

The Babyland Diaper Service van drives past me again, rounding the roundabout, and what bothers me again today like every day—what makes me sick, really—isn't the first image blasted onto the van's broad side, of two human babies tangled up on a play blanket, scattered toys enclosing them, simple white cotton diapers on their pink bodies, No; it's the companion image, the dancing elderly clothed in outfits ironed stiff and clean but with slight bulges in their pants to indicate, I imagine, their dependence on Babyland Diaper Service's service: their discomfort, their incontinence; and the effect that van has on me—the driver on his rounds with two piles of cloth diapers in the back: one stack soiled with: mashed peas; boiled chicken; martinis and chewed olives; forgotten foods long hidden in ninety-year-old colons and finally knocked loose forever from their ailing host; and the second stack, white as a baby's teeth, clean, smelling of cotton and chemical flowers or some concoction called "Mountain Glade" or "Sunshine"—the effect that has on me so early is I start thinking denominators and numbers of visits to the commode I have left before I'm pissing directly into cotton that's wrapped and pinned around my midsection, or worse, till my piss doesn't even reach the air but gets vacuumed straight out and into a bag somewhere (catheterized, colostomized) and no matter what the van's image suggests you won't find me dancing in a green field with a lump of piss-logged undergarment pasted to my spider-veined and liver-marked thighs. That's false advertising. The whole van and the driver and the nurses wiping your ass clean with a wet rag, it harms me, in the morning, when all I'm trying to do is to walk from my house to the blue mailbox at the corner and turn back around without the Babyland van brushing past and reminding me of where my days are headed, and for a moment while turning I catch the driver's eyes looking at me, eyes that should be scanning the street for potential kids or old ladies who might just pop out from between two parked cars, but instead of the street he's looking at me and thinking, "What kind of jerk mails letters at just this time every morning, forever in his pajamas, day after day?" He's headed back to the Babyland depot to swap out old diapers and pick up a new stack of bleached ones tied together like they've been extracted from the earth in some diaper quarry where everything's perfectly white and soft and easy on the skin and comes out gleaming in red plastic packages ready for dispersal, but before that he's off to the old folks' home down the street where he's gotten to know a few customers, the Terminal Porch Sitters he calls them, even though there's no porch and most of the time it's not sitting but slumping catatonic in a wheelchair with food sliding into their bodies through one tube and the results sliding out through another, but he closes his eyes and refocuses on the street, only a few stops left before he can call it a day, or a morning, since he's been making rounds since way before the sun came up and he'll be done before most everybody else breaks for lunch. One joy he gets from this line of work is sitting at Domini eating a sandwich after work when the assholes in suits file in for a midday meal and talk over little paper plates of popcorn and cans of Coke that have them burping sideways or into their hands every sip, sometimes four of them together around a circular table all burping to the right and talking into the middle, laughing and slapping their thighs, checking their watches until they finish in unison and the conversation dies and they all wad their napkins and roll them into the center of their plates and stand up brushing crumbs from their laps, burping into their chests, and scattering a few bills on the table before they leave in file and never once realize the Babyland driver's been watching from a corner over a thick roast beef sandwich, thinking about what he'll do with the remainder of his day. That's one good part. Also, prepping his van in the morning. The prep has become his art. He is the Zen master packing perfect cubes of cloud-white garments still untainted by entropy, fundamentally sound and geometrical before they come back chaotic in the plastic return bags that have gotten thinner since he started working for Babyland, when the company switched suppliers and discovered it could save considerable overhead by using cheap bags, so that now the plastic, when distended with soiled diapers, gets transparent and the used product his customers return is mottled, colorful, and, the once—one morning he tries to not think about too often, which he pushes away whenever his mind forces the image on him—he got a bag from the old folks' home so embarrassingly stuffed the custodian apologized as he lifted it from the metal out box, and when the driver tossed it into the back of the van the thing split open like an overripe cantaloupe and there staring him in the face was an otherwise white diaper with a crimson splotch like the Cyclops's bloodshot eyeball in the center—that's when the joy dries up and the reality comes rushing in and he thinks about the doddering bodies on every story of that elderly center and imagines them as ancient apes being wheeled around until they expire and shit their guts into the Death Diaper, the swan song soil, the final expulsion. Fecal bookends of existence: the ineffable relief of tarry meconium at birth moving inexorably toward the culminating digestive moment. When the Driver pulls into his spot in the half-circle drive at the Crest Apartments Senior Accommodations and Clubhouse, which cannot really boast a clubhouse but rather a buffet-style dining hall for mobile residents, Anthony Carsoli waits for him in the doorway tapping his foot on the Welcome mat, anxious to tell our Driver an unbelievable news story he read about a family on a trip to the nation's Capital that had huddled together on the Supreme Court building stairs, mapping out their plans for the day, when above the father, who's holding a map of DC unwieldy and unfurled in his outstretched arms, a chunk of 172 pounds-per-cubic-foot Vermont marble works loose from the decorative molding near the frieze of The Figure of Authority and falls forty feet directly onto the unsuspecting patriarch's crown and kills him instantly in front of his wife, her brother, her brother's wife, the twin twelve-year-old nieces, and his own son: eight, timid: a bed-wetter and generally anxious child, not to mention countless other tourists and a busload of teenage girls from a private school in Virginia, three of whom are later punished, according to the report, for pocketing shards of marble that had spun off the original piece.. It was a good story, Anthony thought, despite the tragedy. Imagine all those people watching. And if our Driver were to show interest in the first story Anthony had a similar one to back it up, the story of a Baptist minister who'd electrocuted himself dead in front of 2,000 congregants when, baptizing a line of new believers in a large tub of water, he reached up for the microphone and created a circuit through his body powerful enough to propel his corpse twelve feet out of the bath and into the third row of onlookers. Imagine, Anthony wanted to say, imagine you're the boy in the fourth pew, the minister limp and smoking in your lap moments after warning you that evil acts will earn you one-way fare on the express train to Hell. Some story, Anthony thought, tapping his foot and waiting.

Now watch him watching, the way his expression changes when there's no one around. The third floor women's bathroom is the best place to observe him this time of day, scrubbing your hands for the seventh time in the hour, goading yourself to "Ask him, ask him, ask him." What could go wrong? You've never seen him with another woman. You've never heard him talk about a date. He tells you stories during every meal break, stories that last for weeks and star women very much like you in appearance and demeanor and outfiture, nurses most of them, professional women of promise. He brings two tapioca snack packs in his lunch now, one for him, one for you. And two plastic spoons. God how he eats it with the spoon facing down. Now watch him laugh with the Driver who walks toward the building with a fresh delivery slung over his shoulder and a good smile on his face, and a minute later watch them walk to the truck together, small plastic bags held out from their sides so they don't brush pantlegs. Watch them part by touch elbows instead of shaking hands because, you guess, well, because of germs. As if they don't have exactly the same germs anyway. Scrub your hands well. The water is scalding hot but feels like it's killing everything just right, and the soap feels so cool and smooth in your palms.

The letter falls from my hands as I dodge the Babyland Diaper Service bus again and I bend down to save it from moisture that's simultaneously part of the sidewalk and part of everything else around. The van continues down the street. Watch it go.