

## The Things They Left Behind

The things I want to tell you about—the ones they left behind—showed up in my apartment in August of 2002. I'm sure of that, because I found most of them not long after I helped Paula Robeson with her air conditioner. Memory always needs a marker, and that's mine. She was a children's book illustrator, good-looking (hell, *fine*-looking), husband in import-export. A man has a way of remembering occasions when he's actually able to help a good-looking lady in distress (even one who keeps assuring you she's "very married"); such occasions are all too few. These days the would-be knight errant usually just makes matters worse.

She was in the lobby, looking frustrated, when I came down for an afternoon walk. I said *Hi, howya doin'*, the way you do to other folks who share your building, and she asked me in an exasperated tone that stopped just short of querulousness why the super had to be on vacation *now*. I pointed out that even cowgirls get the blues and even supers go on vacation; that August, furthermore, was an extremely logical month to take time off. August in New York (and in Paris, *mon ami*) finds psychoanalysts, trendy artists, and building superintendents mighty thin on the ground.

She didn't smile. I'm not sure she even got the Tom Robbins reference (obliqueness is the curse of the reading class). She said it might be true about August being a good month to take off and go to the Cape or Fire Island, but her damned apartment was just about burning *up* and the damned air conditioner wouldn't so much as burp. I asked her if she'd like me to take a look, and I remember the glance she gave me—those cool, assessing gray eyes. I remember thinking that eyes like that probably saw quite a lot. And I remember smiling at what she asked me: *Are you safe?* It reminded me of that movie, not *Lolita* (thinking about *Lolita*, sometimes at two in the morning, came later) but the one where Laurence Olivier does the impromptu dental work on Dustin Hoffman, asking him over and over again, *Is it safe?*

*I'm safe*, I said. *Haven't attacked a woman in over a year. I used to attack two or three a week, but the meetings are helping.*

A giddy thing to say, but I was in a fairly giddy mood. A *summer* mood. She gave me another look, and then *she* smiled. Put out her hand. *Paula Robeson*, she said. It was the left hand she put out—not normal, but the one with the plain gold band on it. I think that was probably on purpose, don't you? But it was later that she told me about her husband being in import-export. On the day when it was my turn to ask *her* for help.

In the elevator, I told her not to expect too much. Now, if she'd wanted a man to find out the underlying causes of the New York City Draft Riots, or to supply a few amusing anecdotes about the creation of the small-pox vaccine, or even to dig up quotes on the sociological ramifications of the TV remote control (the most important invention of the last fifty years, in my 'umble opinion), I was the guy.

*Research is your game, Mr. Staley?* she asked as we went up in the slow and clattery elevator.

I admitted that it was, although I didn't add that I was still quite new to it. Nor did I ask her to call me Scott—that would have spooked her all over again. And I certainly didn't tell her that I was trying to forget all I'd once known about rural insurance. That I was, in fact, trying to forget quite a lot of things, including about two dozen

faces.

You see, I may be trying to forget, but I still remember quite a lot. I think we all do when we put our minds to it (and sometimes, rather more nastily, when we don't). I even remember something one of those South American novelists said—you know, the ones they call the Magical Realists? Not the guy's name, that's not important, but this quote: *As infants, our first victory comes in grasping some bit of the world, usually our mothers' fingers. Later we discover that the world, and the things of the world, are grasping us, and have been all along.* Borges? Yes, it might have been Borges. Or it might have been Márquez. That I *don't* remember. I just know I got her air conditioner running, and when cool air started blowing out of the convector, it lit up her whole face. I also know it's true, that thing about how perception switches around and we come to realize that the things we thought we were holding are actually holding us. Keeping us prisoner, perhaps—Thoreau certainly thought so—but also holding us in place. That's the trade-off. And no matter what Thoreau might have thought, I believe the trade is mostly a fair one. Or I did then; now, I'm not so sure. And I know these things happened in late August of 2002, not quite a year after a piece of the sky fell down and everything changed for all of us.

On an afternoon about a week after Sir Scott Staley donned his Good Samaritan armor and successfully battled the fearsome air conditioner, I took my afternoon walk to the Staples on 83rd Street to get a box of Zip discs and a ream of paper. I owed a fellow forty pages of background on the development of the Polaroid camera (which is more interesting a story than you might think). When I got back to my apartment, there was a pair of sunglasses with red frames and very distinctive lenses on the little table in the foyer where I keep bills that need to be paid, claim checks, overdue-book notices, and things of that nature. I recognized the glasses at once, and all the strength went out of me. I didn't fall, but I dropped my packages on the floor and leaned against the side of the door, trying to catch my breath and staring at those sunglasses. If there had been nothing to lean against, I believe I would have swooned like a miss in a Victorian novel—one of those where the lustful vampire appears at the stroke of midnight.

Two related but distinct emotional waves struck me. The first was that sense of horrified shame you feel when you know you're about to be caught in some act you will never be able to explain. The memory that comes to mind in this regard is of a thing that happened to me—or almost happened—when I was sixteen.

My mother and sister had gone shopping in Portland and I supposedly had the house to myself until evening. I was reclining naked on my bed with a pair of my sister's underpants wrapped around my cock. The bed was scattered with pictures I'd clipped from magazines I'd found in the back of the garage—the previous owner's stash of *Penthouse* and *Gallery* magazines, very likely. I heard a car come crunching into the driveway. No mistaking the sound of that motor; it was my mother and sister. Peg had come down with some sort of flu bug and started vomiting out the window. They'd gotten as far as Poland Springs and turned around.

I looked at the pictures scattered all over the bed, my clothes scattered all over the floor, and the foam of pink rayon in my left hand. I remember how the strength flowed out of my body, and the terrible sense of lassitude that came in its place. My

mother was yelling for me—"Scott, Scott, come down and help me with your sister, she's sick"—and I remember thinking, "What's the use? I'm caught. I might as well accept it, I'm caught and this is the first thing they'll think of when they think about me for the rest of my life: Scott, the jerk-off artist."

But more often than not a kind of survival overdrive kicks in at such moments. That's what happened to me. I might go down, I decided, but I wouldn't do so without at least an effort to save my dignity. I threw the pictures and the panties under the bed. Then I jumped into my clothes, moving with numb but sure-fingered speed, all the time thinking of this crazy old game show I used to watch, *Beat the Clock*.

