

Rage

Before my first therapist lost his mind, he had me pounding out my rage and screaming twice a day. And it worked. I was much calmer then. That was before Alma left and I didn't care anymore. Why did she leave if I was so calm? She wanted me to change, to be open and honest like I said I was going to be when we got married. "You're not really serious about it," she said. All right, so I didn't pound every day. "Did you pound today?" Alma would ask. "Yeah." Because if I said no, she would scream at me. "Don't you care about our marriage?" "Yes, I do." "Then go pound again." She'd call me a passive-aggressive asshole. I don't remember doing anything passive-aggressive but to keep the peace I'd have to go out to where I parked my car in guest-parking and hope it was too dark for the neighbors to see me sitting there like an idiot flailing my arm up and down. If they didn't see me they must see the car rocking like someone inside fucking. No one fucking, I guarantee. If I pounded in the house, the cats would freak out. No cats now, and I still don't pound in the house. Still feel Alma's presence, I guess, and I never did like her hearing what I would scream when I pounded.

I much prefer my car for everything, reading, eating, sleeping, pounding, even now. And yes, I do pound now. Trying to get Alma back? Maybe. The A/C works great. The heater heats up instantly. And it's cold outside in the winter. This is supposed to be the South but south doesn't mean warm, necessarily, folks. The winters have been like Wisconsin here for several years. No, I guess you couldn't ice fish, but please believe me, it gets cold at night. *Fuck you,*

get off my ass you asshole. No, Janice, edit that out. Another goddamn tailgater.

These Atlanta drivers are the worst, and I should know. As regional representative for Aladdini Software, I drive all over the Southeast, from southern West Virginia to the tip of Florida, Alabama to Mississippi. No, I don't do Louisiana. What I mean by all of that is I have time to record a lot of stuff and I depend on my secretary Janice to edit everything out that is not to the point. And so I have time to pound. I've always had time to pound in my car, but people look at you. Stare. *Fuck you, you jerk.* That guy was staring at me and I wasn't even pounding. *I'm going the speed limit, you asshole.* Anyway, what if someone else gets their hands on this recorder before Janice types everything out? Well, really, who would? There's so much recorded shit these days, no one cares about playing someone else's files, even if, say, I left this fancy recorder on the table in the coffee shop and forgot it like I have forgotten my jacket, my cell phone, my hat, my briefcase, my Creative Loafing newspaper. But just in case somebody does hear this, I'm only babbling as I drive, recording my thoughts on a new Tascam Dr-1 digital recorder, like my new therapist told me to do.

Because I never have anything to say to him. Why do I go to him, then? He doesn't make me pound and, sometime, one of these guys is going to say something that will make a difference to me. *Oh fuck you, Mac.* Another asshole comes up beside me and gives me the finger probably because I wouldn't move over and let him go by without speeding up. Why the hell should I? Anyway, my old therapist, should I give him a name? I'll call him Tom because that was his name He might of come down with Alzheimer's but he's not the only one. Alzheimer's, I talk about it like it's the flu. They have us psyched into getting it because they want to sell us the drugs. They also want to sell us the drugs that prevent Alzheimer's. Marketing, I do some of that myself, and sometimes I tell the truth. Some Aladdini software is good. Am I worried?

Ah, I'm still OK, I still remember Alma. Tom and I go back a long way. Well, he's Alma's boy, actually, though she broke off with him long before I did. Well, I never did, it's just

that Tom kept forgetting our appointments and one day his wife Betty was sitting on his couch. I always liked her. A svelte dresser, classy woman with hair out of a magazine. Better say what kind of a magazine, these days saying hair out of a magazine doesn't mean anything specific. It could mean a head full of white spikes five inches high, could mean a swath of skin right down the middle, the Red Sea parted. Could mean blonde and wavy. Brown silk, black velvet. Ha, ha, *blue* velvet. Remember that movie, Janice? Betty had a hairdo out of Vogue. Betty had a head of hair like a beach-break wave but quiet. *Has*, I believe she still has, though I don't know how long we can use the word *has* for Tom. But Betty, that particular day, wore the same suit she always wore, blue, powder blue, I guess you'd call it. But it looked new, like it always looked. I didn't see her that often, but she had an office just down the hall from Tom, in those days, back in California. Blonde hair, morphing into grayish-silver, but always a beach-break. Never a change in her face, though. Oh, I don't get to the old surf board anymore. Let's see: Let me picture the scene: Tom and Betty were strictly California. Ummm, maybe I should of tried *her*. She was a therapist, too. White blouse with lace fringes. A little orchid on the collar.

