EDGAR LAWRENCE DOCTOROW

WAKEFIELD

People will say that I left my wife and I suppose, as a factual matter, I did, but where was the intentionality? I had no thought of deserting her. It was a series of odd circumstances that put me in the garage attic with all the junk furniture and the raccoon droppings — which is how I began to leave her, all unknowing, of course — whereas I could have walked in the door as I had done every evening after work in the fourteen years and two children of our marriage. Diana would think of her last sight of me, that same morning, when she pulled up to the station and slammed on the brakes, and I got out of the car and, before closing the door, leaned in with a cryptic smile to say goodbye — she would think that I had left her from that moment. In fact, I was ready to let bygones be bygones and, in another fact, I came home the very same evening with every expectation of entering the house that I, we, had bought for the raising of our children. And, to be absolutely honest, I remember I was feeling that kind of blood stir you get in anticipation of sex, because marital arguments had that effect on me.

Of course, the deep change of heart can come over anyone, and I don't see why, like everything else, it wouldn't be in character. After having lived dutifully by the rules, couldn't a man shaken out of his routine and distracted by a noise in his back yard veer away from one door and into another as the first step in the transformation of his life? And look what I was transformed into — hardly something to satisfy a judgment of normal male perfidy.

I will say here that at this moment I love Diana more truthfully than ever in our lives together, including the day of our wedding, when she was so incredibly beautiful in white lace with the sun coming down through the stained glass and setting a rainbow choker on her throat.

On the particular evening I speak of — this thing with the 5:38, when the last car, where I happened to be sitting, did not move off with the rest of the train? Even given the sorry state of the railroads in this country, tell me when that has happened. Every seat taken, and we sat there in the sudden dark and turned to one another for an explanation, as the rest of the train disappeared into the tunnel. It was the bare, fluorescent-lit concrete platform outside that added to the suggestion of imprisonment. Someone

laughed, but in a moment several passengers were up and banging on the doors and windows until a man in a uniform came down the ramp and peered in at us with his hands cupped at his temples.

And then when I do get home, an hour and a half later, I am nearly blinded by the headlights of all the S.U.V.s and taxis waiting at the station. Under an unnaturally black sky is this lateral plane of illumination, because, as it turns out, we have a power outage in town.

Well, it was an entirely unrelated mishap. I knew that, but when you're tired after a long day and trying to get home there's a kind of Doppler effect in the mind, and you think that these disconnects are the trajectory of a collapsing civilization.

I set out on my walk home. Once the procession of commuter pickups with their flaring headlights had passed, everything was silent and dark — the groomed shops on the main street, the courthouse, the gas stations trimmed with hedges, the Gothic prep school behind the lake. Then I was out of the town center and walking the winding residential streets. My neighborhood was an old section of town, the houses large, mostly Victorian, with dormers and wraparound porches and separate garages that had once been stables. Each house was set off on a knoll or well back from the street, with stands of lean trees dividing the properties — just the sort of old establishment solidity that suited me. But now the entire neighborhood seemed to brim with an exaggerated presence. I was conscious of the arbitrariness of place. Why here rather than somewhere else? A very unsettling, disoriented feeling.

A flickering candle or the bobbing beam of a flashlight in each window made me think of homes as supplying families with the means of living furtive lives. There was no moon, and under the low cloud cover a brisk unseasonable wind ruffled the old Norwegian maples that lined the street and dropped a fine rain of spring buds on my shoulders and in my hair. I felt this shower as a kind of derision.

All right, with thoughts like these any man would hurry to his home and hearth. I quickened my pace and would surely have turned up the path and mounted the steps to my porch had I not looked through the driveway gate and seen what I thought was a moving shadow near the garage. So I turned in that direction, my footsteps loud enough on the gravel to scare away whatever it was I had seen, for I supposed it was some animal.

We lived with animal life. I don't mean just dogs and cats. Deer and rabbits regularly dined on the garden flowers, we had Canadian geese, here and there a skunk, the occasional red fox — this time it turned out to be a raccoon. A large one. I have never liked this animal, with its prehensile paws. More than the ape, it has always seemed to me a relative. I lifted my litigation bag as if to throw it and the creature ran behind the garage.

I went after it; I didn't want it on my property. At the foot of the outdoor stairs leading to the garage attic, it reared, hissing and showing its teeth and waving its forelegs at me. Raccoons are susceptible to rabies and this one looked mad, its eyes glowing, and saliva, like liquid glue, hanging from both sides of its jaw. I picked up a rock and that was enough—the creature ran off into the stand of bamboo that bordered the back yard of our neighbor, Dr. Sondervan, who was a psychiatrist, and a known authority on Down syndrome and other genetic misfortunes.

And then, of course, upstairs in the attic space over the garage, where we stored every imaginable thing, three raccoon cubs were in residence, and so that was what all the fuss was about. I didn't know how this raccoon family had got in there. I saw their eyes first, their several eyes. They whimpered and jumped about on the piled furniture, little ball-like humps in the darkness, until I finally managed to shoo them out the door and down the steps to where their mother would presumably reclaim them.

I turned on my cell phone to get at least some small light.

The attic was jammed with rolled-up rugs and bric-a-brac and boxes of college papers, my wife's inherited hope chest, old stereo equipment, a broken-down bureau, discarded board games, her late father's golf clubs, folded-up cribs, and so on. We were a family rich in history, though still young. I felt ridiculously righteous, as if I had fought a battle and reclaimed my kingdom from invaders. But then melancholy took over; there was enough of the past stuffed in here to sadden me, as relics of the past, including photographs, always sadden me.

Everything was thick with dust. A bull's-eye window at the front did not open and the windows on either side were stuck tight, as if fastened by the cobwebs that clung to their frames. The place badly needed airing. I exerted myself and moved things around and was able then to open the door fully. I stood at the top of the stairs to breathe the fresh air, which is when I noticed candlelight coming through the stand of bamboo between our property and the property behind ours, that same Dr. Sondervan's house. He boarded a number of young patients there. It was part of his experimental approach, not without controversy in his profession, to train them for domestic chores and simple tasks that required their interaction with normal people. I had stood up for Sondervan when some of the neighbors fought his petition to run his little sanitarium, though I have to say that in private it made Diana nervous, as the mother of two young girls, that mentally deficient persons were living next door. Of course, there had never been a bit of trouble.

