



BEN EHRENREICH

ETHER

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ONE

The stars.

The sun had long ago set. There was no moon, and the earth was dark. Yet the sky was thick with stars. It was thick too with clouds. The stars circled above them and reeled about the sky. Their light though, for all its will and whimsy, was too weak to be seen from beneath.

The woods also were dark, and the dry fields. Tall yellow lamps lit the highway every fifty yards. From above it looked like nothing more than a long bare necklace of sulfured bulbs, too straight and regular for any constellation. From below it looked like a highway, yellow-tinged. An empty, two-lane, late-night highway. Every third or fourth streetlamp was dark, its bulb shot out by an air gun or a slingshot. There the world was dim. Stars are not so easily extinguished.

But even there, the world was bright with smell and sound — the harsh, dusty smell of the blacktop, the sour mulchy odor of beer cans rotting in the woods, and every now and then the drunk sweetness of datura flowers hanging in trumpets unseen in the dark. Even in the utmost gloom, the world was blinding bright. If you listened, you could hear the wind blow in sudden and uneven fits. Leaves shivered and the dry grass swayed. A crumpled envelope raced across the asphalt. A plastic bag escaped from the low scrub that had ensnared it, leapt free

into the breeze but was just as soon caught by a leaning thistle. It jerked and snapped in protest. Beneath it a cricket's forewings sang in expectation. Beetles clacked their jaws. Weevils crunched away at wood. Blood thumped in a bullfrog's brain. Bats winged between the trees. In the dark as in the light, the whole world ate, and hoped to mate.

Spiders snared flies, which ceased to buzz. Owls tore at the hearts of field mice, which ceased to peep. High in a tree and without a sound, a snake swallowed a pale blue egg before it could hatch into a bird. The spider, the owl, the snake — they all delighted. Living things delight in life. Most of them do. Cells divide, and divide again. We mate that our offspring may mate, and eat that our children may eat. So we're told. Blood enriches the soil. The stars shine on above the clouds. This is not an excuse for anyone.

Not for me and least of all for the stranger who walked beneath the yellow streetlamps beneath those clouds beneath the stars, his feet falling one after the other on the gravel at the side of the road. One foot crushed a colony of ants, but he did not appear to notice. The other foot kicked the muddied brown neck of a beer bottle from his path. Mosquitoes bit at his ankles, but he did not slap them away.

His feet stamped on, rising and falling past trees and the stumps of trees, past a discarded refrigerator laid out on its back, its doors hanging open like the wings of some narcoleptic angel, a family of possums breeding in its belly. His feet trudged on past a stray tricycle, past a fire station with windows boarded, no flag on its pole. They didn't pause, didn't slow when he passed a silent clapboard shack and didn't quicken when a dog ran out from behind the shack to howl at him, ears flapping and tail on

point. He walked past that dog and past the shadow of a cat a few yards farther down. In another house the lights shone with stubborn joy. Music and laughter leaked out through a broken screen. He kept walking, and did not whistle or mutter or hum. No one marked his passage. Not a single car drove by.

He passed sparse rows of darkened houses followed by stretches a half mile long of waste and woods. The houses leaned against the wind. Dreams circled inside them. Clocks ticked. Dust settled where it could. Insomniacs gripped their sheets. In other groaning houses, their rooftops straining toward the ground, drunks drank at kitchen tables, big sisters whispered to little sisters beneath the blankets covering them, mice dared to race across living room floors, lovers nestled heads on lovers' shoulders. None troubled themselves to notice the gaunt figure that hiked along outside their homes, to wonder who he was and what he wanted, or where his feet would lead him.

They led him at last to a gravel parking lot a mile from any structure save the one it fronted, a low box of a building with a red neon light glowing in its single blackened window. Three cars shared the lot with a green and rusted dumpster. The door, painted a thick and high-gloss brown, trembled slightly to the rhythm of the music within. The stranger stopped, paused a moment just beyond the neon glow, glared hard at the video camera above the door, and slapped the dust from his ankles. He crossed the lot, grabbed the knob, and stepped into the light.

I clear my throat.

I feel I owe you some kind of explanation. An introduction. A preface or prologue of some sort. We haven't met, and I am, after all, imposing.

