To say that Rodney went there religiously was not just a figure of speech, for Boyle’s resembled a church even at noon, when no one was yet kneeling in the Gents, asking God for His mercy.

At that hour, a shaft of sunlight shone through stained glass. Which is to say, windows whose glass was comprehensively stained—by a double-glazing of nicotine and automotive exhaust, and the secondhand smoke of a half-century of bullshit.

There were just the two windows—flanking the punched nose of a red front door—so that Boyle’s faced the world through befogged spectacles. Whether these were the befogged spectacles of a man who has just come into a warm place from a cold one or of a man wearing permanent, prescriptive beer goggles depended largely on what one wanted from Boyle’s.

Suffice to say that over the decades the bar and its regulars had begun to resemble one another, in the way of pets and their owners or old married couples.

It was now impossible to tell whether its customers smelled of Boyle’s or Boyle’s smelled of its customers, only that both smelled, unmistakably, of corned beef and Lysol.
Rodney sat at the bar, his right hand slapped up against his brow, so that the ballpoint pen plugged between two fingers appeared to grow from his forehead, like a unicorn horn.

He looked up from his crossword, to the bottles of the back bar: there was something provocative about those jewel-toned vessels, their backs turned to a mirrored wall, as if trying on pants in a department store dressing room, as if checking out their own bottoms in a new pair of jeans.

More than a few of Boyle's regulars regarded the bottles that way—voyeuristically, with what amounted to lust.

A bottle of Cockburn's was shelved next to a bottle of Dry Sack. Given their proximity, Rodney thought of them not as port and sherry but as twinned male medical afflictions, the former leading inevitably to the latter.

In front of him, a pint of Guinness, with its clerical collar of foam. Behind him, four booths, snug as confessionals, their rosewood benches salvaged from St. Michael the Archangel's. Two million asses, squirming through Masses: they had burnished the pews, leaving a rich patina that looked to Rodney like Murphy's Irish Red.

He thought of how, when he farted in church as a kid, his mother whispered, “Now you're sitting in your own pew.”

Boyle's church pews, like Boyle's dogs, had found a better home in Boyle's. A sign above the first booth quoted Mark 2:16:

WHEN THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES SAW HIM, THEY SAID UNTO HIS DISCIPLES, “HOW IS IT THAT HE EATETH AND DRINKETH WITH PUBLICANS AND SINNERS?”

Armen set Rodney's lunch plate heavily on the bar. It settled like a spun coin. Armen's name was Gary Garabedian,
but to anyone who'd been to Boyle's more than once, he was Armen. Armen the Barman.

Rodney and Armen once passed a summer's evening compiling a list of notable people, like Armen, of Armenian ancestry. The list consisted entirely of famous surnames that ended in -ian: Dr. Jack Kevorkian, Cherilyn (Cher) Sarkisian, basketball coach Jerry Tarkanian. “Yossarian,” Rodney said. “From Catch-22.”

“Raffi Cavoukian,” Armen said, citing a multiplatinum children's troubadour whom Rodney had never heard of. Rodney was not merely childless but as bereft of children as a man can be—a kind of orphan in reverse.

Rodney played to his strength and countered with sports personalities of the 1970s: Notre Dame football coach Ara Parseghian, Miami Dolphins kicker Garo Yepremian, and NFL field judge Armen Terzian, who was knocked unconscious by a thrown whiskey bottle after costing the Minnesota Vikings a playoff game against the Dallas Cowboys.

At the end of the bar, another man being slowly knocked unconscious with a whiskey bottle said: “Conan the Barbarian.”

Rodney turned to look at the guy. He had a face like a punched pillow. His jug-handle ears—and the emptiness echoing between them—called to mind golf's Wanamaker Trophy, given annually to the winner of the PGA Championship, whose highlights were just then playing on TV. In time, he would become known to everyone at Boyle's as Wanamaker—except on the back of his Boyle's softball jersey, where his name would be abbreviated in the way that old baseball box scores abbreviated Gionfriddo as “G’fr’do” or Vandermeer as “V’D’Mr.”

On his softball jersey, “Wanamaker” was contracted to “Wan’ker.”
THE PINT MAN

During nights like that one, celebrating celebrated Armenians with a group of strangers, Rodney had all the companionship he needed inside Boyle's.