I can remember how my mother touched my flushed cheek when I got downstairs, and the thoughtful concern in her eyes. "Maybe you're getting sick, too," she said. "Maybe I am," I said, and gladly enough. It was half an hour before I discovered I'd forgotten to zip my fly. Luckily, neither Peg nor my mother noticed, although on any other occasion one or both of them would have asked me if I had a license to sell hot dogs (this was what passed for wit in the house where I grew up). That day one of them was too sick and the other was too worried to be witty. So I got a total pass. Lucky me.

What followed the first emotional wave that August day in my apartment was much simpler: I thought I was going out of my mind. Because those glasses couldn't be there. Absolutely could not. No way.

Then I raised my eyes and saw something else that had most certainly not been in my apartment when I left for Staples half an hour before (locking the door behind me, as I always did). Leaning in the corner between the kitchenette and the living room was a baseball bat. Hillerich & Bradsby, according to the label. And while I couldn't see the other side, I knew what was printed there well enough: CLAIMS ADJUSTOR, the words burned into the ash with the tip of a soldering iron and then colored deep blue. Another sensation rushed through me: a third wave. This was a species of surreal dismay. I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm sure that at that moment I looked as though I had just seen one.

I felt that way, too. Yes indeed. Because those sunglasses had to be gone—long-time gone, as the Dixie Chicks say. Ditto Cleve Farrell's Claims Adjustor. ("Besboll been bery-bery good to mee," Cleve would sometimes say, waving the bat over his head as he sat at his desk. "In-SHOO-rance been bery-bery bad.")

I did the only thing I could think of, which was to grab up Sonja D'Amico's shades and trot back down to the elevator with them, holding them out in front of me the way you might hold out something nasty you found on your apartment floor after a week away on vacation—a piece of decaying food, or the body of a poisoned mouse. I found myself remembering a conversation I'd had about Sonja with a fellow named Warren Anderson. *She must have looked like she thought she was going to pop back up and ask somebody for a Coca-Cola*, I had thought when he told me what he'd seen. Over drinks in the Blarney Stone Pub on Third Avenue, this had been, about six weeks after the sky fell down. After we'd toasted each other on not being dead. Things like that have a way of sticking, whether you want them to or not. Like a musical phrase or the nonsense chorus to a pop song that you just can't get out of your head. You wake up at three in the morning, needing to take a leak, and as you stand

there in front of the bowl, your cock in your hand and your mind about ten percent awake, it comes back to you: *Like she thought she was going to pop back up. Pop back up and ask for a Coke.* At some point during that conversation Warren had asked me if I remembered her funny sunglasses, and I said I did. Sure I did.

Four floors down, Pedro the doorman was standing in the shade of the awning and talking with Rafe the FedEx man. Pedro was a serious hardboy when it came to letting deliverymen stand in front of the building—he had a seven-minute rule, a pocket watch with which to enforce it, and all the beat cops were his buddies—but he got on with Rafe, and sometimes the two of them would stand there for twenty minutes or more with their heads together, doing the old New York Yak. Politics? Baseball? The Gospel According to Henry David Thoreau? I didn't know and never cared less than on that day. They'd been there when I went up with my office supplies, and were still there when a far less carefree Scott Staley came back down. A Scott Staley who had discovered a small but noticeable hole in the column of reality. Just the two of them being there was enough for me. I walked up and held my right hand, the one with the sunglasses in it, out to Pedro.

"What would you call these?" I asked, not bothering to excuse myself or anything, just butting in headfirst.

He gave me a considering stare that said, "I am surprised at your rudeness, Mr. Staley, truly I am," then looked down at my hand. For a long moment he said nothing, and a horrible idea took possession of me: he saw nothing because there was nothing to see. Only my hand outstretched, as if this were Turnabout Tuesday and I expected *him* to tip *me*. My hand was empty. Sure it was, had to be, because Sonja D'Amico's sunglasses no longer existed. Sonja's joke shades were a long time gone.

"I call them sunglasses, Mr. Staley," Pedro said at last. "What else would I call them? Or is this some sort of trick question?"

Rafe the FedEx man, clearly more interested, took them from me. The relief of seeing him holding the sunglasses and looking at them, almost *studying* them, was like having someone scratch that exact place between your shoulder blades that itches. He stepped out from beneath the awning and held them up to the day, making a sun-star flash off each of the heart-shaped lenses.

"They're like the ones the little girl wore in that porno movie with Jeremy Irons," he said at last.

I had to grin in spite of my distress. In New York, even the deliverymen are film critics. It's one of the things to love about the place.

"That's right, *Lolita*," I said, taking the glasses back. "Only the heart-shaped sunglasses were in the version Stanley Kubrick directed. Back when Jeremy Irons was still nothing but a putter." That one hardly made sense (even to me), but I didn't give Shit One. Once again I was feeling giddy...but not in a good way. Not this time.

"Who played the pervo in that one?" Rafe asked.

I shook my head. "I'll be damned if I can remember right now."

"If you don't mind me saying," Pedro said, "you look rather pale, Mr. Staley. Are you coming down with something? The flu, perhaps?"

*No, that was my sister,* I thought of saying. *The day I came within about twenty seconds of getting caught masturbating into her panties while I looked at a picture of*

*Miss April*. But I hadn't been caught. Not then, not on 9/11, either. Fooled ya, beat the clock again. I couldn't speak for Warren Anderson, who told me in the Blarney Stone that he'd stopped on the third floor that morning to talk about the Yankees with a friend, but not getting caught had become quite a specialty of mine.

"I'm all right," I told Pedro, and while that wasn't true, knowing I wasn't the only one who saw Sonja's joke shades as a thing that actually existed in the world made me feel better, at least. If the sunglasses were in the world, probably Cleve Farrell's Hillerich & Bradsby was, too.

"Are those *the* glasses?" Rafe suddenly asked in a respectful, ready-to-be-awestruck voice. "The ones from the first *Lolita*?"

"Nope," I said, folding the bows behind the heart-shaped lenses, and as I did, the name of the girl in the Kubrick version of the film came to me: Sue Lyon. I still couldn't remember who played the pervo. "Just a knock-off."

"Is there something special about them?" Rafe asked. "Is that why you came rushing down here?"

"I don't know," I said. "Someone left them behind in my apartment."

I went upstairs before they could ask any more questions and looked around, hoping there was nothing else. But there was. In addition to the sunglasses and the baseball bat with CLAIMS ADJUSTOR burned into the side, there was a Howie's Laff-Riot Farting Cushion, a conch shell, a steel penny suspended in a Lucite cube, and a ceramic mushroom (red with white spots) that came with a ceramic Alice sitting on top of it. The Farting Cushion had belonged to Jimmy Eagleton and got a certain amount of play every year at the Christmas party. The ceramic Alice had been on Maureen Hannon's desk—a gift from her granddaughter, she'd told me once.

