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Richard McNally

THE PEOPLE IN ROOM 3P

It's almost always a good idea to shout in people's faces.

—M. LeClerc

From a distance of ten miles or so it looks like a museum. Built of light-colored stone, it is barely distinguishable from the surrounding bone-white terrain, and as it wavers in the heat waves rising from the sand, one can't help but wonder whether it's a mirage. To the right, almost on the horizon, another similar structure can be seen, isolated and silent and wavering like a flame, but it appears to be too far away to be visited. Standing in front of the building and tilting back one's head, one counts nine stories and notices that the shades at all the windows, inset and framed in stone, are down. The staircase leading up from the sand to the colonnade is of some size and the shallow steps provide the expected mild pleasure. Turning around at the top and looking back over the terrain one has crossed, one wonders how. . . . The front doors are a good thirty feet high and when pushed inward offer no more resistance than sheets hanging from a clothesline. One's footsteps echo with cinematic distinctness in the marble-walled lobby. The air is cooler here and one feels relieved to be in out of the sun. Occupying the center of the marble floor is a sign in a chrome stand depicting a drawing of a hand with its index finger pointing straight up. One walks past it to the broad interior staircase and starts climbing. On the third floor landing there is a sign similar to the first, though this time the index finger points in the direction of a wide hallway to the right. At intervals along the hallway are heavy-looking brass doors set in blond oak architraves. At the end of the hallway one turns right again and sees, roughly halfway down the corridor ahead, a third sign, this one pointing at a brass door on the right marked 3P. The frame around the door is dripping with what appears to be blood, or a good imitation, and to one side stands a wooden bookcase bearing a variety of odds and ends. Opening the door and flipping on the light, it can be seen that room 3P, lacking a window and smelling of floor wax, is circular in shape and no bigger than a broom closet. Were its purpose to accommodate people, it could hold no

more than four or five. A bookcase no wider than a ladder stands against the back wall and contains a variety of office supplies—boxes of manila file folders, scotch tape dispensers, boxes of envelopes, stacks of lined yellow pads wrapped in shrink wrap. Leaning against the wall to the right is a red-fringed dry mop and a carpet sweeper, while against the wall to the left two short boards stand on end. On the floor are a few rags, a bolt of fabric with a swirling design of green, blue and white, an empty cardboard box and two table lamps without shades or bulbs. The first person to come down the hall to room 3P, her heels clacking on the marble floor, will be a woman with a suspicious face, severely tweezed eyebrows, and wide hips. Her name will be something like Sally or Sharon and she will be in her late twenties or early thirties. Or she will be eighteen. Or fifteen. She will be frisky and have an air of the kennel about her, and she will have learned that often there is little we can do or say that will help. If there will be one thing she dislikes, it will be a high mobility society in which people are constantly waving goodbye and not writing. Following a few steps behind Sally will be a man named . . . Garson Schlozer. He will be an unwholesome individual with gnarled hands and a fondness for reading Nietzsche. If he had any sense of civic decency he would lock himself inside a tool shed somewhere and stay there. He will smell like a pet shop and be dorky-looking to the point one will automatically assume he owns a small to mid-size electronics company. He will have learned that just because someone you like is depressed, it doesn't mean you are required to feel the same way. Standing in front of room 3P, Sally or Sharon will regard the sign pointing at the door, then look at Schlozer and say, I don't think I want to go in there. Schlozer will say, in a quiet voice, We should, turning the doorknob and pulling the door open. But I don't want to, Sally or Sharon will plead, or maybe her name will be Deirdre. Schlozer will tuck in his chin and say, We've got to. We have no choice. Placing his hand on the small of her back, he will attempt to guide her in. She will try to run away but he will grab her around the waist and, despite her writhing and twisting and screaming, he will succeed in pushing her inside and pulling the door closed behind them. On the top shelf of the bookcase in the hallway next to the door to room 3P will be a cardboard canister of Bab-O, two round glass ashtrays, a 32-oz. bottle of Carter's mucilage, a bottle of Sheaffer's washable blue ink, a large spool of black cotton ribbon, and a small green and blue box of Stik-Eese photo mounting corners. Alternatively the shelves will be empty. Or one of them will bear a small mound of carbon dust and that's