I was tired from a long day, that was part of it, but, more likely suffering from some scattered mental state of my own, I groped around till I found the rocking chair with the torn seat that I had always meant to recane, and, in that total darkness and with the light of the candles slow to fade in my mind, I sat down

and, though meaning only to rest a moment, fell asleep. And when I woke it was from the light coming through the dusty windows. I'd slept the night through.

What had brought on our latest argument was what I claimed was Diana's flirtation with someone's house guest at a back-yard cocktail party the previous weekend.

I was not flirting, she said.

You were hitting on the guy.

Only in your peculiar imagination, Wakefield.

That's what she did when we argued — she used the last name. I wasn't Howard, I was Wakefield. It was one of her feminist adaptations of the locker-room style that I detested.

You made a suggestive remark, I said, and you clicked glasses with him.

It was not a suggestive remark, Diana said. It was a retort to something he'd said that was really stupid, if you want to know. Everyone laughed but you. I apologize for feeling good on occasion, Wakefield. I'll try not to feel that way ever again.

This is not the first time you've made a suggestive remark with your husband standing right there. And then denied all knowledge of it.

Leave me alone, please. God knows you've muzzled me to the point where I've lost all confidence in myself. I don't relate to people anymore. I'm too busy wondering if I'm saying the right thing.

You were relating to him, all right.

Do you think with the kind of relationship I've had with you I'd be inclined to start another with someone else? I just want to get through each day — that is all I think about, getting through each day.

That was probably true. On the train to the city, I had to admit to myself that I'd started the argument willfully, in a contrary spirit and with some sense of its eroticism. I did not really believe what I had accused her of. I was the one who came on to people. I had attributed to her my own wandering eye. That is the basis of jealousy, is it not? A feeling that your congenital insincerity is a universal? It did annoy me, seeing

her talking to another man with a glass of white wine in her hand, and her innocent friendliness, which any man could mistake for a come-on, not just me. The fellow himself was not terribly prepossessing. But it bothered me that she was talking to him almost as if I were not standing there beside her.

Diana was naturally graceful and looked younger than she was. She still moved like the dancer she had been in college, her feet pointed slightly outward, her head high, her walk more a glide than something taken step by step. Even after carrying twins, she was as petite and slender as she had been when I met her.

And now in the first light of the new day I was totally bewildered by the situation I had created for myself. I can't claim that I was thinking rationally. But I actually felt that it would be a mistake to walk into my house and explain the sequence of events that had led me to spend the night in the garage attic. Diana would have been up till all hours, pacing the floor and worrying what had happened to me. My appearance, and her sense of relief, would enrage her. Either she would think that I had been with another woman or, if she did believe my story, it would strike her as so weird as to be a kind of benchmark in our married life. After all, we had had that argument the previous day. She would perceive what I told myself could not possibly be true — that something had happened predictive of a failed marriage. And the twins, budding adolescents, who generally thought of me as someone they were unfortunate to live in the same house with, an embarrassment in front of their friends, an oddity who knew nothing about their music — their alienation would be hissingly expressive. I thought of mother and daughters as the opposing team. The home team. I concluded that for now I would rather not go through the scene I had just imagined. Maybe later, I thought, just not now. I had yet to realize my talent for dereliction.

When I came down the garage stairs and relieved myself in the stand of bamboo, the cool air of the dawn welcomed me with a soft breeze. The raccoons were nowhere to be seen. My back was stiff and I felt the first pangs of hunger, but, in fact, I had to admit that I was not at that moment unhappy. What is there about a family that is so sacrosanct, I thought, that one should have to live in it for one's whole life, however unrealized one's life was?

From the shadow of the garage, I beheld the back yard, with its Norwegian maples, the tilted white birches, the ancient apple tree whose branches touched the windows of the family room, and for the first time, it seemed, I understood the green glory of this acreage as something indifferent to human life and quite apart from the Victorian manse set upon it. The sun was not yet up and the grass was draped with a wavy net of mist, punctured here and there with glistening drops of dew. White apple blossoms had

begun to appear in the old tree, and I read the pale light in the sky as the shy illumination of a world to which I had yet to be introduced.

At this point, I suppose, I could have safely unlocked the back door and scuttled about in the kitchen, confident that everyone in the house was still asleep. Instead, I raised the lid of the garbage bin and found in one of the cans my complete dinner of the night before, slammed upside down atop a plastic bag and held in a circle of perfect integrity, as if still on the plate — a grilled veal chop, half a baked potato, peel side up, and a small mound of oiled green salad — so that I could imagine the expression on Diana's face as she had come out here, still angry from our morning argument, and rid herself of the meal gone cold that she had stupidly cooked for that husband of hers.

I wondered now at what hour had she lost patience. That would be a measure of whatever slack she granted me. Another woman might have refrigerated the dinner, but I lived in Diana's judgment; it shone upon me as in a prison cell where the light is never turned off. I lacked interest in her work. Or I was snide and condescending toward her mother. Or I wasted beautiful fall weekends watching dumb football games on television. Or I wouldn't agree to have the bedrooms painted. And if she was such a feminist why did my opening a door for her or helping her on with her coat matter so much?

All I had to do was stand outside my home in the chill of the early morning in order to see things in their totality: Diana felt that she had married the wrong man. Of course, I didn't imagine I was the easiest person to get along with. But even she would have to admit that I was never boring. And, whatever problems we had, sex, the crucial center of our lives, wasn't one of them. Was I under an illusion to think that that was the basis of a sound marriage?

Given these thoughts, I could not bring myself to walk in the door and announce that I was home. I made my breakfast of the congealed veal chop and the potato as I sat out of sight behind the garage.

I had met Diana when she was dating my best friend, Dirk Richardson, whom I had known since middle school. Because she was going with him, I looked at her more closely than I might have otherwise. I registered her as pretty, of course, very attractive, with a lovely smile, light-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, and what the merest glance could affirm was a fine body, but somehow it was Dirk's interest in her, which was clearly of the most intense kind, that made me consider Diana as a potentially serious relationship for myself. At first, Diana wouldn't go out with me. But when I told her I had got permission from Dirk to ask her out she relented, obviously from feelings of hurt and bitterness. Of course, I had lied. When eventually she and Dirk realized my perfidy, things became bitter all around, and in the ensuing

competition, many months in duration, the poor girl was torn between us and, all told, we made the unhappiest ménage you could imagine. We were all children, the three of us, what — barely out of Harvard Law, in my case? And Dirk with an entry-level Wall Street job? And Diana working for a Ph.D. in art history? Young, self-styled Upper East Siders. There were times when Diana wouldn't see me, or wouldn't see Dirk, or wouldn't see either of us. Of course, in retrospect, it's clear that all this was quite the normal thing, when, adrift in their hormonic tides, people in their twenties are about to land on one shore or another.

