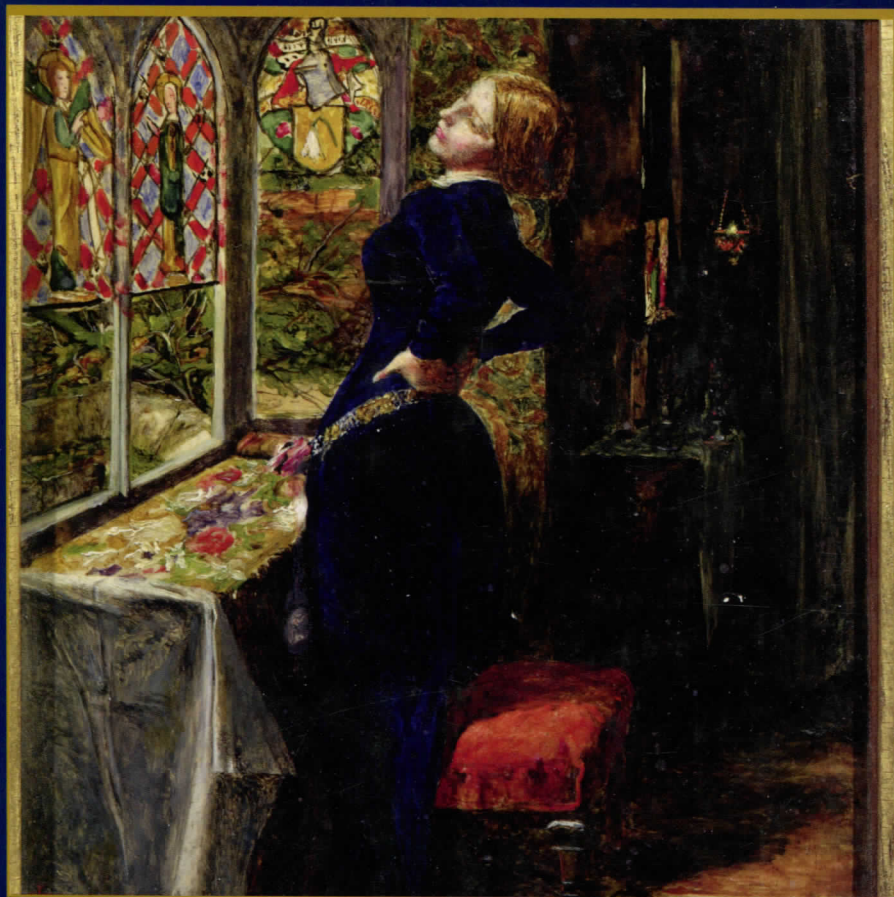


# THE EVANSVILLE REVIEW



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## BENJAMIN OBLER

### Randy Randall

I'd been working at General Cognizance for fifteen years before Randy Randall arrived, doing what I'd always done for them—or "it" I should say, since a corporation is a single entity—which was taking unnecessarily circuitous and impecunious routes in order to secure, for a small branch of an obscure division, sketchy but nevertheless binding legal compliance in the area of contract law. My cube was on the first floor in a five-story building: a cave. Fitting, because primitive business operations were transacted there. Filing government forms—stick drawings. Binders with tabbed dividers, labyrinthine procedural outlines, data tables. Fire-starting. Rat-grilling. Bone-gnawing.

There was high turnover at General Cognizance. In my row, people came and went constantly. Teams of temps and contractors were brought on to fulfill projects, then canned when the terms were met and funds dried up. As fast as the weather changed, I found I had neighbors—neighbors with cell phones that, vibrating, rattled their drawers, neighbors who sniffed excessively and talked about sports teams. They'd introduce themselves, shake my hand. "Neil Roegen," I'd say. "Pleasure." I'd carry on with the flint and kindling. Then seasons shifted and none. Silence. No neighbors. Not even the *lululululu* of an office phone or the *snit, snit* of nail clipping. Many years can pass lulled by these tidal ebbs and flows.

So neighbors, no neighbors. I stayed put. There was always a need for compliance when bidding, and even when a company isn't producing, it must be legal in its idleness. These were federal contracts, and renewable. For some, extensions were awarded. Others were re-won against new competition. Others were lost. When they were lost, fresh hordes of vivacious go-getters were brought in to photocopy the old files and ship them to the next vendor, clogging the cubical aisles with piles of banker's boxes like miniature pyramids. It was during one of these epochal transitions that Randy Randall appeared on my floor.

We first met as I returned to my cube from the kitchenette. I noticed him, his newness, right away at the copier, with his flubby

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girth and tight clothes, leaning over the buttons in a panic, as if at an ATM with a gun to his back. A wave of repulsion washed over me. I tried to stride by uninterrupted when he suddenly stepped backwards and bent to open a paper tray. His rotund buttocks, stuffed into a pair of snug khakis, bumped me firmly, sending me into a filing cabinet opposite, the handle of which slammed into my bony hip. It was this contact that hurt, not the other; the man's ass-like protuberance had met me in a dense but padded nudge, optimally timed and imbued with a sense of uncanny accidental benevolence, like those news items you read where seabird collides with a blind man and restores his sight.

