

Squalor

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They said that dying was like going home. A man, big, burly, not so strong in body as he was in mind (though he always put on a good front even as he was growing older, he kept two paces ahead of youthful companions, took naps on the sly, maintained a gorgeous appetite, taking the world in, in, because it was there for the having if you lovingly cared for it the way he did, if you prepared food with the delight of eating and sharing—his dinners spread for miles), unused to running, finds himself in anything but a clearing, finds himself, brush underfoot and trees thicker than the buildings of the city he so loves. A stream can be heard to be running nearby: beneath him, alongside him, overhead? The knowledge of it makes him less panicked. Unused to running, he moves like a dream, hands and feet in synch, for the sake of a feeling of air in his lungs and the ground deliciously, certainly underfoot.

There is no fanfare in the middle of this day, just a desire to get home because of a feeling in his chest and stomach, the desire to get home now as strong as the earlier desire to go out to buy a new pair of shoes.

It is July.

Heat-wave weather.

He wanted a pair of shoes that would let his feet breathe more. Shoes made of canvas, the kind of shoes I'd never seen him wear. The kind of shoes a man would wear who wore white suits, but he wore blue turtlenecks, black T-shirts, indifferent to fashion, he'd prefer to go naked. A former communist, he enjoyed a stroll on a Sunday afternoon in the Mall, to see what was being produced, and at what cost, and to glimpse the latest state of the art and compare it to all of his own unpatented ideas.

The trees are spinning and there is nothing so loud and beautiful as the sound of his breathing, at least not to me who cannot re-inspire him. The movement of his hands as he separates branches and steps over brambles is beautiful because, as they would have us believe, he is going home, and dying is like going home, and all of it is natural. I don't know if he feels like he's being chased by dogs or if the middle of that day takes him by surprise the way a flock

of birds is disturbed by the gust of a passing train and the passengers, too, thrown back by the quake and lash of what could be feathers or what could be leaves suddenly parted. I imagine a strange mixture of joy and fear for my friend who is unused to running.

They said that dying was like going home but then to go home to die might be to fight it. To say *this* is my home, not some other. To be contained rather than released. The only time I ever saw Sidney afraid was over something so simple as a rental car. He and my mother were visiting Jean and me in Providence, and they decided to rent a car to give them the freedom to go to and from the wedding of a cousin of my mother's that they were attending. Sid, who zipped around Philadelphia streets, hugged the road, cradled the outlying countryside, knew the shortcuts and never got harried in tight traffic, fellow drivers honking up his butt, (though he did comment ever with a questionmark, always with some hope for humanity, "why do they never yield?"), trembled behind the steering wheel of the rental car and fumbled with the controls as though he expected it all to transform into a slapstick comedy where essential knobs snap off and we're all left holding the cord to the parachute that doesn't open.

That night he couldn't sleep.

It had something to do with this car not belonging to him, and the idea of insurance didn't assure him.

"Hey, we'll happily drive you to the wedding, Sid. Take the darn car back. Relax. I'm not used to seeing you this way."

Sid had one recurring dream that I knew of, a nightmare, really, in which he can't find his car. There's a sense I have that the day Sid died he was on foot, or at least he wasn't driving because my mother had been feeling more and more the desire to get behind the wheel again after a long hiatus, and Sidney encouraged her even in the aftermath of the moments of feeling so unwell, of needing to go home, of resolving to see the doctor after the weekend was over. He let her, in this way, carry him to his door, which is profound, really, because the fact of the matter is that Sid

was not the type to let people care for him, and the fact that he died of a heart attack suited his disposition because you couldn't imagine him supine and attended through a protracted illness by strange but tender aids. He was always *doing*. Practicing scales, or chopping onions for a repast with C-span on in the background. He became addicted to their programs for a while and wrote a fascinating paper in which he argued that Newt Gingrich had obviously studied the speeches and documents that shaped the Russian revolution which he was now recycling toward the most conservative ends. There was a hope of seeing his argument in print in a place like *The Nation*, but, for Sid, a self-made polemicist, public intellectual, that door did not open.

They said that dying was like going home, so maybe Sid's push to get home on the day he died was about not believing that, because he was learning that to die was to be in transit without your car and he wanted stasis. (Sid chuckles). He wanted to walk into his house in his new breathing shoes and then slip off those same shoes to rest.