I didn't know if, before I broke into their relationship, Diana had been sleeping with Dirk. I knew now that she was sleeping with neither of us. One day, in a stroke of genius, I told Dirk that I had spent the previous night with her. When he confronted her, she denied it, of course, and, showing his lack of insight and understanding of the quality of the person he was dealing with, he didn't believe her. That was his fatal error, which he compounded by trying to press himself on her. Diana was not a virgin — nobody was by our age — but, as I was later to learn, neither did she have much experience, though that quality of sexy innocence I have mentioned could easily have passed for it. At any rate, you didn't try to force yourself on this woman if you ever expected to see her again. His second mistake, Dirk, before he disappeared from our lives altogether, was to punch me out. He was the heavier of us, though I was the taller. And he landed a couple of good ones before someone pulled him off me. That was the first and last time I've ever actually been hit, though I've been threatened a few times since. But my black eye brought out a tender resolution of Diana's feelings for me. Perhaps she understood that all my tactical cunning was a measure of my devotion, and, as her cool lips brushed my bruised cheek, I could not imagine myself ever having been happier.

After we had been married for a year and some of the energy had gone out of the relationship, I did wonder if my passion might have been pumped up by the competition for her. Would I have been all that crazy about her had she not been my best friend's girl? But then she became pregnant and a whole new array of feelings entered into our marriage and, as her belly swelled, she became more radiant than ever. I had always liked to draw — I drew seriously as late as my freshman year at Harvard — and my knowledge of art had been one of the things that attracted her to me. Now she allowed me to draw her as she posed naked, with her small breasts fruited out and her belly gloriously ripened, as she lay back on some pillows with her hands behind her head and turned on one hip with her legs slightly pulled up but pressed together for modesty, like Goya's "Maja."

I spent that first day watching through the bull's-eye window for the sequence of events that would occur when it became clear that I had gone missing. First, Diana would get the twins off to school. Then, the minute the bus had turned the corner, she would call my office and satisfy herself that I had been seen off by my secretary at the usual time the night before. She would ask to be notified when I showed up for work, her voice not only under control but doggedly cheerful, as if she were calling about a minor family matter. I reasoned that only after a call or two to whichever of our friends she thought might know something would the panic set in. She would look at the clock, and, around eleven, steel herself and call the police.

I was wrong by half an hour. The squad car came up the driveway at eleven-thirty, by my watch. She met the patrolmen at the back door. Our town police are well paid and polite and they are not very different from the rest of us in their distant relationship to crime. But I knew that they would take down a description, ask for a photo and so on, in order to put out a missing-persons bulletin. Yet, when they were back in their car, I saw through the windshield that the cops were smiling: where else were missing husbands to be found but in St. Bart's, drinking piña coladas with their *chiquitas*?

All that was wanting now was Diana's mother, and by noon she was up from the city in her white Escalade — the widow Babs, who had opposed the marriage and was likely now to say so. Babs was what Diana, God help us, might be thirty years hence — high-heeled, ceramicized, liposucted, devaricosed, her golden fall of hair as shiny and hard as peanut brittle.

In the days following, cars pulled up at the house at all hours as friends and colleagues came to show their support and to console Diana, as if I had died. These wretches, hardly able to restrain themselves in their excitement, were making victims of my wife and children. And how many of the husbands would hit on her the first chance they got? I thought about bursting in the door — Wakefield arisen — just to see the expression on their faces.

Then the house grew quiet again. There weren't many lights on. Occasionally, I'd see someone for a moment in a window without being able to tell who it was. One morning after the school bus had stopped to pick up the twins, the garage doors below me rolled up and Diana got in her car and went back to her curator's job at the county art museum. I was hungry, having lived off scraps in our garbage and neighbors' garbage, and also fairly rank at this point, so I slipped into the house and availed myself of its amenities. I ate crackers and nuts from the pantry. I was careful when showering to rinse out my towel, put it in the dryer, and return it, properly folded, to the linen closet. I stole some socks and briefs on the theory that

there were drawers full and a few missing would not be noticed. I thought about taking a fresh shirt and another pair of shoes but decided that that would be risky.

At this stage, I still worried about money. What would I do after I had spent the slender amount of cash in my wallet? If I wanted to disappear completely, I could no longer use my credit cards. I could predate a check and cash it at the downtown branch of our local bank, but when the month's statement came Diana would see it and think that my abandonment of my family had been premeditated, which, of course, it had not.

Early one evening, at that time of day when the apple blossoms release their lovely scent, Diana came out to stand in the back yard. I watched her from my garage atelier. She took a blossom from its branch and put it to her cheek. Then she looked around, as if she had heard something. She turned this way and that, her glance actually passing over the garage. She stood there as if listening, her head slightly tilted, and I had the feeling that she almost knew where I was, that she had sensed my presence. I held my breath. A moment later, she turned and went back inside, and the door closed and I heard the lock click. That loud click was definitive. It sounded in my mind like my release into another world.

I felt the stubble on my chin. Who was this fellow? I had not even thought about what I had left behind in my law office — the cases, the clients, the partnership. I became almost giddy. There would be no more getting on the train. Below me in the garage was my beloved silver BMW 325 convertible. Of what use was it to me? I felt uncharacteristically defiant, as if I were about to roar and pound my chest. I did not need the friends and acquaintances accumulated over the years. I no longer required a change of shirt or a smooth, shaven face. I would not live with credit cards, cell phones. I would live how I might on what I could find or create for myself. If this were a simple abandonment of wife and children, I would have written Diana a note, telling her to find a good lawyer, taken my car out of the garage, and been on my way to Manhattan. I would have checked in to a hotel and walked to work the next morning. Anyone could do that, anyone could run away; he could go as far as he could go and still be the same person. There was nothing to that. This was different. This strange suburb was an environment in which I would have to sustain myself, like a person lost in a jungle, like a castaway on an island. I would not run from it — I would make it my own. That was the game, if it was a game. That was the challenge. I had left not only my home; I had left the system. This life in the glittering eye of the prehensile raccoon was what I wanted, and never had I felt so absolutely secure, as if the several phantom images of myself had resolved into the final form of who I was — clearly and firmly the Howard Wakefield I was meant to be.

