

USELESS
MIRACLE

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a novel

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ONE

My ex-friend and -guru Harvey Bell called dreams “the gibberish of profundity.” Sometimes it was “the profundity of gibberish”; Harvey was all about the music, not the words. I still smile when I think of him, grifter that he was, a short blobby Jew whose eyes grew more protuberant as he fasted down to bantam holy man trim. You’ve got to smile when you think of a professional Eastern Mystic in a turban who continued to call himself Harvey Bell.

He believed that if you hear the funniest joke in the world in a dream, and you wake up remembering “Dog walks into a bar then it rains”; and if the Dalai Lama confides the meaning of life in a dream, and what you’ve written in the notebook by your bed is “Folks needs Skittles,” you have in fact heard the funniest joke in the world and known the meaning of life. The gibberish comes from what Harvey Bell calls the “Semipermeable Membrane.” It’s the barrier between sleep and waking where the gold coins of dreams are exchanged for the slugs of idiocy. This daily gyp is necessary just to go on living. Because . . . and here Harvey, who imparted his wisdom with a certain amount of weary

rote, quoted Eliot . . . because “Human kind cannot bear very much reality.”

I’m thinking of Harvey and his theories because I performed the first unassisted human flight as I was coming out of a dream. I wasn’t sleeping well at the time. Rebecca was on some panels at a film conference at Ann Arbor—the Otto Preminger wars had broken out again among film scholars—and she’d taken Max to see his grandparents who lived nearby. I had to stay on to teach my classes at Northwestern, meet an article deadline, and serve on a dissertation committee, but I spent much of my time pacing the house. They’d never been gone this long. I have two Sylvia Herschel Awards for Outstanding Contributions to Criticism and Hermeneutics; just wanted you to know it wasn’t typical of me to spend an afternoon playing with Max’s soft trucks—VROOM!—or arranging Rebecca’s bras and panties on the bed in invisible-woman poses.

The fourth day I got into bed at two in the afternoon, mashing her pillow over my face to try to catch a whiff of her herbal shampoo. The next thing I remember I was sitting on the beanbag chair in the living room, facing Rebecca and Max on the couch, my friend Toby in the armchair to the left of the coffee table, a vague blur in the armchair to the right (dream specialists always perked up at the mention of the vague blur. But it neither spoke nor stirred in its chair and played no further part in the dream). “Sorry, I’m not convinced,” I said. “I think I’ve mentioned I have a little test to see if I’m dreaming.” I struggled up from the beanbag chair, took my shoes off, and stepped up on the coffee table.

Max pointed and laughed. “Get dow!” he yelled.

“Good luck keeping him off the table now,” Rebecca said, “but never mind. Let’s see the famous test.”

“Okay, move aside, please.” Before I stepped off I looked around for something dreamlike. Apparently the blur in the armchair didn’t qualify as dreamlike to my dreaming self. The daylight in the room was seething, but that was just leaves in the windows behind me. “The actual test is almost redundant. I never perform it unless I’m already dreaming.”

I heard my old friend Toby say, “Why do you get to do the test? If anybody’s dreaming here it’s me.”

“Sounds like the real Toby,” I said and stepped off. I have parsed the distinction between flying and hovering many times since that afternoon, but this was hovering. I was standing still three feet above the carpet, positioned like the cartoon character who hasn’t yet looked down. I looked down—Max’s Ernie doll gaped up from the carpet—and remained in position. It was no big deal; I’d performed the test thousands of times. I started performing the test in puberty, I might as well add, just to give those of you who haven’t given up studying me something to think about.

“This is creeping me out,” Rebecca said. She and Toby were kneeling in front of me, chopping at the air between my feet and the carpet. “What happens now?”

“I wake up.”

“Just a minute. Max wants to tell you a secret.” She lifted him up; his breath was warm on my ear, apple juice and cookies. He whispered “bzz bzz bzz.”

“That’s just pretend whispering, buddy,” I said. “You have to whisper the secret.”

“A child whispers the secret,” Toby said. “Come on, George, what kind of treachery Romanticism are you dreaming?”

The dream hadn't quite evaporated; my figments and I avoided eye contact while we waited for it to end. While we waited, Rebecca kneeled and rubbed a Kleenex at the corner of Max's mouth. He winced and tried to squirm away. Dream Rebecca was identical to my wife down to her dark, shiny new bob and her habit of crinkling her chin when scared or on the verge of tears. She glanced up, forced a brave closed-lipped smile, shrugged. Toby tapped his foot on the carpet and checked his watch.

That's all I could reconstruct over the years with the aid of a therapist, a federally indicted guru, and four hypnotists. I don't know how much extraneous material was added by the process. I'm not absolutely certain there's even a connection between the dream and what came next.

