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Michael Horner Notebook 366

“‘Notebook 366’ is an original telling of two tales via a memoir of sorts. It includes one of the best opening scenes I’ve ever read. The author keeps several tales going at the same time and never drops one. Fascinating.”

– Bill Henderson, President and Editor, Pushcart Press.

Michael Horner teaches at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where he also received an M.F.A. in fiction. He has recently completed his novel, *Public Relations for the Modern Family*. “Notebook 366” is his first published story.

Tom Steward died quietly in the autumn of his sixty-second year at sixty-seven miles per hour. Dead now for only a few seconds, he continues to drive his fourteen-year-old Audi along the western section of the Massachusetts Turnpike. His wife, Gail, who does not yet know, is in the passenger seat, her head against the window and her eyes firmly set on the side mirror. His relatively new \$8,000 scull whistles on the roof rack as its tail points out past the front of the car. Periodically, on this two-hour trip back to their home in Lenox, a drop of the Charles River falls from an invisible crack in the scull and lands on the hood, where it pushes toward the windshield until it dissolves.

The car begins to stray ever so slightly from the left lane where Tom, much to Gail’s chagrin, always insists on driving. But the nearest car is just a set of winking headlights spotting the blue dusk behind them, which Gail watches in the mirror as she muses over the advice anyone in a long-enduring marriage would do well to keep in mind: OBJECTS ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR. By the time the car is fully in the right lane, they pass a sign marking the highest point on the MassPike—1724 feet above sea level—which, the sign points out, is the highest elevation on Interstate 90 until Oacoma, South Dakota. Neither Tom Steward nor Gail Steward sees the sign. If he were still alive and if he were in one of his

edifying moods so rare in the last few years, Tom might have said: “Look at that!” And Gail would have probably rolled her eyes today, when the day before she would not have cared enough to roll her eyes: their own road sign that although the events of the day at the Head of the Charles Regatta in Cambridge had far from fixed everything in their marriage, Tom and Gail knew, at the very least, their exact elevation and in what direction they could head.

Technically, they *are* headed for South Dakota but only so far as the next exit, where after a gradual loss of elevation, they would pay a toll and then head north along Route 20 toward their home, a scant fifteen miles away. But considering the circumstances, they are not going to make it that far. The tires are already edging into the breakdown lane, breaking Gail from her trance. Unlike the places ahead, the distances above the sea, their destination (where, indeed, Tom has already arrived), as close and as frequented as it is, remains unmappable, unmeasurable.

But in the meantime the cruise control keeps the car at its predetermined speed. The orange sun gleams from behind bare trees, and the southwesterly rays crosshatch the windshield, making the road ahead a dilated shadow. Tom Steward holds the steering wheel with steadier, more patient hands than he had when he was alive. His head is tilted awkwardly and his mouth is dropped open. His eyes, poised upon the space between the interior light and the rearview mirror, are no longer focused in the bracketed, forward-looking anticipation of the road they assumed even when the car idled in their driveway at 8 Arrowfield Drive. When Gail finally looks over at her husband, which she will not do until after the car veers into the breakdown lane and then the shoulder, where it will have already picked up its final terrible and bumpy speed before flipping over, she will note in her husband’s dead stare something more familiar than unfamiliar—a look, an expansiveness, she has seen through her binoculars as she crouched down behind burdocks, amid the birches, and secretly watched him glide in his scull across the morning calm waters of Stockbridge Bowl.

Ms. Ashleven puts down her pen and clicks on her desk lamp. The bulb washes the thick gray of twilight from the room. She disturbs Old Felix from her lap and Master Antibes from her feet, and both cats move dazed about the wood floor before finding a new place to rest their bodies, albeit in a place less to their liking. She closes the notebook in front of her and slides it into the top drawer of her desk. She removes the wool blanket full of cat fur from her lap and gently lays it over the back of the chair. With the help of her third and most reliable leg, her cane, she goes window to window pulling down shades. Her feet work against her, and even the olive shoes Dr. Spalding ordered from Brockton can only do so much. She is eighty years old. Her spine has curved earthward like the stem of a dead

flower. She has become one of the hunched old ladies she dreaded becoming. But she can still hold a pen and her bladder, she reminds herself. The cats watch, their heads pivoting with her progress. When the last shade is drawn, she leans against the dusty sill and looks across the room to the lamplit story of her life, 365 notebooks flanking both sides of her desk: her memoir, her third eye.

