

Notes from Lazarus

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Tobias Wolff Award for Fiction

April 11

Been a month since I quit at the plant, and suddenly I have my sense of smell back. Scared me at first. On the paper run this morning, I caught a burning scent coming through the heater. Snapped out of my pre-dawn reverie to hit the brakes and fishtail in the rain, thinking the engine was on fire. Maybe I'd gone too long without changing the oil. So much for the delivery job. Climbed out, lifted the hood—all seemed in order. No smoke, no fire, all the belts turning smoothly, oil level just fine. Got back in the car, sat there for a minute, and it occurred to me that it was just the smell of the heater—the normal smell of the coils heating up—but that it had been so long since I'd actually *noticed* it. Made me wonder: How long after I started working at O'Grady's had I thrown the switches on my sense of smell? How many nights, wandering through a haze of mold and grime and grease and oil and blood and chemicals and rotted meat stuck into floor cracks and body odor and flatulence? How long before I'd become numb to these and, by default, all other smells?

Walked around in a daze once I got home. All my senses resurrected, everything in the world new again, real in ways things weren't quite real before. Strange and wonderful. I've been asking Eliza all day, "What's that smell?" Shoes, air freshener, paint, hard water. "What's that smell?" "It's called cat whizz," she told me. "Try cleaning the litter box, Dennis." I walked around the apartment, sticking my nose into everything and inhaling: newspapers, rubber bands, aquarium. Helped Eliza with dinner, and my olfactories came alive and sizzling with cooking spices, garlic, onion, ginger. Closed my eyes and caught the aroma, floated across the room on the trail of these fantastic wafting scents.

"Eliza," I told her, "I got my nose back."

"That's wonderful," she said. "It adds so much to your face."

Took her out for a ride on the Honda after. Rain hadn't lasted past morning. Sun had come out, set everything glistening and glowing. A bit cold, but worth the fresh air. We left the helmets at home so we could ride through the country and follow all these new scents. Crested a tall hill at one point. Beautiful view, miles of rolling fields, capital dome rising above the rest of Madison's hazy buildings in the distance, acres of sky, masses of clouds like continents drifting across the blue. Wound up at Gov. Nelson Park, feeling purified and cleansed. I took Eliza's

hand and we walked down to the lake. Sun going down behind us. City lights on the opposite shore. Leafless trees silhouetted like cracks in the sky. But we could see the plant across the lake, smoke and steam seeping out of its chimneys, brick façade burning like a red blight in the last of the sun. “There it is,” I said. “Ten years.”

“I don’t know how you could do it for that long,” Eliza said.

“I don’t know *why* I did it that long. Got lulled into it after awhile, I guess.”

Eliza said she used to watch me going off to work each night and get this horrible feeling as if she was watching me descend into hell. “I’d think of the walls rising up out of the ground like some life-sucking nightmare,” she said. “That barbed wire fence, all that concrete and metal and smoke, all those pipes. I’d get this awful feeling just watching you walk down the steps of the apartment. Because I knew that each morning when you came back, you’d smell a little more like the plant and a little less like yourself.”

A breeze blew in from across the lake and dumped a vile stench over us. Some instinct told me as I looked out at the plant, but I asked anyway, “What the hell is *that* smell?”

“It’s what I’ve been sleeping with since we got married,” Eliza said.

We turned and fled.

“Well, I’m done now,” I told her. “No more of that. It’s out of me now. I’m done.” Felt awkward, like I’d stepped out to go to the store and had instead disappeared for years. Like I’d just returned and was making promises, assurances. Like I should be on my knees.

We got on the bike, and I sucked down clean air. Without helmets, Eliza could sit close and wrap her arms around me. Cold evening turned our lips purple, our faces white. Back home, I held her to make her warm. Her hair smelled like rain and crisp, cold leaves. Her neck—I don’t know what to compare the fragrance to. It’s all new. We made love on the couch. When I kissed between her legs, her scent lit me up, this new dimension beyond touch and sight. Everything was new. But we lay there under a blanket afterwards, and at some point I shifted and there came a vague stench from underneath, the same odor that had reached us from across the lake. I put my nose to my shoulder. It was me. It was coming out of my pores. It was still there.