"You have to know what it's all about it," was the punchline to one of his Jewish jokes, and together we would joke when someone died, "well, now they know what it's all about it." And then he would look only serious enough to shrug, "death sucks." Now Sid knows "what it's all about it," and I wait in hours of silence, sleeping, walking, sleepwalking, for him to tell me. But then I think, really, Sid is gone—I did see his unsmiling face in the coffin; unbelieving, I made the mistake of touching his cold face, cold as a magnet—and the sum of his knowledge is what he knew when he was alive, some of which he gave me, and there is a riches there and that is enough.

So he's running in this brush and he's a city guy and he's unused to running and he only knows he wants to go home and he's not sure if he's being led to the door of his apartment or if he's being taken away. Sidney didn't like to fly but he braved it from time to time. He called what he felt an "Antaeus feeling." Flying put him in touch with that uncanniness, and it was hard to deny. In the days before dying, he spoke of wanting to go again to Israel. He had been there once many years before. In the days before he died, he spoke Yiddish words into a taperecorder in an attempt to save the language. He was making a Yiddish primer. This would have been in the workshop/den part of his apartment, a most unkempt affair, not merely lived but worked in. The walls were yellowed from the nicotine

stains of his smoking years, the bathroom could never get entirely clean—there were rust and toothpaste stains dating back to the Second World War. He hired someone to clean but she only went so far as feather dusting his piano music and moving a molding kitchen sponge from one side of the kitchen faucet to the other, so he fired her. His paintings and sculptures were hung or stacked up against the side of walls higgledy piggledy. There were so many different periods that his expression took, but the idea of mathematics wed to artistic form continued to intrigue him the most. Sometimes he and my mother would make a Sunday drive to the country and sketch whatever they saw rising out of or into the quiet.

I didn't like that a man twice my age and more energetic cooked for me whenever we visited, or, rather, I luxuriated in the laziness that overcame me when I entered Sidney's apartment, so full of life, so full of him that you found yourself feeling that you were happy for him to be there for you, no one else was as *there* as Sidney not in a personal but an ontological sense. Perhaps he would be pegged a high functioning person. But once out of guilt and love and not wanting just to collapse into the bear-like arms of the aura of Sidney's place the way he had made it, I insisted on making dinner. It was New Year's Eve and a friend of mine, Arthur, was also going to join us—me, Jean, Sid and my mother. I had perfected pasta puttanesca, and was happy to have access to the splendid array of olives available from Philly's Italian market. The sauce was bubbling toward its final, perfect touch—time to add the anchovies, but so much in the kitchen was greasy that my hands were slippery and the anchovies fell, face down with a sickening splat onto the dirty floor. At the same time, I accidentally knocked over a bottle of olive oil. Sid was stretched on the sofa reading a spy novel, but he jumped when he heard me screaming and cursing and crying like a kid whose Easy Bake oven cookies have caved in. "Mazel tov," he said, as he usually said when he himself dropped or broke something which happened so often that it became a point of fond teasing. "What are you so upset about? Did somebody die?" He always said this to put trouble in perspective. Together we mopped up, in a manner of speaking, the layers of oil and anchovies, and now Sid was finishing preparing the meal, whipping around the kitchen to perform a colorful salad and dessert. "But I wanted to make something for you," I said. "You did," he said. "It's delicious. Not too gourmet schmourmet," and

he even denied the especially pungent gas that the special brand of olives bequeathed us all.

That day when Sid was trying not to run but was feeling called to leave his body and take to some hills, he reached certainly in his pocket for his key and felt good to be home even if he began to feel it was no longer he who was entering. The bright earth, shaken from the sides of the mushrooms he'd prepared that afternoon, gleamed underfoot as he walked habitually to the refrigerator for water. He needed to lie down. He stripped to nothing but his watch and socks. My mother left him to go for a walk. If he were home, perhaps it would mean he were not alone. He lay dreaming in the company of the many selves he had created, the numerous handles on reality, the vegetables washed and chopped routinely, the books read, the bookrests designed by him to hold the body before the books a little longer, for he was strong in mind if not in body even though he had a deep bass voice. Because his voice was so deep, his whisper soothed like a primal percussion.

