

the last thing

by briggs nisbet

salmon
maple syrup
horseradish
smoke detector

the list read, scrawled in purple marker on the refrigerator door. Smudges marked the remnants of previous items and lists and a dark ring of ink had built up around the edges of the white board. A few lone items floated at the corners, fading out, partially wiped away--a movie title perhaps or perhaps not checked out at the video store, a computer part maybe or maybe not purchased, people he needed or no longer needed to call. One rarely knew the status of things in Sebastian's life. His lists were ciphers.

They lay buried beneath mounds of unopened or opened mail, bills, bank statements, a gift certificate from the Christmas before last, photographs of parking lots, a crumpled pink oxford shirt possibly clean.

FedEx
Malcolm
Saturn
Fish tickets

this on a page torn from a pocket-size spiral notebook, drifting atop the dresser flotsam. The notebook itself rarely left his coat pocket, or his satchel, or his briefcase--whatever he happened to take off with that day. In it he noted snatches of overheard conversation, song lyrics, ideas for novels.

When Aggie first met him--at a Dead show--he was bent over a tiny flipbook in the dark, scribbling. She asked him what he was doing,

noticed the light gold hairs on his slender fingers; the friends who introduced them laughed. "It's the song list," they told her. "Oh" she nodded, as if she knew. She wasn't a Dead Head. Later, in a quiet corner of the smoke layered room, he told her Irish jokes; she laughed until her nose began to drip. She had seen the discrete glance at his back pocket before starting each joke. "What's in the pocket?" she queried. Unembarrassed, he pulled out the list. One or two words for each joke. It didn't make them any less funny. She decided to take him home with her.

Sebastian's habits were difficult to assimilate but Aggie managed, partly because she was in love, partly from astonished curiosity. Everything he touched seemed to disappear into a jumble. As weeks passed their apartment's geography altered, flats became mounds and single objects multiplied into junkyards. Sebastian lived in exquisite chaos, balancing on his high wire above the abyss, a list for his umbrella.

Among the things in need of containment in Sebastian's life was his family. He seemed trapped beneath the pile of them. At the top loomed Sebastian's father, a man with whom conversation was an unmarked landmine of prejudice and insult. One of his less deadly bequests to his son was a lifetime collection of Yale neckties, his revered alma mater--not Sebastian's. On first meeting Aggie, he had called her Annie, then Maggie, and over time seemed to settle on Gertie. As Sebastian explained it, his father was possessed by hostile dyslexia. Aggie thought he just didn't like her, but began to understand what Sebastian meant when his father suddenly warmed to her one Thanksgiving dinner and she felt his affection even more threatening than his dislike.

Lists were foreign to Aggie but she could organize everything within her reach. Except Sebastian. She tried, and he tried to let her organize him but it merely increased his anxiety. She asked him to make a list of things he could do to make his life less chaotic. He

wrote

clean desk

yoga

recycling

and though it was not clear exactly how this would help him, the list itself gave them a sense of accomplishment.

The apartment now looked like the scene of an accident; clothes, books, computer parts, coffee cups, and cassette tapes in a massive collision--and Sebastian's father calling nightly with the zeal of a credit card solicitor. One evening, Aggie played her clarinet as Sebastian paced the kitchen, cell phone to ear, for the better part of an hour. Finally, "Yea. Ok. Love you too," resignation in his voice. It was several minutes before he appeared in the living room, seeming not so desperate as she might have expected.

That night after sex, she didn't ask what his father wanted or what they talked about; he seemed strangely buoyant and she let it go. In the morning he sang "Sugar Magnolia" as he fixed her coffee. After he left she went to the kitchen. She glanced at the refrigerator door and the white board as she passed. Something caught her eye. It was the last thing on Sebastian's list.

clean desk

yoga

recycling

burn ties