Maureen had the most beautiful white hair, which she wore long, to her waist. You rarely see that in a business situation, but she'd been with the company for almost forty years and felt she could wear her hair any way she liked. I remembered both the conch shell and the steel penny, but not in whose cubicles (or offices) they had been. It might come to me; it might not. There had been lots of cubicles (and offices) at Light and Bell, Insurers.

The shell, the mushroom, and the Lucite cube were on the coffee table in my living room, gathered in a neat pile. The Farting Cushion was—quite rightly, I thought—lying on top of my toilet tank, beside the current issue of Spenck's Rural Insurance Newsletter. Rural insurance used to be my specialty, as I think I told you. I knew all the odds.

What were the odds on this?

When something goes wrong in your life and you need to talk about it, I think that the first impulse for most people is to call a family member. This wasn't much of an option for me. My father put an egg in his shoe and beat it when I was two and my sister was four. My mother, no quitter she, hit the ground running and raised the two of us, man aging a mail-order clearinghouse out of our home while she did so. I believe this was a business she actually created, and she made an adequate living at it (only the first year was really scary, she told me later). She smoked like a chimney, however, and died of lung cancer at the age of forty-eight, six or eight years before the Internet might have made her a dot-com millionaire.

My sister Peg was currently living in Cleveland, where she had embraced Mary Kay cosmetics, the Indians, and fundamentalist Christianity, not necessarily in that order. If I called and told Peg about the things I'd found in my apartment, she would suggest I get down on my knees and ask Jesus to come into my life. Rightly or wrongly, I did not feel Jesus could help me with my current problem.

I was equipped with the standard number of aunts, uncles, and cousins, but most lived west of the Mississippi, and I hadn't seen any of them in years. The Killians (my mother's side of the family) have never been a reuniting bunch. A card on one's birthday and at Christmas were considered sufficient to fulfill all familial obligations. A card on Valentine's Day or at Easter was a bonus. I called my sister on Christmas or she called me, we muttered the standard crap about getting together "sometime soon," and hung up with what I imagine was mutual relief.

The next option when in trouble would probably be to invite a good friend out for a drink, explain the situation, and then ask for advice. But I was a shy boy who grew into a shy man, and in my current research job I work alone (out of preference) and thus have no colleagues apt to mature into friends. I made a few in my last job—Sonja and Cleve Farrell, to name two—but they're dead, of course.

I reasoned that if you don't have a friend you can talk to, the next-best thing would be to rent one. I could certainly afford a little therapy, and it seemed to me that a few sessions on some psychiatrist's couch (four might do the trick) would be enough for me to explain what had happened and to articulate how it made me feel. How much could four sessions set me back? Six hundred dollars? Maybe eight? That seemed a fair price for a little relief. And I thought there might be a bonus. A disinterested outsider might be able to see some simple and reasonable explanation I was just missing. To my mind the locked door between my apartment and the outside world seemed to do away with most of those, but it was *my* mind, after all; wasn't that the point? And perhaps the problem?

I had it all mapped out. During the first session I'd explain what had happened. When I came to the second one, I'd bring the items in question—sunglasses, Lucite cube, conch shell, baseball bat, ceramic mushroom, the ever-popular Farting Cushion. A little show-and-tell, just like in grammar school. That left two more during which my rent-a-pal and I could figure out the cause of this disturbing tilt in the axis of my life and set things straight again.

A single afternoon spent riffling the Yellow Pages and dialing the telephone was enough to prove to me that the idea of psychiatry was unworkable in fact, no matter how good it might be in theory. The closest I came to an actual appointment was a receptionist who told me that Dr. Jauss might be able to work me in the following January. She intimated even that would take some inspired shoehorning. The others held out no hope whatsoever. I tried half a dozen therapists in Newark and four in White Plains, even a hypnotist in Queens, with the same result. Mohammed Atta and his Suicide Patrol might have been very bery-berly bad for the city of New York (not to mention for the in-SHOO-rance business), but it was clear to me from that single fruitless afternoon on the telephone that they had been a boon to the psychiatric profession, much as the psychiatrists themselves might wish otherwise. If you wanted

to lie on some professional's couch in the summer of 2002, you had to take a number and wait in line.

I could sleep with those things in my apartment, but not well. They whispered to me. I lay awake in my bed, sometimes until two, thinking about Maureen Hannon, who felt she had reached an age (not to mention a level of indispensability) at which she could wear her amazingly long hair any way she damn well liked. Or I'd recall the various people who'd gone running around at the Christmas party, waving Jimmy Eagleton's famous Farting Cushion. It was, as I may have said, a great favorite once people got two or three drinks closer to New Year's. I remembered Bruce Mason asking me if it didn't look like an enema bag for elves—"elves," he said—and by a process of association remembered that the conch shell had been his. Of course. Bruce Mason, Lord of the Flies. And a step further down the associative food chain I found the name and face of James Mason, who had played Humbert Humbert back when Jeremy Irons was still just a putter. The mind is a wily monkey; sometime him take-a de banana, sometime him don't. Which is why I'd brought the sunglasses downstairs, although I'd been aware of no deductive process at the time. I'd only wanted confirmation. There's a George Seferis poem that asks, *Are these the voices of our dead friends, or is it just the gramophone?* Sometimes it's a good question, one you have to ask someone else. Or...listen to this.

Once, in the late eighties, near the end of a bitter two-year romance with alcohol, I woke up in my study after dozing off at my desk in the middle of the night. I staggered off to my bedroom, where, as I reached for the light switch, I saw someone moving around. I flashed on the idea (the near *certainty*) of a junkie burglar with a cheap pawnshop .32 in his trembling hand, and my heart almost came out of my chest. I turned on the light with one hand and was grabbing for something heavy off the top of my bureau with the other—anything, even the silver frame holding the picture of my mother, would have done—when I saw the prowler was me. I was staring wide-eyed back at myself from the mirror on the other side of the room, my shirt half-untucked and my hair standing up in the back. I was disgusted with myself, but I was also relieved.

