So, I Sit

So, I sit here, in this moment, in this institutional recliner upholstered in mint green vinyl that I inherited from the last man who occupied this same room until he died. My feet and legs, encased in white support stockings, are therapeutically propped ("We mustn't let our ankles swell," they declare, quoting chapter and verse from a book they read in Aging 101); my lower half is covered by a thin, off-white blanket that doesn't compliment the gray sweat pants I also inherited and that are just a bit too short and too big in the waist—another laundry mix up, no further explanation necessary or forthcoming.

I am looking out a large picture window, gazing at the thinly spaced stands of trees that frame the parking lot and give this facility—as they refer to it—its official name. Most of us who live here call it something less arboreal.

It is late afternoon in late October, and the red, yellow, and gold leaves, products of summer's lush and abundant harvest, swirl and spiral, caught in a brisk and certain wind that carries the first unsettling sting of winter. Projecting from the sliver of western sky I can just make out in the distance, long shafts of early twilight suffuse through the glass, magnifying the white streaks left by the housekeeper over a month ago.

And as I continue to process this panorama, I remember that Sherlock Holmes is fond of saying (usually to Watson): "You see but you do not observe." So, I try to observe. My old-man's eyes strain to observe, to interpret the larger meaning of this scene the way a hand gropes for familiar flesh in the darkness of a long, cold night. Too often, that hand comes up empty. Then, adding perspective as well as complexity to the interpretation, in the distance, I can plainly hear—even though I can no longer detect a whispered voice when it's less than a yard away—a train blowing its horn, long and loud and mournful.

On my lap is a leather-bound book so thick that it presses uncomfortably into my cloth-covered crotch. The title declares in large and faded gold script, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. I don't

remember how it got in my lap. I don't remember how it got in my room. At one point in my life, I had over a thousand books in my collection, but this impressive tome wasn't one of them. And, while there may have been a time, so many years ago when I was a career-minded professor of literature, when I could actually read the French, I fear that time may have passed.

As I consider the temporal limitations of a person's life, I have to admit—if only to myself—that the great majority, if not all, of these proverbial 'times' appear, at least for me, to have slipped into the realm of another lifetime that I barely remember, and I am left to sit in this invalid chair and marvel at the rounding of what remains of my existence into its homestretch.

On the bureau with the chipped wood finish that embraces the wall to my right, a television vies for my attention. Glaringly enthusiastic disembodied voices are trying to sell me cheap car insurance or credit cards or Viagra—along with other similar products that are useless to me now.

People—interesting only because of their dysfunctional banality and their dirty little secrets which they are so anxious and willing to share with the world—are now elevated to this hour's transient celebrity as they appear to express complete dismay and bewilderment over being betrayed by unworthy lovers. Or they heap abuse on each other with reckless delight while a rapt and rabid audience urges them on as though they were gladiators in a Roman arena. All the fears and ills and hate that our modern society can conjure is dissected, showcased, and analyzed for our entertainment and amusement.

At one time in my life, I would have muted the television or not turned it on at all, preferring silence to this cacophony of noise that is the salacious product of contemporary culture. However, they insist I need the stimulation ("Got to keep the brain active, etc., etc."). Besides, the remote control is next to the television, and both are too far for me to reach without getting up. And I don't really want to get up until I absolutely have to. So, I keep my eyes on the window and let the noise dissipate into a distant corner of my consciousness, mustering a skill I mastered long ago.

I continue my scan of the world outside and I see two of the nursing assistants, Matt and Sheri, I think, huddled together at the corner of the parking lot near the dumpster. It is the second time in the last

hour and twenty minutes I have seen them out there, cigarettes pressed between their lips, and I silently give thanks that neither is assigned to me this afternoon. I also watch a blue SUV pull into the lot and park near the entrance. It looks like Helen Jackson's daughter is here for her weekly inspection. I only hope she doesn't stay for dinner, or, if she does, she doesn't sit at my table, boring me with her monotonous critique, her list of issues that seem to persist and grow from one week to the next and that I can do nothing about, even if I agreed with her, which I don't.

