

# ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

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## AFTER HOURS

I extinguished the golden sconces and clicked on the tv from the recliner but the tv didn't last long interest-wise so off it went in less than a minute. Someone's mother had delivered a silent kiss to her son's left cheek as the screen went dark. The room I was in was dark except for a small lamp that burned a low-wattage bulb across the room. The lamp sat on a narrow table near a door.

I don't remember much what happened after that so all I can now deduce is that — as you may have already deduced — I fell asleep in the recliner. It was toward eleven at night and I was tired from a tiring day at the office, a day much longer than I had expected before driving in. And the drive itself had been tiring, what with my hitting all the red lights — all twenty-seven of them — instead of, say, only half or maybe less than a third. This never happens to anyone, does it? It happened to me.

Twenty-seven reds.

So I walked in twelve minutes late and immediately got called to someone's office. I explained with a profuse sense of urgency about the twenty-seven red lights and (I wanted to say) how I can't control traffic signals (all I said was that I hit all the reds) but the person who had called me in just sat there with a face of granite, a pencil in his right hand, scribbling something onto a piece of paper with my name in large bold letters on the top. It was upside down to me but I could tell he wrote something in a little box beside the day's date. It looked like the word TARDY. Well, of course that's what it was. What else could it have been.

I was released from his granite-faced grip and made my way to my assigned cubicle, complete with an oblong sign stuck on the

outside with my name inscribed in a bold font. I got to work right then, asking myself no questions, telling myself no further information necessary, thinking to myself this is what you are, this is the thing you have become so do it, sit here in this furnished office chair at your furnished office desk and click the mouse on things they want you to address. Do this all day, every day, and when you get back home you will not remember much about what happened, unless it is something your brain collects and retains for after-hours rumination, such as a certain set of numbers that do not add up the way a certain corporate agenda team wants them to, and all you can do is reshuffle, reconsider, find an out-of-the-box method to force them into that particularly peculiar submission. It's a tactic, so join the tactic team and move on. This is what you're made of now, correct?

These days I wonder what would happen if I changed my name, moved to another town, got another job (one that did not require a corporate agenda) and told everyone I knew (and/or who knew me) that I was no longer who I had been and that I now was someone else and that under zero per cent circumstances I should not be worthy of a search for me or my newly created identity. But then that in itself would ruin everything, right? My telling those I know of my future-perfect plan. Yeah. That's a bogus mind-snafu. It's best, really, to continue with two-coffee mornings, one-tea afternoons and a plethora of in-between stress-functions. Nine hours is equal to thirty-seven point five per cent of an entire day; can it be that bad to think about? Yes, I think it can.

It's nearly eight at night and I'm still here. Do you like what I've done with my cubicle?

I didn't think so.

SMOKED

Martin Everson shuts the door to his office and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. He knows he shouldn't smoke in the office environment but he's testy and tense so he has to have one and now. The boss is out for the day and there's nothing important or urgent on the schedule so no one will be checking in. He lights up, sits back, inhales the lovely smoke then holds it inside himself.

Two days later he discovers his girlfriend has left. He calls her but she does not answer. He smokes a cigarette and thinks about her. An hour goes by and he calls her again. Nothing. She is gone. He shouldn't call her again. She is gone and he shouldn't call her. He should have another cigarette and never call her again. He should go to work the next day and have a cigarette and if he thinks about her then he should have another.

A week goes by and Martin is at home. It's a Saturday afternoon, a game is on, he isn't watching it, he's smoking a cigarette, he's trying not to think about the girlfriend, he tries to keep his mind on the cigarette, tries to get his mind back on the game, the tv is messed up, it doesn't work right, the cigarette is almost gone, the girlfriend left, she's gone, the cigarette tastes good and the game is on but the tv is messed up.

In a month Martin has no job. The boss caught him smoking, gave him chance after chance to stop, to abide by policy, to do the work and not smoke, but no, he smoked and thought about the girlfriend, and smoked some more.

He's at home and he's smoking again. Martin can't stop smoking. The girlfriend left and he has no job. The cigarettes remain like newfound friends. Martin leaves the house and takes them with him. They go everywhere together. They are inseparable, full of themselves and more. If Martin dies from smoking, he'll die with a cigarette between his fingers.

