

'The most complicated machines
are made only with words.'

– Jacques Lacan

One morning I picked up a book, I can't remember which one, and as I read I began to hear a voice inside, as if it were speaking to me. Ever since, whenever I read, I hear that same voice. It took me many years and many more books before I discovered the owner of those summery tones, and this volume is a record of that quest. But not only that. It is also a machine for producing this voice. When the book is finished, you will be able to hear what I hear: the voice of Steve Reinke. This may take some getting used to at first, but I want to reassure you that the transition is generally effortless. When it finally arrives, you will very likely ask yourself: how did I ever make it through a book without this accompaniment? How could I have waited so long? Every book is part of the library, and inside that library there is a voice already waiting for you. And you won't have to turn the last page of the last book before the promise of well-being and comfort issuing from that voice belongs to you.

You've come home.

He looked too young to tell anyone they were going to die. Too young to admit even the possibility of death, though he was a doctor, so maybe it came with the office. There was a sadness in this doctor's face that remained a stranger to him, and it kept him young. One day all that unhappiness would catch up to him and he'd grow old in an hour that lasted a hundred years.

'I'm afraid the results aren't good,' the doctor began, looking almost sad, like a fifteen-year-old doing Shakespeare. He was trying to look glum through the tube tan, his perfect tennis game, the annual sex vacation in Thailand, but it wasn't quite working. I felt myself filling with concern. I knew this couldn't be easy for him, especially not before lunch. It was hard to feel anything on an empty stomach, except maybe a longing for the award-winning ice cream they made downstairs. At least ice cream didn't smell. It would be torment having to lead the parade of the unwell while those fragrant compounds played through the office, offering forty-three kinds of heaven.

'We've run both tests, so there's not much doubt now. You're HIV-positive.'

I nodded, worried I wasn't managing the proper expression. HIV-positive? I felt the muscles in my face as a large pack of steel balls that needed to be coaxed and herded to form basic human responses. Only they seemed a little frozen, tired maybe, which made the poor man in front of me, this masquerade of a doctor, look extremely agitated. I don't know why, but this struck me as being funny all of a sudden, and I started laughing in a way I hadn't laughed for a long time. It was such a relief that even though I knew it was the wrong thing to do, even though I felt awful for this stranger sitting next to me, I couldn't stop.

I laughed on and on and then I realized I would have to leave. Sudbury wasn't big enough for news like this. It had offered me a steady diet of fax machines and eight-track tapes and pocket calculators, and when those were gone I chugalugged MTV, four-wheel drives and personal transport vehicles that wouldn't have looked out of place in the Normandy Invasion. And now AIDS. The doctor was telling me it was time to leave these dreams, this body, behind. He mumbled into his diploma and the stethoscope that hung uselessly around his neck. He could have given me pills for stress or anxiety, but he never mentioned it, maybe he was saving them for himself. I gave him my firmest goodbye grip, and his hand felt like it had been left out in the rain. Someone who looked just like me strode out the door with a whistle in his step. Begone, dull care.

What I needed above all was to feel strangers rushing past me. I wanted to look into faces that would stare right through mine. *I don't care*. That's what I hoped for most of all. *I don't know you*. Music to my shrinking ears. It was time to push on. The stairway delivered me to the front door where I could leave the dream of this doctor, this afternoon, behind. Dying. I was twenty-five years old and I was dying. Is that what he said?

When I got back to my basement bachelor, I pulled out a yellowing backpack from the closet and stuffed it up with shirts and underwear and a couple of books. Whatever. I was a week and a half late on the rent, but because I'd been such a model citizen, the landlady, who lived upstairs on a strict diet of 7-Up and Southern Comfort, had let it slide. Mrs. Waxley. Call me Doris, she said, but I didn't. Drank her Comfort sometimes in a room she liked to call her parlour, but after three or four she would always want to crank up the big-band swings and dance, and I wasn't much of a partner. Flat feet, I told her, and then she'd forget so I'd tell her again. She liked to talk about things coming up when she was my age more or less, and I warmed to see her like that, glowing with the Comfort and her once-upon-a-times. I left her a note that said I was going to Toronto because of some family questions and I wondered if she would remember that I didn't have a family, but that didn't seem too likely. Facts didn't tend to stick to her.