I awoke on my side of the bed, ensnared in the blanket and sheets, my head and chest dangling over the edge. I was half-asleep—sleepy enough to wonder what might happen if I performed the test. But first I had to extricate myself. I recall thinking that I'd like to surprise Rebecca and Max with a Houdini act; one minute straightjacketed in bedding and the next . . . my writhing landed me on the carpet, still entangled. I decided to lie there for a while. My polyester pajamas itched. These were supposed to be the new polyester. The room was cool but I was covered in sweat. All I had to do to get free, I reminded myself, was sit up. Instead I flailed at my confinement, still sleepy enough to imagine I could burrow deeper and come out the other side.

At this point of my account the therapist, hypnotist, or guru would pause and say, “Ah. The other side.”

Static cling. It just occurred to me. Harvey thought my fight with the bedding was really the struggle to haul secret dream knowledge into the light of day. But I did laundry that morning and might have forgot to put in the dryer sheets.

I told myself to relax. I was like the man thrashing in quicksand, turning against the direction of the skid, flipped by my own judo. I breathed in, out. I was starting to fall asleep again. No problem, I thought, I'll just—I punched, rolled, kicked, scratched, tore. I don't know where this rage came from, but I was like those cartoon show antagonists I'd been watching all week, brawlers merged into a cyclone of arms, heads, stars, and exclamation points.

In the midst of these exertions I closed my eyes against a seasick feeling. I stopped thrashing, and my body—horizontal and facedown, unsupported by hands or feet or limbs—slowly touched down on the floor. I was awake enough now to wonder where it had just been.

. . .

I first performed the miracle in public—for people other than my wife and son—on April 10, 20__, some time between midnight and 1:30 a.m. It didn't seem worth the bother of checking our watches. As far as I recall, I didn't even win the talent show.

The evening was billed as a nonbirthday party. I'd missed out on my fortieth celebration because I'd kept warning my wife and friends—sometimes grabbing them by the lapels—that I dreaded and forbade a surprise party. “Just because a heart attack is a surprise,” I'd say, “that doesn't make it fun. But at least *it's* a surprise.” So when I came home from teaching on the big night and nothing stirred among the furniture; and when Rebecca

took me to my favorite restaurant and the faces flickering at the other tables never looked my way, I began to realize the worst had happened: my wishes had been respected.

My lifelong friend Toby had his fortieth two weeks before mine and had expressed *his* wishes unambiguously: he'd left the country. But a few weeks later he too was missing his night of the little hats. It seemed pathetic to throw ourselves a consolation birthday, so our nonversion banned presents—again my wishes were respected!—and all mention of birthdays. The guests would be mainly our colleagues at Northwestern.

A half hour before the party my two-year-old Max and I were in the bathroom, Max standing on his bench making faces at our reflections while I tried to wet down and comb our identical cowlicks. By the time I managed to plaster down one, the other would come unstuck, and I couldn't find the glob. In addition to my cowlick he has my pug nose, Rebecca's hazel eyes, her pale skin, our dark hair, and my habit of compressing my lips while thinking.

I caught that look in the mirror. At two and a half Max seemed like a happy kid—liked jokes, games, music, the guy who read the morning stock quotes on channel 23, stories, hugs, rhymes, babbling, being chased, making motor sounds. But this pensiveness always startled me. I wondered what he was figuring out about the world, and how he could possibly get it right. It's on the basis of our misreadings, I suppose, that we become what we are.

“Iris is coming,” I was saying.

“And?”

“And Toby.”

“And?”

“And Jeff.”

“And?”

“And and and and. Is that all you can say? . . . Marge Frederesen? The eco-feminist? She’s coming.”

“Uh-huh.”

He was experimenting with his mouth, scrunching it up and trying to move it all the way to the right side of his face. I thought of my mother warning “careful it doesn’t freeze that way” and wondered if that was my first real worry.

“You look a little sad.” Rebecca had come up behind me; she took the comb out of my hand and began attacking my cowlick. “What’s up?”

“Maybe a little. I’ve been looking at my friends. They don’t look *old* yet—they just look like they’ve been woke up in the middle of the night.”

She gave the comb a painful tug. “Thank you for that image! Come on, you’re adorable.” She put her face next to mine. Her smile is so spacious and employs so much facial machinery, it forces her eyes into glittering slits. She smiled at me in the mirror until I conceded with a shrug that okay, I’m adorable. “And hip,” she added tapping the nosepiece of my frames. “Your little round glasses are back in style. You’re youthful, popular, your lectures are packed, girls have crushes on you. Somebody gave me the address of a blog where your lecture hall baritone’s compared to the voice of God. She marvels that that sound can come out of your—”

“Small?”

She winced. “Compact frame.”

