

## Brian Buckbee / DUBIALITY

*The earth is apparently made up of plates that, from time to time, shift. What happens next is buildings, roads, and people — yes people — fall into the chasm of the earth. But, before that, for a moment, they are suspended in mid-air.*

I came awake this morning surrounded by the debris of a bed that is too large for me, and the memory of a woman floating on an inflatable red raft in the hippopotamus pool at the zoo. Which zoo? I cannot be sure. The woman was glistening with oil and the hippos glided through the clear water beneath her like birds.

The coffee maker had been destroyed, so I did the next sensible thing: I walked up the road to a coffee shop. It is an odd thing, to float on a raft in a hippo pool. The pool, as I recall, was indoors, so I cannot account for the suntan oil. She wore a white bikini, and was oblivious to the onlooking zoo patrons, who seemed more interested in the hippopotami. I can't remember why the woman was in the pool. Was she a zoo employee? Had she won a contest? It seems unsafe to dally with the mighty hippo. But I remember how peaceful she was, and the memory of my dream made me want to cry.

The coffee shop was closed. A stack of Sunday papers sat outside the door. A sign on the door explained the hours of the coffee shop. It seemed as if the hours of operation on their list intersected with, or overlapped, the point on my watch. My watch has hands, but, as I have learned, those cannot be trusted. The street was deserted and, though the sky was blue, the moon was still out. It was fading, perhaps even trying to disguise itself as a precisely exact semicircular cloud. I said hello to the moon. The sun I could not see. Perhaps it was behind some buildings. The sun and the moon at the same time. Who can make sense out of all this? It was early, of course. I went and looked at the clock on the bank. It was 14 degrees Celsius.

Now that I am alone, I have decided to seek shelter in the routine of toast. There is the twisting of the twisty tie, the spinning of the bag, the scanning for mold. There is the somehow noble upright stance of the bread before it drops down, down, down. I am so nearly overcome by emotion that I am unable to push the lever that lowers the bread. I find the courage, however, and am ready to break out in subdued celebration when I notice that the floppiness of a slice has kept it from sinking all the way into the depths of the toaster. The bread slice's lower half is being burned alive. God help us all!

Things are beginning to make less sense to me. I am noticing what a precarious thread the world hangs by. I don't have any clue how the toaster works, and if I stop believing in it, I am afraid it will cease to work at all. The world would be an especially lonely place without toast. At what point, I wonder, does the bread cease to be bread, and become something else altogether? When is that moment that the definitions of things change? Right now, I could pre-empt the toaster's full cycle, and pull out the white squares and run up the street shouting, "This is toast!" and no one would believe me. On my toaster's chart, between white and a series of increasingly threatening browns, is a gray color, like putty. I've never been able to match any kind of bread, at any degree of toasting, to anything near that color. Why doesn't the toaster ever just go up in flames? That's what I'd like to see. I simply cannot be satisfied any longer by toast. I unplug the machine and carry its warm body upstairs to the bathroom. I step into the tub and hurl the toaster through the hole where the window once was. It lands two floors below, right next to the coffee maker. Unlike the coffee maker and the food processor, the toaster looks intact. I could probably go down and get it, bring it back up, plug it in, and it would keep cooking my toast as if nothing had happened. Who needs an object such as this, one that does not even have the decency to be fragile? I can live without toast, can make it in the world without all things. A cup of coffee, however, would be good.

There was a time when the world was not so strange. It was enough just to see somebody else's total confidence in the toaster, or in the incollapsible handle on the gallon milk jug. I could even stand under the hot water while my wife's hand turned the knob to even

hotter, without any fear of getting burned at all. The important things made sense, so the little things didn't matter much. Like how telephone poles don't just fall over at random. And how you can buy apple after apple without finding a worm. I have a pear tree in my backyard, and all the pears have gaping holes. Some of them, I think, are lived in by birds.

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Unless the knocking at the door is Juan Valdez, it looks like I won't be getting coffee today. I open the door, and it's not a Colombian standing there, but a policeman, and, curiously, he's holding a cup of steaming coffee. How did he know? This, here, standing before me, is the brotherhood of man embodied! But it turns out the coffee is not for me at all. He takes a sip from what was, for the briefest of moments, my coffee, and says,

"Good morning." His mustache is dripping coffee and I ask him just what the hell I can do for *him*.

