



I AM
HOMELESS
IF THIS IS NOT
MY HOME

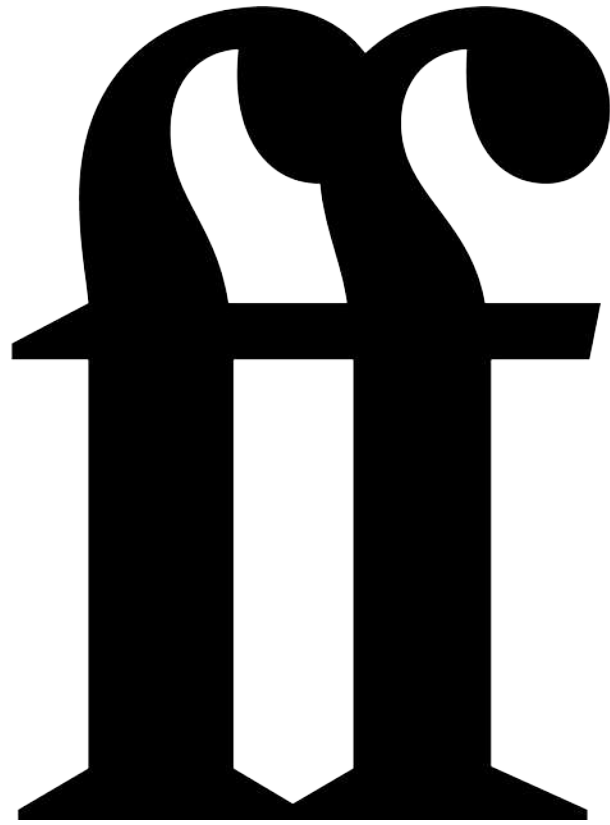
LORRIE
MOORE



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Lorrie Moore

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For my sister and my brothers

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The buckwheat cake was in her mouth ...

STEPHEN FOSTER, "Oh! Susanna"

The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.

WILLIAM FAULKNER, *As I Lay Dying*

We live in an age of some really great blow-job artists. Every era has its art form. The nineteenth century, I know, was tops for the novel.

SHEILA HETI, *How Should a Person Be?*

I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home

Dearest Sister,

The moon has roved away in the sky and I don't even know what the pleiades are but at last I can sit alone in the dark by this lamp, my truest self, day's end toasted to the perfect moment and speak to you. Such peace to have the house quiet— outside I believe I hear the groaning deer. The wild-eyed varmints in the traps are past wailing, and the nightjars whistle their hillbilly tunes. I can momentarily stop pretending to tend to my accounts in the desk cartonier. The gentleman lodger who is keen to relieve me of my spinsterhood has gone upstairs to bed, clacking his walking stick along the rails of the banister, just to create a bit of tension; now overhead his footfall to and from the basin squeaks the boards. I have a vague affection for him, which is not usable enough for marriage. I cannot see what he offers in that regard, despite some impressively memorized Shakespeare and Lord Byron and some queerly fine mimicry of the other lodgers: Priscilla the plump quakeress, tragically maddened by love. Miriam with her laryngitis and Confederate widow's weeds (the town has run out of that slimming black silk and resorts to a confused dark Union blue). Or Mick, the old Chickasaw bachelor, who keeps a whole hawk wing pinned to his never-doffed cowboy hat.

Dapper as a finch, the handsome lodger can also recite the bewildering poems of Felicia Hemans, one of which features a virtuous heroine torn from home by pirates— sweet Jesus take the reins. His mustache is black and thick as broom bristle and the words come flying out from beneath it like the lines of a play in a theater on fire. He has an intriguing trunk of costumes in his closet—cotton tights, wool tights, a spellbinding number of tights, some wigs he combs out and puts on for amusement, and even some stuffing for a hunchback which he portrays unnervingly and then lets the stuffing fall completely out. I don't know how he could manage a vigorous sword fight wearing those wigs. If I don't laugh he puts it all away. He says he suffers stage fright everywhere but the stage. He says he will help me build a platform on the side of the house, if I would like to get into wicked show business and put great joy into the hearts of simple men.

"I will certainly think about that," say I and go about my chores.