“It’s the only useful thing Walter taught me. “The diaphragm, George. Up from the diaphragm!””

Max was singing “and and and and . . .”

“You don’t have to worry for a while,” I said. Rebecca was thirty-two. A month ago she’d had her waist-length dark hair trimmed to a springy bob. She wore a long black skirt and a black off-the-shoulders top that showed off her collarbones and the hemispheric outlines of her breasts. Being childishly adorable *does* have its compensations; you *can* trade it for sex and love, but you need to work harder than the ruggedly handsome or the lunkishly self-confident. You need, in pursuit of Rebecca, the perseverance of the legendary kid in my grammar school who saved up enough box tops for a dune buggy.

“I just got it,” I said. “The hairdo: Greta Klimt. You *are* Greta Klimt.”

Rebecca taught in the film department, and the pop quizzes in empathy that wives like to spring on their husbands—hints, codes, private jokes, telepathic transmissions—were in our case usually references to movies I’d forgotten or hadn’t seen. This isn’t the place to speculate on what that could mean, but I was doing my best to catch up.

“Greta Klimt,” I went on. “Silent movie actress, did her best work with G. W. Pabst. Kansas girl, came to Berlin to join her friend Louise Brooks. Spent most of her time as a B-lister at UFA, but probably the most beautiful silent movie actress. Creamy pale skin, classic oval face. Cheekbones created to be lit by Germans.”

She was working on Max now. “Thanks, but I’ve still got that image in my head.”

I turned and kissed her shoulder. “Sorry.”

If she was bummed by my first image, I wasn’t about to share the other. When I looked at myself and my friends, I thought we hadn’t *changed*, exactly: we looked *too much* like ourselves. Per-

haps that's what Lincoln meant when he said that by forty you get the face you deserve: it's a self-caricature. Your face has cooled in the mold. Whatever you are, you're done.

She was watching me think in the mirror. "Regrets?"

"Didn't we have this conversation on my birthday? Okay. If I had it to do over I probably *still* wouldn't jump out of an airplane or raft down the Amazon or sleep with identical twins. Is that the same as no regrets?"

"You know it's not."

"The truth is, I'm pretty happy. I'm afraid that if I don't seem to have at least a tiny crisis, people will think less of me. If you teach hermeneutics and turn forty, you're required to say—maybe even to yourself—that you'd prefer to be in the jungle tagging monkeys for Greenpeace. In a few weeks people will let me enjoy my life without demanding my regrets."

She gave me a pat on the head. I half-raised an eyebrow at her in the mirror.

Let's get this out of the way. I am a small man. That day, before I'd been assigned my own press narrative, I still thought of myself as a *short* man (all right, sometimes small). I suppose I'd always been slightly bothered about my height. How could I not? I was the son of the astrophysicist and Distinguished Professor at the University of Chicago, Walter Entmen. Yes, *that* Walter Entmen, "the spaces between the stars." He was six five and bore the booming chest and cavernous cranium of the looming thirties movie star Raymond Massey. I'm hardly the first to apply Nietzsche's quotation—he looked like the abyss had been looking into *him*. Sometimes I'd walk into his study and break his nine-light-year gaze. He wouldn't get angry; he was just surprised, I think, that the same universe that contained 100-billion-

square-mile walls of dark matter also contained that craning openmouthed blip by his shoe. Anyway, Walter did his best to prepare me for the world: boxing lessons, gloomy aphorisms. By the time I'd arrived at the morning of my nonbirthday party, I hadn't had much need for either—though I remained serene through squabbles at department meetings with the thought that I could beat up anyone at the conference table. That morning, as I smiled at my wife and son in the bathroom mirror, I was still a peaceful and happy man.

Later the press would assign me the role of small man. At first I was the plucky “small man who could.” As the world grew more disappointed in me, the references to my smallness grew meaner. Later still . . . but far worse things happened to me than nicknames and bad press. So let me concede the point and move on. I am a small man.

Sorry, but I have to get this on the record: at five feet four and three quarters, I'm *not all that small*. I'm taller than most of mankind throughout history. Tall enough to gaze down on James Madison, for example, with my fists on my hips. Taller than average by the standard of many Asian countries. Taller than many of the people who on the slightest acquaintance feel entitled—despite my distinguished reputation in the field of hermeneutics, the theory of textual meaning and interpretation—to walk right up and muss my hair! So why bother? The sign has been taped to my back, so to speak, and to tear it off and stomp on it is to assist in my own diminution—there's nothing funnier than the pique of a small man.

I seem to be getting off point here so let's wrap this up. As I try to make sense of the phenomenon (the word the press settled on to skirt “miracle”), it all seems bound up with my presumed

smallness. Toby, who despite everything he witnessed remained a skeptic, a cynic, and a smart-ass, quipped that it was all divine overcompensation—God’s way of putting lifts in my shoes.