As new people entered through that swinging red door, they were challenged to name an Armenian celebrity whose name ended in -ian. When an old man said, “Ruffian,” Rodney recalled how the great thoroughbred filly was buried where she had collapsed—at Belmont, her nose pointed for all eternity toward a finish line she’d never reach.

It was about as apt a metaphor as he could think of for the comic futility of life.

Rodney forked a piece of porterhouse into his mouth and chewed it like a cud. He fed a French fry to Edith, the bulldog who spent entire days asleep under the bar, a courtesy extended to only a few of Boyle’s regulars.

He had no idea where or whether Edith went when Boyle’s closed. But Rodney had seen Edith drink Bushmill’s directly from a dog dish in a match race won by Wanamaker.

Until a year ago, the bar had two bulldogs. But Edith was widowed when Drinketh died of pneumonia, leaving Edith that most disappointing of all creations: a setup without a punch line.

Rodney had a blind date tonight, a setup that would almost certainly have no payoff.

He took a pull from his pint of Guinness and his brain began to run on its hamster wheel to nowhere: Guinness is stout, stout is a kind of porter, porter was popular among porters in the street markets of London, who drank it in porter houses, which served steak, which is why they call the swatch of suede I am now masticating a “porterhouse steak.”

Rodney wondered if he should order a second porterhouse
tonight, on his date, so that he could regale her with this history.

He looked again at his crossword clue: “Spot remover.” With the safecracker’s disdain for the locksmith, he inked in DOGcatcher. Then his right hand went back to his forehead, and the ballpoint again was unicorncd to his brow.

Before the smoking ban, when that pen was a cigarette, it looked like a smokestack for his brain. That brain remained a bustling widget factory, three shifts working round the clock to make a product that nobody needed, at least not outside of Boyle’s.

Some people have a mind like a steel trap. Rodney had a mind like a lint trap. It retained only useless fluff: batting averages, ancient jingles, a slogan glimpsed once, years ago, on the side of a panel van, for an exterminator (“We’ll Make Your Ants Say Uncle”) or a window-treatment supplier (“A Couple of Blind Guys”) or a septic tank specialist (“Doody Calls”).

High in a corner behind the bar, beneath a ceiling tiled to look like tin, hung an ancient TV, a Zenith at its nadir. Armen turned the sound up. Family Feud, with a new host, who said: “One hundred people surveyed, top five answers on the board, name a famous Rudolph.”

Rodney clicked the ballpoint pen with his thumb as if it were the plunger on Jeopardy and said: “Red-Nosed Reindeer, Giuliani, Nureyev, Valentino . . .”

Armen said, “Wilma Rudolph.”

Wanamaker said, “Wilma Flintstone.”

“It’s famous Rudolphs,” Armen said. “Not famous Wilmas.”

“There are no other famous Wilmas,” Rodney said.

Armen said, “Not true: Wilma Mankiller. Chief of the Cherokee Nation.”

On TV, the host said, “I need an answer.”
A young woman in a lime-sorbet pantsuit held her palms upward as if waiting for rain. She cringed preemptively and said: “Hitler?”

Armen roared and shouted, “Rudolph Hitler!”

Rodney thought how “Rudolph” sounded benign, “Adolf” malevolent. He wondered aloud if names were destiny.

“You mean, would I be a barman if my name weren’t Armen?” Armen asked. “It’s like Alicia Keys. She plays the piano and her name is Keys.”

“Her real name is Cook,” Rodney said. “Her stage name is Keys. Just like your real name is Gary. Armen’s your stage name. You’re Armen because you’re a barman, she’s Keys because she plays piano.”

If Cook’s name was her destiny, Rodney reflected, she’d be making pot pies with Vance, the Boyle’s cook who seemed to pop his head out the kitchen door once a day, like a cuckoo from a clock.

“I’m talking the other way around,” he said. “Like the archbishop of Manila was Cardinal Sin. The team dentist for the San Francisco Giants, his name is Les Plack.”

Armen said, “I read that an unusually high percentage of people named Dennis become dentists.”