## KUMP CONVO

Today's workday was not good at all. I mean, it started fine when I walked in, had my coffee and got things going, but by the time a Mr. Gary Heglin called in to dispute that the universe as we know it exists, it all went into a dive bomb in seconds. As you know, my name is Martin Kump and I handle calls with people who owe money. Gary Heglin owed money, yes, but he didn't want to talk about THAT. No, he wanted to talk about how the government is all a farce and how an unnamed federal official tackled him to the floor one night IN HIS BEDROOM and knocked him unconscious then INSERTED A CHIP IN HIS HEAD and now he is under the control of an unnamed organization that intends to drive him into insanity. I don't make this stuff up. Just like I tell customers who ask me if I am telling them the truth as to how much money they owe when I pull up their respective accounts on my little screen. I DON'T MAKE THIS STUFF UP, I tell them sometimes, the ones who push the question with a certain tone that makes me want to go there and say it. Gary Heglin. He talked for two hours straight. Two hours. And why did I let him go on that long? Why didn't I tell him to stop talking all crazy and that I needed to end the call unless he was going to tell me when we should expect his now extremely late payment of Five Hundred and Sixty Dollars and Seventy-Three Cents? I'll tell you why. I really like talking to Gary Heglin. Or, rather, letting Gary Heglin talk to me. And when I started out saying that the workday wasn't good, I meant to say that in a way it wasn't good but at the same time somewhat invigorating. Besides, I was ahead of the game on my account ledger so two hours of The Gary Heglin Show was welcomed. So, yes. I am honestly going to say that I really hope he calls back. Not every day, mind you, but like often. Maybe like twice a week at most. That would be eight times a month max. I can handle that. I can handle Gary Heglin calling me and saying the same thing over and over again just so I can sit there and be amused and — hey, who knows? — maybe learn something new

for a change! I mean as you can imagine, my job is about as enlightening as watching cows graze.

So Gary Heglin? Bring it. Please bring it.

I'm begging.

### THREE UNTITLED

Nothing is left now except the house. I sit on the driveway waiting for my ride, a friend who said he'd be happy to come by and pick me up and take me somewhere, anywhere but here. He knows what's happened, knows everything. I've left nothing out. His name is Thomas and mine is Martin. What started as a mystery has now become undeniable fact. If night fell at this moment I would still be alone. Cars are passing and I know none of their drivers. At a time like this I don't know who anyone is except Thomas, who knows me well. When he gets here I will lift myself off the concrete and get into his car. He will drive me somewhere, maybe a diner, maybe his house. Or he might just drive and keep driving until we reach yet another end, until I look at the time and think of saying what I want to say but can't.

The ducks in the pond are drowning. It is not a dream I'm having, not a nightmare of some alternate reality. One duck drowns then another follows. I have never seen a drowning duck but today it happens. It seems I am the only one here who notices. There are two kids nearby but they are laughing and throwing rocks into the pond; have they not seen the drowning ducks? If I stand here any longer I will drown. I will turn into a duck and sink straight down into the dark green murky water and the kids will throw their rocks at me and stop laughing and I will die with the drowned ducks as the kids

point and look and run off to tell someone, anyone, anyone at all. Look at me. I'm right here.

A thousand things can happen in a day. I drink my coffee at 7:10 am then drive to work. I shuffle papers like decks of cards. I juggle appointments like large bowling pins. I speak to numerous people, some on the phone, some in person, others via email. I receive thirty-seven emails and send eighty-two. There are endless words spoken, so many words processed, some of which I do not speak. Maybe more than a thousand things can happen in a day. When it is time to go home I call someone and tell them. The day isn't over. The night remains, looming in my periphery. I speed down the road, thinking of a thousand things I could do, but won't.

## JOAN IS DEAD

But that's not everything. When she died her children died too. The entire family died. I found out via some random email from the ex-husband, who now is near death as well. I feel pretty bad myself but I don't think I'm dying. The ex-husband said he will send flowers; I didn't ask who he'd send them to. How he found about Joan, I have no idea; I don't care to know. Flowers mean nothing to a dead person, especially when you don't know who, if anyone, will receive them. I never spoke with Joan. Okay, well, once or twice but that was it. Those weren't actual conversations, just tidbits of small talk about smaller talk. What I remember about her is that she had bright red hair. I'm sure it had turned gray since then. I will not attend the funeral; I have no real connection. And I won't send flowers; the ex-husband will take care of that. If you live long enough you can do anything you want.

