing removed to reveal the dense column of rods and pistons within. I can vividly recall the way, after he had connected its arterial hoses to a wall-mounted lung he kept in the laboratory, he was able to manipulate the actuating rods that protruded from the arm's ragged base, and in response the hand would open and close fitfully.

In the intervening years, our field has advanced to the point where anatomists are able to repair damaged limbs and, on occasion, attach a severed limb. At the same time we have become capable of studying the physiology of the living; I have given a version of that first lecture I saw, during which I opened the casing of my own arm and directed my students' attention to the rods that contracted and extended when I wiggled my fingers.

Despite these advances, the field of anatomy still had a great unsolved mystery at its core: the question of memory. While we knew a little

about the structure of the brain, its physiology is notoriously hard to study because of the brain's extreme delicacy. It is typically the case in fatal accidents that, when the skull is breached, the brain erupts in a cloud of gold, leaving little besides shredded filament and leaf from which nothing useful can be discerned. For decades the prevailing theory of memory was that all of a person's experiences were engraved on sheets of gold foil; it was these sheets, torn apart by the force of the blast, that were the source of the tiny flakes found after accidents. Anatomists would collect the bits of gold leaf—so thin that light passes greenly through them—and spend years trying to reconstruct the original sheets, with the hope of eventually deciphering the symbols in which the deceased's recent experiences were inscribed.

I did not subscribe to this theory, known as the inscription hypothesis, for the simple reason that if all our experiences are in fact recorded, why is it that our memories are incomplete? Advocates of the inscription hypothesis offered an explanation for forgetfulness—suggesting that over time the foil sheets become misaligned from the stylus which reads the memories, until the oldest sheets shift out of contact with it altogether—but I never found it convincing. The appeal of the theory was easy for me to appreciate, though; I too had devoted many an hour to examining flakes of gold through a microscope, and can imagine how gratifying it would be to turn the fine adjustment knob and see legible symbols come into focus.

More than that, how wonderful would it be to decipher the very oldest of a deceased person's memories, ones that he himself had forgotten? None of us can remember much more than a hundred years in the

past, and written records—accounts that we ourselves inscribed but have scant memory of doing so—extend only a few hundred years before that. How many years did we live before the beginning of written history? Where did we come from? It is the promise of finding the answers within our own brains that makes the inscription hypothesis so seductive.

I was a proponent of the competing school of thought, which held that our memories were stored in some medium in which the process of erasure was no more difficult than recording: perhaps in the rotation of gears, or the positions of a series of switches. This theory implied that everything we had forgotten was indeed lost, and our brains contained no histories older than those found in our libraries. One advantage of this theory was that it better explained why, when lungs are installed in those who have died from lack of air, the revived have no memories and are all but mindless: Somehow the shock of death had reset all the gears or switches. The inscriptionists claimed the shock had merely misaligned the foil sheets, but no one was willing to kill a living person, even an imbecile, in order to resolve the debate. I had envisioned an experiment which might allow me to determine the truth conclusively, but it was a risky one, and deserved careful consideration before it was undertaken. I remained undecided for the longest time, until I heard more news about the clock anomaly.

Word arrived from a more distant district that its public crier had likewise observed the turret clock striking the hour before he had finished his new year's recital. What made this notable was that his district's clock employed a different mechanism, one in which the hours were marked by the flow of mercury into a bowl. Here the

discrepancy could not be explained by a common mechanical fault. Most people suspected fraud, a practical joke perpetrated by mischief makers. I had a different suspicion, a darker one that I dared not voice, but it decided my course of action; I would proceed with my experiment.

The first tool I constructed was the simplest: in my laboratory I fixed four prisms on mounting brackets and carefully aligned them so that their apexes formed the corners of a rectangle. When arranged thus, a beam of light directed at one of the lower prisms was reflected up, then backward, then down, and then forward again in a quadrilateral loop. Accordingly, when I sat with my eyes at the level of the first prism, I obtained a clear view of the back of my own head. This solipsistic periscope formed the basis of all that was to come.