Of course my appearance of being small involves more than height. There is the matter of my cuteness. A man with tiny, symmetrical, boyish features—particularly if that man works in a profession of rigor and high seriousness—must constantly guard against the impression of childish adorability, must stand ready to impale it with the steel of his gaze! Don’t know where *that* came from.

Granted: I get defensive. But to people who didn’t know or care about my Auerbach Award, my gravitas was, I gather, cute; there’s nothing funnier than a small man striving to maintain his dignity. A week before my fortieth birthday I went to get my driver’s license renewed. It was one of those express facilities for people who aren’t required to take the driving test: ten or eleven rows of folding chairs, nearly deserted that afternoon, an eye test machine resembling a submarine periscope on the counter, and behind the counter a blue curtain and a camera on a tripod. I passed the eye test and had sat down in front of the blue cloth when it happened. “Yooo Hoooooo! Eeeeeee!” This piercing noise, an exaggeration of the falsetto you might produce to make a baby smile, came from the photographer. He wore the standard white shirt, black necktie, and black pants, a skinny guy in his twenties with black horn-rims and patches of eczema. While he made the sounds, he crossed his eyes, wrinkled his nose, and bared his teeth. By the way, have I mentioned that earlier that month I’d gone to the Hague to address a conference on “Language and World Conflict,” and Jacques Chirac praised my work? That’s right. Jacques Chirac. In the license photograph my

mouth begins to open in an anxious lopsided smile, my eyes bug-ging slightly behind my little round frames. In the days that followed I'd examine that photo, wondering if something about me had provoked the incident. But my cowlick was under control, the Windsor knot in my tie perfectly symmetrical, and, because I was headed directly for Professor Von Helberg's retirement dinner, I was wearing my Dunlap & Dunlap suit. I had to wait for the picture to develop, so I took a seat in the front row. Now the fun begins, I thought. I could watch other people react to the photographer's unconventional methods. But he was all business now: "Look up, sir," "little to the left, ma'am." When my license was ready I tried to strike up a conversation, waiting for the beast to burst loose again. "You're very fast here," I said. "Quite an efficient operation."

"Thank you, sir," he replied with impervious blandness.

But it's the accusation of another kind of smallness that I refuse to bear, and you might call the following pages my brief. As the subject of the world's only verified miracle, I was blamed for its measliness. This all changed, of course, but I cringe to remember it. The world had been waiting for thousands of years, and it felt entitled to something grander. Surely, the accusation went, the *intended* miracle couldn't have been such a gyp; it had to have been the meagerness of the vessel, my own paltry spirit, that brought forth such dinky wonders.

. . .

The talent contest was Toby's idea; no one had the energy to argue—no one had found the energy yet to get up and head for the coats—so he seized the role of dictator and MC. "A few rules," he said over groans too feeble to resist an actual inten-

tion. “Double-jointedness is a condition, not a talent. Kudos for your ability to recite *Paradise Lost* from memory, Edward, but no. Lip-synchers will be beaten. The ability to eat, drink, or swallow huge quantities of anything will have to be its own reward. As for air guitar, Jeff, you might as well put the ‘guitar’ aside and take credit for the air.”

Toby has a big head, its massiveness enhanced that night by the tiny plastic derby secured by a rubber band beneath his chin. That head is set on a big body—not fat, exactly; his softness is dispersed, laundered, you might say, throughout a tall big-boned Clintonesque physique. He’d let his still solid-black hair grow out that year. Toby had small, surprisingly delicate features for a man his size, though the nose was oft-busted. He looked like . . . what? . . . a leg-breaker for the violinists’ union. An apostate monk who’d been in some bar fights. That spring he’d been affecting a Rat Pack look: black sport coats with narrow lapels, white shirts, skinny black ties worn loose and askew. He brought off the Rat Pack/party hat combo with imperious deadpan, as if they were the vestments of some forgotten order.

I assumed that his Goth-looking black-clad Russian date was his motive for the talent show, but he was holding her in reserve. To begin he drafted Iris.

“Oh sweetie, I don’t have a talent.” These and other protests were shouted down and she stepped into the middle of the living room. Iris was an attractive woman, even if the only color I’d seen on her face was its own literary pallor, even if she carried her lanky body like something that exceeded union rules.

She was the funniest person I knew. And yet I have a little room for exposition here because I seldom remembered her jokes. I suppose it’s because they made me worry about her. What

I recall of her improvised standup that night is the raw material: that she'd broken up with her boyfriend; that her mother was blowing her savings on some "voodoo cure"; that Iris dreaded turning thirty-eight, the age at which her father died of a heart attack and five years past the age when her grandfather died of a "heart condition." Oh, and she imagined that the strangers who took her body away would make cracks about the decor. And she mentioned a dream in which a man with the head of a bull stood over her bed and said, "That's it: I'm outta here." The dream was three months ago, and she hadn't been able to write a word of her latest novel since. Her twang was dialed all the way up, not a good sign.