“What about Wilma Mankiller?” Wanamaker said. “How’d you like to go on a blind date, you ask her her name, she says, ‘Mankiller.’ Probably didn’t have a lot of second dates.”

“Mankiller, party of one.” Armen said jauntily. But the four booths of the Boyle’s dining room were empty.

Rodney felt compelled to point out that Wilma Mankiller did not become a killer of men, but Armen had already moved on to Lorena Bobbitt, who famously hacked off her husband’s wang with a kitchen knife and flung it out a car window. “Lorena, bob it,” Armen said. “That’s destiny.”

Wanamaker said to Rodney, “What am I missing?”
Rodney thought of all the possible answers: hair, brains, job, class, deodorant. But all he said was "Look it up."

Armen turned to the back bar and examined Boyle's reference library of Quiz Night argument stoppers. His fingers passed over a 1986 paperback copy of *The Guinness Book of World Records*, its cover torn off, its corners rounded with wear, and plucked instead the paperback dictionary next to it. He cleared his throat theatrically and read:

"Bob noun, second definition: Something that has been cut short, for example, a horse's tail when docked, a dog's ears when clipped, your johnson when removed with a Ginsu knife . . ."

The men at the bar roared. And so the conversation stayed aloft on an undercurrent of fear. Fear of women. Armen had a twelve-year-old daughter whom he almost never saw. Rodney once asked him why and Armen forestalled further inquiry by saying, "She lives with her mother," in a tone that suggested, "She lives with a feral wolverine." And so women were literally castrating, metaphorically man-killing, at least until one of them walked into the bar, which didn't often happen until after five. Then, everyone sat a little straighter, began smoothing out imaginary neckties, a cupped hand in front of every mouth casually checking for halitosis.

At this hour of the afternoon, Boyle's was as male as a monastery.

As Rodney was well aware, monks have been synonymous with beer since at least 800 AD, when Gall began brewing at his monastery in Switzerland, a tradition that continues to this day in the alpine town of St. Gallen.

*Saint* Gallen. Rodney wondered if he too could be sainted for drinking beer in a holy place.
“You’re not a monk,” Armen reminded him. “Your celibacy is involuntary.”

High behind the bar, perched on the plinth of a stereo speaker, was a bottle of Frangelico—a bottle shaped like a Franciscan friar, in a brown habit with a white rope cincture around his waist. It bothered Rodney that this Italian hazelnut liqueur was named for a Piedmontese painter and Dominican—Fra Angelico—when Dominicans wore white habits that were never belted by a rope.

Involuntarily, he thought of the anagram: DESPERATION = A ROPE ENDS IT.

“Think there’s beer in heaven?” Rodney asked Armen.

“In heaven there is no beer,” Armen said. “That’s why we drink it here. Says so right in the polka.”

Rodney wasn’t sure. At home, he kept a laminated prayer card magnetized to the fridge:

I’d like to give a lake of beer to God  
I’d love the Heavenly  
Host to be tippling there  
For all eternity . . .

The Meat Puppets said hell was a lake of fire. Could both be true? Heaven a lake of beer, hell a lake of fire? Rodney liked this notion—of the afterlife as a choice between beer or barbecue, a tailgate for all eternity.

. . . I’d sit with the men, the women of God  
There by the lake of beer  
We’d be drinking good health forever  
And every drop would be a prayer.

—St. Brigid of Kildare (c. 451–525)
Rodney wasn’t the first man who found drink to be a convivial companion in the absence of women. He thought of the thirteen men drinking wine at the Last Supper; of the lifers at Leavenworth making pruno in prison toilets.

His lunch went cold. Or rather, the warm bits went cold while the cold bits went warm. The beer was warming, the porterhouse cooling. That was the day’s special, Guinness and steak, what the wipe board behind the bar called the “Murph & Turf.”

Rodney let his hand fall idly on a stack of Harp coasters, so that he appeared to be taking an alcoholic oath of office.

His bladder twitched, and for the first time in two hours Rodney alit from his stool, with its view backstage into the kitchen. The thrum and slosh of the dishwasher reminded him of childhood, of sitting three feet in front of the TV after dinner, the green shag carpet serving as elephant grass for his army men, while his parents recapped their respective days over coffee in the kitchen.

