

Breakdowns and Boxes

The aphrodisiac's got itself powder-piled in front of me, a cremated pyramid lumped up on a green TV tray. Makes me think of the blizzard outside—howlin' like an ogre, beatin' down the thistles and wheatgrass with concentrated coldness. It's warm in here, though.

Shut up! Let me have my perversions already. My condolences, all you deadbeats whose biggest accomplishment at the end of the day is stuffin' less carbohydrates in your tan little talk-hole. Not much of me left I can move like an athlete anymore, and I don't trust the gyms after they stole my glasses and then put them right back, just to jerk with me.

Which reminds me: striped straw, by the baggie. I cap a nostril, hunch over the puff of green-gray, and sniff hard. Temperature rush—I already forget which way. God *damn*, if that isn't like a burnin' bullet to the back of your eyeballs. What's this stuff again? Crushed beetle 'n monkey hairs, or somethin'? Guy I took it from sure sounded angry when he noticed it was gone. Never was one for coke, but if this is anywhere close, then that's *one* good decision I ever made. Could be worth it now, maybe, 'cause it ain't 'bout tryin' to *escape* me; it's 'bout gettin' back what's mine.

I uncoil like a woodlouse. Corner of my eye: that rosary hangin' on a slanty nail by the kitchen, but I don't *see* it. The TV'll drown it out in a second anyway. Realize I'm still holdin' the straw, flick it back, miss—well, the carpet can have it for a little while—and reach for the remote. That tremble in my wrist again.

I thumb the big green button, and there they are: an exaggerated exposure, blonde on brunette, a forgery of beauty from folks who prob'ly take their paychecks in lotion and Kleenex. Guess all the guys watch it digital these days, on their internets, and not just to kill moonlight when nobody's 'round. And everybody's tryin' to one-up each other, from what I hear. They got blue girls, furry girls, eight-foot-tall girls... how's that for *keepin' up with the Johnsons*? And none of that backwater nonsense that passes for dialogue. Guess *I* could fast-forward, but I'm old-fashioned like that. I like to believe someone's got a reason for bein' where they're at.

Gone in 60 Secretaries, that's the name. Can't read the box from here, but I got a good look at it before I went and sneaked it outta Bob's attic.

My breath gets all constricted; I think of playbills droppin' beneath seats as a big band erupts, and my guts stutter. I watch the gals tangle on a desk, similar to waves slushin' on a white beach, and I wait for a kick, a shift, a jolt 'n jag to let me know I could hump with the best of 'em. But it's still no good. I'm just a cold, covered thistle; might as well be cut off all-together, a victim of that trick where

the magician separates the top and the ass-half like nothin'. I could be one of them hemophiliacs, and there'd be no blood down there.

Green button—*off*. Tape was shit, anyway, made it look like the blonde was goin' down on a ghost in an earthquake. I got to walk off that embarrassin' display; 'least my *legs* can move. So I shove the TV tray aside (let that worthless dust settle), brace my saggy arms on the saggier armrests, and rise to the occasion. One step, and there's somethin' soft-smooth under my bare foot. Ah, shoot, it's that straw. Pick that up later, might want to use it again.

All's I can see out the window is gray fightin' white. No, wait—got some green, trees down the hill at the property line, cuttin' definition and distance into the storm. Then there's the aubergines, purple pips in a row, clipped onto the sill in a metal box fulla dirt. Can't remember where I got the things, though; how's that for an indoor gardener? But drinkin' the daylight now must be like tryin' to suck a fillet through a straw (now that's what I could do with 'round here: some straws)... better get 'em some extra water.

Huh. Kitchen's cooler than the den. Maybe I'll call someone 'bout the insulation, but I s'pose I can just as well snatch a roll and lay it out myself. They can take away your permit, but they can never take away your will to build! If they'd just understood simple facts like that, I'd still have a job.

