BRIEFS: A DISCUSSION OF GENRE AND A PRESENTATION OF SHORT FICTION

THESIS

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Eleven short fictions are introduced with a discussion of genre. Genre is looked at as being a matter of degree ranging from absolute prose on one end of the spectrum to a very specific form of poem with conventions of its own such as the Shakespearean Sonnet on the other end of the spectrum. The analysis is made in an appeal for the short-short story (or sudden fiction) as being a genre of its own. It is argued that regardless of what category a fiction may fall into (and some of the distinctions seem arbitrary), that what is most important is success at conveying a meaningful experience.
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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

So many generic distinctions exist today that it is often difficult to be sure what is meant when one hears a reference to a short story, a short-short story (sudden fiction), a poetic story, poetic prose, prose poetry, or any of the great number of titled divisions in literature. To many people, these are just names, but to others, there are clear definitions and guidelines that must be followed in order to consider a given work as belonging to one of these categories. While these discussions do have some value if the end sought is a better understanding of a work, categorization for the sake of catalog is, finally, not satisfying. All of these forms can be said to fall within a spectrum of varying degrees of prose and poetry. In *Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine and Thomas R. Arp assert that "the difference between poetry and other literature is one only of degree" (9). Whether a work falls in one end of the spectrum or the other is secondary to the work's success as whatever it is. A piece is successful only if it succeeds in adequately conveying a meaningful experience.
Perhaps there are, as Perrine and Arp suggest, varying degrees of prose and poetry. This spectrum would begin at the one end with absolute prose. Next would follow absolute prose with a literary intention, then poetic prose, prose poetry, the short-short story, free verse, blank verse, poems with specifically defined and carefully followed guidelines, and finally, poems with conventions of their own. Absolute prose can be exemplified by text books or technical documents which are intended only to impart factual information. These works use none of the literary techniques such as rhyme, allusion, rhythm, etc. In absolute prose, there is no need for such language.

The next step along this spectrum from absolute prose to conventional form might be exemplified by the writings of someone such as Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's work, while utilizing objective description as do many technical documents (free from the subjectivity of a given character), had a literary intention. He was not interested in merely communicating information, but in communicating an experience. Although Hemingway's style was to utilize specific reports of real details, he "sought to portray the significance of exciting adventures rather than just the excitement itself" (Howard 321). Given this intention, Hemingway took the responsibility of selecting the appropriate details required to convey the significance he desired. It is not as if he had taken a photograph so that
he could show it to the reader. This is clear in a short example from Hemingway's "Big-Two Hearted River, Part 1," where "Nick looked down into the pool from the bridge. It was a hot day. A kingfisher flew up the stream. It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout." These details are selected for their significance to the main character and to the whole story. Hemingway picked what was most important to his intention, and what was most important to his characters. Hemingway's absolute prose clearly had a literary intention.

The prose of D.H. Lawrence is that of poetic prose—the next stage of this spectrum. Poetic prose has many of the qualities of poetry but is not strictly metrical and does not utilize consistent line lengths. For example, the following is a sentence from Lawrence's novel, Sons and Lovers. "This double row of dwellings sat at the foot of the rather sharp slope from Bestwood, and looked out, from the attic windows at least, on the slow climb of the valley towards Selby." This sentence describes a neighborhood, and contains details as realistic as those of Hemingway's. But what sets this language apart from that of Hemingway are the poetic devices with which Lawrence paints his descriptions. Assonance and alliteration are used throughout as with "double row" and "double...dwellings," and "valley towards Selby." It is prose without rhyme, without specific meter, without counted line lengths, but with enough poetic devices
to (continuing Perrine and Arp's idea of "varying degrees of poetry") achieve a higher position in the spectrum than Hemingway's prose or that of a textbook.

Poetic prose may use varying degrees of poetic devices. If a writer packs his prose with more or less poetic devices, the prose will be to a greater or lesser extent poetry, accordingly. Nevertheless, it will all be poetic prose. What specific quantity or quality of devices must be used to distinguish poetic prose from prose is not clear. This judgement is based on a matter of degree, and no clear lines have been established.

Perrine and Arp define a prose poem as being "Usually a short composition having the intention of poetry but written in prose rather than verse" (380). Given that the short-short story and the prose poem both have a literary intention, they are distinguished from each other only by the fact that many publishers print the prose poem with a justified right margin. The prose poem is treated entirely as prose. The following is an excerpt from "The Colonel" by Carolyn Forche:

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung
There are many examples of the short-short story that utilize more poetic devices than does this prose poem. One example of the frustration caused by such definitions comes from *A Handbook to Literature* edited by Holman and Harmon. Their opinion is that "The point seems to be that a writing in prose, even the most prosaic, is a poem if the author says so" (Holman 399).

Next on the spectrum is the free verse poem, which is also nonmetrical verse. The free verse poem is distinguished from the prose poem and the short-short story by the use of the line. The line breaks are intentionally made for reasons of effect. The following is an example from a Stephen Dobyns' poem, "Cemetery Nights":

> Sweet dreams, sweet memories, sweet taste of earth: here's how the dead pretend they're still alive--one drags up a chair, a lamp, unwraps the newspaper from somebody's garbage, then sits holding the paper up to his face.

In this poem, Dobyns utilizes the end of the lines to add emphasis and create anticipation. Free verse can utilize any number of poetic devices.

Blank verse follows free verse on this spectrum as it differs in its utilization of iambic pentameter. Most of the lines of Shakespeare's dramas are written in blank verse. For example, in *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus says
to Helenus, "You are for dreams and slumbers, brother priest" (2.2.37).

As the end of this spectrum is approached, two stages remain. First, there is the class of poems that have specifically defined and carefully followed guidelines such as Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." An excerpt follows:

That's my last duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

This poem uses iambic pentameter and is rhymed in couplets, but there is no specific name for this form.

Last in this spectrum is the class of poetry that has become standardized enough to have attained conventions of its own. An example of this farthest end of the spectrum is the sonnet. The English (or Shakespearean) sonnet is composed of three quatrains and a concluding couplet, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg.

As more titles are discussed, and more definitions associated with them, contradictions and overlaps occur. If one were to subscribe to some sort of hierarchy as listed above, quality would be completely left out as a criteria for what is and what is not poetry. One would then be obligated to say that a poem of rhymed couplets is more of a poem than a prose poem that pays no attention to
any specific form. Without the criteria of quality, one would argue that a rhymed couplet poem is more overtly poetic than a blank verse passage of a Shakespearean play. Clearly, the explanation of this spectrum is not intended to help review the quality of various kinds of literature. It is intended as a tool in the discussion of genre, and finally, as an aid to defend the idea that if a work succeeds, it succeeds, regardless of what it is called.

Still, many debate the lines that divide these genres.

A growing dispute about genre is that between the prose poem and the short-short story (poetic story). This issue has many points to consider, including the opinion that these two genres don't exist at all, but instead are distortions of other established genres, namely the free verse poem or the simple character sketch or merely the description of an incident.

In the collection of American Short-Short Stories, *Sudden Fiction*, Stephen Minot discusses several genres of fiction and poetry. He touches on the subjects of the prose poem and the poetic story.

Finally, there is the poetic story. These are not to be confused with prose poems which are often prosaic fragments written in short lines for no apparent reason. Poetic stories like Dylan Thomas' "August Bank Holiday" are rich in auditory effects—-alliteration, assonance, rhythms of  
syntax and repetition. When read aloud, poetic stories usually offer more to the ear than many prose poems. Imagery is more highly valued than narrative structure. They remain prose, however, because line length is left to chance; it is not part of the art form. (Shapard 244-5)

Minot draws a very crisp line here between poetry and prose, citing line length as the distinction—left to chance, the piece is prose.