When the cool darkness of the bar had given way to the fluorescent light of the Gents, with its bouquet of disinfectant urinal pucks, Rodney stepped onto the tiled platform in front of the toilets. The riser was only six inches high, but it gave the full-bladdered man the pleasant illusion that he wasn’t so much taking a leak as delivering a keynote address. Indeed, over the years, many of Rodney’s fellow urinators had turned orators, delivering incoherent valedictories from these very urinals, their eyes fixed on the white tiled wall a foot in front of them.

Giza had its pyramids. Boyle’s had its urinals, three of them, each one nearly capacious enough to be a walk-in toilet, a stand-up sarcophagus, five feet tall and filled with ice cubes, so that steam rose primordially while Rodney took a whiz.
THE PINT MAN

On the wall, a machine dispensed cologne and condoms, the alpha and omega of the one-night stand.

The condom machine bore a graffito: KATERINA KLESZCZ IS EASIER DONE THAN SAID. Rodney admired the wordplay while deploiring the sentiment.

He shook, shivered, and zipped. He flushed with his elbow, turned the faucets on and off with his wrists, dried his hands on his pants, and then gently kicked open the swinging door of the Gents with the sole of his right running shoe.

Only when he was back in the bar proper did he reflexively begin to breathe through his nose again.

Boyle's was as narrow as a ship's galley and Rodney shuffled sideways between the bar and the four booths, headed for the front door, slapping two singles on the bar after swigging the last of his pint standing up.

Then he stepped out onto Columbus Avenue. When Columbus discovered America, he found natives drinking brewed maize resembling, in the words of his journal, "English beer."

Rodney blinked against the sunlight. He had forgotten it was day. He'd only had two beers, but his head was pleasantly a-tingle, as it always was when going from a dark place to a light one, when going into the real world from a slightly unreal one—as when emerging from a matinee movie or Christmas Mass, the theme from Rocky or "Joy to the World" still ringing in his ears.

When people claim to have died and come back to life, they always describe death this way, as the movement toward a bright light. So perhaps the next world is the real one, Rodney thought, and this is the slightly fantastical one. This world is a cathedral. This world is a cinema. This world is a pub.
Rodney inserted his mail key into box 4K, marked POOLE, and reached inside. Nothing. He reached in farther still, all the way up to his elbow, and felt around at the back, as if trying to conjure a rabbit from a hat.

It should have been a relief, having no Pottery Barn catalog, no dwindling bank statement, no blue Valpak of coupons addressed to “Occupant,” which is precisely what he was in this apartment, nothing more. So why did it feel like a rebuke, like he was unworthy of junk mail?

He took two flights of stairs, two stairs at a time, then inserted a slightly larger key into the door of his apartment: POOLE again, written in the same hand, on the door to a box only slightly larger than the one for his mail, and just marginally better appointed. The slate gray wall-to-wall carpeting was a topographical map of other people’s furniture: dimples and depressions where their beds, couches, and dining tables had been.

Rodney could trace the lives of previous tenants from bachelorhood (the faded spot on the wall once dominated by a fifty-inch TV) to cohabitation (the iron burn on the bedroom carpet) to marriage (the vacancy that allowed Rodney to move in here in the first place).

Marriage mandated moving out of this kind of apartment, and Rodney, at thirty-four, was upsetting the natural order by not moving on.

Keith was moving on, to Chicago, in the morning. And Rodney was helping him. And so his best friend wouldn’t pass his thirty-fifth birthday at Boyle’s—or his fortieth, fiftieth, or sixtieth, for that matter—a spectacle they had both witnessed others “celebrating” before: Armen dashing next door to the deli to buy an Entenmann’s coffee cake, dousing the lights, and holding over the cake a lighter in lieu of candles as he hustled to bar or booth. In the dark, all anyone saw was a
flame floating through Boyle's, like the Holy Spirit in search of a supplicant. And then the flame touched down, lighting a single jack-o-lantern face, which stared directly at the light source, as in that famous photograph of Casey Stengel gazing into a crystal ball.

Rodney was gazing into a crystal ball and seeing a future he felt powerless to avoid. He lay on the bed. It was just after three in the afternoon. The depressant effect of beer was now kicking in.