I wanted this to be like that. I wanted it to be the mirror, the gramophone, even someone playing a nasty practical joke (maybe someone who knew why I hadn't been at the office on that day in September). But I knew it was none of those things. The Farting Cushion was there, an actual guest in my apartment. I could run my thumb over the buckles on Alice's ceramic shoes, slide my finger down the part in her yellow ceramic hair. I could read the date on the penny inside the Lucite cube. Bruce Mason, alias Conch Man, alias Lord of the Flies, took his big pink shell to the company shindig at Jones Beach one July and blew it, summoning people to a jolly picnic lunch of hotdogs and hamburgers. Then he tried to show Freddy Lounds how to do it. The best Freddy had been able to muster was a series of weak honking sounds like...well, like Jimmy Eagleton's Farting Cushion. Around and around it goes. Ultimately, every associative chain forms a necklace.

In late September I had a brainstorm, one of those ideas so simple you can't believe you didn't think of it sooner. Why was I holding onto this unwelcome crap, anyway? Why not just get rid of it? It wasn't as if the items were in trust; the people who owned them weren't going to come back at some later date and ask for them to be returned. The last time I'd seen Cleve Farrell's face it had been on a poster, and the last of those had been torn down by November of '01. The general (if unspoken) feeling was that such homemade homages were bumming out the tourists, who'd begun to creep back to Fun City. What had happened was horrible, most New Yorkers opined, but America was still here and Matthew Broderick would only be in *The Producers* for so long.

I'd gotten Chinese that night, from a place I like two blocks over. My plan was to eat it as I usually ate my evening meal, watching Chuck Scarborough explain the world to me. I was turning on the television when the epiphany came. They *weren't* in trust, these unwelcome souvenirs of the last safe day, nor were they evidence. There had been a crime, yes—everyone agreed to that—but the perpetrators were dead and the ones who'd set them on their crazy course were on the run. There might be trials at some future date, but Scott Staley would never be called to the stand, and Jimmy Eagleton's Farting Cushion would never be marked Exhibit A.

I left my General Tso's chicken sitting on the kitchen counter with the cover still on the aluminum dish, got a laundry bag from the shelf above my seldom-used washing machine, put the things into it (sacking them up, I couldn't believe how light they were, or how long I'd waited to do such a simple thing), and rode down in the elevator with the bag sitting between my feet. I walked to the corner of 75th and Park, looked around to make sure I wasn't being watched (God knows why I felt so furtive, but I did), then put litter in its place. I took one look back over my shoulder as I walked away. The handle of the bat poked out of the basket invitingly. Someone would come along and take it, I had no doubt. Probably before Chuck Scarborough gave way to John Seigenthaler or whoever else was sitting in for Tom Brokaw that evening.

On my way back to my apartment, I stopped at Fun Choy for a fresh order of General Tso's. "Last one no good?" asked Rose Ming, at the cash register. She spoke with some concern. "You tell why."

"No, the last one was fine," I said. "Tonight I just felt like two."

She laughed as though this were the funniest thing she'd ever heard, and I laughed, too. Hard. The kind of laughter that goes well beyond giddy. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed like that, so loudly and so naturally. Certainly not since Light and Bell, Insurers, fell into West Street.

I rode the elevator up to my floor and walked the twelve steps to 4-B. I felt the way seriously ill people must when they awaken one day, assess themselves by the sane light of morning, and discover that the fever has broken. I tucked my takeout bag under my left arm (an awkward maneuver but workable in the short run) and then unlocked my door. I turned on the light. There, on the table where I leave bills that need to be paid, claim checks, and overdue-book notices, were Sonja D'Amico's joke sunglasses, the ones with the red frames and the heart-shaped Lolita lenses. Sonja D'Amico who had, according to Warren Anderson (who was, so far as I knew, the only other surviving employee of Light and Bell's home office), jumped from the one hundred and tenth floor of the stricken building.

He claimed to have seen a photo that caught her as she dropped, Sonja with her hands placed primly on her skirt to keep it from skating up her thighs, her hair standing up



against the smoke and blue of that day's sky, the tips of her shoes pointed down. The description made me think of "Falling," the poem James Dickey wrote about the stewardess who tries to aim the plummeting stone of her body for water, as if she could come up smiling, shaking beads of water from her hair and asking for a Coca-Cola.

"I vomited," Warren told me that day in the Blarney Stone. "I never want to look at a picture like that again, Scott, but I know I'll never forget it. You could see her face, and I think she believed that somehow...yeah, that somehow she was going to be all right."

I've never screamed as an adult, but I almost did so when I looked from Sonja's sunglasses to Cleve Farrell's CLAIMS ADJUSTOR, the latter once more leaning nonchalantly in the corner by the entry to the living room. Some part of my mind must have remembered that the door to the hallway was open and both of my fourth-floor neighbors would hear me if I did scream; then, as the saying is, I would have some 'splainin to do.

I clapped my hand over my mouth to hold it in. The bag with the General Tso's chicken inside fell to the hardwood floor of the foyer and split open. I could barely bring myself to look at the resulting mess. Those dark chunks of cooked meat could have been anything.

I plopped into the single chair I keep in the foyer and put my face in my hands. I didn't scream and I didn't cry, and after a while I was able to clean up the mess. My mind kept trying to go toward the things that had beaten me back from the corner of 75th and Park, but I wouldn't let it. Each time it tried to lunge in that direction, I grabbed its leash and forced it away again.

That night, lying in bed, I listened to conversations. First the things talked (in low voices), and then the people who had owned the things replied (in slightly louder ones). Sometimes they talked about the picnic at Jones Beach—the coconut odor of suntan lotion and Lou Bega singing "Mambo No. 5" over and over from Misha Bryzinski's boom box. Or they talked about Frisbees sailing under the sky while dogs chased them. Sometimes they discussed children puddling along the wet sand with the seats of their shorts and their bathing suits sagging. Mothers in swimsuits ordered from the Lands' End catalogue walking beside them with white gloop on their noses. How many of the kids that day had lost a guardian Mom or a Frisbee-throwing Dad? Man, that was a math problem I didn't want to do. But the voices I heard in my apartment *did* want to do it. They did it over and over.

I remembered Bruce Mason blowing his conch shell and proclaiming himself the Lord of the Flies. I remembered Maureen Hannon once telling me (not at Jones Beach, not this conversation) that *Alice in Wonderland* was the first psychedelic novel. Jimmy Eagleton telling me one afternoon that his son had a learning disability to go along with his stutter, two for the price of one, and the kid was going to need a tutor in math and another one in French if he was going to get out of high school in the foreseeable future. "Before he's eligible for the AARP discount on textbooks" was how Jimmy had put it. His cheeks pale and a bit stubbly in the long afternoon light, as if that morning the razor had been dull.