Twenty-five years she has spent writing these 365 notebooks—a number she aimed for and stayed true to. Three years more she has spent in revision, adding some new sentiment, some new reflection on incident after incident—each one sending her back at least ten years to re-revise. Recently she has wondered at the entire notebook devoted to a nephew she never liked. Even the notebook devoted to a trip with a famous poet in June of '51 that would turn the literary world upside-down—a revelation she once believed would sell her book—she closed halfway through rereading and said aloud: “Let him be.” In writing so carefully and over such a long period, she put a no-man’s-land between her former life and whomever in the world she is right now standing across from all those words she now wishes she could disappear from. Just last night she asked the cats as they gulped down their food, “How do I fix it?”

But what of notebook 366 she has just closed in the drawer? Was this the answer?

She’s hot. She leans toward the thermostat and can’t believe it’s sixty-two. She turns it down to fifty-eight. The thermostat dial is an easier solution than pulling off one of her sweaters or the layers of long underwear that hold her body together as much as anything these days. She wishes she could bundle up her mind as easily. Names slip from faces; magazines and packages arrive that she neither wants nor remembers ordering; necessities such as food, water, and sleep are regularly neglected; and occasionally, she finds herself reading through these notebooks as if the life set down were someone else’s. But like the sculptor she used to know, Hendrick Saddle, who once began with a great marble block and whittled it from monster to man to cherub to bird, finally settling on the finest, most polished, tooth-sized kernel, a pebble, only to exclaim, exhausted: “Here! Here is what it all amounts to!” —Ms. Ashleven wants to believe what she has lost to dissipation she has gained in acuity. Today, her own marble block, these notebooks, has turned into one kernel, one unplanned and unavoidable child: notebook 366.

She sits back at her desk, and the cats stalk their former positions, but she shoos them away and pulls the blanket from the back of the chair and brushes the fur from it. She leans back and stares at the poster framed over her desk: *The Champion Single Sculls* by Eakins. She should eat, she should drink, she should relieve that bladder she holds so well. She brings a section of the blanket to her nose—a square protected from the cats by the fold—

and closing her eyes she inhales. If she could unweave this blanket with words, take away the tenacious scent that fights through the mustard of cat, the onion of years, unwrite the memories laced in the music of its itch...

She refolds the blanket and smooths it over her legs and opens the desk drawer. She is tempted to take the five-dollar bill from the yellowed envelope buried in there, to hold it once again in her hand, thinks, "Too soon," and pulls out notebook 366 instead.

She squints at the clipping that changed everything; she cut it out from the newspaper that morning and taped it to the inside cover of this new notebook. She runs her magnifying glass over its words: *Two Killed in Fiery Pike Crash*. Further down she pauses on: *cause yet to be determined...coming home from the Head of the Charles Regatta...Boston natives, recently moved...vice president at...* She puts the magnifying glass down and brings her glasses to her face, smoothing the wire earpieces behind each lobe along with the strands of hair that have loosened from her bun. She looks over the words she has written on the first pages. What was it she used to tell her adult education class "Memoir! And! You!" week after week? "Honesty and memoir go hand in hand. There are liberties, of course, but these are only tools to get to the hard truths. We lie only if it helps us get there." Ms. Ashleven brings her pen to the notebook and sees if she can get there.

Before Tom Steward was transferred to the western Massachusetts office along with a severe pay cut and a loss of two weeks of vacation when the bank he worked for was gobbled up by a bigger fish—no offer of early retirement as they had hoped, Gail used to watch the Head of the Charles Regatta from their home on the fifth floor of an upscale building, which was on the Charles not far from BU. The sculls were so smooth and beautiful and faraway as they skated over the water she wanted to hear if they were as silent as they seemed. She always tried to interest her husband in going out to watch, and each year he said he did not want to spend one of his precious days off standing in the middle of thousands of drunk college students just to watch boats row by. "Why not watch grass grow?" he would mumble. Instead Tom, an overworked and undistinguished bank vice-president, would spend the morning reading the newspapers and the afternoon watching sports on television. The crowds were never bad the first day. Gail never said anything. She waited until six o'clock to wake him up from the television, so he could eat the dinner she had prepared and watch the movie she had rented.

Each year she told herself that she would go alone to watch the regatta the next. She even went so far as getting brochures about taking lessons, but she never did more than look at the pictures and study the times and prices. They had more money then; they weren't millionaires, but they had more money. She even thought about buying her own

scull and teaching herself how to do it. If someone had predicted that her husband would be the one to take up sculling by his fifty-ninth year and be the one to enter the regatta by his sixty-second year, she would have responded with her incredulous laugh.

