TRAVELLING SPRINKLER

a novel

NICHOLSON BAKER

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One

Roz called to ask me what I wanted for my fifty-fifth birthday. One of her many good qualities is that she remembers people's birthdays. I thought for a second. I knew what I wanted: I wanted a cheap acoustic guitar. You can get them for about seventy dollars at Best Buy. They come in an exciting cardboard box. I saw two boxes, leaning against a wall, waiting, last time I was there. I almost said that's what I wanted—I came dangerously close to saying it—but then I didn't, because you really can't ask your former girlfriend for a guitar, even a cheap guitar. It's too momentous a present. It presupposes too much. It puts her in an awkward position. And of course you can't say, "What I really want is I want you back," either.

So instead I said, "I think what I really want is an egg

salad sandwich." Roz has a particular way with egg salad—she adds in a rare kind of paprika or tarragon or some elusive spice I don't understand. "We could meet at Fort McClary," I said. "I'll bring the picnic basket and the sliced carrots if you bring the egg salad sandwiches."

Fort McClary is a place we used to go sometimes to smell the seaweed and look at the boats. I think it's where the Revolutionary War began, but I'm not sure. There are huge hewn Stonehengeian stones tumbled about in the grass that were going to be part of a defensive wall that never got built. I think Paul Revere rode his poor snorting horse all the way to Fort McClary to warn that the British were coming, which was the beginning of a pointless trade war that didn't need to happen.

Roz was silent for a moment.

"Or," I said, "if a picnic is too heavy-duty we could just have lunch at the Friendly Toast."

"No, no, I can definitely make you an egg salad sandwich," she said. I could hear her smiling the indulgent smile of someone who once loved somebody a long time ago.

We agreed to meet at Fort McClary and have a birthday picnic.

EARLY THIS MORNING I had a literary dream. Roz was still living with me and I was supposed to review a book of military recipes called *Mess: Great Food from Army Kitchens*. Roz and I were testing one of the recipes, which was for

octopus-walnut muffins. Roz pulled the tray of muffins out of the oven and I bit into one. "How does it taste?" she asked.

"Not too good," I said.

"I'm not surprised," she said. We shook our heads and tried to think of a way I could say something nice about the cookbook.

"Maybe you could praise the walnuts?" Roz said.

I woke up.

I'M PARKED ON INIGO ROAD, which is my favorite road anywhere. I wish I could write about the phrase "happy phrase," but there's no time. Very soon I'm going to be Fifty Fucking Five. The three Fs. The last time I hit three Fs was ten years ago, and this time is definitely worse. Unless you're Yeats or Merwin you are done as a poet at fifty-five. Dylan Thomas was in the ground for sixteen years at fifty-five. Keats was dead at, what, twenty-six? Riding on horseback with his sad lungs coughing blood. And as for Wilfred Owen.

The first time I read Keats's sonnet "When I Have Fears," I was eating a tuna sub. I was an applied music major, with a concentration in bassoon. I'd found the poem in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*—the shorter black edition with the Blake watercolor of a griffin on the cover. I propped the Norton open with my brown plastic food tray and I started reading and eating the tuna sub and drinking V8 juice occasionally from a little can.

Keats says: "When I have fears that I may cease to be." He

doesn't say, "When I have fears that I may," you know, "drop dead," or "breathe my last"—no, it's "cease to be." I stopped chewing. I was caught by the emptiness and ungraspability in that phrase. And then came the next line, and I made a little hum of amazement: "When I have fears that I may cease to be," Keats says, "Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain."

I don't want to pretend that the cafeteria spun around. It stayed still. I heard the grinding sound of the cash register printing. But I was thinking very hard. I was thinking about a large tortoiseshell that somebody had given me when I was small. There was a sort of fused backbone on the inside of it that ran down the middle. This bony ridge smelled terrible when you sniffed it close-up, although it had no odor from a normal distance. I imagined the tortoiseshell as the top dome of a human skull, and I imagined Keats's pen gleaning bits of thought flesh from it.