"Why, Miss Libby, an Elizabeth should learn Elizabethan."

"Should she now?"

"I do desire that we be better strangers." He is bold.

But he has his own straitened circumstances which I hardly need to take on as my own, though he appears always in fine fettle—handsome in the silvery variegated fashion of rabbits and foxes, a pair of pomaded muttonchops which he says hide a bite scar from his boyhood horse, Cola. The muttonchops fetchingly collect snow in January, though he limps— some might say *imperceptibly* but that has the lie built right in, so I don't say that, not being a good liar. A cork foot from the secesh, he told me. Mounted the real foot and donated it to a Lost Cause Army Medical Museum, he said, and sometimes he goes and visits it just to say hello. Well, everyone got a little too dressed up for that cause, I do not reply, claret-cap and ostrich plumes, as if they were all in a play, when they should instead have noted that causes have reasons they get themselves lost. The smash comes soon enough, as others have declared, and a boy's adventures know no pity. These dazed old seceshers are like whittlers who take small sticks and chop them away, making nothing but pixie pollen. I find people's ideas are like their perfume—full of fading then dabbing on again—with no small hint of cidered urine. A good scalawag sticks to the late night cipher of her diary. Also? I myself have taken to whittling and am making your Eliza a doll from some spruce wood. Its body is like a star and I will sew it a dress out of an old Indian blanket and it will look exactly like some doddering namesake aunt made it for her.

From time to time I detect some craftiness about this particular lodger and his less than gallant crumbs of bluster. But he can blow a whistle with his eye— no small matter. He sings, "I Used to Be Lucky but Now I'm Not." Then does that whistle out his eye.

Ha! He told me all of his people were actors, that a family of actors was not only the best strategy for the future of American drama but would eventually be its greatest subject! at which I scowled. Then he said not really, but some of his kin were in fact politicians who conducted themselves like actors, one of them once banished to a prison ship, though another brother Ned now mingled with high society. I tried to unclench my mind and free my felt scowl into mock surprise. Then he told me the truth: he had spent years in the circus, after his quinine smuggling for the secesh. Ha again!

"Do I jar you?" he asks with his sly charm.

"No," I say. "I am braced at every turn for disenchantment."

"Well that might be just a little too bad," he says. His look is like last year's bird's nest.

"Simply saying."

“I understand,” he said.

He claims I have inner beauty.

“I wish it would strike outward,” I replied. “It’s best to have things come to the surface.” Among his papers upstairs I have noted letters from female admirers whose signatures he has removed with a razor. A gentlemanly mutilation, I suppose, preserving their privacy.

Well, Lucifer himself was surely a gentleman: he would have needed such manners to get around.

My lodger rhymes *again* with *rain*—what is the point of that? Still, I am afraid I’m too often glad of his company. Thus he has full board at a kind price, plus my bettermost chamber, the brass bed with the Job-tears quilt, the cabinetted tub, and the window with only the one paper pane, the rest being glass ambrotypes of crippled young men which I found on the curb outside a retired war surgeon’s house. They fit nicely between the comes. When the enlivening light shines through them, in rose and gray, it breaks your heart.

Charity, our mother used to say, is more virtuous than love, and in some languages the same. Desire, of course, on my part has been shooed away by the Lord. Though sometimes I think I see it, raggedy, out back among the mossy pavers, like a child cutting across yards to get to school. One sees a darting through the gum trees and hickories that have come back from the winter’s scorching freeze. Oh, yes, I say to the darting thing, the fluff of a dandelion clock or a milkweed puff: I sort of remember you.

Now as I write, a fierce rain has begun to fall on the roof. The owls in the garden will suffer, their wings having to dry to fly. Honey, I have sent your Harry a birthday letter and a grayback with pretty Lucy Pickens on the front. I have heard Miss Pickens was mad as a dog and vain as a cat, but every type of money and mindset is still permissible here. If no bank up there will take the grayback he will have to put it in a scrapbook. You never know what will become a collector’s item—words to be carved on my headstone. Also, REST YOUR HORSE AND BUGGY HERE—that one for visitors, there being no graveside ostler. *Hold your own horses*, if I’m not as ready as I expect to be. I have also sent Harry some old rebel coins for pounding into cufflinks.

