

Baumgartner



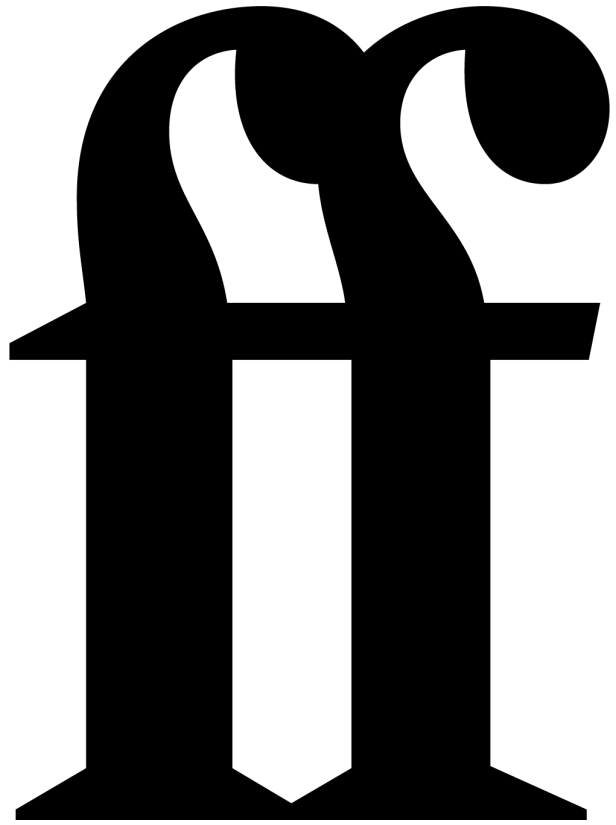
**Paul
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Baumgartner



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Baumgartner is sitting at his desk in the second-floor room he variously refers to as his study, his cogitorium, and his hole. Pen in hand, he is midway through a sentence in the third chapter of his monograph on Kierkegaard's pseudonyms when it occurs to him that the book he needs to quote from in order to finish the sentence is downstairs in the living room, where he left it before going up to bed last night. On the way downstairs to retrieve the book, it also occurs to him that he promised to call his sister this morning at ten o'clock, and since it is almost ten now, he decides that he will go into the kitchen and make the call before retrieving the book from the living room. When he walks into the kitchen, however, he is stopped in his tracks by a sharp, stinging smell. Something is burning, he realizes, and as he advances toward the stove, he sees that one of the front burners has been left on and that a low, persistent flame is eating its way into the bottom of the small aluminum pot he used three hours ago to cook his breakfast of two soft-boiled eggs. He turns off the burner, and then, without thinking twice, that is, without bothering to fetch a pot holder or a towel, he lifts the destroyed, smoldering egg boiler off the stove and scalds his hand. Baumgartner cries out in pain. A fraction of a second later, he drops the pot, which hits the floor with an abrupt, clattering ping, and then, still yelping in pain, he rushes over to the sink, turns on the cold water, sticks his right hand under the spout, and holds it there for the next three or four minutes as the chilly stream pours down over his skin.

Hoping he has warded off any potential blisters on his fingers and palm, Baumgartner cautiously dries off his hand with a dish towel, pauses for a moment to flex his fingers, pats his hand with the towel a couple of more times, and then asks himself what he is doing in the kitchen. Before he can remember that he is supposed to be calling his sister, the telephone rings. He lifts the receiver off the hook and mumbles forth a guarded hello. His sister, he says to himself, finally remembering