it. Something like that. Or there won't be any shelves in the hall, period. The next person to come down the hallway will be Monica Stetler. Monica will be in her early twenties and she will have a dark tan and light brown ringleted hair. Many people have ringleted hair and if you doubt or deny this somebody's going to get their ass kicked. She will come whipping around the corner on in-line skates, executing a turn in which she leans into the curve and crosses one leg in front of the other. When she sees the sign with the finger pointing at the door, she will drag the plastic brake at the heel of her right skate behind her on the floor and come to a halt. Leaning against the wall, she will bend over and untie her laces, then straighten up and kick off the skates, which will hit the opposite wall. Monica will come across as an unemployed circus performer and will have learned that combining red and yellow makes orange. She will open the door with a flinging motion, causing the door knob to hit the hallway wall with a resounding bang. After she goes inside, Schlozer will reach out and pull the door closed. On the second shelf of the bookcase in the hallway will be a black cast-iron ashtray, a champagne glass, a gray aluminum bookend, a faceted vase, a roll of masking tape, and a white rag. Next to arrive will be Alex Fugazy, a surreptitious-looking man with a long neck, and Stuart Halloran, a young fellow whose nose will be slightly bent to one side. Their footsteps will echo in the quiet hallway and when they arrive at the sign, Halloran will extend his index finger and touch the tip of the one depicted by the sign. Fugazy will be well-to-do but sadistic, creating an effect something like a wad of hundred-dollar bills lodged in the windpipe of a cocker spaniel. He will be alternately huffy and torpid and if asked what he wanted from life, would be inclined to answer, To avoid probate. He will have a number of tendencies that as he grows older he will find increasingly hard to control, and will have learned that a peninsula is a body of land surrounded by water on three sides. Halloran will be a gentle, poetic sort, an idealistic youth who will give the impression he has been raised within the confines of a bottle of vitamins. He will have learned that if you just give love, and never get love, you better let love alone. Plagued by a persistent tendency to doubt the authenticity of his existence, he will have a watered-down sense of his status as a moral free agent, and, in general, will wonder what it's all about. He will often look closely at his arms and will invariably be unnerved to discover they seem no more personal, no more human, no more *his*, than anything else his eyes happen to fall upon, whether a toaster in a store window or a belt. He will feel artificial and have a strange sense that

the purpose of his “life” is to fool people into thinking he is a true human being, when in reality he is nothing more than a temporary aggregate of materials no more intrinsically human than cinderblocks. He will not doubt that he is thinking, but he will doubt that thinking is a process any more inherently human than the process of the four-stroke internal combustion engine. He will be aware that he can think A, or he can think B, no pun intended, but in either case he will decline to accept full responsibility for what he thinks, on the grounds that he did not preside over the physical growth and development of his brain from the moment he was conceived to the moment he began to be aware he could reason. Though he will accept responsibility for his actions, such as they are—writing indecipherable poems, casting bread upon the waters, urinating pins and needles, saying the stations of the Cross—for they will seem to be *his* in a way his thoughts will not. As for the relations between them, that zone where thought ends and action begins, he will not consider this susceptible to analysis. Taking his finger from the sign and turning to look at his companion, Halloran will say, But wasn’t that a lie Alex? Fugazy will frown and open the door to 3P and motion for Halloran to enter and the door will close after them with a rich click. On the third shelf will rest a plastic bottle of furniture polish, a black Bostitch stapler, a narrow cardboard box containing a brown extension cord, a Stafford’s ink pad, a small red box of Dennison Deluxe gummed reinforcements with a 29¢ price tag on the side, a red pencil, a large paper clip and a key chain with Chinese characters inscribed on it. If one is inclined to believe in the existence of things like this, ha. Heidegger would call it “equipment” but he’s a freaking Nazi so screw him, dasein, dasein, it’s such a pain. More like da sin. Alongside the box with the extension cord in it, a hammer will lie on its side. The next to come down the hall will be bare-footed Faye Barrington. She will be a frowning young woman with breasts of a certain fullness and annoyed grey-blue eyes. Her skirt will consist of two pale green bathmats (suction cups facing outward) joined at the waist by rusty wires stuck through the corners, and her top will consist of a single strand of thick rope. Faye’s mind will be something like a crossbow that fires backwards and she will generally strike people as a Walt Disney character who has had the misfortune to lose full use of one of her body parts—say a long snake-like tail which she can no longer use to scratch behind her ears. She will have learned to lower her expectations, and when she walks into a room will project a gray haze of disenchantment. Inclined to act feral and raunchy at the slightest provocation,