"Tom's thinking of retiring," she said.

"He never said anything to me about it."

"Stan, he can't even remember your name this week."

That was it. He was only sixty-seven. I'd been seeing him for twenty years, right out of college. Whap, the cord snapped, just like that. What a handsome man, that's what always got me about him. Along with composure, that was what Tom had: Composure. "It changes your energy," he would say, "and anything you can do to change *your* energy is a good thing." He could be a bit sarcastic sometimes, but I got his drift most of the time. "Even though you shouldn't be blaming your life on your mother or father, at this point, I want you to pound: '*Fuck-you-Dad! Fuck-you-Mom!*'"

"What about Alma. Tom? She's the one I hate."

“You don’t hate her, but go ahead and pound on it, just end with something honest.”

“Honest?”

“Pound on, ‘You’re a woman, and I hate women.’”

“I don’t hate women, Tom.”

“Yes, you do, Stan.”

So why did I bring her to Georgia when they made me come here if I hate women and if I hate Alma? I thought we could make it work because I was pounding every morning on a cliff overlooking the beach where the surfers still gathered even on the calmest days, though I had to leave surfing behind for software. No one paid any attention to a forty-year old sitting in his car, beating a child to death: the pissy, whining, self-obsessed child in myself. The Jason monster in those horror flicks. What was the name of those movies? Can’t remember. Look it up, will you, Janice? Not that it’s important. Janice may not look it up. She says she doesn’t hear anything but the words and she just types them in an objective way. That’s the only way I would let her do this, but Dr. Wiseberg says he doesn’t want to listen to every word I say and so he wants the typescript to speed-read it. All my secret thoughts speed-read.

The new age, you know. But I still believe in the pounding, I know Tom had it right if I can just get it right like Tom tried to get me to get it, but I always have felt I was missing something. The breathing’s important too. Maybe I don’t do that right. Breath of fire, indeed. That’s my problem, I always think I have to understand more about it, and then I will get it, just like Maharishi College. If I had only had the ten thousand dollars to go to Switzerland to meditate, then I would of reached enlightenment and would understand everything. But hey, I didn’t have it, and besides, I had to get on with my life. So I went to California and finished at a real college, a cheap college, and then went out to Silicon Valley and got a fucking job. I should of got me a babe with silicone tits, but I ran into Alma, my first day with Aladdini, in the Personnel Department.

Goddamn, that guy almost creamed me, what is he, on a cell phone or something? Oh, it's a woman. I hate women. Alma, come back. Janice, don't read any of that after you type it up, but get this next paragraph exactly as I speak it because I'm trying to work these thoughts into the report on the digitization of the pharmaceutical industry, which I have to present at the conference in Miami next month. Oh, wait, here comes Macon. I'll get back to this later, Janice. Don't go away. *Get off my butt, you jerk.*

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OK, so Janice, so I'm outa there, after almost crashing on the on-ramp, guy doesn't know what the word *merge* means, but anyway, heading back the way I came. Gotta take the car into the dealership, twenty-five thousand mile servicing to keep my warranty current. They really click up fast, the miles. This traffic is crazy today.