why he is here, and now that it is past ten and he has failed to call her, he fully expects Naomi to be the person on the other end of the line, his cantankerous younger sister who will no doubt begin the conversation by scolding him for having forgotten to call her *again, as he always does*, but once the person on the other end begins to speak, it turns out not to be Naomi but a man, an unknown man with an unfamiliar voice who is stammering out some sort of apology to him for being late. Late for what? Baumgartner asks. To read your meter, the man says. I was supposed to be there at nine, remember? No, Baumgartner doesn't remember, he can't recall a single moment in the past days or weeks when he thought the meter reader from the electric company was scheduled to be there at nine, and therefore he tells the man not to worry about it, he plans to be home all morning and afternoon, but the electric company man, who sounds young and inexperienced and eager to please, insists on explaining that he has no time to explain just now why he didn't show up on time, but there was *a good reason* for it, a reason *beyond his control*, and that he will be there as soon as he can. Fine, Baumgartner says, I'll see you then. He hangs up and looks down at his right hand, which has begun to throb from the burn, but when he examines his palm and fingers, he sees no signs of blistering or peeling skin, just a general sort of redness. Not so bad, he thinks, I can live with that, and then, addressing himself in the second person, he thinks, You stupid ass, consider yourself lucky.

It occurs to him that he should call Naomi now, on the spot, *to head her off at the pass*, but just as he lifts the receiver off the hook to dial her number, the doorbell rings. A prolonged sigh emerges from Baumgartner's lungs. With the dial tone still buzzing in his hand, he hangs up the receiver and begins walking toward the front of the house, grumpily kicking aside the scorched pot as he heads out of the kitchen.

His mood brightens when he opens the door and sees that it is the UPS woman, Molly, a frequent visitor who over time has acquired the status of ... of what? Not quite a friend, exactly, but more than just an acquaintance by now, given that she has been coming to the door two or three times a week for the past five years, and the truth is that the lonely Baumgartner, whose wife has been dead for close to a decade, has a secret crush on this chunky woman in her mid-thirties whose last name he doesn't even know, for even if Molly is black and his wife was not,

there is something in her eyes that makes him think of his dead Anna whenever he looks at her. It never fails to happen, but precisely what that thing is he is hard-pressed to say. A sense of alertness, perhaps, although it is a good deal more than that, or else something that could be described as a *radiant vigilance*, or else, if not that, quite simply the power of an *illuminated selfhood*, human aliveness in all its vibratory splendor emanating from within to without in a complex, interlocking dance of feeling and thought—something like that, perhaps, if such a thing makes any sense, but whatever you want to call the thing that Anna had, Molly has it as well. For that reason, Baumgartner has taken to ordering books he does not need and will never open and will end up donating to the local public library for the sole purpose of spending a minute or two in Molly's company every time she rings the bell to deliver one of the books.

Good morning, Professor, she says, smiling her illuminated smile at him as if it were a benediction. Another book for you.

Thank you, Molly, Baumgartner says, smiling back at her as she hands him the slender brown package. How are you doing today?

It's early yet—too soon to tell—but so far the ups are more up than the downs are down. It's hard to feel blue on a gorgeous morning like this one.

The first good day of spring—the best day of the year. Let's enjoy it while we can, Molly. You never know what's going to happen next.

Ain't that the truth, Molly replies. She lets out a short, complicitous laugh, and then, before he can think of some clever or amusing response that would prolong the conversation, she is waving good-bye to him and walking back to her truck.

That is another one of the many things Baumgartner likes about Molly. She always laughs at his lame remarks, even the most feeble ones, the out-and-out duds.

He walks back into the kitchen and deposits the unopened book package on top of the pile of other unopened book packages wedged into a corner of the room near the table. The tower has grown so high of late that it looks as if one or two more of those pale brown rectangles will topple the whole thing over. Baumgartner makes a mental note to remove the books from their cardboard enclosures at some point later in the day and transfer the naked books to the least full of the several cartons sitting

on the back porch that have been set aside with other unwanted books for donation to the public library. Yes, yes, Baumgartner says to himself, I know I promised to do that the last time Molly was here, and the time before that as well, but this time I really mean it.