Though greenbacks are preferred, I still will take from my lodgers whatever the savings and loan will accept, even the new Canadian money which is coursing about, though I would prefer some wampum or a beaver pelt and am not above taking jewelry, since the Union men, and everyone posing as Union men, are having trouble getting their

pension pay. I take silver ingots or rhinestone buttons or large sea shells if they are pretty and you can hear the sea. All is tradable somewhere because we live in a forgotten way in some corner of the beginning of the end of the beginning. I don't know who I really mean by "we." But it does seem this place has been handed some moment in history then grown fearful and impulsive about hanging on to it. A useless lunge. Sinful even. A good scalawag sticks to her diary. As I said.

Once in a while the river floods, giving us the sense that we have once more got to sacrifice before we can start over yet again. I'm grateful my house is on a hill, high above South Sunken Road and a better place from which to pretend to see you. And why is it pretending? Occasionally I know I do. I am here for you and with you. Transportation to be determined. When the clouds swirl and marble the night sky like meat fat, the antimacassars on the clothesline, not taken down at night, flip up in the wind and are my fretted firmament and all my stars. I look through them and on up into the trees, which carve the horizon like a jigsaw. Peek through, sister mine.

Someone at the pots and pans store was speaking of a neighbor woman who has become a bitter old recluse and I piped up that that was going to be my own fate and no one kindly took it upon themselves to disabuse me. Everyone simply stared in bright-eyed agreement. I fear they have seen me muttering to myself on the street. Once, I swaddled a burn on my arm with a dressing, and then when I was out walking began to swat at it, thinking it was a large moth that had wrapped itself around me. I should wear a duster and one of the new pancake hats that are all the rage. I should take up ornamental farming with guano. When I have my visits with the pastor, our Saturday tea in my own front parlor, it strikes me that he is the lone soul to try to argue me into a more cheerful condition. "What is there to be bitter about?" the pastor asks me. And I say, rudely stitching up a nine-patch quilt right in front of him, "Well, sir, to take the long way around the barn, I don't always know, but I do *feel* there's much: I cannot see life, what it's supposed to be: I'm stumped and mystified and frozen in place. Yet other times, I realize, regardless, there's a lot to be thankful for. It's perplexing! How's a soul to know?" And he looks sidelong at the floor and chuckles as if I've once again accomplished the pointless feat of outsmarting a man of God at cards. But I am the empty-handed one. I am the dummy—a card-playing word I've picked up from the courting lodger who has taught me a new game from India or Canada or Australia. He has been to all. I am the partner of the declarer, says lodger Jack with a wink, as he

essentially plays the game himself—I prefer Whist or Faro—with me saying, “What do I do now?” Which stands for the whole thing. But also makes me wonder about the pastor’s other calls. They must be dirt-dull and full of pitiful sick people for him to linger with me and my spiritual paralysis. In the afternoon he swirls the tea around and pretends to read the leaves. “God has plans for you.”

“To wash the dishes,” I say, already weary of God’s plans. Once the handsome lodger passed briskly by in a velvet cape, out the door for his walk, touching his wide-brimmed hat in our direction, while the pastor was there in the receiving parlor with me but we paid little heed to one another. Another time the lodger, in a topcoat blue as crab blood, breezed out and I said to the pastor, “He’s a flouncer.”

Or else if the lodger casts a disapproving eye, I say to the pastor, “He’s a Catholic.” But when I have to say nothing at all, all three of us wordlessly and indulgently appear to understand everything, and for a moment life has grace. Unlike those moments when the lodger strolls past, finds me alone, and twirls his cane at me then fires it like a shotgun.

People don’t think I know who they are. But as mistress of this house I sometimes have a lead on things.

How I miss you still. The other day I remembered how we would sneak into the match satchel and suck on the blown out ones, getting all the crazy juice out of them, craving some mineral or other, and then line our eyes with the blackened tips. And so I did it again just to see how it would make me look today and all I can say is this town has no need of yet another homemade Cleopatra. Although I would look right nice with a big old snake dangling from my breast. Done in by the copperheads just says it all. Everything says everything, and all says all.