she will for the most part give a good impression of being a semi-rational human entity. Moments after she opens the door to 3P and wedges herself inside, a female voice will be heard to say, Cut that out. The bottom shelf will bear a dirty clay flower pot and a folded sheet of transparent plastic. Eighteen-year-old Patricia Kent will come down the hall with a stiff, nearly spastic walk and her general demeanor will say, I am a non-vocal personality. Patricia will be a sealed envelope. Her mother will be sniffy and reclusive and her father will be either a construction worker or a high-wire trapeze artist. Patricia will have a dollhouse where her brain belongs and will often throw herself against the wall in her brother's room. She will have learned two can be as sad as one, and her hobby will be collecting Neil Diamond CDs. One of 19 children, her favorite holiday will be Halloween. When she opens the door to 3P, she will sigh before pressing herself inside, pulling the door closed behind her. Moving down the hall with the gait of a man approaching the gas chamber, Robert Jaruzelski's hands will be trembling and there will be something, frankly, morbid about him. His eyes, tiny and pale and unseeing, will be half-closed and one's immediate reaction will be that he is hopelessly neurasthenic. It will cost essentially no effort to picture him cowering in a corner with his hands over his ears shouting, Put out that light, put out that light! A lonely man, he will have learned that for most people work is a matter of doing trivial things quickly and easy things carefully, and he will not be unfamiliar with headaches that last an entire weekend. Opening the door to 3P, he will slide inside like a mole disappearing into a hole in the ground. C.E. Mubarak will be next, striding down the hall with an air of patrician self-assurance. An industrialist and philanthropist, Mubarak will be as unflappable as a paving stone and will enjoy effective business relationships with a number of leading East Coast financiers. He will also be on a first-name basis with two entertainers who perform in Las Vegas on a regular basis. Not for C.E. Mubarak will be the anxiety of a society twisting itself into tight strands of narcissistic superficiality: in the depths of his teak-brown eyes will be flotillas of oil tankers gliding into the Persian Gulf, their 15-ton propellers churning steadily, their radios spitting purchase orders and destinations from offices in New York and Los Angeles, caustic soda plants pumping product into waiting railroad tankcars at the rate of 2.76 tons a minute as workers with nicknames stitched over the breast pockets of their white overalls hit Auto-Load buttons with one hand and reach for passing female employees with the other, 250-ton Banyan cranes hoisting cement mixers and long bundles of reinforcing

rods to the top of skyscrapers under construction in Los Angeles, Denver and Houston. Mubarak's homes in Oslo, Munich and San Francisco will be veritable museums of early abstract art, and whenever he shows one of his collections to a guest he will say, And if Mondrian turns out to be a fake, I might as well shoot myself. He will have learned a capricious tyrant is more promptly obeyed than a man of compassion and sensitivity, and will manage his business enterprises accordingly. Opening the door to 3P, he will visibly jerk at the sight in front of him, then lower his left shoulder and ram himself into the room. Joseph Colossimo will approach Room 3P with a severe limp and his passage down the hall will create the effect of a mossy log bobbing up and down as it travels down a river polluted by polychlorinated biphenyls, spent motor oil, DDT residues, and a variety of pieces of polyester clothing. He will be John Rowley Cox Professor of Linguistics at a not insignificant university in California and will have committed a number of serious undetected crimes over the course of his lifetime. His hobby will be breeding rabbits in his backyard and his method will be to breed them until the hutch in which they live is so full they can hardly move. As their numbers grow, he will gradually decrease the food supply. He will watch the strong ones tear the weak ones to pieces in the fight over the dwindling quantities of carrots and cabbage. Then he will feed the survivors poisoned food and watch them die a slow and painful death. When they are all dead, he will douse the hutch with gasoline and burn it to the ground. After kicking through the ashes, he will build a new hutch and start over again. With a head as tightly packed as a kapok life preserver, he will have learned that criticism appears superior to its object and will have a tendency when rebuked by a superior to become mealy-mouthed. He goes in the door like a used condom going down a sewer. The last to arrive will be Auguste Mandooka, a thin bony man dressed in a freshly pressed suit who will look like a minister ready to deliver a sermon on premarital sex. His mouth will be hanging open and the expression on his face, weary and anxious and confused, will suggest there is something wounded and shriveled inside his forehead. He will have learned the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and that God is one of the quietest beings one will ever come across, which is not to say silent. Pulling open the door to 3P he will say, I need someone out here. There will be a noise of shuffling feet and a high-pitched voice will say Watch that! Schlozer will come out and the two of them will hand the objects on the bookcase in the hall to the people in the room, except for the hammer, which Mandooka will use to knock the shelves

apart. When he's finished pulling the nails from the boards, he will pass them one at a time to Schlozer, who will hand them to a naked arm extending from the room. When all the boards and the hammer are inside, Mandooka will help Schlozer get back in, leaning forward with outstretched arms against Schlozer's back and driving with his legs. Once Schlozer is in, Mandooka will turn sideways and, straining and grunting, wedge himself in, attempting unsuccessfully to pull the door closed behind him. After a number of cries of Pull! Pull! the door will close with a resonant click, followed by the sound of a bolt sliding home.