The house they bought in Lenox after Tom's transfer was on the east side of a hill that rose full of maples right from their backyard. Dusk came early to their home, but so did dawn as it spread out across the valley. Gail wished the house she had chosen stayed bright into the night and dark all morning, but the placement of the rooms, the house, all of nature seemed to anticipate her husband's new sculling rhythm. Encouraged by a few new friends at the bank, Tom had given sculling a try. Now every night he went to bed at nine and every morning he woke up before his alarm clock at five, ready to scull. At first she was sure Tom would quit. And when she started watching him, she did not really think about what she was doing. She bought the binoculars ostensibly to amuse herself during the day, to get a better view of the cardinal couple she was supposedly monitoring, along with the nuthatches, the chickadees, the blue jays, and of course the squirrels and the crows—her most reliable companions at this house under the hill. She would wait in bed until Tom strapped the boat onto the car and wound out the engine as he pulled onto the street. She would dress quickly and follow him out. She always left a note just in case she did not beat him back to the house. If Tom, after unloading the scull into the garage, ever noticed that her car was not in the exact same spot, if he gave a second look to the engine that still ticked, he never let on to Gail.

She stood in a section of birch trees and burdocks on the opposite shore from the boat ramp. From this vantage point he was never out of sight. Each morning, he sculled for two hours. He would come home smelling of lake and sweat, wash it off in the shower (it was up to Gail to get the smell out of his clothes), and hum his way to work (when he never had hummed before). On his way out he would give Gail an absent peck on the cheek and never mention how she smelled of outdoors; if he had she would have told him she had begun walking in the morning: "You're not the only one who can be active, you know." As he kept sculling, it became easier for Gail to imagine telling him the truth, if he asked. "I watch you," she would say. It might have been satisfying.

Done with her day by eight, Gail felt aimless. She used to lose herself in cleaning, cooking, and socializing, but now she bought microwaveable dinners and paper plates, hinted about getting a maid, and received calls only from telemarketers. Bored with the cardinals, unhappy with the sameness in the birds and squirrels, their grass pecking, their branch flights, their fidgeting, Gail found herself sitting at the dining room table staring out the window to the Berkshire Hills spread out blue from the valley which dipped gradually

from their house. When they used to come to this area for vacation or just a weekend trip for Tanglewood, she wished she could look out every day upon these hills. The suggestion of space, of possibilities, of mystery, always made her morning coffee delicious. Tom, excited to be away from work (for at least the first few days), would be attentive. These vacations here were the best times in their marriage. Had she allowed herself to think they would capture this romance in their daily lives now that they lived at their vacation spot?

Now the coffee had no special taste and went cold in her cup. She couldn't even get the coffee she liked. The hills walled her in from whoever she once was. Now Tom had the scull instead of her. Jealous. Gail granted the scull was better than another woman, but she wondered if it really was.

Ms. Ashleven crosses out *jealous* then writes it in again. She circles *another woman* and sighs. "Sometimes it is okay to go through the back door when the front is locked," she used to tell her memoir classes. She sees now she would have to make more space for Tom and his scull. Through them she would find Gail and once she found Gail then what? Death by car? Think of the quiet moments, stay away from the spectacular, keep to the middle. The middle is where we breathe, where life is, the middle where we return again and again to look for the answers. "Just because you write about him, doesn't mean..." She lets the scull from the Eakins poster take shape in her mind, taps her pen against *another woman*, and then starts again beneath it.

It was seven-thirty in the morning and Tom stayed on the water longer than usual. He would probably be late for work, but he did not care. He was alone. The other early scullers, the guys he worked with, the same guys who saved his life by encouraging him to start sculling, were already headed for their quick showers before going to the bank. The late-rising scullers, the rich and/or the retired, would be on the water soon, but for the moment the lake was his. There was not a ripple on the water that he did not produce himself. When the water was this calm, sculling was like pedaling a bicycle downhill. No matter how old, no matter how out of shape or inexperienced, he was as fast and smooth as any Olympian, for at least a few strokes. This was a new feeling for Tom, and it made him a little heady.

He let the scull glide. His new Adidas suit hugged his skin. He was hot, and he allowed himself to leave the jacket half-zipped, exposing the gray chest hair that curled over the scoop of his tank top. It was not cold out. Normally he would be wearing a shirt and shorts. But the suit was the same one Pete Spicer wore; Pete Spicer who had just held a weekend camp at Lake Placid that Tom had attended, where Tom bought the suit. Gail said she thought camps were for kids. She said those people were just trying to take money from dreamy old men. But Pete Spicer, two-time Olympian, told Tom, "You're a natural. Too bad

someone didn't get a scull under you in college." These words had spun in Tom's mind for the last forty-eight hours. The thing was, Tom had almost gone out for crew when he was at Colgate. He was awed by Pete Spicer's compliment, awed by the chance he had missed, awed by what might have been.

