

MARK PATERSON

Not Your Personal Ashtray

WITH THE EDGE OF THE GLASS between his pursed lips, allowing a slow stream of water to flow into his mouth, wetting his tongue and cooling his throat, Roger watches Geneva reach beneath her desk to buzz the courier in. The office door clicks and the navy blue-clad messenger enters and places a red, white and blue envelope on the front desk, then hands Geneva his clipboard. His company baseball cap looks well worn, worked on at night, at home, Roger speculates, fitting the man's head as if he had left the womb with it on. He flirts with Geneva, leaning his arms on the desk now, and Roger, the glass still to his lips, not drinking anymore, only smelling his own breath, watches the back of her blond hair bob with polite laughter. She hands the pad back and the courier stands up straight again, but he's still talking. He's got his signature, Roger thinks, what else does he want? Geneva laughs so loudly now, so genuinely, that everybody else in the office looks up, notices. Roger pretends not to watch anymore and puts his glass down, empty, half on the plastic desk pad and half on the colour photograph of his mother he's been meaning to frame for the last six months. He pushes it off of the picture's surface before any unseemly rings can form.

Roger looks up again, the courier has finished his subtle harassment and is turning to leave, he has more packages under his arm. Roger sits up a bit in his seat, walks him out the door with his eyes, notices how hairy the backs of the young man's calves are and what an immaculate ironing job has been done on his shorts. Geneva swivels in her chair and stands with the newly arrived envelope in her hand. She is wearing a beige plaid skirt and no stockings, brown low-heels looking comfortable somehow. A long, thin silver chain bounces on her yellow blouse as she

walks directly toward Roger. She waves the envelope playfully in the air, with a mother's teasing "I'm gonna get you" look on her face. A plastic braid keeps the hair out of her eyes—green coloured contact lenses today—but one small collection of strands has escaped and hangs down the right side of her face. Her cheeks are white beneath the subtle touch of blush applied to them, her lips are small, and, with her mouth slightly open, her two front teeth rest gently on her bottom lip.

Roger gets up quickly, a metal clang resounding from the impact his waist and thighs make with his desk. He puts one hand on his chair, then both on the desk, as if checking for injuries, instinctively plunges his forefinger into the bridge of his nose, to push up the eyeglasses that he's not even wearing, and returns his hands to the desk.

"Don't get up," he stutters. "I was just going to fill my water glass." His hands search, find the glass.

"Aren't you sweet?"

"Really, it's no trouble." He meets her halfway.

"Here you go, big shot," she hands him the envelope. "Only the big shots get FedEx, you know."

Roger swallows and regurgitates a giggle from somewhere inside of him, clears his throat, and pats his left breast. Geneva is already at his desk, and returns with his glasses. He accepts them, gratefully, clumsily, slips them over his ears, now ready to read.

"Those really make you look cute, you know."

Of course she says that, Roger thinks. She helped him pick out the glasses at the quick-serve optometry centre near the Métro station last winter. They had met by chance, leaving the office for lunch separately and then finding each other in the same line at the food court. He looked around for signs of a boyfriend, a date, a friend of hers, whoever was eating with her. No such person emerged. Over MSG-free Japanese combos served on styrofoam plates he disclosed to her his quandary over choosing new frames for his reading glasses. It felt strange, letting her in on such intimate knowledge, but it just came out. Even stranger when she practically took him by the arm and, after holding the garbage can flap open for him to brush his plate and plastic utensils off his tray, marched him to the optometry centre.

Inside, he let her take over. It felt natural, familiar to do so, as she picked out various shapes and sizes of frames for him to try

on. There was laughter when he put on a thick, horn-rimmed pair, she saying that her father used to wear ones just like that, and he thinking, but unable to say, the same. She practically fell over, laughing herself silly when, on a whim, she modelled a classical grandma pair of silver rimmed glasses on herself. She came at him, giggling, slapped him on the shoulder, hyperventilating. Then her silver necklace became entangled with a button on his shirt collar. There was an uncomfortable but enjoyable minute of dislodging, she holding her breath to keep from laughing, coughing up soya smelling chuckles throughout, he hot in the ear lobes and nervous. "Don't tell anybody about this, Roger," she joked, half seductively, when they finally freed each other.

