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BAPTISM

AT FIRST THE SOUND OF THE HORN WAS REMOTE, not even faint like the sound was in a dream, but as if it were part of the things you already know at the outset, when the dream begins. The sound began to build and solidify, gently, gelling into certainty, a distant belch of thunder, a television perhaps left on upstairs, the percussion of a child who may have coughed. Before long, he was aware of a definite sound, felt faculties focusing, perceived closeness to waking. Was conscious of trying to recover the dream, because it seemed sweet and cool and comforting, but it was gone in a breath of feathers. With no point any longer in resisting, opened his eyes.

Couldn't see well because there was some kind of schmutz on his eyes and when he wiped them clean with a sleeve he was confronted with a confusing sight. Before him the windshield was a map of cracks, and an airbag billowed against his chest like a hated aunt. The horn was extremely loud—in fact it may have been a blend of several horns—and the air in the car was ribboned with a bad smell. Reached down for his seat belt buckle, having to wrestle with the air bag, and he began to feel a sheen of sweat and an awareness of the sticky heat inside. But a few seconds more and the seat belt was released and he could clamber out of the car.

Found himself standing next to his car at a treeless intersection, on a median of tan grass in the diffident sunshine. From the outside, he could see that the car he had just escaped had been struck on the front driver's fender by another vehicle. This had taken down a light pole and some plants in the process but spared a yellow advertising sign that stood low to the ground on two spindly sticks. People watched from a distance but no ambulances or police cars—they stood outside a post office four lanes away. The other two corners of the intersection were fronted by sound-attenuating rock walls. He concentrated on those rocks for a moment, and they triggered some memory in some obscure fashion and he was cognizant of an overwhelming feeling of being late. Tried to tamp down this urgency but it crowded out his thoughts until he almost sobbed. He could not remember what it was, but

he was terribly late for something and this apparent collision, besides being terrible in its own right, intrinsically, was interfering with the crucial mission.

The car that had struck his own actually looked to be in somewhat better condition, bottlefly-green chassis slightly creased like a worn dollar, all four tires looking good. It had bounced away from his car and had one wheel up on a newspaper box. The driver lay with his head against the steering wheel, no air bag deployed.

Put his arms under the other driver's armpits and gently dragged the driver to the grass, figuring that was a place that rescuers could more easily reach. Then he gingerly perched himself in the driver's seat of the green car.

The newspaper box was an obstinate impediment, and the engine of the green car ground defiantly as he gunned it, but with a lurch he successfully backed off, into the empty lane of one of the roads joining at the intersection. The light was red but there was no crossing traffic and he made a left to avoid waiting for the oncoming cars to pass when the light turned. Instinct was that his destination required him to take the highway to the left. The instrument panel of the other driver's car was hysterical with warning lights and something was wrong with the seat belt sensor because it rang for five minutes though his belt was fastened. On top of everything else he could not find the on/off for the radio, and it screeched at him from some static-choked netherworld until he turned the volume all the way down, leaving a residue at the edges of his hearing. But at least he was away from the horn. Or horns.

He recognized the road as one leading to a larger numbered highway but still could not recall why he was heading in that direction. It was not the way to work. He looked around the other man's car for any kind of a phone so he could give work a call, but there was nothing, and what would he tell them? That he had to do something before he could get to work but couldn't say what it was? He could not read the clock in the other man's car but was filled, full, jammed, replete, suffused with the feeling of being late, as though he were already late, now, and still had ahead of him a long drive.

For three miles to the numbered highway he needled his memory, but the nature of his destination edged away from him without appearing. He tried to reconstruct his day, but with panic he realized that his day was a blank. He couldn't visualize getting up, eating breakfast, taking a shower, shaving. Felt his face—his chin was smooth. So he had shaved. Did he use an electric razor or a disposable? He remembered that there existed electric

razors and disposables but could not recall which he had used. Then he tried to picture himself eating breakfast but saw nothing. He could visualize his favourite coffee place and tried to imagine himself buying a cup. A flirtatious old woman handed him a cup in his memory and said “Have a nice day, Mister,” but the “Mister” was not the end of the sentence but the formal address for his last name, which the coffee lady did not pronounce in his memory. He tried to replay that part, but it stopped at the same place. He was thus forced to admit that he did not, at present, know his own name.

Presumably he'd had a concussion in the car accident, he reasoned practically. Concussions were temporary and his memory would probably come back. How soon does the memory come back? He didn't have any inclination toward an answer. Logically, he might be wise to check into a hospital or at least chill a bit at home until the amnesia passed. He didn't know where home was but he could probably find it, and there were square blue H signs on the roads so finding a hospital would probably be straightforward. But the urgency of the place he was seeking overrode this idea—he could relax and gather his wits after he handled this task. He was so late for it already—he could not recall what it was, or where, or when he was due, but he knew he was late. He looked at his watch but his watch was shattered. Strangely, this only exacerbated his feeling of being late because he could not even keep track of the time but would have to proceed by dead reckoning.

