

D. E. Smith

Familiar Faces

People began first to trickle but then pour, the volume of bodies increasing steadily as a function of time, into the capacious, near hollow (with an empty, not objectless but sort of under-filled quality one might impose upon the near vacuum of space) gym/auditorium where this morning's, 8/11/2001, pre-semester gathering/briefing/new faculty orientation and all around rundown of any changes that might have occurred or been issued in the sort of handed-down-from-above kind of way changes are generally implemented is being held. It is sparsely filled but filling, echoes abounding. Hanging banners that, flaglike on a windless day, dangle gonfalon-style from the steel I-beams that constitute the rafters; six basketball backboards and lowly attached goals, two on either side of its full court length and four half court numbers for practice, hover unused; a greyly carpeted, shallow stage with an escutcheon emblazoned podium stands, now empty, under the one goal in front of the dull, unelectrified scoreboard; dozens of rows of black, squeaky, stackable chairs rolled in on golf cart trailers, mixed with the increasing numbers of drowsy souls that all enter, stand for a second at the back, heads moving from left to right or right to left, all searching for a familiar face or faces or large blocks of vacant seats to go ahead and grab and save in the event that some familiar face not yet here will eventually arrive, scanning the room left to right or right to left, for his or her now seated familiar face.

You arrive as the flood subsides to a trickle, most attendees now seated, interfacing, giving the gym/auditorium a sort of indecipherable, white noise hum. The time it takes for the few now arriving, not late but close to it, to choose a seat lags long, faces now blurring, identities lost in the nebulous crowd of unsorted rows. Some stand in an apparent state of vertical tetraplegia, just heads moving back and forth like spectators of an extended volley, endless, no familiar face standing out in the crowd of innumerable, blankly anonymous faces. But not you, knowing no one, proceeding anxiously past the indecisive, bobble-heading bodies, walking to the dead, anonymous middle, spotting on some row there a set of five seats, comfortable empty, pinching just past, between bunched right-



angled knees and chairs, the slight gap altogether too narrow for normal walking, forcing you to do a sort of sidelong shuffle, bumping knees and trampling purses and apologizing along the way, “Oops... sorry, sorry, excuse me, sorry.”

Seated, you sigh, trying to breathe downward so as not to send violent coffee breath vectoring into the rows ahead, clocking unconscious those in your direct path, turning nauseated peripheral heads your way, disgusted, looking—bald eyes wide and white with angrily pointed pupils—directly at you. You slump in your seat, knees knocking the vertical axis of the back in front of you—whose occupant grunts, audibly agitated—you just trying to reach the phone in your pants pockets that are really too tight for things, but what are your options, really? Pulled out, you begin fiddling with it for no real purpose other than to avoid looking at other people's eyes. Direct eye contact prompts questions, and questions prompt the reasonable expectation of an answer followed by other complementary questions of your own, then their subsequent answers and, God forbid, a conversation with you unprepared for all the bi-directional expectations that entails. You're smack dab in the middle of the set of five empty black seats that squeak as you shift. You are purposely in the middle because you think that this provides the best possible chance, that when the doors close and lights dim and the presenters begin to present, that at least one of the adjacent seats will remain empty, that if one is eventually occupied, you'll be able to comfortably cross your legs away, body turned, politely demonstrating a calm in-

difference and absolutely no desire to interface or become familiar or engage in the sort of inane, completely unnecessary interactions that come tethered—like birthdays and cake—to these sorts of events. But of course, to no avail, best laid plans and all, because not a minute-and-a-half after you sat, fumbled for your phone, attempting with all possible rigor to keep your eyes down, only looking responsively to sounds or possible indications that the thing might be about to begin, ending this purgatory of pure dread—not two minutes, even—some slender blonde in a skirt tight and slit, pushing the conceptual bounds of professional attire, squeezes with short sidewise horizontal shuffles just past your bunched, right-angled knees, diffusing some amalgamated trail of spring flowers and berries and plops down, her sigh vectoring sweet mints right at you.

And of course, you look down, glancing only in the reflexive way that you do when something flies at your face and then directly down again, smiling awkwardly (God knows the tortured ways your face can twist, furrowed brows and mouth slipping around liquidly).

“God, what a morning—didn’t think I was going to make it,” she says, flushed, breathing deeply in a slow, pronounced kind of way that does something to her chest

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at once reverently beautiful and luridly seductive. You breathe hard, real hard, in short, punctuated spurts. So hard you can be heard from a distance, you think—even among the field of indistinguishable voices and abounding echoes that somehow still manage to exist, even though the gym/auditorium has now filled with what intuitively should be enough bodies to deaden their still-bouncing, sonic trajectories. So hard you think two people one row up and four seats over are looking. No, they’re definitely looking. Alternatively, never at once, one head turning back to the stage, as the other head turns, synchronized, counterclockwise to continue looking, each reporting to the other anything they might’ve missed with a hushed voice and constrained gestures, constant.

You think about leaving. Looking at your phone, holding it to your ear in an urgent kind of way, indicative of the reception of a call you’ve been expecting and just can’t miss. It would work, probably go completely unnoticed.

“I mean, first I couldn’t find my keys,” she says, holding her left hand palm upward, no rings, signaling utter exasperation. You manage near eye contact and a sort of affirma-

tive grunt that she, possibly out of nothing other the pity or a fear of the inevitable awkwardness that accompanies silence, finds encouraging.

“Then the cat got in.” You can tell the couple ahead of you have heard the monologue that you, a victim, must bravely endure, now too far in to run. You begin to think of all the possible ways that this thing could end. You could sit here in silence, grunting and attempting to force yourself to look somewhere in her vicinity, head constantly battling some occult, magnetic-like force pulling it anywhere other than your nine o’clock, giving the impression that you’re located somewhere on the highly functional end of the autistic spectrum, somehow braving what must be the sadistic rites thrust upon you as a lecturer, given your apparent psychological condition. The thing was already supposed to have begun, but it’s lagging as usual, with no visible indication that the lagging will end. Skies were clear and cloudless with no hovering blackly ominous cumulonimbi stirring cyclonically to grant reprieve. No fault lines that you know of, to shake every soul from this place.

“And I can’t leave him cause, and I swear to God he’s fixed, but he just still keeps spraying, and I wouldn’t mind, I really wouldn’t, but that smell ... it just never leaves.”

No, you need some other type of thing, something irregular that preternaturally violates that natural order of things, an event of eschatological significance whose apocalyptic proportions would render the significance of this and every other previous occasion trivial. You need, and would now—past the Rubicon, irreversibly caught up in this pained and persistent pseudo-dialogue—barter your soul for an end, would pray to whatever for some unique rapture—a ripping through of the veil of this world by ethereal lightning that comes from the east and flashes to the west—where every soul in this room but yours is among the elect, involuntarily floating away, caught up in the clouds with the multitudes who’ve been sleeping in the dust, called by the brash blare of apocalyptic trumpets and the revelatory four non-directional winds, signaling the end of everything, you the sole preterit soul, forced to cope with the true abomination of desolation. That, you think, expected response now lingering past the breaking point, would be better than this. Everyone disappearing, leaving no one, eliminating the possibility of ever encountering any familiar face other than the one, forever invisible, plastered permanently behind your visual field. Then darkness.