He looks at his watch and sees that it is ten-fifteen. Getting late, he thinks, but perhaps not too late to call Naomi and head her off at the pass before she can begin showering him with foulmouthed insults. He reaches for the phone, but just as he is about to lift it off the hook, the little white devil rings again. Again, he assumes it is his sister, and again he is wrong.

A small, trembling voice answers his mumbled hello with a barely audible question: *Mr. Baumgartner?* The words are spoken by someone so young and so clearly in distress that Baumgartner is flooded with alarm, as if every organ in his body were suddenly working at twice its normal speed. When he asks who it is, the voice says *Rosita*, and all at once he knows that something must have happened to Mrs. Flores, the woman who first came to clean the house a few days after Anna's funeral and has been coming twice a week since then to mop the floors and vacuum the rugs and tend to his laundry and handle numerous other household chores that have prevented him from living in squalor and disarray for the past nine and a half years, the good and steady and mostly silent, walled-off Mrs. Flores, with her construction-worker husband and three children, the two grown boys and the youngest one, Rosita, a skinny twelve-year-old with magnificent brown eyes who comes to the house every year on Halloween for her little bag of goodies.

What's wrong, Rosita? Baumgartner asks. Has something happened to your mother?

No, Rosita says, not my mother. My father.

Baumgartner waits for several moments as the girl's pent-up tears spill out of her in a short, stifled crying fit, and because the little one is struggling to hold herself together and will not allow herself to let go completely, her breath has turned into a series of chopped-off gasps and shudderings. Baumgartner understands that because Mrs. Flores was scheduled to come to the house this afternoon, and because it is spring break and her daughter is not at school, she has instructed Rosita to call Mr. Baumgartner about the emergency while she herself goes off to confront whatever it is that has happened to her husband.

Once the gasps and choked-off tears have subsided somewhat, Baumgartner asks the next question. By piecing together the girl's fragmented account of what her mother told her, who herself had heard it from someone else, he gathers that Mr. Flores was on a kitchen remodeling job this morning, and as he was down in the client's basement cutting two-by-fours with his buzz saw, an operation he has performed hundreds if not thousands of times in the past, he somehow managed to slice off two of the fingers on his right hand.

Baumgartner sees the two severed fingers falling into a pile of sawdust on the floor. He sees the blood flowing from the bare, skinless stumps. He hears Mr. Flores scream.

At last he says: Don't worry, Rosita. I know it sounds terrible, but the doctors can fix it. They can reattach your father's fingers to the hand, and by the time you start school again in the fall, he'll be in perfect shape.

Really?

Yes, really. I promise.

Because the girl is alone in the house, and because she has been locked in a state of pure, petrified panic ever since her mother left for the hospital, Baumgartner goes on talking to her for another ten minutes. At one point toward the end of the conversation, he manages to coax something that resembles a laugh from her, and when they finally hang up, that tiny excuse of a laugh is what stays with him, for he is almost certain it will stand as the single most important thing he has accomplished all day.

Nevertheless, Baumgartner is shaken. He pulls out a chair and sits down, fixing his eyes on the black ring of an old coffee-cup stain as he walks through the scene in his mind. Angel Flores, a veteran carpenter of forty-eight, in the act of doing something he has done repeatedly and successfully over the course of many years, suddenly and unaccountably slips up and, through a single moment's inattention, gravely injures himself. Why? What caused him to lose his concentration and turn his thoughts from the task at hand, which is a simple one if you are concentrating and a dangerous one if you are not? Had one of his co-workers distracted him by walking down the stairs at that moment? Had a stray thought inadvertently entered his head? Had a fly landed on his nose? Had he felt a sudden pain in his stomach? Had he drunk too much last night or quarreled with his wife before leaving the house or ... It

suddenly occurs to him that perhaps Mr. Flores was cutting off his fingers at the precise moment that he, Baumgartner, was burning his hand on the pot. Each one the cause of his own misery, even if one's misery was far greater than the other's, and yet, in each case—

The doorbell rings, interrupting the flow of Baumgartner's wandering thoughts. Damn it, he says, as he slowly rises from the chair and shuffles toward the front of the house, They won't even let a man think around here.

