

2. NOVEL LIVING

When the power went out at home, I saved a bunch of files. When my computer came back on, I was prompted to name a file that had been saved in backup. I placed all the files on disk before I left. Now, I decide to open the file.

OF OF FF
diagnosis
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It looks like gibberish.

I am stuck in Seattle. I finally have some time to catch up. I am sitting on the bed in my hotel room I decide to take the time for myself. I've always thought about doing some writing. Some fiction. What a better time to start than now. I decide on a title: *The Least of My Worries*. I am working on a paragraph: *She is tired. She is curled up on the couch.* I could have said: *She makes herself cozy on the couch.* That doesn't bring out the same sense of fatigue. *Curled up* almost makes her sound like a kitten. It sounds more primitive as if sleep returns her to her natural state.

I have to find this image appealing. It is the key to the story that I am telling. But there is something wrong. Something that makes her fatigue particularly significant. And I am eavesdropping on her. Watching her sleep without her realizing that I am there. I try to get in deeper. To guess what she might be dreaming. To create a dream that might explain how she feels in her waking state. I watch her move slightly. A deeper sleep is starting to set in. I can sense her restlessness. Her fatigue is more than can be satisfied from a simple nap.

She could have tried to make it to the bed. But she was too tired. So she slipped her shoes off and slid her legs up on the couch. Her jeans are loose enough that she can pull herself up on the couch. To stay comfortable in this position, she needs to be pretty limber.

Her hair is straight, brown in a bob. She looks a lot like Ariel. Ariel is slim. There is the same quality to her face. An oval face. Her lips turned inward. When she speaks, there is always this air of modesty. It is so seductive. It just draws you in.

I can imagine a smile on her face. She is satisfied in sleep. That is all that she needs. There are no deep psychological worries. Everything is tranquil.

Her smile is her particular nature. Even when she frowns, she still appears to be smiling I have that image of her burned on my brain.

The last time that I remember her all cozy like this was when we were driving from Seattle to Twin Falls, Idaho. She had dreams of seeing the falls. The day before had been a long one for her. We had first agreed to share the driving. But she changed her mind along the way.

"I'm too tired to drive. I hope that you're not going to kill me."

I just smiled and kept driving.

"I remember the first time that we met. I saw you at that photography exhibit. You were wandering alone. I could see all this concern in your face. You were a caring man. You thought about things. But you didn't know how to smile. Even now, your smile never seems natural. I feel as if you are carrying the weight of the world."

“I feel like that occasionally.”

“I’m not trying to insult you. It’s just the way that you look. That’s what attracted me to you. That almost brittle quality in your mannerisms. It made me think that you needed someone else. That’s why I approached you.”

“As they say, the rest is history.”

She is already scrunched up in her seat. She can barely keep her eyes close.

I am wandering through a gallery. I see her stop and look at one of the photographs. I have seen her before. I’ve known her since her red sports car was new. It has already been years. And the paint is fading badly in a few spots. It makes her seem more vulnerable.

I have always wanted to talk to her. But she always turns away as I come close to her. She seems more approachable today. I walk close to her as if to introduce myself. It just doesn’t seem right. All those failed opportunities flash by me. There is something about her that puts me off. Her world. My world. So different.

“I’ve always wanted to say something to you. But I’ve never felt comfortable. You scare me. You don’t know how to smile.”

“Did you really just say that to me?” I feel embarrassed.

“I’m sorry. That came out all wrong. It seemed as if I was just attacking you.

(I need to give her some background. Something to explain her restless heart!)

Her first job out of school is working in the Biochemistry Department at the University of Washington. She moves to Seattle two years later and finds work in the thriving biotech field.

(Later on.)

I miss the turn for Salt Lake City. I only realize it about twenty miles ahead. In trying to backtrack, I end up heading north. We end up on this treacherous mountain road. There are even patches of snow. I have difficulty maintaining traction. I slide for about ten feet before I regain control. I am very nervous. It is a while before the terrain becomes less forbidding.

