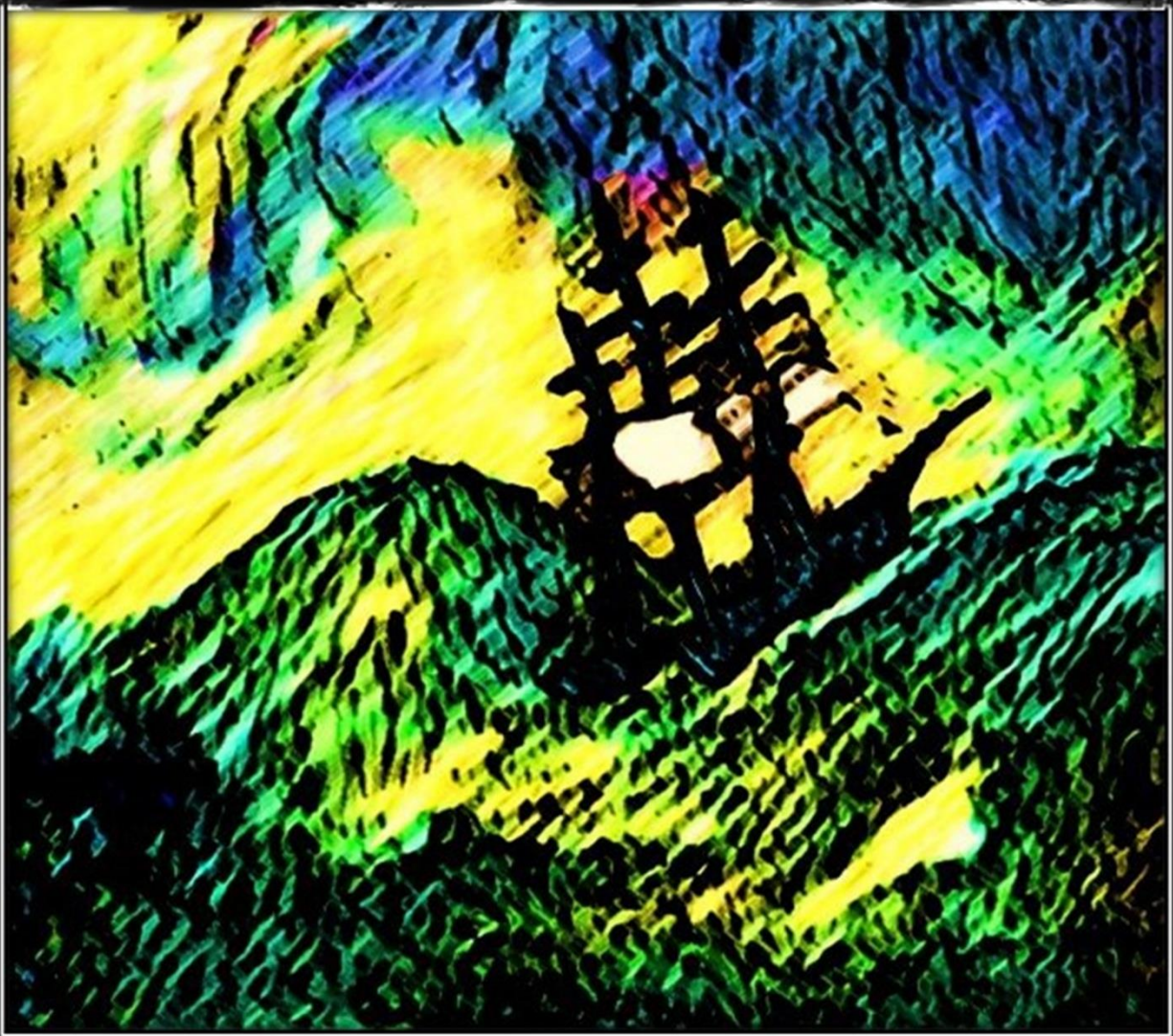


FREE AND CLEAR

Edward Drobinski

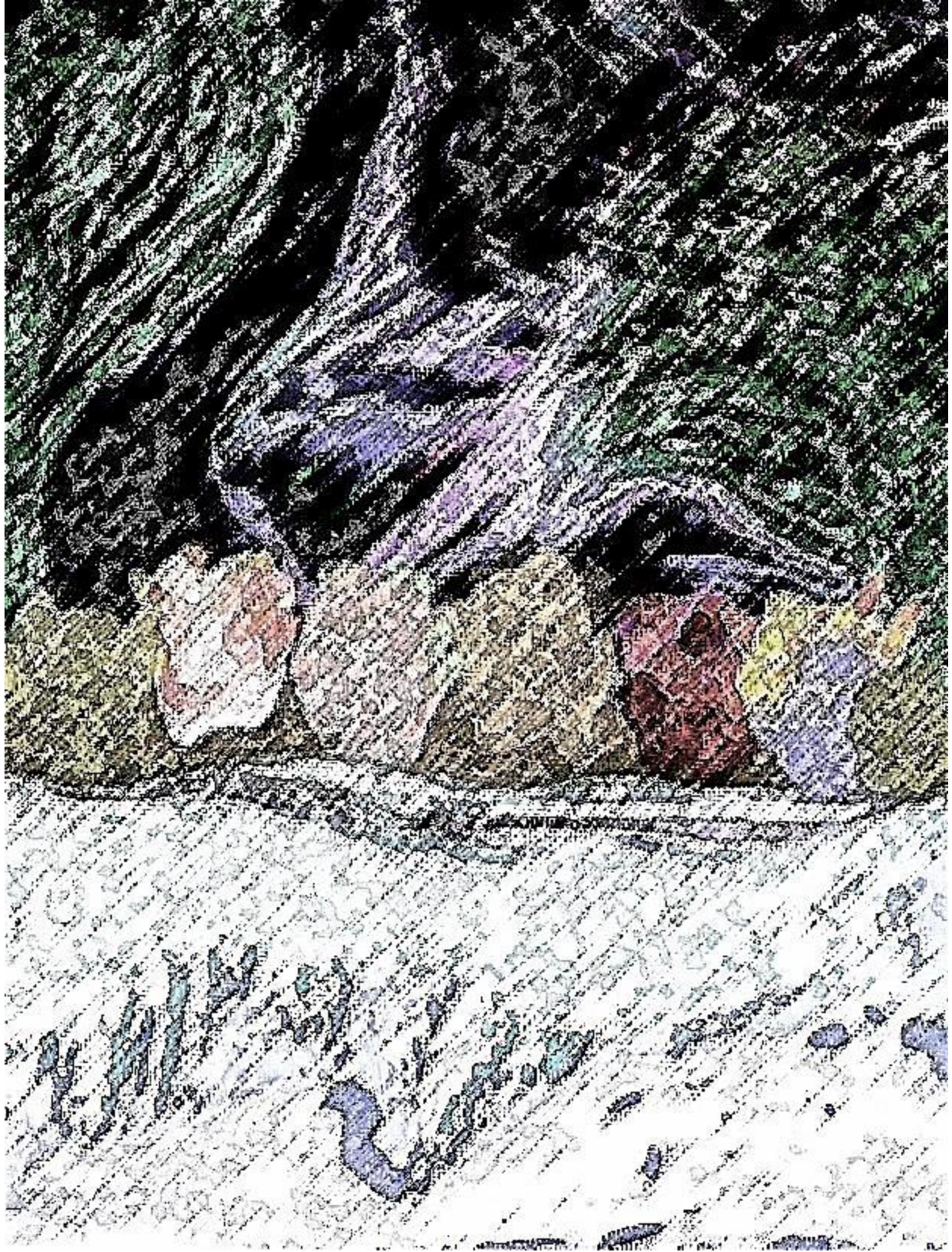




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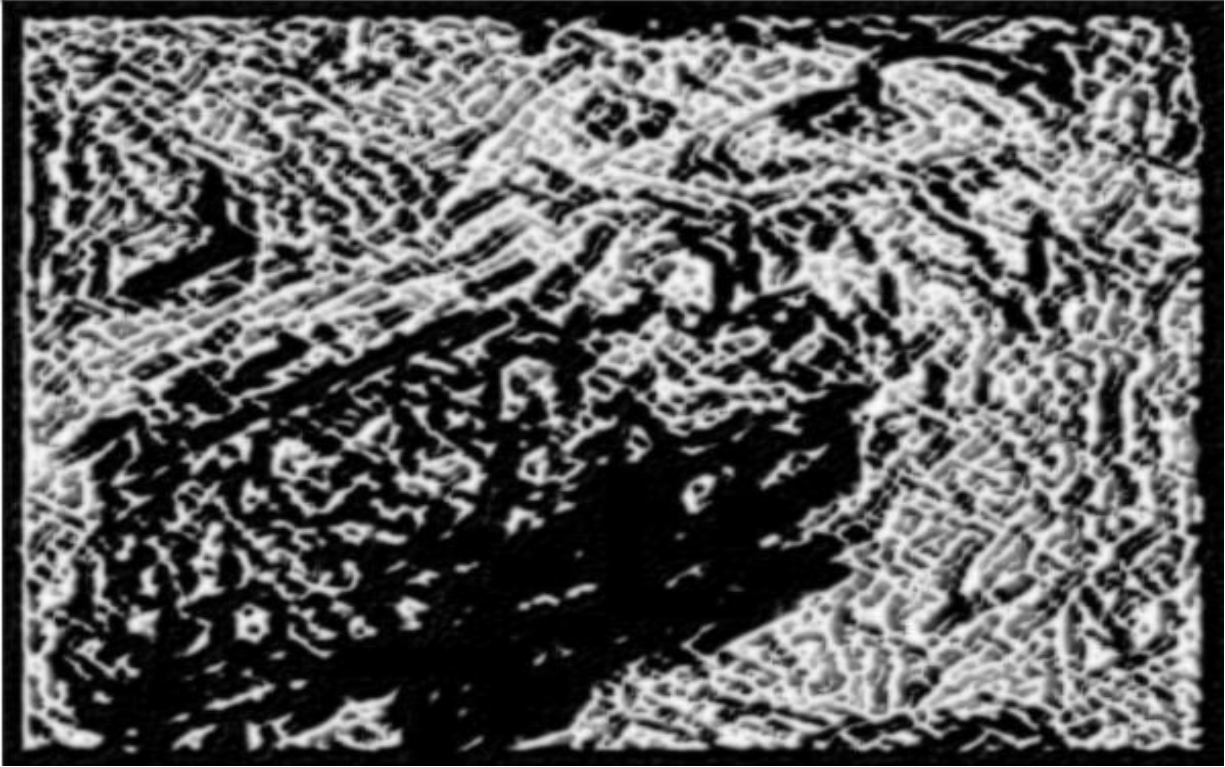


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Chapter 1

It is past mid-day. The sun has long passed its zenith and has crossed into the western sky ruled by a loosely structured gang of dark clouds. They find safety and confidence in their numbers. The daystar's washed-out brilliance struggles to shed light. It is only fleetingly successful at its efforts, as when it escapes one raincloud another soon takes its place. They seem to work in shifts. The hills and trees appear to have taken on fifty different variations of gray drear, the fine distinctions of significance to none but themselves. I'm advised that Easter is coming, but am wary, as I previously have had occasion to be misinformed concerning fluid days of festivity. The gusting wind makes it periodically disagreeable to be outdoors, but I don't care. I have fun things to do inside.

Despite the hindrances, it is bright enough for me to see that my neighbor, Bruce Middleton, leaves the protection of his brick applique surfaced dwelling and enters his driveway. He is making cautious glances at my window, probably not wanting to be obvious that he needs a fix. He must feel particularly lonely today as this is the third time I've seen him. He adjusts his one-size-fits-all, red ersatz baseball cap, with the stretchy band in the back. He feigns being somewhat startled to see me.

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He smiles and waves. From the vantage point of my picture window I smile and wave back. It is customary and expected.