I click on the radio, between the best microwave and spice jars—not expectin' much of a signal in this weather, but it's worth a shot. A blurt of static, then some tone-deaf drummer clatters in like he's leadin' a charge out of hell. The tremble in my hand does me some good this time, spinnin' the dial upwards and elsewhere faster than the thing can register for a second. I've been figurin' they ration the good stations across the band, because streamlinin' the numbers from worst to best would just be too easy. Up to 96.1, and I tune in to the telltale sound of politics: “his rogue maverick mentality—” some hothead dishes, and I cut him off. Don't matter what side he's standin' up for; heads 'n tails have the same face when you're playin' with a trick coin.

I twirl through the 100's: “The dean's dependency... mortgage with no payments until... our new cappuccino...” Nothin' there, neither. Boy, you want to talk 'bout the “degradation of American culture,” you can start with the radio. We got five senses and it only covers hearin', so once you foul that up with electro-rock and super-evangelists and all that, the whole system's in the toilet. Don't know why I keep fiddlin' with the dial; guess there's always the hope that *someone* still knows how to connect with me. Not that fake sincerity from the kids handin' out broadsheets at the intersections downtown; that's one of *many* reasons I stay up here.

I pick a waterin' can from the counter—the plastic green one feels best today—and stick it under the tap. The water chugs lukewarm, and out of somewhere, I remember the Firm's summer

barbeque in '92, my last before I hung up the orange vest. Back at Bob's place: me behind the patio grill, slippin' and slammin' indigestible gobs of pink into black-brown hamburgers. I sweated as dragonflies flew by, and guys I'd only ever seen with hard hats and gloves on tended to their beers, baldin' heads and wedding rings wrapped 'round wives on display for the day. Bob had mowed away the weeds, but a couple of purple-cap thistles still lurked at the garden's fringe.

Gardens! Yes, oh, that's more than enough water. I slap the tap handle, heft the can out and over back to the plant-box. Damn, can't lift what I used to; can't see my arms under this plaid flannel, either, but it feels like they're strainin' enough to get a real curved W-shape goin'. Maybe it's still that aphro-riporiff shakin' my nerves to no end. Well, at least these herbs can make some progress... steady now, and I zigzag water over the sprouts until the dirt darkens and I can see the ragin' sky in a wet film. I just set the can down on the nearest stack of bricks.

The first thing I thought when I saw Elle at that barbeque was *I didn't even know that kind of cleavage was legal*. What? I was still pretty young, and the divorce papers 'tween me and Mary had been good and filed since April. Not like anyone can tell where you're lookin' with a pair of aviators on, anyway. Elle was Eric's sister, on account of his wife was somethin'-or-other which made her unavailable, and it would've taken a blind man to look 'round that yard and still wonder if I was the only one keen on her. With long ginger hair and a figure like that in a midriff-bearin' sun dress, who wouldn't be? But it ain't for anythin' we did that day that I remember her—total opposite, actually. I made sure I never said nothin' to her beyond “nice to meet you”; kept my mouth in a burger, on a beer, or aimed at Bob, Eric, Enrico, Jesse, and the rest of the gang the whole time. Felt like a dumb kid chokin' at his first high school dance, but it was because I was so tired of the whole game after Mary. Just wanted to screw the universe by lookin' a chance right in the big, green eyes and turnin' my head.

I know I got pictures of Mary 'round here... somewhere. It's either that dresser by the front door, the one in the back hallway, or the bedside table. Yeah, I flip through 'em every now and again; it's like a whole sappy story to read there. We met in one of the fraternities durin' a party, first off. There I was with a bottle, gettin' a backrub from the wallpaper while it felt every other Jack in the joint was roundin' the bases upstairs—when what should I see stuck in a pack of bubble-headed cheerleaders but a miniature schoolmistress? 'Least, she looked it, glasses and straight-faced and all, and she also looked like she wanted to be there the least outta all her friends. Seein' as I wasn't too fond of the night so far myself, I figured we had somethin' in common already; when the record needle hit a quiet number, I got my posterior across the floor and made with some introductions. Turned out she was studyin' physics, but also fancied herself a Catholic! I went to church like most any other boy at the time, but I was smack in the middle of an engineering degree, and I s'pose the idea that you could worship the

Lord and still jump into that kind of science really threw me for a loop. And from a lady, no less!