When Baumgartner opens the front door, he finds himself looking into the face of the meter reader, a tall, strapping fellow in his late twenties or early thirties dressed in the electric company's regulation blue shirt, with a PSE&G logo emblazoned on the left pocket and, just under it, in vivid yellow stitching, the name of the man inside the shirt: Ed. As far as Baumgartner can tell, the look in Ed's eyes is both hopeful and distraught. A strange combination, he thinks, and when Ed offers a tentative smile by way of greeting, the effect is even more confusing—as if the meter reader is half expecting the door to be slammed in his face. To allay the man's anxieties, Baumgartner invites him into the house.

Thank you, Mr. Boom Garden, the man says, as he strides across the threshold. I appreciate it.

More amused than miffed by the mangling of his name, Baumgartner says: Why don't we call each other by our first names? I already know yours—Ed—so why don't you drop the mister stuff and call me Sy?

Sigh? says Ed. What kind of a name is that?

Not the sigh you make with your breath—just Sy, S-Y. It's short for Seymour, the ridiculous name my parents gave me when I was born. Sy is no great shakes, I admit, but at least it's better than Seymour.

You, too, huh? says the meter reader.

Me, too, what? says Baumgartner.

Stuck with a name you don't like.

What's wrong with Ed?

Nothing. It's the last name that bugs me.

Oh? And what is it?

Papadopoulos.

Nothing wrong with that. It's a fine Greek name.

For someone who lives in Greece, maybe. But it makes people in America laugh. The other kids laughed at me when I was in school, and

when I was pitching A-ball a few years back, the whole crowd would laugh when they heard my name announced over the loudspeaker. It gives a guy a what-do-you-call-it. A complex.

If it bothers you so much, why don't you change it?

I can't. It would break my father's heart.

Baumgartner is growing bored. If he doesn't put a halt to these meandering irrelevancies, Ed Papadopoulos will soon be spouting his father's entire life story to him or reminiscing about his up-and-down career in the low minor leagues, so Sy, short for Seymour, abruptly changes the topic and asks Ed if he would like to take a look at the meter in the basement. That is when he learns that this is the young man's first day on the job and that the meter downstairs will be the first one he has ever read as a full-fledged employee of the Public Service Electric & Gas Company, which explains why he did not show up at the appointed time—not through any fault of his own, mind you, but because a gang of veteran meter readers on the staff played a joke on him this morning—his first morning on the job!—and emptied the gas tank in his van, leaving him with enough fuel to travel only half a mile, which caused the van to stall out on a crowded road in heavy rush hour traffic and led to the embarrassing delay. He is sorry, he says, so terribly sorry for inconveniencing him. If only he'd had the good sense to check the gas gauge before going off on his rounds, he would have been here on time, but those stupid pranksters had to play their joke on him, just because he's the new kid on the block, and watch and see if he doesn't catch hell from the supervisor for it. Another one of these screwups, and he'll be put on probation. Two more, and he'll probably be canned.

By now, Baumgartner is ready to scream. From whence came this brawny motormouth, he asks himself, and by what means can this inexhaustible flow of words be stopped? And yet, in spite of his growing irritation, he can't help feeling some sympathy for this good-natured oaf, so rather than open his lungs and let forth with a full-throated howl, Baumgartner emits a soft, almost inaudible sigh and begins walking toward the door that leads to the basement.

It's down there, he says, on the back wall to the left, but when he flicks the switch to turn on the basement light, the basement remains dark. Damn it, Baumgartner says, struggling not to lose control of

himself, in the same way little Rosita had struggled not to cry when they talked earlier, The bulb down there must have burned out.

No problem, says Ed. I have a flashlight. Standard equipment, you know.