He arose red-faced and apologized, and I immediately saw that he was a most unsophisticated and out-of-sort sort. His short-sleeved polo was thin and stained in the underarms; it stretched tautly over his bubbling breasts. His glasses were atrociously out of style. His hair, though clean, could not have been made any more amorphous by the most senior stylist at an Uptown salon—flopped on his head lifelessly, going in no particular direction, having no definite aspect other than brown, like the polo shirt. At least he had the decency to be embarrassed.

“Ahhh,” he intoned, as if a doctor held a tongue depressor in his mouth. “Hello. I’m Randy Randall.”

“Hello. Neil Roegen.”

“I’m new here.”

“I know.”

“Sorry about that.”

I clutched my stinging, tingling hip and walked away, looking forward already to that phase when the office goes quiet again, just me, the howling heating ducts, and the voices of those few other permanents several aisles away on this floor of cubicles in this distant corner of the office, in this arcane but necessary division of this possibly criminal but otherwise apparently prosperous company out in the furthest outreaches of the metropolitan area, where the area codes and counties change and farmhouses cower beside the new drugstore at a fresh-minted intersection with nests of closed circuit cameras atop lamppost boughs.

I did not speak to Randy Randall the rest of that day, or again for several more days, though I did think about his name. The duplicity of it. Though that’s not the right word, is it, as duplicity means cunning or contrivance? I mean, rather, its doublesness. Randy Randall. What had his parents been thinking? Had they considered it humorous? Did they hope it would make him outstanding? I found

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it thoughtless: people like me now had to deal with its clumsiness. It was rather like people who explode their lunch in the microwave, then walk off, leaving the splatters for someone else to wipe up. I couldn't account for it, and had to assume that Randy had emerged from the womb possessing an essence so hearty, so singular, that it had to be repeated.

Did I know any other doubled-up names, a Brad Bradley, a Curt Curtis? On my way to the vending machine for some M&Ms, I could think of none, so went back to work on my files. Tearing grist from bones with my teeth, sucking the fatty veins.

\* \* \*

For a while I saw him around, at the supply cabinet, using the 3-hole punch, with timidly sagging shoulders and rolls jiggling under spastic, unsure movements. But I steered clear until having lunch one day in the commons. I was reading the paper, when his bulbous, discombobulated form appeared. I spread the broadsheet wide, but he didn't take the hint. I looked up, and there he was.

"Neil," he said. "May I?"

"Of course," I said, gesturing to a chair, my teeth set. He lowered his lunch tray, and sat beside me with a wan smile. Up close, I could see the unbecoming manner in which dark facial stubble emerged on his blushed cheeks, rosy like a baby's. He was dressed again in ill-fitting clothes, as if up until recently he'd been a normally proportioned man, then woke one day puffed up like Veruca Salt after chewing the bubble gum that turns her into a blueberry, and he had gone on dressing as if nothing had happened.

He had a trembling manner, and operated with aimless motions. Had he been going for a napkin before stutteringly picking up that sandwich? It seemed so. Several times I thought he would set his drink on the raised edge of the tray, causing it to topple. This imprecision completely unnerved me—and I say that knowing how overused the word is in certain circles, certain media. The sense of foreboding attached to the original meaning has been worn thin, the word having been peppered around in mass market paperbacks and such. Unnerved! Discomfited! Everyone says this. Yet here it applied. I may keep to myself, but I'm socially capable enough to scan a newspaper while making idle chat. But with Randy Randall I could not. I felt he might change me. No, I felt he'd changed me already. And I was terrified.

"So what do you do, Mr. Roegen?" Randy asked.

"Here I work with contracts, I said. "We have many agree-

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ments with other entities, and there are laws governing—limiting—the way we can interact. Compliance. That’s what it’s called. I act as signatory. I am a consent-giver. I am a keeper of records.” I sat up high, raising my chin. “But it’s not what I do here that’s so important.”

“Oh?”

“No, it’s what I do elsewhere.”

Randy Randall swallowed a doughy ball of sandwich, and looked at me, waiting.

“Maybe I’ll tell you about it another time. We just met. What about you? Did you come here through an agency?”

“Yup,” he said. His eyes through his glasses were swampy warbling things.

“And did you work before that?”

“No,” he said, shyly. “I didn’t.” He looked up and blushed.

“Unemployed? Laid off?”

“Ahhh,” he groaned with nasal hesitancy, seeming to consider that he might reciprocate the level of secrecy. “No, I wasn’t laid off.”

“Were you in college?”

“Uh-huh. Well, sort of.”

“How does one sort of go to college?”

Randy didn’t answer.

“Fair enough.”

At home a simple web search informed me that Randy Randall had been a child prodigy, enrolling in university at age 14 and completing a double major in three years. An archived newspaper article quoted the 17-year-old graduate saying he wanted to be a neurosurgeon. A neurosurgeon? I laughed at this with satisfying derision. He had not even made RN! Served the overachiever right.