As usual she reacted to our laughs with the pose of a lost, baffled, but resolute traveler. I know that's a lot to read from a disappointed gaze, but we'd shared an office for three years and she'd milked many jokes with it. She must not have sufficiently mastered the language, her pose implied, because the locals were laughing at her pleas for help. But if she persisted in explaining the problem, surely they'd grasp that none of this was funny.

Iris. I think we all wish we'd paid closer attention. But what should we have paid attention *to*? The gloomy jokes? There's nothing that pleased her more than telling them. The way she could tear up while smiling? It's a trick she and Rebecca practiced while watching Renee Zellweger on the DVD of *Jerry McGuire*.

Anyway, the talent show. My teaching assistant Jeff Bingham did something I prefer to forget involving objects up his nose. Marge Fredersen, the eco-feminist, did a spot-on imitation of Britney Spears, I think. Our neighbor Mrs. Housbender juggled three tennis balls and a golf ball, explaining all the while how the size and weight difference made it harder until Toby disquali-

fied her for special pleading. Rebecca did a lovely “My Funny Valentine,” legs crossed on the piano, with jazz accompaniment from Paul Catlow, the science-as-narrative guy. Milly Steinman and her husband Warren Gustafson (Romance languages, Scandinavian literature) had taken up ballroom dancing in their fifties after her inoperable cancer was diagnosed; their tango ended with a full dip, Milly’s shorn head nearly touching the carpet, a rose from our window box in her teeth. Nora Bales, the young linguist with slash-cut red hair, did an angry/perky cover from the Flaming Lips. Her sister Betty did something balletic with jumps and splits and stopped before it got ridiculous. The Beowulf scholar Thomas Willaston sang a cappella in Old English and stalked off to the kitchen when Toby razzed, “Aren’t you ever off-duty?” Nobody razzed Professor Emeritus Maura O’Day, whose cracking voice and baffled pauses made her Gaelic song even more poignant.

Toby and Iris—who despite rumors had never been a couple—did their couples therapy skit, something they’d come up with on a department retreat. They gave a demonstration of the “trust exercise” where one partner, Toby, falls back, trusting that his partner will catch him. Iris was also the one giving the lecture. She’d stop to make one last point to the audience while Toby came crashing down. He was a graceful and fearless big man; his landings, even on the carpet, made the glasses jump. He demonstrated his trust again and again, while at the last second Iris would get distracted or check something in the “Trust Manual” or turn to the audience to take a question. It was just a variation of Charlie Brown and the football, but it brought down the house.

And then Toby’s date Ludmilla disdainfully clacked through

our CDs. She needed music for her act: “otherwise only grunting and Toby making remarks.” She nearly settled on the “Disco Inferno” compilation I ordered from cable at three in the morning the week Rebecca and Max were away, but finally she performed unaccompanied. I had assumed women in Goth-white pancake and bruise-colored lipstick, wobbly racoonish mascara round their eyes, tended not to be athletes. But Ludmilla did deep knee bends, touching her elbows on the floor, all while balancing various large, unwieldy, and asymmetrical objects on her head. I recall a wok, a table lamp, and our black-and-white short-hair cat Claude (I would have introduced him earlier but he’d been hiding that night) perched warily on three economy-size boxes of Calgon. Ludmilla wore, in case you worry about such things, a loose cheerleader skirt, black of course, and panties. For the finale she assembled what Toby introduced as “the Astounding Pile of Everything” on her head and smoothly squatted it up and down. He nudged me to point out her sculpted thighs and noted that she was circus folk. She overheard and snapped, “Not circus folk, performance artist!”

Except for Toby, the men in the room sustained a professorial deadpan. Iris, perhaps speaking for most of the women in the room, bounced cashews off the side of Toby’s head. He knew where they were coming from and didn’t look. She had a surprisingly strong and accurate pitching arm, good follow-through.

“That’s a high point to go out on,” I said when Ludmilla set down the atlas, the bird cage, and the anxious Claude. “I never thought I’d make it through another two and half hours, but I’m glad you thought of it,” I said to Toby. “And by the way, happy nonbirthday, pal. Please don’t start picking up things, Becca. I’ll deal with it in the morning. Thanks for coming, everybody. It

was the greatest nonbirthday ever. Sorry to rush this, I have to get up early.”

No one had budged. Rebecca was next to me on the couch, Max sleeping on her lap. He’d insisted that his tiny rubber band top hat stay on. She took away the empty gin glass that had remained in my hand through Ludmilla’s performance and set it on the coffee table. “I think you’re going to have to perform, George.”