I have reached a tiredness with the housekeeping and so the whole place has lost its spank. Most weekends and holidays I cold harbor it and the lodgers find their meals elsewhere, usually down the road at Wilmer’s. And though Ofelia still comes by to help with the laundry, and place the wash water out in a basin for the thirsty, fatally curious squirrels, and bring in new water from the well and heat it up on the hob, it is never enough. On Mondays, despite the handsome lodger’s request for baked duck (the buckshot would crack a tooth), Ofelia puts a calf head or a hambone in a soup pot and boils away, adding a tin of turnips, every last shuck and nubbin of leftover corn, an age-old can of goober peas. To supplement there is a yam cake, a cottage cheese pie, a cabbage from Mr. Stanley Woo’s cart. Once a month she makes a quite

gruesome hog maw which we eat for days. For breakfast I take a banana and in the center of everybody's oatmeal place a single slice, so they can look at its man-in-the-moon face. The floors grow smudgy and the cornbread dry—good for a panade. I can hardly tell you what I do with the squirrels (well, all right: I drown them with a contraption like a see-saw that dumps them in a tub of water—harder with a duck—and then you whack them if they don't fully drown) but at least the stews don't have pellets in them. Maybe a soapsud or two but not in a way that you would notice unless perhaps one suddenly feels one's conscience a little cleaner.

But all is wearying here at South Sunken Road. I remove a cobweb, and another one soon springs up wide and eery as a fairy hand. The flour moths flicker in and out of the cupboards and I let them. I have not got a good handle on the grandfather clock and sometimes would rather see an actual grandfather standing there than see that mechanical face spinning like a mad devil not telling you how it does what it does. Whereas an old man will tell you everything.

When I go back to the places of the past, nothing is there anymore, as if I have made the whole thing up. It is as if life were just a dream placed in the window to cool, like a pie, then stolen. Those are the moments that I then sit and imagine you and wonder what you would say. Reminiscence is an earache, you would declare. Although I suppose I myself am a type—brooding, prim, not as Christian as I pretend, anti-madamic, as the courting gentleman has remarked. Many of my lodgers—the card players and magicians, the bushwhackers, Jews, and Shawnees—are filled up with the new culture: electricity, railroads, hot air balloons, and the western desert still contriving one silver rush after gold then silver again perhaps for more pictures of soldiers and wars, causing everyone to bust out on a boyish freak for a place with Dust or Butte or Scratch in its name, hooting and humming and carrying the large load of their former and perishing hearts, everybody going farther than they should. The Westward Ho of the disabused soldier. There is now a wooden sidewalk on our main street that is good for getting them there—three blocks worth at any rate. The whiff of boondoggle is in the air. Yesterday I saw a large credulous sow trotting down the wheel-rutted road as if it had heard tell of something and eaten her litter so as to be free to investigate. Though probably she would end up gorging on some forgotten boy's body in some field after the rain somewhere. The farmers' pigs still root up dead soldiers in the ground. You don't even have to be near a battlefield for that. Some of these boys were deserters

and stragglers and all were hungry and shot and now years later rummaged for as livestock feed.

As for the Westward Ho, many of those towns are likely not to take. A hub can turn into the end of the line, even for a credulous hog evading Ofelia's maw. But there is no disenthraling a determined creature! let alone these grizzled mystery men with their secrets and gold necklaces and their money to pay a dentist to pull out all their teeth once they hear of some mecca somewhere— Dimmit River, Turkey Miller's Plum, and suchlike. It all threatens to become a limbo when rumors and auguries of other heavens blow in. Some of these gentlemen have become stationary spectators, having stopped their restless movements some time ago—their hearts no longer consulted. Although no one's heart gets consulted on much, bedeviled, dragged behind, twitching.

Well, darlin girl, sorrow and bitterness must be pushed past, and when one stops to look about, there life is! an inland sea in a landlocked place, the world again ready to barkle you with its fossils and warts and other unwanted larksome gifts. I am personally unreconciled to just about everything.

But all will be well if the creek don't rise.

Yours every time,
Eliz.

