

The Prospector

Lydia and I were fooling around a little bit on the couch when the doorbell rang. It was about eight o'clock and dusk was just settling in. Standing at the door was a man nearly covered in thick dust, wearing a tan jacket and ripped, formless jeans. He had an expansive beard taking over his face like a swatch of invasive ivy. "Can I help you?" I said. "I was wondering if I might be able to survey the little brook in your backyard for precious metals—" he said, "sift through the sand a little bit and see what turns up." I looked out the door past him. Our neighbors, the Sandovals, were rolling the garbage and recycling bins out to the street. The Prospector had a pickax resting on his shoulder and a sifter in his other hand limp at his side like a tambourine. "If this isn't good time I can try you again later," he said. "Yeah, why don't you try us another time," I said. As soon as I closed the door Lydia flattened me up against the door and gave me a long, respectful kiss. I told her I'd meet her up in the bedroom. After I flipped off all the lights downstairs, the backyard appeared through the sliding-glass door. I could see the little brook in the middle of the yard, pulling the darkness in around itself like a heavy bedsheet. I quietly slipped outside and toed through the cold grass to the black brook. I kneeled down beside it and eventually began fingering over the little rocks the cool water trickled through. For the first time since living here I wondered if I could drink that water. I wetted my hands in the brook. I stood and brushed the dirt off my knees and headed back to the house because I wanted to get a flashlight.

The Mayor

I swerved the car to avoid hitting a skunk only to nearly sideswipe a baby deer who I avoided with another swerve. My right tire nipped a possum sending his gray mangy body careening toward someone's mailbox. This infuriated me. When I hit the squirrel, I didn't even flinch. Lydia, who had been mostly screaming during all this, finally quieted down into a strange complaisance.

I pulled the car over to hopefully restart whatever storyline I had wandered onto. It was only a block or two to what looked like the downtown so we decided to walk there. Lydia followed at a polite distance so I waited for her and put my arm around her waist so she would know we are a team. "What is this town," she said. "I don't know but I have some serious concerns about it already, and we've only just arrived," I said. "Let's go talk to the Mayor about it," Lydia suggested, and of course I was all for it. I stopped a woman who was walking by us, and said, "Excuse me, I need to speak to the Mayor, where can I find him?" The woman laughed. "There is no Mayor, or, we are all Mayors, if you prefer."

"Well is there a Central Mayor or something," I said. "Oh of course. He's probably in the sauna about now, if the past can be any indication of the present," she said. So we went to the sauna, which had to be the brown little wood hut we could already see down the street. A sign outside the door read: Clothing Required. So Lydia and I entered as we were and there was the Mayor, mopping his brow with his shirt sleeve. He was still in his suit. "Are you the Central Mayor," I said. He said, "What do you mean Central?" I told him what the woman on the street said and the Mayor only shook his head. "That's just Gretchen, the town psychopath, don't listen to her." I said, "I must admit, this is a strange town. I almost killed a skunk and a deer, then I did kill a possum and a squirrel." The Mayor nodded his head.

"Well, to be honest with you I'm new at being a Mayor."

I could see dark spots of sweat opening up on his shirt.

"So far I've instituted a movie night and allowed for the opening of a new Mexican restaurant, but the wild animals on the street are another story." Then he said, "I'm the Mayor but I don't know everything yet. My wife is a runner, she calls herself Nike, after the shoe company and maybe even the Greek Goddess. She runs circles around this town, literally, and she's always hopping over bunnies and ducks, she goes around and around dodging wildlife then comes home and tells me about it after I cool off from my sweat. She's making imitation crab-meat sandwiches on

toasted sourdough. Can I invite you to dinner,” he said, suddenly hopeful. And Lydia was jabbing me sharply in the ribs in a good way.

The Scrapper

Things are made of littler things and so on. What I like about Zen is that no one can convince you that you're not doing it to some extent at any moment. It's harder to prove you're *not* doing it than that you are. I find comfort in this notion. If not comfort, then relief. I pick up a thin sheet of tin grating and suddenly I remember October 2nd, 1948. I was working for the lumber company. We were raking the smallest branches into hundreds of little piles in the clear-cut area and then setting fire to them. The communal spirit of the valley had drifted away. That's all I remember. I wrote a book about it, all on notecards, but they fell out of my pocket while I was running across a railroad trellis. Imagine my first novel, falling like confetti into the river. The Snake River, wasn't it? I hope so. I can't help thinking, couldn't there have been another, better Age of Mechanical Reproduction? I believe it was me who climbed the tree out back as a kid in domestic protest, hopped into the branches of the next tree in the neighbor's yard and pretended not to hear my parents pleading me to come down. Although it may have been my brother who did that. Either way I was suffering from post-natal insanity. A disease for which the only cure is to continually build your life from scratch. If someone were to offer me actual regards, from scratch, a well-made, workable salvage from the maze of years, it would be the answer to a certain riddle which has occupied me on and off since the moment I or my brother climbed up into that tree. I would say, "We all thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The Sailor