More cars begin to fill the small lot, reminding me that there is a rhythmic consistency to life outside these walls (as well as inside), concerned or at least guilt-driven family members stopping by after work on a Friday afternoon to check up on the old people they conspired to put here, old people who nurtured them from birth, put them through college, paid their bills, wiped their noses, diapered their children.

Still, as cynical as I may appear toward these superficially well-intentioned younger relatives, I will be disappointed—although not surprised—that no car bearing a guilty or otherwise anxious family member will pull into the lot for me on this day or any other. My son discovered self-reliance precisely at the moment when I needed him more than he needed me.

I glance over at the large digital clock on the nightstand next to my bed and see that it is fifty-four minutes before dinner. My stomach growls in anticipation, and for an instant I am happy that at least one system in my aging body appears to be working properly.

I lose interest in the parking lot and shift my eyes to the book on my lap. I still can't remember how it got there. However, I do remember discussing Proust in one of my advanced literature classes that I so enjoyed teaching. Slowly, I trace my finger over the title, methodically regarding each French word: in-search-of-time-lost. In Search of Lost Time. My tired eyes close, their work done for the moment. Now, through the window of my mind, I see a small auditorium; I see a wooden lectern on a raised platform that serves as a stage; I see rows of students with spiral notebooks in their laps, all facing forward, eager to listen, to learn.

I blink, and now I see a den with high windows and shelves of books surrounding a desk made of dark, polished oak. I see Beth approach, her young face radiant in the late afternoon sunlight. She kisses me gently on the cheek as I scribble notes on a yellow pad. “It’s time for dinner,” she whispers and kisses me again. I smile and savor the soft feel of her lips on my skin, a promise of more to come later in the evening when our work is finished.

I open my eyes, and perhaps for the first time I truly understand what is meant by involuntary memory. Maybe for Proust this was something worth spending twenty years writing about. But for me, it is just painful. There is no point in searching for it, I realize: lost time is time lost; we can never get it back. And trying to recover it through memory is just an exercise in futility and self-delusion.

I lift my hand from the book and close my eyes again, hoping that no new memories, involuntary or otherwise, will assault me and further postpone the short sleep into which I would like to lapse. However, the moment is once again disrupted, this time by voices coming from outside my partially open door. “Mrs. Lanigan, please stop.” I recognize the voice as that of Adam, the nurse covering my wing.

I open my eyes and turn my head toward the door in time to see Freda Lanigan’s face, pale and wrinkled and desperate, staring into my room. She has pushed open the door and looks directly at me. Immediately behind her is Adam, sweat beading up on his wide forehead. He gently clutches her shoulder. “No, Mrs. Lanigan,” he says in a firm voice, “This isn’t your room.”

I turn my head back to the window to avoid eye contact with Freda. I know that she knows this really isn’t her room. I know that she has Alzheimer’s and has—at least in the past—mistaken me for her late husband. I feel bad for her, but I can’t help but wonder if, even given her affliction, which is insidiously turning her brain into Swiss cheese, she too has the occasional involuntary memory. Or perhaps she, like so many of us in this place, only seeks the warmth and comfort and love she once had with someone who is now lost to the great and all-consuming ocean of time.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that Adam now has her under control and is nudging her out of my doorway. He looks at me. “I’m sorry, Mr. Abbott,” he says with disarming sincerity.

I nod in reply, and my door closes. I try to put the incident out of my head, although I can still hear poor Freda protesting as she is being ushered away from my room, believing she has been unfairly denied a visit with her husband. I know and accept that the disruption isn’t really her fault; it isn’t Adam’s fault; it isn’t anyone’s fault. Life goes on, even in this darkest of shadows, this limbo for the living.

My stomach growls again, and I note that it is now forty-five minutes before dinner. Time seems to move more slowly when you anticipate something pleasant, like eating a meal that didn’t come out of a microwave. But, then, at this advanced stage of my life, it’s okay for time to move more slowly; my stomach can wait. I settle back in the chair and dare to close my eyes one more time. But sleep, an apparently precious commodity in old age, still won’t come.

