

During the Fall

Craig Loomis

The largest window in the house is in his study—what he calls his study: one splintery picnic table with chair and typewriter, with small mounds of books, papers, magazines scattered, stacked, leaning. In fact, he is standing in front of the window now, arms folded, looking out. He is watching the trees begin their autumnning and the neighbor's two yellow cats cruise the garden and the smear on the glass that is on the outside and unreachable. Farther down the streets, he can see the mailman sitting in his truck, sitting there with windows rolled down, eating his lunch, with thermos and morning paper. A tiny riot of leaves whirls. . . stops. . . whirls. . . stops. . . whirls past his truck; he gives up eating, chewing, long enough to watch. Still looking from his upstairs window, letting his arms slowly unfold, and if he cranes his neck just right he can see a sliver of the graveyard—a smooth wooden fence with sign; now on tiptoes—hearing something like a popping in his ankles—he sees the traffic light on Kendall—a tiny redround looking back at him. A leaf, magenta and as big as his hand, bigger, flutters down. He watches it dip and twist and for a moment go magically up instead of down, but then, finally, getting it right and drifting down, disappearing. He holds up his hand. . . and yes, it was bigger than his hand. The mailman continues to sit and eat and read.

And so he's spending more time upstairs in his study, at the window, with the door locked, even bolted. That, and he no longer feels guilty when the girls rattle the doorknob, asking when Daddy will come out, wondering if they can come in, just for a while, until dinner, promising not to touch anything. But he, through bolted door, says, No. Later. Leave Daddy alone now. While the ten-year-old almost always gives up too easily—slouching down the stairs to tell Mommy that Daddy won't play, won't let them in, it isn't fair—the four-year-old hammers at the door, saying, I want in right now. Right this minute. But even she—the one who can't understand why Cinderella doesn't have a last name—he won't let in. In the end, she, too, gives up on him, and placing her little mouth against the doorknob, says, "I don't friend you."

Not too long ago, he never used to lock the door, but left it wide open, the girls rushing in to share a story, a complaint, to demand an answer: Why does Mickey wear gloves? Why is Pluto named after a planet? Not so very long ago, he never used to spend so much time at the window, watching.

In the mornings, with nothing more than a whiskey-light in the sky, he leaves the house. As he walks the three blocks down and four blocks over, the birds are just beginning their peepings; the same lanky kid on a bicycle saddlebagged with newspapers hurries by, as does the jogger, and here comes a walker of dogs—a poodle and something resembling a hairy-brown scurry.

On the corner three blocks down and four blocks over is a restaurant, and he goes there to sit at the same table and eat the same breakfast—coffee with toast. Not even a breakfast really, just something for him to do while he sits and watches.

He watches the truck drivers—big-bearded and tattooed—saunter in, talking their loud talk, telling their louder jokes. The waitress who wears nylons on Tuesdays

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and a gold bracelet on Fridays no longer asks him what he wants. Instead, when she sees him coming she plunges through the big swinging kitchen door and almost immediately re-plunges, carrying coffee and toast. She gets everything done in one visit: Good morning. How are you? Here's your coffee. Enjoy. In a flutter of skirt—the rub-swish of nylons, if it's Tuesday—she shuffles to another table, more refills, "Bill, please." It's right about then, when she bends just right, that he can see the line of her panties. But there's more, because as she moves away from him—leaning to pocket a tip—he can easily see the white of her bra, the way it clips at the back. Holding the coffee cup to his lips, sometimes sipping, sometimes not, but the cup at his lips, he is almost certain he can see the brown of her nipples when she turns to laugh at one of their jokes. Almost certain he can see them, the way they've pushed through the stuff of bra. The hot coffee washes over his lips but he dare not sip, not yet.

So he gets up early, while wife and daughters are still sleeping, and walks the necessary blocks to sip coffee and nibble toast so he can catch a glimpse of shadowy bra, the soft outline of panties. Of course nothing ever comes of it. It's nothing like that. Yet there's something. . . something in the watching and waiting and being patient, missing nothing, until finally he'll almost always spy a ripple of unclothed flesh, of elastic made visible. It's rewarding. That's the best he can do, even for a professor of English—rewarding. It has to do with winning some kind of small victory.

