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NOW I THINK THE PICTURE WAS UNSPOOLING ALL ALONG AND I JUST failed to notice. The obvious really isn't so—at least it wasn't to me, a Midwestern male cruising at medium altitude, aspiring vaguely to decency, contributing to PBS, moderate in all things including romantic forays, and doing unto others more or less reciprocally.

If I were to pinpoint when the world began reorganizing itself—that is, when my seeing of it began to shift—it would be the day a stranger named Rune blew into our bad luck town of Greenstone, Minnesota, like a spark from the boreal gloom. It was also the day of my release from St. Luke's Hospital down in Duluth, so I was concussed and more than a little adrift.

The previous week I'd driven up-shore to a popular lookout to photograph a distant storm approaching over Lake Superior. It was a beautiful storm, self-contained as storms often are, hunched far out over the vast water like a blob of blue ink, but it stalled in the middle distance and time just slipped away. There's a picnic table up there where I've napped more than once. What woke me this time was the mischievous gale delivering autumn's first snow. I leaped behind the wheel as it came down in armloads. Highway 61 quickly grew rutted and slick. Maybe I was driving too fast. U2 was on the radio—"Mysterious Ways," I seem to recall. Apparently my heartbroken Pontiac breached a safety barrier and made a long, lovely, some might say cinematic arc into the churning lake.

I say *apparently* since this particular memory is not crisp. The airbag deployed at the barricade, snapped my head back, and swaddled me in a whiplash haze that took a long time to shake off. I missed the lightning thoughts and impressions a person might expect in this situation—cold panic, clenching denial, a magician’s bouquet of vibrant regrets.

I’d have sunk with the car if Marcus Jetty hadn’t been doing a little late-season beachcombing. Marcus runs Greenstone Salvage & Tinker, a famous local eyesore of bike frames, tube amps, hula poppers, oil drums, and knobs of driftwood. He was picking along the jagged strand in his raincoat, eye on a fat cork from somebody’s herring net, when a car approached on the highway above. He later described the sounds of a whining V6 and thumping bass line before the barrier burst to shrapnel and the world for a moment muffled itself.

In the silence Marcus looked up. A midsize American sedan sailed dreamlike through thickening snow.

I forgot to thank Marcus when he came to visit during my recovery. Actually I didn’t recognize him. That happened a lot at first. He was reserved and shook my hand as though we were meeting for the first time. “Salvage man,” he kindly explained. Eventually I asked him if he ever expected to salvage a middle-aged bachelor and film projectionist. Nope, no, he replied. The market for such specimens was in decline. Marcus is one of those weathered old reticent types whose rare comment tends to be on point.

The neurologist was a Finn named Koskinen with a broad decent face and a Teddy Roosevelt mustache. He diagnosed *mild traumatic brain injury*. This sounded paradoxical but so did everything else he said. For example, the damage was short-term but might last quite a while or possibly longer than that. I could expect within months to regain my balance as long as I didn’t tip over; to experience fewer headaches or maybe just get used to them. He said over time I would remember the names of friends and the nearer relatives, that I would recover fine motor skills and pockets of personal history I didn’t yet realize had vanished. Despite my confusion I liked Koskinen immediately. He had the heartening bulk of the aging athlete defeated by pastry. He delivered all news as though it were good.

Most welcome was his prediction that language would gradually return. Not that I couldn't speak, but I had to stick to basics. My storehouse of English had been pillaged. At first I thought common nouns were hardest hit, *coffee* and *doorway* and so on, but it soon became clear that the missing were mostly adjectives.

"Don't worry, everything will come back," said Dr. Koskinen. "Most things probably will. A good many of them might return. There will be at least a provisional rebound. How does this make you feel?" I wanted to say *relieved* or *encouraged* or at least *hopeful* but none of these were available. All I could muster was a mute grin at which the doctor nodded with his mouth open in a vaguely alarming smile.

He was correct about the language, though. Within weeks certain prodigal words started filtering home. They came one at a time or in shy small groups. I remember when *sea-kindly* showed up, a sentimental favorite, followed by *desiccated* and *massive*. *Brusque* appeared all by itself, which seemed apt; *merry* and *boisterous* arrived together. This would be a good time to ask for your patience if I use an adjective too many now and again—even now, some years on, they're still returning. I'm just so glad to see them.

