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The Corrections

Written by Jonathan Franzen

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ST. JUDE

The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star. Gust after gust of disorder. Trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end. No children in the yards here. Shadows lengthened on yellowing zoysia. Red oaks and pin oaks and swamp white oaks rained acorns on houses with no mortgage. Storm windows shuddered in the empty bedrooms. And the drone and hiccup of a clothes dryer, the nasal contention of a leaf blower, the ripening of local apples in a paper bag, the smell of the gasoline with which Alfred Lambert had cleaned the paintbrush from his morning painting of the wicker love seat.

Three in the afternoon was a time of danger in these gerontocratic suburbs of St. Jude. Alfred had awakened in the great blue chair in which he'd been sleeping since lunch. He'd had his nap and there would be no local news until five o'clock. Two empty hours were a sinus in which infections bred. He struggled to his feet and stood by the Ping-Pong table, listening in vain for Enid.

Ringings throughout the house was an alarm bell that no one but Alfred and Enid could hear directly. It was the alarm bell of anxiety. It was like one of those big cast-iron dishes with an electric clapper that send schoolchildren into the street in fire drills. By now it had been ringing for so many

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hours that the Lamberts no longer heard the message of “bell ringing” but, as with any sound that continues for so long that you have the leisure to learn its component sounds (as with any word you stare at until it resolves itself into a string of dead letters), instead heard a clapper rapidly striking a metallic resonator, not a pure tone but a granular sequence of percussions with a keening overlay of overtones; ringing for so many days that it simply blended into the background except at certain early-morning hours when one or the other of them awoke in a sweat and realized that a bell had been ringing in their heads for as long as they could remember; ringing for so many months that the sound had given way to a kind of metasound whose rise and fall was not the beating of compression waves but the much, much slower waxing and waning of their *consciousness* of the sound. Which consciousness was particularly acute when the weather itself was in an anxious mood. Then Enid and Alfred—she on her knees in the dining room opening drawers, he in the basement surveying the disastrous Ping-Pong table—each felt near to exploding with anxiety.

The anxiety of coupons, in a drawer containing candles in designer autumn colors. The coupons were bundled in a rubber band, and Enid was realizing that their expiration dates (often jauntily circled in red by the manufacturer) lay months and even years in the past: that these hundred-odd coupons, whose total face value exceeded sixty dollars (potentially one hundred twenty dollars at the Chiltsville supermarket that doubled coupons), had all gone bad. Tilex, sixty cents off. Excedrin PM, a dollar off. The dates were not even *close*. The dates were *historical*. The alarm bell had been ringing for *years*.

She pushed the coupons back in among the candles and shut the drawer. She was looking for a letter that had come by Registered mail some days ago. Alfred had heard the mailman knock on the door and had shouted, “Enid! Enid!”

so loudly that he couldn't hear her shouting back, "Al, I'm getting it!" He'd continued to shout her name, coming closer and closer, and because the sender of the letter was the Axon Corporation, 24 East Industrial Serpentine, Schwenksville, PA, and because there were aspects of the Axon situation that Enid knew about and hoped that Alfred didn't, she'd quickly stashed the letter somewhere within fifteen feet of the front door. Alfred had emerged from the basement bellowing like a piece of earth-moving equipment, "*There's somebody at the door!*" and she'd fairly screamed, "The mailman! The mailman!" and he'd shaken his head at the complexity of it all.

Enid felt sure that her own head would clear if only she didn't have to wonder, every five minutes, what Alfred was up to. But, try as she might, she couldn't get him interested in life. When she encouraged him to take up his metallurgy again, he looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. When she asked whether there wasn't some yard work he could do, he said his legs hurt. When she reminded him that the husbands of her friends all had hobbies (Dave Schumpert his stained glass, Kirby Root his intricate chalets for nesting purple finches, Chuck Meisner his hourly monitoring of his investment portfolio), Alfred acted as if she were trying to distract him from some great labor of his. And what was that labor? Repainting the porch furniture? He'd been repainting the love seat since Labor Day. She seemed to recall that the last time he'd painted the furniture he'd done the love seat in two hours. Now he went to his workshop morning after morning, and after a month she ventured in to see how he was doing and found that all he'd painted of the love seat was the legs.