I'd been drifting toward sleep, but this last one brought me fully awake again with a

start, because I realized the conversation must have taken place not long before September Eleventh. Maybe only days. Perhaps even the Friday before, which would make it the last day I'd ever seen Jimmy alive. And the l'il putter with the stutter and the learning disability: had his name actually been Jeremy, as in Jeremy Irons? Surely not, surely that was just my mind (sometime him take-a de banana) playing its little games, but it had been *close* to that, by God. Jason, maybe. Or Justin. In the wee hours everything grows, and I remember thinking that if the kid's name *did* turn out to be Jeremy, I'd probably go crazy. Straw that broke the camel's back, baby.

Around three in the morning I remembered who had owned the Lucite cube with the steel penny in it: Roland Abelson, in Liability. He called it his retirement fund. It was Roland who had a habit of saying "Lucy, you got some 'splainin to do." One night in the fall of '01, I had seen his widow on the six o'clock news. I had talked with her at one of the company picnics (very likely the one at Jones Beach) and thought then that she was pretty, but widowhood had refined that prettiness, winnowed it into severe beauty. On the news report she kept referring to her husband as "missing." She would not call him "dead." And if he *was* alive—if he ever turned up—he would have some 'splainin to do. You bet. But of course, so would she. A woman who has gone from pretty to beautiful as the result of a mass murder would certainly have some 'splainin to do.

Lying in bed and thinking of this stuff—remembering the crash of the surf at Jones Beach and the Frisbees flying under the sky—filled me with an awful sadness that finally emptied in tears. But I have to admit it was a learning experience. That was the night I came to understand that *things*—even little ones, like a penny in a Lucite cube—can get heavier as time passes. But because it's a weight of the mind, there's no mathematical formula for it, like the ones you can find in an insurance company's Blue Books, where the rate on your whole life policy goes up  $x$  if you smoke and coverage on your crops goes up  $y$  if your farm's in a tornado zone. You see what I'm saying?

It's a weight of the mind.

The following morning I gathered up all the items again, and found a seventh, this one under the couch. The guy in the cubicle next to mine, Misha Bryzinski, had kept a small pair of Punch and Judy dolls on his desk. The one I spied under my sofa with my little eye was Punch. Judy was nowhere to be found, but Punch was enough for me. Those black eyes, staring out from amid the ghost bunnies, gave me a terrible sinking feeling of dismay. I fished the doll out, hating the streak of dust it left behind. A thing that leaves a trail is a real thing, a thing with weight. No question about it. I put Punch and all the other stuff in the little utility closet just off the kitchenette, and there they stayed. At first I wasn't sure they would, but they did.

My mother once told me that if a man wiped his ass and saw blood on the toilet tissue, his response would be to shit in the dark for the next thirty days and hope for the best.

She used this example to illustrate her belief that the cornerstone of male philosophy was “If you ignore it, maybe it’ll go away.”

I ignored the things I’d found in my apartment, I hoped for the best, and things actually got a little better. I rarely heard those voices whispering in the utility closet (except late at night), although I was more and more apt to take my research chores out of the house. By the middle of November, I was spending most of my days in the New York Public Library. I’m sure the lions got used to seeing me there with my PowerBook.

Then, just before Thanksgiving, I happened to be going out of my building one day and met Paula Robeson, the maiden fair whom I’d rescued by pushing the reset button on her air conditioner, coming in.

With absolutely no forethought whatsoever—if I’d had time to think about it, I’m convinced I never would have said a word—I asked her if I could buy her lunch and talk to her about something.

“The fact is,” I said, “I have a problem. Maybe you could push my reset button.”

We were in the lobby. Pedro the doorman was sitting in the corner, reading the *Post* (and listening to every word, I have no doubt—to Pedro, his tenants were the world’s most interesting daytime drama). She gave me a smile both pleasant and nervous. “I guess I owe you one,” she said, “but...you know I’m married, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, not adding that she’d shaken with me wrong-handed so I could hardly fail to notice the ring.

She nodded. “Sure, you must’ve seen us together at least a couple of times, but he was in Europe when I had all that trouble with the air conditioner, and he’s in Europe now. Edward, that’s his name. Over the last two years he’s been in Europe more than he’s here, and although I don’t like it, I’m very married in spite of it.” Then, as a kind of afterthought, she added: “Edward is in import-export.”

*I used to be in insurance, but then one day the company exploded*, I thought of saying. In the end, I managed something a little more sane.

“I don’t want a date, Ms. Robeson,” no more than I wanted to be on a first-name basis with her, and was that a wink of disappointment I saw in her eyes? By God, I thought it was. But at least it convinced her. I was still *safe*.

She put her hands on her hips and looked at me with mock exasperation. Or maybe not so mock. “Then what *do* you want?”

“Just someone to talk to. I tried several shrinks, but they’re...busy.”

“All of them?”

“It would appear so.”

“If you’re having problems with your sex life or feeling the urge to race around town killing men in turbans, I don’t want to know about it.”

“It’s nothing like that. I’m not going to make you blush, I promise.” Which wasn’t quite the same as saying *I promise not to shock you* or *You won’t think I’m crazy*.

“Just lunch and a little advice, that’s all I’m asking. What do you say?”

I was surprised—almost flabbergasted—by my own persuasiveness. If I’d planned the conversation in advance, I almost certainly would have blown the whole deal. I suppose she was curious, and I’m sure she heard a degree of sincerity in my voice. She may also have surmised that if I was the sort of man who liked to try his hand picking up women, I would have had a go on that day in August when I’d actually been alone with her in her apartment, the elusive Edward in France or Germany. And I have to wonder how much actual desperation she saw in my face.

In any case, she agreed to have lunch with me on Friday at Donald’s Grill down the street. Donald’s may be the least romantic restaurant in all of Manhattan—good food,

fluorescent lights, waiters who make it clear they'd like you to hurry. She did so with the air of a woman paying an overdue debt about which she's nearly forgotten. This was not exactly flattering, but it was good enough for me. Noon would be fine for her, she said. If I'd meet her in the lobby, we could walk down there together. I told her that would be fine for me, too.

That night was a good one for me. I went to sleep almost immediately, and there were no dreams of Sonja D'Amico going down beside the burning building with her hands on her thighs, like a stewardess looking for water.

As we strolled down 86th Street the following day, I asked Paula where she'd been when she heard.

"San Francisco," she said. "Fast asleep in a Wradling Hotel suite with Edward beside me, undoubtedly snoring as usual. I was coming back here on September twelfth and Edward was going on to Los Angeles for meetings. The hotel management actually rang the fire alarm."

