

Gavin Cobb

In the Upper Room

When the estranged father explained to his kids that he'd chosen his new downsized apartment primarily because of its location, he had not yet known anything about the habits or lifestyle of his neighbor(s) upstairs. In just the first week after the finalization of the divorce and his subsequent move out of the paid-off home his ex-wife still hosted Pampered Chef parties in the sunlit front room she sometimes referred as the parlor of, however, the estranged husband had quickly become acquainted with what seemed to be the periodically recurrent evening schedule of the indeterminate number of people inhabiting the apartment directly above his own. The unmistakable auditory traces of female sexuality had, on Tuesday and for most of Thursday night, been noticeable in a way the newly estranged but longstandingly straightlaced and conservative father had unconsciously avoided examining or even really admitting to himself. On Friday he had been especially tired after work and was thus almost completely unaware of the otherwise eyebrow-arching noise when he turned in early at nine-fifteen. That first Sunday was what he would later begin privately referring to as an 'off night,' though of course he had no way of knowing this at the time.

Except for a few afternoon court dates and lunch-meetings in his attorney's downtown office, the estranged father had been able to minimize the divorce proceedings' interference with his professional life and had retained—or rather, technically, had been retained by the company's Human Resources department's Employee Retention subdivision, which subdivision's investigation of and unpublished report on the long-term viability of certain on-site employees' pay structures had coincided with the divorce proceedings and had deemed the estranged father's

contractual arrangement ‘highly retainable’—his assistant-managerial engineering job at the local Volvo test facility.

Over the next several weeks, the Tuesday-Thursday-Friday-and-every-other-Sunday-at-just-around-ten-thirty pattern emerged as what you might call a relentlessly dependable aspect of the *mise en scene*, and although he never actually set any of his personal electronic devices’ or kitchen appliances’ digital clocks by the regularity of the ecstatic glottal noises apparently originating—assuming for the purpose of exposition that he was always standing with well-honed posture in immediate proximity to his militarily tucked and made-up bed whenever ten-thirty rolled around on one of these nights, which of course he wasn’t—a mere ten or so feet above his head, he had noted on one Thursday evening shortly after that first Tuesday that the little chemical-green digits on his 12-cup Mr. Coffee’s tiny clock had read a sluggish 10:27 to his oven’s even :30 when the moans began, even though he distinctly remembered having watched the coffee maker tick from 10:28 to 10:29 in a more or less identical situation on the evening of the Tuesday two days before, and so the sounds of what was at that time still taken for granted to be just regular hetero sex involving an unusually vocal and inhibitionless woman had at least brought the coffee maker’s clock’s regrettable tendency to run somewhat slowly in relation to those of the kitchen’s other appliances to the estranged father’s attention. It hadn’t taken long for the sounds of ten-thirty and the gleaming kitchen’s clocks to assume a kind of Pavlovian associative role in the assistant IT manager’s psyche, so that by the end of his second month in the decreasingly new and auspiciously located apartment it was not uncommon for him, whenever he heard anything at all similar in tone or pitch or timbre to the sound of his neighbor(s)’(s) nocturnal ritual, to experience an immediate wave of anxiety regarding the temporal integrity of his kitchen’s various dials and displays. As one might expect, this

association did not apply exclusively to what the estranged father heard inside his own home. Thus, any time his mind registered in even a peripheral or unconscious way anything that might have been plausibly construable as a woman's sensual utterance—but which was more likely just e.g. flirtation (or an actual sex act, actually, given the setting—bad example) on the TR bus to work or a snatch of mordant sitcom dialogue or some shrill internet pop-up's voice-over obtruding into the three and a half designated email hours he'd started having to block out of every workday simply to keep up with the test facility's digicom cascade—any time he overheard anything bearing any degree of aural resemblance to a moan or a simper or even an especially loud or forceful sigh he became immediately and unavoidably preoccupied with clocks, in addition to your other, more physiologically predictable responses. On days when the estranged father was feeling especially tired or pensive or morose, however, this associative imbroglio became even deeper and more complexly disruptive because on these days (which days the novice divorcee privately referred to in the singular as *One of Those Days*, as in for instance *Heck take it, I guess it's just One of Those Days*) the estranged father's irritating clock-thoughts conjured up the further image of himself standing in his well-lit kitchen at half past ten post meridiem and wearing a look of interest and sudden distraction and paying no attention at all to the incessant beeping and blinking and the scrolling digital text on the microwave's little display that meant his single-serve pot-pie was halfway done and ready to be prodded and stirred to make a vent for the slushy interior's excess steam and thus ensure that it received even heating throughout when it went back into the microwave for a second term, plus that image's obvious attendant sensation of sexual arousal in a kind of viciously regressive circle.

