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AN OLD STORY: IN FIVE PARTS

I.

An old story: disappointments in love, debts unpaid, a series of lousy apartments, a series of lousy jobs, betrayals, some rancor, some sickness, etc. He was in many ways typical but he liked to think it was in fact the amassing of these specific typical experiences that made him an individual. After a long winter, with its blizzards and periodic power outages and frozen pipes and eternal darkness, spring had arrived, with its budding branches and populated streets and clear blue skies and women in skirts. Something like hope. By mid-May, after weeks of drinking in bars again and trying to meet new women, he once again fell into his solitary winter ways. The promise of the New was not dead and buried, though it once again felt distant, he decided, one mild afternoon, sitting at his kitchen table. The days passed and each day he'd go through his routine, or one of the four or five routines he'd formed and mixed up, in a sense, to keep from confronting the fact that he was a creature of habit and perhaps temperament who had much in common with a marmot. Still, even with his varied routines, he thought about a certain inescapable mundaneity that he feared came from within but hated to confront so he rarely did. That's to say, confront it.

II.

Instead, he slightly altered and augmented his already-existing routines, taking new streets when he walked to work, stopping in stores he'd never been in before, even going into bookstores that sold books in languages he couldn't read. He read in parks. One night, around dusk, when people walk their dogs while the sun sets, he sat on a park bench, by a pond, reading in the last light. He continued reading and his mind wandered but he reread the words and sentences and paragraphs he'd passed over, lost in thoughts that had little to do with the book in his hands. A woman with a child and dog walked past the bench. He imagined they quickened their pace as they approached. The sky was more blue than orange. The geese were dark in the sky, flying in awkward formation. He watched them disappear into the dark blue. The park lights gradually came on, humming gently; he stood and walked away when they came to full light.

III.

At night he'd read on his couch for hours on end and often until daybreak, or until he fell asleep, whichever came first. Sometimes he drank. When he drank, however, he still read, though absently, that's to say, more absently than usual. While absently reading he'd often dream of past loves, though not necessarily of past events. He'd dream of new and impossible events, with a strong sense of the past running through these fantasies for the sake of verisimilitude. The nights were long, not surprisingly, though he nevertheless occupied them with varying degrees of success. First thing, every morning, he put the kettle on the burner and made mug after mug of steaming Gunpowder Green Tea. Again, he'd submit to routine. Love might be infinite, he'd think, though we're cracked under its impossible pressures.

IV.

Mid-summer it rained for days, a tireless downpour. He avoided going outside. A cat screeched and yowled in the rain outside his window on the fire escape, though he did nothing. It isn't my cat, he thought. The days looked like nights and the nights went on and on. He was finding it difficult to concentrate. He was finding it difficult to sleep. Nothing seemed to maintain his interest, though he submitted to his routines nonetheless. He'd diagnosed his life as hollow and senseless and the world followed suit. Cars hydroplaned in the rain and sounded like ocean waves. Thunder rumbled continuously. While sitting at his kitchen table, he thought, I've slipped through the grates of a storm-sewer. The cat screeched and yowled above the waves.

V.

He sat on a park bench. The sun set. Shadows of leaves shuddered quickly on the pale asphalt path. It would be an hour or so until night. He held a book in his hands, though wasn't following what he was reading; instead, he was thinking about a woman sitting on a red blanket reading across the pond on the grassy embankment. He wondered how he could possibly talk to her. He wondered what he'd possibly say. It seemed so impossible, walking over to her, introducing himself, starting up conversation. The water on the surface of the pond rippled in the breeze. He considered removing

his wristwatch, then asking her if she had the time. That's stupid, he thought. He read absently as the sun set and across the pond a beautiful woman read, too. The sky darkened while the park lights slowly warmed. He closed his book and looked across the pond, where not minutes ago the beautiful woman had been reading, though now she was gone and he sat still on the bench. He waited until the lights reached full intensity, then he stood to walk home.