
K. F. ENGGASS

I Hope To God You Smoke

My personal ritual when summer break begins is to say goodbye to my fourth graders, go home, climb up on the roof and hook up the swamp cooler, thus signaling the official start of the season. I was putting away the ladder when our neighbor across the street, Mrs. de la Serno, waved me over and asked me if I would take care of her house and pets while she and her family visited relatives in Texas. Even though we'd been neighbors for several years I didn't know much about the de la Sernos. I had been unaware, for example, that in addition to all those kids, the de la Sernos owned two hamsters, one blue-tailed lizard, a handful of fish, and a few potted plants.

I said yes to Mrs. de la Serno even though I knew my wife Greta would not be pleased. Greta has a thing about people asking for favors, a dislike of borrowers, sort of a "give them an inch and they'll take a mile" attitude. She is far too organized to borrow anything herself, which is how she justifies her seeming lack of generosity. If she can plan ahead, why can't they? I say "seeming" because I want you to know Greta can be quite generous when she is the one doing the offering.

You never saw a person slave harder and with more beautiful determined cheerfulness than Greta to keep our son Davis alive. Since it didn't work out (Davis died during surgery two years

ago) and since we were forever beyond consolation anyway, in my view it became our duty to reassure others by acting normal. It is up to the afflicted to comfort the rest of us. I say it to my students all the time: you can think what you want *inwardly* but in this class *outwardly* you have to behave. Greta called acting normal glossing over the truth. She called it forgetting. I called it facing reality or moving forward, Greta said I was living a lie—and so on until the whole thing slid underground as such things do if you want to stay married.

Mrs. de la Serno had invited me over the next afternoon to see what was what, so at about four o'clock I headed over there.

Greta glanced up from her book as I left. "You're not bringing any of their various wildlife back over here," she warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I said, although I did sometimes have a Pied Piper effect.

I could hear shouting and thumping from inside the de la Serno house as I approached the front door. The screen door didn't shut properly and it screeched when I pulled it open to knock on the main frame. I don't know how anyone heard me with all that racket but one of the children, José, I'm pretty sure, or Angelo, answered

while the others pushed and shoved and generally bounced off the walls behind him.

"Hey, guys," I said. "What's this? Football practice is indoors now?"

"Naaah," one of the younger ones said in that way I always like, half scornful and half ready to believe anything, while José or Angelo stared right at me and blasted, "That Mr. A man is here." Somewhere inside, Mrs. de la Serno called to me to come in.

Of course we all know the house isn't the best kept on the block. Their idea of landscaping, aside from tumbleweeds, is a combination of scattered toys and pickup trucks all in various states of disrepair. Even so I was surprised at the condition of the interior of their home. I stepped around an empty bookcase lying on its side. A frame with no picture hung crookedly above the fireplace. Socks and underwear were draped on every available surface like Greta's grandmother's pristine doilies multiplied and gone mad. It was as if the de la Sernos had seen a home somewhere and were trying to imitate it without really understanding a home's purpose or the function of its parts. Still, I acted like it wasn't anything unusual.

"How's it going, Mrs. de la Serno," I said. Mrs. de la Serno must have just come home from work. She appeared awfully coiffed for her surroundings.

"Valerie."

"Valerie de la Serno," I repeated. I rolled it out like a red carpet. I admit I always did like saying *de la Serno*. Still do. Sounds aristocratic, and I

said so.

"Does it?" She moved a stack of newspapers from what had once been an upholstered dining room chair but looked as if some of her critters had been nesting in it. I sat down without a blink. Behind her on the wall was a purple-black handprint flecked with what I hoped were tiny seeds. Raspberry preserves?

"Sorry about the mess. We're doing laundry." Mrs. de la Serno balanced the newspapers on a pile of debris containing a large spider-like sculpture, a chandelier without the bulbs, I realized. I couldn't help it, I glanced up and saw the chain and exposed wires dangling above the table.

She noticed and shrugged. "Kids!"

I imagined one of them swinging like Tarzan and with that my view of the house shifted: less chaos, I decided, more passing carnival. Just for an instant I wished I lived smack in the middle of it all.

"I'm waiting until they grow up to fix up the place," Mrs. de la Serno said.

"I know what you mean," I answered, and she gave me a funny look. I could see her remembering our son would never grow up. I looked away, briefly, to give her time. Now her kids were lolling about the living room, lulled by the giant stun-gun of television.