The pack wasn't nearly big enough to fit the collections of coasters and bottle caps and strangers' postcards I liked to pick up at the weekend flea markets, but even the crumbs I stowed seemed extravagant. I was going to miss the records, though. Some newbody would swap the lot of them for a twenty-spot at Handsome's Second Hand, too conveniently located a couple of blocks away. Let them have it, I guessed. I waited until it was dark, until I could hear Mrs. Waxley's heavy, Comfort-soaked steps trudge from the parlour to her bedroom, and the protesting squeal of mattress springs as she sank into them. The bus station was all the way across the map, but there was still plenty of time before the last out-of-towner pulled away.

I stepped out into the night breeze, which was fresher now that the Superstack blew our nickel-mine dandruff into more distant neighbourhoods. With every crack of the sidewalk I muttered, 'Goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye,' until I forgot about it. NASA had sent a team of astronauts up here so they could get a feel for what it would be like on the moon, but that was a few years back, before people could keep a front lawn growing. I stopped at a red light, and then another, even though I was the only beating heart in the neighbourhood. As the light glowed green, I could feel a small spark go off in my chest, as if there were some tiny bedroom waiting there nestled between my liver and kidneys, all pink and plush and soft, and I could almost hear the door shut and feet padding across carpet. Princess retiring for the night.

In the space of five blocks I got so worn down I had to sit for a minute. It had been happening more and more lately. But I pushed the feeling away and pretended to continue walking to the bus station until it was there in front of me. I impersonated a ticket purchase, a man waiting on the seat, a person who enjoyed lineups. I was on the way.

Toronto. I'd been dreaming of the city ever since I had legs to take me there. It had a reassuring greyness, a suspicion of anything or anyone grown too large. Even the neon was pale. It seemed just the place to start counting down the days.

We rolled in before sunset, the stage set of buildings and emptied avenues waiting for a keyword to bring them around. The terminal had the same kicked-dog look of every bus depot in the world, so I picked up a paper and ran grease-pencil circles over every apartment listing I could afford. I palmed a roll of quarters and waited over bad coffee and some sugared deep-fry that even Tim Horton would have been embarrassed to call a doughnut before picking a spot in a cluster of public phones. Oh no, I didn't mind calling back at all. References? No, I didn't have any pets. The auditions had begun.

The building that got its hook into me was an eleven-floor high-rise with a room just large enough to stretch out in while offering a brilliant look across the water. Yes, Lake Ontario, the greatest of the Great Lakes, was clearly visible between the neighbouring condo lookouts, their three ivory teeth roaring into the clouds. My building was so noisy and cheap that I could hardly hear myself think: children were busy dragging the corpses of brand-name TVs and iThings and appliances still wearing bubble wrap up a stairwell that had been refurnished in black felt marker. There was a steady smell of bacon frying and the sound of large dogs shouting at smaller dogs. The men had quick little names like Kit or Sam or John, which they slid out of their mouths real fast and which would pass right on by if you weren't paying attention, while the women had names like Gwendolyn and Prahiti and Tojiku, as if they'd all graduated from the same

college of polysyllabic indifference. They looked at you and their eyes said, *So what?* As soon as I moved in, I felt my mood improving. I was going to like it here.

‘I’m not the landlord, I’m the super. I work for the management company,’ said the round ball of a man who jiggled his way through the doors of my apartment. Roach spray and balding carpet. sos pads and Mr. Clean over everything. When I paid him in cash, he looked at me like we were finally playing on the same team and smiled. He folded the money into squares that grew smaller and smaller as he walked me across the vacancy.

What I really wanted was a plastic surgeon and a shop filled with every face in the world. I’d take one for workdays and another for weekends. Perhaps the one with blond curls to sleep inside. I couldn’t help wondering if anyone would have the jam to pick out the face that looked exactly like the one they were already wearing.

‘I don’t expect we’ll be seeing each other much,’ he told me in a hoarse whisper stolen from a Charles Bronson movie as he handed me the keys. I stole glances at the shiny redheads he had inked over the knuckles of his hands. Whenever he moved his fingers it looked like their legs were kicking, which was a pretty neat trick for a homemade fountain-pen job. When he left, the door closed behind him by itself, fighting a last current of hallway exhaust until it gave in and the metal tongue found its mouth.