I don't remember when the "Smile and Wave" routine started. It seems to me that people always did it with friends. But now it has become institutionalized and is called a significant cultural phenomenon by sociological pundits. Though the opinions are far from unanimous, there is a prevalent theory. We have become disgusted with each other. Yet, longstanding social norms strongly suggest that the neutral well-wishing of benign neglect is considered rude and they say we do have a need to be recognized by our fellow humans. The jury is still out on the latter part, though Bruce is an attestation to this necessity. So we "Smile and Wave," to those we do not know, as a physically easy and perfunctory indication that we are friends; causing the f-word to beg for professional re-definition. Perversely, to attempt any further contact or conversation is a faux pas punishable by bug-eyed stares and being put on the "Special List" contained in the "Local Sex Offenders" website.

I leave the window, sit and turn on my companion computer. I am soon welcomed.

I eagerly authorize my last mortgage payment to the bank I think the current holder of the note and check to see that the transaction had been properly posted. It was! Mortgage Loan # 505-8350-4112-0212 shows a balance of zero dot zero zero. I

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again check to see that the transaction had been properly posted. It still is! In the process of again confirming the transaction I downed my fifth celebratory glass of burgundy and felt excellent, ready to smile and wave to a million Bruces. It still was properly posted.

I get up from my chair with the intent of getting the Cruzer USB Flash Drive sitting on the couch five feet away. I wanted to record this unique event for posterity. I underestimated the difficulty of the maneuver as my head hit the oak floor or brick fireplace. I'm not sure which. In any case, I was on the floor and my head was bleeding profusely. I didn't care; I was free and clear. With no small difficulty I proudly stand.

I no longer see my "friend." I know that if Bruce was still in his driveway, witnessing the affair of the century, that he has sensibly departed. My possible need of help would make him clearly see that he might be of some actual use. Most likely, he has hidden somewhere with a view of my hilarious demise. I think I understand. To be a Good Samaritan has become a crime punishable by being inundated with an insurmountable deluge of sob stories and implied or overt requests for assistance. This is of no consequence to me as I am immune to the world's problems. Drunkenly staggering, doing my best to remain on my feet, I ridiculously waver as I stand alone. I know that this

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temporary imbalance will shortly pass. Of paramount significance, I am free and clear.

I suppose it would be more accurate to reason that it is **we** who are free and clear. My co-obligor, Martha, is at her once chosen job, tending to the abandoned and troubled children of the area. She now hates them, their parents, and the system which, out of financial necessity, has pulled back from any real effort to help those in need. She tells me that the kids hate their world and fantasize of blowing it up in a massive suicide bombing. Statistics show that that by their early twenties, an egregiously disproportionate number personally accomplish the self-destruction aspect. Up until now no one has obliterated the world. Up until now. For a second I think it a travesty. Just for a second. It has no effect whatsoever on my life. As of today; I am; we are free and clear.

In another time I would have termed my co-obligor as my wife. But, in this age of spiraling indebtedness, it is now considered old-fashioned to call someone a wife or a husband. I pragmatically acquiesce to the style of the time when that acquiescence is easily detectable. My thoughts and feelings are another matter. At least I still think so. I do find the ability of internet cookies to accurately "predict" my tastes uncanny and unsettling. I try not to dwell on the recollection of the last time I searched the web for images of deserts, to

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subsequently be offered "affordable vacations" in every conceivable place which has experienced inadequate rainfall, cooking lessons for the lovers of taste and cremation services for the effectively dead. They know me. Other searches are no doubt analyzed by the infecting parasites. The predicting series of ones and zeroes correctly conclude aspects of me which are uncomfortably, more self-revealing; though they do not yet have the capability of understanding that like art; the feeling they analyze only had relevance in that past time and place. I find it amusing. I also am fortified by the ghost-in-the-machine's inability to fully understand. For the most part I don't care about the flawed, state-of-the-art, intrusions of business. I'm free and clear.

I also suspect that the non-sexually specific euphemism, co-obligor, is convenient for the proponents of gay marriage. Whatever the reason for the new parlance, Martha seems as excited about it as much as I am. We share the outlook that the planned insidious, yet painfully obvious word games, are no more and no less worthy of attention, than a dry comedic discourse by someone blessed with timing we may view in our dull moments. Paying off our option curtailing chain is all that matters.