For all my exuberance, I did not fail to understand that I might have left my wife but I would still be able to keep an eye on her.

Of necessity, I was now a nocturnal creature. I slept in the garage attic by day and went out at night. I was alert and sensitive to the weather and the amount of moonlight. I moved from yard to yard, never trusting sidewalks or streets. I learned much about people in the neighborhood, what they ate, when they went to sleep. As spring turned to summer and people left on vacation, more of the houses were empty and there were fewer opportunities for trash-can forage. But then there were fewer dogs to bark at me as I passed under the trees, and, where the dog was big, so was the dog door, and I could crawl in and avail myself of the canned and packaged foods in kitchen pantries. I never took anything but food. I felt an equivalence, but not seriously, to the Native American buffalo hunter who slew the creature for his meat and fur and thanked his risen soul afterward. I really had no illusions about the morality of what I was doing.

My clothes began to show wear and tear. I was growing a beard and my hair was longer. As August approached, I realized that if Diana wanted to do what we had done for many years she would rent the house we liked on the Cape and take the girls there for the month. In my garage den, I took pains to restore the disarray. I planned to sleep out of doors until they came up there for the life jackets, the pontoon float tube, the swim fins, the fishing rods, and whatever other summer junk I had bought so obediently. With a keen sense of dispossession, I wandered out of the neighborhood to find someplace to sleep, and discovered that I had barely begun to use the resources available to me when I came upon an undeveloped piece of land as wild as I could wish. It took me a moment to recognize, in the dim light of a half-moon, that I was in the town's designated Nature Preserve, a place where elementary-school children were taken to get an idea of what an unpaved universe looked like. I had brought my own children here. My law firm had represented the wealthy widow who had deeded this land to the town with the provision that it be kept forever as it was. Now its true wildness loomed before me. The ground was soft and swampy, fallen tree branches lay over the paths, I heard the obsessive self-hypnotizing cicadas, the gulp of the bullfrogs, and knew with an animal sense only lately developed in me that there were some four-footed creatures about. I found a small pond at the bottom end of these woods. It must have been kept fresh by an underground stream, because the water was cold and clear. I stripped and bathed myself and put my clothes back on over my wet body. I slept that night in the crotched trunk of a dead old maple tree. I can't say that I slept well; moths brushed my face and there was a constant stirring of unknown life around me. I was really quite uncomfortable but I resolved to see it through until such nights as this were normal for me.

Yet when Diana and the girls had gone on their vacation and I was able to reclaim my pallet in the garage attic, I felt despicably lonely.

With my new death's-door look, I decided that I had at least an even-money chance to go about unrecognized. I was lean and long-bearded and with a shock of hair that fell down the sides of my face. As my hair grew out, I saw how barbering it in the old days had hidden its increasing grayness. My beard was even further along. I took myself in my tatters to the business district and availed myself of the town's social services. In the public library, which, not incidentally, had a well-kept men's room, I read the daily papers as if informing myself of life on another planet. I thought it was more my image to read the papers than to sit at one of the library computers.

If the weather was good, I liked to take up residence on a bench at the mall. I did not beg; had I begged, the security people would have shooed me off. I sat with my legs crossed and head up, and projected attitude. My regal mien proposed to passersby that I was a delusionary eccentric. Children would come up to me at the urging of their mothers and put coins or dollar bills in my hands. In this way, I was able occasionally to enjoy a hot meal at Burger King or a coffee at Starbucks. Pretending to be mute, I pointed to what I wanted.

I regarded these expeditions to the town center as daring escapades. I needed to prove to myself that I could take risks. While I carried no I.D., there was always the possibility that someone, even Diana herself, if back early from her vacation, might come by and recognize me. I almost wished that she would.

But after a while the novelty of these trips wore off and I reclaimed my residential solitude. I embraced my dereliction as a religious discipline; it was as if I were a monk sworn to an order devoted to affirming God's original world.

Squirrels travelled along the telephone wires, their tails rippling like signal pulses. Raccoons lifted the lids off the garbage pails left at the curb for the morning pickup. If I had preceded them at a pail, they knew immediately that there was nothing there for them. A skunk each night made its rounds like a watchman, taking the same route past the garage and through the stand of bamboo and diagonally across Dr. Sondervan's back yard, and disappearing down his driveway. At the preserve pond, my occasional swim was observed by a slick, slime-covered rat-tailed muskrat. His dark eyes glowed in the moonlight. Only when I had climbed out of the pond did he dive into it, silently, with no apparent disturbance of the water. Most mornings, invader crows arrived, twenty or thirty of them at a time coming out of the sky and cawing away. It was as if loudspeakers were strung in the trees. Sometimes the crows would go quiet and send out reconnaissance, one or two of them circling and landing in the street to examine a candy wrapper or the dregs of a garbage can that the sanitation men had emptied incompletely. A dead squirrel was occasion for a feast, a great black mass of fluttering feathers and bobbing heads stripping the carcass

down to its bones. Altogether they were a kind of crow state, and if there were any dissidents I could not find them. I did dislike it that they drove away the smaller birds — a pair of cardinals, for example, who nested in the back yard, and didn't have the range of these ravenous black birds who would be off as quickly as they had come, in powerful flight to the next block or the next town.

There were house cats always on the prowl, of course, and dogs barking late at night in one house or another, but I did not see them as legitimate. They were sheltered; they lived at the behest of human beings.

One night in early autumn, with the swampy ground of the Nature Preserve papered with fallen leaves, I was hunkered down to examine a dead snake about a foot in length whose color I thought might in life have been green, when, as I stood, I felt something brush the top of my head. As I looked up I saw the wings of a ghostly pale owl fold into his body as he disappeared into a tree. The feathery touch of the owl wing on my scalp left me shivering.

These creatures and I either were food to one another or were not. That was all there was to it. I was presumptive from my loneliness, an unrequited lover as incidental to all of them as they had once been to me.