Light flickered off the condo towers and licked up the carpet in soft streaks. In a couple of hours the sky would go dark and my apartment along with it. I stretched out in the warm spot and looked at a hand that might have belonged to someone else. I was never big on change. Even adolescence had appeared in a reluctant fade of encroaching hair and lowered expectations. But the only way to survive this plague was to become someone else. I would let the illness ravage the body of the person I used to be, destroy it layer by layer until there was nothing left. I was

determined to escape and give myself over to someone who could never be positive. I wanted to ride the whole wagon: the new me wouldn't even get colds or flus, he'd walk through infirm armies never needing a handkerchief, swim inside pus balls, vacation in leper colonies. A clean bill of health.

I started going to the gym at the local community centre, where the neighbourhood reconvened itself one muscle group at a time. Someone had donated a boom box to the room, so that the turbulence of our exertions would not be dealt to our neighbours. Although I could feel breakfast rising every time I approached the door, I was determined to embrace the radio's high-octane disc spinners and their noxious blend of sentimental corporate rock and millionaire rapolas. I strained beneath pegged iron blocks that had been hoisted only moments before without any apparent effort by teenage assassins who paused between reps to adjust their fingerless gloves. I tried to say yes. Yes to the tried-and-truisms that struggled out of the radio's electronic pacifier. Yes to the smiling self-regard the mirror held as we snuck a look or two at our new bodies. Was that a chest I saw growing there? The beginnings of an abdomen, perhaps not a six-pack, but a lonesome ripple crossing the wasteland? Oh yes, and more.

The first week after sign-up I went every day until I was approached by a silver-maned bear whose neck was so muscled he had to turn his entire torso to face his listeners. This gave him the appearance of an overgrown child's toy, and made conversation distracting. He told me I should take a day off to let my muscles heal up and I thanked him for the good word. When I got back in after a day's vacation I was so hungry to lift I would sometimes do back-to-back sets. It wasn't long before I realized the great, treasured secret of every workout hound in the city.

It wasn't the muscles after all, or the steadily accumulating progress of iron. The irresistible seduction lay in the fact that inside those mirrored walls, all thinking crawled to a halt. Every kind of worry took off in the face of the next lift, the closing abdominal crunch. Even though it might last only a minute or two, the endless trivia quiz of my waking life grew quiet at the sight of all that metal, and I felt myself growing lighter, hardly a body at all. The great escape had begun.

I had worked the mill back home, like most everyone else, and in between there had been a series of no-name jobs like painting houses and washing cars and even a stint as a security guard. But here in my new city I was determined to pick up a different plate. After I failed science two years in a row, my guidance counsellor, who we both knew was only a retired phys. ed. instructor, relented and allowed me to take a knot of secretarial courses. Hoping nobody would have enough game to check out-of-town referrals, I created a fine new employment past and signed on with Workforce, plumping for an office hire. Inside two weeks I was behind the desk at McCrearie's, a small insurance hive specializing in big-risk clients. My boss was hardly older than I was, only Johnson had never failed science. His position made him seem larger than he was, a hairless bowling pin with eye rings that sagged into a pair of defeated cheeks. He had an enormous desk he never sat behind, preferring quick, improvised runs up and down the hallway as he paced out his new concern. It seemed his brain worked only while he was on the move, so his secretary, meaning moi, was required to jostle behind him scribbling down his every smirk of genius.

In his company I heard the word *yes* turned into everything but dessert. It was dished as greeting, warning, sign-off and exclamation point. 'Yes?' he would say as he greeted me in the morning. He was already there, of course. I never saw him leave the office, not even to go for lunch. He preferred to be around 'the heat,' as he liked to call it, wearing his brown leather loafers down to the nubs of their tassels.

It became obvious, after the first couple of months, that Johnson had no time or inclination for what he sneeringly referred to as 'a private life.' Along with his correspondence, his endless

filing requests and note takings, I booked appointments with his chiropractor and rowing team. But as my temp posture began to lean into something more permanent, I was asked to book liaisons with escorts. It was understood, of course, that if I breathed a word about it I would be shown the door.

My temp-worker status suited both of us too well. As soon as I left the office it was as if it had never happened. And I can't recall Johnson ever asking me a personal question, not even at the interview. When I met him for the first time he was standing at his desk behind a mountain of paper that he shuffled around for a few minutes before looking up at me. 'Yes?' he asked, as if that were a question. 'Yes?' I answered. 'Yes, are you serious, have you come here to work?' 'Yes,' I said, 'I would like that very much.' We made a point of never looking back.

