

THE ACCELERATING EXPANSION OF THE UNIVERSE

By John Updike

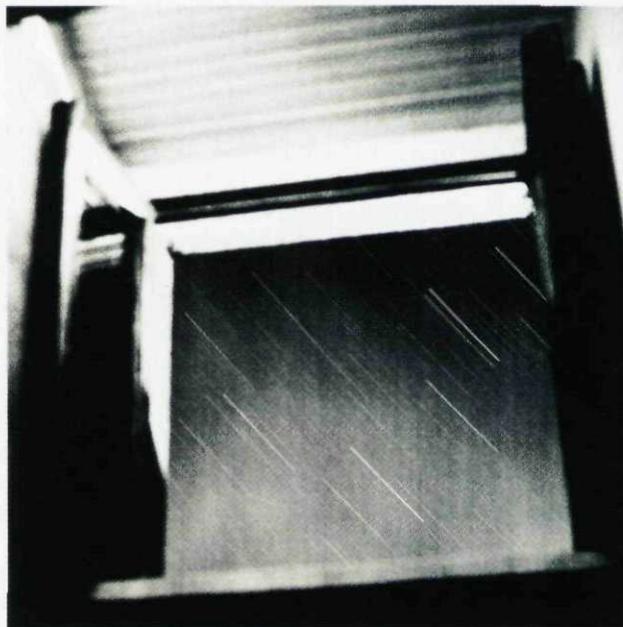
Why should it bother Martin Fairweather? In his long, literate lifetime he had read of many revisions of cosmic theory. Edwin Hubble's discovery of universal expansion had occurred a few years before he was born; by the time of his young manhood, the theory of the Big Bang, with its overtones of Christian Creation by fiat—"Let there be light"—had prevailed over the rather more Buddhist steady-state theory claiming that space itself produced, out of nothingness, one hydrogen atom at a time. In recent decades, in astronomy as in finance, billions had replaced millions as the useful unit: a billion galaxies, a billion stars in each. Ever stronger telescopes, including one suspended in space and named after Hubble, revealed a swarm of fuzzy ovals, each a Milky Way. Such revelations, stupefying for those who tried truly to conceive of the distances and time spans, the amounts of brute matter and of

vacancy seething with virtual particles, had held for Fairweather the far-

no relenting in the speed of the farthest galaxies but instead a detectable

acceleration, so that an eventual dispersion of everything into absolute cold and darkness could be confidently predicted. We are riding a pointless explosion to nowhere. Only an invisible, malevolent anti-gravity, a so-called Dark Force, explained it. Why should Fairweather take it personally? The universe would by a generous margin outlive him—that had always been true. But he had somehow relied on eternity, on there being an eternity even if he wasn't invited to participate in it. The accelerating expansion of the universe imposed an ignominious, cruelly diluted finitude on the enclosing vastness. The eternal hypothetical structures—God, Paradise, the moral law

within—now had utterly no base to stand on. All would melt away. He, no mystic, had always taken a sneaky comfort in the idea of a universal pulse, an alternating Big Bang and Big Crunch, each time recasting matter into an unimaginably small furnace, a subatomic point of fresh beginning. Now this comfort was taken from him, and



fetching hope of a last turn: a culminating piece in the great skyey puzzle would vindicate Mankind's sensation of central importance and disclose a titanic mercy lurking behind the cosmic arrangements.

But the fact, discovered by two independent teams of researchers, seemed to be that not only did deep space show

John Updike's short-story collection The Early Stories, 1953–1975 recently won the PEN/Faulkner Fiction Award. A new novel, Villages, will be published in October.

he drifted into a steady state—an estranging fever, scarcely detectable by those around him—of depression.

Fairweather had not hitherto really believed in his own aging. He could see in the mirror his multiplying gray hairs, his deepening wrinkles, and feel his shortness of breath after exertion, his stiffness after sitting too long in a chair or a car; but these phenomena took place a safe distance from the center of his being. He felt essentially exempt from ruin. He had had a fortunate life.