"That's crazy," Dr. Wiseberg said to me yesterday. *You said to me yesterday.* Let's face it, this recording is for you, Doctor. You told me it was crazy that I married Alma a week after we met. I'm sure you don't mean crazy. Coming from you that would not speak well for my prospects. I couldn't think of a response at the time, but you have to realize they put me on the road right away, even then, and I was afraid they were going to stick me in Chicago, or someplace like that, and I was really in love with Alma. Since she was Catholic, I knew we'd have to get married before -- no, I can't say *fuck* in relation to Alma -- before she would go to bed with me. No, she didn't remind me of my mother, as you allege every now and then, she was anything but my mother. My mother had dark hair, dark eyes, olive complexion. Gypsy blood in her veins from way back, so far back no one knew it was there, but you could see it in her eyes. They sparkled with it. All right, forget my mother, but Alma was blonde. Is blonde. Look at that face. You can't see it, but I have a tiny photo of her hanging from my rearview. Amber eyes glistening in the sun. That's why I married her. Oh, shit, I -- *Oh, beep-beep-beep to you, Fuck-face.* Never mind that. So what if we didn't get a chance to know each other, we had plenty of

time after that. Neither one of us wanted children. Can't bring them into a world like this. War, poverty, crime. Christ. Well, Alma liked her job and she was good at it. Is good at it. What is she, assistant VP or something now? A woman has a right to a career, too, you know. I know, I know, I know. I should give her a call one of these days. She switched to a good company and got on the fast track as soon as she returned to *Calee-forn-ah-aye* without me.

Where's my? Oh, shit, I must of left my cell phone in that damn conference room. I remember, it was pressing too hard against my thigh and I took it out of my pocket and set it in the groove where they used to have ash trays in those fancy leather chair arms in the old days.

I lied about pounding. I haven't pounded in weeks, months, since you said you, Dr. Weisberg, never heard of such a thing in your twenty years in the field. It changes your energy, Doctor, is what Tom said. That's all we are is energy, and when you're locked up in a rage, you need to do something about it. Rage is no good for anyone. Yes, sure, anger is an emotion, just like the others, but what is it useful for? Ok, sure, war. But do we really need more war, Doctor? I don't want to debate this. I'm just getting mad.

Yes, I know. It's good I express my anger. That's what Tom always said. But you can't express your anger when you're in a meeting with a bunch of bosses. I almost said noses. Yes, a bunch of noses. They really pissed me off in there, area VP, higher than Alma, VP of marketing, some jerk from Coca Cola, and I don't know who else. That's why I know I didn't pound this week like I told you I did. You don't care, but I'm sure you have some smug thing to say about it. Like *squash yourself into the mold if you want to come out a cookie*, but I just left without saying anything. "You got anything, Williams?" Shackton asked me. Old Shakey. "No, sir." All right, see you next month. See you, Shakey. I didn't even say that. Shook my head, is all, up and down. Gotta get off this crazy two-eighty-five, the freeway that doesn't go anywhere. If they had it in California, they'd have to call it *The To Itself Freeway*. I'll zoom over here and cut across no-man's land on North Druid Hills and go up.

Alma and I liked professional wrestling. Don't think they have it here, might be one of the reasons we couldn't seem to get into the swing of the southern way of life. People always saying, "Are you from the South?" Little twitches of the nose. Yes. *South California*. Don't snap your neck looking away from me. Home fries and grits. Please, I need my granola. Atlanta is a violent city. One of the first stories I read in the newspaper here, a newspaper almost defunct now after two short years, I mean the two short years of my being here, without Alma, I mean. Well, I only started reading it after Alma left. But this guy gave the finger to the wrong man on the highway and the guy chased him down and ran him off the road, and then to top it off, the first guy must of got out of his car to reason with the other guy. I saw a picture of the other guy going to court. Nobody was going to fight this character. A Killer Diller type. But the killer diller, proving himself worthy of the name, grabbed the first guy's girlfriend's cell phone and threw it over a fence and then took out a knife and stabbed the first guy seventy-three times while the girlfriend watched.