Well, we found ourselves a corner past the punchbowl and got to talkin', and by the time the night wound down I had just enough alcohol in the tank to ask without trippin' over myself if she wouldn't mind a walk home. Sober as a saint, she obliged, but the rain that'd started up outside meant her face was hidden under a green parka for the trip. And no! I didn't try anythin' fresh at the door.

The first picture's just a Polaroid from somewhere 'round then—yeah, here, I found 'em after all, right where I left 'em last: top of last year's flue-stained *New Yorkers*, on the hearth. Just a sandy, eggshell-tinted ol' square showin' a college party in full swing, all balloons 'n bouffants 'n wood panels. I ain't in there, and neither is she, but it lets me keep track of the memory all the same.

The next one's our first real date; we went to the local delicatessen, had us a pair of sodas and hamburgers. She may have just been playin' with how she caressed my hand across the booth after another of my jokes, but with how I beamed, it's a wonder the jukebox didn't catch the glow and glimmer all over the walls. This picture's wider, a panorama of a diner from a downward angle, and a couple sharin' a milkshake. It's close enough.

Another: hints of color now, and—that's us for sure. Pop's hairpiece looks ready to eat his thick eyebrows. Mary's got a sheepish grin. I can't place this one! Must have been 'bout a year later, when Mom realized This Girl was gonna be a big deal for me, and insisted a photograph was in order. Behind the hedges, there's a forest on the hill; Pop had been a logger by trade, and couldn't bear to be out of sight of trees (at least before he got a chance to take them outta sight himself).

But... my arm trembles again; now I can place it, and yet not. This is the picture they cropped for his obituary, on account of it was the most recent one before the accident. Way I heard it, he was workin' a clearing with three other guys when one of the new loggin' machines backfired; a crane whipped 'round and dropped its payload damn near right on top of him. Somebody got 9-1-1 through the CB, but by the time help showed up it was beyond too late; only thing of his that wasn't broken was his workbox, in the *workhouse* across the site. There was a local newscast on it, and Mom got plenty of money from the loggin' company's settlement, but of course fame and fortune don't mean shit when your father was buried and killed at the same time.

So if you're wonderin' why I'd take on a workin' man's job after it killed Pa... well, it didn't start off right then, but that quarrel of mine with the universe sure did. It's all *take* with the world, isn't it? There's no *give*—you only get to borrow. Heard some folks talk 'bout “destiny,” but I notice it's only when their destination was success, and they were already on their way. Has it ever been anybody's destiny to die away from their whole entire family? A big deathbed's still a deathbed. I hadn't thought it out so clear back then, but part of it was formin', like the whitecap at the crest of a wave: if I was bound

to fall, I outta stay close to the ground. To what was *real*, what I could touch and claim *now*.

But not that I didn't give engineering a fair go. After graduation... that degree, that's actually... why do I think it's somewhere else? Well, it's somewhere not here. But while I got a desk job at the foundry, Mary kept studyin'—and boy, it seemed like she'd always learned *somethin'* brand-spankin' new worth sharin', even outside of physics! A badminton racquet could also be a “battledore;” I could remove the wart on my palm with a banana peel; there was a bird called a *tomtit*. “My beautiful blabbermouth,” I called her. Not that she could help me with everythin' (I was on my own for alibis when I was late to work), but I still tried to *give* back. When she came back home from her apartment for the summer, I helped change the oil in her car, and removed the moss build-up 'round her cellar. As gnats sizzled on the eaves' naked bulb and fireflies doodled coronas of yellow against the blackened forest, we'd take to the porch swing and talk with passion 'bout travelin' America, our favorite plants, and the parables of Christ—and, with her indulgence, my favorite footballers.