He went to Spain with his wife as part of his good fortune. Their annual or semiannual trips to Europe had gradually exhausted the more obvious tourist destinations—England, France, Italy, Greece, Scandinavia. She had never been to Spain, and he only once before, on a hurried student trip that had left little trace in his memory. After Madrid and the obligatory day flight to Bilbao to see Frank Gehry's titanium whale, they came south into the land where the Moors for centuries raised lemons, erected filigreed mosques, and sang love songs around the murmurous fountains in the courtyards.

Seville seemed a little short of charm, or perhaps the Fairweathers were tired of being charmed. They were fresh from Granada and Córdoba. In every cathedral and palace there lurked a gloomy Christian boast that the Moors, with their superior refinement and religious tolerance, had been expelled. The Alcázar Palace and the Cathedral of Santa María de la Sede were both, it seemed to Fairweather, bigger than they needed to be, and the streets of the old ghetto, which held their hotel, were narrow and heavily trafficked by buzzing mopeds and rickety delivery trucks that ignored the pedestrians-only signs.

Late one afternoon the aging couple, having done its duty by the Casa de Pilatos, emerged with some relief from the ghetto's quaint alleys onto a slightly broader thoroughfare. They had coffee at an outdoor table, and then headed back to their hotel. His sense of direction told him that the

most direct route lay along a busy one-way street with a narrow sidewalk on one side. "You think?" his cautious wife asked. "Suppose I fall off into traffic?"

"Why would you fall off?" Fairweather scoffed. "I'll be right behind you."

It was true, the noisy stream of traffic did feel very close as they made their way single file, Fairweather in the rear. Fiats and Vespas sped by, stirring the ubiquitous dust. He was watching her feet, or looking at his own, when a sudden sensation of pressure pushed him off balance, and down; there was no resisting this inexplicable force. He fell sideways, twisting. In the midst of his plunge he saw, inches from his eyes, the face, the porous new-shaven cheek, of a dark-haired young man; the man was grimacing with some terrible effort, with some ordeal that he, too, was undergoing.

Then Fairweather hit the asphalt, facedown. His arms were pinioned by the relentless force at his back, and he foresaw that his forehead would strike the street's hard surface. No sooner had this thought been entertained by his brain than the sensation of a momentarily blinding blow on his brow told him that the worst was over, that he would survive.

Automobiles were braking behind him. He raised his head in time to see two men on a moped turn down a side street and, smartly leaning in unison, vanish. One of them had been his dark-haired companion in gravity's terrible grip. The weight on his back was still there, but it lifted, cautiously, and Fairweather realized that the weight had been his wife's body. He lay some seconds longer on the street's abrasive, dirty surface, in a position that felt obscurely privileged, while he relished the apparent fact that his skull had taken the blow without surrendering consciousness: he was one tough old *americano*.

Bit by bit, his swirl of sensations was retrospectively clarified. By the time he got to his feet, with the help of several hands, he understood that his wife's shoulder bag had been snatched and she had been pulled into him. The two of them had been

welded together by the pressure as the dark-haired thief struggled to hold onto his prize without losing his seat on the speeding moped. Fairweather's thumped brain, he noted with satisfaction, was in excellent order, working very fast. But it had not been fast enough for him to reach up and pull his assailant down with him. He would have liked, very much, to have done that.

His wife, Carol, had once been a nurse. She still quickened to emergencies. She was staring intently at his face. So, with less disguised alarm, were the several Spaniards who had gathered behind her. "I'm fine," he said to his wife. He addressed the Spaniards: "*Bueno. No problema.*"

His wife said softly, in her soothing emergency voice, "Darling, don't try to talk. Let's take off your jacket."

"My jacket?" A light tan windbreaker, with a lining for warmth in the Spanish spring, it had been bought new for the trip. "Why?"

He wondered if he was supposed to be translating their exchanges to the gathered crowd. "*¿Por qué?*" he translated aloud.