I live in a small house on a low hill on a short street in a large city. I don't live alone. A woman lives here with me. You won't get to meet her, but she and I sleep side by side on the same lumpy, queen-size mattress in the bedroom in back. She sleeps on the inside, usually on her side but sometimes on her stomach. I sleep on my back, like a corpse I am told, though I do not cross my arms over my chest. I also sleep poorly, and get up often in the night, so I sleep on the outside. I get up and empty my bladder and fill it again with water. Or with whiskey if it's that kind of night. Which tonight it is. I stand barefoot in the kitchen on the cold linoleum until the glass is empty and my throat warm and I can go back to bed. The floor in the hallway is gritty beneath my feet. It needs sweeping, scrubbing. I'll get to it one day.

I pull back the covers and lie listening to her whistling breath, the pace and pitch of it shifting with her dreams. I close my eyes and squeeze them until I see stars. Not really stars, but you know what I mean, as close a substitute as I can hope for. Then I open my eyes and the stars go away. Over the years, we've decorated the walls with posters and photos and prints (Is this straight? Raise the right corner just a smidge. A little lower. There.), but each night the shadows erase all our choices and remake the room according to their own penumbral whims. With the help of the moon, the streetlamps, the headlights and brake lights of

each car that drives by, and the on-and-off-again red pinprick light of the video camera mounted in the corner of the ceiling, the shadows keep at it all night long. I lie awake and watch them playing, shifting and stretching, hiding and revealing, changing shape and color, chasing one another from wall to wall.

I can't see them, but I know there are stars above my roof, real ones, up there above the pebbled stucco ceiling and the dark attic I've never crawled inside and the crumbling roof tiles and the overhanging trees and telephone wires and the clouds above them. And there are more stars above those. I count on that, even if the ceiling and the roof and the clouds and the smog and the lights of the city mean that I can rarely see more than one or two of them. They were here before me, the stars, and they'll be here after me, and on nights like this one that's a comfort. But those other stars you read about just now, that mute sky, those woods and fields and sulfured bulbs, the bull-frog and the bats — I built them. Or at least I named them, which amounts to the same thing. I wrote their names, and called them into being. Quite a trick. That street, that sky, this page too and the white between these words, I made them for you. And for myself, because I am selfish, and because I am trying to make sense of things.

Forgive me if I'm too abstract, but I am struggling with a conundrum. That conundrum is this world. What is in it. What is not. Mainly what is not. And in that absence — in the knot, if you will, of what is not — what to do with what there is. How to look upon it so that it is not entirely painful. I'll be more specific later. I'll try to anyway, because without you these pages are just pulp, but with you they might begin to form, if not an answer, at least a statement of the problem. An alternate phrasing of the

conundrum itself. And that, I hope, might be the beginning of a way out. Better put, of a way in. A way through. For me at least, and perhaps for you as well.

You'll forgive me if I don't start at the beginning. That was too long ago, and hard to pin down. We don't have time. I don't anyway. Besides, taking the long view, nothing really begins, just like nothing ever ends. The cosmos a snake with its tail in its throat, or a turtle sitting atop a turtle, and turtles all the way down. But I have to start somewhere, so it might as well be here, on the hard, slow shell of this old turtle and no other, on this night in particular, here beneath the clouds beneath the dancing stars not in my bedroom anymore but in this gravel parking lot. Wind blowing, trees whispering to trees. A camera humming as it watches from its perch above the door. We left him in mid-stride, his long fingers curled around the doorknob, twisting to the left and to the right, tugging that cold, bronze knob toward him, lifting one foot and then the other, and stepping inside the bar.

He is foiled.

He was tall, with the kind of face you look at once and don't forget, and eyes that burn right through you. His flesh was unlined by age, but his beard was gray and his long and matted hair the same color, perhaps a few shades yellower. He wore a tattered suit that looked to have once been white, but had been spattered, no, crusted, with stains of nearly every color, though mostly a sort of rusted brown. The stains barely showed in the neon dim.

The jukebox in the corner spouted brittle, optimistic pop music, but the bar was nearly empty. A few abandoned balls littered the torn felt of the pool table and like them, the few people in the bar stuck to their positions, intent, apparently, on ignoring one another. The bartender crouched on a stool at the end of the bar, studying the comic book folded on his knees. A man in a John Deere cap snored across from him, the hairs of his long mustache swaying in a puddle of beer with each whistled exhalation. A fat woman in a mini-skirt hugged the jukebox and bobbed with eyes closed to the beat of a song other than the one that the machine was playing. A bald man with no eyebrows and a slight trace of eyeliner conversed intently with an ashtray. "No," the bald man said. "Fuck if I know."