A similarly rectangular arrangement of actuating rods allowed a displacement of action to accompany the displacement of vision afforded by the prisms. The bank of actuating rods was much larger than the periscope, but still relatively straightforward in design; by contrast, what was attached to the end of these respective mechanisms was far more intricate. To the periscope I added a binocular microscope mounted on an armature capable of swiveling side to side or up and down. To the actuating rods I added an array of precision manipulators, although that description hardly does justice to those pinnacles of the mechanician's art. Combining the ingenuity of anatomists and the inspiration provided by the bodily structures they studied, the manipulators enabled their operator to accomplish any task he might normally perform with his own hands, but on a much smaller scale.

Assembling all of this equipment took months, but I could not afford to be anything less than meticulous. Once the preparations were complete, I was able to place each of my hands on a nest of knobs and levers and control a pair of manipulators situated behind my head, and use the periscope to see what they worked on. I would then be able to dissect my own brain.

The very idea must sound like pure madness, I know, and had I told any of my colleagues, they would surely have tried to stop me. But I could not ask anyone else to risk themselves for the sake of anatomical inquiry, and because I wished to conduct the dissection myself, I would not be satisfied by merely being the passive subject of such an operation. Auto-dissection was the only option.

I brought in a dozen full lungs and connected them with a manifold. I mounted this assembly beneath the worktable that I would sit at, and positioned a dispenser to connect directly to the bronchial inlets within my chest. This would supply me with six days' worth of air. To provide for the possibility that I might not have completed my experiment within that period, I had scheduled a visit from a colleague at the end of that time. My presumption, however, was that the only way I would not have finished the operation in that period would be if I had caused my own death.

I began by removing the deeply curved plate that formed the back and top of my head; then the two, more shallowly curved plates that formed the sides. Only my faceplate remained, but it was locked into a restraining bracket, and I could not see its inner surface from the vantage point of my periscope; what I saw exposed was my own brain.

It consisted of a dozen or more subassemblies, whose exteriors were covered by intricately molded shells; by positioning the periscope near the fissures that separated them, I gained a tantalizing glimpse at the fabulous mechanisms within their interiors. Even with what little I could see, I could tell it was the most beautifully complex engine I had ever beheld, so far beyond any device man had constructed that it was incontrovertibly of divine origin. The sight was both exhilarating and dizzying, and I savored it on a strictly aesthetic basis for several minutes before proceeding with my explorations.

It was generally hypothesized that the brain was divided into an engine located in the center of the head which performed the actual cognition, surrounded by an array of components in which memories were stored. What I observed was consistent with this theory, since the peripheral subassemblies seemed to resemble one another, while the subassembly in the center appeared to be different, more heterogeneous and with more moving parts. However the components were packed too closely for me to see much of their operation; if I intended to learn anything more, I would require a more intimate vantage point.

Each subassembly had a local reservoir of air, fed by a hose extending from the regulator at the base of my brain. I focused my periscope on the rearmost subassembly and, using the remote manipulators, I quickly disconnected the outlet hose and installed a longer one in its place. I had practiced this maneuver countless times so that I could perform it in a matter of moments; even so, I was not certain I could complete the connection before the subassembly had depleted its local reservoir. Only after I was satisfied that the component's operation

had not been interrupted did I continue; I rearranged the longer hose to gain a better view of what lay in the fissure behind it: other hoses that connected it to its neighboring components. Using the most slender pair of manipulators to reach into the narrow crevice, I replaced the hoses one by one with longer substitutes. Eventually, I had worked my way around the entire subassembly and replaced every connection it had to the rest of my brain. I was now able to unmount this subassembly from the frame that supported it, and pull the entire section outside of what was once the back of my head.

I knew it was possible I had impaired my capacity to think and was unable to recognize it, but performing some basic arithmetic tests suggested that I was uninjured. With one subassembly hanging from a scaffold above, I now had a better view of the cognition engine at the center of my brain, but there was not enough room to bring the microscope attachment itself in for a close inspection. In order for me to really examine the workings of my brain, I would have to displace at least half a dozen subassemblies.

