

Something Like That River

First they had to fill the car with gas, a ritual Gary had come to hate, and not just because of the cost. Their car was a gas hog they couldn't afford to replace yet, and the thought of where that gas would end up, burned and flung into the atmosphere, melting the polar ice caps and poisoning every human breath, filled him with disgust and shame.

So why am I doing this? he asked himself, as he had so many times, and in the next instant answered himself with the same old explanation: I need a job to live. I need a car to get to the job. The car needs gas.

Is that a syllogism? Gary wondered.

"No," said a voice inside his head.

Was that the voice of self-loathing I just heard?

"Yes," said the voice of self-loathing.

"Shut up," Gary said.

"We'll have to give up cable if gas goes much higher," his wife, Gloria, said as they drove on to the mall.

"Well, that wouldn't be the end of the world," Gary said. In fact, it sounded lovely. The house would be slower and darker without that constant bright flickering, so much quieter and more peaceful without the soundtrack of bombings, earthquakes, and murders, the parade of talking heads shouting their frozen ideologies at each other.

"Don't be ridiculous," Gloria said. "We have to stay connected."

What the hell are we connected to? Gary wondered.

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Gary needed a haircut, or at least that's what everyone seemed to be telling him. He'd let his hair grow a little longer than usual. It looked fuller that way, more vital, carefree. Even a tad dashing. But people noticed.

"Lookin' a little shaggy there, Gary boy," his boss George said, smirking as if he'd caught Gary using the copy machine for personal business.

"Oh, my god – would you look at the wild, flowing locks," the pretty computer tech, Alicia, said, sliding her beautifully manicured index finger through the hair that had begun to creep around Gary's ears, a gesture that thankfully no one else saw, because it would certainly have been judged inappropriate.

"You look like a hobo," Gloria said.

Jesus, what's the deal? Gary thought. Grow a few extra curls and everyone thinks you've gone off the rails.

He stood in the babble and jostle of the busy corridor outside the barber shop, watching Gloria walk away toward the clothing stores. She'd gained twenty pounds in the last year, a twenty pounds she could ill afford, and she needed a whole new wardrobe. That meant another huge stone falling on a credit card already buried beneath an avalanche of debt.

She waddles now, Gary thought. Her ass had grown huge and lumpy. Hard to believe she'd once been a hell of a dancer, lithe and strong, able to leap, bounce and spin for hours on end.

"That's good, very nice, thank you," Gary said, when he stood up after the haircut and looked at himself in the big mirror. He nodded at the barber and tried to smile, hoping to conceal his inward cringe at the sight of his slack and pallid face, at how shriveled and how much older

he looked with his nice thick hair gone. He walked up close to the mirror, closer to himself, but that didn't help.

This isn't how I want to look, he thought.

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