"That must have scared the hell out of you."

"It did, although my first thought wasn't fire but earthquake. Then this disembodied voice came through the speakers, telling us that there was no fire in the hotel, but a hell of a big one in New York."

"Jesus."

"Hearing it like that, in bed in a strange room...hearing it come down from the ceiling like the voice of God..." She shook her head. Her lips were pressed so tightly together that her lipstick almost disappeared. "That was very frightening. I suppose I understand the urge to pass on news like that, and immediately, but I still haven't entirely forgiven the management of the Wradling for doing it that way. I don't think I'll be staying there again."

"Did your husband go on to his meetings?"

"They were canceled. I imagine a lot of meetings were canceled that day. We stayed in bed with the TV on until the sun came up, trying to get our heads around it. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"We talked about who might have been there that we knew. I suppose we weren't the only ones doing that, either."

"Did you come up with anyone?"

"A broker from Shearson Lehman and the assistant manager of the Borders book store in the mall," she said. "One of them was all right. One of them...well, you know, one of them wasn't. What about you?"

So I didn't have to sneak up on it, after all. We weren't even at the restaurant yet and here it was.

"I would have been there," I said. "I *should* have been there. It's where I worked. In an insurance company on the hundred and tenth floor."

She stopped dead on the sidewalk, looking up at me, eyes wide. I suppose to the people who had to veer around us, we must have looked like lovers. "Scott, *no!*"

"Scott, yes," I said. And finally told someone about how I woke up on September Eleventh expecting to do all the things I usually did on weekdays, from the cup of black coffee while I shaved all the way to the cup of cocoa in front of the midnight

news summary on Channel Thirteen. A day like any other day, that was what I had in mind. I think that is what Americans had come to expect as their right. Well, guess what? That's an airplane! Flying into the side of a skyscraper! Ha-ha, asshole, the joke's on you, and half the goddam world's laughing!

I told her about looking out my apartment window and seeing the seven A.M. sky was perfectly cloudless, the sort of blue so deep you think you can almost see through it to the stars beyond. Then I told her about the voice. I think everyone has various voices in their heads and we get used to them. When I was sixteen, one of mine spoke up and suggested it might be quite a kick to masturbate into a pair of my sister's underpants.

*She has about a thousand pairs and surely won't miss one, y'all*, the voice opined. (I did not tell Paula Robeson about this particular adolescent adventure.) I'd have to call that the voice of utter irresponsibility, more familiarly known as Mr. Yow, Git Down.

"Mr. Yow, Git Down?" Paula asked doubtfully.

"In honor of James Brown, the King of Soul."

"If you say so."

Mr. Yow, Git Down had had less and less to say to me, especially since I'd pretty much given up drinking, and on that day he awoke from his doze just long enough to speak a dozen words, but they were life-changers. Life-savers.

The first five (that's me, sitting on the edge of the bed): *Yow, call in sick, y'all!* The next seven (that's me, plodding toward the shower and scratching my left buttock as I go): *Yow, spend the day in Central Park!* There was no premonition involved. It was clearly Mr. Yow, Git Down, not the voice of God. It was just a version of my very own voice (as they all are), in other words, telling me to play hooky. *Do a little suffin fo' yo'self, Gre't God!* The last time I could recall hearing this version of my voice, the subject had been a karaoke contest at a bar on Amsterdam Avenue: *Yow, sing along wit' Neil Diamond, fool—git up on stage and git ya bad self down!*

"I guess I know what you mean," she said, smiling a little.

"Do you?"

"Well...I once took off my shirt in a Key West bar and won ten dollars dancing to 'Honky Tonk Women.'" She paused. "Edward doesn't know, and if you ever tell him, I'll be forced to stab you in the eye with one of his tie tacks."

"Yow, you go, girl," I said, and her smile became a rather wistful grin. It made her look younger. I thought this had a chance of working.

We walked into Donald's. There was a cardboard turkey on the door, cardboard Pilgrims on the green tile wall above the steam table.

"I listened to Mr. Yow, Git Down and I'm here," I said. "But some other things are here, too, and he can't help with them. They're things I can't seem to get rid of. Those are what I want to talk to you about."

"Let me repeat that I'm no shrink," she said, and with more than a trace of uneasiness. The grin was gone. "I majored in German and minored in European history."

*You and your husband must have a lot to talk about*, I thought. What I said out loud was that it didn't have to be her, necessarily, just someone.

"All right. Just as long as you know."

A waiter took our drink orders, decaf for her, regular for me. Once he went away she asked me what things I was talking about.

"This is one of them." From my pocket I withdrew the Lucite cube with the steel penny suspended inside it and put it on the table. Then I told her about the other things, and to whom they had belonged. Cleve "Besboll been bery-bery good to me" Farrell. Maureen Hannon, who wore her hair long to her waist as a sign of her corporate indispensability. Jimmy Eagleton, who had a divine nose for phony accident

claims, a son with learning disabilities, and a Farting Cushion he kept safely tucked away in his desk until the Christmas party rolled around each year. Sonja D'Amico, Light and Bell's best accountant, who had gotten the Lolita sunglasses as a bitter divorce present from her first husband. Bruce "Lord of the Flies" Mason, who would always stand shirtless in my mind's eye, blowing his conch on Jones Beach while the waves rolled up and expired around his bare feet. Last of all, Misha Bryzinski, with whom I'd gone to at least a dozen Mets games. I told her about putting everything but Misha's Punch doll in a trash basket on the corner of Park and 75th, and how they had beaten me back to my apartment, possibly because I had stopped for a second order of General Tso's chicken. During all of this, the Lucite cube stood on the table between us. We managed to eat at least some of our meal in spite of his stern profile.

When I was finished talking, I felt better than I'd dared to hope. But there was a silence from her side of the table that felt terribly heavy.

"So," I said, to break it. "What do you think?"

She took a moment to consider that, and I didn't blame her. "I think that we're not the strangers we were," she said finally, "and making a new friend is never a bad thing. I think I'm glad I know about Mr. Yow, Git Down and that I told you what I did."

"I am, too." And it was true.

"Now may I ask you two questions?"

"Of course."

"How much of what they call 'survivor guilt' are you feeling?"

"I thought you said you weren't a shrink."

"I'm not, but I read the magazines and have even been known to watch *Oprah*. That my husband *does* know, although I prefer not to rub his nose in it. So...how much, Scott?"

