

## Ammonia

In the dream, the water from the mop-bucket splashed on my head, stale and grim and acrid, and I submerged below the surface of the lake before I could feel or taste the ammonia, or before the cleanser had a chance to get into my eyes or nose. I stayed under for as long as I could hold my breath – and didn't open my eyes because of my contact lenses – and wondered if there was a plume or cloud of dirt that a fish maybe could see, corrupting the already addled water of the lake. When my breath gave out, I crowned through the surface and was rewarded with another stream of cold dirty water. I took as deep a breath as I could without risking a mouthful of the wrong stuff and went under again, this time making an effort to swim away from the dock on which my wife was standing. Now this time when I emerged, I felt a purer sting on my head and I could tell she had emptied the mop bucket and was splashing Top Job at my face direct from the bottle. She stopped just as I went under again.

In that way of dreams, where you start out already knowing some things that haven't been explicitly revealed, things that are part of your memories and experiences in the dream even though they aren't part of your real life or real experience, not always anyway, in that same way I knew that the first guests had arrived and that's why my wife quit with the ammonia. I also knew, in the dream, that this punishment had rained down on me because my wife had discovered my recent adultery. The innate knowledge in this dream also included the secret in my heart of my first affair, which she had never discovered, the whole packet of secrecy fractally bestowed on me as the dream began with a splash of soiled cleanser, like a moral zip-file that had to be unpacked in real time but was transmitted in an instant. The dream gave me no memory of the current tryst, the one my wife had discovered, only that it did not involve the same woman as the first affair, a girl I had not seen in real life for thirty years but who in the dream dossier I had met again a few years ago at some conference or overnight, and with whom I tumbled into sin without effort or resistance, years of self-control evaporating as if they applied

to a different game in a different universe. In the dream the lover had deep red hair, Irish brick, though the actual real girl in real life does not, and in the dream I remembered that this secret had featured in other dreams, a memory that followed me from dream to dream, though in the dream I did not know if the secret was real or yet another element of night knowledge.

Lacking experience as I did in being discovered at adultery, I continued to swim, ignorant as to the protocols of punishment practiced by sophisticated people. I was aware logically that some marriages dissolve after adultery, and that some fall apart by sick inertia, and others explode. I was aware academically that some affairs are not even acknowledged, and that the encounter so far, lasting not even ten minutes yet, had been longer than some episodes of discovery and aftermath. I was aware intellectually that my wife would not follow any particular pattern of reaction, that nothing was written down and there were no best practices, but it didn't feel like that – it felt like I could, if I chose, emerge from the lake on the other side and dry off, find a computer and consult WebMd for a prognosis of how long my punishment was likely to last. I could, that is, if the guests were not arriving. But they were arriving, so that reassurance or any other form of reassurance I could seek was suspended, violently, which I would compare to the feeling one has when one boards a plane and realize his keys are missing, and all the places on the roster to check are waxing further and further away.

How long should I stay in the water? Did the social norms or our own isolated customs in our culture of two permit me to join this party, or should I expect to vacate myself? If I did, would it be with an excuse, or brutal honesty, fiery confession? No one told me while I bobbed in the ridiculous lake, so I swam its length, beached by the picnic tables, and found my towel. In the dream, the lake at which this was all happening was the one on the grounds of my kids' summer camp, a circumstance unexplained and unquestioned in that exposition with which I was borne into this scenario.

The couple who had arrived were from my wife's work – I'd had a few friendly conversations with the husband, football and rock-and-roll maybe, and had never seen the wife except maybe at a company picnic or the wedding of a different co-worker of the husband and my wife. In fact, the wife looked different to me – the wedding had been about five years back, so she could be a different person. Or are we all, cell by cell, molecule by molecule, after five years, according to the doctors? The man was helping my wife roll a heavy keg in from the trunk of her car. "I should be doing that," I said, rushing to the scene. But my wife waved me off and the co-worker said, "It's no problem – give you a chance to dry off." So I retreated and tried to decide if withdrawing to change into dry things would set me down a particular obscure but irrevocable path, for example, if I didn't insist on helping with the rest of the setup, would that mean I had ceded the role of the guy who helps, forever? I stood up, trying to pose with some dignity, looked at the guy's wife, decided that she was definitely a new wife and that I wasn't fit enough to stand and chit-chat with her in my bathing suit.