These moments were, socially speaking, inconvenient. They made the estranged father feel embarrassed in a frantic middle-schoolish way he had almost forgotten was a very real part

of the human affective range. He was now many years older and far less self-conscious than he had been during early puberty and as such did not evince the sort of violent capillary flush or percussive stammer that you might expect from your true anxiety-ridden adolescent, though he did not consider these moments to be in any way fun or amusing. The estranged father sometimes remembers (though independently from or parallel to the aforementioned mess of precognitive associations, which is really only similar to the middle school memory in a very broad emotiono-evocative way) a certain traumatic episode from either Mrs. or Ms. Van Neuheiser's sixth-grade Social Studies class in which—the estranged father generally settles on Ms. for the sake of syllabic brevity—in which M(r)s. Van Neuheiser's request for the help of one of her adolescent pupils in redistributing a heap of graded midterm exams had met with what the ex-husband recalls as a ringing operatic silence and not one single upturned, eager, or academically enthusiastic face, and she had thus been as he remembers she said quote-unquote *forced to volunteer a volunteer for them* and had selected the estranged father as that volunteer. For his part, the estranged—now estranged, though at that time obviously—well, the father's early adolescence had (probably not all that surprisingly) been a time of extreme and at times almost debilitating self-consciousness and anxiety, especially with regard to what he viewed as the socially aberrant and malignantly unpredictable nature of his sexual maturation. Nor did the spontaneous erections he had sprung nearly every day during class that first year at General Greene Middle ever really seem to be attributable to anything the estranged father could have rightly called a 'good reason,' though this did not significantly mitigate the feelings of anxiety and fear and profound social discomfort the semi-public erections themselves never once failed to evoke. They seemed to happen at random, and it was not until several years later in Professor Urey's multivariable calculus course at UNC-Charlotte that the estranged father would even

wonder whether it might be possible to model the erections' rate of occurrence or their temporal distribution throughout the six-period school day using a partial differential equation.

At any rate, the estranged father had been busily employed counting and noting the peculiarities of the randomly dispersed little nimbus-like gray flecks in the floor tile directly between his feet with what he didn't realize had manifested to M(r)s. Van Neuheiser as a kind of artificially overt nonchalance rather than cagy neurotic terror in an attempt to disgorge his adolescent penis of its traitorous hemic burden when he'd heard his teacher volunteer him for him from her wooden podium at the front of the room. Interestingly, he now remembers zero sensory detail about the actual process of handing out the papers, though he does recall mentally constructing and cycling through several different contingency plans regarding how he might avoid revealing his current (i.e. then-current) physiological state of protrusive arousal to the class as he carried out his teacher's directive while at the same time also actively worrying that the stress and apparent rise in internal temperature caused by the whole penile emergency might be impeding his ability to formulate an effective contingency plan, and then after a very brief interval also worrying that the act of worrying about this possible impediment might itself also be merely compounding or as it were enlarging or exacerbating the crisis and then again that this worry might also itself be doing so, etc., so that the whole memory just seems to run up against this one single involutedly agonizing point in time and to flounder in terms of its relation to the dad's normal perceptions of time and space like—again, as the estranged father would only come to realize later on after he'd had a couple semesters of college math—like a discontinuous function or convergent series approaching a limit. Maybe because of their abstractness, the mathematical analogies do tend to blunt the embarrassment the estranged father feels even now

whenever he remembers the episode, though it's still not something he's ever exactly enjoyed dwelling on.

(N.B. It's not so much that the estranged father now has trouble remembering whether his teacher was married or whether she wore a ring or anything, but that he just never paid close enough attention to find out for sure either way and is now fairly certain he probably addressed her as both Mrs. and Ms. Van Neuheiser at different points during the 1977-78 academic year.)

The estranged father's job at the local Volvo test facility, by the way, is to preview his programmers' crash-test simulations and vet their parameters for real-life viability before emailing them four rooms down the hall to the test-track's field manager. This means that, once he's finished with his morning email-combing, the E.F. then spends the workday's remaining 4.5 hours perusing computerized models of collision-simulations, each model requiring a total of three viewings, corresponding to the number of simulated camera angles permitted by the company's own patented CrashPeek software. He monitors the impact's results for both the naked chassis and their diversely human-toned cargo, the latter being occasionally, on nasty runs, rocketed cameraward through the windshield whose laminant makes it only shatter-resistant, their eyes the color of White-Out and almost heartbreakingly round.