Laboriously, painstakingly, I repeated the procedure of substituting hoses for other subassemblies, repositioning another one farther back, two more higher up, and two others out to the sides, suspending all six from the scaffold above my head. When I was done, my brain looked like an explosion frozen an infinitesimal fraction of a second after the detonation, and again I felt dizzy when I thought about it. But at last the cognition engine itself was exposed, supported on a pillar of hoses and actuating rods leading down into my torso. I now also had room to rotate my microscope around a full three hundred and sixty degrees, and pass my gaze across the inner faces of the subassemblies

I had moved. What I saw was a microcosm of auric machinery, a landscape of tiny spinning rotors and miniature reciprocating cylinders.

As I contemplated this vista, I wondered, where was my body? The conduits which displaced my vision and action around the room were in principle no different from those which connected my original eyes and hands to my brain. For the duration of this experiment, were these manipulators not essentially my hands? Were the magnifying lenses at the end of my periscope not essentially my eyes? I was an everted person, with my tiny, fragmented body situated at the center of my own distended brain. It was in this unlikely configuration that I began to explore myself.

I turned my microscope to one of the memory subassemblies, and began examining its design. I had no expectation that I would be able to decipher my memories, only that I might divine the means by which they were recorded. As I had predicted, there were no reams of foil pages visible, but to my surprise neither did I see banks of gearwheels or switches. Instead, the subassembly seemed to consist almost entirely of a bank of air tubules. Through the interstices between the tubules I was able to glimpse ripples passing through the bank's interior.

With careful inspection and increasing magnification, I discerned that the tubules ramified into tiny air capillaries, which were interwoven with a dense latticework of wires on which gold leaves were hinged. Under the influence of air escaping from the capillaries, the leaves were held in a variety of positions. These were not switches in the

conventional sense, for they did not retain their position without a current of air to support them, but I hypothesized that these were the switches I had sought, the medium in which my memories were recorded. The ripples I saw must have been acts of recall, as an arrangement of leaves was read and sent back to the cognition engine.

Armed with this new understanding, I then turned my microscope to the cognition engine. Here too I observed a latticework of wires, but they did not bear leaves suspended in position; instead the leaves flipped back and forth almost too rapidly to see. Indeed, almost the entire engine appeared to be in motion, consisting more of lattice than of air capillaries, and I wondered how air could reach all the gold leaves in a coherent manner. For many hours I scrutinized the leaves, until I realized that they themselves were playing the role of capillaries; the leaves formed temporary conduits and valves that existed just long enough to redirect air at other leaves in turn, and then disappeared as a result. This was an engine undergoing continuous transformation, indeed modifying itself as part of its operation. The lattice was not so much a machine as it was a page on which the machine was written, and on which the machine itself ceaselessly wrote.

My consciousness could be said to be encoded in the position of these tiny leaves, but it would be more accurate to say that it was encoded in the ever-shifting pattern of air driving these leaves. Watching the oscillations of these flakes of gold, I saw that air does not, as we had always assumed, simply provide power to the engine that realizes our thoughts. Air is in fact the very medium of our thoughts. All that we are is a pattern of air flow. My memories were inscribed, not as

grooves on foil or even the position of switches, but as persistent currents of argon.

In the moments after I grasped the nature of this lattice mechanism, a cascade of insights penetrated my consciousness in rapid succession. The first and most trivial was understanding why gold, the most malleable and ductile of metals, was the only material out of which our brains could be made. Only the thinnest of foil leaves could move rapidly enough for such a mechanism, and only the most delicate of filaments could act as hinges for them. By comparison, the copper burr raised by my stylus as I engrave these words and brushed from the sheet when I finish each page is as coarse and heavy as scrap. This truly was a medium where erasing and recording could be performed rapidly, far more so than any arrangement of switches or gears.