Geneva settled on a small pair of glasses for him, smaller than Roger would have ever dared wear, with oval rims. She told him he'd fit in as easily on the terrace of a St. Denis café as in the office with these glasses. He trusted her judgement, had none of his own, and put his money down.

"What are you doing for lunch today?" she asks, reading the address label of the Federal Express envelope over his shoulder.

"Lunch?" He looks at his watch. "Lunch. I, I brought a lunch today."

"You always bring a lunch, Roger. When are we going to go to lunch again?"

"I have to fill my water glass," he spits out, not even looking back at her.

He feels her watching him walk out the door with the envelope under his arm and his damned water glass in his hand.

Roger strides quickly down the hall, blue walls, grey carpet, less familiar than the office, more anonymous. He passes doors to the offices of other companies in the building, the elevators, and turns the corner. He opens the washroom door just wide enough to slip inside, and closes it by leaning back against the door, one palm flat against its wooden surface, the other still holding the glass. The envelope pops out from under his arm from the leaning and falls on the checkered tile floor. He doesn't pick it up right away, he's too busy breathing.

He is accosted by his own image in the long mirror in front of him, running the length of the sink and counter, the counter that Roger knows is stained with little globs of wasted liquid soap. It's always like that. He looks at his face in the mirror and thinks his

head is shaped like an acorn. His hair is thinning in the front, showing off his entire forehead and a good portion of his exterior scalp. Where his brown hair begins it stands, not straight up but at an acute angle with the top of his skull, without any aid from teasing or hair care products. With the glasses his eyes are not as boring as he usually finds them, brown, nothing. His bony cheeks are populated by tiny specks of the black stubble that always returns to his face well before lunch. He puts one finger to his large, flat lips, bites at the nail.

He bends to pick up his envelope, taking care to make as little contact between the bathroom floor and his fingers as possible. He straightens, is confronted with himself again in the mirror. He looks at his V-neck sweater, dark and light checkers of green, the beige collar of his shirt underneath, and the knot of his brown woolen tie. His pants are brown, flannel, and he can feel the thin brown socks around his damp, sweaty feet, encased in the brown pair of topsiders that are just the right size so that he never has to tie or untie them when putting them on or taking them off. He approaches the mirror, looks deeply into his own eyes, their size magnified by the glasses, then finds a clean place on the counter for his water glass and envelope. He rushes past the urinal and escapes into the toilet stall.

Roger is disgusted, appalled. The water in the toilet is yellow, unflushed, and the remains of a smoked cigarette float on the surface. The butt is in two pieces: the foam portion of the filtre, dislodged from its soaked paper sheath, and the tobacco-laden cylinder with its black, burnt out triangular end. A thin stream of brown tar snakes out from the tip, motionless in the water. The black plastic toilet seat is inundated with grey and black cigarette ashes that lie among three tiny liquid puddles of unknown origin. There are more ashes on the floor, and more puddles, and the whole place suddenly smells like the all-night doughnut shop when there are no empty seats in the non-smoking section for Roger. "Dammit," he says, out loud. He hates the fact that he must share this bathroom with the other men from his office, and the men from all of the offices on the eleventh floor. They know they're not supposed to smoke in here.

He thinks of the men that lounge around outside the building in spring and summer, their shirtsleeves rolled up to beat the heat, ties flapping in the breeze, flicking ashes and butts all over

the pavement. He tries to remember their faces, guessing at who the guilty party might be. He thinks of them crowding the entrance in the fall and winter, staying warm with him forced to breathe their stench, the whole lobby smelling like the inside of an old, empty beer bottle. Why should smokers take more breaks than the rest of us, he asks himself for the umpteenth time. I take breaks to relieve myself and to fill my water glass, I take care of the basics. They take breaks to meet their chemically enhanced needs and feel perfectly justified in doing so. He stares at the toilet seat again, cannot believe that somebody on the eleventh floor has the gall to leave it in such a state. He exits, punching the stall door open, fills his water glass, retrieves his envelope, and marches back to the office.