I was expecting the phone to ring any second, asking me for confirmation of the "earthly miracle;" and then enjoying a mutual scream of "YESSSS." I mean it's no small accomplishment.

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It hasn't been done since something like 1968. And, here it was April 1, 2035; an age of second mortgages, home equity loans, refinances, credit cards with a lien on your house and various other nefarious financial instruments which, if signed, give the banks the right to threaten foreclosure. They can now forget that. Their power has been effectively countered.

Blood dripped to the floor. I don't care in the least. I wonder if my attitude is the result of having accomplished a long term goal, the burgundy, or symbolism of some divine sort. I cautiously lower myself to the floor and finger the red stuff. I put my moistened and anointed finger in my mouth. I taste. The reality of the corporeal flavor makes a strong anti-symbolic statement. No mystifying matter; this is real.

I think back to times past with a heartfelt joy that they were gone. I will never again have to suffer the accusatory phone calls from the efficient-bank-lady with a Jamaican patois by way of Boston's Back Bay saying that they have not received my monthly tithe. It's a predictable, banal, annual routine; usually perpetrated just before Christmas, when the institution strives to make year-end numbers something the financial community will tolerate. They then add **my** insult to **my** injury by charging me a five dollar phone payment fee and a twenty dollar "Stop Payment" fee on the supposedly not-received check I sent. They always charge no matter how many thank yous are proffered

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to the hard-assed, crabby, immigrant lady in the Collection Department. I always suspect that while she is acting as if I was trying to run a sophisticated con and steal from the bank, which has had a record of my prompt payments for more than a decade, is grinning as she admires and holds my "lost check." To maximize the bank's theft of fees, and to make matters worse and more of a nuisance for me, she processes the check two days later. This is always her predictable modus operandi. And also predictably; one problem compounds the other; **ALWAYS**. I am certain that she finds her malfeasance amusing and personally satisfying. I curse her with an incapability of achieving an orgasmic release, but realize that my curse is inconsequential to her. Instead, I hope she remains constipated for life. On every occasion, I shortly receive notices indicating that the check which she has charged me for "stopping," has been paid, resulting in an overdraft and a myriad of insufficient funds fees charged for every check they "kindly" paid. Rather than being angered at the prior mistreatment, I am relieved that that part of my life is over. I am free and clear. We are free and clear.

No longer will I feel compelled to speak in Hopefully Undetected Facetious Terminal Nerdism" (HUFTN) in an unsuccessful attempt to evoke sympathy from the unsympathetic. This sly and misdiagnosed syndrome has been adroitly

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distinguished from the long accepted, Currently Fashionable Facetious Terminal Nerdism (CFFTN) and True Terminal Nerdism (TTN). Few can tell the difference between HUFTN, CFFTN and TTN with any certitude without the aid of one popularly recognized and rarely critiqued as an unprofessionally and stupidly opinionated psychologist; not even the perpetrator. However, someone with un-common common sense told me that if it walks like a duck, talks like a duck, looks like a duck, etc., etc., etc. It sounds good to me and I look forward to the day when I can run the thought by Martha. I am certain of reinforcing agreement. Maybe this can be accomplished when the distracting and insignificant zombies, who pathetically demand attention, go back to the smoke and mirrors of a rarely-watched Bela Lugosi movie. I am not comfortable in deriding cripples. I know am one of them. I truly understand. However, to continue on, I have to believe that I don't care and that I am free and clear; that we are free and clear.

I question my self-serving ideas, but dismiss the thought in recognition of the fact that I always/usually utilize the word "we." The understandable, cynical, educated, twenty-first century perception of what, in my heart and mind, I think I naturally stand for and love, are dismissed, producing a hardening of my heart. No, it is not a hardening. I know that it is not. I bleed profusely and uncontrollably. I am

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soft and much too vulnerable. It doesn't hurt. What hurts is in my head; if only I could shut it off. The part of me which demands survival tell me that what I experience is a fighter's reaction to that with which we are all daily assaulted. The company implied initially serves to ameliorate; but quickly leads to a questioning follow-up of; "You are alone. Why bother?" My misunderstood and melancholy existence sees that the world interprets this mindset as just another Machiavellian ploy; no more, no less; an attempt to gain advantage. Sometimes I cry at the thought of the possibilities denied. There was a time; I know there was; when a happy face looked into mine and told me that this was that for which she had waited so many years. At the time I thought that I understood, as I felt precisely the same way. I thought I knew the exact feeling; an eternity of longing. Now, I wonder. I cry. For me? No, for **us**. I am sure of that.