At the center of lake, he dug the oars into the water and turned until he faced the birch trees at the east end of the lake. In the renewed stillness, the water as calm as the air, he looked for Gail's birding binoculars peering from among the birches, looked for her crouched in the burdock. He listened for the snap of twigs and her stifled sneezes (only his wife could be allergic to birch and burdock). She did not seem to be there this morning. He thought about his return from the camp last night; how Gail's stiff eyes greeted him when he showed her his new suit and told her about the compliment he had been given. It had been her eyes that prevented him from mentioning the \$8,000 scull he had ordered, the one Pete Spicer recommended.

But he was a different man today. A new man. He felt it. He was capable, he had new powers. He had recaptured some aspect of confidence only available to the young—something he had missed his first time around. He was not going to jump into racing, and even though his friends were all going to race at the Head of the Charles, he would wait, perfect his form, go there not to participate—he had spent his whole life participating—he would go there to win, even if it was in the Master Division. For the moment he allowed himself to dream that he might win the whole thing. Anything was possible. Tom Steward felt omnipotent and young. And he was glad Gail was not there to remind him otherwise.

Ms. Ashleven grabs her cane to help her from her chair. She scolds herself: "Where can you run? Does she think she can hide so easily?" When she sits back down, she looks at the blanket on the floor. Master Antibes meows from across the room and Old Felix joins in.

"You know if he hadn't started doing this," Gail's sister said over the phone, "he was probably headed straight for heart-attackville." Gail could still hear the surprise in her sister's voice. She had to talk to someone and her sister was the only one she had left. "You should be happy for him. I wish my Tom would do something like that. To have the bed to myself for a few hours each morning, I'd buy him an eight thousand dollar scull. Believe me that would be better than Paris. You have any brochures? No kidding, I could leave them around the house. My Tom hasn't seen his toes in years."

Gail had to admit that her Tom was probably in the best shape of his life; she had not thought about it in that way before.

"You don't notice? I mean you know, he must be better in the sack?"

Gail changed the subject to her sister's children, remembering why she did not like

talking to her—fifty years old and saying *sack*, she was always so crass.

“Gail you just need something in your life. Stay away from the volunteer stuff. You’ve done too much of that. Do something for yourself for once. Take a bartending class. Take anything. There are all sorts of studies about keeping your mind in shape. If you work it, you keep it longer. Think of mom. That’s not for us. That’s not the way to finish your life.”

“There’s this memoir class.”

“Great. Go for it. You never know right? Hey, but be kind to me.”

Ms. Ashleven stops writing. She thinks about Gail sitting behind the school desk at the back of the classroom, her distracted intensity so hard to ignore. Her posture so stiff. Her whole body language read *I don’t want to be here*. From the first day Ms. Ashleven thought Gail would bolt at any moment, and when she did not leave, not even after the break, Ms. Ashleven was sure she would not return next time. But she came back for seven weeks running. With one week left in the class, Gail had not written one single word or spoken once. Ms. Ashleven knows there is a note about Gail somewhere in notebook 365 at the top of the stack to her right, a curious asterisk in her years of teaching memoir, but she does not open the book, does not thumb through the pages, wetting her fingers on the postage sponge. She doesn’t need to be reminded of Gail’s effect on her even before she saw that newspaper clipping this morning. Now here amidst this new notebook, the kernel of it all? She begins to write again.

At the start of the second-to-last “Memoir! And! You!” meeting, Ms. Ashleven gave Gail one of her own blank notebooks. She now regrets writing on the cover: *Get in touch with what is scary to you*. [Ms. Ashleven underscores this part and shakes her head: “I’m trying. I’m trying.”] She regrets writing on the first page: *the past is not ever as bad as it seems--it’s worse*. [Ms. Ashleven nods here.] On the second page she wrote: *explore so you can get somewhere*. On the last page: *if you got here without writing anything, why are you taking my class?* Gail walked out. Ms. Ashleven took it as a good sign that Gail left with the notebook. She told the class to find some significance in a conflict that had occurred with someone they hardly knew, and she hurried down the hallway. She yelled after Gail all the way out of the building and across the parking lot before Gail stopped. Ms. Ashleven did not have a cane yet, but she was still slow on her feet, and Gail shook her head as she got closer. Gail had a wry smirk which only came in focus under the street lamps when Ms. Ashleven was a few feet away. A smirk she recognized as desperate and depressed, a false shield protecting a vulnerable center. The stars were out above them, diminished by the parking lot lights, and first Ms. Ashleven looked at the sky as she caught her breath and then looked at Gail’s lit figure and her dozen shadows that spread across the pavement from

her feet like charcoal petals.

“You know why I take your class?” Gail asked without any prompting. “Because my husband sculls.”