A bolt from his memory reminded him that he would receive emails on his smart phone and these would show his name at the top. He looked down at the cupholder where he usually placed his phone while driving, but saw again that he was not in his own car. The radio might give the time, he realized, so he turned the volume up and found his favorite news station, the frequency of which popped easily into his head. The radio announcer stated that it was 9:30 A.M. on June 28th and gave a year in the future. He puzzled over this for several minutes. The current year was 1998, and he could call up some details about 1998 like who won the Super Bowl and the last movie he saw. But he realized on some weird level that something was wrong with that. He wasn't sure he could drive in 1998, for example, and it felt wrong that people had smart phones in 1998. Hypothetically, the current year might really be the one identified by the radio, and the amnesia could be interfering with his recall of anything specific after 1998. He returned to the memory of buying the coffee and tried to flesh out the image of himself in the picture. Was he a teenager in the image? A man who had just started a new job? Or his present self? He noticed that the car's centre

mirror was unscratched, so if he wanted he could look at himself and check for gray hair, wrinkles, other signs that would mark his age. He did not take a look, but it helped his confidence a little to know this step was possible. In his back pocket, as they say sometimes.

A car honked and he looked up to see the green light at the numbered highway—he would have to decide to go east or west. He chose west without hesitation. The road and its billboards and gas stations and signs looked familiar. He cautiously tried to pop a destination out of his memory, sidling up to it like a hunted fly.

The answer did not come, but he found his memory on the borderline of another scene, and he carefully let it blossom in hopes that it would lead him somewhere. It felt newer than 1998 so it could be a sign that his more recent memories were coming back. The memory scene was in another car, and he had a sensation that it was a used car and not in good shape, and in the memory there was a tumult of fast food wrappers in the passenger's foot space. There were taco wrappers, he knew, and on the passenger seat there was a cassette tape with the film pulled out and damaged like the innards of a pumpkin, and in his memory he was sweaty and overheated because the used car had no air conditioning. He was driving around his college town looking for something and was forced to detour onto an unfamiliar road, where he found himself caught in a traffic jam going the wrong direction on a road that was useless to him. "Holzworth Road" popped into his brain—this was the turnoff he had been seeking in that memory, seeking and never finding. He suddenly remembered it was for a job interview, an interview that never happened because he became lost on his way.

The Holzworth Road incident was after his sophomore year at College in 2003, so he was getting closer to the present. He tried to tease up some facts about the doomed interview, but what arose more vividly were the emotions, the clenched frustration, and the dull coin of disappointment in his stomach. His feeling was not only of a missed opportunity but of a pretense exposed, feeling not only that he had lost his chance at the Holzworth Road job but that he had never merited consideration and the mishap on the road only dissolved a delusion. He remembered that he had bought and consumed most of a six-pack after realizing the interview could not be made. And suddenly he had an extremely clear snapshot, leaning against his overheating car in the parking lot of an urban liquor store, watching eight lanes of traffic pour by, their passage witnessed impassively by a peeling billboard for Italian rolls.

He tried to work his way back from the Holzworth Road incident. Could

he recall what kind of job he was interviewing for? What was his next interview? When he replaced that junker with something respectable? Any of these threads could bridge him to the current year but they floated away like spots in one's eyesight. He did the math—2003 was many years before the one claimed by the radio—he would have to find many bridges.

On the numbered road he noticed a faux gaslight lamp on one side of the entrance to the furniture store. His memory instantly played an image of a similar gaslight, illuminated in the heartsick September sunset, outside the suburban mansion of his father's superior from work. There was some sort of pang associated with this scene. He heard the swearing of crickets in the memory, more vividly than sounds usually sound in a memory, and he saw that he was talking to someone in the light of these lamps. The boss' daughter, he remembered, and he knew it was the first and last time he met her, and he felt the sick weak steam of his crush on her as perfectly as if some wretch had bottled it that night to use against him later, so intensely that he gasped out loud.

But that must have been even earlier than the job interview, he realized. Had he been eleven? Twelve? He was going the wrong way.

The car he was driving chimed at him, and one of the warning icons cut through his fugue and he realized that he needed gas. He pulled into a gas station of an unfamiliar brand and stammered when he saw the numbers on the price board. Apparently sometime after 1998 they had gone back to the lame 1970s trick of charging by the litre. But wouldn't that make the prices seem lower? He pulled into the station but hesitated before docking at a pump with a panicky vibe that he had no cash, and if he did not know his own name he could not sign a name on the charge slip. He trembled out his wallet and confirmed that there was no more than a few singles in there. The first credit card he found had a signature strip on the back and he squinted at it with a slight relief because he thought he could probably fake the name written there. Then he turned it over and read the embossed characters: Richard Hutchinson. He was Richard Hutchinson.

He waited for this knowledge of his own name to unlock the floodgates of memory. He closed his eyes and saw nothing but the coffee shop lady telling him to have a nice day but now saying "Have a nice day, Mr. Hutchinson." At any rate he could buy gas now, he considered sensibly.

The attendant pumped the gas, which was a nice change from 1998, and expressed a concern to Hutchinson that his car was not safe to drive. Hutchinson promised him that he planned to get it repaired just as soon as he took care of some urgent business.

