

D. D. Miller



DAVID FOSTER WALLACE RUINED
MY SUICIDE

AND OTHER STORIES

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A Buckrider Book

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SON OF SON OF FLYING PIG

 Last week a group of New Agers set up in Christie Pits and meditated in shifts next to the temporary garbage dump that had been set up there: frizzy hair and hoop earrings; stretchy clothes from Lululemon; beards and dreads and thick-rimmed, oversized glasses. They sat crossed-legged, lining the makeshift fencing around the mountain of trash. Facing inward, they closed their eyes and Zenned themselves right through the smell. I heard about it on the radio and read about it on a blog. The blog posted photos where you could see crowds watching the people meditating, scarves and hands clutched to their noses and mouths as they stared.

It's been seven weeks now since the city workers strike began, and the smell of rotting garbage is beginning to overwhelm. The odour hangs with the humidity. It clings to the hairs on my arms and to my sweat-damp T-shirts. It rises from the mounds of garbage lining the streets, stacked in absurd piles at the ends of driveways, overflowing from public bins on street corners and building up in the city's parks.

There are other important services down: no one's been married all summer, home renovations have come to a halt, permits for whatever needs permitting are not being given. In the beginning, that's the kind of stuff people talked about: daycare and summer camps. Now, just the garbage.



Our realtor told us that there was an elderly couple – the Hamiltons – living in the other side of the duplex, and on the day we moved in Mrs. Hamilton sat in her bay window and watched us intently. For the hours that it took us to get all of the stuff out of the truck and into our home, she never left her perch at the window. Only her eyes and the top of her head were visible, and her gaze followed our every move. At one point, I looked up and waved, and she waved back without hesitation.

Heather and I bought this place – our first home – in spring, and we were in by the first of May. We live at the

end of a dead end just off of Weston Road in the west end of the city. Red brick, two floors, half-finished basement, back deck, a white picket fence down the middle of the yard cutting off our side from the neighbours'. The lawn is small, but the grass grows evenly and green. This summer I've taken to sitting out on the back deck with a six-pack and my laptop, streaming XFM, one of the local rock radio stations. Our yard backs onto the rail lines, and I know when all the GO trains pass. It's got so that I can feel them even before I can hear them.

I met Mr. Hamilton at the end of the first week after we moved in. It was warm for early May, and he was out back watering his lawn, standing with the hose in his hand and a smoke dangling from his mouth. He wore a pair of black canvas Converse sneakers, white socks pulled up over his calves, a bucket hat with a full brim, a pair of khaki shorts and an unbuttoned, multicoloured Hawaiian shirt. His skin was so white it almost looked blue.

"Mr. Hamilton," I said, trotting over to the fence.

He nodded briefly. His eyes were hidden behind a gaudy pair of sunglasses, and I couldn't tell if he was looking at me or the spray from his hose. I was wearing only cut-offs and felt very naked. I had a beer in my hand, and it struck me that it might've been too early to be seen drinking.

I stopped at the fence, shifted the beer to my left hand and stretched my right in greeting. He eventually put

down his hose – the water still flowing – and walked over and accepted it.

“Jake Masters,” I said. “My wife and I just moved in.”

“Yup,” he said, and stood there. He had a well-trimmed, white beard that was yellowed around his mouth where the cigarette smoke weaved through the hairs.

“Nice lawn,” I said because I didn’t know what else to say. The water kept rushing out of his hose. “How long have you and Mrs. Hamilton been here?” I’d still only seen Edna Hamilton sitting at their bay window.

“Twenty-five years.” He took the cigarette out of his mouth and squeezed the tip of it so that the ashes fell flickering to the ground. He put the butt in his shirt pocket. “Lot changes in twenty-five years,” he said.

I wished I could see his eyes beyond those sunglasses.

“Gonna be a hot summer,” he said, turning. He bent down and grabbed the hose, his back to me, and resumed watering his lawn.

The strike ended up killing Mr. Hamilton before the summer ended. At least, that’s what I joked. My wife said my joke was in bad taste. “Dead people don’t have taste,” I said, but she didn’t laugh at that either.



I’d been laid-off by the time we moved into the house, and have drawn unemployment since. My old boss, Bernard

Gould, broke it to me right around the time Heather and I were finishing up the paperwork on the house. The business was Gould's Fasteners and Pulleys, and it did wholesale distribution and large-project rentals of fasteners and pulleys. It wasn't a great job, but it was a job, and I'd been there for almost five years working as a salesman. He paid me as well as he could, added commission when I made big sales. His business was suffering before the strike: construction was down due to the recession. Sometimes I can't help but wonder if this summer has completely destroyed him.