He seemed to wish that she would go away. He said that the brush had got dried out, that that was what was taking so long. He said that scraping wicker was like trying to peel a blueberry. He said that there were crickets. She felt a

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shortness of breath then, but perhaps it was only the smell of gasoline and of the dampness of the workshop that smelled like urine (but could not possibly be urine). She fled upstairs to look for the letter from Axon.

Six days a week several pounds of mail came through the slot in the front door, and since nothing incidental was allowed to pile up downstairs—since the fiction of living in this house was that no one lived here—Enid faced a substantial tactical challenge. She didn't think of herself as a guerrilla, but a guerrilla was what she was. By day she ferried matériel from depot to depot, often just a step ahead of the governing force. By night, beneath a charming but too-dim sconce at a too-small table in the breakfast nook, she staged various actions: paid bills, balanced checkbooks, attempted to decipher Medicare co-payment records and make sense of a threatening Third Notice from a medical lab that demanded immediate payment of \$0.22 while simultaneously showing an account balance of \$0.00 carried forward and thus indicating that she owed nothing and in any case offering no address to which remittance might be made. It would happen that the First and Second Notices were underground somewhere, and because of the constraints under which Enid waged her campaign she had only the dimmest sense of where those other Notices might be on any given evening. She might suspect, perhaps, the family-room closet, but the governing force, in the person of Alfred, would be watching a network newsmagazine at a volume thunderous enough to keep him awake, and he had every light in the family room burning, and there was a non-negligible possibility that if she opened the closet door a cascade of catalogues and *House Beautifuls* and miscellaneous Merrill Lynch statements would come toppling and sliding out, incurring Alfred's wrath. There was also the possibility that the Notices would not be there, since the governing force staged random raids on her depots, threatening to "pitch" the whole lot of it if she didn't

take care of it, but she was too busy dodging these raids to ever quite take care of it, and in the succession of forced migrations and deportations any lingering semblance of order was lost, and so the random Nordstrom shopping bag that was camped behind a dust ruffle with one of its plastic handles semi-detached would contain the whole shuffled pathos of a refugee existence—non-consecutive issues of *Good Housekeeping*, black-and-white snapshots of Enid in the 1940s, brown recipes on high-acid paper that called for wilted lettuce, the current month's telephone and gas bills, the detailed First Notice from the medical lab instructing copayers to ignore subsequent billings for less than fifty cents, a complimentary cruise ship photo of Enid and Alfred wearing leis and sipping beverages from hollow coconuts, and the only extant copies of two of their children's birth certificates, for example.

Although Enid's ostensible foe was Alfred, what made her a guerrilla was the house that occupied them both. Its furnishings were of the kind that brooked no clutter. There were chairs and tables by Ethan Allen. Spode and Waterford in the breakfront. Obligatory ficuses, obligatory Norfolk pines. Fanned copies of *Architectural Digest* on a glass-topped coffee table. Touristic plunder—enamelware from China, a Viennese music box that Enid out of a sense of duty and mercy every so often wound up and raised the lid of. The tune was "Strangers in the Night."

Unfortunately, Enid lacked the temperament to manage such a house, and Alfred lacked the neurological wherewithal. Alfred's cries of rage on discovering evidence of guerrilla actions—a Nordstrom bag surprised in broad daylight on the basement stairs, nearly precipitating a tumble—were the cries of a government that could no longer govern. He'd lately developed a knack for making his printing calculator spit columns of meaningless eight-digit figures. After he devoted the better part of an afternoon to figuring

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the cleaning woman's social security payments five different times and came up with four different numbers and finally just accepted the one number (\$635.78) that he'd managed to come up with twice (the correct figure was \$70.00), Enid staged a nighttime raid on his filing cabinet and relieved it of all tax files, which might have improved household efficiency had the files not found their way into a Nordstrom bag with some misleadingly ancient *Good Housekeepings* concealing the more germane documents underneath, which casualty of war led to the cleaning woman's filling out the forms herself, with Enid merely writing the checks and Alfred shaking his head at the complexity of it all.