In their discussion of accents, Perrine and Arp state very clearly what they believe to be the distinction between prose and verse. "In every word of more than one syllable, one syllable is **accented** or stressed, that is, given more prominence in pronunciation than the rest. The only difference between prose and verse is that in prose these accents occur more or less haphazardly; in verse the poet has arranged them to occur at regular intervals" (Perrine 177). In addition, they clarify their distinction between free verse and verse.

By our definition, [free verse] is not verse at all; that is, it is not metrical. It may be rimed or unrimed but it is more often the latter. The only difference between free verse and rhythmical prose is that free verse introduces one additional rhythmical unit, the line. The arrangement into lines divides the material into rhythmical units
or cadences. Beyond its line arrangement there are no necessary differences between it and rhythmical prose." (Perrine 186-7)

While Minot states that the only difference between prose and poetry is that poetry maintains a regular line length, Perrine and Arp state the difference to be that, in verse, the accents have been arranged to occur at regular intervals. Free verse does not strictly adhere to using accents at regular intervals. It differs from prose only in its utilization of the line. Therefore, Perrine and Arp state that it is not verse at all. A good point to reiterate here is that a debate over what specific characteristics make a genre, though potentially useful in understanding a piece of work, could go on forever. Therefore, perhaps one should concentrate on what makes a given piece successful or not successful as art.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of a given genre or a piece of art in that genre, one must consider what common requirements should exist in all of the above. Two criteria to be considered are those of "completeness" and "autonomy." These two terms are distinguished in the following manner: Completeness means that the piece is finished, that it has come to a conclusion. Autonomy means that the piece stands on its own, independent of any other specific work. This definition of autonomy allows for a work to borrow significance from elsewhere in the literary
tradition as long as the work must always remain more than a part of something else.

Either of these conditions can exist without the other, but unless a work has autonomy and completeness, it should not be considered a successful work of art. A piece can be complete without being autonomous by telling an entire story, but without making enough sense for effective communication without prior knowledge of another work. The individual volumes of a trilogy of novels may be an example of completeness without autonomy. A piece can be autonomous without being complete simply by relying on no other prior or future knowledge, and at the same time by not coming to an inevitable conclusion. Flannery O'Connor states that "I'll call anything a story in which specific characters and events influence each other to form a meaningful narrative" (66).

Genre requires both completeness and autonomy. These two criteria are necessary in order to distinguish a complete work from mere fragments of writing, whatever the quality of the actual writing. For instance, one could randomly pull a chapter out of a classic novel, cut the chapter in half, put a title on it, and consider the halfway mark of the original chapter to be the conclusion. What would remain could not be considered a complete work of art. It could still be well-written, and it could still contain all of the writer's techniques, locally used. A metaphor
may still be as significant as it was in the body of the whole novel, an intricate combination of assonance and consonance might still sound as lovely as it had, but as a whole, one would not have a complete piece. The piece may be longer than most short stories and have well-developed characters, but the characters may not stand for anything on their own. The piece of prose would not stand on its own. Simply put, this fragment would most likely not be able to adequately convey a meaningful experience. Therefore, it would not be complete. "A story is a complete dramatic action--and in good stories, the characters are shown through the action and the action is controlled through the characters, and the result of this is meaning that derives from the whole presented experience" (O'Connor 90).

Using completeness and autonomy as the criteria for a completed piece of work, and believing that all of the above-mentioned genres or sub-genres have this capability, then perhaps it is more a matter of properly defining the many different titles of these types of work than worrying over whether a given piece is prose or poetry. Perhaps readers can spend their time discussing whether or not the given piece is successful as whatever it is. Then, let them decide why or why not. A story can be complete merely by showing how one character deals with one specific emotion or event, something that is attempted in many of the pieces in this collection.
A character need not be embellished with every detail, but the character must be shown clearly enough to allow for the reader to understand the central conflict through the character's reactions to events. A fundamental change must be observable in the central character. Essentially, a story must center on a character or characters and must be developed significantly enough to allow the reader to elicit some meaning. It is common in these pieces for a strong emotion or a specific reaction to a given social situation to be exaggerated and epitomized in the central character. It is imperative that the character be fleshed out and made whole, not left as some absurd caricature designed simply to get a point across. When this is successful, the character is the story.

The amount of action or plot varies from story to story in this collection, but what comes through is the character and how the character deals with the central problem and with other characters. Communicating the significance of the given event or situation is accomplished by showing the character's reactions to it—by creating scenes in which the character is forced to deal with whatever complications his life has put in his way. A major idea that runs through this work is the last gasp of the central character, and how he or she deals with it. What the characters deal with is not as important as how they deal with it, for that reveals who they are, and, thus, the necessary, central drama.
The first story in this collection, "Apprehensions," is an exception in that it fits into the genre of poetic prose by virtue of its rhythm and its extensive use of assonance, alliteration and other poetic devices. The rest of the pieces use varying amounts of poetic devices, but this one piece uses them extensively enough to be considered a separate genre. This might be occasioned by the fact that it was originally written as a poem and later rewritten as a short-short story.

The story concentrates on one unnamed character sitting in a park to enjoy his lunch. The man's "encounter" with another man is the conflict—the external conflict. The title of the story names the inner conflict (the main conflict of this story)—the man's own "apprehensions" about his life.

Each of the remaining pieces fit in the above-defined spectrum as either a short-short story or as a short story. In addition to length, the greatest distinctions between these two genres is the level of plot development and the story's connections to the past and future. For example, in a story like "Reassurance," readers get only a glimpse of a character. The story has no real plot development, and only the present is discussed—no past and no future. Only enough is shown to reveal the central conflict in one character, in a small fragment of his life. This is a short-short story. A story such as "No More Humor" is a
little longer, and spends more time developing the characters' relationships to each other. It suggests more about the past and the future of the characters.

The story, "A Small Debt," begins by showing enough details of the main character, Todd, to allow some understanding of who he is. A creditable case is made for him to be in the void in which he lives. He is not altogether without motivation or goals, but he is not in a hurry either. Whether or not this is his natural state or a temporary condition is not clear until the end of the story.

This story is uncommon among these pieces in that it starts with a long description of the character, depicting him in his apparently daily routine. Like many of these pieces, the story goes on to describe a very short period of this one person's life from which the reader must extrapolate the beginning and the ending of the story; arguably this story is complete because it communicates an experience. The main character, Todd, has an encounter with his ex-lover. Prior to the meeting, the reader is shown Todd's present life, and during the brief visit, the reader is given a glimpse of Todd's past. At the conclusion, the reader has some indication of the future, uncertain as it may be. Still, the reader knows that the young lady is Todd's past. The story is over, completed by the reader having witnessed this one man's small triumph.
Similarly, in "Along a Walk," another man has an encounter with an ex-lover. In the story, there is a clear ending, but a more unfinished (at least by the main character) middle. Once again, the story takes place in a brief span of time. The action is comprised only of one drive accompanied by some opening and closing narration. The narration provides a solid beginning and ending to the story. The middle section deals with the action of the drive and the main character's sighting of his ex-lover. This section is unexplained--just presented. The reader is given no answers as to why this man feels the way he does, nor is the reader helped with any reasons for the man's inaction--not trying again with the walking lady.

In the story, "Daily News," the young woman is not tortured by her past, but by her present. This story can be properly referred to as a short-short story. It is a result of the reaction of the main character to an increasing horror--the seeming demise of her country. The reader sees her as a young woman, on her own, and working in the world. She is a teacher. The story describes this one woman's morning and it culminates in her final solution to her problems with the world. The reader never learns very many facts about the character, but the reader knows enough to understand who she is, to share in her experience, and to feel her desperation.
Another person's last gasp is shown in the story, "Old Snow." In this story, a recently retired man is confronted by a sudden abundance of free time and the prospect of a slow physical decline. He still has the help of his wife and the friendship of his children, but he lives increasingly in the past. He begins to have vivid dreams of happy times in his youth. He sleepwalks through these dreams and to the horror of both himself and his wife, starts to wake up in the middle of them.