What next became clear was why installing full lungs into a person who has died from lack of air does not bring him back to life. These leaves within the lattice remain balanced between continuous cushions of air. This arrangement lets them flit back and forth swiftly, but it also means that if the flow of air ever ceases, everything is lost; the leaves all collapse into identical pendent states, erasing the patterns and the consciousness they represent. Restoring the air supply cannot recreate what has evanesced. This was the price of speed; a more stable medium for storing patterns would mean that our consciousnesses would operate far more slowly.

It was then that I perceived the solution to the clock anomaly. I saw that the speed of these leaves' movements depended on their being supported by air; with sufficient air flow, the leaves could move nearly

frictionlessly. If they were moving more slowly, it was because they were being subjected to more friction, which could occur only if the cushions of air that supported them were thinner, and the air flowing through the lattice was moving with less force.

It is not that the turret clocks are running faster. What is happening is that our brains are running slower. The turret clocks are driven by pendulums, whose tempo never varies, or by the flow of mercury through a pipe, which does not change. But our brains rely on the passage of air, and when that air flows more slowly, our thoughts slow down, making the clocks seem to us to run faster.

I had feared that our brains might be growing slower, and it was this prospect that had spurred me to pursue my auto-dissection. But I had assumed that our cognition engines—while powered by air—were ultimately mechanical in nature, and some aspect of the mechanism was gradually becoming deformed through fatigue, and thus responsible for the slowing. That would have been dire, but there was at least the hope that we might be able to repair the mechanism, and restore our brains to their original speed of operation.

But if our thoughts were purely patterns of air rather than the movement of toothed gears, the problem was much more serious, for what could cause the air flowing through every person's brain to move less rapidly? It could not be a decrease in the pressure from our filling stations' dispensers; the air pressure in our lungs is so high that it must be stepped down by a series of regulators before reaching our brains. The diminution in force, I saw, must arise from the opposite

direction: The pressure of our surrounding atmosphere was increasing.

How could this be? As soon as the question formed, the only possible answer became apparent: Our sky must not be infinite in height. Somewhere above the limits of our vision, the chromium walls surrounding our world must curve inward to form a dome; our universe is a sealed chamber rather than an open well. And air is gradually accumulating within that chamber, until it equals the pressure in the reservoir below.

This is why, at the beginning of this engraving, I said that air is not the source of life. Air can neither be created nor destroyed; the total amount of air in the universe remains constant, and if air were all that we needed to live, we would never die. But in truth the source of life is a difference in air pressure, the flow of air from spaces where it is thick to those where it is thin. The activity of our brains, the motion of our bodies, the action of every machine we have ever built is driven by the movement of air, the force exerted as differing pressures seek to balance each other out. When the pressure everywhere in the universe is the same, all air will be motionless, and useless; one day we will be surrounded by motionless air and unable to derive any benefit from it.

We are not really consuming air at all. The amount of air that I draw from each day's new pair of lungs is exactly as much as seeps out through the joints of my limbs and the seams of my casing, exactly as much as I am adding to the atmosphere around me; all I am doing is converting air at high pressure to air at low. With every movement of

my body, I contribute to the equalization of pressure in our universe. With every thought that I have, I hasten the arrival of that fatal equilibrium.

Had I come to this realization under any other circumstance, I would have leapt up from my chair and ran into the streets, but in my current situation—body locked in a restraining bracket, brain suspended across my laboratory—doing so was impossible. I could see the leaves of my brain flitting faster from the tumult of my thoughts, which in turn increased my agitation at being so restrained and immobile. Panic at that moment might have led to my death, a nightmarish paroxysm of simultaneously being trapped and spiraling out of control, struggling against my restraints until my air ran out. It was by chance as much as by intention that my hands adjusted the controls to avert my periscopic gaze from the latticework, so all I could see was the plain surface of my worktable. Thus freed from having to see and magnify my own apprehensions, I was able to calm down. When I had regained sufficient composure, I began the lengthy process of reassembling myself. Eventually I restored my brain to its original compact configuration, reattached the plates of my head, and released myself from the restraining bracket.