For now, the remainder of lunch, we talked of more general things. He told me where he was living. He had moved to Minneapolis only recently and was renting one of those studios beside Loring Park, in that small corner of scenic brownstones in the shadow of the Foshay, a neighborhood that might be mistaken for Boston or somewhere more cosmopolitan. It had been used in a few movies—one where the broken-hearted hero sells Christmas trees from a lot. I’d lived there once upon a time, in my younger days. I knew each building, remembered the area well.

“Sure, sure, I lived in the Bell Arms long ago.”

“That’s where I am, the Bell Arms.”

“Back in my day,” I said to Randy, “rent was \$325. How

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much is it now?"

"\$750," Randy said, with respectful flatness, knowing the figure dated me.

Never before had I been defined by a rate of increase. I felt old and out-of-touch, yet tried not to react. "You face the park for that price, I hope."

"Yes, the park."

"Hmm. Well, back to the grindstone," I said, getting up.

"Hang on, Neil," he said. He grappled with his napkin, then a ketchup packet, then the napkin again, eventually wiping his swollen lips. "I wanted to ask you about General Cognizance."

There was a lot to tell. It was a big company with many divisions and sites, holdings, interests, endeavors.

"Okay," I said. "But let me just get some dessert." I was feeling suddenly rather peckish.

I came back to the table with a slice of apple pie from the café counter. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, ahhhh, is it a good company? I mean, I like it so far. Maybe I could have a future here. But I've heard there's high turnover."

"Right, the turnover. The thing is, Randy, is that, yes, General Cognizance does have high turnover. Now, I'm being straight with you, because..." I couldn't tell him why exactly. I wasn't known for my straightness. "Well, I'm being straight with you, that's all. Mmm, this is good pie. The turnover is atrocious, and it's not talked about. It's just accepted. Okay? It's management's fault. It's always management's fault. That's true everywhere. But what else is true is that they are the ones bringing in the contracts in the first place. The all-important work. So, yes, it's because of them and their impudence that people are kicked out and cut loose in the most heartless ways, but it's also because of them that anyone makes a single cent in the first place. Now, that strikes a lot of people as unjust. But if you can get square with it, you'll stand a much better chance of blending in here. If you take to GC—that's what we call it, colloquially—GC will likely take to you."

"Ahhhhh," Randy tonelessly sang, like a chorister trying to warm up his voice without making music. He began every utterance this way, and I could see him sorting through reams of confusing impulses until the right words lined up and gelled, setting like jello in a mold. "Thank you, Neil. That's a relief. I was worried. It's just, my girlfriend will be moving here, too, if I have a steady job. You know. If I have a steady job to support her."

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“Uh-huh. That’s your plan, is it? The agreement you two have?”

“Yes.”

I was familiar with such schemes.

Randy regarded me with a timid and earnest gaze. He looked proud to have made a friend and particularly relieved about the turnover. Now he had the inside scoop about how to survive it, and knew what course he had to follow to ensure his job security and the arrival of his out-of-state sweetheart, whom he surely missed and longed for. But as he looked at me in this grateful, foolish way, he reached for his soda and knocked it over with his sausage-like fingers.

You hear that a lot about fingers, much more often than is warranted, I assure you. Only a very select few peoples’ fingers truly resemble sausages, one in eighteen or so. It’s not nearly as many as it’s made out to be. I know, I pay attention to these things, on top of the compliance work that I do. This is part of what I alluded to with Randy but refrained from disclosing to him. Anyway Randy Randall was one, one of the sausage-fingered. His nervous Johnsonville Brats barreled right into the side of his Coke, just as carelessly as his glutinous glutes had rammed me, sending me careening into a new orbit.

“You’re welcome,” I said, standing up and taking the last bite of pie. “Better get that cleaned up.”

\* \* \*

Many have made the mistake of thinking that with my thick brown mustache, feathered hair, trim physique and general dapper appearance, that I would be quite a lady killer. Especially with the authentic Greek fisherman’s hat I wear, ordered from a New England catalog. My time with General Cognizance has earned me some niceties, seeing as the company gives generous raises to the loyal, and seeing how each year the value of federal contracts balloons by the millions—my eye-catching wardrobe is one of these rewards of devotion. Yet, no, I am not married and never have been. I am a solitary figure. I prefer the quiet of an empty room, an infinity of choice open to me upon my arrival home, when I cross the threshold into my modest Winnetka house.

Winnetka is an indistinct suburb comfortably removed from downtown, safely distanced from Loring Park, where I lived 15 years ago and the walrus-like Randy Randall now resides. In fact, Winnetka is precisely halfway between Minneapolis’ gleaming towers and the northwest perimeter of the county, where General Cognizance headquarters squats lowly, brick and reflective glass, among reedy marshes and red-breasted blackbirds tweeting atop the cord grass,



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lamenting the shrinking of their terrain.