"Keep calm," she told him levelly, as if he were crazed. "I'll help you, darling."

Fairweather was beginning to find her officious; but in moving his lips to protest he tasted something warm and salty. Then, as a walker in the woods realizes that a tickly swarm of midges have enveloped his head, he realized that he was bleeding down his face. His face had met the asphalt on the right eyebrow, the crest of bone there—a blood-packed site, he knew from old sports injuries. He saw the light: his wife, the eminently practical nurse, was worried that he would bleed on the new windbreaker. It had not been expensive, but it evidently outweighed his wound, his drama. As she gently peeled the coat from his shoulders, the crowd behind her, and the cabdriver who had braked in time to avoid running over him, started to offer advice, of which the most prominent word was *policía*. "*Policía, policía,*" they seemed to be chanting.

After removing his coat, Carol had picked his hip pocket, and now she handed him his own folded handkerchief and indicated that he should

keep it pressed against his right orbital arch. Thus dramatized, on center stage amid the halted traffic, Fairweather stood tall; he gestured rather grandly with his free hand, like a matador disavowing a spectacular kill. "Policía," he pronounced scornfully, and, unable to come up with the Spanish for "What can they do?" expressed the opinion "¡Polizía—nada!" From their alarmed faces, it could have been more happily put. Not long ago, this had been a police state.

Traffic was beginning to honk; the cabdriver needed to get on his way. This driver, wearing a wool jacket and tie in the formal, self-important European manner, was small and round-faced and visibly shaken by nearly running over an elderly American. His hand still held aloft, Fairweather told him, "Muchas gracias, señor—vaya con Dios." The phrase had floated into his head from a Patti Page song popular when he was an adolescent. To the crowd he proclaimed, "¡Adiós, amigos!" This, too, was no doubt inadequate, but what he wanted to say in final benediction materialized in his head only in French: "Tous vous êtes très gentiles."

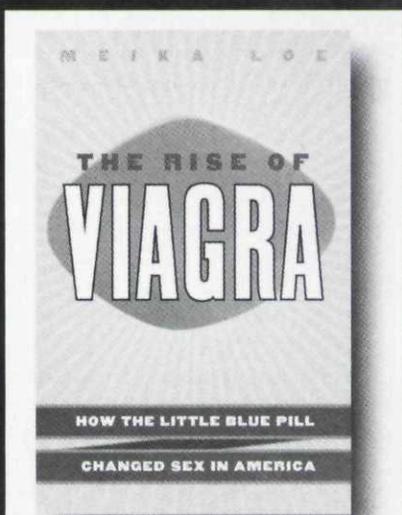
Fairweather felt exhilarated, striding through the antique streets holding a bloody handkerchief to his orbital arch while his wife—younger than he, with light blue eyes—trotted beside him holding his jacket, which, for all her concern, bore only a single drop of blood, now dried. "That son of a bitch," he said, meaning the thief. "What all did you have in it?" he asked, meaning her shoulder bag.

"My wallet, without much money. The credit cards are the big nuisance. They can help me cancel them back at the hotel. If they can give me lemons and salt, I can get the blood out of the jacket."

"Will you stop focusing on my blood? You knew when you married me I had blood inside me." Why be angry at her? *¡Por qué?* As if in apology, he said, "You always hear of things like this, but I never thought it would happen to me." He corrected himself. "To us." She was teaching him, this late in his life, feminism.