"Wanted to catch you before work," he says. He is all dressed up in his cop suit and his cruiser is in the driveway. To me, and I'm no cop, the evidence suggests he is already working. He continues:

"Some neighbors complained about the junk in the front yard." He points his mug toward the pile of domesticity beneath the bathroom window.

"Really," I say. I have not seen a neighbor in quite some time.

"You know," he says, giving me a once-over, "this is a nice neighborhood and all."

"Well, *sure*," I say, taking a look around. I see exactly what he means.

"Now, if this were *my* neighborhood..." he says, and trails off, implying that there are many homes in his neighborhood that have such piles out front. "You know, cars on blocks, old refrigerators."

"Yes, I see," I say. And now he's got me thinking. "I've always wondered what makes the refrigerator work."

He sniffs authoritatively. He has mighty nostrils. I have upset him.

"They don't work at all," he says. "That's why they're in the front yards."

"*That* I understand," I say. I look up at my bathroom window and have a brief, intense fantasy.



My policeman friend is rather chatty. "It seems like I spend half my time driving around, ripping the doors off abandoned refrigerators," he says.

"And why do you do that?" I ask.

"To keep kids from suffocating."

"It's tragic," I say.

"Yes it is," he says, nodding his head sadly.

What I said next I should not have said out loud. "Poor, poor refrigerators."

My new officer friend left in a hurry. I need to clean this shit up, is what he said. I suppose that is how people talk in his neighborhood.

I always thought that surgeons operate on a person's heart through their ribs. That explained to me why so many doctors were small, because they needed little, nimble fingers. Then I learned they split the whole rib cage open, like a peeled orange. What I don't understand is why everything inside just doesn't spill out. Why don't they ever do an autopsy and say, "It was the heart. We found it in the stomach." It turns out the heart is an ugly thing. It is topped with greasy fat much the way Liza Minelli's head is topped with hair. People can now live with monkey hearts instead of their own. I believe I have seen that somewhere recently. Maybe it was a monkey living with a man's heart. (Poor, poor monkey.) They put all sorts of things in the heart these days. Pieces of metal, balloons and pig parts. Do we even need a body any more? Or can we just be heads that immigrant servants mix in the preferred company of our choice? Or has that been done, too? What I do know is that there's an island somewhere where a man's worth is judged by the number of monkeys he has working for him. Monkey, drive my car!

I have the perpetual headache of one who is oversleeping. That is not to say that I am waking up past an appointed time, though that is exactly what *oversleeping* seems to mean. Rather, I am sleeping too much, similar in many ways as someone who eats too much *overeats*. Oddly, it seems as if those who are *oversexed* don't have sex at all. They just think about it a lot. Even words are failing me now.

When I'm not sleeping, which usually isn't the case, I think about sleep. If not for the headaches, I'd never get up at all. There are people greeting me in my dreams who I have not thought about for years. Beautiful people who I have been intimate with in the past, and in my dreams want to give, give, give. Bless their fatty hearts! The strange rooms of my dreams suddenly now all have beds in them. And as I sleep in my own bed, I dream of myself in those dream-beds, and of girls as far back as my grade school girlfriend, who asked me to go steady with her while we hung upside down from the jungle gym. It is the headaches that prevent me from lingering in bed. But when a headache ceases, I start looking for a place to lie down.

I have slept under a bridge and on a bridge and on the floor of a clothing store beneath some long, hanging garments. A woman who maybe worked there, maybe did not (who can tell these days), asked me what I was doing. "I'm resting," I said. She said she was calling security, and that was the end of my sleep. I am not afraid of security, never have been, but I felt a headache coming on, and there was a pin sticking out of my leg.

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I am dragging the love seat up the stairs when there is yet another knock at the door. If this is the mustached policeman, I will have a hard time explaining what a couch is doing in the stairwell. Is this what it was like for my wife while I was working, what with the doorbell constantly ringing and strange men standing on the threshold? No wonder she left.

There is a man on my porch wearing skin-tight black shorts and a tank top. How can one prepare for such unexpected visitors? Next time it will be ten monkeys formed into a pyramid. "Yes?" I say.

He hands me a cheaply made brochure and explains to me that he is a fitness instructor looking for clients. I inspect his brochure and ask, "Is this crayon?"

"Yes," he says proudly.

He is a professional, so I choose to be blunt. "Do I look fat?" I ask.

"Nope," he says. "But there's a woman two doors down, she's huge."

"Mrs. Jenkins."

He is intent on reiterating her fatness. This time with a visual. He blows out his cheeks and makes a circle with his arms.