The stranger took a stool near the door beside a slender woman with weathered skin and busy, drink-blurred eyes. She jumped a bit when he sat down. Hooking a lock of hair behind one ear, she bit her lip and then released it into a bright, scared smile. The stranger ordered a Coca Cola. The woman beside him slid a cigarette out of the pack on the bar in front of her.

She looked his way, then consulted the palm of her hand as if hoping to find her lines cribbed there. She tapped her painted nails on the bar, took a deep breath, and spoke. "Got a light?"

The stranger nodded toward the plastic lighter that sat beside her cigarettes. "Oh," she said. "How silly. Silly me."

The woman pushed her hair from her eyes and scratched at the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. "My name's Marty," she said, and extended a pale, long-fingered hand for him to shake. Her voice, for all its quivering, was as sunny as anything could be in the heavy gloom of the bar. "It's Martha, really, but nobody calls me that 'cept my mom when she's not calling me something nasty."

She giggled, embarrassed. He took her hand and nodded, but said nothing in return.

Marty sucked on her cigarette and blew a wide cone of smoke from one corner of her mouth. She scratched her nose and tried again. "You're not from around here," she said. "Are you?"

The stranger sipped at his cola. "I am," he said, smiling tightly. "From here. Here and pretty much everywhere."

"You must've been here way back then, cause I never seen you, and I know just about everyone."

Marty laughed. Together they listened to her laughter fade and fall before he spoke. The ice in his soda crackled as it melted.

"Yes," he said. "Way back."

Marty took a short breath and, already blushing, gave his knee a light, experimental slap with the back of her hand. "Wash you up a little and you'd be cute as a kitten," she beamed. "You got those matinee eyes."

He twisted his beard into one long thin braid, looked up

at her from beneath bushy white eyebrows, and returned her smile.

She stared at her lap. She suddenly looked very tired, as if the gloom of the bar had seeped beneath her defenses, extinguishing what little cheer she had struggled to ignite. Her voice was thin and weak when she spoke again. "You gonna ask me if you can buy me a drink?"

He asked, and she consented. He paid with crumpled bills, and tipped the bartender with a handful of change. Her drink arrived in a tall, fluted glass, with a wedge of orange and a pink paper umbrella on its rim. She emptied it in three long gulps, sucked the orange from its rind, and wiped her mouth on her wrist. The drink seemed to revive her. "I'll tell you," she said, twirling the umbrella between her thumb and forefinger, "You're lucky you got outta this town, cause it is dead." She spelled it. "D-E-A-D, dead."

He smiled again, more warmly this time. "Looks like there's a little life in it yet."

"I try," she said, her eyebrows raised. "Lord knows I try."

"Lord knows," he agreed.

Marty stared at the bottles arrayed in tiers behind the bar. She did not take her eyes from them until she finished talking. "I quit my job today," she began, blinking at the recollection. "That's why I'm here. Celebrating. If you couldn't tell. I don't know why I quit it, but I did. Sometimes you need a change. That's what I told myself. Funny thing is though, it was the best job I ever had. Really. Good pay, the boss was nice enough. Or almost nice. I liked the other people, some of them. It was fine. But I woke up this morning and I could not bear to go in. I just couldn't. So I went back to sleep and when the phone rang I

told him I quit. That's it, I just quit. Then I came here. Sometimes you need a change."

Marty hugged herself for a moment. She scratched again at her nose and lifted her glass to her lips. There was nothing in it but ice. "My mother died," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "Yesterday."

The stranger offered no response.

She fumbled in her purse and came out with a small chromed plastic tube. She lit another cigarette and, between puffs, applied the lipstick to her lips. Narrowing her eyes, she considered the figure perched beside her. "You believe in god?" she asked.

"Believe?"

"Yeah, believe. Is that a personal question? Cause every time I ask someone that I feel like it's a personal question, like I just asked for your bank statements or if you like sniffing panties. Can I just ask you that? Is that too much?"

"You can ask."

"Good. Cause sometimes I don't want to talk about the weather, or the lottery, or whatever. How cute my dog is. Sometimes . . ." She didn't finish the thought, but took one last drag from her cigarette and sat while it smoldered to the filter in the ashtray. "It wasn't my mother that died," she said. "It was my little girl." She covered her face with her hands.