There wasn’t a deli next door to Boyle’s anymore. The deli had become a place to buy expensive French soaps, just as the newsagent on the other side of Boyle’s had been eaten by a cell-phone store. Boyle’s was being squeezed on both sides by retail chains. He thought of them as fingers trying to pop a zit. But Boyle’s refused to burst.

He set the alarm for five. The clock radio was on his nightstand, on top of his laptop. Where the power cord connected to the computer there was a light that glowed red when the battery was depleted, green when it was fully charged, as it was now.

That light was another madeleine of Rodney’s childhood, the same glowing green as the lighted numbers on the clock-radio in his boyhood bedroom. He kept the laptop next to his bed so he could check baseball scores and play Ms. Pac-Man late at night and to feel something warm on his lap in the morning. But it also served, in the hours in between, as a night-light, a beacon of comfort.

Rodney had long since abandoned any notion of being delivered from this life. It didn’t help that he was meeting a strange woman for a drink at 6:30. A man with no work going for an “after-work drink.”

Coming, as he just had, from Boyle’s, he might have pro-
posed instead some after-drink work. They could have met at an office and shuffled papers.

He extended his legs under the covers and heard a pair of pants fall to the floor from the foot of the bed. Rodney tried to keep his apartment clean, his twenty-by-thirty-two-foot box, subdivided into two smaller boxes. It was one of life’s noble struggles, he thought: dusting, though dust thou art and to dust though shalt return; vacuuming, though we are each of us bound for yet another box, where the dirt will always win.

At 5:30, Rodney laid out his clothes as if for his own funeral and, with a contradictory surge of optimism that even he found heartbreaking, scrubbed himself meticulously in the shower.

Then he got dressed, and passed another heartbreaking interlude selecting his boxers, as if those stood any chance of being seen tonight by anyone but him: maybe if he was hit by a taxi, or an exploding steam pipe blew his pants to tatters, as in a cartoon.

But alas, neither of these things happened on his walk to Midtown—sixteen blocks with his gaze fixed in the distance like a car’s headlamps.

On the street, Rodney only ogled women for as long as it took them to pass from his path. He never turned his head, seldom shifted his eyes, merely looked straight ahead with an expression of pained preoccupation. He feared women noticing them.

Five years ago, as he sat on the 1 train at a stop that wasn’t his, he stared absentmindedly at a girl on the platform whose eyes seemed to be elsewhere. After a long delay, the train
pulled away with a heavy sigh, at which time the girl looked up, made eye contact, and flipped Rodney the bird.

So not for him the swiveling head, the sprung eyeballs, the wolf-whistling of those construction-crew-on-lunch-break birds of prey. Rodney respected the honesty, if not the indiscretion, of the Latin dude who—in response to a passing female—was now shaking a hand in front of him as if it had just been burned on a stovetop.

And yet these women, they were everywhere—the tourists, baristas, waitresses, hostesses, actresses, artists, cleaning ladies, clubbers, and college chicks—each in a state of August underdress.

It was somehow worse when they were fully dressed for business. Arriving early at Rococo, Rodney resolved to walk around the big block between Seventh and Sixth, and was halfway around when he became hypnotized by a besuited executrix walking toward him. He allowed himself an incautious searchlight-sweep of the eyes. She returned a weary expression that seemed to say, “Did you get a good look?”

And so it was that Rodney felt his ears combust and his bowels seize as he arrived at an enormous glass door on which “Rococo” was etched in script.

He passed the maître d’, whose expression of ennui was somehow consistent with the enormous limp pocket hankie that flopped from his breast pocket like a dog’s tongue—or a driver’s-side airbag, deployed then deflated.

If she liked this place—and she must; she picked it—what chance did she have of liking Rodney, or vice versa?

The bar was blue-lit, in the manner of a prime-time television game show. Men waved crisp twenties above their heads,
trying to attract the attention of a bartender who pretended not to see them. They might have been waving sell orders on the floor of the stock exchange. Indeed, hours earlier, many were doing just that.

In front of nearly every seated man and woman was a cell phone or Treo or BlackBerry, placed on the bar as a pistol might have been in an Old West saloon.