Why was I even swimming with the guests so soon to arrive? I didn't wonder then, as it was happening, but I wonder now.

My clothes were still laid out on the bed, and I shook each article to dislodge any spiders or scorpions, which I haven't done in waking life since Boy Scouts.

My briefcase was open on the bed, but every stitch of paper that had been in it when I awoke was strewn around the room, intact or crumpled or torn. A confidential document bound with a zebra-striped paper clip was splayed on a footstool like a ring of paint samples. The letter from the lover was the only article that had been in my briefcase that was treated gently, carefully laid on my wife's side of the bed as if it were the starter of what my wife thought might be a pile. I knew there had not been anything else to collect in that pile, and I took the letter into the bathroom with a candle-lighter and set it on fire above the toilet. One flaming shard fell against the toilet seat and made a burn mark before I

brushed it off, hoping the pain was one installment in my penance to the world. When I flushed, a few black burnt scraps did not make it down, so I waited for the tank to refill and flushed again.

I came downstairs to find two more couples had arrived, including the only invitees who were from my work. There was also a man and a woman who I did not recognize at all – I assumed they were together or at least they were working together, setting up a table extension with my wife. She was overlapping tablecloths, arranging china, adjusting centerpieces, with crisp snaps of her hand like a doctor changing a dressing who has been promised the end of her shift, efficient and disapproving. Snap. Slap. Snip.

“Hey, thanks for coming, guys,” I said to the woman from my work, who is Louise, and her husband, who is Ralph.

Louise looked down and says “Sorry.” Ralph looked at me blankly, said “excuse me,” and left.

I turned back to the table setting and agonized over whether I am supposed to offer to help. The case of the keg suggested my help is not welcome. Experience told me I may also be criticized for not offering to help. Screw it, I said to myself. I’m not interested in the wrong-every-way game today.

I walked outside to see what might need my attention on the north forty. The guy who had assisted with the keg was out there talking to three more arrivals from my wife’s old job who are still close. Two of them had a baby – it was the two men but it was the woman who was holding the baby at the moment, fussing over it and rocking it from a standing position like some kind of weird yoga. The one guy looked agitated at this scrambling motion – the baby looked like he wanted to get down. My name was known to this knot of people and they said hello without evidence of whatever collective whatever was affecting Louise and Ralph.

Food was brought out by more acquaintances pressed into service by my spouse, including the daughter of one co-worker who was about eight and carried a large tray of crudités, biting her lip with

concentration. I helped the kid with the tray and took it to the same table that received the other stuff. I made some small talk with one of the newcomers, who didn't act strange either, though I imagine that my conversation, of which I remember nothing, was not sparkling.

My wife was not in evidence, but I found her around the side, throwing chicken and burgers on my grill while talking to the woman who may be a second wife. She had the flames too high and her face was flushed – the skin showing in the V of her shirt was perspiring and a blond tress had fallen in front of her eyes – the whole effect was very arousing. “Can I do that?” I asked, abandoning my standards.

“No,” said my spouse. “Talk to people.”

I walked around the property instead, trying to make a count of the guests and to calculate if anyone is missing. By the time I was around the side again, food was already being served, maybe ten minutes after appetizers were introduced. A plate of burgers posed on a table and people helped themselves – some patties looked to me to be pretty rare and the rolls had soaked in some blood from the meat. The kid had one of these burgers and was munching it while playing with the baby, who was suspended in some kind of contraption with springs and belts that made him look like he was emerging from a volcano. The baby struggled heroically – he either desperately wanted out of the cone or he wanted the girl's burger.