Geneva buzzes him in, he avoids her eyes, though he knows she's looking at him. Roger sits back down at his desk and takes a small sip of water. He completely avoids the photograph this time, placing his glass on the corner of his desk with the small jade plant. He can't work, Geneva is after him about lunch again and the bathroom is filthy. He removes his glasses, rubs his eyes, and turns to look out his window. He rests his chin in one palm and sighs. It is bright outside; the tinted glass of his window is bluer than usual. He looks down on the Trans Canada Highway, the raised portion where Cote de Liesse begins beneath it. A few cars fly by in both directions, little toy cars from the eleventh floor. Lazy, late people, Roger thinks. There are trucks and vans, too. They're okay, they're supposed to be there. Behind the autoroute, peeking over its elevated lanes, is the big orange Salada sign, the giant Kraft logo, and the brown billboard with a smoked meat sandwich and pickle advertising Les Aliments T. Lauzon. The Hygrade kids chow down perpetually on their hot dogs. Watching over all, huge, green, is the northern slope of Mount Royal.

The trees and bushes mix together from this distance, the mountain looks vital, alive. Roger likes to look at the mountain. He stares at his two favourite landmarks: the Université de Montréal tower and St. Joseph's Oratory. He likes them equally, each beautiful in its own way. His mother liked the tower best, she once told him as they drove home from the Laurentiens, the mountain suddenly visible as they sped through Laval on the autoroute. "Which one do you like?" He didn't know.

The Université tower stands noble and erect, shooting straight up into the sky. With its lean stem and rounded triangular apex, Roger thinks it looks like a beige torpedo readied for launch. From up high on the eleventh floor, it looks small enough for one of his hands to grasp it all the way around, his thumb meeting and resting on his four fingers. He is proud that Montreal has such a monument to impress visitors with, thinks he would definitely point it out if he ever had a visitor.

The Oratory, with Brother André's preserved heart stored within, is softer, rounder, not as snatching to the eye as the tower, but just as magnificent. The old green dome appears to lounge about the trees, flopping out as if by its own choice. A crucifix is centred on its coned roof, all so small from Roger's perch, small enough to reach out and cup in his palm. He thinks he would like to take somebody to the Oratory, a visitor, and show them the three sets of stairs, explain the religious significance of the centre stairs, tour the cathedral and gift shop, gaze upon the many abandoned crutches and canes kept behind glass, and, of course, pay homage at the little iron case where the amputated heart of the man who built the place is kept. He thinks Geneva might like to go. No, she would laugh at the idea. He turns away from the window, away from the tower and the Oratory, planning to get a little work done.

But his bladder is full. The painful yearning for relief returns his thoughts to the bathroom, the filthy bathroom. He has to do something about the lack of respect that the eleventh floor wash-room is being treated with. He hates the smokers he knows are downstairs, or maybe in the bathroom right now. He imagines ten of them, good looking, confident men, crammed in the toilet stall like 1950s pranksters in a phone booth, smoking, ashing, laughing, mocking him. He sees their groomed, full heads of hair, their white teeth, their chiselled cheek and jawbones. Laughing, jostling each other in the cramped quarters, blowing smoke everywhere. He hates them.

Roger places a sheet of white typing paper in front of him and grabs a black felt marker from among the pens and pencils in the coffee mug at the edge of his desk. He looks up at the ceiling, taps the pen against his chin a few times, then uncaps it. He writes, furiously, a steady stream of angry ink flowing from the marker onto the paper. He puts a period to his last sentence and reads over his work. Geneva is coming over.

"What's that?"

"This? This is a notice to those people who think the men's washroom is their own personal ashtray. I'm not going to stand for it anymore, Geneva."

"You're not?" She seems surprised by Roger's sudden air of certainty. He likes that she's surprised, but doesn't know exactly why. "Can I see?" she asks.

Roger hands her his notice, she reads.

THIS IS NOT YOUR PERSONAL ASHTRAY.

Please do not smoke or leave your ashes here.

We share this space.

"Wow, you really mean it, Roger. Are you going to put this up in the bathroom?"

"Yes." He rises, clanging his thighs against the bottom of the desk again. "I'm not going to take it anymore."

He marches to the door, puts one hand on the handle, then hears her call out: "You want some scotch tape?"

