
IN REGARD TO THE SOCK YOU LEFT IN THE COMMUNITY DRYER

Jonathan Starke

I once found your grocery list on the cement path that cuts between our apartments. The list was written in blue ink, a man's handwriting, frantic, squiggly T's and W's. You had about twelve things listed, but *case of soda* and *hamburger buns* were already crossed out, as if you'd realized there was no need for expectant plurals here, just you, a man alone in an apartment with bent and peeling heating grates and light switches that flip up but turn on no light.

Sometimes I wonder if you click those switches (I have them, too) and imagine where the light goes, to what distant spaces and people the wires and circuits travel from within our walls.

I've read of lonely men before, known too well how they talk to passersby at traffic lights; hold doors for people to get in a quick word; tear off a newspaper corner, jot their name and number on the sandy-gray paper, and hand it to a stranger, using phrases like *I know you don't know me* or *Please don't think I'm strange*, followed always by a *but*, a reason, an excuse, an attempt to justify a connection. Maybe I've lived in distant places with only voices on the other sides of walls to keep me company, where a woman I love, loved, may continue loving in one of those back-of-the-mind kind of ways, still walks along the streets of a small town in Oregon, never knowing all she did for me just by coming in and out of her apartment, speaking to her mother over the phone in a voice that could have been talking to me, up at me, through the whirl of the ceiling fan and the plaster and tile.

I know your kind of lonely.

I imagine yours to be worse than mine. I say this because of how I walk through the alley to the dumpster at night, a bag of trash in my hand, and always see your bedroom window open regardless of the season, a fan beating against the screen, *lump thump, lump thump*, as the dusty propeller spins. I remember one time this winter, when it was below freezing, so cold I didn't risk walking all the way to the dumpster, but hurled the trash bag from a good distance, and walked back toward my apartment. The *lump thump* stopped me this time, made me get close to the wall that separates us, peer inside through your bug-resin-covered screen. Though it was hard to see into your bedroom, I imagined I knew it exactly. The

small ringlets in your carpet, black burn marks from rolling over in bed and stubbing your cigarettes out in the dark. The way you line your shoes against the wall, all in a row, based on type: work boots, sneakers, sandals, spikes. Your dozens of melted-down candles stuck in thick glass bases, multi-colored paper clips in water-damaged Christmas tins, the last love letters you ever received, postmarked 1993, stashed at the bottom of a shoebox you place under your bed, something you'd pull out and touch at night. Instead you sit on the floor with your back against the wall, trying to forget, the ash of your cigarette crawling closer and closer to your fingertips. No woman has seen that room, and this is your seventh, eighth, ninth year in this crumbling apartment, so no woman can have seen how you've stuck hundreds of Dennis Rodman basketball cards to the walls; taped them at the corners with clear, skinny strands; organized them by team; by home and away jersey; by hair color. It fascinated you how this nobody from nowhere could rise to such heights, add a different tattoo for each rebounding title, each championship, each time he laid into another woman. You had dreams like that for yourself when you were young, but it wasn't basketball you wanted to play.

I know it was baseball you were really after because I saw you outside one day with your son. Could he have been anyone else's? I thought, *What is he doing here? Where did he come from?* I'd never seen you with a woman, never seen a woman enter or exit or even stride past this crumbling complex. I thought to look to the sky, to see if your son had drifted down from a brown-basketed balloon and landed on the lawn. I didn't take my eyes off of you, either of you. How could I? A five-year-old son out of nowhere—I just couldn't have imagined. You probably know nothing about my dreams of having my own son, about how I've never

been able to keep a woman around, make her dizzy with happiness, get a solid grip on her to the point where I could have what you have. So I opened my door and put the groceries on the couch, heard them topple over, the thunk of glass and plastic. Then I went to the corner of the living room and pulled the curtain aside with two fingers, held the linen open for a long time. I watched you walk across the yard, get down on one knee, reducing yourself to his little height, and pitch a Wiffle ball in the air. I saw its arc, the way it came down toward your son's cherry-red bat, how it whistled by as he swung and missed and beat the bat in the dirt. See, you did something there I've always been afraid I'd do wrong: you told him it was okay, that failure is okay. I couldn't hear you say it, but I didn't have to—it was all in the way you got up off your knee and didn't even brush the stiff grass from your kneecap, just walked over to him and touched him on the shoulder, kissed the top of his head, took the wide part of the bat in your hand, the sweet spot, and rubbed it over like you were giving him magic.

Sometimes when I'm pushing my cart down the grocery aisle, I think I'll run into you and some of that magic will rub off on me. I go after work, sometimes at midnight, sometimes later or earlier, however you see things. I can't help but think of you then, pushing that piece of mesh steel around

stocked corners. I'm not sure how I haven't seen you there, how I haven't rammed my cart into yours when turning a corner, just like they do in love stories, and *poof*, up flies that magic dust. When I've got my own grocery list, that's when I'm mostly reminded of you, because it makes me wonder what it would be like if I left my list for you to find somewhere. I bet it would look similar to yours. If I tried hard enough, I could recall jotting down things like *case of soda* or *hamburger buns* or even *jumbo cans of cashews* and later realizing I have nobody to share them with.

There's a second part to that Wiffle-Ball story. The part where I let go of the curtain because you'd moved so far down the lawn I couldn't see you or your son anymore, and I pulled out my keys—while the milk lay on its side in the grocery bag, spoiling—and I went back outside, walked to my car, and opened the trunk like I'd forgotten something. On my way back, still staring at the two of you, you noticed me for the first time and waved, and I waved back. If someone asked, you'd say that was the closest we ever came to meeting, but I wouldn't agree with that. There was a time I'd forgotten my laundry in the community dryer between our apartments. I figure you work on a roadside crew for the city, scraping ditches out with a rake, and you must have needed to dry those dripping denim work shirts so badly

that you picked my laundry out of the dryer and threw it in a heap in my basket. I bet you didn't think much of it. *Fucker isn't here to get his laundry. Isn't that what a man should do? Finish the job he sets out to do?* When I realized my mistake, I went to the community laundry room and found my clothes in a wrinkled pile, shirts and pant legs draping over the sides of the basket because you probably pitched them in a rush. The moment I had the clothes inside my place, I touched those collars and stitches you'd touched with your own fingers; it's like we'd really met, you and I, but if there was any magic in that, I haven't seen any evidence of it. I haven't known it—not yet. Maybe you're faulty or I'm faulty or everything in the world is like these light switches: you turn one on and expect something, but the light, it doesn't come. The current's running somewhere in these walls, I know it, can feel it, but where it is, where it comes and goes and travels to, I may never know. And there's something I've been trying to work out since I found your crossed-out grocery list, since I saw you with your son, since I found this sock of yours with the red stitches across the toe and gray shade at the top; it's this thing about how similar I feel we are, yet you've ended up with a son, with *my* dream, and I can turn my hands over time and again and find I've done nothing of worth here. ❧