He fights for his freedom from the past. He tries to find things to make his current life interesting to him. He looks for optimism, but finds none. Finally, he and his wife move from their old house in an effort to force some of the old memories from his immediate consciousness. Unfortunately, his consciousness is not that which has been causing him the most serious problems--the sleepwalking. In the end, the man is desperate, out on his own, having walked back in his sleep to the neighborhood in which he had lived so much of his life.

"Old Snow" is longer than average for this collection. The reader is shown a desperate older couple trying to maintain some integrity in their retirement. All they want is to have some good years, some happy years, now that they are retired. They are blocked from this pleasant retirement by the man's inability to surrender his past to his present.
The man is never able to assess his new life as a retired man without comparing it to his past life as a young man.

All of these stories, however short they may be, are arguably complete. Regardless of what category a fiction may fall into, what is most important is success at communicating a meaningful experience.
CHAPTER II

APPREHENSIONS

A tiny man on a park bench catches a glimpse of a large man's eyes and quickly turns away. He digs in his paper bag for a snack he's packed to finish his lunch, some chips or some cookies--anything to help fill the last little emptiness in his belly. Folding the bag, he thinks of the other man's eyes and wants to look again to guess who he is and what brings him to the park.

Turning, angling his head, he looks around at the large, sad and ugly man staring back. He wonders if the man is really staring or if this is coincidence. He knows that coincidence is easy to live with. He often manages to convince himself that occurrences are mere chance because by believing this, he knows he will rarely have reason to act. He knows that when things happen accidentally, there is no one to blame, and better yet, nothing to fix or change. Sometimes, when desperation threatens to meet him for lunch in the park, he decides to take the afternoon off and that, too, is coincidence when his walk home takes him past signs advertising liquor sales.

Why would this man be staring at him? he thinks as he unfolds some plastic wrap that is protecting a few cookies.
nothing to fix or change. Sometimes, when desperation threatens to meet him for lunch in the park, he decides to take the afternoon off, and then there is coincidence too, if his path home takes him past signs advertising liquor sales.

Why would this man be staring at me? He unfolds some plastic wrap that is protecting a few cookies. I have nothing to offer him--no valuable possessions, nothing to be jealous of, nothing to be angry about, nothing to hate. He wonders at the audacity this man must possess to be able to stare and stare at him, never turning away, never nodding, always retaining the same look of careless belligerence. How can the man keep the same expression in his eyes? he wonders. How can someone remain for such a long time without thinking of a million mistakes or a thousand thirsty women or a hundred killers all out to change one's expression from determination to despair? What is it that enables that man to sit across the park and stare forever? Ray fights the desire to look one more time at the man, thinking the other no better than he, no more right to be looking toward him.

Losing this battle, he finds the man's eyes still staring back at him. He refuses to turn away this time, for he has backed down like that all his life. He keeps eye contact with the man across the park, and remains unwilling to turn away, not about to surrender the satisfaction to the
other of watching him fail. Finally he blinks, tries to smile at the man, then looks down, pretending to have some dirt in his eye, something he can't wash away, some piece of dirt, stuck under his eyelid that keeps sliding back and forth from the top to the side of his eye, to the bottom, scratching deeply, scaring the surface, constantly changing the world into blurs, limiting his view of everything, helping him to hide from the ugly man's stare.
CHAPTER III

DAILY NEWS

As was normal for her, Lisa woke up late, dragged a white, terry cloth robe around her naked, bony body, and allowed both a cup of fresh coffee and her thoughts about work to elevate her blood pressure. Following her second cup, she walked outside to the curb in the 90 degree morning to get her newspaper. When she got back inside, she was already sweating, so she dropped her robe just inside the doorway and adjusted the air conditioning. She cleared away an empty ashtray and a pack of chewing gum from the small, dusty table that stood in front of her couch.

Lisa sat down on the cool wooden table and read the front page of the paper--every word of it. She didn't bother to turn the pages to finish a given story, for she had learned long ago that the important facts in an article were presented first. She believed most things were only worth effort in their beginning, before the illusion of possibility was worn down by the apathy and inconsideration of others.

Finally, disgusted by news of "Local Girl Slain While Jogging" and "Man Dragged From Car," Lisa set the paper on the couch. Had there been someone to tell her thoughts to
just then, she would have gathered her feelings into exclamations of desperation, but, as it was, she let her emotions run freely around the room. Hate hid in a corner, behind the television. Joy tried to escape, but it was too small to turn the doorknob. Fear gathered a posse around it and began to paint the walls with graffiti depicting crimes against everything. The posse scratched out slogans praising murder, rape, and racism.

Lisa was twenty-three, and, having just received a degree in psychology, she worked six days a week calling up people to survey opinions about various products. She would spend hours calling people to find out if their new computer was usable enough for them. She might spend a day contacting pet owners to learn if their dog was enjoying the new dog food more than the old. Lisa walked back into the kitchen, her naked body resembling those in photos of starving refugees. Trying to cool off, she followed her third cup of coffee with a glass of milk.

She wished she could somehow fall back to sleep. When she had first awakened, she entertained fantasies of spending the day reading, perhaps one of Dostoevsky's novels she had collected and occasionally glanced at on their well-dusted shelves.

She walked back into her living room and found a channel that was free of news. She wondered if maybe she should start getting the evening newspaper. At least that
way she could enjoy her day and get something done. She went upstairs, and, passing the thermostat, she set it even lower. She went to her bathroom and began to draw a cool bath.

When the water had risen high enough in the tub, she turned it off. She didn't test the water. When she stood in the tub, the water came up almost past her nearly shapeless calves. Supporting herself with her frail arms on the sides of the tub, she slid into the water with a shudder. She studied the goose bumps on her shoulder and on her raised knees. She rubbed her right knee until the bumps went away and then compared it to her left. She sank down into the cold water until her face was fully submerged, then sat back up and wiped her bangs from her face.

Lisa relaxed for a moment, sliding down until her chin met the water, before looking past her toilet to the large bulletin board she had installed on the wall. Even though she could barely make out the print from where she sat, she began to carefully read every word of every article she'd secured to the cork. Each one seemed to her to be more devastating than the last. This was her previous week's collection of the most despairing articles she'd read on the front page of her newspaper. This would help her to live with the world, would help her to wrestle with it.

Lisa sat up in the tub to allow her to reach the cigarettes and lighter that were on the top of the toilet
tank. She had been trying to quit, but chewing gum was not enough to sustain her through the morning paper. She lit a cigarette with her wet hands and placed the lighter and cigarette pack back on the tank.

The day was overcast, and without the bathroom light on, the room was too dim to easily read the papers on the bulletin board. Lisa got up on her knees and leaned over the floor toward the light switch and the clippings. Putting one hand down on the cold tile floor, she supported herself as she stretched past the toilet to reach the bulletin board. With her free hand, she held out her cigarette to shed a tiny glow onto the words. She gently pressed her lit cigarette against the lowest of the clippings until it began to give off its own light.

Pleased, Lisa stretched out, supporting her neck with the side of the tub. She began to read the topmost articles posted on the bulletin board. Soon she was unable to see past the flames to make out the words. She considered getting up to turn down the air conditioner once more, but remembered an article about the utility rates going up again soon. When her face began to sweat, she slid down below the waterline.
CHAPTER IV

ASSURANCE

Early during an infrequent party, Scott sat with a group of his friends in the corner of Steffani's apartment. At thirty years old, Scott needed to make a conscious effort to dress as he had in college, worn jeans, college jersey, torn up jean jacket, clean white shoes. This was his attempt to appear careless about his appearance, to concern himself with only the things that really matter. Deep down he was concerned with important things. The essentially important thing that Scott struggled with was the affirmation of his own existence. Without an external force to aid him in the constant acknowledgement of himself, Scott was not unlike a naked, sightless man fully submerged in water that was carefully warmed to the exact temperature of his body, 98.6 degrees according to the text books, but 98.4 degrees for Scott.