A sound arose from Ms. Ashleven’s throat. *Sculls*, she might have echoed aloud. As she met Gail’s eyes, she had to regard them with suspicion. But she knew Gail had no connection to her, no interest in her history. “That one word,” she thought, “one word...the power to strip my life bare, trying to protect what I demand my students to reveal.” Ms. Ashleven struggled for words: “It doesn’t matter why you’re here. Don’t you want to put your life in perspective?”

“Perspective? I did your exercises. They were shit. I don’t want to know what I used to be like. I don’t even want to know what I’m like now.”

“But you keep coming back. You must...” Ms. Ashleven reached out, but Gail backed away. “Come back to class. I’m going to talk about writing in the third person, a trick for those of us who can’t detach ourselves. A way to break through the barrier of our own skin from the outside, working inward. It’s the way I work. It might work for you too.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I know it sounds strange, but writing is funny. Sometimes you have to use tricks to get you there. I even write about myself writing. It’s difficult to explain, but it works for me. The important thing is getting there.”

“If you have to trick yourself, why do it?”

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

“Socrates,” Gail said. “His apology. Or I guess really Plato, right?”

Ms. Ashleven nodded, but she did not know. She thought it was her own.

“I know a thing or two,” Gail said. “Does that surprise you? Did you think I was just another one of your housewives trying to make sense of her boring, unloved life?”

Ms. Ashleven could not find any words.

“Do you want my memoir so badly?” Gail asked. “Maybe you can make my life worth living, maybe you can be my Plato.” She took a deep breath and then began: “I’m fifty-five. Wait, I mean *she’s* fifty-five.” Gail’s incredulous laugh, it hurt Ms. Ashleven to the bone. “This really does work. Look at me go!” Gail paused and started again: “Gail Steward doesn’t have any children. Her hair has been gray since she was twenty-seven. After the merger at the bank and the transfer from Boston, her husband Tom eats, drinks, sleeps, and breathes sculling, but she thinks she is more obsessed than he is. She spies on him, you know, while he’s out on the lake, binoculars. We used to vacation here. I used to love Tanglewood.”

“Stockbridge Bowl, right? Where he sculls?”

It was Gail’s turn to regard Ms. Ashleven with suspicion.

“Keep going, please, forgive my desire for specifics.”

“I, I mean, *she* talks to her sister only when she is desperate and has downed a good bit of brandy, *raspberry* brandy. When her mother was dying, she was too stubborn to make amends even though her mother did not remember what had happened. All Gail’s friendships from Boston couldn’t span the distance. I wonder why? Back in Boston Gail once rushed home as soon as she found out her best friend’s husband was having an affair, just so she could be the first one to tell her friend the news. I didn’t even bother to take my jacket off or say hello. She never spoke to me again.

“Hey, get this.” Gail took a deep breath, her eyes a little wild. “You will love this one: once, when we were at Virginia Beach for our twenty-fifth anniversary, while Tom was still asleep, I walked to the end of the boardwalk and watched the bungee jumpers fall from a crane over an air bag, and before I knew it they were strapping me in and hoisting me up. I didn’t even scream. Sometimes when I’m chopping vegetables I think of stabbing him. So much for your third person.”

“No, you see *it worked*. That was beautiful.”

“You’re more screwed up than I thought.”

“Come back to class. Tell me more. You’re getting somewhere.”

“Yes, you and your *getting somewhere*, always with getting somewhere. Every class you tell us writing will get us somewhere. It’s almost as if you’re trying to convince yourself. I’d like to know where writing about your life for what is it? Twenty years?”

“Twenty-seven as of last week.”

“Twenty-seven years, and where has it gotten you? In the third person, too! Talk about avoidance. I guess I understand why you do this and why you want to pry into everybody in the class’s life. You must be sick of your own.”

[*Oh Gail, Ms. Ashleven says to the notebook, if you only knew.*]

“But thanks for the notebook. We don’t have the kind of money we used to. Our house is drafty, and with winter coming we need some kindling.” She walked away across the parking lot.

“Kindling for your thoughts,” Ms. Ashleven yelled after her. “See you next week.”

But Gail never came back. Ms. Ashleven closes the notebook and leans back in her chair and stares at the Eakins poster. She had a relationship with a sculler once. A young girl herself then: fifty years old, still looking for adventure, still meeting men in the aisles of the used bookstore where she had worked off and on. It was a whirlwind romance, a water

funnel, in her life of dusty tornadoes. He was married, the only time in her life she knowingly entered into an affair. For half of one summer and into autumn until two weeks before the leaves fell, she would drive to Stockbridge Bowl at the crack of dawn and watch him row. She would hug the blanket he gave her against her breasts and tip her toe into the water to make it seem as if she had some other reason to be there. She liked that he did not flinch from his training. After years of men pursuing her, it was nice to be ignored. He was ten years older than she was, rich and vigorous; he had retired early, and he and his wife had a home in Boston and in Lenox, where they would come in the middle of June and depart when the leaves were at their peak. His wife, he said, liked the idea of splendor and beauty and could endure decline only when it came to certain friends.