At first the other anatomists did not believe me when I told them what I had discovered, but in the months that followed my initial auto-dissection, more and more of them became convinced. More examinations of people's brains were performed, more measurements of atmospheric pressure were taken, and the results were all found to confirm my claims. The background air pressure of our universe was indeed increasing, and slowing our thoughts as a result.

There was widespread panic in the days after the truth first became widely known, as people contemplated for the first time the idea that death was inevitable. Many called for the strict curtailment of activities in order to minimize the thickening of our atmosphere; accusations of wasted air escalated into furious brawls and, in some districts, deaths. It was the shame of having caused these deaths, together with the reminder that it would be many centuries yet before our atmosphere's pressure became equal to that of the reservoir underground, that caused the panic to subside. We are not sure precisely how many centuries it will take; additional measurements and calculations are being performed and debated. In the meantime, there is much discussion over how we should spend the time that remains to us.

One sect has dedicated itself to the goal of reversing the equalization of pressure, and found many adherents. The mechanicians among them constructed an engine that takes air from our atmosphere and forces it into a smaller volume, a process they called "compression." Their engine restores air to the pressure it originally had in the reservoir, and these Reversalists excitedly announced that it would form the basis of a new kind of filling station, one that would—with each lung it refilled—revitalize not only individuals but the universe itself. Alas, closer examination of the engine revealed its fatal flaw. The engine itself is powered by air from the reservoir, and for every lungful of air that it produces, the engine consumes not just a lungful, but slightly more. It does not reverse the process of equalization, but like everything else in the world, exacerbates it.

Although some of their adherents left in disillusionment after this setback, the Reversalists as a group were undeterred, and began drawing up alternate designs in which the compressor was powered instead by the uncoiling of springs or the descent of weights. These mechanisms fared no better. Every spring that is wound tight represents air released by the person who did the winding; every weight that rests higher than ground level represents air released by the person who did the lifting. There is no source of power in the universe that does not ultimately derive from a difference in air pressure, and there can be no engine whose operation will not, on balance, reduce that difference.

The Reversalists continue their labors, confident that they will one day construct an engine that generates more compression than it uses, a perpetual power source that will restore to the universe its lost vigor. I do not share their optimism; I believe that the process of equalization is inexorable. Eventually, all the air in our universe will be evenly distributed, no denser or more rarefied in one spot than in any other, unable to drive a piston, turn a rotor, or flip a leaf of gold foil. It will be the end of pressure, the end of motive power, the end of thought. The universe will have reached perfect equilibrium.

Some find irony in the fact that a study of our brains revealed to us not the secrets of the past, but what ultimately awaits us in the future. However, I maintain that we have indeed learned something important about the past. The universe began as an enormous breath being held. Who knows why, but whatever the reason, I am glad that it did, because I owe my existence to that fact. All my desires and ruminations are no more and no less than eddy currents generated by

the gradual exhalation of our universe. And until this great exhalation is finished, my thoughts live on.

So that our thoughts may continue as long as possible, anatomists and mechanicians are designing replacements for our cerebral regulators, capable of gradually increasing the air pressure within our brains and keeping it just higher than the surrounding atmospheric pressure. Once these are installed, our thoughts will continue at roughly the same speed even as the air thickens around us. But this does not mean that life will continue unchanged. Eventually the pressure differential will fall to such a level that our limbs will weaken and our movements will grow sluggish. We may then try to slow our thoughts so that our physical torpor is less conspicuous to us, but that will also cause external processes to appear to accelerate. The ticking of clocks will rise to a chatter as their pendulums wave frantically; falling objects will slam to the ground as if propelled by springs; undulations will race down cables like the crack of a whip.

At some point our limbs will cease moving altogether. I cannot be certain of the precise sequence of events near the end, but I imagine a scenario in which our thoughts will continue to operate, so that we remain conscious but frozen, immobile as statues. Perhaps we'll be able to speak for a while longer, because our voice boxes operate on a smaller pressure differential than our limbs, but without the ability to visit a filling station, every utterance will reduce the amount of air left for thought, and bring us closer to the moment that our thoughts cease altogether. Will it be preferable to remain mute to prolong our ability to think, or to talk until the very end? I don't know.