I am a creature of habit, and my chief habit has been to spend time alone, thinking. This is the important work that I do which I alluded to in the commons at GC. Which is not to say that I consider myself a philosopher or seer or logician or anything of that description. Only that I am a sober man with a sober demeanor who would preoccupy himself with any of the thousands of trifles available to a person in this day and age, if only they didn't all aggravate me. In the evenings, I read, I listen to classical music, I build models of balsa wood and string, during which I let my mind wander far beyond the bounds of contract law fine-print, dependency clauses and sublicensing mumbo jumbo, forgetting the corporate directive delivered to me by my absentee supervisor to skim over the waters of compliance while clinging to a rope of the federal dollar, never letting it snap. Perhaps that is a mixed metaphor. But never mind! My hobbies and habits are chiefly ones of stillness, concentration and abstemiousness. And what I found was that once I'd met Randy Randall, taken in the vision of his orblike body, like a giant chocolate-coated raisin at the copy machine, and learned of his circumstances so like circumstances I'd once been in—new to GC, young, and in love—I could not concentrate, could not be still, could not exercise moderation.

I continued to think, because it was habitual, but my thoughts roamed to him; and at the loss of control of my mind I became nervous. And nervous, I ate. Now, understand, I am not a man of vice. Liquors taste toxic to me. Beer is so filling and crudely gaseous. Tobacco makes my eyes water and my throat itch. Street drugs I wouldn't know where to locate or how to administer. Food, however, is omnipresent, and often calming. The apple pie was a spark that set my sweet tooth ablaze. I began regularly buying desserts from the café counter—cakes, bars, pies. One evening, I made a batch of cookies, finding a dusty flour tin in the back of the cabinet, and brown sugar rock-hard from neglect. They were heavenly. I ate four, and felt much eased, then returned to my reading. When the second batch was finished, I sampled one, and found it even more soothing. I was aloft with indulgent pleasure.

I read and they called me, and I read and they called me, and I resisted, and they called me. Finally I put my book down.

A glass of whole milk accompanying the next three only amplified my delight. Fully sated, I moved to my hobby table, my pants-waist unsnapped, but harboring visions, as I worked on a scale model of a Viking ship, of the timid, awkward Randy stuffed into his Loring Park studio awaiting the ringing of his phone.

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Though I had been repulsed by him at first, and was still, in the coming weeks, I felt less damning towards him, like I could take some pity in his sorry state, and even a mild affection bloomed in me for his hopeful delusions that he might survive the ins and outs of GC's turnover epochs as ably as I'd done, simply on some slick advice. It amused me, smugly. Or rather I was amused, and smug. No, no, the smugness arrived in the amusement. The point being there was a deliciousness to his naivety, how he knew nothing, despite his advanced IQ, of the flocks that had come and gone before him. Sure, he'd solved puzzles as a toddler. He'd mastered Mozart at 6. He'd built circuits for science fairs with so much unaccountable (and it turns out, undesirable) precociousness. What good did it do him? Now he was a flabby newcomer in a dismally sterile corporation. He'd had to consult *me*, a prehistoric caveman cowering among drying raccoon hides and crumbled bones. For all his natural genius, Randy Randall didn't know the sound a letter opener makes scraping lonely missives on the walls out of the campfire soot. He was ignorant of the noxious residue released when executive ruthlessness combusts with managerial indifference. He knew nothing of the cyclical eras that pass unnoticed—but by me.

I realized I needed to seek him out and find out how things were going. See if he was on the right path. And maybe even avert him from taking the wrong one.

\* \* \*

I tracked him down one morning having orange juice. An expansive aura surrounded him—and I don't mean physically expansive—in the sunlit commons. He looked ruddy in the cheeks, but he was not blushing.

"Look at you," I said, sitting down beside him. "You're beet red."

"Exertion," he said.

"Tying your shoes?"

"Ahhh, no. I biked here."

"Really? From downtown?"

He had. The price of gas had spiked precipitously, and biking was part of his plan to pinch pennies and build a nest-egg to ensure the arrival of June. That was her name, the Michigan sweetheart who would alight if the financial landing strip were laid. June like the month. June like June Cleaver.

"Impressive," I said, surprising myself. (I've never been one to dish out praise). "It's a long way from Loring Park."

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“Well, Neil, I’m cutting corners,” Randy said, with a bit more breeze and confidence than he’d ever shown. “You know, a lot of regular expenses can be trimmed. I’m not running the air conditioning. I’ve put in fluorescent light bulbs. I’m packing lunches. The cafeteria here is nice, but it adds up.”

Before him sat an open Tupperware of carrots sticks.

“Blanketing your life in frugality and temperance,” I said.

“Ahhh, something like that.” This “ahhh” was less one of hesitancy than stifled laughter.

“Eating like a rabbit. Biking to work. You’ll be fit as a fiddle.”

“Yes,” he said. “Already I’ve lost two pounds.”

“I’ll be damned. Well, a doughnut calls. See you later.”