"Suburbs are weird," I told Mrs. de la Serno. "Here we've been living practically side by side all these years and I've never been inside your home before." Then I gave her my best big old smile.

I got my instructions and a key and crossed the street. Greta was in the kitchen, wrestling

with one of the crisper bins in our refrigerator. The tracks were broken and it took some work to jam the drawer in place. It was a pain, I have to admit. Our fridge was basically an antique, on its last legs and always crammed to the gills with stuff we didn't feel like eating, but it looked great compared to what I'd just seen.

"Well?" Greta asked. She placed three carrots on the cutting board.

"It's a zoo over there," I said. "You don't even want to know."

"Lots of kids."

"Yeah. They don't seem to have enough beds. Well, it looks like they, the adults, have a bed, but there's only one other bed in the house. Do the kids all sleep in one bed? All seven? I can't figure it out."

"You were checking out all the bedrooms?"

"That's where the animals are. I couldn't help it. Most of the doors are off the hinges."

"Not much money."

"This is beyond money. They have a gigantic TV."

"Of course."

"Of course."

Greta peeled the carrots and cut them into sticks. She arranged a half-circle of cucumber rounds, some black olives, and the carrots on our etched-glass platter.

"What's for dinner?" I asked. With extra deliberateness she nudged the carrot peelings toward the disposal. I always forget she won't answer that question. I walked over to the magnetic board on the fridge where she'd written our meals

for the week. Tucked partway under the board was a photo of Davis looking pleased with himself plunked in our wok and a postcard I'd sent to Greta in the short interval before I'd followed her out here to New Mexico. In a little bubble above the head of a woman the postcard said, "Of all the things I've lost, I miss my mind the most." Today's meal entry was, "mloaf/mashpot/crudites." Now I realized I did smell meatloaf and just then the oven let out one of its metallic heat bangs, so you see Greta was entirely right. I had enough clues and didn't need to ask.

"The changing state of matter," I said. Sweat trickled down my back under my T-shirt. The kitchen was sweltering. To tell the truth, it wasn't a good day for meatloaf.

Greta wiped the counter in slow, steady circles. "How long are they going to be gone?"

"Twelve days."

"Twelve days!"

"Don't worry, Greta." I marked the day of their return, June 11, on the calendar. "You won't have to do anything. I'll take care of everything."

I was wrong, though. On the second day Mrs. de la Serno's, Valerie's, swamp cooler sprang a leak, sending sparkling arcs of water into the early morning sun. It was lovely in a screwed-up way. Run-off flowed clear around the corner almost to the Morrisons'. It must've been leaking all night. I got up on the roof, which sagged alarmingly around the base of the cooler, then I climbed back down.

Inside the house water poured steadily into the

kitchen. A chunk of ceiling had fallen, part landing on a table, part on the floor, and insulation had swollen, bulging through the resultant hole like an obscene pink hernia or a prolapsed stoma, just to name a few of Davis's former difficulties.

I shut off the water to the cooler, unplugged everything, and tried to think what else to do. Their kitchen had the same layout as ours, so now I knew what ours would look like after a hurricane. All the houses here in the neighborhood had been built in the space of six months, going up about as fast as a wildfire but in reverse, if I may mix disasters. I picked up a few pieces of plaster and set them on the counter. I hauled the dripping floor rug outside and hung it over the porch railing. A strand of spaghetti, white as an exposed slug in overturned earth, clung to the underside.

I went back in and waded through the kitchen to the utility closet but couldn't find a mop, so I retreated to the bedrooms and fed the fish their flakes, checked the hamsters' water bottle hanging there like a little IV, turned on the lizard's heat lamp so he'd warm up enough to eat his two crickets per day. The crickets had to be alive and kicking to be of interest to the lizard. The insects lived in egg cartons in a screened cage in the master bedroom and were chirping like crazy in the dim light. How did Valerie and her husband sleep? I fished my two victims into a test tube and they scabbled frantically to get out.

Sometimes, I have to reflect, Greta is right about what people will ask of you.

I was tapping on the lizard's aquarium trying

to get him to liven up so I could feed him when I heard Greta call my name. I came out of the de la Serno back bedroom still holding the crickets and found Greta peering through the screen, afraid to enter. I opened the door.

"What did you *do* to this place?" she asked.

"I didn't 'do' anything. The cooler broke. I can't find a mop."