April 3

After ten years of hearing Brooks tell stories about the crowd at Barbarian Inn, I went there to meet him for lunch. All this time I’d pictured a dark, smoky tavern populated with beefy, Popeye-armed men, hands big enough to wrap entirely around iced beer mugs. Wasn’t quite as scary as that. Middle of the day, though. There’s a big picture window looking out at the Cherokee marsh. Pretty

view of cattails and birches, and inside, the tavern was bright from the sun. Small lunch crowd. Just regular guys, like anybody over at O'Grady's. A place to unwind from the daily grind, tell each other some stories, enjoy whatever's on tap. Brooks offered to buy me a beer, and I said I'd have whatever he was drinking. Bartender brought out two stouts, black as fresh tar. "You could stand a spoon up in those," Brooks grinned.

He looked as good as I've seen him in months. Beard trimmed neatly, hair not all matted down from wearing a hardhat. Not quite so tired. We talked about books. He said he was re-reading *Canaan*. That was the book he gave me way back at the beginning to save me from cheap thrillers. "You want to be a writer," I remember him saying skeptically, "and you're fueling yourself with trash." His mission was to broaden my horizons, and I think he's done it. Told him I'm reading Eliot for a class. "Ah, Eliot," he said, and went into how he and his college buddies had memorized *The Waste Land*, had spent many late hours over coffee and cigarettes picking apart the symbols, references, subtexts. I'd heard the story before, but he was animated, so I let him go on. He took a swig of beer and gazed at his gnarled hand. "*So many*," he sighed. "*I had not thought death had undone so many*." He was looking, I realized, at his wedding band.

Couple regulars came in, exchanged hellos with Brooks and plopped onto stools down the bar. "How ya holdin' up, Floyd?" one asked. Brooks shrugged, said almost tersely, "Day by day." He introduced me as an escapee. "He has evaded Our Lady of Perpetual Disaster by a hair," he said. The regulars offered congratulations and ordered beers.

"You've been out for three weeks," Brooks said. "Are you happy?"

It seemed to him an important question, the way he leaned toward me and waited, intent, so I thought about it for a second. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I am."

"You're a fucking paperboy."

"Only till I get through school."

"And then it's off to disturb the universes of high school students."

"I'll do what I can."

"You've got life experience to draw on. That'll help. If you don't break under the administration and the parents."

"I didn't break at O'Grady's," I pointed out.

We clinked our mugs together to that.

After awhile Brooks said, "Your wife appreciates having you home nights, I imagine." I said that she did. Brooks ordered us another round. He reached back and took an envelope out of his jacket. Nicotine-yellow fingers opened the flap with reverence, carefully pulled out two photographs: Attractive middle-aged woman, long black hair tinged with silver, graceful lines around a sensuous smile, bright green eyes. I'd never met her. Brooks seemed poised to say something, but then he shook his head, and we just looked at the photos together. The bartender

came back with refilled mugs, and Brooks showed him the photos. Bartender said she looked like a very refined lady indeed, and Brooks said that she was. We looked at the pictures another couple moments. Then he made a sound with his throat. "Once you care deeply for someone, it never stops," he said. "Never."

Out in the parking lot, he lit a cigarette. We watched a crane glide down to the marsh and wade on stilt legs. "What are you going to write, when you write about all this?" Brooks asked.

"You mean O'Grady's?"

He nodded and blew smoke.

"I'll write about the power plant fire," I said. "I'll write about standing on the roof and watching it burn."

"That was a night," Brooks said, approving.

We shook hands. I promised to keep tossing a free *Times* at his door as long as I had the delivery job. He wished me luck in school and in my writing. There seemed to be that one last thing to say that neither of us could quite voice, and my inability to find words took on an awkward tinge of shame. I couldn't bring myself to promise we'd keep in touch, because I didn't expect it to be true, and because I didn't want to choke Brooks with such a trite line at that particular moment. We shook hands again, and I said goodbye to the Barbarian Inn.

March 13

So: Life is too short and my world is too small. Not sure what I expect, but life is not going to just pick up and start happening one day. Got to go out there and experience it. This world can be huge if I'm willing to step outside my own boundaries.

