

AN EMPTYING

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And we had been talking for hours, Marc and I, or what seemed like hours, but was, in actuality, forty-five minutes or so, when, almost out of nowhere, he said that “dates have always been important to me, or not always, but at least for the last seven or so years. I nearly fainted,” he continued, “in a bad situation, and at that moment I realized, or I had an idea of what others could feel...it was a Thursday, I think, seven years ago, on December 18th, so, from that day on,” he said, “every December 18th I think about that day and I thought about way back before then, when I was with Lora and she would drive home from work and have these panic attacks from time to time”—he said ‘time to time’ while waving his left hand back and forth in the air—“I would just tell her to get over it, to stop being a baby, and she would cry, and I just wouldn’t care, but on December 18th, seven years ago, when I almost fainted—it was like something from the TV,” he said, “the ground under me, or my legs became unsettled, I couldn’t stand, I started sweating, I felt like crying but I didn’t, I grabbed onto the bench to catch myself,” he grabbed my stool, “I knew what she felt, and I felt bad.” Marc and I were in a bar, a so-called “sports bar” named Time Out, when Marc continued, “it was after December 18th, when I was away, you remember, away because of what happened, and I had nothing, no money really to buy anything, when a black guy gave me a few items—I don’t know why—deodorant, a plastic soap container, a comb, basic toiletries, and I thanked him, and told him I’d get him back, and he said “no problem,” you know how it goes, and, strangely, I didn’t really see him around anymore, or only from a distance, in passing, we never spoke again, I never paid him back, but I have had the plastic soap container all this time, it’s really pretty fucking stupid,” he said, “it’s nothing, a cheap plastic container for soap. Things like that—soap, soap containers, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb, you know—we were allowed to take from place to place, nothing else, oh, envelopes, paper, that kind of stuff, but you know about that,” he said, “and when I was through there I brought the soap container back and have used it ever since, it’s in my shower now, as we speak,” and I thought it strange that he said “as we speak.” “And no one

knows about it until now,” he said. “A soap container,” he continued, “and every day, many times a day, I use the container, I open it, take out the soap, and I never think about it, only from time to time, I don’t know why I have it, or kept it, it’s just there, and I shower frequently, at least three times a day, at least,” he repeated. I said that I do too, shower often. Marc then spoke about, what he termed, “real” and “not real.” We talked about things like this, in the so-called “sports bar,” every time I would visit. The other people would just recede into the darkness and it would be the two of us there, and time either moved very slow or very fast, or would seem to not move at all. “What is not real,” Marc said, “is the day-to-day dirt and sweat and stuff that’s on us from work and that we wash off with the soap from the soap container, what is ‘real,’” he said, making a motion with his right arm, “is the stuff that’s there on us that we can’t see that we try and wash off every day, the stuff that doesn’t wash off, you know.” I said I didn’t know what he meant. “Everything is a container,” Marc said, “there are small containers and large containers.” He made a gesture with his hands when he said “small,” opening them slightly and bringing them close to his body, and opening his arms and spreading them out wide when he said “large.” “Anything that can hold something is a container, enclosures are containers, we’re in a container right now.” I just looked at him. “But I don’t care about large containers... they’re not even worth thinking about or talking about. Small containers,” he continued, “are like the soap container, though all, really, contain nothing, we think they hold things,” he continued, “soap, valuables, photographs, but they are all empty, all containers. Anything can be a container: cylinders, shoe boxes, cigar boxes, old coffee cans, empty tennis ball cans, various receptacles, little wooden boxes, cardboard boxes you have used for moving, a container can be a drawer, but only if”—he said “only if” and raised his hand in the air—“what you are trying to contain is buried under old magazines and newspapers, the trunk of a car,” he continued, “a secret spot in the ceiling of a closet is a container...” “Once when I was a child,” I said, “I buried a lock I found under a tree in my backyard...” “That’s not a container,” he said. “Why?” “The ground can’t be a container, that’s all,” he said. I disagreed but didn’t say so. We stood there silently for a time and he asked about my father, who was in the hospital. “He’s still here,” I said. And I thought, just at this moment, of the clear glass cylinders behind his bed in the hospital slowly filling up with black viscous goo. What is

that stuff? “Hey,” Marc said, “you’ve used the soap container and didn’t know it.” “I knew it,” I said. “Yeah, but you didn’t know about it.” “I guess,” I agreed. “Small containers,” Marc said, “not enclosures”—he said “enclosures” emphatically—“need to be tucked away somewhere, where only the person who owns the container can get to the container.” “What about the soap dish?” I asked, “it’s right in plain sight...in the shower.” “Hidden in plain sight,” he said, “you didn’t know anything about it until I told you, and no one else knows about it, and you’re not back here often...so,” he continued, “it’s still hidden, still a soap container.” He said “container” slowly. “Found things,” he said, “things you put away...that is what goes in containers...but they’re really empty...they contain nothing. The soap container,” he continued, “is constantly being emptied and filled, emptied and filled,” he repeated, “but it contains nothing.” In my parents’ house, I thought, which is right down the road, in my childhood bedroom, in the closet, the drawers, where the bed used to be, where the dresser used to be, where the television used to be, where the radio used to be, where the bookshelves used to be.... “Hey,” Marc said, “you’re staying, right?” “No, I have to go, it’s late,” I said. “No, you’re staying.” And I felt myself moving in my head, and I pictured myself walking out of the back door and down the steps and into the car...but I couldn’t move. It was as though I were nailed down to the spot next to Marc, as if I couldn’t move no matter what. And we stood there, in near silence, for a while longer, until finally it grew very late and I touched Marc and walked out the back door. I was exhausted. I felt as though my insides had been taken out—hollowed—but I felt altogether not unpleasant. When I stepped outside it was as though I walked out seeing nothing—not the moon, the field, the trees, the few remaining cars—until I looked in the window of my car and saw my face—half window, half night—and I turned from myself and looked back into darkness, and then I turned back around and quickly opened the door.