"You never came back. I thought maybe you'd been murdered by burglars." She followed me to the kitchen, picking her way along sodden carpet like a cat in wet grass. In the kitchen the leak had slowed to a drip, radiating ripples that died against the base of the cabinets. "Oh my God." Greta seemed truly amazed.

"Come see the lizard eat," I offered, raising the test tube. The crickets were still energetically butting heads against that invisible barrier, confounded by glass. Greta gave me a completely blank look. "The lizard," I repeated. "Greta?"

"You didn't even tell me the half of it." Greta's nose wrinkled, even though we were back safe in our own living room with its book-lined shelves and spare, Danish furniture. We'd finished mopping the best we could over there, using our own mop, and we had moved the hamsters into Davis's old room. I'd been worried that without the cooler in operation the little guys might keel over in the New Mexico heat.

"You know you'll have to call her," Greta said. She still looked subdued, even after a shower, her hair up and braided, three shades of blond.

"I guess I'll have to."

"Well, they can't come home to this. It'll be too big a shock."

"I'll ruin their vacation."

"It's not *you* ruining *their* vacation," Greta said, sounding a bit more like herself. "It's *them* ruining *ours*. You have to call."

"I'll give them until tomorrow."

Greta shook her head at me.

"It's just a house," I reminded her. "One more day of blissful ignorance."

I have to think, though, is ignorance blissful? Davis had turned blue during one of his massive chokes and I called the doctor and basically said, "Fix him. Just fix him." I didn't even want Davis around right at that moment, just had to stop that choking, whatever it took. A few days later, we witnessed a pediatric intern in the ICU perform a cutdown on the inside of Davis's elbow in order to insert a catheter, in order to hook him up to an IV, in order to prep him for more surgery, in order to, as it turned out, kill him. His arm looked just like a raw chicken breast but skinny, those little pockets of yellow fat under the skin. I, for one, couldn't believe there was any fat left on him. It took the intern forever with the catheter and when she finally succeeded Greta and I left the hospital without a word and went home. We closed the curtains and went straight to bed in the middle of the afternoon, but after only a moment someone knocked on the door. I couldn't face it, wouldn't, so Greta got up. A while later she came back.

"Maybe you can tell me what that was about," she said, lying back down. One of our other

neighbors, not Valerie de la Serno, had come by asking to borrow an envelope.

Greta asked him what size, got him the envelope, but he'd acted strange, hesitating for a moment by the door, then shrugging and leaving. She wondered if he'd somehow figured out about Davis's latest setback and wanted to offer comfort but couldn't think what to say.

"No, that wasn't it," I said, because I saw the whole thing. "You should have given him more than one envelope."

"How am I supposed to know that?" Greta said. "If you say *an* envelope I'm going to give you *one* envelope. How many envelopes am I supposed to give them if they say one envelope?"

"Seven," I said.

"Seven?" Her voice was so outraged that I had to laugh. We both laughed, if I remember, for way too long. Then we got up, splashed water on our faces, and went back to the hospital.

We were lying on our backs side by side in the dark, listening to the rhythmic squeak of the hamster wheel. Two more days had passed and I still hadn't called Valerie de la Serno about the breakdown of her cooler.

"What are their names?" Greta asked. "Our nocturnal friends."

"I didn't ask."

"I feel like I should know their names since they are now guests in our house."

"I told you I'm sorry. Look on the bright side. That leak watered one of their philodendrons."

"Just don't." Greta got up. She was gone

awhile. I got up, too, to see what she was doing. I saw from the doorway that she was in Davis's room on hands and knees giving the hamsters the eye—those poor, hapless rodents trying to stand up to that enormous pale-gray gaze right on the other side of the bars.

"Hey." She turned to look at me and I helped her up. Her knees were textured from the carpet.

"Meet Squirrely," she said. "And Stinky. All they do is scratch themselves. I fail to see the attraction, but at least now they have names."

We got back in bed. I put my hand on her shoulder.

"It's so hot," Greta said, and I took my hand back.

"Not as hot as it is over there," I reminded her.

"I was watching a commercial today and it showed a winter scene and I almost cried. I am sick of being so hot."

I could hear whole choruses of crickets. Maybe the free ones were calling to their trapped brothers at the de la Serno house, a chirping opera. "You know what I don't like?" I said. "I hate it when crickets crawl. They look terrible when they crawl, legs all bent up. Jumping's one thing, what they're meant for, but crawling is another."

"That woman has a lot of nerve."

We waited some more. Would sleep be impossible? Probably.