His wife is screaming at the daughters to stop screaming, their voices booming up through the ceiling, his floor. His sweater has holes at the elbows and some mysterious stain at the neck. It's getting colder, and the girls are already beginning to talk of Halloween, of what to be and not to be. He is standing at his window again, looking out into the bright night. Some of the trees are stark, their branches witchy, and if he looks just right he can see lights and windows that he cannot see during the leafygreen of springtime. He glances toward the graveyard, but of course there is nothing to see but a bigger double-darkness. Somebody's dog is barking, and another answers, and then another. The screaming has not stopped. The floor quivers. Putting his cheek against the cool glass helps a little.

After giving a damn good lecture on Stephen Crane, he asks two students to stay after for a moment. They do, and he begins: Why do you want to wear jeans with gaping holes at the knees? Does it have something to do with migrant workers? No? With the homeless? Forgotten vets? No? Then perhaps it's symbolic. . . ? What, then, is the advantage of looking wartorn and dispossessed, like some Eastern European refugee? You've been to war? No? Then you've seen war—what bullets and bombs can do? Have you ever seen the beast of battle outside the fluff of newspapers and films and. . . ? No, of course you haven't. Have you heard the screams, seen what napalm can do to flesh and bone? Seen what it does to babies? No, again. You just know about jeans with holes in the knees and baseball caps worn backwards and earphones screwed into your ears, and. . . . Saying all this and more, he speaks in a soft even voice, lecture-like; saying it slowly, looking them straight in the face so they won't forget. All the while, the students—a pimply boy and a not so pimply girl—remain wide-eyed, moving only to nod at the right times. Finally, as another class begins to filter in—something to do with economics—she clears her throat and says, Yes, we see. Will that be all, professor? He, smiling, already feeling good about Stephen Crane, and now this, says, Of course. Don't let me keep you.

Not much later, once back in his office, with door firmly locked, he puts his head in his hands, and thinks, No, no, that wasn't it either. Not even close. He reaches to turn off the lights so it will look like he is not in—no office hours today. Head in his hands.

It's been weeks since the last time, she says.

He gives her words a moment, nodding, hearing sidewalk shouts, giggling, and then slowly runs his hand through his hair. He is going bald. But because it has been such a slow, tedious process, he can almost fool himself into believing it isn't so, that it's all a matter of bad haircuts and miscombings. Still, in the end, it is so: he's going bald. And there once would have been a time not too long ago when he would have done something about it, when he would have looked for help, advice, treatment, lotions, oils. But that was once. Actually, there's nothing so terribly wrong with going bald. Haroldson is aimed in that direction, while Meyers and Barton are already there—have arrived, nothing but a fuzz around the ears.

Again he runs his hand across his head, feeling the warm slick of his scalp. It is only then that he looks over at her, saying, I know.

I know, I know. She mimics. You always know, but you don't care, do you? Do you?

He thinks about giving this a moment too, but then quickly decides against it. He looks down at his hands, as if there might be something there to help him. No, he says. I really don't care.

The sun is bright, the air still. It feels like July but Halloween is only two weeks away. She carefully places her elbows on the table and turns to look out the window. It's nothing like his upstairs window. This one is smaller and cluttered with curtains. Over the trees, in the deep October blue, a line of frayed jet stream hangs over the afternoon.

He gets up and walks up the stairs and into his study. There is a small electric fan at the end of the picnic table and he switches it on. As he waits for its humming to warm to words, again he goes to his hands, turning them over. At the knuckles is something like a liverspot—brown, stainlike; he doesn't remember it being so large. Turning his hands over. The fan is now humming, pushing cool air first this way, then that. Blowing cool air across his face and then coming back to do it again and again, it speaks to him: Good to see you. Good to see you. Good to see you. Good to . . .

The ten-year-old, who is now full of no big deals, I have no ideas and good for yous, comes home two days before Halloween hysterical. She cannot find her clarinet. She had it before she got in the car, had it in her hand, and now, now it's gone—disappeared. How can that be?