Someone asked for barbecue sauce at the table. My wife was not around to direct me to look for it or to forbid me too, so I was free to volunteer to find it. I knew I had several bottles in a white pantry in the basement that I inherited from a southern Aunt two years earlier. Soon after bringing it home, chipped white enamel like something in which a doctor from the sixties might keep bandages, with a clear jar of tongue depressors on top, soon after bringing it home I had filled it with condiments and canned fruit, most items of which still sit patiently on its Contac-papered shelves like innocent but stoic citizens of Death Row.

I examined the expiration dates of some likely barbecue sauces, selecting two of different genres, when I heard some feet on the steps and see Louise from my work. “Hi,” she said, “Karen asked me to get some stuff from your supply,” – Karen being my wife.

She sorted through some pickles on a shelf and made no attempt at conversation, nothing about the meeting on the day just past or the presentation that awaited us at the end of the weekend, nothing about co-workers who might attend this party or those not invited, or even weather or traffic. I felt some responsibility for getting it going but nothing came out of my mouth and I was distracted by the thought as she returns up the stairs that it was my mother, not me, who had the chipped enamel cabinet and the shelves in the basement with overflow groceries. I saw Louise’s ankles disappear and noticed she wore cuffed jeans like someone in a religious order attending a secular party who is taking pains to dress modestly.

I returned to the backyard with the barbecue sauce bottles (choice of two) and one family was already packing up to leave. “Sorry,” the wife was telling Karen, “Sophie is exhausted. We couldn’t get her to take a nap before we came.”

“Hey, no need to go,” I said. “She can take a nap upstairs. We can push the bed against the wall – she won’t fall off.”

“Let them go if they want to go,” said Karen, and she returned to some hot dogs she was cooking over raging flames. She had a pile already on a china plate, disordered and jumbled like war detritus. An industrial-sized plastic bag of hot dog rolls was clumsily speared to provide access and it hung like an effigy on one of the plastic hooks on the side of the grill for utensils.

I felt like eating something. Or, rather, I felt that I should be eating something. Or, rather, I felt that it was unjust and immature for there to be a feeling that I don’t deserve to eat something. I found a

hamburger roll and looked for some of the exotic condiments I had bought at a gourmet store in an outlet mall that Karen and I had patronized but which had nothing but womens' clothes outlets (besides the gourmet shop). None of these condiments – Indian aioli, sriracha, Polish mustard, caruru, heriseh and wasabi – had been put out. I visualized where they might be but elected not to find them – there were plenty of more conventional alternatives already. Once my roll was prepared with mustard, ketchup, raw and cooked onions, fried breaded jalapenos, two kinds of cheese, it did not look like food. I found that I could not visualize what food looked like, or remember myself eating this stuff that people called food. Common sense told me that the roll just needed a burger patty and that I would be myself again but instead I put the roll down, carefully, on the corner of a faux-gingham table cover, like a crime scene. The rest of the table had been turned into the staging area for wine and beer bottles, and I stared in astonishment at the number that were piled on the table, more than could possibly have been consumed in the short time that guests had been present. I didn't recognize most of the bottles – people must have brought their own as gifts but then consumed them. I felt that the first guests arrived less than thirty minutes previous but the astonishing tumult of bottles made me question myself, haphazard heights and some with stained or missing labels, a city attracting flies.

“Hey, gotta run, sorry,” said a voice, spraying crumbs of hot dog bun while he wrapped a second frankfurter in a napkin for later. It was a guy from my work named Karl, who I learned had given a woman named Kerry a ride even though they dislike each other. My ears turned red in irritation that he was stuffing his pockets, but that was irrational – there was so much food that only a fool would resent someone taking extra. Kerry gave me a half wave and looked sheepish.