She never made collection calls on behalf of an unavoidably competitive, nickel and diming bank. Her heart would not have allowed it. I love her more than my life. I stand still and see her. My tears become tiny waterfalls in the hillside; which leave observing photographers to click on the unusual sight, in instinctive, but mindless recognition of its rarity. She is there. I am certain of that. I have to be.

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Now that I am again on my feet; physically, that is; I wonder if Bruce is back in the driveway enjoying the second segment of Macbeth. I'm sure that he has not even comprehended the first, and momentarily feel as if I am somewhat envious. The random feeling passes and I say; "No, I am not." I don't wish him anything bad. No purpose is served. Philosophically, I think that the purpose of being here is to feel; to feel the entirety. To know extreme happiness one must know extreme sorrow. Anything else is an unsatisfying compromise with the apathetic Bruces; next door, next day and next town over.

I question the timing of my tangential, mental meanderings as the activities of the day started as a triumph. I think it possible that the wine is capable of a debilitating obstacle; yet it feels so good for a while. Clarity and momentary purpose flash through my windows as the discouraged sun makes an effort to have some effect on the colorless day. It becomes a consideration to me that I may have digressed from that which is essential to that for which I care. What I am certain of is that the whole bank thing has to be a conspiracy designed to force people to use the institution's "identity theft **resistant**," as opposed to "identity theft **proof**," on line banking services. I have been advised by numerous victims that the correct term is actually "identity theft **conducive**."

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I once had a lawyer friend. The juxtaposition of the concluding words, is not an oxymoron. He told me that in court he effectively uses the phrase; "Golly, gosh and darn," when a ruling is not in his favor. When I said that it sounded overly hokey, he advised me that I would be surprised how much the codger judges go for it. I know so little of human nature.

Blood hit the floor in regular drops and spattered in a circular pattern, forming its own tiny, damaged universe.

I hope I don't need a stitch as I am much too drunk to drive wherever the hospital approved under my politicized and thereby incomprehensible and useless National Health Care plan requires me to go. It's probably somewhere out of state to discourage and thereby defeat it's purpose. One problem compounds the other; **ALWAYS**. For fifteen years of my adult life I have been striving to become the only person I know with no problems. I believe such people do exist. I see them on TV. There's the show with the successful black businessman whose biggest problem is that he distractedly misinterprets what others say, throws a fit and then has to apologize to everyone. Then there's the one with the Assistant DA who obsesses about the possibility that the limitations of the law he knows will prevent the heinous criminal from getting his just desserts. While I'm not a proponent of felonious amnesty, his obsession suggests to me that the rest of his life must be just hunky

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dory. Lucky zealot. To top them all is the well-dressed, bisexual, moneyed office manager, whose co-obligor (female) and lover-under-day-to-day contract (male) accept the existence of the other. Rather than managing the office, which is actually done by an exceedingly underpaid and meticulous young woman, he cries to all reachable ears of how he feels guilty about his affairs in continual graphic detail. Perhaps his Nielsen approved remorse is merely an ostentatious affectation of those comfortable. He is obviously in tune with affectation and verbalizing his misery, but, for some unexplainably instinctive reason, I just don't sympathize. In fact, whenever I watch, I take my pleasure in fantasizing that both mates leave him and the meticulous young woman gets his job.

The blood is now going into my right eye and I am getting worried. I decide to try an old remedy. At least I think that it is an old remedy. I saw it used on boxers when I was a kid. I put on a thick coating of Vaseline. The phone rings, and while I didn't want another concern, I thought it might be Martha, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Well, did you do it?"

I recognize Martha's voice and gruffly say; "Boy, did I ever," humoring myself.

"....."

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