Unused to running, Sid stands. And I don't know where any of the rest of us is while this is happening, but at least he is home. He can't sleep for the pain in his shoulder. It hurts to breathe. "Mazel tov." He wanders to the bathroom dressed in his watch and socks. His bathroom has a toilet, a shower, a dirty floor. A blonde/yellow hairbrush filled with his grey black hairs. Shampooing leads to baldness according to Sid, and his hair is thick even luxurious as his broad smile. His bathroom has a mirror and a sink. You have to wonder how many people die while the sun is shining. My friend Larry would paraphrase Dante: a swimmer reaches shore after a long and difficult swim and only as he looks back is stricken with fear as he tries to understand how he possibly could have done that. This year, instead of holding Sid's hand, my mother's hands, resisting arthritis, fill in the addresses of two hundred and fifty Christmas cards for her boss who is a lawyer. He wants his clients to get that personal touch.

I have one of those dreams in which a person who died is suddenly available. In some such dreams, the person is only temporarily available, as though they've crossed back into your world to meet your demand but you both know they cannot stay in the dream, and the dream cannot become the day to which you wake, because they are home whereas you are, who knows where, or they are who knows where and you are home. In other such dreams, the person hasn't died and you experience cognitive dissonance and

surprise and a kind of joy as in a state of being drugged. In my dream, my mother and Jeannie and I are visiting someone in a hospital, and we're told that in some part of this hospital, we will find Sid. We will be able to talk to him if we can successfully pretend that he's alive, at least temporarily, if we don't bring death up. The hospital room we enter is crammed full with no room between the beds like a sick ward in a war zone. I'm thinking about what I want to say to Sid: I want to ask him if he could ever have anticipated in the wildest corner of his political imagination that President Clinton would someday be impeached. But Sid is nowhere to be found in this hospital room, so we don't talk, and I presume this is because I've gotten the place of our rendezvous wrong. He didn't die in a hospital, he had no time for hospitals, he died at home.

They said that dying was like going home. On a visit to my apartment, Sid asked jokingly if there were a vampire living there because he couldn't find a mirror anywhere in the house. Like his, my apartment did have the obligatory mirror in the bathroom. A man unused to running, feels breathless, backs up against a tree, himself a tree-like man, tired, for now he'll rest, then pick up the thread of his day later—prepare dinner, practice, sleep in the arms of his beloved, keep worry at bay, resume new shoes—Sid dies sitting up, wearing nothing but his watch and socks. My mother finds him on the bathroom floor and finds in the palm of her hand beads of sweat from the back of his neck as she takes his head in her arms.

Are these people strangers who try to make his body breathe again in his apartment, who lift his body to his bed, who take him from his home?

How does a person take on a city, or a city a persona? Philadelphia is never the same to me without Sidney, his home.

No visit to Sid was ever complete without an argument. When we had matched our wits at a political or philosophical crossroads, then I'd know the weekend was complete and all was right with the world. These were usually battlements laced with respect and affection, but occasionally our differences took on sharp severity, and I'd feel sick at heart to see either of us so cruel. Sid's opinion of a book I'd been writing was particularly harsh. He confronted me with the charge that I could not possibly write about my grandfather or interpret his journals because I hadn't been there when he wrote them, I'd only been a child to

him in the last twelve years of his life, most importantly, I didn't know him as my mother knew him. It wasn't right, this insistence of mine to try to tell his story. Sid's eyes, usually large and tender, would become beady when he attacked me on these counts. I didn't use force in my replies because I felt too hurt by his wanting to silence me. I'd make points about how no one could claim ownership of my grandfather's story, of how my writing need not usurp my mother's own recourse to her version of the tale. To him, it was black and white. It wasn't my domain. I did not have authority. "Go ahead," I'd think, "break my arm, and see if I don't write it anyway. No one, and certainly not you who has not been able to claim your own authority to paint, to sing, to write, is going to take the small song I have made." And then I'd return to feeling gentle because I figured Sid did not really believe what he was saying to me, and I pictured him harangued by my mother who kept him up nights tortured by the implications of there being two writers in the family.

They said that dying was like going home. So what right did I have now to tell Sid's body, now that his voice could not defend it? I am contemplating the necessity to return to a room, not just any room, the room one chooses, if one has a choice, to be on the threshold to nowhere. In a different time or place, I would prepare Sid's body for burial. A ritual of touch and cleansing and veneration. Or maybe not, because I wasn't, after all, kin. What right is a woman's with regard to her friend, a man? Maybe this writing is my rite over the body, so many sheets laid out across my lap keep me warm. I feel the need to follow my beloved friend through his last moments. Why? I picture Sid saying my need to walk with him, a man unused to running, through the door of his apartment, to his bed, into the bathroom, is morose. Why don't I think about other things instead? Make music. Prepare a hearty soup. Read Wittgenstein. Inherit Sid's appetite. Indeed, why don't I?