But so at the outset of the custody battle that really didn't begin in earnest until a couple of months after the separation, the estranged father had pushed for an every-other-Saturday-and-Sunday arrangement—though with this pattern of custodial weekends being inversely rather than directly synchronized with his upstairs neighbor's or neighbors' other, less G-rated system—purely out of a natural paternal and very much predictable wish to shield his two kids from the percussive and elated and ever so vaguely damp or moist aural traces of half past ten. However, as the weeks of closed-doors counseling wore on and the estranged father became gradually able

to not only distinguish but almost understand the general sense of three separate Latin juridical phrases on an entirely phonetic basis without ever knowing what language they were in or why his attorney kept using them in the context of a branch of law he'd never thought of as being particularly recondite or jargon-heavy, the estranged father began to feel something not utterly unlike gratitude for his otherwise silent postoccupational evenings alone in the apartment with only its ambient sounds and their faceless source(s) for company. In other words, for reasons more or less unrelated to his kids' psycho-social welfare, he was now thankful for the foresight he had unwittingly exercised in drawing up his proposed custody-schedule (with the dynamic and prescient custody arrangement allowing for two full consecutive days of satisfying and definitely as they say quality time per fortnight even as it left the estranged father's other schedule of engagements seamless and untouched) several weeks before when he was still pretty much ignorant—at least, he told himself, on the level of conscious awareness—of the pleasure he derived from the recurrent primetime symphony. Symphony or something else, depending on whether and to what extent there were multiple people involved. With also a certain amount of personal stress and angst and identity-crisis-style repression-busting going on inside him, like emotionally, the estranged father being once again yes maybe a bit less prone to introspection than you might think of as ideal but really a fairly normal, wholesome, slightly right-of-center guy without any sort of quote 'prior history' or criminal record to speak of other than that one citation a few years back when he had *finally set fire to that goddamned plaque of hers* that she'd gotten in the mail from Pampered Chef Corporate and that had had *Honorary Delicatsesseur* engraved right below her name in the same baroquey stylized cursive font—the plaque's varnish or sealant having taken a bit longer to ignite than the estranged father would have thought ideal but ensuring a thoroughly rapacious burn once it did—though he'd been looking at a paltry

misdemeanor destruction of property or disorderly conduct-level charge at the very worst and even that had been expunged as soon as he'd paid the fine. It was maybe the most ominous of their marriage's earlier rough spots, to be sure, though still an anomaly in terms of the estranged father's overall psychological résumé.

But once the estranged father had become so deeply reliant on the nightly erotolalia for what he inwardly referred to as 'deprogramming' that any peeping tom of even industry-standard abilities could have seen him hoisting himself up from the MSNBC evening recap at precisely 10:26 on relevant nights with near-Kantian regularity to pour himself a dilute highball and still be sure to have enough time for the first couple of sips to work their way into circulation before loosening whichever of his tucked and wrinkleless oxford's buttons was the uppermost to still be fastened and mounting his queen-sized Serta and, drink in hand, assuming a standing position near the center of the expensive mattress's bottom-left quadrant and just off to the side of the ceiling's integrated fan's motor's casing in the by now well-trodden area of greatest audibility, it was only a matter of time before the combination of wobbly mattress-springs and Glenlivet single-malt and accretive post-work fatigue—plus an element of distraction that hardly needs another mention—betrayed its true deleterious potential and caused the estranged father to lose his balance and footing and, in the process of flailing about with his arms in a doomed but admirable effort to avoid the fearsome spill that might result in the bed's sheets and/or comforter being stained a permanent and repulsive brown, to knock his tumbler's rim against the fan's motor's white steel casing in such a way as to interrupt the dubitably coital interlude with the loud blunt ringing of glass against painted metal, though luckily he was able to both maintain the contents of his tumbler and to land more or less on his feet with only minimal assistance from the closet's doorjamb but with a formidable solution of dread and curious arousal bubbling up from

somewhere around the area of the large intestine, which solution all of a sudden became way more monotonic on the side of arousal and curiosity as the estranged father heard and rapidly began interpreting the second of the last few moments' two discrete percussive sounds, the echoless *thunt* of hardwood rising to meet the dropped magenta plastic of whatever lurid object the Cherry Stem Emporium had purveyed under the trade name *ET: The Estroterrestrial*, the upstairs neighbor having lost her lubricated grip and bolted up and out to investigate through the bedroom's door-crack the sound she's now certain she'd mistaken for the only late-evening knock she could remember having thought she'd heard in at least the last eighteen months.