After five minutes, the barman deigned to uncap an Amstel Light for Rodney and decant it into a pilsner glass, tall and fluted, more tulip vase than beer glass.

Rodney was seated at a bar table, nursing the beer and trying not to look at the door when a woman’s voice said: “You wouldn’t happen to be Rodney?”

He managed not to blowhole his beer in a single, Vesuvian spit take when he looked—chastely now—on the woman he had just ogled on Sixth Avenue.

She wore a business suit and carried a briefcase and smelled of oatmeal-scented soap. Rodney thought of her, not unpleasantly, as the attorney for the guy on the Quaker Oats box.

“Yes. I’m afraid so.”

“Mairead,” she said, extending her hand. “Like parade.”

It was a note, she said, that her mother had her carry to teachers every fall on the first day of school: “Her name is Mairead, it rhymes with ‘parade.’ ”

Rodney took Mairead’s right hand and pumped her arm as if she were a slot machine full of quarters. His quarters. Was she ever going to pay out, or should he cut his losses instantly and move on to another machine?

It was a question that occupied him on most first dates.

“Rodney,” Rodney said, though she already knew that. “As in . . .” He could think of nothing that rhymes with “Rodney,”
nor of anything clever to say, and so he just left the sentence to sit there on the table, unfinished. God willing, a busboy would hustle by and whisk it from their sight.

Mairead finally said, "Keith was right—you are tall."

"Am I?" Rodney said. "I was worried I’d look like a Smurf in this light."

She laughed and Rodney felt himself relax. She said: "How tall are you?"

"Six-five," Rodney said. "You?"

"Six feet. When I was a kid they called me Olive Oyl."

Rodney was reminded of a joke he’d heard at Boyle’s that involved Olive Oyl and the punch line “Extra Virgin.” But all he said was, “Would you like a drink?”

They both looked in vain for a server. “Where’d she go?” Rodney said.

"Disappeared," said Mairead. “She’s in the Federal Waitress Protection Program.”

Rodney laughed.

“It’s not mine,” Mairead said. “I heard someone else say it once.”

“Whatever we drink, it’ll look like antifreeze,” Rodney said. "Or Ty-D-Bol," said Mairead.

Rodney tried to think of another blue liquid and said, one beat too late: “The blue stuff the combs float in at the barber shop.”

The silence that ensued sat on the table between them like an entrée that serves six.

A waitress, dressed like a ninja and every bit as silent, suddenly materialized at their table. She introduced herself as Celeste. Mairead ordered a pinot grigio. Rodney said, “I’ll have the blue-plate special.”

“Excuse me?” Celeste said.
Rodney said, “I’d just like a light beer and some water.”

“Pellegrino?” Celeste asked.

“Tap,” Mairead said.

“I’ll bring a carafe,” said Celeste. She pronounced it the French way: ca-RAHF. Rodney was pretty sure she’d pronounce charade as “sha-ROD” and the capital of Iowa as “Day Mwan.”

“I thought carafe rhymed with giraffe,” Mairead said when the blue-faced ninja Celeste had vanished.

“I’m just happy to see Violet working again,” Rodney said. “After becoming a blueberry at the Wonka factory.”

When Celeste returned with the drinks, Rodney sucked the foam from his fluted beer and said, “Pinot grigio. It sounds like a boxer. From the fifties. Lost on points to Carmen Basilio.”

“I’m not much of a beer drinker,” Mairead said. “Or a boxing fan.”

Rodney reacted with mock horror. “Not much of a beer drinker?” he said.

“Sorry.”

“This country was founded on beer,” Rodney said. “The pilgrims, they landed at Plymouth Rock because they ran out of beer. True story.”

“Then they should have called it Rolling Rock,” Mairead said.

“They found a journal kept by one of the passengers,” Rodney said. “He wrote, ‘We could not take time for further search, our victuals being much spent, especially our beer.’”

“You memorized that?”

“It’s only one sentence,” Rodney said.

“Vittles is not a word you hear a lot these days,” Mairead said. She leaned into the table, almost imperceptibly, and said:
“So tell me, Rodney”—and here she inclined her head ever so slightly to the left—“do you read a lot of pilgrim journals?”

“I do,” said Rodney, inclining his head to mirror hers. “I have a thing for pilgrims. Just today I bought one of those big hats with a buckle on it.”