"I had gerbils once when I was a kid," Greta said.

I liked it when she told stories about her child-

hood because mostly she never did. "I didn't know that."

"It wasn't a big success. Charlie and George. Charlie and Georgette, actually. All of a sudden I had about ten, fifteen gerbils, even counting the ones Georgette ate at birth. My mother was furious. She made me take the whole batch back."

"That's a life lesson for you."

"Sure was. Life, sex, birth, death, and cannibalism all in one cage."

"Wait. Isn't cannibalism just for humans?" I asked.

"One that eats the flesh of its own kind." Greta has always been extremely useful as a dictionary. "I am so *hot*. Sometimes I think I'm going to just climb inside the refrigerator. You come home, you can't find me, you go for a beer. I'm in the refrigerator. I could practically live in there preserved for all eternity. Of course I'd asphyxiate myself but it would be worth it."

"That's because it's not cooling off enough at night." Even I could hear my sudden teacherly tone. "Swamp coolers don't work when it's at all humid."

"I don't care *why*. Do you think I care *why*?" Her profile was dark against the dim glow of the pillow. "Answer me this: Why do we always wait until our appliances fall apart to get new ones? What is it about us that we can't be preemptive? We're as bad as *they* are in our own way."

"They're not bad."

"Ha. You know she came over here once."

"Mrs. de la Serno?"

"A long time ago. I can't remember why she

came over. To borrow something, probably, knowing this neighborhood. I told her Davis was back in the ICU and I was about to head over there. I was in a hurry, that's what that meant, but she came in and sat herself right down. She was pregnant, I remember that. She said that in some cultures they bring the infants right out there into the middle of the village, let everyone breathe on them or whatever, and it separates the strong from the weak. I'm not sure why she thought it would be useful to tell me that."

"Maybe she was just being friendly. Inviting you to the village."

"Oh, right."

"Seriously."

"And maybe she was telling me to get rid of my kid for the benefit of mankind. I said to her, 'Well, Davis has been in a crowd of nurses, at least.'"

"What did she say to that?"

"Oh, you know. It deflected her. I think she laughed."

"Maybe there's something to it. All those kids. You couldn't knock them down with trucks."

"You can't wish for other kids to have birth defects just because yours did."

"You can't?"

"Well, *I* can." Greta said, "But *you* shouldn't. You're the neighborhood good guy."

It was 8:30 a.m., late for me. I forced myself out of bed and put on some shorts. As I walked down the hall, blinking at the light, the doorbell rang. I looked in the kitchen as I went by. The

vegetable crisper from the refrigerator was on the floor upside down with a pale leafy limb of celery poking out, and the orange Mrs. de la Serno had given me for the crickets had rolled like a decapitated head, but still in its clear plastic bag, ending up near Greta's foot. Greta was reading the newspaper.

I stopped. The doorbell rang again.

"Better get that," Greta said, not looking up.

I unlocked the door. "Morning."

She'd been leaving but she turned back to face me. I'd seen her around getting in and out of a van up the street, frizzy fake-red hair, but I hadn't seen her up close before. She looked better at a distance.

"I hope to God you smoke," she said.

"Sorry." I wondered why I was apologizing.

"Well, then, you got a lighter?"

"No. Sorry. I might have some matches."

"Matches." She thought about it. "Got any bleach?"

That threw me for a second. "Bleach?"

"Yeah. If it helps, imagine I'm doing the laundry."

"Imagine?"

"Yeah."

"Sure." I didn't ask her how much bleach. I didn't ask who, what, where, when, why, or how. Remembering all my rules for normalcy I gave her the whole entire jug.

The new Sears was just down the hill, having moved into the vacated Montgomery Ward's store at the east end of the mall. As we were riding up

the escalator we passed one of my former parents from school riding on the downward path. He got to the bottom, then turned around and came right back up in slow motion to say hello.

While we reminisced, Greta sidled farther and farther away toward rows of refrigerators. There had to be about fifty, sixty different refrigerators, at least. The stainless steel look was big these days, we agreed, and then the guy launched into a long story about his son, who was now in the army. I was nodding and chuckling in all the right places and imagining a ten-year-old in camouflage fatigues but mostly I was watching Greta, who was wandering like a child lost in a petrified forest, opening doors here and there and peering in. Soon she was accosted by a young fellow with a Sears nameplate and dark hair gilded an unnatural yellow on the tips, but she fended him off without much trouble. I could just see her brain clicking over, pure Greta: abandoned without a clue but determined never to ask for help. When Davis died she didn't join any support group and she certainly did not talk much to me. She read a lot instead, books by cancer survivors and mothers of sons with AIDS, one by the wife of a stroke victim who pasted notes on the washer so the guy could do the laundry at least, and memoirs by soldiers. When I finally asked her why war she said, "Obviously I'm enjoying the death of innocence."