Diana was always comfortable in her body and was careless about covering herself in front of our girls. She didn't mind being seen in the nude, and when I suggested that it might not be the best thing for them she replied that, on the contrary, it was instructive for them to see how naturally accepting and unself-conscious a woman could be about her physical being. Well, then, how about a man, if they were to see me walking around in the altogether? I said. And Diana said, Really, Howard, Mr. Prude in the nude? Not a chance.

In our bedroom, Diana seemed not to care if the blinds were open when she was dressing or undressing. I was always the one to close them. Who are you trying to attract? I would say to her, and she'd say, That very good-looking fellow out there in the apple tree. But she seemed as oblivious of her effect nude in a bedroom window as she was when attracting men at cocktail parties. All this behavior was ambiguous and kept me wondering.

And now, though I was not up in the apple tree, I had found various salients in our half acre that allowed me to see a good deal of her at night, when she went to bed. It was always alone, I was satisfied to see. She would sometimes come right up to the window and stare into the darkness while brushing her

hair. In those moments, with the light behind her, I would see her lovely shape only in silhouette. Then she would turn and walk back into the room. A long-waisted girl with narrow shoulders and firm buttocks.

Oddly enough, seeing my wife in the nude usually got me thinking of her financial situation. I did this to assure myself that she would not find it necessary to sell the house and move elsewhere. Her salary at the museum was just adequate, and we had a mortgage, prep-school tuition for the twins — all the usual presiding expenses. On the other hand, I had set up a savings account in her name and had added to it regularly. My investments were in a revocable trust of which she as well as I was a trustee. And I had paid down a considerable part of the mortgage with my last year's partner's bonus. She might have to cut back on her clothes purchases and all the little luxuries she enjoyed, she would have to give up her hope of redoing the bathrooms in marble, but that was hardly to suggest her impoverishment. I was the impoverished one.

My spying was not restricted to her bedtime. Now in the autumn it grew dark earlier every day. I liked to know what was going on. I would hunker down in the garden foliage under the windows and listen to the conversation. There she would be in the dining room, helping the twins with their homework. Or they would all three be putting together their dinner. Never once did I hear my name mentioned. Arguments I could hear from the very edge of the property, one of the twins, screeching and stamping her foot. A door would slam. Sometimes Diana came out on the back porch and lit a cigarette, standing there holding her elbow, the hand with the cigarette pointing at the sky. That was news — she had quit the habit years before. Sometimes she was out for the evening and all I could see were the flickering colored lights of the TV in the family room. I didn't like it that she left the twins alone. I kept watch at the bull's-eye window in my attic until I saw her car come up the drive.

On Halloween, the street was busy with parents escorting their cutely costumed children from one porch to another. Diana always prepared for the onslaught by buying tons of candy. All the lights were on in my house. I heard laughter. And here passing under the window of my garage attic were a few of Dr. Sondervan's patients. They had come through the bamboo, ambling down the drive, these larger children, carrying shopping bags for the treasures to be collected from somewhat uneasy neighbors receiving them at the front door.

Every two weeks, the town residents put out for trash their hard, nonorganic items: old TVs, broken chairs, boxes of paperbacks, end tables, busted lamps, toys their children had outgrown, and so on. I had come away previously with a usable, only slightly torn and sperm-stained futon from this resource,

as well as an old portable radio that looked as if it might work if I could find some batteries for it. I did miss music as I missed nothing else.

On this night I went looking for some shoes. Mine had worn away. They were falling apart. It was a damp night; it had rained in the afternoon and slick wet leaves were pressed to the streets. Timing was crucial: by one in the morning, anything that was going to be thrown out was on the sidewalk. By two, anything that was usable was gone. On these nights, people from the south end of town cruised around in their old pickups or in cars that tilted to one side, and they'd pull up and, with their motors running, hop out to judge items, grabbing each thing for examination, to see if it met their exacting standards.

Some winding blocks away from my home base, I spotted in the light of a street lamp a promising trove — an unusually large pile of curbed junk that could have passed for an installation in a Chelsea gallery. It bespoke someone's desperation to move — stacks of chairs, open cartons of toys and stuffed animals, board games, a sofa, a brass headboard, skis, a desk with a lamp still clamped to it, and, underneath everything, layers of men's and women's clothing going damp in the dew. I was busy putting things aside and digging under the suits and dresses, and didn't hear the truck approach or the men get out, a pair of them, who were suddenly there beside me, two guys in sleeveless T-shirts to show off their muscular arms. They were talking to each other in some foreign language and it was as if I weren't there, because, as they worked their way through the trove, lifting away the furniture to put in their truck, the cartons of toys, the skis and everything else, they got around rather quickly to the pile of clothes under which I had just found three or four shoeboxes and they pushed me aside to get at these things. Just a minute, I thought, having found a pair of white-and-tan wingtips, not my style at all, but they seemed in the moonlight to be right out of a store window and close to my size. I kicked off the sole-flapping holey pair I was wearing. At this point, I had no reason to think that these scavenger men were anything but boors. Now it appeared that a woman was with them, who was wider and heavier in the arms than they were, and, as I stood there, she decided that my pair of shoes, too, should be theirs. No, I said. Mine, mine! The shoebox was wet and, with each of us pulling, it came apart and the shoes dropped to the ground. I grabbed them before she could. Mine! I shouted and slapped them together, sole against sole, in her face. She shrieked and a moment later I was running down the street with the two men chasing me and shouting curses, or what I assumed were curses, great hoarse expletives that echoed through the trees and set dogs barking in the dark houses.

I found myself running well, a shoe stuck paddle-like over each hand. I heard heavy panting behind me, then a cry as one of the men slipped on the wet leaves in the street and went down. As I ran, I visualized the blunt faces of these people and decided that they were a mother and two sons. I supposed

they made a business out of their collectibles. This was to be admired — entry-level work into the American dream. But I'd had them first — the shoes, I mean — and by the law of salvage they were mine.

Mine! I had said like a child. Mine, mine! These were the first words I had spoken in all the months of my dereliction. And as I uttered them I almost thought it was someone else speaking.

I had an advantage in knowing the neighborhood, and gained on my pursuit by cutting across yards and up driveways and through garden gates, punishing my tender wet feet every step of the way. I heard a rhythmic wheeze and realized that it was coming from my aching chest. I didn't dare look behind me. I heard their truck somewhere on an adjoining street and imagined the mother, that sturdy peasant of a woman, behind the wheel, peering over her headlights for a sight of me. I was nearing my atelier now, coming up the back way through my neighbor Sondervan's yard. I reasoned that I did not want these people to know where I lived. Retribution could be theirs at any time they chose if they saw me climb the stairs to the garage attic. My solution was not entirely logical: as I approached the stand of bamboo, I veered off, and ducked down the three stone steps to the basement door of Sondervan's house.