In the beginning her sobbing is soft, half-hidden. He can hear her through the vents. But as she begins to think about it, the sobbing grows bigger. That, and the mother is there to remind her how much a clarinet costs, how much lessons cost. Does she have any idea? With mouth quivering, her face red-wet with tears, the ten-year-old slumps to the floor. He doesn't have to go downstairs to know this is the scene; he has seen it before—six months ago with a puppy who, one May morning, decided to curl up and die behind the washing machine. The ten-year-old squirming on the carpet, bumping into table legs, chairs. My clarinet. All the while the mother slants in the doorway, reminding her of the cost.

In the morning, before he begins his walk, he will go to the garage, unlock the car, search and find the clarinet wedged under the seat. He will take it into the house and set it tower-like on the kitchen table. He will then walk the three blocks down and four over with his head down, crushing hundreds, maybe thousands, of leaves and twigs as he goes. He will feel a kind of sadness, and then something else, something bigger, fuller than sorrow. All he can do is walk faster. Once at the restaurant, he will slip into his chair, out of breath, the air refusing to go into his mouth fast enough. He presses his head on the table. He is trying desperately to regain his breath when she brings the coffee and toast.

The next night, during mid-shower, he looks down and sees a strand of white in the tangle of his pubic hair. He quickly plucks it, thinking nothing of the tiny dot of pain that follows. He has strands of white hair on his head, on his chest, probably on his back. But there? He turns so the water will hit his back and leave him alone with his one hair.

He looks at it closely, as if there is something to be found out. He has never thought about white pubic hair—not once. Only when the ten-year-old thumps at the door, saying she has to go, can't wait much longer, hurry, does he flick it from his fingers, watching it spin in the water and cling to the side and spin some more before dropping into the black of drain.

Except for his early morning walks to the restaurant and a sometimes bus ride to the university, he stays home. Almost over night the small town has grown thick with cashiers, clerks, waiters and attendants who can't wait to take his money, and then when they do, not even having the common courtesy to say thank you. An entire army of cashiers and clerks who don't know how to say thank you, who don't know how to do simple addition and subtraction without using a calculator. Then there are those old women who think nothing of elbowing their way onto the bus, making it impossible for him to get off, for others to get on. Old Chinese women with brightly-colored shopping bags. Finally, there's the grocer who almost always goes out of his way to say, Hello. How are you? Good to see you. But he doesn't mean it. The words aren't even out of his mouth—half in and half out—and he's back to his grocery—stacking and ordering and checking.

As he hurries home, he sees some boy—no older than his ten-year-old—drop a chewing gun wrapper on the ground. It isn't even a drop, but more like a throw. And just like that, he grabs the boy by the t-shirt, spins him around, and in his best policeman voice, says, pick it up.

When he gets home his throat is throbbing. He bolts the door and turns on the fan. Shaking his head, wondering what's going on, wondering why he can't get it right.

As he talks about Ernest Hemingway, his life and times, his writings, not even ten minutes into Oak Park and the Italian Front and Paris, and already students are glancing at their wristwatches, turning to see out the window, into the naked branches. Still, he goes on. There is a girl in the front row whose knees always seem to shine, to glisten, and when he takes his Hemingway to her—standing directly in front of her sparkling knees—she smiles, nods and writes something in her notebook. A heavy fluttering interrupts. Someone in the corner has dropped a book, papers. It's the boy who is trying to grow a moustache. He quickly steps over, taking his Hemingway to him, standing over him, talking Hemingway to him and only him, until, finally—his book and papers now neatly back on the desk—he, too, looks up, smiles and nods.

In the end, he asks if there are any questions. The wind is blowing, it looks like rain. He has gone overtime, economic students are at the door. Strangely enough, he feels nothing like anger today.

Walking down the hall now, and a boy comes up to him, asking, Will you be in your office today? The boy is carrying three thick books. There is nothing familiar about the boy; his face is new. The boy says it's important, and then smiles, as if importance and smiling go together. He looks harder, longer at the boy—a girlish straight-back gloss to his hair, a nose that might have been broken once. He says, Why would I want to go to my office? The boy doesn't move, but blinks, waiting for what has to be more, something else. Finally it occurs to him that there is no more, and he says, Yes, why would you. Getting one last grip on his books, he turns and walks away.

As he watches the boy go, he does three things: closes his eyes, sighs, sets his teeth.