"She's pregnant," I say. (She's not.)

"Oh," he says. He is mortified, genuinely mortified. He cleverly falls back on his pitch, expounding on the tortuous devices he would set me to. He promises to make me "buff."

"I'm not interested in 'buff,'" I tell him. "But if you want a used microwave," I say, pointing to the pile with my out-of-shape chin, "help yourself." My attempt to close the door is then thwarted by a well-trained waffle shoe.

"Wait," he says.

"What is it?" I ask impatiently. I am now anxious to get back to shoving the love seat out the window.

"I can also help you get your heart fit."

I am an old-looking thirty-four. But to him, I may as well have been born in the back of a mule-driven wagon while the folks headed west to pick apple trees. The look on his face makes me think that he thinks I am considering his offer. What I am actually considering is what it would be like to crash the living room ceiling fan over his head. He then makes an egregious error, a genuinely egregious error. He says, "Maybe I could help your wife."

I have just struck the fitness instructor. I got him right on the nose. I can see him out the peephole. He is flat on his back. Yep, I got him good. He is stretched out like a buff corpse. I think this means that it is too late to ask him to help me lug the sofa upstairs. He eventually gets to his feet, and then bounds off. He is remarkably fast.

It is a hard thing to be up and left so quickly. Someone packs a few bags, gets in the car and drives away. Maybe it isn't hard at all. Out the driveway, down two small roads. A lane here, an avenue there, and just like that you're on the highway. They go so fast, all those cars. It's a miracle they aren't constantly knocking one another off the road. People, in those cars, talk to each other on telephones. They may be zooming toward each other, yakking away at a hundred miles an hour. What happens at the exact moment they pass, at that instant when they spot each other talking to each other, lips moving



to the words they're hearing. Probably nothing happens. Maybe somebody blows a tire. Perhaps a chunk of metal has been run over. But the tire patches itself, and inflates itself, *while the car is still moving*. That seems ridiculous to me, and very unfair. Couples, these days, stand so little a chance.

It would take the hands of a skilled surgeon to reduce my headache to a more tolerable level, meaning one I could sleep with. Coffee helps, but that would mean I'd have to walk back up the road. I have a terrible taste in my mouth. Yesterday, I threw the toothpaste out the window because it came out of the tube in three such precise colors. It has come to this: toothpaste baffles me. The mouthwash has been taken, a phenomena which I am also at a loss to explain. A shower seems like a good idea, though my naked body does not look good to me any more, not one bit. Since I knocked out the window with the fondue pot, I now can stand in the tub and look straight down at the accumulating pile of domestic items. If I slipped on a bar of soap, I could fall right out the window myself. Things have come to pass, however, so the only soap in the bathroom comes in a bottle, and is meant to be applied with a scrunchy loofah, a surprisingly slippery blossom of blue and white, which also has recently been deposited to the ground below.

There is, however, an unopened bar of soap under the kitchen sink. I am under the sink because I am looking for blenders and mixers and juicers and the like. I leave them all for later and take the soap up to the shower. The water is quite cold since I disconnected the water heater and threw it on the pile. While it is true the neighbors can see me through the hole where the window was, I also get to look out at the expanse of suburbia. There is not much to see at this hour: manicured hedges, a robin bobbing for worms, and a cop car cruising up my driveway. Someone is in the backseat and the cop — my cop — gets out and walks toward the front porch. When he sees me, he yells, "Hey!"

That's my cue to get out of the shower and put some clothes on. I grab the nearest thing handy, a woman's robe, my wife's robe, and make my way past the love seat, down the stairs, and answer the door. Apparently the officer has someone in the back of his car who is claiming that I punched him. I have a feeling I know who that

someone is. Normally, an affluent resident would have the edge over a tight-pantsed solicitor in such a dispute. My pile of junk, however, combined with my earlier behavior, has tipped the scales of justice in favor of my opponent.

"I can explain," I say. But I am not thinking of explanations, but for ways to fit the names of famous mustached men into the conversation in order to sway the law in my favor. All I can come up with under pressure, though, is Rollie Fingers, a handlebarred Oakland Athletics pitcher from the 1970's, and Dennis Weaver, the guy who played McCloud. Before I can present a defense, the cop says, "What the hell?!"

I follow his gaze over my shoulder. There are red footprints on the living room carpet. They walk right up to where I'm standing. "Huh," I say.

"You're bleeding," the cop says.

