

# In the Evening

In the evening, a group of friends gathered at a building of open studios. Among the group an unfamiliar face accompanied one of the friends. Someone asked the pair, “How do you guys know each other?” The two looked directly at each other, happy, smiling, and after a mutually considered pause, with simultaneous bobs they pecked each other on the lips. Then they laughed and everyone else laughed too, but only after their own considered pause.

Together, the group shared much of their time at the annual event in a room that contained another room that was itself an artwork that contained other artworks among friends and their friends and not friends. One man was very thin like a pole. His black jeans were neat and hemmed perfectly to the top of his canvas shoes. Not much of a butt. He was tired and slow and deliberate in his speech. One might imagine him enjoying a nap in the kind of daytime sun that would come in from the large industrial windows that formed one wall of the studio. The soles of his shoes were corrugated such that he might stand in a rainy street and let the wash run right under him. One woman had her phone in an open pants pocket that was just to the side of her knee. The pants were baby blue and thick soft jersey. Another man was mostly in browns and wore pants that stopped a hand’s breadth above his ankles.

An old friend of theirs had been living and working in one of the nearby studios for thirteen years. They were all amazed at this. No one among them ever stayed in one place so long. Her paintings were great, broad canvases with larger-than-life figures, mythical, allegorical archetypes lost and un-

tethered in odd landscapes that were like the occasions of an alternate, desultory natural order. In small areas that revealed themselves only after long looking, she painted in precise strokes, ephemeral minutiae—trivial details, polished and preserved close observations. She walked dogs for a living. She said she kept the business simple and didn’t want it to grow. She only wanted to paint in her studio in the morning and then go out in the afternoon and take long walks and get paid for it. They all laughed. What a beautiful life! They also laughed about the graffiti artist they could see through her window who was painting a fantastic mural of a pulsating cuttlefish on a building across the street because he was really hamming it up for a small crowd. To separate himself and his collection of spray cans he had set up a simple arc of three stanchions connected by two retractable belts that made a shape like a pathetic stage.

Many of the artists also lived in the building, and the group had to walk through one artist’s kitchen to get to a studio whose floor was spread with delicate assemblages. The work was boring, and on their way back out they stopped and sat around the kitchen table and two of them told a story of being in the same space years ago when they were invited to a critique group. They didn’t understand that it was intended to be only supportive and uplifting, so they participated in the manner they had all acquired in graduate school in which the artist’s work is challenged with conviction, and questioning any aspect was fair game. They all might say they had benefited from that skeptical method, but also agreed that more support would have been helpful in school. Those two were never invited back to the group.

They retreated to the hallway where conversations carried on, situating themselves in the space between the doorways to a pair of adjacent studios. As they stood and conversed, members of a different group shuffled back and forth between the two rooms, fleeing one for the other when it became too hot, seeking the cooler one which would soon enough, as its population swelled, become the

warmer one, the cycle continuing through the evening.

Accompanying the other group was a small dog flecked like speckled black paint all over except for his socks of pure white. She had her own independent patterns of curiosities and circulation, and was the calmest creature of all with no apparent need for affections or attentions. She ignored all beckons for her company, and seemed uninterested, yet tolerant, of the commotion. 'She just doesn't care,' someone said.

Michael told them about the legal issues with the lease at their building. Earlier in the week, at court they got a look at their building owner for the first time—a 300-pound gay man who'd come up from Florida—Jupiter!—rolled in by wheelchair by his two young, male assistants. He was bald, in a track suit and pony tail, and amidst the proceedings removed a shoe and sock in order to scratch in long, sawing strokes a swollen foot with the butt end of a Bic. The judge sided with the artists, and the owner congratulated them wistfully without looking at them: "I'll die before that lease is up."

They talked about how terrible a show was. How great another was. There was a recollection of a teacher from their MFA days who offered that a work up for critique lacked diffidence, and the artist said he was still trying to figure out what that meant. The conversation turned to the expense of the city, the impossibility of staying, and the impossibility of leaving, "Where do we go?" They spoke of the work of a market-friendly painter classmate ("a good designer") building a home in Belize.

