

The Way You Live Now

by Gary Percesepe

You look different. People, maybe your friends, notice. You've been wondering about this. Each day it seems that you look different from the day before. There's a consistency thing that's missing here, in the looks department.

Your wife leaves for work, her first day back since the accident. She is concerned about you. She has reason. There are things she would like to ask.

Into the cold February morning with your wife goes your remaining child, a daughter, fifteen, past the age of riding a bus to school. In two months she will drive herself to the nearby high school. Coatless and petite, she moves gracefully past you, pausing to peck your waiting cheek. Her eyes are moist but hopeful. The carpet holds the traces of her footsteps. Stephanie. Sister of Steven, daughter of Peter and Irene, grand-daughter of Patrick and Elaine, Thomas and Marybeth, cousin of Seth, Karen, and Jeffrey. So many ways to name her, so many relations we bear to one another. Family relations, you think, are like logical or mathematical functions in the naming, but not in the living. To name is not to live, life not imitating logic. So much spills out and over, bursts its containers and tumbles free, staining the world.

From behind the wheel of the car a kiss is blown. The kiss flutters across the length of the garage, past the carefully hung garden utensils, ladder, lawn mower, shelves holding screws, nails, nuts, bolts, all labeled and contained in shiny plastic cases, past the workbench with its clean, uncluttered surface, till it reaches you, exhausted, drooping, heavy with knowledge. You stare at your wife through the windshield. Her face looks wavy, distorted, a circus funhouse face.

The house is quiet. You won't go in to teach today, you decide. Take some more time. Let your assistant teach the logic class.

You make a mental note of the rising number of people that know you. You vow to trim the list.

You go into the kitchen to wash the dishes. There are three of them: three juice glasses, three forks, one coffee mug. You wash them carefully, watching the jetted water splash against the aluminum sink, feeling it ricochet up and onto the sleeve of your shirt, warming you. You turn the glasses upside down and place them, dripping, in the cupboard. The plates and forks are returned to their places, their gleaming surfaces free of the clinging grit of food.

You walk the house, closing each door. All but your son's, which, you see, is already closed. The phone rings. It's your assistant. You twist the cord in a tight knot as he talks, then lift and swing the phone in the opposite direction so that it's twirling madly.

You try to locate what's been lost, try to get a fix on yourself. There's this day after day sameness across time and space that gives us our identity. Our substance. We depend on sameness; without it difference makes no sense. This sameness, you wager, is what's been lost. It's not like you're deliberately trying to change anything, this much you understand. It's just that you wake up, you shower, you brush your hair in front of the mirror, and there's a different guy each day looking back, as perplexed about the whole thing as you.

This is the way you live now.

What is happening to you? You wish you knew. You're unrecognizable to yourself. There's probably a word for this, some Latin medical term no doubt that would sum it all up.

Your wife's minister had drawn you aside into his office after the funeral service. He told you that it is during the disquiet of our lives, during the turmoil of the difficult, that new ideas come.

Transformation. He quoted a German philosopher: *Better a mended sock than a torn one; not so with consciousness*. In hushed ministerial tones, the kind you imagine is used in confessional booths at Catholic churches, he spoke, using an economy of words.

You glance at the pile of student papers lying in a stack on the floor by the kitchen table. You pick one up, surprised at its length. As you read you see words that are misspelled (missed by a spell-check program? Or just more human error?) and you move quickly

to correct them, your pen a sense-making instrument, a machine for correction. You understand this process; the processing of words. What you don't understand is how to correct you. What the steps are, what this all leads to. That's where you're still a bit shaky, you'd say. Sure.

You get up from the table, lay the student's paper aside. You walk into the darkened hallway of your house. You are alone in the house for the first time in days. People related to you--sisters, mother, father, brother, uncles, cousins--and people from your wife's church carrying armloads of food, their voices clattering in the old house, all have left. They have gone back to where they came from, leaving behind in the house only their familial smells, and flattened dreams. Three people will sleep in this house tonight. It was difficult for you, for a while, to sort out those two sets, relatives and strangers. For a time all was confusion, meals were taken in the presence of strangers, women would knock at the door of your bathroom and call to see who was inside.