Put in my notice at the beginning of the week, and here it is now: my last night. I'm sitting in the cafeteria, waiting for the last hours to drag themselves around. Told Frankie it's for school, so I can focus more. So I can get some actual sleep. For awhile it's been two hours of sleep in the morning, another three here and there, and it's been good luck if I can get a total of five, sleeping around school like that. I can't sleep here like most of the guys, laid out on rows of chairs or heads down on tables. Too much work to do. Schoolwork, reading, writing. I'm known as "Bookworm" for all this. "There's the Bookworm, pluggin' away," they say.

That's all true. Sleep and focus are reasons to get out of here. Plus, it's just about time. Ten years is just about goddamn time. Been one game too many with the Company. One stab in the back too many. One ripped-off arm too many. Time to go. Time to get off graveyard and return to the land of the living.

(Perkins just threw down his newspaper and grumbled, "Here we sit in an open boil in the asshole of the world." Then he looked at me like I'm a son of a

bitch for wanting to leave. He said, "Put *that* in your book, Bookworm." They're all waiting for me to write the Great American O'Grady Meats Novel. I told them I'll call it *The Jungle: Part II*. Tagline: "Upton Sinclair had no idea.")

When I gave the news at the beginning of the week, most everyone congratulated me. "Good for you," they said. "At least *somebody's* got the sense to get the hell outta this hole." Schwartz, ever the contrarian, told me I'm making a mistake. "You quit here, you're gonna regret it," he said. "You've got a steady job here, you've got ten years in, you've got more seniority than half the people on nights. Why would you wanna quit a secure job like this? The pay ain't as bad as you guys are always talking."

Told him I've only got a year of school left. The unexpected criticism made me feel rattled, but I said, "We'll be able to swing it for a year. I'll work some part-time jobs."

"Dumbass," Schwartz called me. "You've only got a year left. What's a year? Finish school, *then* quit here."

Told him that working here full-time and going to school are killing me. "If I stay here, I won't finish school, and that's a fact. Besides," I said, "I can't take this place anymore."

"Some guys work here all their lives," Schwartz said.

"Yeah," I said. "They do." And I was suddenly calm.

Monday night, when I told Frankie, he said, "You've been here ten years. Why you leavin' us?"

"Because I don't want to make it eleven," I told him.

I'm just writing now to kill time. Already handed out all the hose nozzles I've been hoarding, and gave away my freezer jacket. Stuffed a handful of earplugs in my bookbag. Eliza might need those once I start sleeping nights with her. Thought she'd be upset when I told her I wanted to quit early. Was all ready for my speech, how it will work out, how I have to quit if I want to finish school. Didn't need it. She just looked at me for a long minute like she was making sure I was serious, then threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. Surprised the hell out of me.

Almost time. I'll make the rounds, say my goodbyes, shake hands. Brooks still isn't back from family leave yet. Hope to see him again, despite the way he can grate on me sometimes. Hope to see all these guys again, but not in here. Perkins said earlier, "Stop by and visit us, Bookworm." I told him we'd have to get together on the outside. I'm not setting foot back in here again.

There it is. Clock finally gave in. Wish I could think of something profound to write. End of an era. My own damn fault that it was an "era" in the first place, though.

Time to ascend into the shining world again.

March 1

The talk of the plant tonight is this: On Saturday, Jimmy Specs got his arm torn off at the shoulder in Turkey Bacon Stuff. He got it stuck in a vacuum mixer and it tore the arm right off. Perkins says Specs was covering for someone who'd called in sick. He was working alone, which he shouldn't have been since he'd had no real training. "Here it is—go to it." Fuckers are all about safety until it comes to getting the line started on time in the morning. So, the talk goes, there's Specs, twisted red meat and nerve bundles spilling out of his shoulder. Walks down the hall to the corporate elevator, takes it up to third, walks to the Sanitation office and sits down. Nobody in there. Perkins was the first to find him. He stuffed ice in the wound and created a compress and probably saved the guy's life while they waited for the ambulance. Tonight, all the carpets are gone—elevator, hallway, Sanitation office. That mixer—can't imagine. It's not like Specs is some puny little guy. Took the arm right off anyway. He was dazed when Perkins worked on his wound. Gave a little mirthless laugh (Perkins told me), said, "I keep wantin' to scratch my nose with that hand."