We come into this awe-inspiring valley. The basin is a serene lake. We feel blessed. The land seems almost primitive. There isn’t a house around at all. We pull to the side of the road. It is hot here. We both bathe naked in the cold pool. It is icy. We can only take it for a few minutes. I glide in the water. I feel powerful.

We warm up in the car. I hold her close. We make love in the back. We barely make it back to I-80. This time we catch the turn for Salt Lake. We are indeed on our way.

We stay somewhere in the outskirts of Salt Lake. She decides to share my adventure. I think about our time lost in the mountains. For a brief moment there seemed to be no possibility of rescue. I contemplated our destruction in the wilderness. From my present vantage point, that is a sheer memory. A glimpse. I reach out beyond the screen and miss its touch.

I am with her. I move as she moves until here is nowhere else to go. She is my wonder of the world. I want this feeling to last. We are in the middle of nowhere with so far to go.

It is frightening to drift this far on my own. I need to believe in her. I need to believe that she is with me at every moment of this journey. I am already too far out of myself. I dream that I am alone in this hotel.

I wake up to have her looking down at me. My prayers have been answered.

(I am getting tired. But the story excites me. I keep writing.)

After working in Seattle, she moves to the valley of the sun. Phoenix embraces her with

its impolitic advances and its utter contrast with everything that she has come to know and love. She adapts to the sun. Her body embraces its contours, the deep heat. She becomes part of the desert. She is completely physical. Her spirit drifts away to another part of the world.

She works in the building across from mine. I live in Atlanta. She has been transferred here from Phoenix. I need her to be here in Atlanta. I need to see her leave the building day after day. Sometimes we leave at the same time. I don't think that she notices me. I barely notice myself. I want her to look back, to say something to me. I am talking to myself, saying things that she might say to me. Then I answer back. All this is fascinating.

She gets in to her new sports car and speeds away.

"Don't I know you too well?"

I am left watching her from the parking lot. The story is going to start a little later from now. But now it is the same story with slight variations. I think about her. Perhaps she will turn back.

I have been working too much. Hardly going out at all. I see a flier for an art opening. It is a photographer that has done some work for our company. I throw the invitation in the trash. It's not really my thing.

I have considered becoming a photographer myself. I watch the window like a camera. I do not only let the images flash by. I work to capture the patterns. This has little to do with my life. I have already been working here too long for it to matter. I like sales. I am waiting for them to put me on the road. It is becoming mundane working in the city. I spend too much time on the phone. My clients don't really understand what we have to offer.

The parking space is empty where she had parked her car. She left around 5:30. Sometimes I work to plan my exit so that we might coincide. It's not like that today. I have too much work. Clients who have been out all day just returning to the office before they have to drive home. This is my life. So I have to make the sales when I can. They have a life outside their offices. I have to catch them before they leap to that other world.

I get in my car and drive home. I live near my office. I can take even longer at work. I have no pets. I am completely alone in my apartment. I am already past that point when my dreams have failed to bear fruition. I am beyond that point. I have accustomed myself to my new reality. The goals of day to day. A promotion. A raise. Maybe, eventually, a real life.

I can't tell people that I am just out of college. It has been almost five years. That exuberance of the first few years has slowed down. Then I could party until three and come in refreshed to the office. That would kill me today. I am not old. I am still in my twenties. I am mature.

I don't really believe that. But it gives me an excuse. When I get in my car today, I look across at the parking space where she has been. It could have been someone else. It often is. I am talking to another woman, someone from my office when she passes by and gets in her car. I have to move so that she will not run into me. She really doesn't notice that I have accommodated for her. She almost expects it. That has happened so many times.

Today, the parking lot is almost empty. It is after 7. There are a few of us still here. We have not given up. Not today.

(I put aside my writing.)

I am tired. It has been an uneventful day in Seattle. I am waiting without any relief. I do

need some help. Someone who could just make me feel better about what is going on. I am bored eating alone. Ariel is able to talk to me for a while. But it is not the same.