“I never understood the point of those,” Mairead said. “A belt around a hat? What was that all about?” Rodney was relieved. She was getting into the spirit. It’s a conversation he might have had at Boyle’s.

“You know how some people unbuckle their belts after Thanksgiving dinner?” Rodney said. His last relationship, his only relationship, ended on Thanksgiving weekend.

“Please tell me you don’t do that,” Mairead said.

“Okay,” Rodney said. “I don’t do that.”

“Oh God,” Mairead said, shaking her head. “You do.”

Rodney continued: “I wonder if the pilgrims, at that first Thanksgiving, leaned back in their chairs after dinner and unbuckled their hats.”

Mairead was smiling when she said, “You have a lot of free time, don’t you Rodney?”

“I do, actually.” He wasn’t kidding.

A comfortable silence settled over the table, like a muffling snowfall. Rodney seized the chance, said, “Excuse me,” and went in search of the men’s room. What he found instead were two doors, one marked “Ragazzo,” one marked “Ragazza,” and Rodney thought: Oh for fuck sake. He wanted to take a leak, not play The Lady or the Tiger. But now he was forced to choose, without so much as the kind of hint you get in bad seafood joints that call their cans “Buoys” and “Gulls.”

He grabbed the handle of the door marked “Ragazzo” and pulled. It was like Let’s Make a Deal. What was behind door number two: the Pontiac Bonneville or the donkey eating hay?

Rodney guessed right. He knew this was the Gents because
it looked like a German disco. Stepping up to a black marble wall, Rodney peed into a perpetual waterfall as smooth and thin and clear as Saran Wrap. He knew this was going to cost him. And sure enough, as he turned toward the wall of sinks, he reflexively cupped his palms together, as if preparing to collect rainwater, so that the middle-aged Hispanic men's room attendant could dispense a sad ejaculate of liquid soap into them.

The man wore a white jacket, and Rodney resented whoever had made him do so, as if it were somehow more dignified to listen to the percussive farts of bond traders while dressed as Bond.

Worse, the attendant's presence foreclosed a second visit to the john. It was too awkward to see this guy repeatedly, even though he's pretending not to see you: he just stands there like a cigar-store Indian until you've shaken and zipped. But all the while he's thinking you must have a bladder the size of a walnut.

And what Rodney was always thinking on his fourth visit to the bog after breaking his seal was: Christ, I've already taken half a pack of Big Red from this guy's gum basket and I'm down to my last single and I'm sure as hell not asking him to make change, so after this one I won't be able to take another leak. I won't be able to afford to take another leak. And I don't have many rules in life but one of them is: Don't borrow money to take a whiz. Or as Armen once told him, "Don't pee on credit."

It was in the bathroom that Rodney missed Boyle's the most.

He hated these bars, where even the commode was commoditized.

Was that the root of commodity—commode? Rodney resolved to look it up later.
When he returned to the table, Mairead was putting her cellphone into her briefcase. They were, respectively, a BlackBerry and a Burberry, an observation Rodney kept to himself.

“Sorry,” she said. “Work.”

“Keith says you’re in... marketing?”

“Right,” Mairead said.

“I was in a bar once,” Rodney said, neglecting to mention it was Boyle’s, and he’d been there more than once, “and we were trying to come up with the most unmarketable product imaginable. I won with E-Cola, a soft drink that combined the negative associations of E. coli and Ebola.”

“They tried that,” Mairead said. “Only it was called New Coke.”

Rodney laughed and Mairead did too, revealing a slight overbite that gave Rodney a spreading warmth in his chest, like a sip of Jameson’s going down.

“And you’re in...”

He knew it was coming. “Debt,” Rodney said. “Not really. Not yet. But I did lose my job six weeks ago. Keith didn’t tell you?” Rodney couldn’t believe Keith hadn’t warned her, or at least warned him that he hadn’t warned her.

“I’m sorry,” said Mairead.

“Don’t be,” Rodney said. “I got downsized. Or rightsized. ‘Smartsized,’ I think they called it.”

Whatever it was, I’ve capsized, Rodney wanted to add. But instead he said, “I worked at Talbott. In corporate communications.”