He takes two small pieces of tape gratefully, and walks out into the blue hallway. He pictures the bathroom in his mind, mulls over the different places he can place his sign, tries to decide where it would be most visible. If I can take a stand like this, he thinks, maybe I can ask Geneva to the Oratory. He straight-arms the washroom door open and is hit full on by a long, low-lying cloud of cigarette smoke. The paper in his hands feels suddenly large, obvious. He holds it behind his back with both hands. A man stands to the side of the mirror, his back to Roger, using in the urinal. He's wearing a black woolly sweater. His khaki pants are pulled down a bit, to just beneath his backside, exposing a pair of murky green briefs. Roger is reminded of the kids in grade school who got teased and taunted for not knowing how to pull down their zipper instead of their pants in front of a urinal. Was I one of those kids? He can't remember. The underwear is very loose around the man's buttocks, particularly sagging in the middle. Roger can see small, prickly black hairs and a few red blemishes on the small portion of exposed thighs. He turns to leave.

"Hey, wait," the man says. "I'm almost done."

Roger stands at the door, sideways to the man, looking at the floor. He peeks up, sees the man's head is turned to the side

now, looking at Roger, a burning cigarette with a long, teetering ash dangling from his mouth. Roger does not recognize his face, cannot place it among the extra-long-break-takers from downstairs.

The man jiggles, pulls up his pants, zips, buttons, drops his cigarette into the urinal, hissing, and turns to face Roger while he ties his belt. Roger looks down again. He sees ashes on the floor, looks the man in the eye. His mouth moves to speak, to personally inform the man of the essence of the notice he came to post, but nothing comes out.

"Do you work on this floor?" the man asks, his back to Roger again, washing his hands, dripping liquid soap all over the counter. "I don't think I've seen you before."

"Yes, at August Sales." Roger is relieved to speak, to talk about anything but what he had come to the bathroom for. He listens to the silence that follows. "Do you, um, work on this floor, too?"

"No, I work up on the fourteenth. It's a little weird, but I prefer this bathroom, so I come down here sometimes." He dries his hands with a paper towel. He extends one hand. "I'm Gene."

Roger offers his right hand, keeping the left behind his back, clasping the notice. "Roger." Gene's hand is soft, moist, but his grip is firm.

"Nice to meet you, Roger. Well," he bends a little and waves ceremoniously at the urinal, "It's all yours."

"Um, thank you." Roger takes a step toward the urinal, his bladder readying itself for deflation. He forgets the nature of the notice and holds it in front of his waist.

"What's that?" Gene asks, pointing.

Roger looks at the pointing finger, at his waist region, aghast. The he realizes that Gene means the paper. "Oh, nothing."

"Let me see." He has a new cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He lights it with a click and a snap from his silver lighter. "What have you got there?" He places himself in front of Roger, quietly, but rigidly. He puts his hand out for the paper, Roger feels hypnotized, surrenders the notice. His bladder screams at him, threatening him with contractions. He isn't listening.

"... *not your personal asbtray*. Oh, I didn't know this bothered you. I'm sorry." Gene flicks his wasted cigarette into the urinal, hissing again. "You were going to hang this up, weren't you?"

"Well, um, it's really not that big of a deal. I mean, yes, I don't like the ashes on the floor, on the seat, but the smell isn't all that bad, really. You know, I don't really need to put that up, you can just throw it out. Please."

"Hey, Rog, don't get all tied up in knots like that. It's okay, I understand." Gene approaches Roger, puts one of his soft, firm hands on his shoulder. His light brown bangs and blue eyes are right in his face. Roger smells his breath, rancid, like a tar truck. He feels Gene's hand squeeze his shoulder, gently, becoming a massage. He twists, but Gene doesn't release his grip.

"Excuse me," Roger says, "I really have to use the toilet."

"Okay, okay." Gene lifts his hand from Roger's shoulder, keeps it in the air, innocuous.

Roger shuffles to the urinal, presses his body as close as possible to the porcelain, unzips his pants and cups both of his hands to shroud himself. He waits to feel the relief he yearns for, but his bladder is wreaking revenge on him now, and Gene is still standing there. How can he go when that, that harassing man is right behind him?

"Just whistle a bit, think about a waterfall, it'll come then."

"I can take care of myself, thank you," Roger barks at the ceramic wall.