She did not sob, just quivered slightly. The stranger made no attempt to console her. He stared without expression at his own reflected image among the bottles in the mirror across the bar. The song on the jukebox faded out. Silence spread to the corners of the barroom like an angry, buzzing haze. You could hear, or almost hear, or could imagine you could hear,

the camera above the pool table swiveling on its mount. The fat woman who had been dancing alone stopped dancing, but not until a minute or so after the music had ceased to play. With a jangle of keys and a muttered “That’s it then,” she stumbled to the door.

Marty lifted her face from her hands. Her eyes were red, but they were dry, and her cheeks were not streaked with tears. “Don’t worry,” she said. “Nobody died.” She shook the ice in her glass. “Everything’s just fine.” She swiveled towards him on her stool and flashed a quick, sad smile. She put a hand on his knee, then pulled it back again.

He turned to her and spoke. “Do you?” he asked.

“Do I what?” she said.

“Do you believe? In god?”

She knit her brow. “That’s nice of you to ask,” she said, “but it’s really none of your fucking business.” Then Marty laughed a high and wheezy laugh, winked, and took his hand in hers. “I’m joking, sweetheart. You can ask me anything you want.”

The stranger pulled his hand away. She whispered hurriedly in his ear. “Listen, you like blow? Cause I got some in my bag.”

Without waiting for a response, she grabbed him by his thumb and led him to the back of the bar and through a door labeled “Gals.” She locked the feeble hook and eye behind him. As she rummaged through her bag, facing the sink and looking up at him every few seconds in the soap-stained mirror as if it were necessary to reassure herself that he had not already disappeared, she reached one palm behind her and rested it shakily on his chest. Her hand dropped down and gripped his belt. He took a single step back.

“Don’t let me scare you,” she said, locating at last in the cluttered depths of her purse a small pocket mirror and a plasticine bag of clumpy white powder. She laughed weakly. “I scare all the good ones away.” She turned around to face him. “Only the bad ones stick around,” she said. “And the worse ones.”

She tapped the powder onto the glass of the mirror, crushing any pebbled bits with the edge of her drivers license and cutting the resulting pile into four short lines. “Got a bill?” she said.

He pulled one from his pocket, crumpled like the others.

“That won’t work.” She produced a crisp twenty of her own, rolled it into a thin straw and sucked one line into each of her nostrils before offering him the mirror. He shook his head.

“You don’t want?” The surprise in her eyes fell away swiftly. “Why’d you come in here,” she asked with a coy grin, “if you don’t want?”

Marty flushed at her own forwardness, cocked her head back and snorted. She squeezed shut her eyes as the drug sped from synapse to synapse. She shivered. “You’re gonna be nice to me, aren’t you?”

She didn’t wait for an answer, but lowered her head to sniff the remaining lines. Before she could, he shot out an arm and took her by the throat with his hand. Her pocket mirror bounced on the linoleum. White powder dusted her boots. He began to squeeze. She jammed her knee into his scrotum and when he doubled over, she caught him beneath the chin with an uppercut that sent him sprawling onto the toilet behind him.

“Fucking freak!” she yelled, then grabbed her purse, spat in his face, and slammed the door behind her.

The stranger stood, straightened his jacket and his pants

and splashed his face with water from the sink. It was brown, and the sink was clogged with cigarette butts, what looked to be a tampon. From behind the door, he could hear the woman yelling. "That fucking fucker tried to fucking kill me," she shrieked. A second or two later, the door swung open and a white light shattered between his temples. When he came to, the barkeep was carrying him out, gripping him by the back of the neck. His feet dragged behind him like a doll's. The barkeep opened the door and tossed him into the parking lot.

He lifted himself onto his elbows. His eyes shone with rage. "Damn you," he hissed. "Damn you to hell."

Standing in the doorway, the bartender laughed. "Shit," he said. "That's a good one." And with that he spat a full tablespoon of tobacco juice onto what was left of the stranger's white suit, and closed the door behind him.

The bird.

In the darkened streets she made her rounds. The night was cool, the streets quiet. But it was not the heat and certainly not the noise that kept the woman awake. She could neither hear nor speak, and some nights she also could not sleep. Some nights, and some days too, swarms of sharp-winged flies invaded her skull, entering through her ears and nose and through the corners of her mouth and circling madly in the small black-orange room between her forehead and the rear wall of her cranium. The only thing to do was walk, so she gathered her skirts about her and climbed the embankment into the streets.