Add it to the garden of severed limbs. Plant it there among the fingers and hands and strips of flesh. Water it with worker blood and corporate greed, watch it grow. That nightmare I used to have of slipping and getting my chin stuck on the Ham Slice blade. That other time the housing came open before the blade had stopped spinning, scared me so bad I about dropped the hose. Damned hose probably would have whipped me right into the slicer. I can remember Darin sitting on the floor in the puddle of blood that ran down his slicker suit, face all twisted in pain as Neville squeezed the arm above the wound to cut off circulation. Darin and Specs and everyone between. All I keep thinking as the details come in: That could've been me on any given night.

February 27

Snow came down all day today, wind whipping it around like howling spirits. Two or three feet, they said on the news, but I saw drifts a lot deeper than that when I went out with Eliza. I'd signed up to work tonight, planning to stay well into morning and soak up some Sunday doubletime, but it didn't happen. Got all suited up in coat, gloves, stocking cap, boots, made sure there was a sleeping bag in the car in case I got stuck somewhere. Eliza didn't say anything about me not going, though I could tell she thought it'd be a good night for me to stay home. I told her I'd try going around the lake to avoid the idiot drivers on the Beltline. I'm generally able to take my sweet time going around the lake. Promised I'd drive

safe. Promised I'd call once I made it to work to let her know, so she wouldn't keep worrying. But my legs felt heavy just going down the stairs. Can't explain—like this weight pressing down. Parking lot was just one shapeless field of snow. I could see out on the Beltline, a car half-buried in a drift. Three guys thigh-deep in snow, trying to push the car, only managed to rock it back and forth. Car shook like it was laughing at them. Snow was a fine powder, all the day's tire tracks already erased. I dug out my driver's side door, got in, started the engine, heat on full blast, defrosters on. Sat there. Parking lot lights glowing orange-pink through thick blanket of snow over the windshield. Total concealment, tomb-like. Sat there, as if suspended between one thought and the next, until it seemed I heard my name being called. Turned the heat down to listen. Turned the engine off, pushed the door open, headed back upstairs, tracked snow into the apartment. Eliza had been watching through the window, and she asked, "What'd you forget?"

"Forgot what I was supposed to be doing," I said.

Eliza regarded me carefully. "What were you supposed to be doing?"

"I'm starting to remember."

A quick call in to Frankie—Sorry, roads are too bad, can't make it in. Then I waited for Eliza to get suited up, and we hiked down the street to Pheasant Branch Creek. The utter stillness of the neighborhood. All the mud and decay and hard edges muted by the snow, everything twinkling in the moonlight. Watching the clouds of our breath. It was night, but the snow gave back light. We were invigorated by the cold. We ran around in the snow like kids, then huddled near the creek, listening to the trickle, watching the flakes drift down like giant confetti. Back in the apartment, she made hot chocolate, and then I warmed her hands in mine. "Futile the winds," I said, "to a heart stuck at O'Grady Meats."

"How's it go from there?" Eliza asked.

"That's what I'm starting to remember," I said. "I'm starting to remember how that one's supposed to go."

February 16

For Valentine's Day, Brooks brought in the news that his wife has six months to a year, and those are the most optimistic guesses. "This is going to be an all-new adventure," he said. "One I'm not particularly looking forward to." He sat with his shoulders pushed down beneath a weight I couldn't imagine. Eyes darting, face drained of color. Simply torn up. Lends an entirely new perspective to everything. "What do you do?" he said. "Go out and get tanked? I've tried that for lesser problems, it's never been a good antidote." He said, "I think, if she's up to it, we'll go downtown this weekend and get a couple of tickets to the Orpheum, see whatever they're playing. Get a Wisconsin Parks sticker and go on tour this spring." He said she'll be on oxygen tanks soon. A nurse will be coming to the house for a

few months. “A whole new adventure.”

Admitted he'd been in denial. That he'd been riding his wife pretty hard about her attitude up until a couple days ago. Telling her she brings this on psychologically. If she wants to live, she will. But it's not that way. *I'm sorry*, he told her. *I didn't know it was like this*. There's a possibility of chemo, but he thinks that would only prolong suffering with a semblance of life. “I will make sure she understands very clearly all of the options and what they mean,” Brooks said. “Then I'll leave it up to her. I'll go with whatever she chooses.”