Good. I'm sure you'll be able to find it.

Maybe yes, maybe no, says the novice meter reader. You wouldn't mind going down to show me where it is, would you? Just this once, so I won't waste any more of your time.

It occurs to Baumgartner that Ed Papadopoulos is afraid of the dark, or perhaps just afraid of dark basements, especially in old houses like this one, with spiderwebs dangling from the beams and giant bugs scampering along the floor and God knows what invisible objects blocking passage to the meter, and therefore, even though he has no doubt that Naomi will call him the instant his foot touches the bottom step, Baumgartner reluctantly allows himself to be talked into leading the way.

The stairs to the basement are wobbly and decrepit, one more thing that Baumgartner has promised himself to repair and still hasn't, not even after years of making the same promise with the same sense of earnest resolve, for it never occurs to him to think about the stairs until he finds himself walking down to the basement, and once he goes up again and shuts the door, he forgets all about them. Now, with no overhead light to illuminate the stairs, and with the only source of light coming from Ed's flashlight behind him, Baumgartner warily takes hold of the splintered wooden railing, but no sooner does he tighten his grip around it than his scorched palm and fingers are jabbed by a thousand phantom needles—as if he were being burned again. He instantly draws back the hand, and because there is no railing on the left, he has nothing to hold on to anymore, but still, confident that he knows these stairs well after living in this house for so many years, he hazards a first step downward, misses the plank by half an inch, loses his balance in the dark, and tumbles down to the bottom, bashing an elbow, bashing the other elbow, and then cracking his right knee against the hard cement floor.

For the second time that morning, Baumgartner cries out in pain.

The cry dissipates into a prolonged spasm of groans as his crumpled-up body twists around on the dank floor. He has no idea that his limbs are moving, but he nevertheless knows that he is still conscious, for a

number of disconnected thoughts are bouncing around in his head, even if those thoughts are dim and incomprehensible to him, which would disqualify them as true thoughts, he supposes, and relegate them to the category of almost-thoughts or non-thoughts, except perhaps that in spite of the pain assaulting his elbows and right knee, there is no pain in his head, which would suggest that his skull has survived the fall without any serious knocks, which in turn would suggest that when all is said and done the accident will not have turned him into a blithering, drooling idiot ripe for the glue factory. A moment later, however, when Ed is standing over him and shining the flashlight in his face, Baumgartner is unable to summon the words to tell him to turn the light elsewhere and instead lets out another groan as he puts his right hand over his eyes. This inability to articulate his thoughts troubles him, even frightens him. If nothing else, it proves that the brainworks are still scrambled, if not permanently damaged after all, or else merely gummed up for the time being by the pain that has gone on digging into various body parts other than his head, his right elbow in particular, which felt as if it would burst into flames when he lifted his arm to cover his eyes with his hand, the same right hand that has already been burned this morning and is still aching now, no doubt because he broke the final stage of his fall by thrusting out his hands as he hit the cement floor at the bottom, even though he has no memory of doing that.

Holy shit, Ed says. Are you all right?

After a long pause, Baumgartner at last manages to push some words out of his mouth. Hard to say, he says. Gratifying as it is to learn that he has not lost the power of speech, the pain is still too strong for him to exult in the victory. At least I'm not dead, he continues. There's something to be said for that, I suppose.

Of course there is, replies the meter man, there's everything to be said for it. But tell me, Sy, where does it hurt?

As Baumgartner enumerates the banged-up places on his body, Ed, slipping into the role of professional sports trainer, carefully assesses the potential damage to each battered muscle, tendon, and bone, and once the inventory is complete, he asks Baumgartner if he has the strength to be lifted off the ground and guided up the stairs.

Let's give it a shot, Baumgartner says. If I can't make it, we'll know soon enough.