"In essence, I agree with you on this point, Jay," Scott said as he leaned back into his chair, through a bright beam of light from a poorly-angled lamp. His eyes reflected the spotlight as they passed through it. "Still, there remains an element of insincerity..."
"Thanks anyway," Jay shot back, turning to Cheryl and Janne, who were actively involved in the conversation. "I don't think I've said enough to make my position clear, anyway--"

Scott excused himself from the conversation with the brisk flash of his empty glass.

A minute later, Scott involved himself in conversation at Steffani's wet bar. Long neck Budweiser in hand, Mike leaned against the bar facing Robert, who sat on a stool holding a Seven and Seven in one hand and a straw in the other. Originally the conversation between Mike and Robert had been about baseball, but they were soon discussing the possibility of the increased wages of baseball athletes as playing a central role in the continuing downfall of the country. Scott argued that having undercut the value system people have toward money, the baseball salaries, in the long run, were causing the collapse of the United State's once strong economy. Scott was, after all, an economist for a blue chip corporation.

Rob refilled Scott's drink for him and left the scene with a hasty conclusion to his part of the conversation.

"I see your point now," Mike agreed with Scott, standing up straight, and picking up a full beer as he dragged his casual sport coat from a stool next to him.
"Excellent. You see, it's an idea I've been ruminating over for some time now, and the story of how it came about is nearly as fascinating as the idea itself."

"Oh, I'm sure, but I need to get back to Dawn and see if she needs a drink or anything."

"Understood. We'll talk another time."

Scott was the last one to leave that party, having unsuccessfully made his pitch to spend the night with Steffani. At about two a.m., he went down to his recently simonized, white Mustang and climbed inside. Immediately after starting the engine, he pushed a tape into the player. He drove away thoughtfully as he listened to his own reassuring voice saying, "Your name is Scott Thompson. Relax, for your existence is real. You are significant. You will survive, and you will not be alone in this world or the next. You will not cease to exist if you cannot hear yourself speak. This tape will not stop playing, but even if it did, you would not drive off the side of the road."
CHAPTER V

ALONG A ROW

Yesterday I saw Melissa for the first time in six years. I hadn't even heard about her in close to a year. Six years is not a lifetime, but if you've made the decisions we've made...well, suffice it to say that it's a long time. Six years ago, I knew with such certainty what I wanted that I could tell anyone about it in clear simple statements, could sing about it for days at a time, could carve it in stone, and could even tell it to the object of that desire, herself--Melissa. It still seems impossible that our one night of inaction has led me to such a desperate place, so I refuse to accept or believe that I'm really here.

Even now, it's easy to see Melissa's tired, sunburned face telling me the truth six years ago. She was telling me that when things fell apart between us, that it had been the wrong decision. She was telling me she wished she had had the strength to hold out, to outlast her confusion over me, to wait until it had all blown over. She came right out and said she wanted to try again, but understood if I didn't want to, for I "had a good thing going."
Even then, she had been through yet another relationship, perhaps two. Once again she had experienced great fights of self-awareness. The kind of awareness some people feel when they look in the mirror for the first time in a long while and are surprised at what their appearance. Even while making her confessions to me, she seemed to be grasping for some clarity, some singularity of thought. She recounted to me her past year, and the trouble with a young British man and another ex-boyfriend. All along, she tried to make a case for how she was finally sure about everything. She told me then that she had made a big mistake with me. She told me stories about how I continued to come up in her daily life, the things I once said, the help I had supposedly lent her when she really needed someone to understand her and to care.

When she finally let me know this truth, I was wrapped up in a new relationship. Still, I imagined myself hold her several times that night and never made a move. I think I saw her almost cry that night--it would have been the only time. She drove away with a sarcastic comment about me being too light, but that she liked skinny guys. She told me not to tell her if I was ever going to call her again, that she'd prefer to guess about it. I'm still not sure if she was letting me off the hook or if it was just easier for her. I went home and stared and fidgeted for a few days, considering my options, never being certain what they were.
I got married, and somehow found the spirit to invite her to the ceremony. She couldn't make it, but she was apologetic. My wife didn't miss her. I still have no children, but I guess it's about that time. Time for me to accept things. Six years is a long time to be constantly trying to fall back asleep and catch up to the dream you left there the night before.

So when I saw Melissa walking along a row of shops today, I didn't even stop to say hello. I hope I looked in a hurry because all I did was wave and drive right by. I didn't make it very far--pulled into a secluded place as soon as I could and found myself choking. It didn't last long, but each time I look in the mirror today, I wonder if my eyes will ever be white again.

I don't even want to know how she's doing because I know how I am. I don't even want to know if she's married because I know I always will be. I don't even want to know what time it is because it can only be later.
CHAPTER VI

VACANCY

Marlene turned to me, her long brown hair swirling around from her back. She wore a green sweater, knowing it would brighten her green eyes, as if she had planned this encounter on our front lawn. Marlene was five feet ten inches tall with straight hair that came down to her knees. She hesitated, feigning indecision; I knew she was certain of every move. An ice cream truck down the street played "Home on the Range," and I wanted to chase it with the last few coins in my pocket.

When Marlene first turned to me, I was stunned, but when the moment had ceased to stun me, I asked harshly, "Are you gonna leave or what?"

Barefoot, wearing only a green, cotton sun dress, she walked toward me through the grass in our yard and gently put her arms around my neck. "No," she said. "I was just feeling tense."

That was the fourth time in about two weeks that I had heard the ice cream truck, so that night I packed a laundry bag and left shortly after Marlene fell asleep. It wasn't until two weeks later that I realized I had, in my haste, left the laundry soap and the fabric softener under our bed.
Things were hard on me for a few days, and with only one bag, keeping the clean clothes from those soiled was challenging—so much so that it took up most of my time. Eventually, I made it to a theater and saw other moving people. Food was never a problem because I have loved buttered popcorn all my life.

When all the words had been memorized, I found the patience for reading, and even wrote a postcard, but never mailed it, having only first class stamps. I stayed in a hotel one night, but the bed was so familiar I checked out at midnight. I went down to the river to wash my clothes on a rock, but accidentally left my laundry bag on a cross town bus. I considered going into a bar to get warm one night, but knew myself well enough not to risk that kind of comfort.

I was always up and walking by sunrise—looking. Nothing was remarkable in the greys of the inner city at that hour, but my muscles ached to be stretched. It was the kind of pleasure that some people get when they stop poking themselves in the eye. On one unusually clear morning, the sun got up early just to surprise me with long brown hair. I saw it across a six lane highway. The hair caught the sun’s rays, all of them, and sucked them in. Brown, straight hair, down to a woman’s knees. For an instant, I thought of ice cream, but before she was out of sight, I recognized beauty.
I never saw that woman before, nor have I seen her since. I inhaled all the way to work for the first time in a lifetime, shaving, washing, and dressing as I went.

I resist the desire to make attempts at summarizing things.
CHAPTER VII

OLD SNOW

They say that as you get older, you need less sleep, but I think young people confuse that idea with the simple reality that the older you get, the harder it is to stay comfortable for too many hours in a row. Perhaps there is something to needing less sleep, though, because it wasn't until one night a couple weeks after my retirement from the Post Office, that I started getting my after-hours exercise. Sadly, I was not awake to enjoy it.

I remember standing over Tommy's crib twenty years ago, in 1965, rummaging through his bedclothes, trying to find his pacifier as he cried hysterically. I was reaching in and around in his blankets as he screamed louder and louder. I was starting to rip all the blankets off the bed when my wife called me.

"Clarence? What are you doing here at this hour? Clarence? Clarence!"