He would not even wave to her from the water. He told her to arrive later, but she always came early. For her the watching—his stare as he moved forward looking back, the stare into nothing but himself as he stared out into the world he moved away from, his hands crossing over each other, the slide of his thighs, the gentle but dramatic heave of his back, the harmony of muscle, wood, and water—all these were more satisfying than what they did when they finally met on top of the blanket amid the birches and burdocks on the east side of the lake.

But at the end of September when the leaves were at their brightest, he was not on the lake. She went every morning for a week, went to the birches and sat under them on the blanket. She would pick the spiny burdocks and let them hang from her fingers. It was cold then, and she held herself and watched the empty water and the crows cawing across the narrow inlet. Everything orange and red, the edges of the water where the trees reflected the borders of the sky. He and his wife left too soon, their phone already disconnected. The leaves held on to their peak for two weeks more.

On the morning of the first hard frost, she lay naked on the blanket, her skin arming itself in goose flesh. She did not allow herself to shiver as she looked through the stiff leaf bodies falling as if the frost had bitten them off at the stem. How to describe the death, the utter emptiness of their unnatural touch as they landed on her body? Beyond the falling leaves the blue sky jumped forward and back, eventually taking on the roundness of the world as the leaves buried her, and she thought that for once by looking out she had seen what was inside of her.

What were those months in the grand scale of her life? Love? The only time it really had been love? She wishes she could have won Gail over with love. Sculling, it was a bond that she could have pursued had she ever seen Gail again. Their meeting, a coincidence that should have been explored. They could have talked about it over coffee. Commiserated. She

had never commiserated with anyone, and she was sure Gail hadn't either, and that was what they both needed. She might have met Gail to watch her husband, and maybe when she had gained her trust, she might have told another living soul about that romance that ended thirty years ago and never found its way into the memoir she started writing because of it—the thing she needed to do to hold her life together, the thing she clothed herself for the following thirty years to keep off the frost, the stiff dead leaves accumulating on her skin, pages and leaves and love... She was certain Gail would understand and sympathize. Three years and so many times Gail was there with her, but always a haze, a gentle reminder, a rehearsed conversation in the night, a name in the phonebook she could never bring herself to call, filling in the gaps around her life.

What would she really have told Gail? *It wasn't just the sculling, it might as well have been me screwing your husband?* Ms. Ashleven can only laugh at herself as she stops the shiver that runs through her. Moving forward, looking back. Sometimes her mind crosses itself and Gail becomes the wife and Tom her lover. Her chair might as well be the sliding seat of a scull. Can she say that she is moving forward? he gathers the wool blanket from off the floor and wraps it around her shoulders, and it covers her with that music again, that music she can still feel even through two sweaters and a turtleneck, the music of her naked back working atop its finely woven itch. She opens notebook 366, and quickly flips by the newspaper clipping that made any meeting impossible. She thinks for a moment about tea as she examines the ink smudges on her swollen hands. She rummages through the top drawer of her desk and pulls the five-dollar bill out of a yellowed envelope. She flattens it just above the notebook and begins to write.

At the Head of the Charles Regatta (on that day that would be their last), they had woken up at three-thirty to get to Tom's early start time. Outside, it was cold and dark and he would not let her help put the scull on the roof rack. She had never seen him so nervous. After an hour he pulled over, jumped out of the car and disappeared into the dark, where she could hear him heaving. Gail drove the rest of the way. He did not talk. Twice he made her stop to check the ropes stabilizing the scull and twice more he vomited. The heavy rain that pounded against the car as they drove east along the MassPike was just a cold ocean mist by the time they arrived in Boston.

When he was changing in the front seat as they sat in the crowded parking lot full of competitors, she noticed the veins in his abdomen. When she pictured him, she still saw the man with his belly looped over his belt. As his start time grew closer, he barked at one of his coworkers who came over to wish him luck, another he avoided. She had to re-pin his number because he did not think she did it right the first time. When he was on what

seemed like his tenth trip to the blue line of Port-a-Pottys, she walked away without a word and without the umbrella, the binoculars swinging from her neck.