You pull open the door to the attic and climb the ladder to the gloomy elevated space of memory. What you seek: the remembered light of childhood. In the dusty box of old photographs you find the one you want. It is a sunny day in New York. A boy of eight or nine, at the height of childhood, stands outside the walls of the Central Methodist church, near the black wrought iron fence. He is dressed smartly in a gray wool suit with matching cap, knobby knees showing below the gray shorts. There is an inscrutable look on his face, not, it seems to you, the look of a child; as if he knows more but is not telling. There is no childish smile on his face to soften his features, nor even a silly schoolboy grin, just a serious little boy, his dark eyes averted from the sun (or is it from the picture-taker?). In the corner of the picture a bride can be seen, her back to the camera, and a small crowd of people dressed in 1950s finery. The boy looks unrelated to it, and to everything else.

Steven was a neat and orderly child. He gave you no trouble. He thought before answering. When he spoke, the room often grew silent. He had few friends. He liked his bus driver, a plump, jolly

woman. He was the first to be seated for dinner in the evenings. He was a timely child.

You remember a scene from your childhood, when you were seven. In that church, in the last pew, you paid no attention to the service until the end. When everyone had their head down in prayer, and you saw the minister make the sign of the cross over the bowed congregation. How blessed you felt to have seen him make this ancient silent symbol on your behalf, unseen by all the others, unnoticed. You alone had seen, and that tall handsome man with the flowing yellow hair winked at you and smiled. All for you. How you loved him, loved his god at that moment. You learned later, from your unimaginative parents that he was not a very good minister, and had as a young man wanted to be a forest ranger. Probably he should have, said your mother at the time, his preaching certainly leaves much to be desired, but this new information only endeared him to you all the more.

On the ground floor again, you head for your son's bedroom. You pull the door open slowly, and glance around the room. The bed is unmade. From where you stand, hand still on the doorknob, you can see the small imprint of his body on the sheets, curved toward the wall. At the foot of the bed you see a book. You move slowly toward it, stalking it, as if it might disappear. You study the title. It is a library book. Its plastic protective cover feels cool to the touch. You pull the book up to your face until you feel its surface graze against your skin. Its musty smell you take in manfully. There will be no tears. You will refuse them, even when you realize this is the book you checked out with Steven weeks before. You look inside the cover. The book is due today.

You hadn't wanted to leave the house today. That was not your plan. The work you need to do is not outside. These are your thoughts.

You flip on the TV, clicking past talk show guests with tales of woe until you find Mary Tyler Moore on Lifetime. Mary's at a party with Rhoda. Rhoda pretends to be the wife of an astronaut. A woman inquires, which one? Rhoda declines to answer. You know how it is,

she tells the woman, You tell someone his name, people all start wanting moonrocks. The laugh track kicks in. You hit the off button on the remote.

You find the vacuum cleaner and vacuum for forty-five minutes, the entire house, making sure that the thick pile faces in the same direction. When you finish there are parallel grooves in the carpet the length of each room. You sink into the soft chair in your study and stare absently at the books on your shelf. When the phone goes off in the kitchen you count the number of pulses: fourteen. You make not even the slightest movement. You disturb no space.

Driving to the library you try for no sudden movements. You wish to go unnoticed. You realize that you are already fading, you're thinning out, with any luck soon you'll be invisible, your childhood wish. A shade. You drive down streets with no name, the signposts long since defaced, past boarded up factories and the block long brick building that once housed a prosperous magazine. You wonder if anyone can name these streets now, if that was the idea behind the defacing.

If you can keep from speaking, this task, too, can be accomplished.

You wait as a car backs out of a space at the crowded parking lot of the library. A woman in a sleek black Buick tilts her head, wants to back up, asks you with her eyes if she has clearance. You fumble with the many buttons of the stereo till you find the one you're looking for, to disconnect. The automatic antenna slips back into its hidden hole with a muted thump. To a silent count you wait, eyes averted, till she moves the Buick. You glide into the space she has vacated, and kill the engine.