These are the words that woke me as I stood in our house, against a wall in a room that we hadn't used in years. Diane stood by the light switch and stared at me.

I mumbled a thing or two even I didn't understand, standing in the mostly empty room, squinting from the bright
overhead light. I tried to make out the expression on my wife's face as she slowly crossed the room toward where I stood.

"Clarence. Are you okay?" the kindest voice in the world asked me. "Oh, dear. I said, are you okay?"

"Yes," I finally said, recovering a little and feeling embarrassed. "Uh..."

"Let's get back to bed." Diane held my hand and began to lead me out of the room.

I felt like a stupid child. She in her terry cloth robe and me in my...in my... I realized then that I was naked. I never slept naked anymore—ever since we had our first kid. I felt like such an old fool as I scanned the floor, half expecting to see where I might have relieved myself in my dream.

We walked back through our forty-three-year-old house. The house I had helped build. The house where we had, for the most part successfully, raised five children. Neither one of us talked as we went back to our bedroom. Diane was too kind to talk of it, and I was too amazed to speak. I think I was afraid that if we talked about it right then it would become real, and if we just let it go, we could pretend it never happened—just a bad dream. Once back in our room, I pulled on my flannel pajamas and climbed into our bed. I lay on my back and Diane snuggled up next to me with her head on my shoulder. It felt pretty comfortable,
and I decided not to accuse her of lying that way in order to hold me down.

For a few days I spent a lot of time keeping busy by fixing up the old house, but reality set in shortly. The truth was, our house didn't really need any work. I rearranged some boxes in the garage, reorganized some tools, cleaned some old outdoor furniture, but that was that. On one desperate Monday morning after walking to the edge of the driveway in the crisp, 40 degree, March air to get the mail, I had a mad thought of painting the exterior of the house. I was delighted by the idea for two or three seconds before turning back to the house and remembering that seven years earlier we had installed aluminum siding.

Diane and I spent time reading and there was often a sports game of one kind or another on the television. We reminisced a lot and took pride in our past lives. It seemed as if at least one of us was always looking through an old photo album. None of our kids were in town any longer, and we considered relocating, but we didn't know where or even why, exactly. We spent time together and did those things we'd always done.

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"C'mon, Bobby," I said as I squatted down to the ground next to my oldest son. "It's not the end of the world, buddy. You're only seven, for crying out loud."

Bobby stood in the middle of the back patio with tears in his eyes. He had just gotten into his first fist fight--the first of many. He stood straight, trying to look proud. He wasn't crying because he was hurt, but because he had lost.

"The little shit was twice your size," I shouted. "I mean, that kid was twice your size. It's nothing to get upset over. You're going to grow."

"I know. I know, Dad," he sputtered. "I wanna be big now!"

I walked over to a large bath tub that we kept in the back yard as a toy chest, and rummaged through it until I found the football. "Hey, Bob?" I looked over at my son sitting dejectedly on the edge of the patio. He was scratching in an ant hill with a stick when he looked up at me. "Catch?" I asked.

"Clarence," I heard a voice, but it wasn't Bobby's. "Clarence, I love you, dear. Please come inside."

I looked at Bobby, sitting there, and I wondered why he didn't answer me. I tried to call him again. The sun went away suddenly and I found myself standing in the darkness of our back yard holding a deflated football in one hand. I tried to focus on where the voice was coming from. Diane stood on the edge of the patio, resting her hand on the edge of the sliding glass door with light from inside the house pouring out around her. I nervously checked myself to see
what I was wearing, and to my relief I had on a sweat suit--
one I hadn't seen in years.

"Please come inside," Diane repeated taking a step
toward me in her bare feet.

"No, stay there," I said, moving finally. "What's
going on?" I followed behind her into the recreation room
in the rear of the house.

"Let's not worry about it tonight," she said as she
took my hand and led me into our bedroom.

The next day, Diane and I talked about my sleepwalking,
and we concluded that it was probably just a temporary
reaction to the "empty nest syndrome" of which we'd heard so
much from friends, family, and the media--we'd been amply
warned.

I started thinking about going back to school. I
wasn't too old to go to school and learn something fun,
useful even. They retrain people when they change careers.
It made me angry when I thought about not being trained for
retirement. Diane bought me a plastic model sailboat to
help pass the endless afternoons, but the small pieces drove
me crazy and I ended up throwing it out, having barely
started it. I went to a local meeting of retired people.
"Life After Work" was the name of the program. The meeting
depressed me so much that I left at the break. Everyone
there seemed dead already, and I needed to be around young
people, I thought, not people my own age.
"I put those sleds up here last spring, boys. Hang on a second." I set up a ladder to allow myself access to the upper level of the shed I'd built in the back yard. Well, I call it the shed, but the kids call it the playhouse or the 'fort'. I let them use the lower level in any way they wanted.

Bracing myself on the ladder, I moved some boxes around and tried to remember where I'd put the snow sleds from the previous year.

"Dad, I need to meet Kathy," said Cindy, my six-year-old daughter.

"What time, dear?" I craned my head around to try to see her.

She stood in the doorway of the shed, half in shadow, half in sunlight, blocking the sun from her eyes with her hand as she looked up at me. "Three-thirty," she responded with exaggerated desperation.

"Okay, we'll get you there, honey." I spotted the red blade of a sled against the back wall and I remember wondering how it had gotten back so far just as I lost my balance and fell from the ladder, crashing to the painted ply wood floor.
"Oh my God!" a woman screamed. "Clarence, don't move. I'll call the ambulance!"

It was Diane, I knew that much. I couldn't see anything, but I knew I was lying on my side and I hurt a lot. When I tried to get up, a lot of pain shot through my right leg. I must have passed out, because only an instant later I heard an ambulance siren and I was talking to some woman, and that's about all I can recall until I opened my eyes into very bright lights, staring up from a hospital bed.

As it turns out, I had broken my shin bone. Time went by and I healed.

Meanwhile, I didn't sleepwalk. Diane and I decided that we should sell the house to help free us of some of the old memories, good as they were, and to help us move forward with our lives. We both decided to take some classes and start our second lives together. We weren't going to start over, though. We decided that was the wrong way to think about it, for that implied a failed past, or total separation from our past. No, we were just going to think about it as another try at something new.

We stayed in the same town because we knew it so well and it was comfortable to us. We bought a smaller house on the outskirts in a new development. Diane thought maybe we should get a condominium or an apartment, but I told her that if I didn't at least have my yard to work in she could
just start digging my grave. I liked the new place. It was a good size for the two of us and I had a two-car garage to work in for the first time in my life. The only aspect I didn't really like about the new place was just that--it was new.

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I heard car horns. "Hey, open your eyes old man!" a boy's voice yelled and disappeared.

"Get out of the road!" a drunken girl's voice screamed. Car horns rang in my ears.

I was on the side of a road. It was dark except for the occasional headlights streaming by. I stared at the headlights as they approached me two at a time. They came right at me, closer and closer, then, at the last minute, passing by. I stepped off the road and found some grass to sit down in. I was relieved that I was dressed. My head cleared slowly as I tried to focus my vision in the darkness. I had no idea where I was or what I was doing.

Finally I started looking around and realized that the grass I was sitting in was a lawn in front of a big red brick building. I walked up to it, trying to find a name on it--identify it. I recognized it as my kids' grade school a moment before I found the big yellow letters stuck to the side of the wall that read, "Woodland Heights Grade School."
I realized that I'd been trying to walk back to our former house.

I started running around the school. I don't know what I was looking for or why I was running. When I got to the back of the building, I slowed to a walk and immediately experienced brief memories of watching Bobby or Tommy playing baseball on the nearby fields. There was the game where Tommy's team had to play against the pitcher who was so much bigger than all of them, and they didn't get any hits. There was the game where Bobby hit the team's only over-the-fence home run of the season.