This was not the conversation I had planned, and that rather annoyed me. How much was this guy affecting me? I felt the need to inspect my bruise, which had slowly emerged in the days after the collision with Randy as deep-set and subcutaneous. I went to the restroom, lowered my pants, and studied its progress. The yellow and purple splotch was neither tender nor sore anymore. It had sunk in and mellowed. But it is the nature of these bruises to linger a long while; I could expect this one to inevitably do the same.

This word rang in my head in the way that certain words do sometimes. Just echoing away for no reason. I returned to my cube, gobbled the last bites of my cherry Bismarck, and pulled my keyboard toward me. I searched the web for “inevitable.” A quote was returned: “*We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude.*” This from a clergyman named Swindon in a far-distant land centuries ago.

While I pondered whether these words were still relevant, the computer dinged, alerting me to an arriving email. A department announcement. A position had been created, and Randy Randall appointed, hired on full-time, permanent. Project Quality Analyst. I went immediately to Steve Campbell, my distant cave-neighbor. Animosity mounted in me, bordering on paranoia, directed towards the naïve blubber-butt, who though not assigned to me in any way, felt something like my protégé, or rival.

“He’s extremely capable,” Campbell said, turning in his chair, pictures of his children behind him, their crayon drawings magnet-held to his cabinets.

“Yes, capable. But of what?”

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“Of many things. He’s organized. Takes initiative. Team player. He was a child prodigy, you know.”

“A failed one.”

“Neil, he was pushed into academics as a kid. Got burned out. That’s not a blemish. General Cognizance hires on merit. We also fire on demerits.”

Steve peered meaningfully over the top of his glasses.

“It. *It* fires on demerits. GC is an it, Steve, not a we.”

I barely squeezed out these words, struggling to catch my breath. My chest felt constricted. I helped myself to Campbell’s candy dish.

“Once he’s settled in,” Campbell added, crossing a leg, “I thought Randall could help manage your compliance records.”

“That won’t be necessary, thank you very much!” I barked, gnawing on two Tootsie Rolls at once. I skulked away.

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After work, I parked my car a careful distance from the bike racks in the west lot and waited. Randy showed, unlocked a chain, and put an aerodynamic helmet atop his treasured dome. Gracelessly, he heaved a thunderous thigh over a bike, and set off wobbling wildly. Fumbling to steer, he pushed his glasses up on his nose, and shoved his toes in the pedal clips. He looked like an 80-pound catfish on a skateboard. I started my car.

He left the company grounds and went south down Schmidt Lake Road. I rolled slowly out of the lot, letting him gain some distance. A few blocks on, through some traffic signals, I caught up to him. He was on the bike path beside the road, hunched over the handlebars, his pink shirt (he had been wearing livelier colors lately) already darkened with sweat. I pulled up in the near lane, and rolled down my passenger window, steering with one hand, leaning across the seats.

“I don’t think June should come!” I yelled.

He looked up with a start, swerved, and regained his balance. “Neil?”

“June! I’ve been thinking. It’s not a good idea! She shouldn’t come!”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“This position! They’re playing you! Playing you like a fiddle! It’s their one string, the only tune they know.”

“Ahhh,” Randy groaned, in that way he had, skeptical but fearful of disagreeing. His fat forearms strained, clutching the han-

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dlebars, with unnecessary force. His face was complected in anticipation of terror, as if he were riding at the front of a roller coaster. "But Mr. Campbell said—"

"Campbell can't be trusted!" I yelled. A tow-truck roared by, honking. I was going under the speed limit. "That contract you signed, did you read the fine print?"

Randy looked from the path to me and back again, his face contorted in confusion. "Maybe this isn't a good time." I noticed he did not wear ankle clips around his trouser legs, and one cuff had been frayed by the sprocket's teeth.

"All GC contracts are no-fault. They can fire you at any time for no reason. You'll have no recourse. Is that what you want? Think of June! She'll be crushed! You promised her security."

"Neil, we should talk tomorrow!" he yelled.

"Don't tell her tonight. I know you're planning to call."

Well, yeah, but..."

"They're setting you up to knock you down. I've seen it happen a hundred times."

"What about you? You've been there fifteen years?"

"That's different! I'm different." More cars honked at me now. I accidentally drove up the curb and back down with a thump.

"Ahhh, I don't know what you mean by that," Randy said.

"Just don't call tonight! Don't get June's hopes up! Sleep on it, Randy. All right?"

"I guess so, Neil."

"That a boy."

I sat upright and stepped on the gas. In my rearview, I saw Randy, with his innocent doe eyes, recede like a seal on an ice floe.

The next morning, before I could formulate a plan, Randy found me in the corner of the café, behind one of the potted plants that are placed around the building to bring some of the ambience of the surrounding marshes, with their grasses and cat-o-nine-tails, inside.

"You really think it's a mistake to send for June?" he said, sitting down. His face was puffy. Thinner, but puffy.

"Have you been crying, Randy?"

"I, ahhhh..." He hesitated. "I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about what you said."

"Listen, Randy, I was just trying to help. I shouldn't meddle."

"If I screw this up, I'll never forgive myself. I need to know, You really think GC could burn me?"