I've been lazily looking for work, but there's not much buying going on, so not much demand for salesmen. The heat's been making it difficult to think too hard about work but easy to think about sitting on the back deck drinking beer, watching an endless loop of sports highlights and retro wrestling clips online, all with a soundtrack supplied by the classic rock on XFM.

The radio station is a major sponsor of the annual Toronto Summer Fest Parade, which is now being threatened by the city strike. I've been following the station's attempts to fundraise all summer to pay for the extra costs of security and cleaning that the city would have usually covered: the mayor sat in a dunk tank for a full day outside of the downtown studio, the Kids in the Hall did a reunion show that was broadcast over the radio and there is a concert scheduled featuring the Tragically Hip and other local bands.

This morning on the radio, they said that this was the longest we'd gone without rain in twenty-four years. Seventeen straight days with zero precipitation. I don't know how rain would affect the garbage, but it would give us some relief from the smell, that's for sure. It would knock it out of the sky at least.



Heather had a much more pleasant first encounter with Mr. Hamilton. "He wasn't nearly as bad as you said," she told me during dinner one night. "He was very polite to me." She plopped a big purple olive in her mouth. I could see her working to suck out the pit.

Heather eats gloriously. She's a decent-looking woman: thick and straight shoulder-length brown hair, and an indistinguishable face, except her lips. She has the most beautiful, full lips, shaped like a beautifully written capital *M*, that are a striking shade of pink. I watched her bring a piece of dripping penne to her lips, press it against them until they eventually gave way, her upper lip forming a sensual arc over the pasta, enveloping it. Her tongue worked its way over the tip of the pasta and drew it the rest of the way. Her lips closed on it, and they were damp with oil.

"He was even flirty," she said, swallowing.

"Old men like young women," I said. "They can't help

it.” I looked down at the pasta on the end of my fork. I felt inadequate eating across from her.

“You’re ageist.” Heather works in the provincial tax office. She likes it because she never has to deal with the public. Just documents, she said, and they never complain. She was putting in long hours and beginning to look it. Her face was pale, almost gaunt, around those bright lips.

We ate in silence. I peeked up to watch her catch a sliver of red pepper on the end of her fork and bring it to her mouth. I shivered a little as it parted her lips.



When they were still there, Edna Hamilton rarely left her home. Twice a week a nurse came by to push her in her wheelchair down to the little parkette at the end of the street where they would sit and feed the pigeons that congregated there. Often, Edna would reach down for the birds as they ate. She would stretch out her hand to try to touch them, but they would always scatter before she could reach them, their little heads bobbing frantically, and Edna would sit back and laugh.

Aside from that, it seemed as if she spent the majority of her time sitting at the bay window at the front of her house. Because of the wheelchair, you just had this little rectangular vision of her from upper lip to her thinning hair. I actually felt bad that we didn’t live on a busier

street and made an effort to walk by and wave when I could. Once, after I waved, she brought her hand to her mouth and giggled. I could see it in the squint of her eyes, the shaking of her hair, and I couldn't help but imagine a once young and vibrant Edna, born into the world at the wrong time, fated to become an extension of the man who'd marry her, the children she'd bear. A life spent sitting at a window, watching while the world passed her by.



There are a million flies buzzing around the back of the Hamiltons'; the wasps don't even bother with our side of the yard anymore. There was a point around week four of the strike when I couldn't sit outside: the smell was too much. Now eight weeks in, I'm back outside and only catch a faint hint of it. I don't think my sense of smell will ever be the same again.

The contents of the Hamiltons' house are piled on their side of the back deck. It's mostly in bags, but there are nicotine-stained lampshades, half-rotting chairs and other pieces of old, broken furniture. Mr. Hamilton's shoes are lined up in a neat row in front of it all. They're mostly what you'd expect from an old man: faded loafers; a pair of grass-stained golf shoes; dusty, black dress shoes. But then there're those shoes he was wearing when I first saw

him. The black Converse canvas shoes every kid standing outside of music venues downtown has jutting out from under their skinny jeans. I can't begin to imagine how Mr. Hamilton came to own a pair.