Halloween is tonight. From his window he watches his daughters bicycle and rollerskate with their friends. He tries to read but the afternoon is filled with little hurts, bits of screams, double-dares, no ways, unfairs, . . . He has read ten pages but he doesn't know what he has read.

Once the sun goes down, the neighborhood comes alive with cartoon characters, super-heroes, widow-peaked vampires. An occasional ghost. He walks the neighborhood with his daughters.

The ten-year-old almost changed her mind, thinking that she was too old for this, . . . this kid's stuff. But after a while, when nobody bothered to say yes or no or good idea, she changed back and hurried to decide on a costume—hair back, with lipstick, and purplely eyeshadow, perfume. When she's ready, he has to ask her what she is. What's the costume? And she, pouting because he shouldn't have to ask—isn't it obvious—says a little too quickly, too loudly, Dancer. I'm a dancer. He nods, saying, Of course. Meanwhile, the four-year-old is Tinker Bell, with pink fluff and sparkles and a magic wand of cotton and coathanger and cardboard. Together, the three of them go door to door.

If it weren't for the candy, the four-year-old would have given up after door two. Her Tinker Bell mask is too big and keeps slipping down around her mouth, flapping about her neck. He tells her to take it off, that it's all right, no one will care. Here, I'll put it in my pocket. It's then that she stops in mid-sidewalk and looking him straight in the face asks if Tinker Bell wears a mask. Does she? He says he isn't sure, but—Let me think—Maybe not. Yes or no? she demands. The ten-year-old has never stopped walking. Yes or no? When he says no, she lets go of his hand and struggles to put the mask right, to get the eyeholes straight.

They walk on, neither one of them wanting to held his hand. Their bags grow big, fuller, until, the neighborhood all done, they aim for home. As he takes the stairs to his study, he thinks how nobody wants to dress up like a cowboy anymore. There are no more firemen, no soldiers. He takes the stairs as if he is tired, weary, but that can't be right, because he hasn't done anything.

Later that night, Halloween all but spent for another year, he sits in his study, at the window, reading, when the doorbell rings. He puts the book down, waiting to see if there's been some mistake. But no, it rings again, and then again. He checks his watch and it says eleven. The doorbell ringing. He gets up and looks out the window. A silent street, with streetlights spilling yellow here and there. He unbolts his door and goes down the stairs. At the front door he places his hand on the doorknob, thinking, I'll leave my hand here until it rings again. He waits, and just when he thinks it's over, the doorbell ringer gone, the knocking starts. He pulls his hand away as the big white door quivers. He wants to be angry, ever furious, but nothing comes of it. Finally, there's nothing left to do but unlock the door and open it.

On the porch stands a skeleton, grinning. A very late trick-or-treater, he thinks, and so big too, almost too big, too old, for things like this. A skeleton grinning, holding out his bag. No cars, no dogs, nothing but the night. Do you know how late it is? The grinning skull nods. Aren't you a little too old for this? How old are you? But the skeleton only holds his bag higher.

He fights back the urge to glance at his watch, to see if, in some crazy way, it's all a mistake. All the while he knows he should be getting angry and slamming the door. Knowing all this, but not doing it. Instead, this Professor of English grabs a handful of candy that's there in a bowl by the door and drops it into the outstretched bag. When he does, the bag closes and the skeleton steps back, stopping at the edge of the porch. And now there is something like a waiting, but not even that, more like a

holding. A cold October night, and the skeleton has not moved. He slowly shuts the door—all the while thinking how important it is that he close the door softly—and pulls the bolt. He waits for what seems a long time, both hands flat against the door, waiting as if there is one last thing.

Now that all the trees have gone the way of autumn, raw and leafless, he can see a great patch of the graveyard. Wearing the same sweater with holes at the elbows, he watches the November through the window. Not a day goes by that he hasn't thought about that skeleton at the door. He's dreamed it three or four times now: the knocking. In his dreams the door is bigger, darker, worm-worn, and there's the knocking but he can't answer it because the ten-year-old wants her bicycle fixed, his wife wants him to read this, and students keep tapping him on the shoulder, insisting that they have to meet with him, if not now when—it's important. Even now, his chair at the window, arms folded, chin on his chest, he hears it knocking, pounding at the door, demanding to be let in right this minute. You hear me? Right now.