I think about the file again. The gibberish. I don't even know how it got on my computer. Now it is on my laptop. It must mean something. Something to some computer expert. It could be a security code. I have to ask some of the guys in the office.

Tomorrow is another day of waiting. I set up my laptop on the table and start to write again.

She is coming out of the office. Today I have resolved to catch her. I have never seen her so determined. She has her reasons to hurry up. I will never catch her. On any other day, my pace would have been sufficient. Not today. She is way ahead of me.

She is trying to keep a rendez-vous that she has made for this evening. She still has to go home to get ready. She will risk what little she has for this guy. I know what she wants. And it's not going to happen tonight.

She recognizes that something is wrong from the moment that he sits down. But she needs to pretend that this will work. It is important that she thinks this way. He is training for a road race. He runs every morning. He is very serious about his body. She is struck by his look. But she cannot pierce the wall that he places in front of himself. He expects her to worship him from this distance. He does the same for himself.

She is committed to her health as well. She assumes that they share something in common. But the dinner seems tedious. She still wants to be with him.

He invites her to go to a club to dance afterwards. She excuses herself to go to the washroom while he gets drinks. He stands by the bar with the two drink in his hands. She has prepared to leave the place. He is left standing by the bar. He realizes not to call her again.

I am coming home from a late night of my own. I turn the corner. I almost plough into her car. It is parked close to where I live. I am surprised that she lives so close to me. It upsets my careful strategy. She is encroaching on my life.

The next few days I see her car again. It seems that she has moved into a place near here. When it is not parked there at night, I wonder if she is off on some escapade. I am working hard to respect her privacy. But she seems to be around me at all times. Something is drawing us together. I still feel this incredible distance between us.

I am sitting at my desk. I pull the invitation to the art opening out of the garbage. I look at it on the desk. It is this Friday. I have no plans. I think about asking one of the women who work here if they want to accompany me. I decide to go alone.

I walk in to see Ralph working the room. I don't see anyone else from our office. Everyone seems to know someone here. I only know the artist, just barely.

I get a drink and walk around to look at the art. It is very different from what he is doing commercially. It is so desolate. He has one picture of a thirteen year old girl. She has dark hair. Piercings. She seems abandoned. She is sleepwalking through her life at such a young age. She is curled up in a doorway of a rundown building.

All his work has this social element to it.. He depicts squalor amidst the geometric precision of the modern architecture. None of the crowd treats his work with the seriousness that it demands. It is all useless chatter.

Ralph believes that they understand. I feel like one of his models amidst these socialites.

I want someone to say something to me, to lift me from this place of depression. Ralph has been too good at evoking this mood. It only makes me want to drink more.

“I saw you sitting there.”

I look over at her. She seems interested in me.

“I see you at the office all the time. You work at the nearby building.” She listens to what I say, but it hardly affects her.

“Yes, I guess that’s you.”

Of course, it’s me. I pass her over and over again. Does she need a fucking guide dog?

“What have you been up to tonight?”

“I went out to dinner, but it was boring. I ducked out. He wanted to take me dancing. But I told him that I had other plans. I’ve been looking forward to seeing this show. My date wouldn’t have understood. Do you understand?”

“I don’t know. I feel like one of his models. He could photograph me.”

“You look too healthy to be in one of his pictures. But you don’t smile much.”

“I try!”

“Your face looks like one of those faces that isn’t meant to smile.”

“That sounds crazy.”

“No, really, you look like you’ve got important things to think about.”

“I guess that I’m messing with our compatibility quotient, but you do have a great smile.”

She laughs, “That sounds positively silly.”

“I guess it does.”

“We really should get out of here before the artist thinks that he should shoot us for his next show.”

“I haven’t eaten.”

“I have, but I could watch you.”

We are driving from Denver up to route 80.

“I’m getting tired.”

“We haven’t been going that long.”

“I need to stop for a few minutes.”