I started running again, trying to leave my dreamed kids behind the school. My side began to hurt, and I slowed to a walk again by the time I reached the front. Eventually, I found the front entrance. It was now very familiar to me, even at night. Everything I looked at was something I had seen before—in the same way, in the same light. Exhausted, I sat down on the steps.

Each car that drove by carried people I had known. People who had come to our birthday parties thrown at the house. People who had cheered in the stands with me at baseball and basketball games. I struggled to lower my stare from the passing windows, to the car doors, to the wheels spinning past. I dragged my gaze down to the road and then away from where it blurred with the tires. Slowly I found the curb and then the grass, and finally my own
feet. I sat stared at my old man's feet. I tried to be logical, to make a sound decision. Finally, I got up again and started walking in the direction I thought I had come from, hoping Diane would drive up to save me.
CHAPTER VIII

NO MORE HUMOR

"I don't think I want to get into the harness tonight—"

"No one has mentioned the harness, dear." Stan walked with his palms turned up, towards his wife, Kathy. "I know things haven't exactly been rosy around here, so I wouldn't expect you to want anything like the harness tonight."

"Or the ironing board, or the rocking chair, or the bathroom wall—nothing tonight!" Katherine's large green eyes stared down at her shorter husband. She stood in her living room wearing only a pair of Stan's boxer shorts with her arms crossed over her large bare chest.

"Nothing?" Stan yelled in disbelief as he gaped at his six-foot one-inch tall wife. He traced her entire body with his eyes—every perfect inch of it. She didn't even have a scar or a blemish or a tanline. He scanned up her neck and across her firmly pressed together lips to rest on those green eyes which seemed to take up nearly half her face.

"I want to get dressed and go do some shopping—maybe see a movie," Kathy said quickly as she moved her hands down to her hips and attempted her most defiant pose. She took a step toward her skinny five and a half feet tall husband. "Listen, honey," she began in a sincere and
understanding voice. "I know you work hard all while day looking forward to the vacuum cleaner, or the dog's mattress or the bread maker, but I just need a night off."

She walked the last three steps toward him and put her hands around his bare waist. "I will always love you for the help you've given me. Please understand, it's been a long time since I've had a break, and if I go out tonight, I promise not to leave the exercise room except to take a shower this entire weekend."

Stan did not respond. He stood motionless. After a few seconds he dropped his head in dejection. "Have I done something wrong?" he said, almost whimpering.

"No," Kathy replied at once. "No, and I don't want you thinking things like that either. I need you. Please honey, don't be thinking things like that. No, of course not."

"I'm sorry, dear," Stan said still looking down. "I just love you so much," his voice gained some strength, "and we're not getting any younger."

"I know. That's part of the reason I want a night off."

"Why? What do you mean?" Stan sounded hurt and he shuffled his bare feet in the thick, clean, bright blue shag carpeting.

Kathy closed the distance between them and hugged Stan's head to her chest. "Nothing. I didn't mean what
you're thinking. It's just that sometimes I think there's more to life, and that maybe I need to get out into it a little more."

Stan gently licked Kathy's right nipple, then looked up at her. "Why?"

Kathy sighed in frustration. "It's not that being with you every night isn't great because it is. It's just that-"

"What? What?"

"It's just that I need some time to reflect. A girl needs a little time to reflect on her life."

"Why?" Stan looked down again and began to chew on the her right breast.

"It...It makes life more enjoyable." Kathy paused for a moment and then spoke in a rush. "I don't want to look up and be fifty years old and wonder where--ouch!--careful! I don't want to wonder where my youth has gone."

"We'll know."

"I want some time to reflect on it while I'm actually living it--kind of make it last longer--you know?"

"You can't tell me it's even possible for it to last longer." Stan backed away from Kathy and then walked over to the sofa and threw his naked body down on it.

Stan's comment was intended to be humorous, but even though Kathy had finally learned to recognize it, she didn't really understand humor. She usually felt hurt when humor
was directed toward her, especially when the originator knew she didn't understand it.

"Please don't be so difficult about this--I just want some time," she answered.

"You looking for a little extra action?" Stan said, his face half-muzzled in a couch cushion.

"I'm not suicidal," Kathy responded without sarcasm. Kathy didn't have sarcasm in her. She could only tell the plain truth about whatever she felt at the given moment--if she could articulate what she felt. She never felt very much except when Stan was helping her.

Stan turned over onto his back. "It's almost like you're saying, 'We don't talk anymore.'" Stan pretended to whine.

"That's not what I'm saying."

"Good, because you know we've never talked."

Kathy walked over to the couch and sat down on the coffee table in front of it. "I didn't marry you because of the great conversation, but maybe we need to start talking."

"Next thing you know you're going to ask me to get us a phone again." Stan sat up to face her.

"Sometimes I feel like we are just a living cliche."

With both hands, Stan reached over and gently touched the waistband of Kathy's boxers. "Not so much has changed," he told her.
Kathy stood up and snatched the boxers out of Stan's hands as he dragged them down to her knees. "Damn it!" she yelled in his face. She pulled them up as she stepped backwards over the coffee table.

"I'm sorry," Stan blurted as he stood up.

Kathy walked across the room and pulled back an upper edge of the drapery to look out across the street. She tried not to cry. The sun was just disappearing behind their house casting a shadow over the quiet middle class neighborhood. Stan walked up to her and put a careful hand on her back.

"Sometimes I just need to remember how wonderful my life is compared to all the lonely people out there." He spoke softly at her shoulders. "I love you, Kath. We have each other and we shouldn't forget how lucky we are for it. I can back off a little--I'm sorry."

Kathy turned around, leaned back against the wall, put her arms around him, and looked over his forehead. She stroked the back of his neck with her right hand. "I'm really fine, honey. I know you're the best thing that's ever happened to me." She moved her mouth close to his ear. "Maybe we can lie down in a bed once in a while?"

Stan pulled away just enough to look into her face—still beautiful and still young. He sought out her left, clear green eye and stared for a long moment. "Yes," he said as if he was agreeing to rip off his own arms. He took
a deep breath, and then spoke very evenly and sincerely. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Kathy embraced him tightly. "Oh, just that you asked is enough. Wait a minute, maybe there is one thing." She pulled back to be able to see him. "What would you say to no more humor? It frustrates me so much."

"Done." he said quickly. "You will never hear it again."

Kathy let go of Stan, then took two steps away from the window, away from the neighborhood. She started toward their exercise room, turned back to Stan and then quickly bent down and slid her shorts down to her ankles. She smiled at Stan who smiled back. She stepped out of the shorts and walked out of the room. "I love you, Stan!" she shouted as she went through the door.

Stan followed her into their exercise room which was almost completely barren of furniture, and was everywhere painted a flat white. Kathy was placing a football mouthpiece into her mouth. Then she tied a large handkerchief around her head securely locking in the mouthpiece and preventing her from making any noises other than faint moanings. As she was tying the handkerchief behind her, she looked at Stan with an expression of delight which had in it a hint of hopefulness. Next, she picked up two ear plugs from a shelf against the far wall.
"No, Kath. Let's do without those tonight." Stan said, taking a step into the room and closing the door behind him. He flipped two switches on the wall by the door. A large bright light came on in the ceiling above Kathy and two seven-feet-tall fans, one on either side of her, began to spin.
"Hey, there's one I know," Luke thought as he took a piece of chicken from his plate and fed it to his cat, Peko. Through the wall of his tiny duplex apartment, he could hear the music from the other half of the building whenever his neighbors were home. But he was never able to recognize the songs. Two young men, fifty years Luke's junior, lived next to him. They had been living there for almost a year when Luke heard the song he recognized as "Party Doll," and it drowned out the TV commercial for a new, women's perfume. He had talked to his neighbors a few times, meeting them accidentally when he walked around to his mailbox which hung next to theirs on the front of the house. But he had never really conversed with them. He didn't have many visitors, and he didn't mind the constant music coming through his walls. It was not a problem for him to turn his TV volume up if he wanted or simply to move closer to his screen and speaker. He enjoyed his neighbors, even if the only thing they shared was the music and the one wall.