It's the fate of most Ping-Pong tables in home basements eventually to serve the ends of other, more desperate games. After Alfred retired he appropriated the eastern end of the table for his banking and correspondence. At the western end was the portable color TV on which he'd intended to watch the local news while sitting in his great blue chair but which was now fully engulfed by *Good Housekeepings* and the seasonal candy tins and baroque but cheaply made candle holders that Enid never quite found time to transport to the Nearly New consignment shop. The Ping-Pong table was the one field on which the civil war raged openly. At the eastern end Alfred's calculator was ambushed by floral print pot-holders and souvenir coasters from the Epcot Center and a device for pitting cherries which Enid had owned for thirty years and never used, while he, in turn, at the western end, for absolutely no reason that Enid could ever fathom, ripped to pieces a wreath made of pinecones and spray-painted filberts and brazil nuts.

To the east of the Ping-Pong table was the workshop that housed Alfred's metallurgical lab. The workshop was now home to a colony of mute, dust-colored crickets, which, when startled, would scatter across the room like a handful of dropped marbles, some of them misfiring at crazy angles,

others toppling over with the weight of their own copious protoplasm. They popped all too easily, and cleanup took more than one Kleenex. Enid and Alfred had many afflictions which they believed to be extraordinary, oversized—shameful—and the crickets were one of them.

The gray dust of evil spells and the cobwebs of enchantment thickly cloaked the old electric arc furnace, and the jars of exotic rhodium and sinister cadmium and stalwart bismuth, and the hand-printed labels browned by the vapors from a glass-stoppered bottle of aqua regia, and the quadruled notebook in which the latest entry in Alfred's hand dated from a time, fifteen years ago, before the betrayals had begun. Something as daily and friendly as a pencil still occupied the random spot on the workbench where Alfred had laid it in a different decade; the passage of so many years imbued the pencil with a kind of enmity. Asbestos mitts hung from a nail beneath two certificates of U.S. patents, the frames warped and sprung by dampness. On the hood of a binocular microscope lay big chips of peeled paint from the ceiling. The only dust-free objects in the room were the wicker love seat, a can of Rust-Oleum and some brushes, and a couple of Yuban coffee cans which despite increasingly strong olfactory evidence Enid chose not to believe were filling up with her husband's urine, because what earthly reason could he have, with a nice little half-bathroom not twenty feet away, for peeing in a Yuban can?

To the west of the Ping-Pong table was Alfred's great blue chair. The chair was overstuffed, vaguely gubernatorial. It was made of leather, but it smelled like the inside of a Lexus. Like something modern and medical and impermeable that you could wipe the smell of death off easily, with a damp cloth, before the next person sat down to die in it.

The chair was the only major purchase Alfred had ever made without Enid's approval. When he'd traveled to China to confer with Chinese railroad engineers, Enid had gone

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along and the two of them had visited a rug factory to buy a rug for their family room. They were unaccustomed to spending money on themselves, and so they chose one of the least expensive rugs, with a simple blue design from the Book of Changes on a solid field of beige. A few years later, when Alfred retired from the Midland Pacific Railroad, he set about replacing the old cow-smelling black leather armchair in which he watched TV and took his naps. He wanted something really comfortable, of course, but after a lifetime of providing for others he needed more than just comfort: he needed a monument to this need. So he went, alone, to a non-discount furniture store and picked out a chair of permanence. An engineer's chair. A chair so big that even a big man got lost in it; a chair designed to bear up under heavy stress. And because the blue of its leather vaguely matched the blue in the Chinese rug, Enid had no choice but to suffer its deployment in the family room.

Soon, however, Alfred's hands were spilling decaffeinated coffee on the rug's beige expanses, and wild grandchildren were leaving berries and crayons underfoot, and Enid began to feel that the rug was a mistake. It seemed to her that in trying to save money in life she had made many mistakes like this. She reached the point of thinking it would have been better to buy no rug than to buy this rug. Finally, as Alfred's naps deepened toward enchantment, she grew bolder. Her own mother had left her a tiny inheritance years ago. Interest had been added to principal, certain stocks had performed rather well, and now she had an income of her own. She reconceived the family room in greens and yellows. She ordered fabrics. A paperhanger came, and Alfred, who was napping temporarily in the dining room, leaped to his feet like a man with a bad dream.

"You're redecorating *again*?"

"It's my own money," Enid said. "This is how I'm spending it."

“And what about the money *I* made? What about the work *I* did?”