The door was unlocked. I slipped inside and slid down against the wall and attempted to catch my breath. At the end of a short hallway was another door, indicated to me now by the light that came on behind it. The door opened and I had to raise my arms against the light. I must have made an odd picture, sitting there with each hand in a wingtip shoe, as if that were how shoes were worn, because whoever was standing there began to laugh.

In this way, I became a familiar of two of the unfortunates who lived in the basement dormitory under the care of Dr. Sondervan.

One was a Down-syndromer by the name of Herbert. Emily, his pal, was the other — I don't know what she was, but she couldn't keep from smiling, out of unceasing happiness or a neurological glitch, but either way it was eerily unnatural. This bucktoothed girl with very thin hair, I couldn't tell her age — she might have been anything from fourteen to nineteen. She and Herbert, who was smaller in his proportions than he should have been, with a round head, slanted eyes, and a nose that looked as if he'd had a boxing career, seemed distinct from the four other patients down there, who were aloof, who took me in with a glance that first night and couldn't care less after that — teen-agers, apparently, three male, one female, physically normal-looking, compared with Herbert and Emily, but living in their own minds, with not much concern for what went on around them. I assumed that they were a variety of autistics, though of course I knew nothing about autism, except what I had read in magazines or seen on television.

But Herbert and Emily loved me from the moment they saw me sitting there with the shoes on my hands, as if they had found someone mentally less fortunate even than they, who may not have known much but did know that shoes were more properly worn on the feet. They didn't ask what had brought me to their door, but welcomed me as one might a stray cat. From that first moment, they were solicitous and protective, instructing me to repeat their names after them to make sure I understood, and then asking my name. Howard, I said, my name is Howard.

They brought me a glass of water and Emily, giggling all the while, brushed the sweated thatch of hair from my forehead. Howard is a fine name, she said. Don't you love the autumn, Howard? I love the falling leaves, don't you?

They took the shoes from my hands and fitted them on my wet feet, Herbert, with his mouth open as befit his concentration, tying the laces, and Emily looking on as if it were a surgical procedure. Neatly done, Herbert, very fine indeed, she said. As soon as I judged it safe to go, they insisted on following me to my garage and watched as I climbed the stairs to make sure that I did not fall.

So now two of Dr. Sondervan's mental defectives knew about me. It would be a costly pair of shoes if they blabbed about Howard, the nice man who lived next door over the garage. There was not only the doctor but his staff, the three or four women who ran the household, to whom they might say something. I looked around the attic, my de-facto home. The only sensible thing to do was to leave. But how could I? While I struggled with this, I maintained a watch by day and didn't make my nightly forage until well past their lights-out.

A couple of mornings later, I saw Herbert and Emily and the others in the back yard. They were sitting on the ground, and there was Sondervan addressing them, like students in a class. The doctor was a tall but stooped man in his seventies, with a gray goatee and black horn-rimmed glasses. I had never seen him without a jacket and tie, and in deference to the season he had added a short-sleeved sweater that served as a vest. I couldn't hear what he was saying, though I could hear his voice; a thin, high elderly man's voice, it was, but self-assured and with an almost smugly assumed authority. At one point, Herbert grabbed a handful of fallen leaves and tossed them up so that they rained down on Emily's head. She, of course, laughed, thus interrupting the lecture. The doctor glared. How normal this all was. Had Herbert and Emily revealed my whereabouts, wouldn't I by now have heard from someone — from Sondervan himself, or from Diana, or from the police, or from all of them, my little world crashing down on my head? I understood that for whatever reason, perhaps a dissident impulse that they might not even understand, the retarded children, if they were children, had decided to make me their secret.

It was odd — on the occasions when they could visit me safely, I enjoyed their company. I found my own mind comfortable with the reduced wattage that conversation with them required. They did see things, notice things. Their predominant emotion was wonder. Everything in the attic was examined, as if they were visiting a museum. Herbert opened and shut the brass snaps of my litigation bag over and over. Emily, digging in Diana's hope chest, came up with an antique silver hand mirror in which to study herself. Perhaps, not having spoken with another human being for some months, I was overly responsive, but I was happy to explain how a life jacket worked, and why the game of golf required many clubs, or how spiderwebs were made, or why I, yet another exhibit, lived here in this attic. I gave them the expurgated version of that: I told them that I was a wanderer, a hermit by choice, and that this attic was one stop on my life's journey. Then I had to assure them that I had no intention of moving on for quite some time.

I worried that they would be found missing back at their place, but somehow they knew when they could get away safely. And they brought me things, little gifts of food and bottled water, knowing without my having to explain that I was a person in need. They would bring me a piece of cake and solemnly watch me eat it. Herbert, with his dark almond eyes in that globular head, had the most intense stare. He would hold himself at the shoulders and watch how my jaw moved. And Emily, of course, chattered on, as if she had to speak for both of them. Isn't that good, Howard? Do you like cake? What is your favorite? I like chocolate cake the best, though strawberry is good, too.

They may have been heartbreaking — and they were, casting me into the realm of remorseless normality — but in fact Herbert and Emily were there when I needed them. Sharply honed as my survival skills had become, some residual upper-middle-class indifference to the weather had left me unprepared for winter. What was thrown into the neighborhood garbage pails after Thanksgiving had fed me nicely for several days, but I was chilled as I foraged, and within a week the wind was whistling through the siding of my attic hideout. I had no heat up here. Winter, with its assortment of effects, was a threat to my life style.

I cursed the homeowner I had been for neglecting the upkeep of this place. I rummaged about in all the junk I lived with and, finding some antique curtains in Diana's inherited hope chest, I laid them atop the old coat that I used for a blanket and, pulling down over my ears the watch cap that I had found on the street, I snaked down under these pathetic coverings on my salvaged futon and tried to keep my teeth from chattering.

How could I stay abreast of what was going on in my house if, when the snow came, my every footstep in the yard would leave a trail of incrimination and such clear proof of a prowler on the grounds as to get Diana on the phone to the town police?