Carol in turn explained, "I was so concerned with staying on the side-

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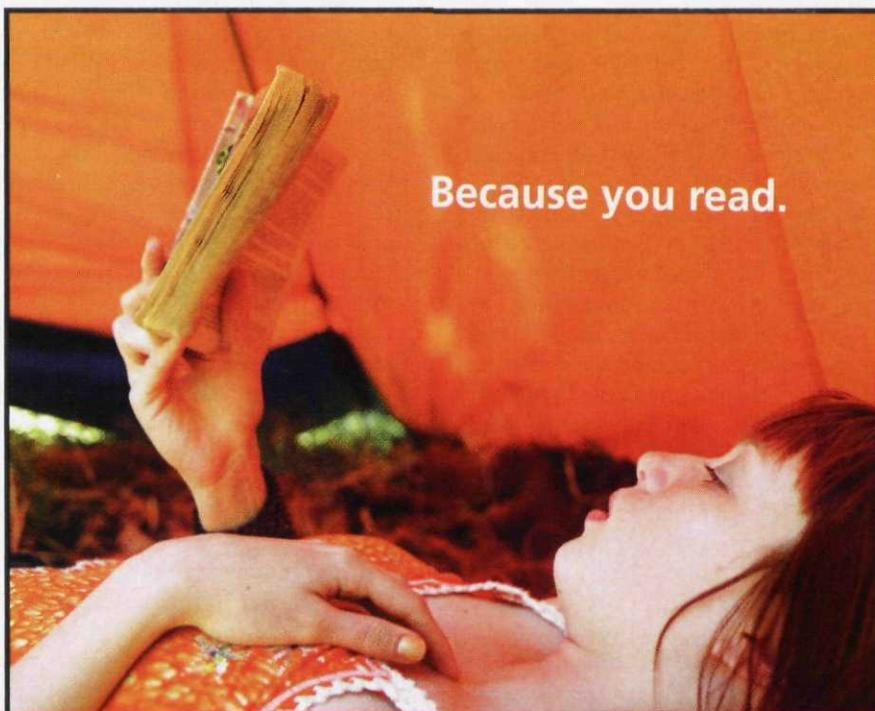
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walk I guess I forgot to switch the bag to my inside shoulder. Now I keep thinking of everything that was in it. The Instamatic full of shots of the Alhambra and the cathedral with all those pillars, whatever it was called, that used to be a mosque. My favorite scarf—you can't get wool that lightweight anymore. Marty, I feel sick. This is all just hitting me. The guidebook kept warning us about Gypsies. Did he look like a Gypsy to you? I never saw him."

"Boy, I did. His face was right next to mine for a second. He didn't wear an earring, just a very determined expression. I guess he thought you'd let go before you did."

"I couldn't believe somebody else wanted it," she said. "It was so sudden, you don't think. Thank you, by the way, for cushioning my fall. I didn't even skin my knees."

"Anytime, my dear. That's rotten about your perfect scarf."

"He won't know what it was worth to me. He'll throw it away."

La policia were already at the hotel. How had they known? "The cabdriver reported," said the smiling young clerk behind the desk. "Then they called hotels." How much of a police state was this, still? The policeman himself, a phlegmatic, bland man in his forties—colorless, as if a policeman's experience had washed all the color and capacity for surprise out of him—spoke no English; at least he didn't risk his dignity by venturing even a phrase. He glanced at Fairweather's clotted eyebrow and gave him a long form to fill out. Through the desk clerk, the policeman communicated an intention to take him away, though the victim protested, "*Es nada. ¡Nada!*" Mrs. Fairweather, the desk clerk translated with a smile that promised a rare treat, was invited to come along.

In the back of the police car she confided, "The clerk was telling me while you were being looked at about a woman who got thrown down and broke her hip, and in another incident a husband who tried to intervene and got stabbed and killed. So we were lucky."

"Good for us," Fairweather said, beginning to feel weary. His eyebrow stung. Shock was wearing off. They were being taken, he realized, out of

the tourist region, into the real Seville, its ordinary neighborhoods and everyday institutions, its places for working and shopping, living and dying. They passed down streets of restaurants, past banks and a department store, all still bustling in the growing dark, when an American city would be shutting down. The silent policeman stopped his car. This must be the hospital. The building had a six-story Beaux-Arts core, with a post-Franco modern wing. Within, all was brightly lit but with a milkier, subtler light than an American hospital would have employed. The dramas that flood hospitals on American television were not occurring here. Instead, there was a thinly populated languor; most of the desks were empty. No one seemed to speak English. Nor did the policeman offer anyone in his own language a long explanation of Fairweather's case—his crisis, his survival.