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“It’s none of my business. I’m probably way off base.”

“Now you’re just being nice. Come on, Neil, tell me the truth. I know you probably heard that I went to college early—a prodigy and all that. It’s true, and I’m grateful for my gifts, but what I’ve always wanted was to meet someone and start a family. To be normal for once. No more MENSA, no more Honors Society, no more brain scans and tests. I don’t want to work in a think tank or at the NSA. I gave back, ahhhh, all my grant money. Then I met June, and now I have that chance. June’s just a regular girl. Smart, yeah, but she’s a nonprofit administrator, she has no interest in academic glory or mingling with the cognoscenti. She doesn’t pressure me. She accepts me for who I am. Anyway, this is my chance to get what I want. Is this the wrong place to do it?”

I had to think about that one. My stomach growled loudly. “Sorry,” I said to Randy, clutching my belly with both hands. I looked away nervously. The café counter was selling frosted long johns with sprinkles today. I looked back to Randy: his neck was narrower, his breasts flattened. “Randy,” I said. “We cannot change the past. We cannot change how other people will act. We can only...uh, all that matters...”

I folded the paper, reached for my beverage but found I had none.

“We have to play the one note... No, no, wait.”

“I’m sorry?” Randy questioned.

“*You’re* sorry? No, I’m sorry. Listen, I have to get to work. I have to make this company comply.”

\* \* \*

At home that evening, with a Bundt cake in the oven, a necessary project presented. I gathered my belts from the closet: wide black, wide brown, braided, reversible. I felt like a snake handler, clutching them by the throat at arm’s length as if they would writhe and snap. I laid them one by one on the basement workbench and, using an awl I had bought, punched new holes—holes where I needed them now, and holes beyond that for good measure, right to the tip of the leather.

It took some labor, pounding away and wrenching the awl out, and I grew winded.

I returned upstairs, and smelled delicious caramelized sugar. The air was thick—and smoky! My cake! No! I snatched the mitts and plucked the pan from the oven and tipped it out onto the counter-top. I’d burned it! In anger, I hurled the oven mitt—it sailed through like a discus into the living room. I opened some windows, turned on

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the ceiling fan, and went to fetch the tossed mitt. I discovered it had knocked over the framed picture of an old flame, April.

I wiped the glass with my shirttail and put her upright again. April. Dear discontented April.

June. April and June. Both months. April comes before June.

Suddenly I felt very uneasy. The walls leaned in around me. I felt hollowed out, like a jack-o-lantern. I left everything as it was, grabbed my coat and drove away from the house. I didn't know where I was going at first, but when I saw Baker's Square, I pulled in. Their French silk pie grounded my conspiratorial thoughts, but only briefly. As I sat, bloated and disconsolate, I looked about me. The dull finish of the tableware, the plastic coffee carafes, and the carpet were composed with that cheap genericness that is so heartbreaking. I remembered the seminar April and I had put on, almost 15 years ago. The sterile promise of the hotel conference room ... a similar carpet, me—then too—at a lone table, heartsick.

\* \* \*

I had been with General Cognizance one year; I was in product development, a growing division. Green but sharp, I was perhaps too prideful, and not magnanimous enough with those who knew more than me, who possessed more experience. April was in sales, and a standout, a star. She wielded her considerable personal gravity with aplomb, convincing potential clients of the unmatched superiority of GC's services, even though its competitors had been at it longer using infrastructures that GC was only beginning to build. April was stunning to look at—everyone knew it, could not ignore it, and said nothing, as they were supposed to in an office environment. Red hair. Slender but not too slender. Business skirts, silk blouses. A fierce guardedness about her personal space that broadcast a tantalizing self-possession. She intimidated men, but then disarmed with a charming laugh and eager smile. Is that the right word, disarm? With what were men like me armed? Their desire, I suppose. And their territorial natures. Their need to conquer and possess.

She intruded in men's domain with her unflappable determination. Nothing shattered her professional demeanor. Conference calls, meetings, even when you popped into her cube with an impromptu question, she didn't miss a beat. Had the answer. Had the smile. Had the lilac and golden camphor perfume heated by her active body—her exposed throat.

We'd been paired to assemble a presentation on a new product line. Those days working in the commons, papers spread out before us, I thought there was a connection. There was laughter. There

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was abundant eye-contact. There was cooperation, praise, asking, giving and receiving. We spent an evening at my Loring Park apartment, for a change of scenery, something more casual. April arrived in jeans and loose hair, on my doorstep surrounded by night rather than fluorescence. Before wrapping up, I ventured some boldness. A coded conversation ensued. She said we should wait to get through this project first, not mix things up. *Later, who knows, Neil, we'll see.* That convincing smile.

And then the presentation—my stammering, my nervousness, embarrassed coughs in the audience. And April stepping in with her clear, strong voice, moving forward unflinching into the projector's beams, a pie chart spreading over her face. And me advancing the slides and looking down at my feet, the nauseating slurry of the hotel conference room carpet. And me, cued, resuming with the script about the polymer-based synthetics, which were lightweight, but tear-resistant up to 30 kgf. Their cross-discipline applications.