The late night talk show was over, but Luke didn't need to go to sleep yet. He didn't have any early appointments. Luke wondered why his neighbors would be up so late on a
Tuesday night. He guessed that they were on vacation. He always knew when either one of them were not home by looking out one of his windows to see which of their cars were in the back lot. He knew when visitors came and left.

Luke knew both neighbor's schedules pretty well, and usually, when they were home, he could tell what they were doing from the slightest sounds. The TV was the most obvious indicator. Also, when one of the bedroom stereos was on, he could tell which one, and he could determine from the volume the approximate activity the neighbor was involved in. If it was at a medium volume, perhaps he was grading papers, or writing out checks for bills. If it was very loud, the neighbor was probably throwing darts, writing a letter, ironing, or lifting weights. If it was on very softly, the young man was getting up in the morning or going to sleep at night.

Luke could make the same kinds of estimations about the varying volumes of the living room stereo. When it was on loud like it was now, especially this late, it could only mean a party. This was supported by the presence of three extra cars in the back lot. Any number of additional cars might be parked on the street at the front of the house, but having already made his once-a-day trip to collect his mail, Luke did not know how many cars were there.

Peko was pregnant, and Luke looked forward to the additions to his small apartment family. There was plenty
of room for them, he was certain. He always left his rear
window open about five inches so that Peko could scramble in
and out at will. He decided that it would be nice to have a
little more traffic.

Luke had been to his share of parties when he was
younger, and it pleased him that people were on the other
side of his wall, having fun and enjoying their youth. He
heard the neighbors' back door slam shut and some voices
move past his side window.

"C'mon Cheryl, why do you have to leave so early?"
"It's two o'clock, Mike. I told you last week I would
have to leave at midnight."
"Well, you lied."

He heard a car start, followed by a very loud song on
the stereo which was immediately turned down.

"I'll call you when I get home tomorrow afternoon,
Good-night." The door slammed.

Later, a truck door thumped during a commercial on the
TV. The noises all bled together for Luke. He experienced
his life with whatever senses happened to be effected,
mostly his ears, though occasionally the TV would show him
something pleasing.

Luke leaned forward to flip a cockroach off of his
screen. He wondered again if he should have talked to the
guys next door when he saw that they had hired an
exterminator. He knew that his neighbor's could never
really get rid of the bugs so long as he had them. His phone rang, and he knocked over a couple glasses and pushed off two issues of Life Magazine to grab the receiver.

"Yeah?" he said into the phone.

"Is Steve there?"

"Who?"

"Hey, sorry man, I must have the wrong number."

"Oh, that's okay young..." The phone clicked.

Luke recognized "It's Over" being played next door.

"How unusual," he thought. "I wonder if they know the real history behind that song?"

He got off of his couch and slid his feet over to the adjoining wall, pressing his ear closer. "Hmmm," he thought, "Perhaps they'd like to know about that beautiful song..." He stood against the wall until the song ended, and then he turned his head, with the slightest hint of a shadowed smile on his lips, and walked back to his couch, picking up the two glasses he had knocked over earlier.

Sitting back down again, he leaned forward to change the channel. He flipped past static and talk shows. He came across another commercial for a woman's perfume, and turned off the volume before dragging his legs up onto the green cushions of his couch and bending his arm under his pillow. When the commercial was over, he closed his eyes but kept his ears open.
CHAPTER X

HOURS OF RARE INSTANTS

Even now, when my old friend Tom somehow becomes disoriented about which way is up, he will escape his office for an afternoon or for a morning so that he can take a walk on a university campus. He says he loves being in a place where almost everyone around him has hope, and where many even have a tremendous drive for success, however unrealistic it may be. He gets in these "Life is a Journey" moods which I believe are his way of justifying the fact that he has never gotten anywhere. It's easy for Tom to tell me that the true beauty of life is the getting to, not the being at someplace, because he has never been any place either of us would like to be.

Tom is a man with few passions. He's always been a fine natural athlete, but never cared enough to work at being great. He's quite physically fit, but probably wouldn't be if it required of him a conscious effort. He's always enjoyed the attention of the opposite sex, but never enough to go out of his way to look his best, even though many women consider his best to be striking. Tom is content to be able to get up and look forward to the day. He enjoys telling me what rambles through his mind.
There's a certain truth that comes through in his words sometimes. Often I don't feel it in them while he's saying them, but once in a while I know there is some truth there. It has hit me before, on a hot day when I, for some reason, have had to remain in the direct sun for a while--not long enough to feel hot all over, but long enough to feel a specific heat in an exact part of my back, through my suit coat. It's a kind of heat that is familiar. It suddenly reminds me of every instant in my life when I have ever felt that kind of heat--from the time I was a little boy until the last time I felt the heat which always seems to have been a long time ago. For that instant, all those moments are the same moment. Every occurrence of that heat is exactly the same as that immediate heat. Anything that had happened in my life between those moments, any growing that I had done, any knowledge that I might have accumulated was pointless--none of it had any effect. Nothing could alter the bringing together of all those insignificant times of my life into one. It's at times like that when I wonder if I've gotten anywhere. More importantly, it's at times like that when I sort of believe in Tom telling me that it doesn't matter whether we have "gotten" somewhere or not.

Tom once had a fiance', and they were planning on having children. Tom told me, "Now I'm getting somewhere," but he lost her, and at times I wonder if it matters to him that he lost her at all. He has told me that it does matter
that they were together, but I don't know if it matters to him that they're not anymore.

Sometimes, very rarely, I will see a young woman from a certain angle, in a certain light. It will not be all of her face, usually not much of her face—most of it will remain in my imagination, but in that rare instant, I will experience a knowledge of beauty, a belief in it. I'll feel that anything is possible and that it is worth everything in life to keep alive that possibility. Those rare instants remind me that those kinds of feelings exist, and they make me think of Tom again, and I wonder if those glimpses I see are what he seeks on a college campus. When I see the corner of a woman's smile or just the ends of some short red hair blown in the night wind, I wonder if my feelings are any different or any less significant than those that Tom loves to talk about so much.

Those glimpses are flashes of possibility. Often there is beauty in what Tom says about his "Journey," and I will miss it when he leaves tomorrow. He tells me he's bored here and needs to find something else. He says the better he gets at his current job, the less room there is for improvement, and that the more people he meets in the area, the fewer people there are for him to meet. I asked him not to tell me where he is going, but I didn't tell him why. I don't wish to know because I never want to give in to the urge to follow him.
CHAPTER XI

A SMALL DEBT

Todd surveyed the intersection, following the sidewalk with his eyes, scanning past the copy shop on the corner and past the computer store, finally resting his gaze on the pizza restaurant. Each time he saw someone, he paused his eye for a moment and stared at the person's face.

I recognize everyone, he thought, and I don't want to.

At six feet one inch tall, he looked like a giant bug, for his legs and arms were too thin for his chest and hips. Still, each time he passed a window in which he could see his reflection, he was happy not to be the 250 pound giant he had been throughout his twenties.

Todd stopped at the curb, pulled his back pack off, and dug around through the notebooks and the textbooks, the crumpled pieces of paper and the pens and pencils. When he found his pocket calculator, he pulled it out of the bag, opened it up and made sure that it was powered off. When he was assured that the battery was not going to waste, he put the calculator back, zipped up the pack, and slung it back onto his shoulder--the left one instead of the right, to give himself a rest.
Todd crossed the street to a small wooded area where he sat on a vacant, shaded park bench. He checked his pockets to make sure that he still had his apartment key. Exhausted, he dug through his back pack again, checked his calculator again, and pulled out a small paperback about speed reading, and a few minutes later he fell asleep.