Two uniformed women, possibly nuns, one in green and one in white, interviewed the victim. Fairweather pointed at his wound and explained, "*Dos hombres jóvenes—Vespa, vroom, vrrrooom! Mi esposa*"—at a loss for words to describe how Carol had been tugged down, he made a grab at his own shoulder, then did a toppling motion with his forearm—"boom!" The women nodded sympathetically, and went away, and eventually brought a man down the echoing hall. Feminist though he was becoming, Fairweather was relieved to see a man taking charge. The word *hidalgo* came to his mind; the man was a somebody, a son of somebody. He was short and fair and squarish—a blond descendant of the Visigoths, with a toothbrush mustache and an air of courteous amusement. He was a doctor. He examined Fairweather's eyebrow and gestured for him to sit on a high, sheeted bed. Fairweather liked his gestures, firm but unhurried, with a touch of ceremony.

Fairweather's comprehension of Spanish was improving; he understood that the doctor was asking the nurse for Novocaine, and that the nurse came back, rather breathlessly reporting that no Novocaine could be found. The doctor urbanely shrugged, but his eyes declined to join his patient's in a wink at such female incompetence. When at last,

after much distant chatter and clatter, the anesthetic was found, Fairweather lay back and shut his eyes. He felt a paper mask being lowered onto his face. In her soothing nurse's voice Carol described in his ear what was happening to him: "Now, Marty, he has the needle, you're going to feel a pinch, he's injecting all around the gash, don't move your head suddenly. Now he has some gauze, he's going to wipe out your eyebrow, don't make that funny face, keep your face still . . ."

Through his numbness Fairweather felt the tug of the stitches and the latex-gloved fingertips lightly pressing on his brow. How kind this doctor, and the policeman, and this entire post-Fascist nation were! When the operation was over, he produced his wallet, holding credit cards and a pastel salad of Euro bills, but his attempt at payment was waved away. Instead, a flamboyantly signed document, giving his wound an official status, was handed to him. A slight, ceremonious smile tweaked the toothbrush mustache. "One week," the doctor said, in his lone effort at English, "stitches out."

In a week, Fairweather, his black eye faded, was back in the United States, where his own doctor, a youth no older than the Gypsy robber, marveled that the stitches were silk. "In this country," he explained, "you never see real silk used anymore."

Why was this unlucky event—being mugged and injured in a foreign land—so pleasing to Fairweather? It was, he supposed, the element of contact. In his universe of accelerating expansion, he enjoyed less and less contact. Retired, he had lost contact with his old associates, full of sociable promises though their partings had been. His children were adult and far-flung, and the grandchildren within his reach had only polite interest in the stale treats—the moronic kiddie movies, the expeditions to cacophonous bowling alleys indelibly smelling of cigarettes—that he could offer. His old poker group, which used to crowd eight around a dining-room table, had increasing difficulty mustering the minimum

five players, and his old golf foursome had been dispersed to infirmity and Florida if not to the grave. One partner remained who shared Fairweather's old-fashioned aversion to riding a golf cart and was willing to walk with him; on a winter morning his handsome photograph, twenty years out of date, popped up in the obituary section of the *Boston Globe*.

Other than the obituaries, newspapers had less and less in them that pertained to Fairweather—crucial sports contests, burning social issues, international crises, all took place over a certain horizon. A curvature of concern left him out of it. He was islanded. Even his doctors and financial advisers, the caretakers of his old age, were increasingly difficult to reach, hiding behind a screen of recorded messages and secretaries whose hurried, immigrant accents were difficult for Fairweather to decipher. If a heart attack or a catastrophic downturn in the market were to overtake him, he would be left clutching the telephone while shimmering streams of Vivaldi or soupy instrumental arrangements of old Beatles standards filled the interminable wait for the next available service representative.