The pen is really the only tool sharp enough to do the job of brain-gleaning properly. Keats knew that. He had medical training. He was supposed to be a doctor. He didn't like medical school much, but he assisted at surgeries. The idea of the inside of the head as an object that had crevices and hiding places—that it was gleanable—was something that he knew firsthand. And he also knew, because he was a sick man, that his fears were justified. His mother died of consumption. He was a fourteen-year-old boy when he stayed up watching her die. He knew what it meant for a complicated gentle person to simply cease to be. And his brain was teeming with the

unwrittenness of what he had to say. He had to hurry. He knew all that.

The rest of the poem isn't nearly so good, but it ends with a bang: "Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink."

I DIDN'T BRING the list of things I wanted to write about today. Sometimes I note things I want to write about on a folded piece of paper, but I left my piece of paper in my bed. It's an empty bed. This may be one of the empty-bed birthdays. I've had a few.

But a summer birthday is a good thing. On the branch near my car, on every twig that isn't dead, there has been a lot of activity. The sap is up in these trees, and the leaves have had no choice but to move outward. Billions of buds in each tree, the leaves tremblingly uncurving, squirming outward. It's a forced migration. The sap is pressurized and the leaves have to flee outward from the very ends of the twigs. What it creates is a fog of green over all of Inigo Road.

I've just been waiting for summer, waiting and wanting, and now it's here. Yesterday was actually hot, and today I've put a Post-it note on the corner of my computer screen: NO YUKON JACK TILL YOU FINISH. I need a new drug. Huey Lewis sang that song and then foolishly sued Ray Parker, Jr., claiming that Parker had pinched the bassline for the *Ghostbusters* theme.

I'm debating whether to buy a can of Skoal smokeless tobacco.

THREE QUICK FAREWELL SHOTS of Yukon Jack. Oh my flipping God. Deep breath now. Hello, my strangely shaped figments, I'm Paul Chowder. I'm here and so are you. We are in the same Minkowski space, shaped like a saddle. You're in the saddle and I'm in the saddle and we're not going to fall off Revere's horse because it doesn't exist.

My knees are laughing. Is that allowed?

Here's my tip of the night. Nod. It's worth nodding at things sometimes. Just give a big nod. That's the way they are? Okay, nod, yes. Practice nodding.

Thirty-five years ago, when I was twenty, I sold my Heckel bassoon. And that was that. Now I'm supposed to be writing a new book of poetry, which I'm calling *Misery Hat*. I don't want to work on it. Today, to get inspired, I dipped into an extremely long poem by Samuel Rogers called *Human Life*, because I liked the title. It didn't do much for me, but I remembered that Samuel Rogers was friends with Tennyson and Coleridge, and that made me haul out my old edition of Tennyson and look at his extremely long poem *Maud*, narrated by an insane person who rambles. Tennyson was very ill if not clinically insane when he wrote parts of *Maud*, and a lot of it is unreadable. But there is one very nice soaring patch that everyone remembers. It begins, "Come into the garden, Maud, / For the black bat, night, has flown." There Tennyson has us. Night itself is a black bat. How thrilling and un-Victorian is that? In the same passage there's a

mention of an unusual chamber group that's apparently been serenading the roses all night long—a flute, a violin, and a bassoon. It's a bassoon not because Tennyson knew anything about the bassoon, but because he needed an evocative word to rhyme with "tune" and "moon." And also because he may have been remembering another poetical bassoon passage, from Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*:

> The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,
> For he heard the loud bassoon.

Coleridge didn't know much about the bassoon either, or he wouldn't have said it was loud. The bassoon's liability as an orchestral instrument is that it is quite soft, much softer in volume than its size would suggest. At a wedding reception in 1797, when Coleridge was working on his poem, it might have been used to double the bassline played by the spinet or the cello. But bassoonists the world over are grateful to Coleridge for including them in his stanza.