Toby was on my other side. “Hermeneutics is not a talent,” he warned, snapping the rubber band of the tiny hat I’d forgotten I was wearing.

“I dunno,” I said. “Would anybody like to hear ‘Rhapsody in Blue?’”

“I’m invoking the ‘Fucking Boring’ rule,” he said.

Rebecca leaned close and whispered, “Why don’t you do your trick?” That’s what we’d been calling it while we tried to decide whether it was a trivial freakish ability like triple-jointedness, or the most important thing ever. Sometimes Rebecca believed it *was* a trick, and she’d used an old Hula-Hoop to check for wires. At first she thought I was gliding on “some sort of skateboard thing.” For weeks I’d amuse her and Max with a performance every evening. Max was the first to get bored. Then it was once a week, then longer. My talent, in the form I’d been given it, seemed to have no use whatever except maybe tabloid notoriety. I’d already had myself scanned and blood-tested: nothing. When we realized that at least for now my ability would make no difference in our lives, we shrugged and moved on.

Her whisper had been overheard. “Yeah,” people were saying, “let’s see your trick, George.” Ludmilla leaned across the coffee table and snatched off my little hat.

“Really,” I said, and sometimes I believed it: “it’s nothing.”

. . .

I walked to the end of the hall, turned around, and lay face down on the carpet. The guests began to follow, and I ordered them back. They craned and squirmed in the living room entrance.

Rebecca sidled past them. Gathering the hem of her long skirt, she crouched down in a catcher's stance. She was holding the stereo's remote. "Ready, champ?"

I raised my head and exhaled. "Ready."

She pressed the remote and from the living room hyperventilating strings and imperial horns blared John Williams's overture for *Superman*. It was just dawning on me how embarrassing this would be. Max was beside her, holding out his arms. "Daddy, here!"

"Come on, George." She patted the carpet in front of her; a round of hoots and dog whistles began and abruptly broke off.

In the months to come everyone asked, "What do you think of when you do it?" You might as well ask what I think of when I lift my arm. By a similar though more strenuous act of will, my body rose horizontally three or four inches off the carpet (I'd never been able to get any higher) and flew (I couldn't just hover) very slowly (I'd never managed to go any faster) toward my wife and son. Partly for balance and partly for show, I extended my arms forward like Superman, my torso moving parallel to the floor. I didn't need to think about any particular thing to get airborne, but I had my cherished images. That night I pictured the Himalayas just below me, the searchlight ferocity of the snow-caps at noon, the delirium-blue of stark altitude.

You can't expect a bunch of drunken, supercilious academics to remain awestruck for long, and here came the flak. "Dustball

at six o'clock" . . . "Look! Down on the floor! It's a dog! It's a cat!" and so forth. And I did look ridiculous in flight. As if my speed and altitude weren't laughable enough, my exertions were often accompanied by involuntary squinting or mumbling. Sometimes my tongue protruded between my lips.

A few of the guests ventured into the hallway. Their looming faces—the vastly jutting noses, the black depths of the nostrils—looked grotesque from my baby's-eye view. Hands probed the margin between me and the carpet. Ludmilla gave me a quick but thorough frisk that set me veering (very slowly, fortunately) toward the wall. Other women were saying, "Look at his little mouth moving!" "And the way he kicks his little legs!" (I forgot to mention the kicking—I don't think it contributed to my airworthiness; just another tic.) "Like he's swimming across the pool to his mommy!"

A word about my dignity: no, I think we've covered that.

A shoe on my back pressed me into the carpet. "Just checking your wind shear resistance, buddy," said Toby. He allowed me to rise back up and fly on. The old twinkle-dust grin looked a bit carnivorous from that angle. Despite his just-drunk-just-goofing-around-old-buddy facade, I knew he was jealous; he thought if anyone should be flying it was he, and he wouldn't look like a moron doing it.

Flight is exhausting. I can't describe how I did it—it involved no bodily movement except the useless kicking of my legs—but like swimming it strained every muscle. Staying airborne caused an agonizing muscular rigidity that made me dread paralysis or stroke. The length of our hall was my limit, and by midflight I'd be trembling, grunting, sweating, my shirt transparent. It reminded Rebecca of Jimmy Stewart, I forget the film, flying

across the Atlantic with the engine sputtering, ice on the wings, bolts popping. I had reached that point. I fought not to expend the last of my energies thrashing and flailing. Three inches below me, our good, gray Stainmaster carpet beguiled like an exile's dream of home.

The guests backed off to the living room entrance; there were no more jokes. The only voice was Rebecca's, calm, almost a whisper, guiding me home. "Keep your arms straight. Do your breathing—slowly, slowly. Stop kicking, it's a waste of energy." Max was trying to run to me, but she held him back in the crook of her arm.