After waking, Todd stood up to escape the glare of the setting sun. He checked his back pocket to make sure that he still had his money clip. Considering a slice of pizza, he crossed the street and stood in front of the glass walls of the restaurant. Since the sun was well behind the building, he was able to get a particularly good reflection of himself in the wall. "Gregor..." he whispered to himself, and changed his mind about getting pizza.

He started walking, turned the corner, and, halfway down the next street, he stopped and slid his back pack off of his shoulder again. His calculator was still powered off, and that made him smile. He dragged the pack for a couple feet before putting it back over his left shoulder.

As Todd reached the end of the street, he was nearly run down by a beer truck. The driver stopped to let Todd pass, and they waved to each other. Todd wondered what else he might be forgetting.

"Todd," came a voice from behind some bushes, in front of a house he was passing.

"Huh?" he paused and looked for the person.
"It's me," said a female voice through a window, and a moment later she came out onto the porch, the screen door squeaking behind her. She was in her late twenties, with very short red hair, and a little bit of a hooked nose. She wore a white tank top and black jean shorts.

"Hey," Todd said flatly, sliding his pack to the ground.

"Been a long time."

"Yeah, funny how you can go so long without seeing someone in a town this small."

"Well, to be honest--I've seen you a bunch."

"Me too."

"Do you have a second?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, "But--." She had turned and was running back inside--the screen door making a loud swish as it opened and closed.

Todd slumped to the ground where he leaned against a tree and looked up into its branches--now almost bare. He reached up to pull a yellow leaf from the lowest branch, and turning it over in his hands, studying the veins, he tried to know how the colors seemed to simply bleed away.

"Here," the woman returned and extended two books under his nose.

"Oh," he said, a little startled. He stood awkwardly, grazing his head on a branch, and took the books from her.

"Thanks--I forgot about these."
"You left them in the old place. I found them when I moved out a couple weeks ago."

Todd looked up at the house again, studying it, then he looked at the books briefly and unzipped his back pack. Stuffing them in, he looked up at her as she shaded her face with her hand, keeping the sun from her eyes. "I'm on my way to work," he lied.

"I wasn't going to keep you," she said, sounding a little hurt. "I'll see you around...if you don't see me first, I guess."

Todd smiled and stood up.

"Hey, I was..."

Todd's smile went away instantly at hearing the hint of desperation in her voice. He didn't have to force the look of concern onto his face, but he couldn't hide the expression in his eyes.

There was a long silence before the woman spoke. "I was hoping you could lend me some money for my rent," she said finally, not looking at him, hiding her eyes with her hand, shading out the sun.

"I'm not doing very well these days," he answered, buying himself some time. "But I can help you out some," he finally said, surrendering his desire to find a clear motive for his actions.
The woman looked back toward her porch, at the sound of someone walking inside the house. She turned back quickly and looked past Todd's eyes. "Could you spare fifty?"

Todd released his back pack and fished out his wallet. "I've got to make this just a loan, Karen." He handed her fifty dollars. "I'm sorry things are so rough for you right now."

"Thanks," she answered, and leaned to hug him with one tense arm. The screen door on the porch squeaked twice as a twenty-ish, muscular man came out of her house wearing only some baggy shorts, and, without a word, he sat down on the porch bench behind the bushes.

Todd, never really looking toward the house, stared about six inches to the right of Karen and said, "See Ya." He then grabbed one of the straps of his pack and dragged it down the sidewalk for a few feet before picking it up and throwing it over his shoulder—two more books and it still felt a little lighter than it had a few minutes before.

"You too," Karen said finally, though loud enough for Todd to hear. "I'll get this back to you soon!"

"Okay," Todd angled his head up into the air. He heard the sound of the porch door opening and closing twice. He tried to remember the titles of the books that had just been returned to him.
CHAPTER XII

SLIGHTLY MORE THAN A SECOND

Stan was one of the few to take advantage of the meteor shower. Most people barely noticed the difference or were just happy to have 15 minutes more to sleep each night, but Stan was aware of the change in his life. When Stan was an overweight seventeen-year-old high school drop out, an expected meteor shower came through our solar system with unexpected results. What actually happened is that the Earth was shifted out of its orbit just a bit, toward Venus, resulting in the Earth's orbit around the sun increasing a small amount and the revolution of the Earth slowing down slightly. Hence the year grew in length to 366.4 days and the day became 24 hours and 15 minutes long. Most people were scared for a while, but when after a month's time no more quakes occurred, everyone seemed to adjust. Stan never could get used to the networks' new 15-minute-long sitcom format. Unlike most people, the change in the length of the day bothered him.

Stan worked at a grocery store, stocking the shelves at night. He didn't have friends who were drop outs. Peer pressure was not what caused him to fail out. He dropped out simply because he couldn't find a reason to stay in.
Stan preferred staring out of windows to the company of most people. He sought out windows that did not throw back a reflection of his roundish body. He was busy spending his late adolescence waiting for an advantage. He once thought about joining something--the band, but he didn't like those who had already joined. One day at school, he considered sitting at a lunch table in the cafeteria with some other boys, but as he stood in the lunch line looking at the group, he noticed a shadow on the floor that resembled something--maybe a fish--and he forgot about his intention until after school.

So Stan was working nights and staring in the daytime when the meteor shower came through. Scientists have yet to satisfactorily explain the effect of the meteor shower, and there is still a band of nomads in northern Montana convinced it was a government plot to give Congress some excuse for the sad shape of the economy. Residents from Southern California didn't notice anything special, but most of the rest of the world experienced what felt like an earthquake that lasted for about a minute.

Stan could not this event away among other natural phenomena to be pulled off of a shelf when bored--like the Bermuda Triangle or the Egyptian pyramids. Stan was moved to action by this happening, and just as the rest of the world was putting the newspaper articles away as future collector's items, Stan was beginning to see the
significance of it all. He wrote to the television networks suggesting that they use the extra air time for an environmental awareness program or for free time for political candidates to talk about the issues. This hasn't happened yet, so Stan is still considering further suggestions.

As far as the clocks are concerned, The United Nations Council is considering keeping the appearance of the clock unchanged, and instead many UN members advocate increasing the length of each second by slightly more than one percent. Stan has written one unpublished editorial claiming that the UN would probably have increased the length of every second already if they could have gotten away with it, fixing all the clocks with the simple snap of fingers. He believes it would all have been kept a secret from the common man.

Stan went on, in yet another editorial, this one published in a small town newspaper, to discuss the horrific results of lengthening the second. If it was possible to increase the length of a second and to keep it a secret, he argued that all of the Olympic records to date would probably be broken shortly, and that the average basketball score would certainly increase. All statistics previously measured by time would become obsolete. In a brief flash of sarcasm, he stated that the U.S. representative might well argue in favor of lengthening the seconds, knowing proudly that baseball statistics would be unaffected.
Stan noticed details such as the fact that the average middle class American rented 1.1 more movies per week, and that each person spent approximately three dollars more on food each week. Most of the changes were minor, and could have been predicted. Stan's life didn't change just because of the extra 15 minutes each day. His life changed because of how he thought about all the time in the day, and how he thought about using all of his time. He soon realized the improvement he could make on his physique with only a 15-minute workout each day. He also learned how much work he could get done toward his high school GED in 15 minutes a day, though he usually worked much longer. Stan discovered that he could read a classic short story in 15 minutes or that he could read and work toward an understanding of a great poem. He learned that he could read several verses from the Bible, think about them, and reread them—all in only 15 minutes. Had someone ever shown him previously, that instead of eating a fatty hamburger four times a week, he could fix himself a pasta salad in under 15 minutes, he may never have needed for the Earth to move.
WORKS CITED