Despite the shared concerns, each was reaching an age and circumstances in life sufficiently complex in myriad, individuated ways such that they would each continue on a thread that would not likely weave back into the same whole, each drifting off into the new worlds they were creating for themselves. In the midst of the event, one among the group received a text from another one who had

noticed them earlier—"I think we should have an affair"—which was read and not reacted to.

The conversation was taken over for several minutes by the one who always talked passionately with a bit of unsocial intensity of the book—always history or science—he currently read. It was not brought on by an association sparked by the conversation, by a detail that had caused him to recall something from a past work. Rather, he simply laid siege to the group, disgorged upon them what he was consuming at the moment—an excited recitation of his new knowledge fresh from the page. He read voraciously the facts of the world, and it was as though they flowed into and out of him rapid as rivers, each new story replacing the last. Any subject that did not constitute a call to action. He told them that evening of the complicated consciousness of the octopus. When he stepped away from the group for a moment, someone who had been his studio mate recalled that this friend once arrived to the studio in the morning energized and told him that he had a need to fight with his girlfriend after breakfast every morning so he could storm off to the studio full of energy.

A new face joined their small crowd and garnered furtively the attention of each sensitive one of them. He was so comfortable among them that each thought he must be a friend of one of the others.

He was just enough above average height to summon extra attention, and had an ease about him that caused the minds of these transplanted New Yorkers to think he was 'very California,' though he was not. Jeans, greyed hair that still maintained its youthful stormy swirl and volume, and a general good face touched here and there by newly accumulated stains of age. A complete lack of tension in the psoas founded his perfect posture.

And he knew what to say. Someone's masked adolescent daughter said she was interested in philosophy. She couldn't answer anyone's questions about her interest but was also unbothered to say so. He

told a bad joke about Descartes—"...I think not' and he disappeared," and declared his favorite painting in the show was rock n' roll while everything else was jazz. His charm loosened them all and made a few more things possible that evening.

They all left. One had to go back to relieve her partner at home watching their new baby. Others went off to eat sushi at the place that pre-mixed the wasabi and soy. And one went to see a couple of more shows before biking home. It was not yet dark at the end of a beautiful day, and for a long stretch on Putnam Avenue he was alone under a nearly cloudless darkening blue sky. He took it right down the middle of the road along what seemed like the crest of an exaggerated arc—the very curve of the earth bulging up beneath the street. He thought about recently learning that the moon's gravity pulls and distorts the earth just like the oceans' tides, the effect on land too subtle to see or feel. Cars, trees, and brownstone homes lined the street, and at a stretch he was able to roll right through two long traffic lights at a quick steady pace without stopping. He was surprised and exhilarated by the energy he generated, his body warm with the heat of the effort.

### *Keep going*

When he arrived home and climbed the staircase lined with wood panels he could smell the sweet mahogany sawdust that lingered in the air from the carpenters who were working on the last unrenovated unit of the house that a friend would soon occupy.

It was a rare quiet night, no backyard parties he'd need to mask with his own music. He settled into the small sofa near the window and read for two hours about the origins of freedom in the United States of America. When his thoughts began to run off the page he shifted to his bed and pulled the covers over himself next to an open window and listened. The occasional traffic. Distant sirens—the city's nocturnal birdsong. Tree leaves rattled. Everything outside had blackened. The enormous

tree that consumed his backyard view was deep and soft. At its edges leaf silhouettes quivered independently, and he sensed the nervousness of the entire great mass.