Perhaps a few of us, in the days before we cease moving, will be able to connect our cerebral regulators directly to the dispensers in the filling stations, in effect replacing our lungs with the mighty lung of the world. If so, those few will be able to remain conscious right up to the final moments before all pressure is equalized. The last bit of air pressure left in our universe will be expended driving a person's conscious thought.

And then, our universe will be in a state of absolute equilibrium. All life and thought will cease, and with them, time itself.

But I maintain a slender hope.

Even though our universe is enclosed, perhaps it is not the only air chamber in the infinite expanse of solid chromium. I speculate that there could be another pocket of air elsewhere, another universe besides our own that is even larger in volume. It is possible that this hypothetical universe has the same or higher air pressure as ours, but suppose that it had a much lower air pressure than ours, perhaps even a true vacuum?

The chromium that separates us from this supposed universe is too thick and too hard for us to drill through, so there is no way we could reach it ourselves, no way to bleed off the excess atmosphere from our universe and regain motive power that way. But I fantasize that this neighboring universe has its own inhabitants, ones with capabilities beyond our own. What if they were able to create a conduit between the two universes, and install valves to release air from ours? They might use our universe as a reservoir, running dispensers with which

they could fill their own lungs, and use our air as a way to drive their own civilization.

It cheers me to imagine that the air that once powered me could power others, to believe that the breath that enables me to engrave these words could one day flow through someone else's body. I do not delude myself into thinking that this would be a way for me to live again, because I am not that air, I am the pattern that it assumed, temporarily. The pattern that is me, the patterns that are the entire world in which I live, would be gone.

But I have an even fainter hope: that those inhabitants not only use our universe as a reservoir, but that once they have emptied it of its air, they might one day be able to open a passage and actually enter our universe as explorers. They might wander our streets, see our frozen bodies, look through our possessions, and wonder about the lives we led.

Which is why I have written this account. You, I hope, are one of those explorers. You, I hope, found these sheets of copper and deciphered the words engraved on their surfaces. And whether or not your brain is impelled by the air that once impelled mine, through the act of reading my words, the patterns that form your thoughts become an imitation of the patterns that once formed mine. And in that way I live again, through you.

Your fellow explorers will have found and read the other books that we left behind, and through the collaborative action of your imaginations, my entire civilization lives again. As you walk through our silent districts, imagine them as they were; with the turret clocks

striking the hours, the filling stations crowded with gossiping neighbors, criers reciting verse in the public squares and anatomists giving lectures in the classrooms. Visualize all of these the next time you look at the frozen world around you, and it will become, in your minds, animated and vital again.

I wish you well, explorer, but I wonder: Does the same fate that befell me await you? I can only imagine that it must, that the tendency toward equilibrium is not a trait peculiar to our universe but inherent in all universes. Perhaps that is just a limitation of my thinking, and your people have discovered a source of pressure that is truly eternal. But my speculations are fanciful enough already. I will assume that one day your thoughts too will cease, although I cannot fathom how far in the future that might be. Your lives will end just as ours did, just as everyone's must. No matter how long it takes, eventually equilibrium will be reached.

I hope you are not saddened by that awareness. I hope that your expedition was more than a search for other universes to use as reservoirs. I hope that you were motivated by a desire for knowledge, a yearning to see what can arise from a universe's exhalation. Because even if a universe's lifespan is calculable, the variety of life that is generated within it is not. The buildings we have erected, the art and music and verse we have composed, the very lives we've led: None of them could have been predicted, because none of them were inevitable. Our universe might have slid into equilibrium emitting nothing more than a quiet hiss. The fact that it spawned such plenitude is a miracle, one that is matched only by your universe giving rise to you.

Though I am long dead as you read this, explorer, I offer to you a valediction. Contemplate the marvel that is existence, and rejoice that you are able to do so. I feel I have the right to tell you this because, as I am inscribing these words, I am doing the same.