Mary wasn't much of a sportswoman, but she *was* a yachtswoman—actually, first thing I noticed 'bout her property when I drove up to meet her parents (in Mom's car, yes, but I felt no need to mention the fact) was the great big boat up on a landfall of four wooden blocks by the shed. That boat would take us on many a sunny vacation over the next few years, and eventually, it was where I proposed to her. Shakin' on bended knee at sea, I offered her a big ol' chunk of my salary in the form of a diamond ring. She wore a purple pinafore, like a parlormaid, and she said *yes*. Combined with a glossy postcard of a guy and gal in each others arms on a yacht, that's all I need for rememberin'.

So then I had a wife, Mom had a daughter-in-law, and everybody had to get down to business bookin' Mary's chapel for the wedding. Got a bleached-out copy of the invitation in the... somewhere. Anyway, the pews were overflowin' on both sides, Mary with her prayer group partners and me with my coworkers from the office to round out the cousins 'n grandparents—and of course, our mothers.

That's her rosary from the ceremony, in fact, over on the wall. But every time I think I'll take it down, I find somethin' better to do.

So we got ourselves a nice house closer in the city, a golden retriever while the baby from our purist's consummation was on the way. When the war rumbled its way across the headlines and over every channel, I had just aged out over the draft; I consider myself a patriot through and through, but if I had to choose between bein' a family man and an infantryman, I'd take the first. So my life was all staples, files, and subcontracts while Mary rounded out her dresses and started shoppin' for cribs. I didn't get a secretary, but I did work my up through the ranks to teachin' the new hires.

And then there was our son, Joseph. Oh, damn... I swear that's his cries right now, but it's just the wind again out there. He had my prickly black hair, and her dewy blue eyes. The doctor had given

him a slap and everythin' was fine, they said. Until a week later, when Mary screamed as she found him flat-still in the crib—cold and covered. “Sudden Infant Death Syndrome,” they called it. Like the baby's just a top that stopped spinnin', or a wind-up toy that wound down ahead of schedule.

The memorial was brief; when you'd only had so much life in you, there was only so much you could mourn. That's what it felt like I needed to convince myself, at least.

Mary wanted us to try again, and I said that if my firstborn son was gonna die in the night, then maybe God wasn't rarin' for us to be parents—if there even was a God at all, now that I'd thought about it. And you know what? I'm gonna fast-forward this time. Why does every story have to have a nice laid-out middle and end? Sometimes your life just goes south like a turd in the can, and there's nothin' further to report. I lost my job when they found out I was takin' office supplies, and a few gadgets from the factory floor, too. I never saw what the problem was—it was *my* work, so why couldn't I? With that black mark on my resume and the economy the way it was, I went huntin' in the classifieds until somethin' fast and familiar came up: manual labor for a construction firm.

But somethin' else kept me and Mary together for another decade or two. Call it true love, womanly obligation, spite... whatever it was, it 'ventually went and ran out, just like everythin' else worth carin' about ever has for me. Old man, old news. Speakin' of news, she pops up in there every now and then—the paper, or just some high 'n mighty TV bit. Few years back she wrote a, what'd she call it, a “novelette” about her life as both a scientist and a woman of faith. Good for her, I s'pose. She's a “deaconess” now, last I heard, and prob'ly invokin' the Pope against the likes of me.

Well, at this point, why not. The world's beaten me so much, why not let the Maker take his turn? His best weapon's always been time, though—time, and the waste it lays to your body. A rustin' of the joints, spine slunkin' like a stick in quicksand, belly buildin' a paunch of jerky and cooler-friendly food until they haul me in for a bypass in a sticky stupor...