Questions from the audience with no apparent answer. Stabs in the dark about GC's market share and its business model. April correcting me. "What Neil means is..." Her smile afterwards, as we packed away our materials and others shuffled out, unnatural. Something it had never been. Forced. Condescending. *Who knows. We'll see.*

She had seen.

The product line, PolyFlex, did horribly and was discontinued. And at the end of the quarter, Paul Higgins was promoted to Sr. Product Development, which everyone understood was April's choice named to the VP behind closed doors. Paul was assigned to the next big project, on which April was the sales lead.

I'd hear Paul's office phone ring *lululululu*. Moments later, Paul would stride down the aisle towards April's office. April's supra-professional greeting would ring out, "Hey, you!" Their two cars the only remaining in the empty lot as I depart.

You? I had never been *you*. I had always been *Neil*.

A company announcement. Congratulations to April and Paul. The client acquisition.

A department mail. Congratulations to April and Paul. An engagement. A card goes around. A gift collection envelope. I check my name without signing, without contributing. A guttural grunt sounds.

I did not ascend. In a department reordering, I was transferred to legal. Contracts. Compliance. "A great fit for you," Campbell said. The cave. The bustle of the sales division upstairs like a shishing shoreline—only faintly audible to me.



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I donned my hides. I took up my implements. I gnawed gristle. I became who I am: a man emasculated and rebuked, residing in caves, one a cube, one a hard-to-find home, and dashing from the seclusion of one to the other.

\* \* \*

Since that time I've worked at GC, driving the same route five days a week, forward and back. Sherridan Road, Olsen's Highway, the freeway to Schmidt Lake Road. What few landmarks there are! Only stores, restaurants, a park, a hospital. I would have sworn nothing on this path could surprise me or had ever gone unnoticed.

But then, the first day with Randy in his leadership position, I drove away from the bakery munching a lemon Danish, and I spotted a church I'd never seen before. Something about Calvary, a word I find confusing for a religious denomination, as it is so closely resembles that military term, cavalry. It was a little church in a roadside office park, nestled in with insurance agents and rinky-dink lawyers. It had a sign on a marquee: "THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH." I swear previously there was nothing here—nothing! Now this message, pedestrian but seemingly directed. It felt prescriptive, foretelling. I yanked the car into the next turn lane and doubled-back. I pulled up just under the letterboard to take in the full portent, rolling down the window and leaning out, reading the words again with the cool, clear morning air on my face. The shoulder seam of my dapper leather jacket split. *Crrrrk*.

\* \* \*

Randy's regimen worked. Pedaling and pumping, even in his floppy, uncoordinated manner, he shed pounds. When he stood at the copier now, ridges of shoulder blades showed on his formerly dune-like back. In spring, like a bear coming out of hibernation, a jaw line emerged upon his neck. Rolls diminished. Sodas were no longer spilled, having been replaced by mineral water.

It happened over weeks and months, naturally. And with it, weeks and months in his new managerial position passed, a position which paid more and required him to step into a higher echelon of personal presentability. He found room in his budget for wardrobe updates. Fitted shirts, Hugo Boss and Perry Ellis, last year's overstock sold at the discount chain. His new vigor filled them well. He was even attractive, I'd say. With less fatty ballast, his comportment changed, his chest bobbing proudly on the waves of a newfound self-confidence. He must have felt he belonged at GC and had finally found a niche that rewarded his mental abilities without making a show of them.

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His hair, though, remained as it had been, which at first meant it was out of proportion to the improved rest of him, like a house with new siding and a trashed roof. But then somehow by happenstance or luck, it slowly became fashionable. Arriving in the mornings with helmet head and cycling sweat, he used the company gym locker room, emerging among the cubes with shower-wet hair. Forgoing the expense of haircuts, he'd let it grow long, which was especially evident under the weight of water. I saw him, tic-like, often finger-comb it across his forehead. This evidently trained the hair, as it lost its formlessness. Though a general muss still prevailed, a part surfaced above one temple. And then one day it all clicked into place. I saw in the Arts & Entertainment section over lunch a picture of some young TV star or singer, and he had Randy's "do" exactly. Indiscriminate and effortless, Randy was on the cutting edge of style.

The final piece of the puzzle for him was the breaking of his glasses. They fell off in a bike-commute pothole incident. Rather than buying new frames, he opted for contact lenses. After the initial shock, the clean look, like the hair, became him. I mean, it became an integrated part of his new self, and I mean it became him—it flattered him. Ironically, he looked more of a brainiac without the specs, because the playful enjoyment he was getting from life, meeting the challenge of his new position, gaining serious ground on Operation June's Arrival, was now visible in his unencumbered eyes.