Korean griddle grease and the smoke from late morning weed in the air, winds light and variable, the sweet-stink of sun-warmed trash bags—this was the Indian Summer the Algonquins had wanted to be rid of, and succeeded, absconding with their jewels and hilarity. The vibrating scorch and scotch of the subway. Sulfurous sewage exhaled from the hard open mouth of the Broadway local. Block after block of brick and concrete buildings—some roaring some asleep—engaged in geometric jungles of scaffolding. Traffic rumbled like a sea, ambulances practiced their glissandos—authority was the merchandise as well as the port. Authority in quotation marks was everybody’s brand. Vespas sped by seemingly without riders.

Finn got the young attendant to retrieve the car from the garage—early from the early bird special. While waiting he noted a bicycle rickshaw slowing in front of him. Its driver resembled Pete Seeger, replete with a neat wool cap, a flannel shirt, suspenders. But instead of crooning “Turn, Turn, Turn,” he was screaming “Watch! Watch! Watch!” at the top of his lungs. “Watch out for the instructions under the hood! Don’t think they’re not there! Be afraid of the silver ladies and the pink wires and the shoes the shoes the shoes ...” The white schizophrenics were allowed to ride bikes here. The black schizophrenics huddled under blankets and cardboard on sidewalks against the façades of the skyscrapers. Pieces of paper rolled into jars with scrawled writing facing outward: *I am not homeless. This is my home.*

“Hey!” The man running the food cart on the corner of Twenty-Eighth shouted at the Pete Seeger bike cabbie. “Dude! You need a burrito!” Then the bike cabbie drove away. The Chelsea cookware bombs had happened one month before. People were both moving on and not.

The smell of the city in morning, the mix of food and smog, triggered in Finn the trips to strange cities he had taken as a child; he had been made to be up too early, with his school groups, or his family, and now he could feel again the vague terror and strange adventure of a world happening simultaneously and separately from the world he was from. Cities seemed cobbled together from parts of other cities in other times.

These days people spoke loudly into their own cellphones. He

recalled when he had first heard people doing this, at the turn of this century, talking loudly in public on phones he couldn't see. He had been in disbelief. It was like everyone had willingly become insane. The disbelief times were now gone but the voluntary insanity had remained.

He thanked the valet with a ten then headed out. He no longer knew his way around what he called No York: all these neighborhoods telling him "No." "NoHo"—a guffawing denial. "NoMad" where he was staying— of course that was where he was staying. "Nolita." Didn't he date her in high school? Or rather *junior* high? A joke had to be revised, polished, rubbed until the genie got out, ran off, and it just wasn't funny anymore.

backseat of his Subaru. On a sharp turn it slid to the other side across the seat and banged up against the door.

Driving toward the Bronx was a nightmare but cheaper than a cab. His GPS attempted to redirect him and all was improvisational. The coils of concrete ramps were a mad nest for some giant bird in a horror movie. On the Grand Central Parkway eighteen-wheelers, fulfillment by Amazon, lurked in Finn's blind spot then passed violently on the right, splattering mud on his windshield, which he smeared and smudged and dimmed with the wipers on their frantic high speed as well as the squirters with their buoyant blue spritz. Occasionally a truck let loose with its horn, the salvos of an ocean liner come ashore. He had not approached from this direction in a while and hardly had a moment to ponder the sign for the Triborough Bridge and see how it had become the RFK, a carpetbagging brother bridge to the charming prez's airport. Another thing he could not quite say to his students—for whom he was their official disabuser. But the subject of brothers was on his mind. He was trying to mull moments into anecdotes for his own dying one. They should be anecdotes that were amusing, if the listener were actually leaving this earth. But they should not make the dying laugh in a way that made them want more of life. The dying should laugh wearily in a way that said, *OK. OK. Enough.*

A tough assignment. He was a teacher but didn't really believe in assignments at all, let alone tough ones. Why should anyone have to leave after a day of school only to go home and do more work?

And who *was* Major Deegan anyway?

A take-home exam marked on a bell curve with no liberty, only death. Give me one or the other! Who said that, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen? And why are these two conditions—liberty and death—considered mutually exclusive? Support your argument with examples.

Finn had been teaching school too long.