. . .

The stragglers and I ended up in the kitchen. Iris, Ludmilla, and Toby were there, and Rebecca when she'd negotiated the hat and put Max to bed.

Also at the table were Charles Blaustein, the other hermeneutist in the department, and his wife Karen, who worked as a loan officer at a bank. I didn't know why they were there, let alone *still* there. Charles and I weren't unfriendly, but he'd never invited me to his house, and this was the first pro forma invitation he'd accepted. Karen, tall, slim, tense, with long gray-streaked brown hair, mostly kept her eyes down where one thumb was rubbing the other on her lap. Charles was also tall and slim, with thinning silver hair, aviator glasses, and a way of sitting—he didn't seem drunk or stoned—that made me think he was battenning himself in place. He sat there in his fully buttoned overcoat even though it was a warm spring night. My small talk had bounced right off. Perhaps he wasn't staring at me; maybe I only

thought so because they'd barely spoken to anyone that night, hadn't eaten or drunk, just sat as if enduring a procedure. Maybe, I thought, he's just shy or watchful. After all our years together in the department, I barely knew him.

I thought maybe it's not as creepy as it seems. The pioneering Russian director and film theorist Dziga Vertov did an experiment. He took the same shot of an actor and inserted it into various kinds of footage. Then he showed it to test subjects. Depending on the context they thought the man humorous, menacing, happy, sad, angry, pensive. But I couldn't imagine footage that would make this not creepy. The best I could come up with was the Blausteins staring at each other at their own kitchen table, a pendulum wall clock slowly chopping up the minute.

The Blaustein Effect was seeping into everyone. The prospect of filling their silence was dreadful—like tossing cats down a well. I looked to Iris. When Rebecca forbade her to bring in dishes from the living room, she'd gone to some mental place where there were no Blausteins. She was fiddling with the Mary Tyler Moore curl of her muted blonde hair. I couldn't explain why we didn't all stand up and say goodnight.

Another possibility occurred to me. Maybe I was the only one who was spooked by Charles. Maybe everyone else was spooked by me. Or at least by the possibility they'd witnessed a miracle. Was that why Charles was stock-still in his overcoat?

Toby, leaning over the back of Ludmilla's chair, was smirking into the middle distance; I thought he was waiting for his blind-side moment to debunk me, but Ludmilla filled the vacuum. "You are filmmaker," she said to Rebecca.

“Not for a while—I’m teaching full-time. I used to make documentaries.”

“You are political?”

“Yes and no. I don’t like to know in advance what I’ll think about my subject. Were you an acrobat in Russia?”

“Not acrobat, performance artist. This I do here. I was engineer in Russia.”

“You know,” I said to Iris, “I flew tonight and nobody’s said a thing about it.”

“I know, baby.” She patted my hand.

Ludmilla turned to me. “You and Toby,” she said, “are long friends.”

“We grew up in Hyde Park, sons of emotionally distant U of C fathers. I used to dare him to call my father Walter. Or to ask him, ‘Aren’t the spaces between the stars just empty?’ And he did! I think Walter respected him, in a ferocious scowling kind of way.”

“Toby is charming but I do not think he is serious man.”

I came to my friend’s defense. “He’s one of the foremost authorities on the seventeenth-century essayist and eschatologist Sir Thomas Browne. You can’t be frivolous . . . and . . . you’re not buying this. He can seem like he’s just goofing around in his life, but he has great physical and moral courage. He was kind of a shrimp before his growth spurt, but when he saw bullies going after someone . . .”

“Those were Hyde Park bullies,” he said. “Come on.”

“He was the first one to make a stink on principle when the university wanted to kick some pariah off the faculty. You might think there are no consequences for a guy with tenure, but he taught all comp for a year just for that.”

She mentioned that her uncle had been in the Gulag, and Toby said, "Got me there."

She turned back to me. "You and Charles. You are hermeneutists."

Charles spoke! "George invented the New Hermeneutics. You might say I'm his acolyte or disciple." He talked through the side of his mouth in a sneering voice reminiscent of Edward G. Robinson or the Penguin. I'd been told it was a medical condition, which was also responsible for the limited mobility of his features.

It crossed my mind, not that I believed it, that Charles might have a gun under his coat. It seemed like a plausible modern religious narrative: man performs miracle, assassinated by his disciple. As I said, just a passing thought, though not, it turned out, entirely off-track. The knife rack on the counter was out of reach. Above the counter were hooks with shiny pots and pans, the wok, the egg whisker, and several gleaming pleasing things I'd never been able to identify. Sorry. I miss that life.