So, I open my eyes and glance over at the bureau. My gaze passes quickly over the television and then drifts, eventually stopping on a collection of framed five-by-seven photographs. These are all I have left of a life that now seems distant and foreign, as though it was lived by someone else, perhaps even the last person who occupied this room. With that in mind, I regard the photographs with a mixture of pleasure, pain, and curious detachment.

The photograph that first catches my attention is one of my son bedecked in full academic regalia, his final graduation from the university. I was a full professor and department head then, enjoying the complete measure of success in my profession while he was just beginning his career. Now he is the respected and career-obsessed professor, often doing field work half a world away, forsaking all personal relationships in the headlong pursuit of greater fame and recognition, increased intellectual satisfaction, the only things truly worth pursuing in the narrow-minded world we both know so well.

I feel bad for him. At least, I was blessed to have known love in its purest form. I will always carry that love with me while he will have only the relics he has spent his adult life collecting. If he

would come to visit me, I would attempt to share that lesson with him before it really is too late. But he won't come to visit. I make him uncomfortable because he has always looked at me and seen his own future. And this is not exactly a future one would embrace with arms fully open. Sometimes ignorance truly is bliss.

My eyes move away from the picture of my son and settle on a photograph of a younger-looking man standing in front of a three-story colonial with a wide and sweeping front porch. I manage a small smile as I recognize the young man as me when I was around thirty. Beth and I bought this house two years after we were married, liberating ourselves from the cheap, one-bedroom apartments so often occupied by poor graduate students. The house, built before the Great Depression, required a significant amount of renovation, which is how we could afford it on an assistant professor's salary. However, over the years, we were able to transform it into a home to be truly proud of. I can only hope the family that now lives there is treating it with the appropriate respect and is as happy as we once were.

I am about to shift my focus to the next picture when there is a soft knock at my door. Before I can respond, the door opens. "I have your afternoon meds, Mr. Abbott," Adam says as he strides into my room, carrying a small plastic cup containing two pills.

I nod, and he sets the cup on my nightstand. He knows I will take the pills at the appropriate time; I am a very reliable and compliant resident. In this place, it is foolish and even counterproductive to be otherwise.

He turns toward the door then stops. "I'm sorry about Mrs. Lanigan," he says.

I nod again. "It's all right," I say. "She can't help it. Thanks for taking care of it."

He smiles and glances at the book next to me. "What do you think of the book?"

I look down at the book; I still can't remember how it got in my chair and know I need to ask the question in the right way so he doesn't think I'm showing signs of the dreaded dementia, thus prompting a visit from the consulting neurologist and a morning wasted on a battery of tests that would conclude nothing. "Who brought it?"

“Phil brought it,” Adam says. “He said he was a student in one of your classes and remembered studying the book.”

I remember that Phil is Phil Comstock, the administrator. I didn’t remember him as a student until he mentioned it to me not long after I came to live here. I realize that he must have brought the book earlier this afternoon while I was taking my customary nap after lunch. “Please tell Phil that I appreciate the book,” I say to Adam. “And any time he wants to discuss it to please stop by.”

Adam smiles again. “I will be sure to do that,” he says. Then he is gone, closing the door behind him.

The room is silent and empty once again, and I think about Phil Comstock, a seemingly earnest man who is about ten years younger than my son. I think about why and how a man would take a graduate-level course in literature then end up as the administrator of a nursing home. I wonder if this is the profession he chose or if the profession somehow chose him. I know and fully appreciate that I was very fortunate to have been able to make a living at what I most loved doing. Not everyone has that luxury.

I wonder if Phil loves what he’s doing or if he has merely accepted it as the best he’s going to do in life and is putting on a brave front to mask his disappointment. Or maybe he is more ambitious than he appears to be and this is a rung on his self-defined ladder of success.