It was seven-thirty now and Gail felt as if it were afternoon. There was a world of difference between three-thirty and five when she usually woke up and followed her husband. She had been excited to come back to Boston. She had made reservations at the Arlington for the weekend and had left messages with their Boston friends. But when she told Tom about her plans all he could think about was where he'd put his scull and how he needed to rest and get to bed early, so she had cancelled everything, and as Tom kept telling her there was no need for her to come, the more she was resolved to go. So here she was in Boston again. First she walked by their old building, but she did not see anyone she knew. The carpeting in the entrance had been changed to green. Through the glass doors she could see where their name used to be on their mailbox. She crossed back over the Charles. She was wet and cold. The oldest scullers started first. She had seen in the list of competitors that someone who was eighty-five was participating. Hovering in another parking lot, she saw women her own age and much older with muscles in their arms, not so nervous as her husband, baring their bodies as they changed indiscreetly in their cars—the direct focus of their eyes.

The mist stopped as she walked along Memorial Drive. Her clothes were damp and her corduroys chafed. There were no crowds, just a scattering of people, only half of whom seemed interested in the race. The scullers moved upriver in the same direction she walked. They were not moving much faster than she was. These old scullers struggled with their oars in such slow motion it was painful to watch. Her husband was certainly smoother than these men. Steam rose from their bodies and lungs. The thought crossed her mind that she would like to see her husband a little haggard. She imagined taunting him by walking alongside him for the entire length of the course; she would yell encouraging words the whole way, but keep up with him.

“What happened?” someone yelled out.

One of the scullers Gail had been watching had stopped. His face was in his hands, and the oars slipped from the oarlocks and floated away. She brought the binoculars to her eyes, dialed for focus, and saw her husband. Of course it was.

He was sobbing into his hands, bouncing in his stalled boat, and causing delicate ripples in the river. She wondered if it had anything to do with her.

Along the riverbank a group of early morning gawkers crowded together pointing their umbrellas as the official motorboat guided her husband to the opposite shore, where there was an empty grass banking backed by the concrete barrier which separated the river from

the speeding cars along Storrow Drive. Gail watched as the oars floated toward her. "They let anyone do it," one person said. "It's not like the marathon where you have to qualify." "I bet that guy has a Harley," someone else said. "He's got midlife crisis written all over him." "Maybe his wife has cancer," a young woman suggested. "Then what's he doing out here?" her male companion, a boy with a goatee, retorted, the same one who had suggested the midlife crisis. "He's doing it for her," the woman replied, turning away from him. When her husband's oars snagged at the bank in front of her, Gail looked at the gawkers. "I suppose someone should get those," someone said, but no one did. Another sculler was gliding by as if nothing had happened. Finally Gail claimed them and the people looked at her suspiciously. "I know him. I'll bring them to him," she said as she kneeled to bend over the banking. As she stretched, the binoculars touched the green water.

Getting hold of the oars, she lifted them out, dripping. It was the first time she had touched anything having to do with her husband's scull. The oars were long and light. Her only experience had been wooden canoe paddles somewhere back in her summer camp past. She held them up. She couldn't believe how light they were. They felt as if they might get away from her, rise into the air.

The gawkers had dispersed except for a woman she had not noticed before. The woman was about Gail's age and wore a dark green evening dress with a plunging neckline. Her makeup looked a week old and there was one vein of mascara on her cheek. Her hair was wet and frizzy. The woman's neck looked barren and vulnerable between the deep V of the dress and the way she held her chin high and forward. She had something clenched in one fist. When she realized the woman was staring at her, a chill ran through her.

She saw EMTs running toward the group that surrounded her husband. After failing to get the motorboat's attention by waving the oars, she held the oars to her shoulder, and without looking at the woman, she headed for the bridge a half-mile up river. The oars were light on her shoulder and she walked as quickly as she could.

By the time she got to the other side, they had taken her husband away, and everyone was gone. The sun was trying to break through. On the river the scullers moved gracefully, each one seeming younger than the previous. She looked to where the woman had been standing, but she was gone. At her back, the cars blindly passed, their tires hissing over the drying pavement. She wondered why she had not told the gawkers that it was her husband, his oars, and by extension her own. Why had she not yelled? Why had she not run? She squatted, and with her fingers she traced the impression her husband had left in the muddy grass, rimmed with what seemed like a hundred footprints.

"That's something," Ms. Ashleven says to the notebook.

It was early afternoon before Gail found her husband in their car with his eyes closed and his hands on the steering wheel. The scull was already secured to the roof rack. It did not matter that the sun was now shining, that the sky was blue, the day warm. She was tired of people sending her in wrong directions, tired of her stiffened clothes, tired of carrying the oars. Her worry had sparked her anger; her anger had consumed the last hour; but when his eyes opened and turned to her without moving his head, they were flat, and her anger faded. She didn't think she had ever seen him this tired. He got out of the car, slowly propping himself on the door. He was wearing his jeans and the lake-smelling sweatshirt he used to wear on cool mornings before he got that new warmup suit, which was balled up in the back seat.