What do you do?

Drove home this morning with Brooks' tormented face in front of me. Kept thinking too of Perkins, the night he told me his wife had given him the final word, said she didn't want to be married to him anymore. How he stood there and leaned on the table with his fists and put his head down and was suddenly crying. Fifteen years of marriage. And it's all part of life, I know, but somehow it's that place, too, the plant. Like some giant misery mill. A poison that infects us and gradually spreads to everything in our outside life, snuffing out sparks and sucking at the feet of everyone we love. Until we're all just so tired.

Crawled into bed with Eliza. Her arm was stretched onto the empty side of the bed, her hand clutching the edge of my pillow. I pushed her arm in, gently, so my weight wouldn't be on it, and I felt how cold her skin was, saw how pale her fingers. Must've been exhausted, because I found myself in tears. Pulled the covers up and held her close. My cheek against hers. Until she stirred just enough to breathe in, wrinkle her nose at the smell, turn over and scoot away. She took the blanket with her. Didn't want to wake her, so I just lay there and gazed at the back of her head, the layers of her hair, the curve of her neck. Kept wondering: What would I do? Lay there wondering and shivering.

January 1

Little while ago, right around midnight, Jimmy Specs came back and flicked the lights on and off and shouted “Happy New Year” to all the sleepers, a couple of whom sat up and cursed him roundly until he went away. I'm on unofficial guard. Lights are off in the back of the cafeteria, probably about eight guys back here, stretched out on lined-up chairs, mostly hidden by the tables. I'm at the edge of the dark, keeping my eyes open for bosses as I write. Long dead night, drifting into a no-production holiday. We're all on doubletime.

Saw Brooks at the beginning of the night. Beard all gnarled, face gray with the wear of too many years here. I've never stopped wondering what he's doing here. Educated, intelligent, aware of exactly what kind of hole he's stuck in. So why's he still in it? College degree, kids grown and gone, wife who has an understanding of how big the world can be. Brooks told me awhile ago that she was born in India,

to missionary parents. Lived there all the way through high school. She came to the States for college. That's where she and Brooks met. He told me once (in a rare, glory-days kind of mood) how they'd talked about Eliot, recited Ginsberg, made love to the Doors. The promise that must have been dangling out there for the two of them back then. The dreams and possibilities raised, only to be stunted by this place. What happened? What kind of a lull can extinguish such hopes? Now look: Brooks is decrepit and dwindling, and his wife's minus a lung from cancer. That's a little past the point of a fresh start.

Before he left I asked Brooks if he thought this year would bring an end to what he calls the "horse latitudes." As he explained it to me, the horse latitudes are a section of ocean so calm that ships relying on winds would stall. In the old days, sailors worried about provisions running out, and they'd throw the horses overboard. Brooks told me eight months ago he was in the horse latitudes, and when I asked him about it last month he said the horses on his ship were starting to eye him with suspicion. When I asked him tonight he said, "There does seem to be something in the air." He said it with foreboding, though, not hope, and I didn't press any further.

Then it was his turn to quiz me. Asked if I had any New Year's resolutions. "Sure," I said. "Why not? I'll write my way out of this place."

"Shoot high to hit the mark," Brooks answered, but I could tell he wasn't impressed.

"I know. I've been saying that since the day I started. Look where it's got me."

Brooks shrugged. "Even if you leave—when any of us leave—the stink of this place will trail after us for the rest of our lives. We'll be like Lazarus, forever rubbing sleep out of our eyes and tracking dirt in on the rug."

Maybe that's true for him. I didn't argue.

Nights like this you can almost forget where you are. No production workers coming in and making a racket with the vending machines since there's no production starting up today. Most of the bosses long gone, working on those hangovers. Walking through the corridors, you can hear the echoes of your own footfalls. Calm glow of the city lights through the windows. Waiting for the clock to wind itself around to morning, and the clock's waiting for the last few punch cards to pock open the silence. Until then: the stragglers straggle into the back here, we nod at each other, an understanding, I'm here and I'll keep watch. They yawn, stretch, line up a row of chairs. Tuck themselves in under a freezer jacket, close their eyes and, numbed by cold and fatigue, drift off to sleep the sleep of the dead.