But he does think about water: the fountain at Square Victoria, the bust of the old Queen. His mother liked to visit Queen Victoria on Sundays. He always had to go with her, drinking tea from a thermos with her, always with her, waiting until she was tired enough to decide to go home. The ritual began when he was a child, and before Roger realized that he had grown to be a man he was still doing it. Still taking trips to the Laurentiens with Mother ("Let's go see the leaves"), watching Perry Mason and, in later years, Matlock, with her at night ("Oh, I wonder who did it?"), going for endless walks ("My knees just kill, let's sit here for a while"), and always, always, drinking tea on Sundays with Queen Victoria ("My Auntie Vic met her once during a parade, you know"). Roger empties himself, wishing Gene would just go away.

He sidesteps to the sink, plunges his hands under warm water, Gene is there in the mirror, lighting another cigarette. He hooks it in the corner of his mouth, eyes squinting, and turns around, holding Roger's notice against the wall. "How about right here?"

Roger doesn't bother to dry his hands and snatches the sign away from Gene. "You're mocking me," he hisses, surprised at his own boldness.

"No, no, seriously," Gene says, "This'll be my last time. I won't do it here anymore. I swear." He takes a long drag, the cigarette buttressed between his thumb and forefinger.

Roger pulls the door open and walks quickly down the hall, the paper flapping in his hand at his side. He hears Gene, "Aw c'mon, Rog! Hey Rog! Wait!"

He glances behind him, sees Gene is following, without the cigarette. Roger increases his pace, and when he gets around the corner, out of sight, he jogs. The office door clicks at the exact moment he grabs the handle, as if Geneva has been waiting for him, only him, vigilantly. "Hey," she remarks as he flies by her desk, "You didn't put up your sign."

Roger retreats to his desk, feels protected by it. This is where he's supposed to be, this is where he belongs. His papers, pens, telephone, Post-Its, calendar, the jade plant—they're all familiar. Posting signs in public washrooms is not. He can't believe the notion to do something crazy like that ever entered his mind. Everything would have gone on normally if he'd just stayed where he belonged. Done what he's supposed to do. He would have been safe. He crumples the notice and tosses it into the wastepaper basket under the desk.

He looks out the window again, right at the domed Oratory. He thinks of his mother, her funeral just two months ago. He didn't even tell Geneva that she'd died. He didn't know if he was allowed. His mother wasn't there anymore to tell him what was okay to do and what wasn't. She didn't leave instructions. He remembers how he imagined soon after the funeral what it would be like to tell Geneva, and how he felt comforted in that fantasy. But was it okay to really do it?

He hears the office door click. Gene is coming in. He's talking to Geneva, talking to her the same way the courier talked to her before. All suave. Roger is angry, scared, and embarrassed all at the same time. Gene is still talking to Geneva, but he's looking beyond her. He's scanning the office. Roger tilts his head toward the surface of his desk, hooks his hand to his forehead like he's shading himself from the sun, and watches Gene as stealthily as he can. Their eyes meet. Gene waves. Roger can't look away now.

Gene comes around Geneva's desk. She stands up, steps in front of him, shakes her head, no, you can't go over there. She glances back at Roger, quickly, but then Gene's hand is on her shoulder. She twists her head to look at it, as if an insect were crawling there. Roger sees Gene's fingers move in unison, kneading the flesh surrounding Geneva's shoulder blade. Roger shoots up, clanging his waist against the underside of his desk.

Geneva takes one step back, breaking Gene's grip on her, then in one fluid motion steps forward again and slaps Gene full on across the face. He recoils, presses his palm lightly to his reddened cheek. Roger stands beside his desk, frozen. Gene's eyes find his, look at him like he's an old buddy betrayed, and Roger doesn't move. Can't. Deep down he knows he should move, do something, but it's too automatic to wait for somebody to tell him exactly what he should do. Two other men from the office are marching toward Gene. They escort him out the door, go with him into the hall.

Geneva just stands there, looking down, her back to Roger, her arms hugging her sides. Roger feels his left foot move first, then his right. He's walking toward her. He's deciding it's the right thing to do. When he gets close he changes his direction slightly, a diagonal line out from where she stands, then a diagonal line in, so that he arrives before her at an angle that won't startle her. She's still looking at the floor. He touches her arm ever so lightly with the tips of his fingers and bends his head to get his eyes at her level. Her lips tremble slightly, and she's tearing.

"Maybe we should take an early lunch," he says.

"Thank you." She reaches for his hand on her arm and clasps it, hard.

He holds the office door open. She passes him, goes out. Roger is right behind her.