I kissed a man. He had a thin moustache and geeky black framed glasses before they were considered fashionably retro. He served me crunchy food that was good for me and enjoyed Indian cuisine. He wore gray hushpuppies and bluejeans and commented on how sexy I looked in a long pink skirt I wore in the halls of the posh suburban high school we both taught at. I didn't enjoy kissing him, I didn't know I preferred women. He was one among several men I slept with without sleeping with. I invited him home. At

twenty-two, I hadn't yet made a home to bring him to. I was renting a room in someone else's home, sharing their kitchen, bathroom, and washing machine. I was a kind of boarder. I took him instead home-home. To the home where I grew up. He was supposed to be progressive. I didn't tell him my house was a "row home." It didn't occur to me to name it. Basically, I was taking him home because I often went home to see my family on weekends, just out of college and truly on my own. When we arrived at the house, he held his chest. He twirled his moustache and wiped his glasses to marvel at the colors my mother had chosen to paint the walls: a dining room decked out in cobalt blue and mandarin orange living room. He complained of severe fatigue and asked to take a nap in my brother's room. An afternoon passed while I talked to my mother in the dining room. When Jeff reappeared, it was time to go. He said he fell in and out of sleep, tried to listen to an opera on the radio, but mostly was battling a dreadful feeling of depression about being in my house. It reminded him so of the house where he grew up. The hole in the wall. "What hole in the wall?" I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't recall a hole in the wall of my brother's room, but he described cracks, and holes, and a room too small for consciousness to hold, and pencil marks and smudges, and ripped sheets, and nothing the diva's singing could do to take him out of it. He said my house was "squalid." The squalidness. The squalor. It reminded him of something he knew. It was unrecognizable, this picture he was painting of my home. On the drive back, I kept wishing for a stop at the library to look the word up, or hoped to find a dog-eared dictionary in his glove-compartment. Squalid. I remembered seeing the word in Dickens. It referred to children sleeping in cupboards in London slums, and rat infested water, and no birth control and lots of birth defects, and basically grimy chaos.

Squalid from the Latin *squalidus*, stiff with dirt, if not with ecstasy or death. He was describing the home I might go to to die, the home of my childhood. There *were* a few fond memories there of Christmases past. Hiding beneath the Christmas tree in a red cotton dress that was too cool for the season. Lying beneath the tree as close to the plastic trunk as I could get and feeling the flashing lights against my eyes, against my skin, like a small campside fire under a star. Studying a miniature crèche until I was small enough to enter to ask the kneeling peasant if those eggs he offered the child from his hat were hard-boiled,

soft-boiled, chocolate or raw. I studied the paper fold-out that my mother presented at Thanksgiving with a similar composure, fingers placed end to end, chin propped atop fingers, dreaming my way into the miniature house where a spool was being spun, a biscuit lay inside a basket to cool, a hat with a buckle matched a buckled shoe, where lace swept the side of a man's leathered calf, where a cat followed a red bobbin around the room and a baby pulled the blue button on her own dress, where a pile of orange leaves made a warm bed, and other wonders unfolded as though from the seams of a paper accordion, this reverie of mine. I wondered if Jeff were able to enjoy the meal my mother had been making while he had been contemplating in a downward spiral the hole in the wall.

What made my poor grandmother polish her kitchen to a fetish? After washing dishes, she continued to clean up water droplets. Open a cupboard and you would find Andy Warhol's canvas realized: soups and oats and other cylindrically stored foodstuffs, layered like an existential quilt to infinity. Child of the depression. Polished squalor. Poignant excess. Needless repetition. Sometimes Sidney would be visited by a cleaning *dybbuk* that made him speed through his house gathering papers and plastics and anything that seemed guaranteed to trip someone underfoot or anything that in that moment appeared uncontained and hazardous. One Christmas while we stayed with him, Jean and I exchanged a gift of lingerie in private. But the next day and the next the lingerie, its tissue paper and box were nowhere to be found until we were forced to describe it to my mother and Sidney and then conclude that it was whisked by Sidney out the door and down the garbage shoot, into the incinerator, accidentally. (Sid, unused to running, was occasionally compelled to tame the excess.)