A huge shadow moves over the lawn. Like a low, ominous cloud has just formed above our house. I look up and slowly it comes into view from over the roof of the house: first the snout, then the whole head and, finally, the body. It's a massive flying pig. A huge, pink balloon like a float in a parade. On the side is written "Son of Son of Flying Pig." On the belly I can make out "97.7 XFM. X Marks The Spot." The pig is floating at a pretty good pace. There are long cords dangling from its feet. It's too far away to tell for sure, but I bet there are Steele's Heavy Wire Jaw Clamps at the ends of them. It's what I would have recommended when I worked at Gould's. I can't see how they would ever fail though, so I assume it must've been the fasteners. Faulty fasteners.



It was early July, just a few weeks into the strike, when we met the Hamiltons' son, Andrew. He stopped by one evening after dinner. He was tall and athletic in that I-was-a-big-time-high-school-superstar kind of way: he was soft and languid now. He wore pressed khakis, a greyish polo T-shirt. Clean shaven, his skin was near to perfect,

with only a barely visible line of summer freckles crossing the bridge of his nose.

He explained to us that his father, who'd been suffering from emphysema, had caught another bout of pneumonia and was in the hospital on oxygen, and it didn't look good. He didn't respond much to our condolences and ended up walking away before we could think to invite him inside.

The old man lasted another two weeks or so.

When Andrew eventually took Edna away to a nursing home, I remember lying in bed, feeling inexplicably angry. "I think Mr. Hamilton wanted to go before his wife," I said. "He probably knew Edna wasn't going to last much longer and decided to get the jump on her."

Heather was undressing at the foot of the bed. She dropped her shirt on the floor and stared hard at me, wearing nothing but a bra and jeans. Her toes gripped the carpet. "What are you talking about?"

"He was selfish. He didn't want to be left alone." I shifted under the sheets, crossed my feet.

"You didn't even know them," she said, kicking the pant leg from her foot.

"He never once took her out that I ever saw." I crossed my arms. "He had that nurse come and push her up and down the street. He wouldn't even do that for her."

"They were married for, like, forty years or something. We knew them for a few months. Don't judge."

Heather got into bed and curled up in a fetal ball. I reached over and touched her bare shoulder. She didn't move.

Before I was laid off we had been trying to get pregnant. Heather had stopped taking the pill, and we were doing it whenever and wherever we could. We had to cool it after we lost my income, but she never went back on the pill, and we hadn't had sex for weeks.

"I'm sorry," I said, but I wasn't really sure what I was sorry about, or whether or not I even needed to be. I lay back and stared up at the ceiling. In the distance I could hear the 11:05 GO train approaching.



On the radio they've been tracking the flight of Son of Son of Flying Pig and have been encouraging people to phone in their sightings. The massive blimp – XFM's Toronto Summer Fest float – is caught up in air currents and has been making its way back and forth throughout the city. I glance up at the sky but see nothing but blue. Not even a cloud.

I look over at the Hamiltons' pile of garbage. Mr. Hamilton's shoes are still there. That pair of black Converse canvas sneakers, still in nearly perfect shape. I get up, jump the little picket fence and cover my mouth as I walk up the back steps toward the pile. Wasps and flies

buzz all around me, but I grab the sneakers and rush back into my yard.

They are a little tight, but are canvas and, aside from the tightness, they are comfortable and certainly hipper than anything I've ever worn. I get up and walk around the lawn. Then I walk out toward the front of the house and begin to stroll down our street. I can't help but stare down at them and admire them the way you do with new shoes, feeling that silent sort of arrogance you get from new footwear. As I walk, I begin to imagine that I'm pushing Edna Hamilton down the street in her wheelchair. I imagine that I'm Mr. Hamilton, only he has his whole life to live over again, and he's decided to take his wife for walks, to love her with all of his heart, even if she is no longer the same woman he married.

I turn at the end of the block and head back. The shoes aren't stretching as well as I thought they would, and my toes are already starting to ache. I can feel a blister forming on my heel.

When I near our duplex, I am surprised to see someone in the Hamiltons' front window. More surprised that it's Edna. I stop right in the middle of the street and stare. She looks different from before. She's resting her chin in her hand; her sharp, bare elbow perched on the sill. She's staring off over my head, over the houses across the street, and I feel like I'm seeing Edna as she truly was. Reflective, sad even, slightly paler than usual. Today, she seems lost

in thought. I wait and watch her stare into nothing. I'm moved by this, by seeing her capable of such simplicity.