I get out to stretch my legs. I come back to where the car was parked, and it is gone. Where did she go. This is not like leaving someone at the supermarket near his house. I am a continent away from my home.

“What were you thinking?”

“I thought that you were sleeping in the back of the car.”

“What were you really doing? Playing some joke on me.”

“Gas was cheaper at the other place. I just filled up.”

“You could have told me. I didn’t know what the fuck was going on.”

“I’m sorry about that. I wouldn’t have left you here.”

“What if you met someone else.”

“Someone else like how. Someone that I didn’t know. Or someone that I already knew.”

“Why would someone that you knew be following us?”

“It all sounded stupid in the first place. I just went across the way for gas.”

“Is there someone following us. I thought that I saw you talking to someone when we

stopped in Denver.”

“I was just asking for directions to the interstate.”

“We has just got off the interstate.”

“No, we hadn’t. We were in the city getting something to eat.”

(I am trying to keep track of the two stories.)

I say something to Ralph and then duck out of the reception. I wonder what had possessed me to go. I didn’t belong there at all. As I am going out, I see that woman from the other building head in. Her sport car is parked near mine.

I can see her greeted by a man in a light grey jacket. It appears that she was supposed to meet him at the reception. I get in my car and drive home. I haven’t eaten. I have a snack at home. Something light. Then I head off to sleep.

Tomorrow at work, I am looking at the parking lot from my window. She arrives late. I guess she had fun last night.

I am looking at brochure for a vacation in the Northwest. I think about flying to Seattle and renting a car. I could visit Idaho and Utah. It’s just a thought. I’d like to see the mountains.

That night I try to park my car and I sideswipe someone next to me. I don’t notice anyone around, so I decide to just get out of there. I see someone trying to call his cell phone. He is trying to read my license plate. I speed off.

I go and hide in the neighborhood for over half an hour. Then I feel it’s safe to leave. I just can’t think about what happened.

“Have you been following me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw you car in my neighborhood. I’ve seen you here before. I’ve passed you numerous times in this lot. Now you’re following me home.”

“I just happen to live in the same neighborhood. I live off Morningside.”

She tries to apologize, “I’ve been feeling paranoid as of late.”

“Maybe you need a drink.”

“I’ve been partying a little much lately. That’s why I’m so edgy.”

“Come out and get a bottled water.”

“I really should get to bed early tonight.”

(He’s not good at convincing her to go out with him. He needs a helper. A special guardian. Some kind of providence.)

I look at her car. “Did someone run into your car?”

“It was hit and run. I didn’t even notice it myself until this morning.”

I look over at my car. I’d hate it if someone had done that to me. Her car isn’t as spiffy as it used to be.

“I’d go crazy if that happened to me.” My paint job still looks perfect.

“I needed some other work done on the car anyway.”

“It is a pain.”

“Yeah, it is. Makes you want to get a drink.”

She is inviting me along. At first, she was ready to kill me.

“I really should get to bed early tonight.”

“I didn’t think that I was asking. But it wouldn’t hurt to go out for a little while.”

“I’m not good at moderation.”

“Just stare into my eyes. I’m good at hypnotizing people.”

“Those are nice shoes that you’re wearing.”

“Sometimes you just have to spend money on yourself.”

“I used to see Washington plates on your car.”

“I’m from Seattle. I lived there for quite a while.”

“I’ve never been there. I’ve thought about a trip.”

“I’d love to show you around.” She pauses and catches herself, “I hope that I’m not being too forward.”

“You’re not. We were just talking.”

She gives me a big smile, “I need my drink.”

I am a little hesitant.

(More reworking.)

We have new neighbors. Eva moves in with her husband. She is very outgoing. Not an exhibitionist, but she seems very proud of her body.

“You have to come over some time.”

“We’d love to.”

“The only tricky thing is that my husband is often away. Your wife doesn’t go away for business much, does she?”

“Hardly ever. I do the traveling.”

“Where do you go?”

“Everywhere. Our company has offices in Denver and Seattle. And another one in Dallas. I go there quite bit.”