During the day, as he sat at tasks, he may sometimes stare blankly and motionless at nearby surfaces, at walls with shadow patterns, at the oblique angles of tables and legs, and lose himself in the meeting of their abstract qualities and his concrete thoughts, but at night in the complete darkness in bed as he turned onto his back and stared up into the dark static where there was nothing in sight, no impediment to vision, no object to stop the forward progress of a gaze, and so it seemed to extend far beyond the ceiling into an infinite dimension, he swum out into it because it seemed like freedom. He hovered there momentarily, letting the weight of his limbs fall away one by one, and felt a release of pressure like an expansion of his body in all directions. Yet he was wary. In a flash he knew he could come apart, become untethered and the openness would turn itself into an anger animated by forces and images out of his control. They would overwhelm him, and he would reach for something to hold onto. He wrestled with his own body in the bed. He pushed against it. He clenched fists that crushed nothing. He resisted the walls and mattress. He stripped naked because he could not stand anything near him. He shook his head like he was mad. It all seemed involuntary. He wanted to scream. He could not, or he would not. He spread his arms like wings and held on to the mattress like a raft at sea, and he rode it. He punched it. He rolled into a ball and held himself there. Then he saw the fists of others punching himself, bats swinging toward his torso. He knew to talk to himself, tried to become calm. First, the anonymous requests, "Please, stop," then the consolations, "This will pass." And continued, "This is temporary. You are strong enough to get through it. Bear it. Don't ask too much of yourself. Survive. This will pass and you will be okay. You hate this and it's painful, and you feel like you're going mad, but you are not. This is temporary, and you do not know what's going to happen." He breathed hard. He sighed

forcefully. He tried to find a peace. He made the effort to repeat the hard breaths over and over, bringing himself down one infinite breath at a time.

*I do not want anything*

Sometimes, he gave up and got up. He turned on the lights. He got dressed. He ate something. He poured a can of Coke over ice and the fizz cheered like a distant crowd. He turned on the computer and looked for videos. He downloaded files and arranged them in a grid, each in their own window, and watched the whole set at once. He came. He closed all that and switched the lights back off. He took the laptop back to bed, set a pillow against a wall, sat cross-legged with the sheets drawn up to his stomach, propped the laptop on his lap, and sat in the glow of the screen reading a long review of an old, venerated poet's collected works. A tiny insect might crawl across the screen, pink and blue pixels jagged around its seed-like shape.

Among the effects of recovering his mind, chance memories knocked loose, and on this night he recalled as a teen, as an average athlete, coming around the third turn of a 400-meter individual junior varsity heat. He trailed only the leader, just off his outside shoulder, when he heard suddenly the voice of his coach calling out from the sidelines. *Stride with him! Stride with him!* The insistent voice and its repetition was like a gait itself. One, two. One, two. He did not think, but he obeyed it as if it were his own thought. His body followed. He matched the strides of the leader perfectly, landing foot with foot. Together, they were an awkward four-legged beast. And as the corner straightened into the final leg, in the outside lane, along a path of a greater radius, he saw that he was covering more ground with each step, was running faster than his opponent, so that as the lane unbent itself into a straight line he eased ahead, rolling into a victory that never would have been kept and remembered without that cry of encouragement.

Earlier in the day while working at home only a few feet from where he lay now, he'd heard the muffled voices of his landlords as they zigzagged up the flights of stairs respectfully explaining to each other aspects of the local building code and quietly conspiring in the care of the house. The same pair carried on conversations during their morning runs.

He looked out at the flat black mass of the tree. It seemed closer to the building now—a shaggy, rangy body of early summer overgrowth. The weather had turned and a gentle rain began to fall. The raindrops mixed with the drips derived from the trees, gutters and crossing wires, and in the water's single-minded pursuit of gravity it cascaded onto every surface in the yard, hurrying down steep slopes, patiently spreading across flattened grades, pooling in shallows it had wormed its way into, filling voids, saturating soft things until their internal bonds broke, finding the fissures, the seams that split when the weather changed, thinning itself into those hairline cracks, riving through cracked bark skin, slipping into clefts of dried earth contracted by thirst, into desiccated pores that quivered in surprise, and finally obtaining the passages of insects, following along the mad portals of their intricate sophistication. The rain washed debris from glistening surfaces and the wet, white glints at their edges looked back to the late-night lights still burning in the surrounding windows. The rain continued in a slow and steady train of uncountable thoughts.