Afterward, he regarded the road from the driveway of the filling station and felt a needle of anxiety because the road suddenly looked completely alien, and once he was on the road he needed a mile or two to find it familiar again. That was always the way—one could drive a road daily and never notice the local features that could look so strange when they were seen out of context. But the feeling thankfully subsided, and he started to recognize the woody stretch of road.

A few miles further along, and the scenery began looking so familiar that he dared to hope the amnesia was starting to lift. But nothing else came with it—only the road. The farmstands and subdivisions, decrepit pickups and diners, post offices and trailer parks, seemed friendly and known, along with the unlikely motels and churches with witty sermon boards and a particular abandoned home, windows boarded, slats in the old hayloft askew as if pushed aside for a defender's rifle. And not only the man-made items on the road, but the trees, sometimes close by the highway and sometimes at a distance like a shy hound, but always visible. At a red light, he looked hard at the trees on his right and recognized the shape of their clusters, where they bulged and where they were thin and where they were veined with little roads. They stood, disapproving and prehistoric, and the manufactured objects in the scene seemed like a pretense.

Something about his glimpse of the woods bothered him and he looked over at them again at the next red light. There was a malevolence in their bearing, set back from the road with a buffer of grass as though the grass was for the protection of those on the road and the trees were mobile, fluid and feral, a monstrous peril held back only temporarily but ignored by most in their terror. The trees crowded each other heedless and impatient, but then suddenly looked ordinary again, and he hit the accelerator again and proceeded.

To test whether these woods were truly familiar or if the recognition was a symptom of his concussion, he tried to predict something. "There will be a bar called Connie's Place," he said to himself, and he saw the bar within five minutes.

These landmarks were leading him somewhere, somewhere to do with childhood, the miles falling behind him like veils, like the lyrics one recovers to a song long unheard and long unthought of. The landmarks had some kind of significance to his mission, but that instinct was wrong or seemed wrong because the woods had to do with his past but the obligation for which he was late had to do with his present. He hoped he hadn't been led astray by some chance reminder of his youth but each spot he recognized drove his

urgency higher. He saw a sun-blached sign for Cavender Road and turned on it without hesitation. When he saw the redwood fence of a horse farm, and knew there would be a John Deere on blocks near the tree line, and then saw the tractor, he caught a sob of relief in his throat. Whatever he was late for, it was near here and he was almost there.

Cautiously and patiently, he waited for his identity to float out of this fertile soil, but still—nothing. He tried to place himself here as a child, but nothing. Maybe he had ridden here on a schoolbus—he tried to imagine himself looking through the smeared window of a bus and seeing the John Deere on blocks, but nothing would come. And then he knew it was time to turn again and he had to hold off on the memory fishing.

The next turn nearly screamed at him though it was an unmarked driveway that led into the woods and seemed to have room for only one car. He took it with his heart pounding, feeling certain that he had finally reached his destination. Low tree branches slapped the roof of the car and he doubted. Maybe this path only resembled something from his youth and he was about to drive into a lake or something. But then the gravel passage opened into a grassy circle, surrounded by very tall pines. There were other cars parked here, angled on different tangents, one with its fender nearly wedged against a picnic table. On the other side of the circle was a long tent, and he could see a man keeping guard outside the tent with a clipboard.

He had to park the car in a side area off the circle with quite a walk to the long tent. It was very hot—the air shimmered and walking through it felt like it was the middle of a rain of drops that had stalled in midair from the torpor. By the time he reached the circle of cars, his face had undergone a baptism of sweat.

The clipboard man looked up and saw him and waited. Whether the clipboard man was waiting for him personally or was there to meet anyone who happened by, he couldn't guess. When he was two yards away, the heat really hit him and his knees felt sore. There was no place to sit and anyway he could sit when he had kept his appointment. While he stood, waiting for a second wind, another man in attire similar to the clipboard man came out of the tent with a small boy and a bearded man in a business suit. The business suit man and the boy strode to an SUV that was parked on the circle, the boy clutching a paper taken from an archery target. The other man talked to the clipboard man.

They both looked at him expectantly.

"Hello," he greeted. "Here I am." That sounded ridiculous.

"Where's your son?" asked the man who had come from the tent. He,

and the clipboard man too, of course, wore a red polo shirt. He seemed to be speaking for both of the red-shirted men.

The question seemed nonsensical.

“Mr. Hutchinson, have you been in an accident?”

He nodded—knew the answer to that question. “I believe I have.” Hutchinson still stood a few yards away, hoping the familiar scenery would unlock the memories. He closed his eyes awaiting a warm flood.

“Mr. Hutchinson, where is your son?” The clipboard man spoke slowly as to someone who didn’t speak English. “Do you have your son?”

“He’s in shock,” said the other red-shirted man. That man scurried into the tent, and within moments there were several other young people in red shirts swarming out. Hutchinson beamed and joked with them that they were running like they had heard the ice cream truck. A red-headed girl in flip-flops took his elbow and led him over to a jeep and had him sit on the tailgate; why, he did not understand. The tailgate was dusty. He sat and put his head in his hands while five or six red shirts discussed something in a language that kept shifting in and out of English. A particularly thick drop of perspiration slid off his inclined forehead and made a spot in the dust.