I considered the question. It was a good one—and, of course, it was one I'd asked myself on more than one of those sleepless nights. "Quite a lot," I said. "Also, quite a lot of relief, I won't lie about that. If Mr. Yow, Git Down was a real person, he'd never have to pick up another restaurant tab. Not when I was with him, at least." I paused. "Does that shock you?"

She reached across the table and briefly touched my hand. "Not even a little."

Hearing her say that made me feel better than I would have believed. I gave her hand a brief squeeze and then let it go. "What's your other question?"

"How important to you is it that I believe your story about these things coming back?"

I thought this was an excellent question, even though the Lucite cube was right there next to the sugar bowl. Such items are not exactly rare, after all. And I thought that if she *had* majored in psychology rather than German, she probably would have done fine.

"Not as important as I thought an hour ago," I said. "Just telling it has been a help."

She nodded and smiled. "Good. Now here's my best guess: someone is very likely playing a game with you. Not a nice one."

"Trickin' on me," I said. I tried not to show it, but I'd rarely been so disappointed. Maybe a layer of disbelief settles over people in certain circumstances, protecting them. Or maybe—probably—I hadn't conveyed my own sense that this thing was just...happening. *Still* happening. The way avalanches do.

"Trickin' on you," she agreed, and then: "But you don't believe it."

More points for perception. I nodded. "I locked the door when I went out, and it was locked when I came back from Staples. I heard the clunk the tumblers make when they turn. They're loud. You can't miss them."

"Still...survivor guilt is a funny thing. And powerful, at least according to the

magazines.”

“This...” *This isn’t survivor guilt* was what I meant to say, but it would have been the wrong thing. I had a fighting chance to make a new friend here, and having a new friend would be good, no matter how the rest of this came out. So I amended it. “I don’t think this is survivor guilt.” I pointed to the Lucite cube. “It’s right there, isn’t it? Like Sonja’s sunglasses. You see it. I do, too. I suppose I could have bought it myself, but...” I shrugged, trying to convey what we both surely knew: *anything* is possible. “I don’t think you did that. But neither can I accept the idea that a trapdoor opened between reality and the twilight zone and these things fell out.”

Yes, that was the problem. For Paula the idea that the Lucite cube and the other things which had appeared in my apartment had some supernatural origin was automatically off-limits, no matter how much the facts might seem to support the idea. What I needed to do was to decide if I needed to argue the point more than I needed to make a friend.

I decided I did not.

“All right,” I said. I caught the waiter’s eye and made a check-writing gesture in the air. “I can accept your inability to accept.”

“Can you?” she asked, looking at me closely.

“Yes.” And I thought it was true. “If, that is, we could have a cup of coffee from time to time. Or just say hi in the lobby.”

“Absolutely.” But she sounded absent, not really in the conversation. She was looking at the Lucite cube with the steel penny inside it. Then she looked up at me. I could almost see a lightbulb appearing over her head, like in a cartoon. She reached out and grasped the cube with one hand. I could never convey the depth of the dread I felt when she did that, but what could I say? We were New Yorkers in a clean, well-lighted place. For her part, she’d already laid down the ground rules, and they pretty firmly excluded the supernatural. The supernatural was out of bounds. Anything hit there was a do-over.

And there was a light in Paula’s eyes. One that suggested Ms. Yow, Git Down was in the house, and I know from personal experience that’s a hard voice to resist.

“Give it to me,” she proposed, smiling into my eyes. When she did that I could see—for the first time, really—that she was sexy as well as pretty.

“Why?” As if I didn’t know.

“Call it my fee for listening to your story.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good—”

“It is, though,” she said. She was warming to her own inspiration, and when people do that, they rarely take no for an answer. “It’s a *great* idea. I’ll make sure this piece of memorabilia at least doesn’t come back to you, wagging its tail behind it. We’ve got a safe in the apartment.” She made a charming little pantomime gesture of shutting a safe door, twirling the combination, and then throwing the key back over her shoulder. “All right,” I said. “It’s my gift to you.” And I felt something that might have been mean-spirited gladness. Call it the voice of Mr. Yow, You’ll Find Out. Apparently just getting it off my chest wasn’t enough, after all. She hadn’t believed me, and at least part of me *did* want to be believed and resented Paula for not getting what it wanted. That part knew that letting her take the Lucite cube was an absolutely terrible idea, but was glad to see her tuck it away in her purse, just the same.

“There,” she said briskly. “Mama say bye-bye, make all gone. Maybe when it doesn’t come back in a week—or two, I guess it all depends on how stubborn your subconscious wants to be—you can start giving the rest of the things away.” And her saying that was her real gift to me that day, although I didn’t know it then.

"Maybe so," I said, and smiled. Big smile for the new friend. Big smile for pretty Mama. All the time thinking, You'll find out.  
Yow.

She did.

Three nights later, while I was watching Chuck Scarborough explain the city's latest transit woes on the six o'clock news, my doorbell rang. Since no one had been announced, I assumed it was a package, maybe even Rafe with something from FedEx. I opened the door and there stood Paula Robeson.

This was not the woman with whom I'd had lunch. Call this version of Paula Ms. Yow, Ain't That Chemotherapy *Nasty*. She was wearing a little lipstick but nothing else in the way of makeup, and her complexion was a sickly shade of yellow-white. There were dark brownish purple arcs under her eyes. She might have given her hair a token swipe with the brush before coming down from the fifth floor, but it hadn't done much good. It looked like straw and stuck out on either side of her head in a way that would have been comic-strip funny under other circumstances. She was holding the Lucite cube up in front of her breasts, allowing me to note that the well-kept nails on that hand were gone. She'd chewed them away, right down to the quick. And my first thought, God help me, was *yep, she found out*.

She held it out to me. "Take it back," she said.

I did so without a word.

"His name was Roland Abelson," she said. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"He had red hair."

"Yes."

"Not married but paying child support to a woman in Rahway."

I hadn't known that—didn't believe *anyone* at Light and Bell had known that—but I nodded again, and not just to keep her rolling. I was sure she was right. "What was her name, Paula?" Not knowing why I was asking, not yet, just knowing I had to know.

"Tonya Gregson." It was as if she was in a trance. There was something in her eyes, though, something so terrible I could hardly stand to look at it. Nevertheless, I stored the name away. *Tonya Gregson, Rahway*. And then, like some guy doing stockroom inventory: *One Lucite cube with penny inside*.