Whoa, a Fed Ex truck. Hold on, Janice. What? Oh, my God. *Hey! Ha, ha. Oh. Fuck you.*

Oh, wait a minute. God, Janice. Lucky I didn't give him the finger, but it might of been the same guy I was just talking about, only bigger, came up behind me. Well, I did cut him off but you know how those Fed Ex trucks are, parked right square in my lane and I had to get over fast. I signaled and everything but this guy didn't want to get over. I swear he was about an inch from my rear bumper. I thought sure he was going to bump me. So I slowed down and he swung to the left, no, I can't see his license plate, the South, again, if they had plates on the front, I would of seen it, but what he's got on the front is a fake plate that says MEXICO. He's in the left turn lane now. We both got caught by the red light. I'm looking over at him. I got my window rolled down. Wait. Let me roll it up so he can't see my lips. Tinted glass, you know. I was gonna say, *What are you, some kind of fucking idiot?* but I didn't say nothing. I'm looking at this guy now, Janice. Holy shit, the look on his face. I got to get out of here.

Okay, Wow. I just zipped a quick right turn across in front of another car and escaped down Buford Highway even though I don't ever go that way. But Janice, you saw *Under the Volcano*? The mountain bar scene where Albert Finney gets killed. Those guys inside that bar. *Mountain Men*. That's this guy. My heart's jumping inside my chest. Where to go, what to do? I didn't say anything, did I? No. Goddamn, Janice, the hair on the back of my neck is tingling. Is he coming after me? No, he had to turn left, I think, thank God. What if he flips around? Is he flipping? Can't see that far, too many cars. Shit.

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I'm all right now, Janice. In the waiting room at the car dealer. I couldn't talk for a long time, all the thoughts about that guy coming after me. You can easily turn around anywhere on Buford Highway and then it's a simple matter to see my black Prius, even a mile away. He could of been way back and seen me turn up Clairmont. That's why I'm whispering, I mean because I'm in the waiting room, not because Man Mountain has me by the neck. I watched my rear view, imagining all kinds of things, but didn't see any clear evidence he had come after me. I had a feeling he would, but I guess he didn't. Place is crowded today, that's why you hear all that background noise, the TV blasting. Ignore that, Janice. Suicide bombers. A revolution somewhere. U.S. drone wipes out the wrong village. Economy is going up or down, I don't know which. I can't think straight. That guy is in my brain.

The reason Alma found out I had quit pounding: I let her favorite cat out of the garage by mistake and it ran out into a kudzu field and we never saw it again. But I swear, I didn't see the goddamn kitty in the garage. You know how dark it is in the corners of a garage. He must of been already out there hiding before I blocked off the cat door. I block it off with my toolbox so I can clean the shit out of the cat-boxes and put it in the garbage can, in plastic bags, of course, Janice, like I do every day. Well, I don't do it anymore. Something was on my mind, I don't know what. He's never down there at that time of day. But I open the garage door and zoom,

flash, out of some dark corner. And he's gone. I saw his little brown-and-white tail in the light of the streetlamp disappear into the pile of bones at the edge of our development. That stuff that looks so pretty in the spring and summer but strangles everything it comes into contact with, and then shrivels up into the ugliest maze of twisted alien fingers you ever saw in winter. Well, you see it, you're from Georgia. Kudzu. I had to tell Alma. What else could I do? We looked all night, drove everywhere, walked everywhere, yelling, crying, "Kitty, Kitty, Kitty. Here Kitty. Here Elmo." No dice. Little fucker had waited for two years to get out into the great outdoors and he was gone. Alma says he must be dead. I don't know. Winter time. Goddamn cars with drivers on cell phones. No one cares. Yes, I'm sorry and I vowed to start pounding again, but Alma wouldn't listen. She skittered out of here faster than the cat. Janice, you got to find me a real estate agent who can sell the joint. Alma, come back. Oh, shit. I'm going broke fast. I will start pounding, Alma. I will.

I like that service manager. Filipino guy, Juan Jago. Really treats me nice. Yes sir, this, yes sir that. No charge for that. You got a coupon for this. You got all kinds of coupons, sir. We'll wash it, too, coupon or no. Don't worry. I'll come and get you when it's done. Donuts in the waiting room. So what if you can't hear yourself think. I'll continue this when I get back on the road, Janice. Got to go up to Alpharetta yet, *Alfie-retta*, first town.