I was tempted during one dry cold spell to let myself in the back door of my house and keep warm beside my basement furnace, safely spending a few hours down there between midnight and dawn. But I would not surrender to my former self. Whatever I did I would do as I had done. Which meant also that going into a shelter for the homeless — there had to be one somewhere in town, probably at the south end, where lived immigrants, undocumented aliens, and the working poor — that, too, was out of the question. And never mind principles: even the homeless have names, histories, and inquisitive social workers. If I played dumb, went mute, how could I not end up committed somewhere? Better to freeze to death. As I understood it, it wasn't half bad — you simply grew warm and fell asleep.

Another option, one not prohibited by any vows I had taken, was to find shelter in Dr. Sondervan's house. While it is true that I did more than once sneak into the basement dorm to use the bathroom, and on occasion I even risked a shower with Herbert and Emily guarding the door, and while another time, late at night, they led me into the dark kitchen, whose antiseptic smell was an offense to my nostrils, and whose ticking clock suggested discipline verging on tyranny, so that it was almost as a courtesy to them that I accepted an apple and a chicken leg, I could not reasonably expect in this odd doctor's sanitarium to go unnoticed as an overnight guest.

And so, as I pondered and worried and accomplished nothing, the winter blew in with a wild snow that scoured the streets and roared through my meagre shelter like the vengeful God of the Old Testament.

Of course, I was not trapped; I just felt as if I were. I thought what a brilliant evolutionary expedient was hibernation, and if bears and hedgehogs and bats had managed to work it into their repertoire why hadn't we?

Actually, as the snow was blown against the siding of the garage it stuck there, sealing off the cracks, and my atelier became a bit cozier, though not in time to keep me from falling ill. I thought I had caught cold when I awoke with eyes watering and a sore throat. But when I tried to get up I felt too weak to stand. I could actually feel the virus humming happily through me. There comes a moment when you have to admit that you're sick. How could I have expected otherwise, as undernourished and poorly prepared for the winter as I was?

I had never in my life felt so bad. I must have been running a high fever, because I was out of it half the time. I have an image of two alarmed young retards standing in the doorway looking down at me. Perhaps I gave them a pathetic wave of my pale, bony hand. And then one of them must have come back that night or another, because I woke up in the small hours with a hot-water bottle under my feet. And — this is the most phantasmic impression of all — once I awakened to find Emily in my bed, clothed, with her

arms and legs wrapped around me as if to provide warmth. At the same time, though, she was pressing her pelvis rhythmically against my hip and cooing something and kissing my bearded cheeks.

After several days, I found myself still alive. I got up from my poor pallet and did not collapse. I was a bit weak but steady on my feet and clearheaded. If one can feel physically chastened, as if having been scrubbed down to another skin, that's what I felt. I studied myself in the antique silver hand mirror: what a thin, gaunt fellow I had become, though with eyes bright with intelligence. I decided that I had passed through some crisis that was more a test of spirit than a lousy virus. I felt good. Tall and lean and limber. There was a stale sandwich and a glass of frozen milk beside my bed. The jars that served as my urinals were empty and aligned in a gleaming row. Sun came through the bull's-eye window and cast an oblong rainbowed image of itself on the attic floor.

Wrapping my coat around me, I went outside into the cold pure air of the winter morning, careful not to slip on the icy steps. The bamboo copse was encased in clear ice. I looked for my friends, for some sign of them, but there was not even one track in the snow covering Sondervan's back yard. I saw no smoke from the chimney, no lights at the back basement door that had always burned there, day and night. So they were gone, the whole crew of them, patients, staff. Do you take a houseful of mentally problematic people for a Christmas vacation? Or had the neighbors finally got a court to rule against Sondervan's little sanitarium? And the doctor? Had he fled to his practice in the city? I didn't know.

They had been like little elves tending to my illness, Herbert and Emily, there but not there.

I spent that day getting used to the fact that I was alone again in the fullness of my hermitage. It was not a bad feeling. The childishness of the two of them had migrated somewhat to me, and, while I felt bad for them, their home, such as it was, taken from them, it was a relief to be back in my own mind, undistracted, uninvolved. That night I was once again out on my rounds, and the takings were good. I put together a fine dinner and for drink I melted snow in my mouth.

When the weather softened, leaving only patches of snow on the ground, I resumed my nighttime surveillance of my home. I found some subtle changes. Diana had done something with her hair, cut it shorter. I was not sure it was right for her. There was a jauntiness in her step. The twins appeared to have grown an inch or two since the last time I had looked in the window. Quite the young ladies. No

more fighting, no door slams. Mother and daughters seemed very together, even happy. The undecorated fir tree in the dining room told me that Christmas had not yet arrived.

Why did all of this come to me as a presentiment? I was uneasy as I climbed back to my atelier. I found myself thinking of the law. I knew that, having disappeared and not been found after diligent inquiry, I would be declared an absentee and Diana, as my spouse, would become temporary administrator of my property. Had she not seen to that, I was sure that one of my partners would have seen to it for her. What I could not remember was how much time would have to elapse before I was declared legally dead and the provisions of my will would come into play. Was it a year, two years, five years? And why was I thinking about this? “Spouse”? “Diligent inquiry”? Why was I thinking with these words, these legal terms? I had expunged the law from my mind, I had wiped the slate clean, so what was the matter with me?

I did something then out of a gleeful-seeming desperation that I still don’t understand. A couple of times a year, an old Italian man who had a knife-and-tool-sharpening business in his van would come to the back door and ask if anything needed to be sharpened. He had his van outfitted with a gas-powered grinding wheel. Diana would give him kitchen knives, poultry shears, scissors, even if they didn’t need sharpening, just because she knew he needed work. I think it was the Old World quality of this gentle peddler that appealed to her. So there I was, looking out the window and watching him come up the driveway and stand at the door while Diana went into the kitchen to find something for him.

A moment later, I was standing behind him with a big grin; I was this tall, long-haired homeless soul with a gray beard down to his chest, who, for all Diana knew, as she returned with a handful of knives, was the old Italian’s assistant. I wanted to look into her eyes, I wanted to see if there was any recognition there. I didn’t know what I would do if she recognized me; I didn’t even know if I wanted her to recognize me. She didn’t. The knives were handed over, the door closed, and the old Italian, after frowning at me and muttering something in his own language, went back to his van.