Charles Darwin knew slightly more about the bassoon than either Coleridge or Tennyson. When he was old and sad he asked his son to play bassoon for a heap of earthworms, to study their responsiveness to low sounds. He also played a tin whistle for them and pounded on the piano and shouted at them. "They took not the least notice," Darwin said. There's also a poem about the vowels by John Gould Fletcher, one of the Imagists. The letter U, according to Fletcher, sounds like "torrid bassoons and flutes that murmur without repose, / Butterflies, bumblebees, buzzing about a hot rose." Fletcher

read the torrid bassoons passage to Amy Lowell in London, and later he wrote an autobiography called *Life Is My Song*. Later still, depressed, he drowned himself in less than three feet of water in a recently dredged pond in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Selling my bassoon was one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made. I've regretted it a thousand times since. And here's the strange thing. I've written three books of poems, and I've never once written a bassoon poem. I have never used the word "bassoon" in a single poem. Not once. I guess I was saving it up, which is not always a good idea.

NAN, MY NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBOR, asked me to help with her chickens. She has five hens plus one droopy-tailed bantam rooster who has a reputation for being fierce and territorial, although he's always fine with me, staring at me warily from one eye and cock-a-doodling a fair amount. Nan is away in Toronto taking care of her mother, who isn't doing well. She, Nan, has been acting a little odd recently—preoccupied and remote. It could be that she's worried about her mom, but also I think her "friend," Chuck, is maybe no longer in the picture. He takes care of submarines, and there was an arson fire at the Navy base in Kittery that caused half a billion dollars' worth of damage to a very fancy nuclear submarine. A worker at the base confessed to setting the fire because he wanted to leave early that day. That's how things are in the Navy.

All I have to do is let the chickens out in the morning, so that they can spend the day pecking for trifles in the grass. I scatter some cracked corn under the bushes to give them a better peck-to-success ratio. Then, as dusk comes, I wait for them to file back into their shed and I close the door. You can't herd them, you just have to wait till they go in of their own accord. I've gotten in the habit of bringing my white plastic chair over to Nan's yard and waiting for them to be done with their day. If I don't close the door, the chickens may be attacked at night by raccoons or foxes.

Ah, there they go now, filing into their enclosure. The hens are big and brown and fluffy, and their back parts are white with chickenshit and egg laying. The rooster is small and iridescently blue-black. I guess they mate all night, I don't know. There's a faded sign on the door that says "Every Birdie Welcome."

THE WHITE PLASTIC CHAIR is comfortable, but not as comfortable as the driver's seat of my car. I practically live in my car these days, and I usually buy gas at Irving Circle K. One reason I like Irving is that they play oldies music from tinny speakers at the gas pump. Another reason is that they leave the little clickers in the pump handle so that you can start filling your tank and then go inside to buy a bottle of Pellegrino water and a bag of Planter's trail mix from a man at the register who looks like he's nursing a massive hangover.

Today at Irving I went back out to the car with my

purchases and I absentmindedly tried to drive off without removing the gas spout from my car. I heard a clunk and looked back and saw the pump hose lying on the ground, surrounded by what seemed to be a dark spreading stain of gasoline. I thought I'd torn off the handle. I said, "Oh, no!" and got out, and then I saw that it was just a trick of the shadows. The spout was fine. It had pulled free of the car and fallen, and there was no sign of damage to the hose and no leaked gas. I felt a huge relief. I drove off singing a song that I heard a few weeks ago in Quaker meeting, called "How Can I Keep from Singing?" One of the meeting elders, Chase, had stood in the silence and said that all morning he'd been remembering a song that Pete Seeger used to sing. Pete Seeger learned it from a singer named Doris Plenn, Chase said, who learned it from her grandmother. And then he sang it. He wasn't a great singer, but it didn't matter. "My life flows on in endless song," he sang. "Above earth's lamentation." I was so impressed by the song that when I got home I looked it up on iTunes and bought two versions of it, one by Bruce Springsteen and one by a group called Cordelia's Dad, accompanied by slow fiddle chords.

Long ago the Quakers were opposed to music—they said that the effort a musician expended to learn an instrument kept him from worthier pursuits. But now they sometimes stand and sing at meeting.

I really need a guitar.