"Here's the deal," she said when I finally got over there. "I'm sick of how we are. I don't want to go through the whole procedure we always go through. No heavy-duty thinking, OK? Let's just

pick one and go with it."

"OK," I said, "This one." I put my hand on the closest beast, a monster side-by-side, gleaming black.

"Will it fit?" She smiled a little. "Does it come in almond?"

I looked at the tag. "They don't have almond anymore. They have *bisque*."

"*Bisque*. Ha."

I felt good. As you may have guessed, "Ha" is as big a laugh as you'll get from Greta these days.

The crickets had been dying in droves. I fed the survivors an orange slice and dampened a fresh wad of paper towel to set in their water dish. Feeding the crickets in order to keep them alive to feed to the lizard—I was running an entire ecosystem and only God knew what was growing in the ceiling by now. When I opened the front door twice per day the de la Serno house belched dankness just like one of those huge corrugated drainpipes we used to dare each other to enter when we were kids. Except hotter. Maybe the crickets needed some fresh air. I carried the cage outside and set it on the porch near the kitchen rug, which had dried stiff as a board.

That evening trying to find Greta I happened to look out our bedroom window.

Birds had gathered in a rough circle around the cricket cage, cocking their heads and hopping and chattering like expectant picnickers at a barbecue. Greta stood in the street nearby. Her elongated shadow bent over the curb and stretched

toward the de la Serno door. Something about her lone watchfulness, how thin and scooped-out she still seemed, finally made me locate my instructions and call Valerie de la Serno's cell phone number. I broke the news, and don't you know Valerie really did seem fine with it, didn't seem to care that her ceiling had fallen in, asked me to call her brother-in-law to check out the damage. I felt weirdly let down. What right did she have to be so blasé about it all? I couldn't think what I'd been avoiding by not calling her right away in the first place.

I drank a beer, then two, then three, sitting in the kitchen. Across the street two men were up on the roof of the de la Serno house pretending to know what they were doing by banging on the swamp cooler with a wrench, and in a matter of minutes the delivery truck from Sears would arrive to haul off the old and bring in the new. Greta was in the living room, just visible through the doorway. Every so often she would raise her voice and read me some quote from *The Scarlet Letter*. She rereads it every summer in preparation for yet another fall semester at the high school, dedicated public servant that she is.

Bisque. It was bothering me. Bisque suddenly sounded too yellow, too warm, like infant formula. Once when Greta had opened Davis's gastrostomy tube to feed him a milk curd had flown out, propelled like a visible burp, and had landed right in her cup of coffee. In the mornings she would sing Davis a goofy "airbag-airbag" song because his colostomy bag was always full of a night's gas, puffing out his pajamas like a balloon stuck on his abdo-

men. "Dance, Davis," we'd command, and like any normal kid he'd grab the edge of the coffee table, bend his knees and bounce up and down.

"What are you looking up?" Greta put down her book.

"Ignominious bisque."

"Just don't," she said.

"Here's what I hate about dictionaries. Now I have to look up vitreous."

"Glassy."

"Listen to this. 'Vitreous humor,'" I read, "'The clear colorless transparent jelly that fills the eyeball posterior to the lens.' Doesn't sound funny to me."

Greta followed me back to the kitchen.

I patted the refrigerator's broad, placid front, finally stripped of all magnets, photos and messages. I opened the door one final time and selected the last beer, the only thing left inside. "Farewell, dear refrigerator." As I pulled the plug I actually felt a pang. What were we in for next? "Goodbye, you old icebox."

"Oh, stop it," Greta said, but she sat with me at the kitchen table while we waited for the Sears guys—for the delivery—stealing sips of my beer and occasionally shaking her head at whatever her thoughts were as she unfolded and refolded our faded old blue-plaid dish towel.

What was bisque anyway? A creamy soup. Thick hot lobster bisque. In the years to come when neighbors dropped by to borrow a couple eggs, maybe some sour cream, they would ask us: why on earth did you buy that huge yellow refrigerator?