All of which sent me into a resigned depression. My cozy Winnetka house no longer felt welcoming. Its sheltering walls became enemies; they had betrayed me. My evening routine grew hollow. There was nothing I could think about that didn't lead me back to Randy, June or April—the parallelogram of our fates, their rising prominence, my decline into uselessness. General Cognizance, my former respite, turned not only unsatisfying, but grim and haunting. The obscurity of my work which had once conferred my uniqueness, validated my personhood, now felt like a plain insult, proof of just how pitiful I was. I had once thought being a corporate compliance fudger demonstrated subtly and complexity. Now the fifteen years of records I've kept for GC, each license signed "Neil Roegen, for the Applicant," seemed like evidence of my low-standing and dim potential from the start. That my supervisor spent most of his time glad-handing in D.C., I once saw as a sign of his trust in my independent capacity; now it felt like a scornful admittance of my total inconsequence.

My dapper looks, my stupid Greek hat, my mustache—all

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a disguise. An attractive shell containing a valueless core, like a chocolate Easter bunny. My cave—a rock-hard shelter from pain, judgment, rejection. April's rejection. Like a bad check. Insufficient funds. But perhaps that's too pedestrian. Leave it to me, Neil Roegen, to formulate an inapt metaphor for myself.

My only consolation was to eat. And that's what I did, with zeal, with abandon. Where once I had specialized in cultural anthropology, balsa warships, and unchallenged erudition, now I pursued connoisseurship in the milieu of the breaded sweet. Brioches, scones, fruit breads, turnovers, rolls, cobblers, cannolis, crumbles, crostatas, streusels, strudels, dumplings, flans, fritters, kringles, gallettes, éclairs, diplomats, tortes and tarts. I learned all the best places in town. Their bakers became my confidants.

My skin turned swollen and pimply. My gut expanded but with nothing jolly about it—nothing like an outdoorsman's acceptable robustness, or a chef's complimentary girth. Mine was a sad flap like a yard waste bag filled with rain runoff, that dangled down, obscuring my genitalia. Moving about the office, I waddled and wheezed. My arms hung away from my sides, held aloft by wads of fat. When I got haircuts, I tilted my head forward to open the crease that swallowed my neckline.

I didn't speak to Randy at the office anymore. He regarded me strangely, with downcast expressions of regret or shame. I mustered my best chipper Hellos, to ease his guilt. He was to blame for none of this. We had brief exchanges in the commons sometimes.

"June is coming," he said once.

"That's great. Good for you. Good for you."

Another time, he let me know of his transfer to another GC facility, to manage production operations. "Things are working out all right, Neil."

"Yeah, well..."

"Who knew, huh?"

"Who knew?" I laughed.

"Well, thanks for everything."

"Hey, you earned it. *Aptitude*." Awkwardly, I drew out the Ewwww in aptitude. I was still no good with compliments.

"Ahhhh, stop by the plant sometime, I'll show you around." That *ahh* seemed gratuitous; little hesitancy remained in him.

\* \* \*

One night, several months later, I was at home feeling particularly lethargic and degenerated, my breathing at its heaviest,

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my resolve at its weakest. There was really nothing I enjoyed doing anymore. Most nights I watched television, eager for bedtime, which was closer to waking and my trip to Woullet's Bakery on Broadway. I got up from the indented, sagging lump that was once my reading chair, got in my car, and drove out into the night. I took the freeways east, saw the lighted Foshay on the horizon, and exited. Loring Park.

I found an open spot just where I used to leave my old Datsun, not directly in front of the Bell Arms building, but offset, right under the streetlight, for theft prevention. Tilting the steering wheel up, I heaved myself out of the car, and lumbered up the walk. As I reached the door, a jogger sprang out, eyes on his iPod. He collided with me, then looked up. "Oh, gosh! Sorry!" He showed his palm and dashed off on nimble legs.

Affixed on a stamped strip on the old brass name plates by the mailboxes: "R. Randall / J. McNeely." Randy and June. I buzzed. My heart thumped and thumped. I thought about what I wanted to say. I heard floorboards creaking, a swift, energetic *thumm, thumm, thumm, thumm*, as of lively feet coming down the carpeted stairs, just as I had done, receiving April on a dark night 15 years ago. A tear welled in my eye. I was really looking forward to letting Randy know how I felt about what he'd accomplished, how admirably he'd handled himself—how he'd persisted despite his fears. It was my privilege to have known him. I grinned involuntarily. Another set of thumms, describing a second flight. My mouth became foamy and dry. I cracked my neck. Then my arm tingled sharply. My left arm, and I saw Randy coming down the last flight of stairs, but there was discomfort and I didn't feel well at all. I put my hand on the wall, unlocked my knees, and dropped my chin. I felt my color drain. Randy looked good, behind the tri-pane mullioned glass—healthy and magnanimous. He reached for the deadbolt and chain, a curious puzzlement and concern on his face. His mouth opened, as if to say, Ahhhh. He hastened with the lock but fumbled it with ham-fisted fidgeting, even though his fists were no longer hams. Good old Randy. It was good to see him. A shame he was being swallowed by an enclosing aperture of fuzzy blackness.

Then I felt strongly that I should compose myself, and also to lie down.