Eventually, she looks down at me and smiles. I raise my hand to wave, and she looks straight into my eyes. She holds her soft, sad smile and waves back. Edna crosses her arms along the sill and rests her chin on them. As we stare at one another, her skin begins to shrink and soften; the lines around her eyes thin into the taut skin of her temples. Her cracked, deflated lips moisten and become full. The tangled mess of her hair begins to darken, then the wisps come together to form thick curls that bounce on her shoulders.

A car horn startles me and I turn quickly. One of my neighbours is waiting there in the middle of the street. He glares at me, raises his hands and shrugs. I move to let him pass. He pulls into his driveway and glances over toward my duplex and shakes his head. I look back up at the window, but it's completely empty.



Today on the radio, they say that the union has walked away from negotiations. The spokeswoman says there is no end in sight. She says that if the city isn't willing to budge, this thing could go until winter. We're about to hit week nine now, and the population is straining. There are daily protests at Queen's Park, people calling for the

mayor's head. Rumours of legislation. Scabs. A man in the east end rented a backhoe and dug up his entire front yard. He filled it with all of his family's garbage and then covered it. If there wasn't a strike happening, solid waste management inspectors would have been called, and he might have been charged. As it stands, people are just thinking it sounds like a good idea.

After the news update, the DJ returns and gives an update on the Son of Son of Flying Pig. The pig has been spotted in my neighbourhood again. It's losing air, flying low and nearing one of the temporary dump sites a few streets over. In an ominous tone, the voice on the radio says that the pig's flight is becoming potentially dangerous. Authorities have decided that it's time for action.

The noon GO train roars by behind my house. I glance up as it passes, and then, out of the corner of my eye, I see it: Son of Son of Flying Pig.

Mr. Hamilton's shoes are the closest, so I grab them and pull them on, wincing as the too-tight fabric at the back rubs against the blister on my heel. I slip out from the backyard and head down the street at a brisk pace, following the pig. It has lost a considerable amount of air since I first saw it and looks emaciated now; the XFM logos on the side are crumbling in on themselves. As I walk, I see that others are also following, and still more are standing on their front steps, heads tilted skyward toward the Son of Son of Flying Pig as if this were the actual

parade: a single, lonely float dancing wounded in the sky.

And then it's gone.

There's a bang that sounds like a gun, and the pig is tumbling rapidly, its body twisting in on itself until it's out of sight. The people who have been following it speed up and I follow. We round the corner just in time to see the blimp make its final descent. I'm surprised to discover that there are dozens of people watching as the massive deflated pig comes to rest on top of the pile of garbage in the middle of the park. There is an odd silence. Along with the spectators there are police cars, two news vans and still another from the radio station, XFM, yet for a moment no one moves or says anything.

Then, without warning, the deflated rubber carcass of Son of Son of Flying Pig bursts into flames and, within seconds, thick, black smoke fills the sky.



Heather notices the shoes sitting by the front door two days later on her way to work.

"Where did you get those," she asks and I tell her. "Why do you want to wear them? Christ, Jake, this is just weird."

"They don't really fit anyway," I say. I'm crusty with sleep, standing there in only my boxers. "They gave me blisters."

“It’s just weird.”

“Look.” I lean against the wall and lift my left foot up, turning it. There’s a torn blister on the back of my heel. Just a flap of dead skin.

She shakes her head and sighs a big frustrated sigh. “It just doesn’t seem right to take a dead man’s shoes.”

“Well, what does he care, anyway?”

She puts her right hand on her hip and tilts her head. She looks sexy when she’s mad because of the way she pouts those fantastic lips. “Maybe you should spend a little more time job searching,” she says.

“What’s that got to do with it?”

She clenches her fingers into fists then stretches them wide.

I smile, hoping to lighten the situation. “Heather, it’s not that bad. I’m just going to throw them out anyway.”

She shakes her head and closes her eyes. “Whatever,” she says. “I’ve got to go.” She turns, opens the door and steps out.

I rush to the bay window in our living room. She’s already in the car. I stare down at her, hoping she’ll look up at me, but then the car rolls to the end of the driveway and she pulls out into the street. I keep waving and stop only when the car is out of sight.

Yet even then I don’t move. I stay and stare out at the houses across from ours, the trees lining the yards, the cars sitting in the driveways, the basketball hoops and the

trimmed hedges. I stay there for a long time, beginning to see, with each passing moment, how interesting the world looks from here, framed as it is by the wooden sill around the bay window.