He's right, I am bleeding! "There must have been glass in the tub."

"You need a doctor," the cop says.

He's right, of course. My fat, ugly heart is pumping blood right out of me and onto the tiled floor. It has pumped blood onto the white living room carpet, the white stairway carpet, and, I'd imagine, the white hallway carpet. Small-fingered medical professionals wait for me in giant smokestacked facilities of anatomical repair. "I'm a doctor," I suddenly find myself saying. "I'll take care of this."

He fingers his mustache skeptically. "Are you sure?" He looks concerned, but what I'm wondering about is what happened to my cup of coffee. My becoming a doctor was unforecasted, but it has a profound effect on the policeman. The balance, I can tell, has shifted away from the aerobics instructor and now we are at a stalemate, dead even, at a point in the middle of it all.

"Look," I plead, "the guy insulted me..." But no sign from the man that things have changed.

...insulted my wife." Still even.

I add the following absurdity: "I'm a respectable member of this community."

It feels, to me, like things are about to tilt in my favor.

"Where's your wife?" he asks.

"She left," I say.



He looks like he's been punched in his big gut. A brother among men! He nods in the direction of the car and says, "I'll talk to him."

Few things are clear to me, but I understand his predicament right away. He's going to want to drive me to the hospital. But the man I just beat up is in the back of his car, which means he'd either have to drop the instructor off on my curb, or one of us would have to ride up front with him. By the looks of him, he's had enough of me. It is also safe to assume the fitness instructor has worn out his welcome with such a portly fellow. "I better get myself over to the clinic," I say. I begin to ease the door shut, expecting a shoe to get in the way, but the cop turns and walks away. He's had enough.

I am woozy, but I make it over to the couch. I rip the armrest covers, wrap them around my feet and think of smelling salts. I once blacked out for a number of hours. At that time, I functioned with no recollection of what I did. I drank a lot, and I think someone may have slipped me something extra. I only have one memory that escaped the blackout, in which I was kneeling down in an intensely bright room, kissing a girl's toes. Those toes would some day become my wife's toes. She was clothed in a sheet, and there were several other people watching. That's all I remember. It seems to me conceivable that I could have killed somebody that night. In that state, did my decision-making abilities break down? That I kissed strange toes makes me think I might have been capable of anything. I am dreaming about toes, giant toes, when I am awakened by the distinct sound of somebody rooting through my trash. I hobble to the door and find a small child near my pile.

"What is all this?" she asks.

"It's a pile of junk," I answer.

She steps onto the mound, which is now big enough that she reaches a considerable height. She has brown hair streaked blonde and is wearing overalls.

"It's not safe," I say, and she asks for a jelly sandwich.

It is a good thing I haven't thrown the refrigerator out the window, because it turns out we have all sorts of jelly. Here is something else I did not know. And that I did not know it, and that we have all this jelly, makes me hurt. I have trouble with the screw top and have to turn my back on the girl so she will not see me

crying while I make her sandwich. Thankfully, she doesn't ask me to toast the bread. If she did, I would be forced to drive the butter knife right through my ribs.

This girl has brought me such undeserved happiness and such choking pain that I can't look at her. All she wants is a jelly sandwich and a friend and maybe to toss an appliance or two on a pile of junk. She eats her sandwich and I send her upstairs to play. It is true, I love her.

I hear her upstairs in the bathroom. Good, she has found an object suitable for heaving out the window. My satisfaction is interrupted when I notice her little sandals by the door and remember the glass in the tub. "No!" I shout and sprint up the stairs, past the love seat, and into the bathroom. "No!" I yell, and stop her before she can step into the tub. Then, softer, gentler, I say, "Wait."

I return a moment later with a dustpan and broom. I sweep the glass into a pile and step into the tub. I squat down and brush the pieces of glass into the dustpan. She waits patiently by the side of the tub with a mixing bowl in her arms.

What I've come to realize is this: that's me walking up the road, breaking up the dinette, stepping into the tub. I am alone now, and I have been left with all the time in the world to *think* about all the things in the world. I shudder at the science that went into making the dustpan and broom. I look at the girl, then the size of the window, and I am afraid for her. "Wait," I say, and hurl the tools out the window. I press my hands on the tub's porcelain bottom, trapping the slivers of glass in my palms.

I'm squatting like that, in the tub, bleeding, when I hear somebody shout "Hey!" out front. I recognize that mustached voice, and I know what he wants this time. But I won't give her up. I won't let them have her.