“I guess us wives will have to keep each other company. That way we won’t get any evil ideas.”

“I think that the evil works much better in pairs.”

“So they say. I could use an evil twin. Evil sisters.”

“My wife is mild.”

“Really! Just take off the mask. Behind every meek woman is a tiger waiting to get out.”

I suspect that she could do much worse damage.

“Honey, have you met the new neighbors.”

“That Eva seems like trouble. She loves those low-cut blouses.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

My wife Angel fell asleep on the couch while I was up in my office working. I carried her to our bed. Then I got ready myself and went to sleep.

“You seemed pretty tired last night.”

“Long day. What did you do after I went to sleep?”

“I followed right behind you.”

Eva is waiting outside as I come home that evening.

“Doing some heavy lifting today.”

“I don’t do that kind of work.”

“Everybody does that kind of work.”

“Whatever you say.”

“I’d watch that wife of yours. You always have to watch out for those meek types.”

I feel as if I have nothing to worry about. But Eva seems insistent in trying to plant ideas in my head.

“Henry has been a little strange around me recently. When you were away, I caught him sneaking around your place.

Henry does seem suspicious. But Angel would never do anything with him. He’s not her type.

“That woman next door has some crazy notion that Henry was over here.”

“What gives her that idea?”

“She’s naturally suspicious.”

I’m upstairs in my study. It’s late. I was sure that Angel had already gone to bed. I look down and think that she is moving in the back yard. I rush down and see nothing. Angel is sound asleep in our bedroom.

I can see Eva through the illumined window across the way.

I turn off the computer and stop my writing for a while. I am surprised how easy it is. There are still inconsistencies in my story that I need to work out.

I’ve been seeing Angel for a couple of month on and off. Nothing too serious. She seem genuinely interested in me. We’ll hang out all the time. Then for days at a time, I won’t hear from her at all.

“Are you seeing someone?”

“No, why do you ask.”

“You just get lost for days.”

“Lost? I go to work. I come home. Sometimes I just need my space.”

“Space? Are you seeing someone else.”

“No!” I look at her strangely. “You don’t believe me.”

“I don’t know what to think.”

She almost uses my doubts as her excuse. It permits her to increase her distance.

“If you’re going to treat me as if I did something wrong, it makes me feel bad. I ‘m not going to want to spend time with you if you’re acting like that.”

I keep wondering what I have done to push things to this point. She wants me to desire her. Now that she has me hooked, she can do whatever she pleases. I should be clued in to this game.

I am sitting in my office. I see her pull her sport car into the parking lot. No wonder I haven’t had a chance to talk to her. She lives off this sort of distance.

“I never said anything at all to lead you on. I gave you no indication that I was interested in you.”

“Why are you saying this to me?”

“You’re always watching me. And thinking about me. You give me the creeps.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can tell how you look at me. I’m not stupid. I know what you’re about. It’s obvious. You’re not my type. You don’t have what it takes.”

“So why does this type of yours always disappoint you?”

“Maybe you should be asking the same thing about me. Your obsession is leading

nowhere.”

“I’m not obsessed. I just notice you casually when I get my car.”

“I’ve seen you staring.”

“That would suggest that you’re staring back at me yourself.”

“I’m just keeping my eyes on things. And I notice that you’re staring.”

It’s early in the morning. I am still in Seattle. I am at the desk writing away. I am full of ideas.

“I’m sorry that I said those things to you in the parking lot.”

“What things?”

“You know the way that I talked to you. I appreciate your interest. I’m just a fuck up. I ruin people’s lives. Especially my own.”

“Don’t say that.”

“No, it’s true. I ‘m suspicious about what they do. But I don’t want anyone to be concerned about me. I just find guys who are sort of perfect for that. They don’t really fuck me over because I expect that kind of thing.”

“If you know what’s going on, why can’t you stop it.”

“I guess that I’m programmed to be that way.”

Eva is looking at the window. She comes out as I am walking to my car.