Then I wonder why Phil chose this particular book to give me. As I recall, in that class, we discussed several masterpieces from the late Victorian period into the early Twentieth Century, a rather eclectic mix which included, among others, *Ulysses, Portrait of a Lady*, and *Heart of Darkness*. Since Conrad is one of my favorite authors, I remember that I spent much more time discussing *Heart of Darkness* than any of the other great novels. Did Phil give me the Proust work because he liked it, because he thought I liked it, or because he is sending me some kind of message that I failed to decipher? Or, perhaps, he found the book at a library sale and kindly thought of me.

While I am thinking about Phil and this facility which I now call home, I glance at the digital clock. It is thirty-six minutes before dinner, probably too late for anything more than a catnap, which usually just gives me a headache. I shift my attention once again to the collection of photographs, ignoring the steady drone of the television. Slowly, I scan each one, triggering a range of emotions. There is, of course, the one of me when I was twelve, posing with the sword my father liberated from a Japanese officer at Okinawa, the battle that cost him two fingers and an earlobe and changed him forever as a man and a father.

Next is the picture of me in my own army uniform, taken after I completed my training as a clerk. Although the Korean War was raging at the time, for some inexplicable reason, neither I nor my company was ever shipped overseas. Two years later, I was in college on the GI Bill. I have always wondered if my father, who died abruptly six months before the battle of Chosin Reservoir, would have been proud of me, in spite of my lack of experience in combat. I was never particularly proud of myself and have seldom spoken of my time in the military, sometimes even thinking that it is actually some other young man in that uniform, perhaps even the one who occupied this room before me—a bona fide war hero, from what they tell me. How ironic, it seems, that, in spite of what we do in life, we all come to the same end.

At last, my eyes shift to the picture I have been trying to avoid. It is a photograph taken the day I retired from the university. I'm standing at the main entrance to the old, ivy-covered building in which I devoted the great majority of my adult life or at least the best years of it. Next to me is Beth, looking every bit as beautiful as she did on our wedding day. She wears a broad smile as she peers into the camera. She waited more than forty years for that day on which our life together became more important to me than my career.

In the picture, I have my arm around her shoulder, but my half-smile appears forced and artificial. I still remember the pitiful ambivalence I felt at that moment: what I was giving up versus what I was gaining. If I had known then that our new life in retirement would only last three years, with

her battling cancer for the last two, I would like to believe that I would've felt differently, certainly much more accepting, perhaps even convivial. But, then, none of us can ever foresee what curves the future will throw at us. We can only live in the moment. And we cannot change what we were any more than we can change what we are. To paraphrase Poe: Ultimately, Darkness and Decay and Death hold illimitable dominion over all.

As I continue to look at the picture, I'm a bit surprised and embarrassed to feel tears forming in my eyes, so many that they create a translucent curtain through which I can no longer clearly see the images that provoked the tears. This is a blessing.

I blink away the tears, glance once again at the clock, and am grateful that it hasn't stopped like the great ebony clock did in the Poe story. It is now twenty-seven minutes before dinner, and so I shift my attention back to the window and the world outside. The parking lot is now mostly full, the sun is setting, and the autumn leaves are still abundant and swirling. I flinch as I realize this whole scene is an old and tired metaphor coming to life.

I close my eyes, but the metaphor is still there, strong and as certain as death. So now I understand and accept that as the years pile up around you like these dying leaves animated by the wind, you are much more likely to look back than to look ahead. Which makes perfect sense because you have so many more years to look back on than to look forward to. And what do I have to look forward to anyway? Clean linen on Tuesday? Fish sticks and green beans for dinner on Friday? My eight o'clock cup of vanilla ice cream? Freda Lanigan mistaking me for her dead husband (and perhaps me pretending she is my dead wife—some feelings never truly go away)?

I am an old man in an old place thinking old thoughts. I think of Eliot's poem *Gerontion*: "Here I am, an old man in a dry month, being read to by a boy, waiting for rain…I am an old man, a dull head among the windy spaces."

When I was a young scholar, viewing the world as literature I was trained to interpret, I pretended to understand the poem, which was, ironically, written by a man who was not yet forty. But I

really didn’t understand it, couldn’t understand it. I’m not sure I understand it now. Or that I will ever understand it. Or that I really want to. Old age simply is what it is.

I wish they would call us for dinner.