He left it at that. He always did. Perhaps he’d been fooling himself, but Rodney thought corporate communications had a nice, alliterative lilt—implying a poetry that was absent from the actual job. Rodney had edited annual reports, written speeches for corporate officers, concocted epic obfuscations for the company website, and endlessly vetted bullshit
memoranda written by superiors who thought his attention to misplaced commas was quaint, as if he were a bootblack or a candlemaker or some other faintly ridiculous anachronism.

When a VP at the Talbott Corporation was named by a female employee in a lurid sexual harassment suit, Rodney wrote a speech, approved by Legal, for CEO Thomas Girard to read at the next shareholder meeting. It was a righteous manifesto about caring and corporate responsibility. “I make it a point, once a month, to dip my hand into every complaint box in our headquarters,” Girard said. “And more often than not I come away with compliments.”

Only he didn’t say that. Not exactly. Rodney missed the typo, and so did Girard, who stepped before one thousand shareholders in the Grand Ballroom of the Phoenician Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, just after breakfast, and said: “I make it a point, once a month, to dip my hand into every compliant box in our headquarters. And more often than not I come away with compliments.”

Rodney was smartsized before lunch, long before it hit YouTube.

“Fortunately, I still have the first nickel I ever made,” Rodney said. He didn’t want Mairead to think he was broke, so he allowed her instead to think he was cheap. But it was literally true, about Rodney’s first nickel, as he didn’t spend or ever carry change, and despised those fastidious counters-out of coins who were always ahead of him at checkout counters. *Three-ninety-seven? Hang on, I’ve got ninety-seven cents right here,* before they pucker their coin purses and begin counting out pennies. His ex-girlfriend did that.

Every night, Rodney put all his change in the plastic souvenir Shea Stadium beer cup on his dresser, and when that was full, he emptied it into sixty-four-ounce energy-drink bottle in the closet, and when *that* was full he decanted it into the
Coinstar machine at Food Emporium, where he got ninety-three cents on the dollar, and a grateful world economy got a hundred bucks in nickels and dimes that smelled powerfully of Fierce Grape Gatorade.

Rodney was explaining all of this to Mairead when she said, “So you don’t wash your clothes?”

“Is it that obvious?” Rodney asked, and made a show of sniffing both armpits. To his horror, there was a pong coming off his shirt.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Mairead said, wincing. “But since we’re on the subject . . .”

Rodney remained silent, mortified.

*Mortify*: To kill.

A smile fissured across her face and Mairead said, “How do you do laundry if you never carry change? That’s what I’m asking.”

“Oh,” Rodney said. “Right.” He felt his face flush. “The machines in my building, they take those debit-card readers. I add twenty bucks at a time to my laundry card. Eliminates the need for quarters.”

After a short silence Mairead let out an involuntary burst of laughter and looked at Rodney, to Rodney’s mind, the way one might look at a puppy in traction.

Even lit blue, she was magnificently brown-eyed. Rodney found himself avoiding direct eye contact with Mairead, treating her eyes as twin solar eclipses. He was tempted to make a pinhole projector with two paper plates before looking directly at her, this brown-eyed girl. But it was another Van Morrison song, “On Hyndford Street,” that he couldn’t get out of his head.

When Mairead announced after a second round of drinks that she’d best be getting home, Rodney said, “Yeah, we could talk till we’re blue in the face, but . . .”
She smiled again.

Rodney realized, with some relief, that she wasn't going to bring it up, his ogling her on Sixth Avenue five minutes before they met. What was the etymology of that pleasing verb, Rodney wondered. He made a mental note to Google *ogle*, a phrase—*Google ogle*—he now found pleasing in its own right.

“But what?” Mairead said.

“But I have to get up in the morning, too,” Rodney said, and for the first time in a long time it was actually true. “I’m helping Keith move. He’s too cheap to pay movers.”

Rodney saw her into a cab, said, “I’ll call you,” and stepped out of earshot before she could protest. Then he waved goodbye to Mairead-Rhymes-With-Parade, to Carafe-Sounds-Like-Giraffe.

And then Rodney walked home, “On Hyndford Street” playing in his head, “feeling wondrous and lit up inside, with a sense of everlasting life.”