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You there, Janice? Ha, ha, just kidding. Okay, here I am now, cruising up Peachtree. Everything is Peachtree here. And yet you can't buy a peach you can eat anywhere. They're either hard as rocks or soft as boiled eggs. You buy 'em green one day and they're rotten the next. Traffic is light. I guess I'll what, swing over somewhere and go on up. Black clouds ahead but I think they're way up over the northern mountains. I'm not going that far. Oh, wait, what's that in my mirror? *No, get off my ass.*

Oh, shit, Janice. It's that guy. Oh, my heart, Janice. I can't stand it. That guy, must of

been waiting for me to come out of the Toyota lot. He is so close to my bumper. No, I can't identify the truck, an old something, red, rusty red color, that same plate on front, yeah, MEXICO. I don't want to turn off now. You know how the sleekest highway turns into a country road in two seconds here. I'm trying. Okay, wait. Swing onto two-eighty-five is the only thing I can do.

Man, oh man. No cell phone. No OnStar. Doesn't somebody see him? He's staying just far enough back, now. Probably knows if he bumps me someone's going to call nine-one-one. I gotta think about this. If I remember right, a couple of exits up, the off ramp is like a wave. I can catch it and slash off before he knows it. Can't keep this up. I just don't dare do such a thing. That would be challenging this guy. This freeway goes in circles. Sixty-three miles and I'll be right back here. I'll go ahead and cook on it awhile. You still there, Janice?

When I was eleven, I went cliff climbing with the neighbor kid, Billy. I didn't tell my mom, because he was a poor kid I wasn't supposed to hang out with. My mom really got mad when I did things she told me not to do. But Billy dared me to go. He seemed to me like any other kid. When we had our bikes parked safely out of the way, I noticed Billy's shoes. "Don't you have some better shoes?" All his clothes, pants and shirt both, were grey with ragged edges around the pockets and pants legs and shirt sleeves and collar.

"Fuck you. We're poor."

Crossing the creek on a skinny log bridge, Billy stopped in the middle, balanced twenty feet above the rushing water, and he shouted back at me. "What's a matter. You a little sissy?"

Billy, even in those slick-soled shoes, ran across, prancing like a pony in a parade. I took a couple of steps out on the log and suddenly my head felt like a balloon with the air going out of it. My knees wobbled. I wished I didn't have the pack on my back, but it was too late for that. I stood there, looking upstream, listening to the roar of the fast water. Billy shouted: "Come on, you coward." I sat down, slamming my butt on a huge knot in the log, grabbing on with both

hands. “Come on, Staneeeeeeeeee, come on, little child,” Billy yelled. I scooted across, scraping my legs, my hands slipping on the moist bark of the log bridge. It seemed like a hundred miles. “Fuck,” Billy said when I pulled myself to my feet on the other side. “How you going to get back?”

From this angle, the cliffs didn't look that steep. Billy and me wound our way up a little trail, and when that ended, Billy started jumping from big rock to big rock, and leaning down and grabbing bushes to pull himself up ridges, and generally scaling the mountain with ease. Even I felt easy with the climb, my new tennis shoes gripping the rocks and soil, now that there was no void below me. Halfway up to the cave, which from this distance and angle was a tiny black hole in the side of the cliff, Billy stopped and sat on a rock below me. When he lit his cigarette with a silver cigarette lighter, I realized it was the same lighter he was going to light a turtle on fire with yesterday down in my back yard. I crossed around below Billy and looked up at him again. This put the sun at Billy's back, and he seemed to disappear in the ball of light. I had to put my hand up over my eyes to bring Billy back in focus. You mean bastard, I thought.

“Fuck,” Billy said, “this cigarette tastes like shit.” I came up to just below Billy's knees. “You want one?”

“No.” I looked back down, shocked at how steep it was. The cliffs dropped sharply below us, the slope looking like a jagged bunch of rocks with tiny patches of green here and there. The creek was way down below, a tiny silver line cutting through the gray surface, the sound of the water barely audible. I looked up at the cave. It seemed to be as high as the moon.

“I can't get there from here,” I said

“What do you mean?”

“It's straight up. You got to go down to the last level and cross under those craggy stones and get to where that slope goes up to that ledge. See the trail?”

“Fuck that. You dumb-ass. That's too much work.”