“You’ve been giving me some strange looks.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Staring. I can tell when a guy undresses me with his eyes.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“What would you like me to do about it?”

“You brought it up, Eva. You tell me.”

“You’re married. What would Angel think if she knew what you were doing?”

“I haven’t done anything. You’ve got a nice body. I took a look.”

“You took more than a look. You just took it all.”

“If that’s what you call it, so be it. I have to go.

“Are you sure that you don’t want to come in?”

“And do what?”

“Take more than a look.”

“Are you a temptress?”

“I’m actually more of a helper. I know that things are messed up for you and Angel. I’m trying to help out.”

“By getting me in a worse mess.”

“It will only make you more desirable. She’ll see you sneaking around.”

“She’ll see me fucking around on her. It will break the bonds of honesty between us.”

“What bonds? She’s seeing someone else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t tell me that you’re putting the glow in her face.”

I keep wondering about what Eva is telling me. I wonder who the guy is. I decide to follow her tomorrow. We no longer work at the same location. I can hardly wait all day while she’s in the lab. Maybe it’s happening while she’s at work.

“Did you follow me yesterday?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw your car in my neighborhood after work.”

“I just went home.”

“That’s funny. My name’s Eva. I’m sure that you’ve seen me in the parking lot.”

“I’ve seen you a few times. But I’ve never had the chance to say anything.”

I introduce myself.

She keeps talking, “We need to get a drink sometime.”

“I’d love that.”

She wears tight clothes for the office. Her skirt seems rather short. She doesn’t wear hose and has high, high heels. I watch her walk to the door.

“Eva, what do you do?”

“I’m a paralegal. My firm specializes in liability cases.”

“Wow! Accidents and all.”

“Something like that. But we’re not ambulance chasers.”

“Really.”

She glances over at me. She almost consumes me as we talk.

I’m having a drink with Eva in the bar of my hotel. I’ve been writing all morning.

“Your wife lives in Atlanta.”

“I live in Atlanta.”

“Walter, you’re in a bar in Seattle.”

“I’ve been in a bar since I got to Seattle. My company pays me to get drunk. That way, I won’t run to another firm.”

“That’s very clever of them.”

“I have to say that it is.”

She looks appealing. I should get back to my writing. If I keep talking, I get caught up in her little mess.

“Guys have been giving me that look since I was thirteen. Sometimes I’m flattered. But then I can feel them taking something from me. I just become faint of soul.”

When I get back to my room there is a message for me. I call down to the desk.

“We’ve got a delivery for you.”

It’s a Fedex envelope. I open it. There’s a note inside.

I know what you’ve been doing. You got my file by mistake on your email. Now you’re taking my idea for your novel. All the stuff about the switch in names of the two girls. Of the wife’s illness. And the disappearance of the other girl. All those things are in my novel. You have to cease this immediately or there will be severe consequences.

I look at the envelope. I immediately call the number from the addressee. It doesn’t work. I get one of my people at work to look up the address. It’s fake too.

What could he be talking about? Sure, I may have received his email by mistake. It’s not as if I could really make sense out of the gibberish. What was he saying about the illness. I feel as if he has my computer monitored.

When I get back to the room, I turn it on and off a few times. No one seems to have tampered with it. It’s always with me.

I like the twist about Angel's illness. That was what I needed.

"Have you been following me?"

"No, but someone has been following me. You work in a lawyer's office. This guy claims that I'm stealing his novel."

"What have you taken?"

"Nothing. He just sent me all this code. It seems ridiculous. Just gibberish. Now he says that I'm using his ideas."

"How does he know what you are writing?"

"That's what I want to know."

"Has anyone been up in your room?"

"Not at this point."

"I don't know much about copyright law, but you have nothing to worry about."

"He just seems a little mysterious. I don't know who he is. I don't know what he's capable of."

"You can't really trust him. But then it could all be a prank."

"I did get the file. The tampered file."

"You really did nothing with it."

"That's what I say."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Take you back to my room."