So Ed Papadopoulos, a stranger who entered Baumgartner's house no more than ten minutes ago, hoists the old man from the ground with his right hand as he holds the flashlight with his left, and then, with his right arm firmly clamped around Baumgartner's ribs and torso, begins the laborious process of maneuvering him up the narrow, rickety stairs. Of all the things that hurt, Baumgartner discovers, it is the knee that hurts the most, hurts so much that merely to stand on it produces a yowling sort of pain, such yowls as to mimic the discord and clamor of forty screeching bobcats, and yet, spurred on by his gratitude for Ed's solicitous care and capable, muscular arm, Baumgartner is determined to do his best and not complain, to bear up to the yowls and shrieks in steadfast, stoical silence. Therefore, even when Ed launches into an account of his own knee injury four years ago, a torn meniscus that put him on the shelf for most of the season and ultimately destroyed his pitching career, Baumgartner emits no sound but for an occasional grunt, nor does he speak or cry out when Ed goes on to explain that once he returned from his injury his heater had lost its sting and his curve had lost its snap, and there it was, he says, So long Charlie, it's been nice to know ya, and even then, as Baumgartner remains trapped within the ex-pitcher's long-winded tale of broken dreams and cups of coffee that were never drunk, which lasts throughout the entire four minutes it takes to ascend the stairs, he does not hold it against Ed and in fact clings to the meter reader's words as a grim but welcome distraction from the pain.

Once they make it to the top of the stairs, Baumgartner continues to lean on Ed as he hobbles forward into the living room, where his protector eases him onto the sofa and then props up his head with a pair of embroidered pillows. We should put some ice on that knee, the young man says, and before Baumgartner can tell him that the ice machine in the refrigerator is broken, Ed disappears from the room. Baumgartner listens as the freezer compartment is opened and then closed. A few seconds later, Ed reappears, looking both befuddled and chagrined. No ice, he says, speaking in the same forlorn tone as a child who has just discovered there is no Santa Claus or an adolescent searcher who has just discovered there is no God or a dying man who has just discovered there is no tomorrow.

Don't worry about it, Baumgartner says, I'll be fine.

I don't know about that, the meter man says. You look pretty banged up, Sy. Hair all disheveled, your pants all smudgy and stained. We should probably get you to the hospital for some X-rays. Just to make sure nothing's broken.

Forget it, Baumgartner says. No hospital, no X-rays. All I need is a little rest, a chance to regroup. I'll be up and about in no time.

Well, suit yourself, Ed says, looking over his patient carefully as small, invisible wheels begin to turn in his head. At least let me get you a glass of water, okay?

Thank you. A glass of water would be lovely.

A minute and a half later, as Baumgartner is drinking the water, Ed abruptly sits down on the floor and leans forward until his face is almost touching Baumgartner's. Tell me, Sy, he asks, what year is it?

Baumgartner pauses in mid-sip, gulps down the water gathered in his mouth, and says: What kind of a question is that?

Just humor me, Sy. What year is it?

Well, let's see. If we can eliminate 1906 and 1687, along with 1777 and 1944, then it must be 2018. How's that? Close enough?

Ed smiles and says: Right down the middle of the plate.

Satisfied?

Two or three more—just for the fun of it.

Sighing deeply with exasperation, Baumgartner ponders whether to pop Ed in the snout or to play along out of politeness. He shuts his eyes, poised at the crossroads between crotchety old grump and otherworldly sage, and finally says, All right, doctor. Next question.

Where are we?

Where? Why, we're here, of course, where we always are—each one of us locked in his or her here from the moment we're born until the day we die.

True enough, but I'm thinking more along the lines of what town we're in. The place on the map that the two of us are in right now.

Well, in that case, we're in Princeton, aren't we? Princeton, New Jersey, to be exact. A beautiful but dreary place in my opinion, but that's only my opinion. What do you think?

I don't know. I've never been here before. It looks pretty nice to me, but I don't live here the way you do, so I can't really say.