As opposed to this, there had been the Spanish doctor, his firm velvet touch on Fairweather's brow, and the member of the *policía* providing in stoical silence a tour of the real Seville, and the swarthy young mugger, not necessarily a Gypsy but distinctly dark, with shiny black hair *en brosse*, his face inches away and touchingly contorted in the work of retaining his loot. In Spain, everything had felt closer.

Mrs. Fairweather, meanwhile, led an ever busier American life, with her committees and bridge groups and book clubs and manicure appointments. She had joined the universal dispersion of which Fairweather felt himself at the center. As she went off one day, she assigned him a small task that, she patiently explained, "even he" could do. Last summer she had decided, against his advice, to have the two heavy tall doors opening into the living room removed. "I hate stuffy rooms," she told him, unstopably. "Air! Light!"

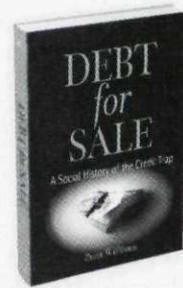
It made the house airier but (he pointed out in vain) harder to heat.

Too heavy for him to lift, the doors had been carried down to the barn by two young men and wrapped in a tarpaulin and leaned in a corner, against the remote possibility of their re-installation someday, if not by the Fairweathers then by the next owners—even the house, as his time in it dwindled, was flying from him. One of the doors had a blue doorknob, rare old cobalt glass, which Carol wanted to see installed where they could enjoy the sight of it. Could he possibly go down and take the knob off? "Really, a child could do it," she said.

The day was a clear one in February, with a cold breeze. The barn was a relic of the horse-and-buggy era, with several stalls and mangers and a large central space the Fairweathers had slowly filled with things they didn't have the heart or the imagination to throw away. Their children had left bulky deposits of school books, flat-tired bicycles, defunct toys, unplayable 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ r.p.m. records. Dead ancestors persisted in the form of framed diplomas, garden tools, and musty trunks stuffed with clothes and letters more ancient than the barn itself.

After a frightening moment of senile blankness, Fairweather recalled the padlock combination. The creosoted barn doors creaked open. The interior held the dim, expectant hush of an abandoned church. The two living-room doors leaned in their beige tarpaulin against a wall six feet behind an old cherrywood corner cupboard that Fairweather had inherited when his mother died. The imposing three-sided cupboard had been a presence in his childhood, a choice piece of Pennsylvania cabinetmaking and a looming proof of his family's pretensions to respectability. In a child's view it emanated the grave mystery of ownership—to buy things, and then to have them all yours, and to have the state with its laws and enforcers keep others from taking them, had struck him as a solemn and central privilege. He could hardly bear to part with anything that was his. Even the

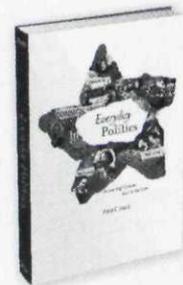
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oldest clothes might be used as cleaning rags, or an outfit for a very dirty job, dirtier than this one.

A section of the corner cupboard with paneled doors formed the lower portion; upon it rested, with no attachment but gravity, a similar-size unit whose single large door held nine panes of wavery old glass. The shelves behind the glass used to be loaded with rarely used family china, its gleaming ranks changelessly presiding in the dining room while the child Fairweather played on the carpet and executed crayon drawings, much admired by his elders, at the dining table. When, after a long widowhood, his mother had died, the cupboard had seemed the most precious part of his inheritance, and he had saved it from auction and in a rented truck brought it up to Massachusetts from Pennsylvania. But none of his children had wanted it, or had room for it in their straitened living quarters, and Carol, whose sense of décor, formed in hospitals, favored a clean and bare look, didn't see that their house, a stately neo-colonial with more than its share of windows and radiators, had a place for it either. And so it had come to rest in the barn, waiting for someone to cherish it as Fairweather did and take it away.