You stare at the dashboard. A smile plays at the corners of your mouth as you read the embossed silver lettering on the Panasonic stereo system: FULL LOGIC CONTROL. You think of your computer at work, of the message you once found after a series of false prompts: UNRECOVERABLE ERROR.

All errors are not unrecoverable, you think. Full logic control. You recall from last week's logic lecture what can be done with words, Aristotle's categorical propositions in standard form. Some S are P, No S are P, Some S are not P, All S are P. No errors are unrecoverable. All errors are unrecoverable. Some errors are unrecoverable. Some errors are not unrecoverable. You try to remember which is a contradiction, which a mere contrary. It escapes you. Unmoved mover, you think. That was Aristotle too.

The book is titled, Mastering Instrument Flying. Steven was ten. He had found this book, as he did all others, by himself. He wanted to be a pilot. Flying was what he wanted, for himself, for you. To soar, you think, above all this, out of harm's way. This was before the accident. Before he took his last step, the one you'll remember most, viewed from the safety of your kitchen window while grading at the table, the one that set in motion sirens and ambulances, and the startled, sobbing faces of fourth grade children, the one the driver with the thick fingers never saw as he swerved on the ice to avoid the yellow school bus, in his panic not seeing the small dark form that was your son.

Later, in the emergency room, after the doctors pronounced their verdict, brooking no discussion, you listened stoically to the man's sobbing story, the police waiting dumbly nearby, then the bus driver's, until, overwhelmed, you heard someone say, What's that, Mr. Thick Fingers? (absurdly, you called him this to his face), Excuse me, Mr. Fuckin' Thick Fingers? What's the matter, you can't see lights, the color yellow doesn't register with you? You walk out your door and you don't think, Shit, there's ice, I should slow down? You have children, Mr. Thick Fingers? Yeah, well I did too, once, I had a son.

Stop, Peter, please, your wife pleaded.

You ignored her, started on the bus driver, followed her out to the hospital parking lot where her bus sat stupid and empty, idling merrily, its children packed off to meet with school psychologists.

She cried, this bus driver.

You let her.

Names of lawyers raced through your mind, unbidden.

It was then that you had glanced at the big shiny bus mirror. The mirror held an image, but it wasn't yours. You were unrecognizable. Unrecoverable? This is how it began.

Death, you realize, is what people tell you it is.

You remember now, sitting in the library's parking lot, that you had been looking at books, killing time, when Steven had called you to the circulation desk to check out *Mastering Instrument Flying*. Past the many aisles of fiction written by skilled liars living failed lives, spin-doctored histories written to support the lies of those in power, the stacks of false, outdated science, paperback romance novels, philosophical ideas with half-lives much shorter than rumored, stale as week-old bread, you had walked. Following his voice, with no great urgency, you had snaked your way to that desk, noting the dust upon each volume, light but unmistakable. Useless knowledge.

Now you hold the book in your hands, as he had held it. You caress its creamy white pages, running your fingers across entire sentences, tracing the outlines of commas and question marks, dreading the periods. You feel what he had felt; touching the pages of this book, a third skin unites you.

You enter the library, head down. You walk to the counter. You're prepared for this. The clerk takes the book from your hands, with it also the note. On it, you've written, *This book is on time*.

You sit in your car, waiting. You check the mirrors.

When you walk back to the circulation desk the clerk acts surprised to see you again. She asks if she can help. You spot Steven's book, not yet shelved, recoverable, and you point to it with a steady finger. The clerk smiles at you, then asks simply, *Renewal?* You nod, your head bobbing idiotically, and then onto your tongue you feel the word drop, as if from a great height, sudden and with remarkable lightness, and it pushes its way out past you, to her, leaving both of you laughing, that peculiar, hissing, affirmative, *Yes*, you say. *Yes*.