All the world's done is take, I tell you. My father. My son. My faith. My wife. My job. My manhood. When I take *back*—from the mall, the hardware store, the antique parlor, the sex shop—it's just to settle the score. Worst thing that happens is I'll remember too much, but I doubt that's possible. No matter how much you break down, there's just gonna be crap about yourself you're never gonna understand. Other people too, for that matter. Might as well *try*; you can stay close to the ground and still reach for everythin' you want. Not like anyone suspects me when this or that turns up missin'.

So as these walls creak and buckle, the kitchen cabinets clatter, and the beams in the bedroom settle, I'm silent. With a crick to my back and box elders to the sides, it's just this burnt-out soul and cabin, my bastion against the weirdos and shallow sentiments in that metropolis down yonder.

A thunderclap smacks the air right outside, and my heart feels like a dartboard as I drop the

pictures. Lightnin' now! I should've lifted a couple of flashlights when I was at the store last week.

But wait... no, I hear footfalls. Definitely someone out there. "Go away!" I bark. I never care to show my temper, but if someone's on my land and I didn't invite 'em up, I ain't much for pleasantries.

Mutterin' now. Janglin'. They pickin' the lock? I look around for the fire-poker—let's see, umbrellas, pajama crate, fourth alarm clock—

White-cold light billows in, and there's a woman in the doorway. "Dad?" she says. Sounds afraid herself. One of those nut-jobs on the prowl lookin' for a fix? I should've hid that powder after all.

"Smells like yeast in here..." she wrinkles her nose and frowns as she slowly steps in. She looks around my stacks. "Is that... a bundle of yardsticks? And a box of toothpaste tubes? And... those *are* newspapers. All those newspapers. Oh, Jesus." She claps her mouth with a slim hand, and like it's some kinda cue, 'cause another guy comes right the hell out of nowhere in the snow behind her.

"Mr. Dale?" he says. "Thomas Dale?" He smiles; he's got glasses with no rims and a peppery beard, but damned if I can trust a man with a tie that red and a suit that straight. I size him up as a chump on the spot, and keep lookin' for somethin' sharp.

Now *he's* lookin' around the place. Free show, buddy, just wait till I'm armed. "Hoarding," he states. "It's often an offshoot of schizophrenia or dementia." He was tryin' to whisper, badly; they say hearin's the first sense to go, but mine's better than ever.

"You said you haven't been able to contact him in a week?" continues the chump in the tie.

She nodded. That windbreaker of hers is too thin for this weather, isn't it? And why don't they close the door already? It's a wonder my stacks aren't blowin' every which way.

"Any tremors? Memory loss?"

She nods again, lightly, like she's afraid her head'll fall off. "He remembers me sometimes, and sometimes he doesn't. I don't know *why*—everything else, he seems to *get*, but—"

He clutches her shoulders and shushes her. "It's not your fault, and it's not *his*. Selective amnesia comes from strong emotions. We can take him back, run some tests, and—"

What's this jackass talkin' 'bout? The madhouse?

"Doctor..." The gal says. "He's not going to get... arrested, is he?" Now that I look at her, she's an awful lot like Mary: got the same shiny hair, the same curved nose. Gettin' those same lines around the face, like she did in her forties. What're the odds?

"I don't believe hoarding is a crime in a private residence, Ms. Dale. However, with the amount of stolen goods the authorities said have been traced to this address..." The chump clears his throat. "Kleptomania's another matter. But that's for you and your lawyer to discuss. In the meantime, I can recommend a therapist who—"

“But... the blizzard!” I shout. I know it's sudden—but how did they even make it up the hill?

She's still got her mouth covered, but I can see some tears in her eyes now. “Dad, it's... it's the middle of summer.” I can see two other guys behind her now, in white, like they're made out of the storm itself. They're comin' in, carryin' somethin' real hesitant.

I just want to remember. I just want everythin' I deserve, and fit it all in a box if I can.

Wait, is that one of them straight-jackets they got?