From a Salvation Army remainder box I bought ten identical baby-blue T-shirts that screamed "Ted's" across the chest, sleeves and neck. If Ted was going to spring for the merchandise then people were going to know about it. At the gym they started calling me Ted's and I loved that. Not Ted but Ted's.

I had worked my bench press up over twenty-five kilos and walked home that night looking forward to a tv dinner and then maybe dancing at Soccerdads. I liked wearing the T-shirts over there too, but no one had called me Ted's. Yet. A couple of blocks from home I ran into a front of lake breeze and felt suspended in the summer currents, which I could see approaching and receding like kite trails of warm and warmer. Each moment of skin dissolved into atoms turning, and when I looked out onto the strip of grass that followed the walk, I could see a thousand varieties of green in a single stem. My knees grew soft and I pushed my arms out in front of my face to keep it from hurting later. The ground fell, and then the trees and lake.

The sound of traffic like a warm blanket. I tried to turn over but my body was too far away to reach. There was one point left in the world, one small hole left for me to look through. It was green and soft and comfortable, so I settled into it and closed my eyes and went to sleep. I might have lain there for an hour or several days, but when I woke it was dark. I wiped the dust off my Ted's and saw my apartment waiting just ahead. A posse of small children ran up to cars stopped at the light and pointed their fingers at the drivers and shouted, 'Bang! You're dead,' and ran away laughing. I nodded as I stepped inside.

He seemed to inhabit his skin like an old couch, like it was something big and comfortable and well-worn, and he invited anyone in sight to roll around in it with him. His name was Niko and he was the most indiscriminating man I'd ever met. His charms lay scattered about him like spoiled buckshot, aimed at anything that moved. He was an egomaniac without an ego, a shameless bully who flattered anyone he thought was better than himself, which included almost everyone. He just wanted to be everyone's friend, kind of, which mostly meant he didn't have any friends at all.

The person I used to be wouldn't have noticed Niko if he were the last one standing on the island, but the new me, or at least the person I had begun releasing in one-arm dumbbell rows and wide-grip pull-downs, clamped onto Niko and wouldn't let up. With his help, I might lose any trace of the one giving way to illness. There would be no whim too grey, no service too low, that I wouldn't perform with a smile.

We met at the Speedomatic Laundry, which wasn't very matic and certainly wasn't speedy. Niko had staggered towards the door with a year's worth of clothing reruns straining out of a garbage bag that burst as he tried to ease it through the small broken entrance that seemed especially designed, like the Speedomatic itself, to discourage all comers. He cursed loudly and easily, in a language that turned out to be Greek, then cast about for assistance from the chattering classes. He was a small-boned twenty-something with a shock of black hair rising straight from his scalp, which gave him a permanently surprised expression. *Oh really?* his face seemed to say, even if he was bored, or turned on, or angry enough to put his fist through a window. Which he didn't do often, not anymore.

Niko wasn't from here, like just about everyone else. He had spent the years after high school wandering through nuclear test sites, just to be alone, he told me later, though I wondered what he was really after out there. Sometimes I thought I could still catch a glimpse of all that desert up inside him, though it might have been my projector running overtime.

I was beside him in a moment, stooping through the piles of thrift-store ware and hustler sweats that passed for Niko's wardrobe, bits of it plastered together with something that appeared suspiciously like chili. We bundled it in tidy piles by the nearest machine and came back for more, Niko pausing to direct the flow like he'd arranged the whole thing. Finally he turned to me and said, 'My service is on holidays, so here I am on a Friday night. What a nightmare. If you don't wash them right away, clothes expand in the bag, like peanuts. Don't you find?' I didn't find, but I wasn't about to let on. Because there was nothing about him that was sweet to the taste, I knew he was going to become my new best friend. My very own anti-madeleine. One look at him, and I would be able to forget everything.

'Do you work there?' Niko asked me, nodding at my chest.

'Where?'

'At Ted's,' he remarked in a voice that made clear he didn't care what my answer was.

'No, not yet,' I told him. 'I thought I'd buy the shirt and see how it felt.'

'Classic,' he replied, and promptly lost himself in the stop-and-start turn of the washer. It wasn't drugs that lent his eyes that midnight glow but good old-fashioned indifference. I was closing in.