Fairweather loved it because its delicately irregular old panes reflected into his mind the wobbly ghosts of his grandparents and his mother and father and Uncle Wilbur, a New Jersey dairy farmer who once had taken out his penknife and jimmed open the corner cupboard's door during a humid summer visit. Uncle Wilbur had had an accent that Fairweather never heard anymore, a soft mild wheeze formed, possibly, in patient conversation with animals. Fairweather's mother on that long-ago summer day (the air heavy with promise of a thunderstorm) had complained of being unable to retrieve something from the cupboard—the big porcelain soup tureen, perhaps, or the dessert dishes with scalloped edges like glossy thick doilies. The door was stuck, swollen by the humidity. The New Jersey relative's clever patience with his penknife had opened it and saved

the day—that distant day—so that joyous exclamations arose from the visiting family members seated expectantly around the table. It was a trivial incident magnified by family closeness; it touched Fairweather to realize that in the level run of his childhood days so small a thing would stick up and cast a shadow that stayed in his memory. Uncle Wilbur's knife-marks could still be seen on the edge of the delicate door; in New England's drier climate it swung open easily.

With the enshrined china auctioned off, along with most of the rest of the family possessions, Fairweather had sentimentally filled the cupboard with his mother's small treasures—pottery vases wearing a purplish brown glaze or a matte marbled pattern like endpapers, several baskets woven of multicolored straw, boxes holding arrowheads she collected as a young farm girl, her father's hand-painted shaving mug, porcelain figurines (an elf with polka-dot wings, a baby robin in its tinted nest), some sandstone "rose-stones" acquired as souvenirs of her one trip West, some Sunday-school attendance badges and field-day blue ribbons that her only son had once been awarded. Fairweather had even saved in the cupboard her last pocketbook, a plump black one with its catch on the top—its leather mildewed over the years, and inside it a pocket holding her driver's license, her Social Security and Medicare cards, and a reminder for a doctor's appointment scheduled for the week after she had, abruptly, died. All these things that had outlived usefulness, these souvenirs of a life of which Fairweather was the last caring witness, these remnants he lacked the will to discard, depressed him, deepening the low fever of depression in which even as modest a task as removing a blue doorknob loomed like a mountain almost impossible to climb.

It was difficult moving the tarpaulin to one side. The husky workmen—*dos hombres jóvenes*—had wrapped the two doors together and then leaned them so their weight pinned the covering top and bottom. The blue knob was on the inside, toward the wall. Fairweather

had left his reading glasses up at the house, so he could not make out the head of the little screw that held the knob in place. The light, through some metal-framed windows reinforced with wire and not cleaned for decades, was poor. He lifted the doors toward him, closer to what light there was. He seemed to make out, shifting his head to gain a clearer spot of vision, that there was no screw; in the hole where one should have been was something like a nailhead, which would have to be pulled with a needle-nosed pliers. He hadn't brought pliers. Why was everything in life so difficult? To see a little better, to get the blue knob a few inches farther into the open, he hoisted the doors in their encumbering wrap toward him, so that they were vertical.

Suddenly he was being pressed, as he had been on that street in Seville, downward irresistibly, by a force he could not at first understand. Then he *did* understand: the doors were falling on him. Together the two substantial doors, fabricated in a weightier era, pressed him flat, facedown, onto a pile of old beaded boards he also, in thrift's absurd inertia, was saving; his knees scraped on the rough edges, and splinters gouged the side of his right hand. As his brain registered these injuries he felt the weight of the doors continue to fall, past him; in the second before it happened he knew what was going to happen: they would slam into the top half of the corner cupboard, and it would topple from its perch on the lower half, and all would be smashed and scattered—arrowheads and badges and vases and baskets and figurines and the nine panes of irreplaceable old wavery glass in the finely made see-through door.

The crashing tumult, as he lay with shut eyes and stinging knees on the lumber, came in stages, bad followed by worse, worse by worst, and then silence. Winter wind whispered in a high corner of the barn. A splinter of glass tardily let go and tinkled to the floor. All was destroyed, shattered, dispersed. Fairweather's brain, working as fast as a knitting machine, had in a split second seen it all coming. For that split second, he had not been depressed. ■

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