

THE UNIVERSAL

SYMBOL

I was sleeping in the middle of the road again, of course, my blanket laid out across the pavement and my few utensils and my tin coffee pot for in the morning. It wasn't dark outside yet, since it was the middle of summer, and when I looked to the north I could see the road curve down from the rich peoples' houses up on top of the hill, curving down like a question mark in reverse, on the inside curve of the question the iris-shaped median the city had put in with the colorful petunias growing around the sign that showed drivers there was an obstacle in their path. I was in the road at the bottom of the hill, in a place where the road was straighter and where the houses weren't as fancy. The city had yet to erect a sign alerting motorists to my presence, but there had been promises made. *Any day now*, a policeman had told me when I asked my usual question about the sign a couple of days before. So maybe there would be a sign soon. I wondered what it would look like, what sort of universal symbol the city would come up with to represent MAN SLEEPING IN ROAD.

It was always this road, and it was always the same tin coffee pot and the few silver utensils. The utensils were superfluous, really, because I had nothing to eat with them, but the coffee pot was of some use to me since, each morning in the road, the first noise I heard, even prior to the singing of the birds, was the sound of coffee percolating—without fire, without an obvious water source, percolating there on the blanket thrown down on the gritty pavement. The problem was always that I had no cup to drink from.

But it was not morning yet, not even fully nighttime, and the summer sky was still light to the west, a hazy pink, and on the darker east horizon, past the green shutters of the brick house where the old lady

used to live, our former neighbor, who had been carted off to a rest home or died, no telling which, in the time since we had moved across town, there hung a few pale stars. A vehicle, headlights on, came down the road. It appeared to be a domestic automobile, of average size and boxy contours. Heaving a great sigh of the sort that I heaved each time I must pick up my blanket, my coffee pot, my few utensils, and shuffle to the side of the road, I picked up my blanket, my coffee pot, my few utensils, and shuffled to the side of the road. The car went by, a ruffle of air and semi-dazzling light in the semi-lighted evening, the same way that all cars went by at this time of day. It is curious that I never heard the cars after I had fallen asleep, and that they never ran over me. But there are more curious aspects of this story, things that might very well go unmentioned.

On the sidewalk this time, after the car had gone by, I found our cat, or she found me, rubbing her head against my shoes, her canines bared to leave her scent on my pant leg. She often had the same idea I had—to return to this, our former home, where we had been happy. In the mornings, when I gathered up my blanket and my coffee pot and my utensils, she would often be there on the sidewalk or in the yard, hiding among the azaleas. As I trundled my way across town to our newer home, she would follow me at a distance of twenty feet or so, trotting every now and then to keep up, her old haunches swaying back and forth beneath her. But it was rare to see her in the evening, as I did now.

It was even rarer, as it happened then, for the door of the house to open, the house that had once been ours, with its screened-in-porch and the azalea bushes surrounding it, not in flower in the middle of summer, and behind the porch and the azaleas the living room, with its hardwood floors and its high white ceilings, the bookcase that opened like a trap door into the spacious master bedroom, and the sturdy doors with glassed-in squares that closed upon the dining room with the elegant chandelier, and the newly remodeled kitchen on past that, with the butcher's block in the middle and the blue and white squares of tile, which were pleasing to look at but hard to keep clean, so that my wife and I had made an arrangement for daily sweeping, alternating days, that we kept for years with a kind of loving responsibility, and on past the kitchen the hallway that led to the childrens' rooms, all of which, standing on the sidewalk, our cat rubbing against me, I could remember distinctly and with a pain so sharp at that moment that I could not be-

lieve it originated in me, but must have come from someone else, maybe from the old neighbor lady who had perhaps died behind her green shutters in the interim, feeling at the moment of her death this same pain and letting it go into the floorboards of her upstairs bedroom, into the walls and foundations of the house, from which it crept under her neatly trimmed yard of Bermuda grass into the cracks of the pavement, and seeped up into me while I lay there with my blanket and my coffee pot and my silver utensils, to be felt now as I stood on the sidewalk and contemplated, somewhere inside me amidst the pain, the interior of my old house across the street, as revealed by the opening of the door, and the appearance in the doorway of a young woman, the current tenant presumably, who appeared to be a lovely younger version of my wife, but was in fact not my wife at all.

And the sight of this lovely woman who looked so much like a younger version of my wife only intensified the pain I was feeling, the pain associated with seeing the inside of my former house and thinking how happy I was in it, how I used to wake up early in the morning and make a pot of coffee, leaving my wife asleep in bed for the time being, uncurling myself from her warm body there under the covers, looking at her sleeping face, putting on sweats and socks and T-shirt and proceeding to the kitchen to make that pot of coffee, the smell of fresh coffee in the air of the kitchen, and then waking each of my children so that they could go to school, patting their sleepy heads or their sleepy shoulders and calling out *Up, up, up, time's a-wasting*, or something to that effect, and then returning to the kitchen where the coffee was brewing, hissing and spouting and bubbling, and I would scramble eggs or boil water for oatmeal or pour a bowl of cereal and milk or toast a frozen waffle or on really ambitious days mix up the batter for pancakes, and as I was preparing the breakfast my children would stumble in blearily, eye-rubbing, eye-blinking, yawning in a state of half-dress, sit at the butcher block that doubled as a table, spoon or fork in hand, waiting for their breakfast, their waffles or whatever, depending, and their juice, waiting with a kind of simple trust in my ability to provide their basic needs, and unlike the cat, a mere kitten at the time, not responding to my sudden movements or the occasional sounds, not apprehending falsely any danger, knowing that the kitchen at breakfast time was entirely safe, not knowing that that was because I had worked my entire adult life to make it that way, and then me returning to the bedroom to wake my wife, who

would drive the kids to school while I prepared for work, watching her wake, sit up in the bed and put her feet on the floor, marveling at the sight of her bare breasts, marveling at the sight of her rear end as she pulled up a pair of sweats, attached a bra, pulled on a T-shirt, found her glasses on the bedside table, yawned and stumbled past me, sometimes placing her hand on my arm in a good morning caress, and I would always hope that there would be enough time, in my case, and enough inclination, in hers, for us to make love once she returned from taking the kids to school and before I left for work, and then sitting at the table in a kind of happy stupor, drinking my hot coffee, watching my children, watching my wife, listening to their conversations about homework and after-school activities, happy with life and with the possibilities of life in a way that I had not felt now in a very long time. Now our children were older and they were gone from the new house that we owned instead of rented across town, and there were no more family breakfasts and no more sleepy, loving moments in the morning between my wife and I, and no passion between us, and it seemed to me no hope or joy. And so when this lovely woman who looked like a younger version of my wife, dressed in a satiny green gown hanging loosely enough to show the movement of her full breasts underneath, stood there in the doorway, holding the door open, the light inside warm and inviting, in such a way that it seemed to be beckoning someone inside, whether that someone should be me or the cat, and our old cat indeed then scampering toward the open door with a youthful bounce of the sort which I had no longer thought her capable, and the woman continuing to hold the door after the cat had passed through, and now smiling, unmistakably, across the road at me, I began to move without thought or hesitation in an eager stride across the pavement and the sidewalk and into the grass of the small front yard, feeling as if I were receding rather than going forward, receding into the bright light and the soft glow of the woman's hair and skin, and it was as if I could see myself still from my position across the road where I had intended to sleep again as I had so many times, longing for the things the heart always longs for, and it seemed to me that there was no longer any need for a sign, that at this moment, this moment that seemed to curl back on itself into some infinite place, I would clearly look to all the world like a man returning home.