

pages. He began to read out the listing of towns in order. Most were small towns whose names were new to his ears. Towns strung out along the roads to who knows where. He'd read several pages when a massive sense of fatigue, built up over the last few days, broke over him like a wave. He felt a luke-warm sludge slowly circulating through his veins.

He wanted to sleep.

He felt as if sleep would wipe everything clean. He had only to sleep. . . .

When he closed his eyes, deep behind his ears he could hear the sound of waves. Wintry waves striking the jetty, threading between the concrete blocks along the shore.

Nothing to explain to anyone any more, thought the Rat. No doubt the bottom of the sea is warmer, more peaceful and quiet than any town. No, why think of anything now? Enough already . . .

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The hum of pinball had all but vanished from my life. As had the feeling that I had no place to go. Not that I've gotten to the big climax, like King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. That was still far in the future. When the steeds were tired,

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the swords bent, and armor all rusted by time I would lay myself down in a field of grass to peacefully listen to the wind. It will be all the same to me: the bottom of a reservoir or a refrigerated warehouse on a chicken farm, I'll take whatever route I have to.

The only thing I can claim as an epilogue to this interlude in my life is an incident hardly more momentous than a clothesline in the rain.

It's this.

One day, the twins bought a box of cotton swabs. Three hundred swabs to the box, it was. So whenever I finished taking a bath, the twins would sit one on each side of me and simultaneously clean both my ears. The two of them were positively great at cleaning ears. I'd just shut my eyes, and sip beer while listening to the sound of two cotton swabs swishing around in my ears. One night, however, in the midst of the ear-cleaning proceedings I happened to sneeze, and in that instant, I lost almost all hearing in both ears.

"Can you hear my voice?" asked the one on the right.

"Just barely," I said, my own voice seeming to emanate from somewhere inside my nose.

"How about this side?" asked the one on the left.

"The same."

"You just had to sneeze then, didn't you."

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"Of all the stupid things."

I sighed. I felt as I were being lectured by the two corner bowling pins of a seven-ten split.

"Do you think drinking some water might clear it up?" asked one of them.

"Come off it," I shouted angrily.

Even so, the twins made me drink a whole bucketful of water. All it did was make my stomach feel as if it were going to burst. My ears didn't hurt, so apparently what had happened was that sneezing had driven earwax way back into my ears. I couldn't think of what else it could be. I pulled two flashlights out of the closet and had the twins take a look. They shone them deep into my ears, and peered for several minutes as if they were looking for cracks where the wind might get through.

"Can't see anything."

"Not a speck."

"Well, then, why can't I hear?" I shouted again.

"Expiration date's up."

"You've gone deaf."

Without asking them anything further, I checked the telephone directory and rang up the nearest ear, nose, and throat clinic. It was next to impossible to hear anything over the phone, although maybe that made the nurse more sympathetic. If I could come right away, she said, she'd leave the

front door open. We quickly climbed into some clothes, left the apartment, and walked along the bus route.

The doctor was a woman of about fifty, hair like frayed iron wire, but pleasant enough. She opened the door of the waiting room and clapped her hands to quiet down the twins, then seated me in a chair and asked me without much interest what was wrong with me.

When I finished my explanation, she said that I didn't have to shout any more because she already understood the problem. She took out an enormous needleless syringe, sucked up a full charge of an amber liquid, and gave me a tin contraption shaped like a megaphone to hold under my ear. She put the syringe in my ear and the amber liquid came rushing into my ear like a herd of zebras, the overflow spilling into the megaphone. After repeating the process three times, she coaxed a thin cotton swab into the depths of my ear. By the time both ears were done, my hearing had returned to normal.

"I can hear," I marveled.

"Earwax," she said succinctly. It sounded like the tail-end of a round of password.

"But I didn't see a thing."

"It's bent."

"Huh?"

"Your ear passage is much more curved than most."

She sketched the inside of my ear on the back of a matchbook. In diagram, it looked like one of those brackets for reinforcing table corners.

"So you see, if a plug of wax rounds the bend, it's beyond recall."

I cleared my throat. "What should I do then?"

"What should you do? Just take care when you clean your ears. C-A-R-E!"

"This having abnormally curved ear passages and all, could it have adverse effects on anything?"

"Adverse effects?"

"For example . . . mentally?"

"None," she said.

We took a fifteen-minute detour through the golf course on the way back to the apartment. The dogleg on the eleventh hole reminded me of the insides of my ear; the flag, a cotton swab. And that's not all: clouds ranged across the moon like a squadron of B-52s, dense woods held down the terrain to the west like a fish-shaped paperweight, stars spilled out across the sky like moldy parsley flakes . . . but enough. My ears were keen in picking out every sound there was to hear. I felt as if a veil had been lifted from the world. Miles away night

birds were calling, miles away people were shutting windows, miles away lovers whispered sweet nothings.

"Glad that worked out," said one twin.

"Real glad," said the other.

* * *

It's like Tennessee Williams said. The past and the present, we might say, "go like this." The future is a "maybe."

Yet when we look back on the darkness that obscures the path that brought us this far, we only come up with another indefinite "maybe." The only thing we perceive with any clarity is the present moment, and even that just passes by.

That's pretty much what I was thinking as I accompanied the twins to see them off. We cut across the golf course to the bus stop two stops ahead of ours. I kept silent the whole time. Seven o'clock Sunday morning, the sky a piercing blue. The turf underfoot showed a hint of the temporary death that awaited it until spring. Here, in time, would come the frosts and blankets of snow. Then would gleam a crystal clear morning light. We walked on, the sere bleached turf crunching beneath our feet with each step.

"What are you thinking about?" asked one of the twins.