I saw something floating toward me on the waves. It wasn't like it was the first time this had happened. For instance only a few days ago I bumped up against a de-tethered buoy and I'd passed by about a thousand empty milk jugs over the past few weeks of my sailing. What was I doing? I was thinking of many things. What was floating toward me on the waves turned out to be a glass bottle with a message corked inside. I reeled it in with my fishing net and twisted at the cork. Just as it was about to give, I stopped. I couldn't do it. Some things are not to be done. Well I kept the thing anyway, laid it next to my never-ending bag of pancake mix, and I never stopped thinking about it. My dreams were invariable. Always me opening the bottle and reading the message. My fear was that I'd go ahead and open it up in my sleep. Well and why didn't I just open it up and read it? Because some messages are not for me. Eventually I came to be certain that written on the little scroll inside the bottle was my future, or some knowledge so poignant, insightful and revelatory that I was destined to only receive it in this most unusual circumstance. But maybe this too would be pointless. What kind of knowledge written down on a little shred of paper could inform or illuminate my quite limited situation of sea and sky and pancake mix? The only glimmer of power I held in the vast natural world was the power of refusal. And this is exactly what I exerted when at last I tossed the unopened message bottle back from whence it came, sent it back on its woeful journey to the ends of the earth. And I returned to what was slowly becoming mine.

The Wise Man

“When are you going to grow up,” Mr. Andrew said to Mr. Toms. “Oh I don’t know.” “Why not now,” said Mr. Andrew. “Eh, I’ll grow up when I’m dead,” said Mr. Toms. “Am I supposed to take that literally,” said Mr. Andrew. “I don’t think it’s possible to take that literally,” Mr. Toms said. Mr. Toms and Mr. Andrew were standing in a place that was not a place. It was easier for them to talk there since there were no distractions. Suddenly a woman Mr. Toms loved dearly appeared in view. When he was here, he had an eraser in his hand which he could erase anything with, including people, such as this woman. “What do you think you’re doing,” Mr. Andrew said, eyeing the eraser in Mr. Toms’ hand. “I know you’re not going to do what I think you might do,” Mr. Andrew added. In one swift motion Mr. Toms erased Mr. Andrew and also the woman in the distance before she could get any closer. This is what Mr. Toms thought: The birds tweet and I tweet back. I get hungry and I eat something because I have to. The wind spreads things around, and I sort of do that too. But that’s where it ends, the story goes nowhere. There’s just no way to fully think things through. A thought rises up from wherever and tickles my brain, sometimes so much so that I burst into giggles. I don’t know how to prevent this except by not thinking. But that’s easier said than done. Think about where thoughts come from. It’s like following lava back up into the mouth of a volcano. It’s too late by the time you get to the source—you can’t quite see in because of all the lava crashing upon your shoulders. Well. I open up my appointment calendar—an officer of the law is scheduled to appear later today. I have nothing to hide out here in this place that is not a place, so I’m not afraid. I just don’t know where he’s going to come from—which direction. He may come from the same place thoughts come from. I wish that wise man, Mr. Andrew, were here to advise me, since I’m at a loss as to what to say to the officer when he arrives. I wish I hadn’t erased Mr. Andrew in that impulsive all-encompassing erasing motion I used on him and also simultaneously that dear dear dear acquaintance of mine, Dawn Lonsinger. Sadly I haven’t even met her yet. That’s the reason I got nervous and erased her when I saw her approaching from the distance. I was overwhelmed by her presence. I believe that’s the right word—presence. Which, as I now know, is not always a good thing. At that moment, Mr. Andrew was unfortunate enough to also be in range of my eraser. I know what I’ll do when the officer arrives.

I won't say anything. I'm not here to explain myself.
I'm seriously considering not saying anything ever again. Boy
I'm getting excited now. Here comes the officer. And not a minute
too soon.