"How did you get them?" he asked, staring at the oars.

"They floated right to me."

"You saw?"

"I was there, but you know me. I only saw you after they took you to the other side. Someone said it looked like you cramped."

Tom snorted, but then nodded.

"By the time I got to the other side," Gail continued, "you were gone. How are you?"

"I'm OK. They made me get checked out." He ran his eyes along the length of one of the oars. "It was nothing," he said. "I'm fine."

He reached out for the oars. Gail was going to apologize for leaving him this morning, but did not. She was going to ask what really happened out there, but did not. And for a moment they held the oars together.

After they stopped to eat at a diner they frequented when they lived in Boston, she insisted on driving home, but he told her he'd rather keep his mind occupied. As they drove and Boston's skyline faded behind them, they would begin to talk about things. Small things they made epic and grand when they were young lovers, the same things they didn't give stock to after they were married, the things they feared to speak of in their forties and fifties, and, if they were given the chance, the same things they would begin to embrace again as an old married couple. A start. *Things*. Just things. I don't know what they were. They just talked about things that they had not spoken of in years, everyday things taken for granted. After two hours of talking, they grew quiet, Gail lost herself in the side mirror, and Tom died, the silent eruption of a heart; they would pass the elevation sign, and Gail would not know he was dead, would never know if their marriage had come back together because everything—this renewed connection, the road disappearing, the car flipping—everything happened so fast.

Ms. Ashleven keeps the pen gripped in one hand and the corner of the notebook gripped in the other. She takes in a deep breath and sighs it out as my pen blots the notebook. Maybe if I had ever had the chance to speak to Gail—if we had sat among the birches and burdocks with the warm sun slanted upon us—I would have told her about my own trip to the Head of the Charles, where I confronted my sculler before the race, told him if he did not keep seeing me I would tell his wife. He was taping his hands. He looked me up and down and shook his head: “She already knows.” I begged to see him just once more, we could meet that night, he knew how discreet I could be. He looked at me again, one moment—it was enough, his gray eyes cold—and continued to wind the tape around his hands. I backed away. He lifted his scull and put it in the water, gathered his oars, and in a few strokes he had pulled himself away into the center of the river, his eyes straight through me.

Later, when his wife stopped to watch the scullers from a grassy bank, I stood behind her. She had a scarf thrown casually around her neck. I approached her. I wanted to grab hold of it and strangle that neck—I loved him so much. She turned and her face contorted into a polite smile, that moneyed city persona, that fine line of mascara and that perfect eight-in-the-morning lip gloss. He did tell her, I thought; I was too amazed to introduce myself, but then she took a step back and pulled her wallet from her purse and held out a five-dollar bill: “This is all I have.” The bill drooped stiffly: its corners, new and crisp—her four, short and clear-polished nails along the edge of the bill, her thumb pinching it from beneath—fingers that had touched her husband when? That morning? Last night? Months ago? I looked at the money, then to the wife, not understanding her gesture. Behind her the scullers passed, silent but for the lap of water and the gasp of breath—echoes in the still air. At that moment, all I wished was for him to pass. I wanted him to see me standing next to his wife; I wanted him to see how much power I had over him; I wanted him to break down on that river; I wanted full destruction upon both their lives. But none of the scullers were him. “Take it,” the wife said. “Get yourself something to eat. Do you know about the Fens shelter? There are good people there to help you. It’s very clean.” I tasted the stale alcohol still thick on my tongue. I looked down at my wet, disheveled dress, my mud splattered legs and shoes. I had walked all night looking for courage and thirty years later still have found none. The notebooks started. Now there is just one. And even now in this kernel here before me, I dare not write his name. *The third person. The back door. Taking liberties. Getting there.* My only chance to change things and I can’t...

Ms. Ashleven places the five-dollar bill in the crease of the last page and shuts the notebook. “Fiery” catches her eye as the flap closes. Even now the seconds keep ticking.

The idea is to control time, and Ms. Ashleven has to laugh at that. A memoir must control time, she has said it over and over. She pulls the blanket tight around her. But the time, the hours and minutes that make up this body, this wrinkled skin and these fragile bones, this deteriorating mind, time won't detach itself, won't imbue itself into a notebook, yet, all the same, without any trouble at all it has leapt into this blanket, and no matter what I do she cannot beat it out.

The cats approach. "I'll feed you," she tells them as she closes the notebook again.

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