And, back in my atelier, I thought of the green-eyed glance of my wife, the intelligence it took in, the judgment it registered, all in that instant of nonrecognition. While I, her lawful husband, stood there grinning like an idiot. I decided that it was good that she hadn’t recognized me — it would have been disastrous if she had. My devilish impulse had pulled off a good joke. But my disappointment was like one of those knives, after sharpening, in my chest.

A day or two later, in the late afternoon, as the setting sun reddened the sky over the big trees, I heard a car pulling into the driveway. A door slammed, and by the time I got to the attic window whoever

it was had disappeared around the front of the house. I had never seen this car before. It was a top-of-the-line sedan, a sleek black Mercedes. Long after the sun had set and all the lights were on in my house, I could see that the car was still there. I kept going back to the window and the car kept being there. Whoever it was, he was staying to dinner. For, of course, I knew it was a he.

The moon was out, and so it was somewhat risky for me to go around to the dining room and look in the window. The shades were drawn — what was she trying to hide? — but not completely; there was an inch or two of light above the windowsill. When I bent my legs and peered in, I could see his back, and the back of his head, and, across the table from him, my smiling radiant wife lifting her wineglass as if in acknowledgment of something he had said. I heard the girls' voices; the whole family was there, having themselves a grand time with this guest, this special guest, whoever he was.

I lurked about through dinner; they took their damn time, all of them, and then there was coffee and dessert, which Diana liked to serve in the living room. I ran around to that window and again saw his back. He was a well-tailored fellow with a good head of salt-and-pepper hair. He was not particularly tall but sturdy, strong-looking. It was no one I knew, not anyone from my firm, not one of our friends come to hit on Diana. Was it someone she had met? I was determined to keep watch and to satisfy myself that he did not stay past dinner. But surely that was not in the cards, not with the twins in the house. Nevertheless, I lingered at the window, even though the night was cold and getting colder. And then he did leave; they were handing him his coat and I turned and ran around the back of the house and took a position at the corner, where I could see the driveway. I was looking at the front of his car, and when he got in and the cabin of the car lit up, I had a clear view of his face, and it was my former best friend, Dirk Richardson, the man from whom I had stolen Diana, a lifetime ago.

The next days were busy ones. I washed as best I could with melted snow and dried myself with one of Dr. Sondervan's towels, a gift from Herbert and Emily. I took my wallet out of the top drawer of the old broken-down bureau. In it was all the cash I had come home with that night of the raccoon, my credit cards, Social Security card, driver's license. I dug around for my checkbook, house and car keys — all the impedimenta of citizenry. I then contrived to get myself to town, cutting through the Sondervan back yard to the next block and thence to the business district.

My first stop was the Goodwill store, where I replaced my tattered rags with a clean and minimally decent brown suit, unironed shirt, overcoat, wool socks, and a pair of brogues that were no better fitting than my wingtips but more appropriate to the season. The ladies at the Goodwill were shocked when I

walked in, but my courteous demeanor and the clear effort I was making to better myself left them smiling approvingly as I left. And don't forget to get yourself a nice haircut, dear, one of them said.

That was exactly my intention. I walked into a unisex place on the theory that my shoulder-length hair would not alarm them as it would a traditional old-time barber. Still, there was resistance — Can't come in here without an appointment, the hairdresser-in-chief sniffed — at which point I laid two crisp hundred-dollar bills on the cashier's table and an empty chair materialized. A layered cut and not too short, I said.

I watched in the big mirror as, snip by snip, I travelled back in time. With each falling hank of hair, more and more of the disastrous lineaments of my previous self emerged, until, big naked ears and all, staring back at me was the missing link to Howard Wakefield. Yet a shave was still required for the transmogrification, and this took another fifty dollars, shaves not being in the repertoire of this crew of artistes. Somehow they came up with shears and a straight razor and several of the staff gathered around to agree on a strategy. I didn't want to see. I lay back in the chair and prepared to have my throat cut. I didn't care. I was disappointed in myself and how easily I was acclimating to the old life. It was as if I had never left.

Finally, I was sat up to see the result, and it was me, all right, looking pale and somewhat skinnier, the eyes perhaps too importunate, a new loose fold of flesh under the chin, Howard Wakefield redux, a man of the system.

That was enough for one day.

That night, in my unaccustomed togs, I slipped around to the house to see if anything special was going on. Another visitor, perhaps, a justice of the peace to accompany Dirk Richardson? But all was quiet. No strange cars in the driveway, and my wife at her dressing table, not quite naked in her negligible concession to winter. She had something on the stereo, her favorite composer, Schubert, whom she had touted to me when we were dating. It was one of the Impromptus, played by Dinu Lipatti, and it brought back the old days, before such music was no longer ours. I felt as if an artery had been opened, and ran back to my attic.

The next morning, the garage doors opened beneath me and I watched as Diana, with the girls in tow, backed the S.U.V. down the driveway. Of course. Christmas shopping. They would head for the mall. They would lunch there as well. I waited a few minutes, took out my car keys, went downstairs, and turned on the engine of my BMW. It started right up.

I had heard about Dirk over the years that he had made himself a fortune. And why not, as he was a hedge-fund manager who was quoted on the business pages.

Remarkable how I still knew how to drive, and how I remembered all the shortcuts to the highway to New York. An hour later, the city rose up before my eyes, and in a moment, it seemed, I was in it, in all the noisy raucous chaos of souls flowing through the city's canyons, each of them with an imperial intention. They were underground, too, rumbling along in the subways. They were stacked above my head, too, forty, fifty stories of them. It was stunning. I was in shock and barely able to negotiate the entrance to a garage.

Had I actually worked in this city most of my adult life? Would I have to again?

My Madison Avenue haberdashery was still where it had always been and my man was there standing in the suit department as if he'd been waiting for me. I had had myself barbered and had clothed myself in a reasonably presentable outfit at the Goodwill before coming here, just so that I could get through the door. He looked at me and shook his head. He beckoned. Come with me, he said.

And that is how that evening, after parking the BMW in front of the next house, and taking the trouble to reclaim my litigation bag from the attic, I stood at my front door in my black cashmere coat and pin-striped suit with a Turnbull & Asser spread-collar shirt and a sober Armani silk tie, American-flag suspenders, and Cole Haan black English calfskin shoes, and I turned the key in the lock.

Every light in the house was on. I could hear them in the dining room; they were decorating the Christmas tree.

Hello? I shouted. I'm home! ♦