Pop quiz (who was your birth father? one out of every ten people have a different dad from the one they think is theirs). Finn himself believed he and Max were only half brothers. How else to explain both the love and the noncomprehension, a pairing that dogged him. Chalk and cheese. This was his own private theory. Their mother had been, well, romantic.

He was approaching the neighborhood of the hospice with a flash of light scarring the periphery of his right eye— from the glare of steel suddenly pulling into view and causing him to veer. The flash was now etched there, another reminder of the proximity of death, as if he needed one more. When he turned his head, it darted and flew like a quick white bat. He supposed much in his life was exactly that: a truck that had not yet hit his vision and so was just lurking blindly there, reaping and grim. The steady crawl of a tsunami in the rearview mirror, coming up from behind. Instead of slowing, he sped up. How scattered their family had become, both brothers figures of displacement, their departed addresses stacking up thinly behind them, as when people once put new postage stamps on top of old ones, in order to reuse the envelope.

He swung onto the first Riverdale exit. In addition to the dried filth of the cat box sliding around behind him, glass shards in a paper bag from a broken goblet rattled farther back in the hatch of his car. He kept forgetting about that—forgot until he took a sharp corner as he was doing now and it all clacked around back there louder than the sliding cat box. The Airbnb had kitchen privileges, and he had voluntarily helped with the dishes, though now he had been asked by his host—in addition to dumping his Navy Lake landlady's litter— to find a replacement amber-hued goblet for the one that had broken when Finn had lifted it, still warm, out of the dishwasher. Tasked onerously by both the Airbnb host and his landlady: this new condition seemed his strange and unexpected fate. Last night Finn had wrapped the glass in a newspaper and placed it in the kitchen trash can. He had failed to leave a note to explain properly. So in the morning the host removed the entirety of it and constructed a tiny sculpture— the stem holding the jagged amber pieces skyward— replete with an angry cardboard sign that read *WTF?* in bright black Sharpie. Because Finn's brother was dying, even the idea of this assignment to find a "replacement glass"— or else he would be fined and kitchen privileges would be revoked, the cardboard also said— irritated the hell out of him. By emptying the dishwasher he had only been trying to help— though he'd been trying to

do that his whole life. He had moved out of his Navy Lake condo with Lily so she could have the time to think, which she'd requested, and now he had a landlady's litter box in his car. Then this morning, the note he received alongside the broken glass which included the request "Look at the photos on the crystal sites. Perhaps you will find a replacement online among the special crystal. But you will probably have to look in all the fine glassware shops. I can't remember where I bought it but I absolutely cannot entertain without a matching replacement glass."

Look at the photos on the crystal sites?

Just last month his same Navy Lake landlady had made Finn go to the plumbing showroom to shop for a new toilet to replace the limed-up one his bowels had fallen victim to his second day of residence. The salesman on the showroom floor had sized up Finn's thighs: "You may need a larger seat," he said and had him sit down on several of the toilets in the public showroom. He directed Finn to yet another. And soon Finn was striding from display toilet to display toilet and just sitting on them. "Well now try this higher one? More comfortable for reading? Now stand and face the toilet so we can see how the aim would be."

"I don't think a man has ever spoken so intimately to me before," Finn had said.

And then the salesman showed him how the seat would fall in slow motion rather than with a loud clack. "Your wife will like that." Finn knew he was then supposed to reveal he wasn't married but instead he just said, "Will she?" What he really wanted to say as he sat on various toilets all around the showroom was *May I please have a little privacy?*

He would tell his brother, Max, these stories to amuse and distract him—"It was like taking crap after crap right there in the store!"—to let Max know the madness of the world he was leaving. Not that Max didn't know, but there were illustrations that might ease the transition.

The drive into the hospice parking lot was a concrete descent that seemed endless but purposeful—a preparation for hell. When he found a spot on the final level it seemed like a warm bed for a tired man: all experiences, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, express one another if you let them. He got out and locked the door. A fat shimmering purple-necked pigeon, somehow trapped down here, waddled up to him intently like a cat then waddled away.

He had last been with Max during the long months of chemo but had not until now returned to New York to pay a visit to this hospice. He