"He tried to crawl under his desk, did you know that? No, I can see you didn't. His hair was on fire and he was crying. Because in that instant he understood he was never going to own a catamaran or even mow his lawn again." She reached out and put a hand on my cheek, a gesture so intimate it would have been shocking even if her hand had not been so cold. "At the end, he would have given every cent he had, and every stock option he held, just to be able to mow his lawn again. Do you believe that?"

"Yes."

"The place was full of screams, he could smell jet fuel, and *he understood it was his dying hour*. Do you understand that? Do you understand the *enormity* of that?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak. You could have put a gun to my head and I still wouldn't have been able to speak.



"The politicians talk about memorials and courage and wars to end terrorism, but burning hair is apolitical." She bared her teeth in an unspeakable grin. A moment later it was gone. "He was trying to crawl under his desk with his hair on fire. There was a plastic thing under his desk, a what-do-you-call it—"

"Mat—"

"Yes, a mat, a plastic mat, and his hands were on that and he could feel the ridges in the plastic and smell his own burning hair. Do you understand that?"

I nodded. I started to cry. It was Roland Abelson we were talking about, this guy I used to work with. He was in Liability and I didn't know him very well. To say hi to is all; how was I supposed to know he had a kid in Rahway? And if I hadn't played hooky that day, my hair probably would have burned, too. I'd never really understood that before.

"I don't want to see you again," she said. She flashed her gruesome grin once more, but now she was crying, too. "I don't care about your problems. I don't care about any of the shit you found. We're quits. From now on you leave me alone." She started to turn away, then turned back. She said: "They did it in the name of God, but there is no God. If there was a God, Mr. Staley, He would have struck all eighteen of them dead in their boarding lounges with their boarding passes in their hands, but no God did. They called for passengers to get on and those fucks just got on."

I watched her walk back to the elevator. Her back was very stiff. Her hair stuck out on either side of her head, making her look like a girl in a Sunday funnies cartoon. She didn't want to see me anymore, and I didn't blame her. I closed the door and looked at the steel Abe Lincoln in the Lucite cube. I looked at him for quite a long time. I thought about how the hair of his beard would have smelled if U.S. Grant had stuck one of his everlasting cigars in it. That unpleasant frying aroma. On TV, someone was saying that there was a mattress blowout going on at Sleepy's. After that, Len Berman came on and talked about the Jets.

That night I woke up at two in the morning, listening to the voices whisper. I hadn't had any dreams or visions of the people who owned the objects, hadn't seen anyone with their hair on fire or jumping from the windows to escape the burning jet fuel, but why would I? I knew who they were, and the things they left behind had been left for me. Letting Paula Robeson take the Lucite cube had been wrong, but only because she was the wrong person.

And speaking of Paula, one of the voices was hers. *You can start giving the rest of the things away*, it said. And it said, *I guess it all depends on how stubborn your subconscious wants to be*.

I lay back down and after a while I was able to go to sleep. I dreamed I was in Central Park, feeding the ducks, when all at once there was a loud noise like a sonic boom and smoke filled the sky. In my dream, the smoke smelled like burning hair.

I thought about Tonya Gregson in Rahway—Tonya and the child who might or might

not have Roland Abelson's eyes—and thought I'd have to work up to that one. I decided to start with Bruce Mason's widow.

I took the train to Dobbs Ferry and called a taxi from the station. The cabbie took me to a Cape Cod house on a residential street. I gave him some money, told him to wait—I wouldn't be long—and rang the doorbell. I had a box under one arm. It looked like the kind that contains a bakery cake.

I only had to ring once because I'd called ahead and Janice Mason was expecting me. I had my story carefully prepared and told it with some confidence, knowing that the taxi sitting in the driveway, its meter running, would forestall any detailed cross-examination.

On September seventh, I said—the Friday before—I had tried to blow a note from the conch Bruce kept on his desk, as I had heard Bruce himself do at the Jones Beach picnic. (Janice, Mrs. Lord of the Flies, nodding; she had been there, of course.) Well, I said, to make a long story short, I had persuaded Bruce to let me have the conch shell over the weekend so I could practice. Then, on Tuesday morning, I'd awakened with a raging sinus infection and a horrible headache to go with it. (This was a story I had already told several people.) I'd been drinking a cup of tea when I heard the boom and saw the rising smoke. I hadn't thought of the conch shell again until just this week. I'd been cleaning out my little utility closet and by damn, there it was. And I just thought...well, it's not much of a keepsake, but I just thought maybe you'd like to...you know...

Her eyes filled up with tears just as mine had when Paula brought back Roland Abelson's "retirement fund," only these weren't accompanied by the look of fright that I'm sure was on my own face as Paula stood there with her stiff hair sticking out on either side of her head. Janice told me she would be glad to have any keepsake of Bruce.

"I can't get over the way we said good-bye," she said, holding the box in her arms.

"He always left very early because he took the train. He kissed me on the cheek and I opened one eye and asked him if he'd bring back a pint of half-and-half. He said he would. That's the last thing he ever said to me. When he asked me to marry him, I felt like Helen of Troy—stupid but absolutely true—and I wish I'd said something better than 'Bring home a pint of half-and-half.' But we'd been married a long time, and it seemed like business as usual that day, and...we don't know, do we?"

"No."

"Yes. Any parting could be forever, and we don't know. Thank you, Mr. Staley. For coming out and bringing me this. That was very kind." She smiled a little then. "Do you remember how he stood on the beach with his shirt off and blew it?"

"Yes," I said, and looked at the way she held the box. Later she would sit down and take the shell out and hold it on her lap and cry. I knew that the conch, at least, would never come back to my apartment. It was home.

I returned to the station and caught the train back to New York. The cars were almost empty at that time of day, early afternoon, and I sat by a rain-and dirt-streaked window, looking out at the river and the approaching skyline. On cloudy and rainy days, you almost seem to be creating that skyline out of your own imagination, a piece at a time.

Tomorrow I'd go to Rahway, with the penny in the Lucite cube. Perhaps the child would take it in his or her chubby hand and look at it curiously. In any case, it would be out of my life. I thought the only difficult thing to get rid of would be Jimmy Eagleton's Farting Cushion—I could hardly tell Mrs. Eagleton I'd brought it home for the weekend in order to practice using it, could I? But necessity is the mother of invention, and I was confident that I would eventually think of some halfway plausible story.

It occurred to me that other things might show up, in time. And I'd be lying if I told you I found that possibility entirely unpleasant. When it comes to returning things which people believe have been lost forever, things that have *weight*, there are compensations. Even if they're only little things, like a pair of joke sunglasses or a steel penny in a Lucite cube...yeah. I'd have to say there are compensations.