This argument had been effective in the past—it was, so to speak, the constitutional basis of the tyranny’s legitimacy—but it didn’t work now. “That rug is nearly ten years old, and we’ll never get the coffee stains out,” Enid answered.

Alfred gestured at his blue chair, which under the paperhanger’s plastic dropcloths looked like something you might deliver to a power station on a flatbed truck. He was trembling with incredulity, unable to believe that Enid could have forgotten this crushing refutation of her arguments, this overwhelming impediment to her plans. It was as if all the unfreedom in which he’d spent his seven decades of life were embodied in this six-year-old but essentially brand-new chair. He was grinning, his face aglow with the awful perfection of his logic.

“And what about the chair, then?” he said. “*What about the chair?*”

Enid looked at the chair. Her expression was merely pained, no more. “I never liked that chair.”

This was probably the most terrible thing she could have said to Alfred. The chair was the only sign he’d ever given of having a personal vision of the future. Enid’s words filled him with such sorrow—he felt such pity for the chair, such solidarity with it, such astonished grief at its betrayal—that he pulled off the dropcloth and sank into its arms and fell asleep.

(It was a way of recognizing places of enchantment: people falling asleep like this.)

When it became clear that both the rug and Alfred’s chair had to go, the rug was easily shed. Enid advertised in the free local paper and netted a nervous bird of a woman who was still making mistakes and whose fifties came out of her purse in a disorderly roll that she unpeeled and flattened with shaking fingers.

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But the chair? The chair was a monument and a symbol and could not be parted from Alfred. It could only be relocated, and so it went into the basement and Alfred followed. And so in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground.

Enid could hear Alfred upstairs now, opening and closing drawers. He became agitated whenever they were going to see their children. Seeing their children was the only thing he seemed to care about anymore.

In the streaklessly clean windows of the dining room there was chaos. The berserk wind, the negating shadows. Enid had looked everywhere for the letter from the Axon Corporation, and she couldn't find it.

Alfred was standing in the master bedroom wondering why the drawers of his dresser were open, who had opened them, whether he had opened them himself. He couldn't help blaming Enid for his confusion. For witnessing it into existence. For existing, herself, as a person who could have opened these drawers.

"Al? What are you doing?"

He turned to the doorway where she'd appeared. He began a sentence: "I am—" but when he was taken by surprise, every sentence became an adventure in the woods; as soon as he could no longer see the light of the clearing from which he'd entered, he would realize that the crumbs he'd dropped for bearings had been eaten by birds, silent deft darting things which he couldn't quite see in the darkness but which were so numerous and swarming in their hunger that it seemed as if *they* were the darkness, as if the darkness weren't uniform, weren't an absence of light but a teeming and corpuscular thing, and indeed when as a studious teenager he'd encountered the word "crepuscular" in *McKay's Treasury of English Verse*, the corpuscles of biology had bled into his understanding of the word, so that for his entire

adult life he'd seen in twilight a corpuscularity, as of the graininess of the high-speed film necessary for photography under conditions of low ambient light, as of a kind of sinister decay; and hence the panic of a man betrayed deep in the woods whose darkness was the darkness of starlings blotting out the sunset or black ants storming a dead opossum, a darkness that didn't just exist but actively *consumed* the bearings that he'd sensibly established for himself, lest he be lost; but in the instant of realizing he was lost, time became marvelously slow and he discovered hitherto unguessed eternities in the space between one word and the next, or rather he became trapped in that space between words and could only stand and watch as time sped on without him, the thoughtless boyish part of him crashing on out of sight blindly through the woods while he, trapped, the grownup Al, watched in oddly impersonal suspense to see if the panic-stricken little boy might, despite no longer knowing where he was or at what point he'd entered the woods of this sentence, still manage to blunder into the clearing where Enid was waiting for him, unaware of any woods—"packing my suitcase," he heard himself say. This sounded right. Verb, possessive, noun. Here was a suitcase in front of him, an important confirmation. He'd betrayed nothing.

But Enid had spoken again. The audiologist had said that he was mildly impaired. He frowned at her, not following.

"It's *Thursday*," she said, louder. "We're not leaving until *Saturday*."

"Saturday!" he echoed.

She berated him then, and for a while the crepuscular birds retreated, but outside the wind had blown the sun out, and it was getting very cold.