What's more important to a house? Its windows, floorboards, corners, or doors? Was a house only equal to its windows? Or does light mean differently in an empty room, a room with a rug, a room with a mirror, a room set high above a ground covered with green or covered with snow, a low room, a room where a person sleeps or dies, a room where a person works or dresses? Where some people saw filth, I felt at home in Sid's apartment. I loved as well the homes within the home, the views within the views, the dwellings within the dwellings of his paintings: a cityscape, before a new range of highrisers were erected to block the view of the art museum (at one time, the painting showed,

a river could be glimpsed from Sid's apartment); an interior with piano makes the instrument appear delicate to the fingers that hope to master it; a second interior with piano shows the wood darkened and tough as the thicket of plants on the sill that dare their owner to take the risk to nurture them (the piano may not sound, the plants may die); the face of the boy who lived in these rooms viewing himself in a mirror, not a single line unbroken.

For myself, I love the house I live in for the way it carries the sound of the movements of a beloved from the room she is in to the room I am in. Shuffle, turn page, clang of pot, sigh; hum, step, call to me or not. Whether a house buffets rain or forms icicles seems worth noticing to me, and I might measure a house, its real value, by the width and depth of its mail slot. I notice the paths I form in the habits I tread in my house, and I wonder if a squalid house is one that never repeats itself.

Maybe all houses were paper houses. When Jean was small she cut squares into the sides of cereal boxes then set the miniature house on fire in the backyard and gazed with glee at the smoke forced to rush like coiled spirits out the portals. In Larry's neighborhood, children were encouraged to make May Altars in their homes. A votive candle and a flower were suggested. Larry, however, filled the tiny corner paid to his devotion with patterns built out of construction paper and crepe. A single candle was replaced by one real candelabra and ten more made of cardboard and paper flames; one flower was supplanted by a spray of poppy-colored crepe. Each year the girls in the neighborhood made pilgrimages to Larry's altar, while the boys broke objects or each other in the street. Sidney had a penchant for making boxes. His house was filled with cardboard boxes and bags—to collect papers and pens, recipes and tools, paintbrushes and keys. Most houses, to his mind, could use more horizontal surfaces.

They said that dying was like going home, so when I try to picture Sid's death (because he was my friend, because I didn't want him to feel like he was without us if he cried, if he knew this pain were taking him away so instantly), I place him in the attitude of a child being bathed. I portray him to myself as Bernard in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* for whom "Mrs. Constable, girt in a bath-towel, takes her lemon-colored sponge and soaks it in water . . ."

holding it high above me, shivering beneath her, she squeezes it. Water pours down the runnel of my spine. Bright arrows of

sensation shoot on either side. I am covered with warm flesh. My dry crannies are wetted; my cold body is warmed; it is sluiced and gleaming. Water descends and sheets me like an eel. Now hot towels envelop me, and their roughness, as I rub my back, makes my blood purr. Rich and heavy sensations form on the roof of my mind; down showers the day—the woods; and Elvedon; Susan and the pigeon. Pouring down the walls of my mind, running together, the day falls copious, resplendent. Now I tie my pyjamas loosely round me, and lie under this thin sheet afloat in the shallow light which is like a film of water drawn over my eyes by a wave. I hear through it far off, far away, faint and far, the chorus beginning; wheels; dogs; men shouting; church bells; the chorus beginning.

Maybe I just want to read this passage as a false memory into the room I can no longer enter, its being the room in which Sid flew from us. Sid's exodus, the space between his being and non-being, could not be filled with the return to an ecstatic sponge-bath administered by a mother because his mother, as he described her, was forever (for as long as he knew her) a "neurotic invalid," (who also died of a heart attack), and when he grew to be a man, he didn't put much stock in bathing but he took joy in caring for others and he carefully documented and forever prepared his mother's Russian Jewish recipes from before the days in which she refused to leave her bed.

Gaston Bachelard, on gender and space had said, "In the intimate harmony of walls and furniture, it may be said that we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside." But Sidney was a homemaker. His interiors sported blissful disarray and something always in excess to what could be accounted as a life. Call it squalid. In which case, going home was better than dying and to be invited into his home was to be taken into an encounter with intimacy.