"Thank you, Charles, but you're my colleague, not my disciple. He's made many important contributions to the New Hermeneutics."

"Toby says you are number two hermeneutist," Ludmilla said to Charles.

"There are two hermeneutists in the department," he said curtly from the side of his mouth. Karen was looking down the hall to the door as if strenuous wishing might get her there.

I looked at Rebecca. She shrugged.

Putting a point on it, Ludmilla said, "Ah. You are number two hermeneutist in *department*." (After they broke up, Toby paraphrased George Sanders: "She's a graduate of the squat-thrust school of etiquette.")

“Karen,” Rebecca said brightly, “would you like something? We still have cake.”

Karen was still yearning for the door. “No.”

“Something to drink?”

“No.”

“Charles?”

He shook his head.

The silence was making even Toby squirmy. “I was there with George when lightning struck. He invented the New Hermeneutics at the pancake house on Howard. He was eating the Big Boy Breakfast. Actually made notations on the tablecloth.”

“You are hermeneutist, George,” Ludmilla said. “You study what.”

“My field is the theory of meaning.”

“My father was killed by bus. What is the meaning?”

“I’m sorry about your father. I study the meaning of *texts*. Though actually contemporary hermeneutics is mostly the *theory* of meaning.”

“Never meaning. Only theory of meaning. Like squirrel on wheel.”

Toby kissed the top of her bright red bob. “Oh please, say ‘Keel moose and squorrel.’ I beg and she’ll never say it.”

“I will never say this. I am adorable for no man.”

Cracking up, Rebecca and Iris high-fived her. With her accent, her smokey voice, and her ill-conceived mime/Goth look beneath her perfectly coifed bob, she was adorable. As an adorable man, I sympathized.

Ludmilla turned her wobbly-circled gaze on Iris, who couldn’t hold back an anxious “Uh-oh!”

“You write funny novels. And yet you are sad woman.”

“I’m with you so far.”

“In Russia I read Twain, Lenny Bruce, Mencken. But American people are not like this. I want to understand real American humor.” She unzipped her purse and turned it upside down. Along with a lipstick, a compact and so forth, dozens of paper squares flapped onto the table. I picked up a few. They were the sappy one-panel comics from the funny page: Family Circus, Dennis the Menace, Love Is, Marmaduke.

“Why is funny. I don’t understand.”

“Okay,” Iris said, throwing herself on the grenade. “Let’s go in the living room.”

When they’d left, Toby seized the moment. “I guess nobody else can deal with it, George, so it’s up to me. How about it? Laser mirrors, or the old magnets-in-the-pants?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, do you? It’s not a trick and I’m too tired to talk about it.”

“Do you believe it, Rebecca?”

She shrugged. “He passed the Hula-Hoop test.”

“Blaustains?”

They said they didn’t know.

“Then let me give you some advice, my friend. Choose your narrative. Otherwise the press will hand you one. Do you want to be a paranormal guy, a saint, a superhero—”

“I can fly a few yards very slowly a few inches above the ground. Is that worth the tights?”

“How about wily fake, which perhaps has the virtue of being true? You’d better figure it out because what are the chances nobody got you on cell phone video tonight?”

“Do you really think I’m a wily fake?”

“No. I just don’t want to process the alternatives right now . . . Or maybe you’d like to be God?”

“What?”

“They can’t say you’re God, but they can do a three-part series, *Is He God?* Ever hear the Lenny Bruce bit about missionaries? Your first lesson in PR, George. If the natives think you’re God, they’re cooperative, won’t kill you and so forth. So you’re a little vague about it. ‘Well I’m not *God*, but . . .’ And work on the flying. It’s not that people won’t believe in a pathetic God. But it’ll piss them off. Right, Blausteins?”

I stood up. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.” Toby and Rebecca also stood, and I had a bad moment when I feared the Blausteins might stay in their chairs. But they stood and thanked Rebecca and me for a lovely time. In the living room Iris was saying, “The cat and the mouse are in love, sweetie. What could be funnier than that? Oh, we have to go already?”

At the door Rebecca straightened Iris’s collar. Iris had won two National Book Awards, been voted teacher of the year, was perhaps the highest paid professor in the English department. But Rebecca was always fussing with her, straightening her collar, brushing off a hair. Once she’d licked her thumb and rubbed away a smudge. “Say, would you like to come to dinner next week? We’re thinking of inviting somebody else. I don’t know if it’s too soon after Lucas.”

“Am I ready to get back on the horse again? Sure I am. If you fall off the horse and break your leg, they have to shoot you, right?”

Useless Miracle

Okay: I remember the jokes. Every damn one.

The Blausteins were the last to walk out; Rebecca closed the door, pressed her back against it, and slowly slid down to the welcome mat.

“Ancient fuckin’ Mariner!”