Upon my release I wasn't allowed to drive right away. Even if I could, my car was sitting on its roof under ninety feet of water, so Tom Beeman delivered me home. Beeman's my oldest friend, a massive garrulous North Dakotan of Samoan ancestry—that I remembered him immediately was a relief to us both. He owns and edits the local weekly. He drives a minuscule Geo Metro—he claims to like the mileage, but what he really likes is to pull over and flabbergast onlookers just by climbing out. So little car and so much Beeman emerging from it. The Geo has ruinous shocks, so we went bounding up historic Highway 61 while he brought me up to speed. Genghis, the raccoon Beeman had rescued when its mother was killed in the road, had run off again. He was openly relieved. Nothing is sweeter than a baby raccoon or more wrathful than the baby grown. Beeman said he'd written a short article about my close call and been inundated with people asking after my welfare. Apparently I was popular. Avoiding my eyes he said a rumor had started that I didn't make it, that I died in the lake, so he

drove out to where it happened and sure enough someone had hung a twist of flowers on the torn fence. Carnations and baby's breath. There was a white plastic cross and a laminated photo saying, "Virgil Wander RIP." While he poked around, a little scorched-haired lady arrived in a Chevy pickup and marched to the brink with a rosary. When Tom revealed I was alive she wrapped it around her fist in annoyance and sped off dragging a veil of smoke.

I listened to Tom as best I could—he has a naturally comforting voice—but a bad concussion jangles everything. My mind was not clear. His gentle baritone came at me like elbows. The Geo's elliptical progress plus the acute brightness of the world made me queasy. We developed a hand signal so Tom could pull over and allow me to puke. Resting on a swale of grass overlooking the lake, sweat cooling on my brow, I thought I saw a man out there. Not in a boat—just a man standing upright on the shimmery surface of Lake Superior. The lake was so calm it looked concave. The man stood at ease a hundred yards out. He turned his head to look at me. I seemed to shrink, or the world to expand.

"Do you see that?" I asked Beeman, who kept a civil distance. I pointed at the man on the lake. Beeman shrugged: "See what?"

I didn't elaborate. The man smiled—he was way out there, but I could see him smiling right at me. He had a black suit on. He looked like a keyhole or exclamation point standing on the water.

Beeman took me home and carried a paper sack up the seventeen steps to my rooms above the Empress Theater. The sack contained my clothes from the accident, laundered and wadded back up, a toothbrush and razor, and two pairs of throwaway hospital slippers with square toes. Beeman had also fetched my mail from the post office and run into the Citgo for bread and a half gallon of two-percent milk. It was his doing I could get into the apartment at all—my only key was in the Pontiac, down in the glimmery murk. During my stay at St. Luke's, Tom had hired a locksmith to change out the assembly. I stood blinking in front of the flashy new knob until he handed me the key.

I've lived at the Empress a long time—first because of a dire romantic impulse and second because in seven years of trying I haven't been able to sell it. Nevertheless you put your stamp on a home. It's nicer than you'd expect. I had the bachelor's discreet pride in my maple floors and built-in cabinets. My big sister Orry comes from Colorado once or twice a year and always brings some vintage item that suits the place—the bird clock and art deco mirror, the Bakelite wall sconce. Orry walks the tightrope between irony and genuine zeal. She is fond of seafoam green.

For more than twenty years I'd felt at home, in my home. Now I stood weirdly slack in the middle of my kitchen. Everything was off. The fall of light from the wall fixture, the pressboard ceiling tiles mimicking ornamental tin. My skin prickled. What might seem to you only the webby neglect of a week's absence felt to me ominous and elemental. The scene felt staged for my benefit, down to the smallest details: a dead ladybug legs-up on the counter, fingerprint whorls on the chrome toaster.

The evidence of my life lay before me, and I was unconvinced.

After Beeman left I walked through the rooms, turned the TV on and off, flicked through shirts in the closet. The unease would not dissipate. I went through my mail. In the most recent issue of the *Observer* was Beeman's short article about my accident—I started it four or five times but couldn't stay interested. There was coverage of last week's city council meeting, a fluff piece on a local retiree whose antique wrench collection filled two boxcars, and a disturbing paragraph in the police blotter about a young woman found dead of exposure in the woods a few miles north of town.

I cracked open some windows. Even the views were askew. They had an inert stereoscopic quality: EMPRESS in vertical blue neon out front, with Main Street below and the water tower two blocks inland. Out back the pea-gravel roof of the auditorium and past it the moody old sea. I might've been clicking through with a View-Master.

I couldn't nail down what had changed in the apartment.

To begin with, it seemed to belong to someone else.

This made a kind of sense—my perceptions had shifted, just as Dr. Koskinen said. Still, I hadn't expected my hanging shirts to seem like somebody else's shirts, or my framed map of the Spanish Virgin Islands to seem like somebody else's daydream. The candle I light every week for my parents was reduced to a meaningless blue pillar. I wandered into my bedroom and lay down. I had made it to late afternoon. The doctor had said I should sleep as much as possible and try not to think too hard.

But as my bones settled on the mattress, a notion crept in. A short sentence appeared in my mind implying I could go ahead and wear those shirts. I could paint the walls, sell the furniture, throw out the candle. I could do whatever I liked with the building, for one simple reason.