“Want to go back down?”

“And tell everybody at school we’re pussies?”

I thought: You jerk, I wish you would go away, I wish I had never met you, I wish you would fall off the cliff and break your neck. I turned away from Billy.

Billy got up suddenly and started climbing. Before I knew it, he was on the other side of the craggy stones and up on the ledge above, and on what seemed to be a straight trail to the cave. But I needed to rest. Heck with you, Billy. I sat down on the same stone Billy had been sitting on and took out my canteen. I unscrewed the lid and let it drop from my fingers, but somehow it came loose from the chain, or the chain broke right where it hooks to the canteen or something, I couldn’t quite tell, but the lid dropped away from the canteen, hit the rock beside my tennis shoe, and then caromed over the side of the ledge. Reaching helplessly after it, I could hear it ping as it bounced down the wall of the cliff, hitting stone after stone, for an amazingly long time and when it stopped pinging, I still heard the echo of a ping

I couldn’t think of what to do. I took a drink but had no way to stopper the mouth of the canteen, I sat looking at it, wondering if I could just drink all the water, and wondering, if I did that, would it be the same as saving the water to drink later. That is, would I get more dehydrated or less by the time I got back down to the creek to fill the canteen? Somehow, with me just sitting there, the air seemed to get very quiet. I wondered if Billy made it to the cave yet. But when I looked up, I didn’t see Billy.

I stood. I felt dizzy and I grabbed a bush on the side of the stone wall to look around the outcropping. No Billy. “B-i-i-l-l-e-y ...” I yelled. But my voice went nowhere. The wind blew it right back into my mouth. I crossed the chasm, crawling on my hands and knees, and got to the side where the slope led up to the ledge. Nothing. I climbed up to the ledge, pushed myself over the top, and laid there for a moment getting my breath. But I knew something was wrong as I pulled myself across the edge and looked over the side.

I saw an elongated dark ball down among the rocks several levels down, curled up, not moving. It looked like one of those large plastic garbage bags somebody flung away into the wrong place. I watched it for a long time. It didn't move for a long time. Then I saw what I thought was one brownish shoe sticking up from beneath it, and I knew it was Billy's shoe. I didn't yell Billy's name, though, because it was such a long way down. It's funny, I thought, I didn't hear anything. Billy didn't yell, or anything. Did not make a sound. But he must have hit the rocks with some sort of thud. Why didn't I hear anything? I shuddered. The wind was cold. No, don't think about that. Don't think about anything, I thought.

I pulled myself up to where I could sit and where I could get my pack off my back and open it up. Inside, I found the lunch my mother made for me to take to the library. A turkey sandwich with carrots and olives on the side in a little plastic container. A carton of milk. I opened the carton of milk and took a swig. Ugh. I looked at the carton: 2% MILK. I hated 2% milk. My mother knew I hated 2% milk. I didn't want to drink it but was afraid to dump it on the ground because I didn't want to see a bunch of white stuff running down the side of the mountain. I thought of the open milk carton and the open canteen and I didn't know how I was going to get back down. I'd have to carry them both with me. I couldn't litter, because my mom told me never to litter. I couldn't waste the water, because my mother told me never to waste water. How was I going to get across the creek with that log bridge like a high-wire act in a circus? I thought about the roar of the fast water under me, I watched a patch of shade down below shift slowly across the stones, like there was a huge cloud full of rain up above somewhere, but I didn't look up to see if there was or not. I closed my eyes, trying to stop it, trying to stop the roar, trying to stop the shadow, but I knew I couldn't stop anything. Just as I opened my eyes, the shadow swallowed up the dark blob I knew was Billy.

I don't remember how I got down the mountain. I don't remember how I got across the log bridge. But I remember riding my bike home as fast as I could. I never told my mom

anything. I never told *anybody* anything. They found Billy two days later. I never told anybody anything about it.

You still there, Janice? I can't shake this guy. I might have to hop onto I-Twenty and drive over to Alabama. I have enough gas. You know, I moved to Georgia to get away from the mountains. I don't think they have any over there, either.

The End