The night felt safer than the day. Darkness, the woman knew, has its privileges. Blindness too, and even deafness. At night there were no cars to hit her on the avenues, no looming trucks, no people to scold her for one or another imagined sin. There were fewer men to pull her into alleys, no bored policemen choosing their targets from behind mirrored shades, no sneakered women with clipboards and government name tags, lips pursed in pity but eyes dead to care. She had no fear of rats and the dogs left her alone.

She crouched to pass through a hole in the fence and cross from the concrete lip of the embankment through the tangled weeds to the lots between the warehouses. She walked down the middle of the potholed street. Searching the walls for cameras, she saw none. Steel shutters had been pulled closed over the loading bays. Even the high windows of the warehouses had been painted black or gray. At night the buildings had no eyes. Their mouths were sewn shut. This was a comfort to her — to

pass unseen, unspoken to — and also, of course, a torment. Invisibility has its costs. If no one saw her, she asked herself, was she even there?

But the woman was not entirely alone. It hardly counts as company, but she soon came across a man. She almost stumbled over him where he lay curled on the ground beside a dumpster. His eyes were closed, his mouth open. In lieu of a blanket, he wore a lumpy army-surplus jacket. He wheezed in short, troubled breaths, hugging an empty bottle like an infant to his breast. She tiptoed around him — wary, keeping her feet and ankles at least an arm's length from his sleep-twitching hands — and lifted the corner of the dumpster's lid. It was empty save a cardboard box, which was also empty, so she rushed away and did not slow until she had put a block between them. Only once she had gazed back and seen the shadow of him there unmoving, like a lump in the pitted asphalt, did she allow herself to pause and pull a stone from her shoe.

A block away, she stopped again and watched the insects circling in the inverted funnels of yellow light that hung down from the streetlamps to her right and to her left. She tried to count them but soon gave up. There were too many and they flickered about too quickly. Some of them were moths. All of them spiraled expectantly upward, abandoning for this one bright chance at transcendence all the screaming demands of sustenance and procreation. Who can blame them? A bat flitted from lamp to lamp and picked them off.

She clanked open the lids of the dumpsters in the alley beside a produce warehouse and found a full crate of pears wedged among the bulbous trash bags. The fruits were too ripe and too bruised to sell, but not to eat. She heaved out the crate

and laid it in the shadows at the edge of the alley where she could find it again on her way back. She took one pear with her, biting through its browning flesh. The juice ran down her chin and onto her chest through the open collars of her shirts. She smiled at its sweetness, chewing as she walked.

The woman passed a sprawling cinderblock building indistinguishable from the rest but which she knew to be a distribution hub for plastic toys, a sort of vast nursery and holding pen for injection-molded infants, ponies, soldiers and bears. She ducked to dodge a swiveling camera, climbed a fence and tried the dumpsters. Two were locked, one was empty and a fourth was filled only with pink plastic shavings, shredded paper and the crusted styrofoam remains of workers' meals — no dolls or parts of dolls.

Around the corner, on the other side of the now-sleepy highway, behind the wholesale flower mart, she found a mound of discarded bouquets of the most extraordinary blossoms: petals like meteors, like velvet curtains, like bayonets; pistils like furred stag's legs, like spotted towers, stigmata that looked soft and wide enough to sleep on. Their stems had broken, so the florists deemed them ruined. She could carry at least two bouquets, she figured, stacked atop the pears. As she knelt to choose among them, she saw to her surprise that one of the flowers was twitching. It was a huge, drooping, pudendal bloom, red, yellow and black and pulsing furiously as if wired to a miniature engine. She lifted it, and the flower fell still. On the pavement beneath, she found a tiny bird. It was a hummingbird, no bigger than her thumb. One of its wings lay outstretched beneath it like another strange petal. Its other wing beat with such speed that she could barely see it. For all its effort, the bird could not fly.

She scooped the bird up with her fingers and folded its broken wing against its tiny, humming body. It weighed less than the flower that had covered it. In her hand, the hummingbird was still. The wing ceased its fluttering. Its shiny, black, pinprick of an eye did not express pain or panic or anything at all. But even in the dull, sepia light of the streetlamp, the bird's plumage shimmered from green to red to gold and seemed to be all of those colors at once. She stroked its head with the pad of her index finger and placed it gently in the breast pocket of her outermost shirt. She picked two bouquets of flowers and went back to fetch the fruit.

Walking home, she stopped every few paces, set down her load and lifted the bird from her pocket. Its heart whirred like a turbine in her palm.