The previous tenant was dead.

Poor Virgil didn't actually make it.

I popped off the mattress and pulled on shoes. They didn't seem like my shoes exactly. They resisted my hands and feet. I pulled them on anyway and got away from there.

I ended up at the waterfront. It's not as though there's any other destination in Greenstone. The truth is that I moved here largely because of the inland sea. I'd always felt peaceful around it—a naïve response given its fearsome temper, but who could resist that wide throw of horizon, the columns of morning steam? And the sound of a continual tectonic bass line. In a northeast gale this pounding adds a layer of friction to every conversation in town.

At the foot of the city pier stood a threadbare stranger. He had eight-day whiskers and fisherman hands, a pipe in his mouth like a mariner in a fable, and a question in his eyes. A rolled-up paper kite was tucked under his arm—I could see bold swatches of paint on it.

There was always a kite in the picture with Rune, as it turned out.

He watched me. He carried an atmosphere of dispersing confusion, as though he were coming awake. "Do you live in this place?" he inquired.

I nodded.

“Is there a motor hotel? There used to be a motor hotel. I don’t remember where.”

His voice was high, with a rhythmic inflection like short smooth waves. For some reason it gave me a lift. He had a hundred merry crinkles at his eyes and a long-haul sadness in his shoulders.

“Not anymore—not exactly.” If I’d had more words, I’d have described Greenstone’s last operational motel, the *Voyageur*, a peeling L-shaped heap with scraggy whirlwinds of litter roaming the parking lot. Though technically “open,” the *Voyageur* is always full, its rooms permanently occupied by the owner’s grown children who failed to rise on the outside.

“Oh well,” he said, shaking himself like a terrier. He peered round at the Slake International taconite plant, a looming vast trapezoid which had signified bustling growth in the 1950s and lingering decline ever since. Its few tiny windows were whitewashed or broken; its majestic ore dock rose out of the water on eighty-foot pilings and cast a black-boned reflection across the harbor. No ship had loaded here in so long that saplings and ferns grew wild on the planking. We had a little forest up there. I looked at the kite scrolled under his arm. He’d picked the wrong day for that, but then he looked like a man who could wait.

He said, “You are here a long time?”

“Twenty-five years.”

At this something changed in him. He acquired an edge. Before I’d have said he looked like many a good-natured pensioner making do without much pension. Now in front of my eyes he seemed to intensify.

“Twenty-five years? Perhaps you knew my son. He lived here. Right in this town,” he added, looking round himself, as though giving structure to a still-new idea.

“Is that right. What’s his name?”

The old man ignored the question. He pulled a kitchen match from his pocket, thumbnailed it, and relit his pipe, which let me tell you held the most fragrant tobacco—brisk autumn cedar and coffee and orange peel. A few sharp puffs brought it crackling and he held it up to watch smoke drift off the bowl. The smoke ghosted straight up and hung there undecided.

“Who’s your boy then?” I inquired again, in part to disguise my shakiness; I was only hours out of the hospital. “Maybe I know him—it’s a small town.”

Again he ignored me. In fact he began to hum, an awkward surprise. First conversations are clumsy enough without the other person humming. It isn’t Midwestern behavior. It isn’t even really adult behavior. Later Orry would call it Winnie-the-Pooh behavior and that’s as close as I can come. He hummed and he puffed and he did something miniature with his feet, like a blackbird keeping its balance on a tin roof, then turned and asked in a tone of courteous pleasure whether I’d care to stay and launch the kite he had brought, a kite of his own design he had carried a great long distance to fly over Lake Superior, the mightiest freshwater sea in the world.

“No wind,” I pointed out.

“Not yet,” he agreed in a tone of mild irritation, as though the wind were being delivered by UPS. He took the kite from under his arm and shook it out. I hadn’t flown one in thirty years and was ambushed by a sneaky sense of longing.

“It’s good in the air, this one,” Rune mused. “Not that it behaves. No no! Its manners are very terrible! But what a flyer!”

As if hearing its name, the kite woke riffing in his hands. A wild sort of face was painted on it. He soothed it in the crook of his elbow like an anxious pet. My fingertips fairly trembled—it seemed as if flying a kite on a string was precisely what I’d wanted forever to do, yet somehow had forgotten.

He held out the kite. I reached for it, a mistake. Everything whirled. Colors blurred, my ear canals fizzed.

“I’m not so well at the moment,” I said, then asked—a third time—“What was the name of your son?”

He turned to me. For an instant his whole face seemed to rise. He looked as though he might lift off like a kite himself.

“Alec Sandstrom,” he said. I can’t forget how he watched my eyes, saying it. Or how I looked away.

Did I remember Alec?

Good luck finding someone in Greenstone who didn’t.