“He's my ride,” she said, seeming in need of rescue. In my head the whole sentence “Stay if you want – I can give you a ride” formulated and disappeared unsaid. I had an instantaneous train of thought that if there was a chance that disaster could be avoided with Karen, offering Kerry a ride would destroy that

last chance, but that thought battled with the thought that there was no chance so why should a simple innocent favor be at its mercy? And my mouth said nothing, and they walked off.

It seemed to me people were evacuating, abandoning us – the sun was high and strong and it couldn't even be three in the afternoon yet. There were shouts as one car dinged another in their mad haste to leave. I squinted toward the driveway and saw the driver of the car that was dented wave the other on – no time or impulse to stay, inspect the damage, trade insurance.

“Have you seen Ralph?” asked Louise at my shoulder. “Everyone's leaving, but I don't see him anywhere.”

“No need to rush,” I responded. “There's plenty of food.” That sounded stupid, and I felt like I should say something else right away to wipe out her memory of my awkwardness.

“He might have gone for a smoke,” said Louise. “He thinks I don't know he smokes.”

“OK, on it.” And I cut across the grass. Our driveway goes out to a rural road without a sidewalk, so I hoped Ralph hadn't gone that way. We back against a high school with large soccer fields next to it. There was also a walking path to the right of our house that travels past a farm before reaching the high school.

I took the path, and got past the farm without seeing Ralph. I did notice a cigarette butt or two but I didn't see how I could prove or disprove that it was connected to Ralph.

I continued. Ahead I saw a knot of people, standing in a scattered fashion but facing the same way. As I got closer, I saw a sole child weaving among the still adults like a bobbin. Ralph might have joined this crowd, whatever they were doing. A little closer and I could see that what they were doing was watching a game – the field had been hidden from my view by a rise. It was a women's lacrosse game. Ralph was not in evidence on the side I had reached. There were other attendees on the other side of



the field but I couldn't see much of their faces. There was no way to cross over while the game continued.

The athletes scurried, each and every one desperately beautiful, a team of humorless Joans of Arc. A girl made a great play near the sidelines. She wore a transparent mask over her whole upper face, for protection, no doubt. She wore the mask as if it was her shield not only from lacrosse balls and sticks but from the ludicrous hazards of the willfully clumsy world of men.

A guy watching the game wore a sweatshirt advertising the college at which I attended graduate school. Thinking perhaps he could be asked about Ralph, I considered breaking the ice with the coincidence of the college. He viewed the lacrosse with a vapid flinty concentration. A girl's father? A rival coach? A sports nut? Someone who just wandered by and can't resist girls in sleeveless tops and knee socks?

"Afternoon," I said, "Did you go there?" gesturing at the sweatshirt.

He nodded. "BS, 89".

I nodded. "MBA, 88."

There was a twinge on my thigh – my cell phone. The text was from an unknown number. "Ralph back – Thx. CU later."

I continued to watch the game, mentally going over the guest list to the extent that I reconstructed it, calculating if anyone is left. There was a whistle in the game. The women retreated to two sidelines, peering at adults who might be coaches. There was no scoreboard anywhere and I didn't know if the game was over. A few people left but many stayed, almost silent. To me, if it was the end of the game there would be more excitement, athletes lining up for some kind of ceremony of good sportsmanship. Even if it were halftime, if lacrosse even has a half-time, I would have expected more talk from the people watching.

A rabbit ran onto the field and sniffed the air. I wonder if the rabbit had a minute or ten minutes or forever before it needed to make way for the game.

I felt a second text. When I look I see that it is from Karen. "Guests all gone. Come home."

When I looked up, the guy with the sweatshirt was gone.

Texts are not a very clear form of communication, as many people have observed. Karen might have meant, "come home to the comfort of your family" but I doubted it. She might have meant "come home and report to work" or "come home and take your punishment."

That was the very moment of the dream when I first wondered if it was a dream, though in the dream I wasn't convinced, because the sequence of events seemed far too long to be a dream.

One girl came out onto the grass and started firing shots at an empty net. None of the other players paid any attention but the onlookers, and I, watched with the concentration of conspirators.