Baumgartner wants to go on teasing Ed as they march through the remaining questions, but he can't bring himself to do it. The force of the young man's goodwill overwhelms any impulse to mock him, and so once the little Q&A is finished and the meter man is satisfied that his patient has no concussion or other life-threatening symptoms, Baumgartner tells him that he has already taken up enough of his time and that he should be off on his rounds again, lickety-split, since there are more meters to be read today, which suddenly reminds Ed that in all the confusion following Baumgartner's tumble down the stairs, he has forgotten to read the meter, and just like that he grabs hold of his flashlight and hustles out of the room to complete his first job as an official member of the PSE&G staff.

As Baumgartner listens to the sound of boots clomping down the basement stairs, he reflects on the curious skein of circumstances that have put him on his back with a pair of throbbing elbows and a swollen, aching knee, which no doubt will cause him to walk with a limp for the next several weeks, if not to the end of the summer or perhaps even to the end of his life. Nothing to be done about that, he says to himself, and then his thoughts turn to poor Mr. Flores and that dreadful business of the two chopped-off fingers. How horrible it must have been to see himself doing that to his own body, Baumgartner thinks, not just watching his fingers fall off his hand but knowing that he himself was responsible for his own mutilation. From all he has heard, doctors can routinely sew back severed fingers these days and get them working normally again, but he doesn't know anyone who has personally experienced one of those miraculous restorations and therefore hopes he was not lying to Rosita when he promised that her father would eventually be whole again, for one must never lie to children, *never*, not under any circumstances, even if that rule can sometimes be broken when it comes to adults.

By now he has forgotten all about his Kierkegaard essay and the book he was planning to carry upstairs in order to polish off the sentence he was writing. He has also forgotten about the phone call to his sister and the fact that he ever had a sister to begin with, for so much has happened since those things were important, pressing matters to him that they might as well have been part of someone else's life. For the time being, his only plans are to go on resting for a while and wait for Ed to return from his meter work below, at which point he will thank him for his

many kindnesses and send him on his way. He closes his eyes, and for the next minute or two his thoughts continue to drift from this thing to that thing, but before long there are no things and the thoughts have been replaced by a succession of dream images, most of them of Anna when Anna was young, and one by one he sees her smiling at him and frowning at him and spinning across a room somewhere and sitting in a chair somewhere and standing on her toes and stretching her arms toward the ceiling.

When he wakes up, the light trickling into the room suggests that some time has passed. Baumgartner assumes it has been no more than twelve or fifteen minutes, but when he looks at his watch, the dial says ten to one, which means that he has been out cold for forty-five minutes or an hour. He glances over at the coffee table immediately to his right and sees that a handwritten note is lying on top of a pile of books. If he wants to read it, he will have to extend his right arm in order to snag the sheet with his fingertips, which will further call upon him to test the condition of his elbow, but what the hell, he thinks, be a brave boy and do it, and so Baumgartner does it, and while the elbow is sore and painful, the pain is not so terrible as to require anything more than a loud grunt.

Dear Sy, You were asleep when I got upstairs. I didn't want to disturb you so I left. When I'm done working I'll go to the store and get you a bag of ice. It will help your knee and cut down the swelling. I'll also get a new lightbulb for your basement. Expect me between 6 and 6:30. Sincerely yours, Ed Papadopoulos.

Extraordinary, Baumgartner says to himself. A perfect stranger going out of his way to do all that. In a world full of shitheads and selfish brutes, along comes this good-hearted innocent as an angel of mercy, and yes, the ice will surely help, since the knee is exceedingly tender and the flesh around the patella is bloated now, spongy with blood and damaged tissue or whatever it is that gathers under the skin when a part of the body begins to swell.

Baumgartner makes a mental note to call Ed's supervisor at PSE&G and gush enthusiastically about the outstanding qualities of the new man on his team.

The only telephone on the ground floor is in the kitchen, and when Baumgartner thinks about going to the kitchen, he understands that he is