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The Ceiling Leak

RICHARD GOODMAN

We had a lot of heavy rainstorms here in New York City last summer. They were heavy even by New York standards, a place that will often shrug its shoulders at anything less than what might be signified world-class—a party, a sports contest, a skyscraper, a disaster. I heard the most violent rainstorm, which took place in late August, from my apartment in upper Manhattan, which began roughly at 4:30 AM. The thunderclaps woke me up. “Thunderclaps” seems too meek a word for what entered my apartment. It was as if someone had snapped a gigantic sequoia in half. The thunder was so loud, you could practically visualize it, think of it as having mass, the sound occupied so much space in the air. There was lightening, too, of course, that preceded it, white spasms that jerked the air. Then the inevitable waiting for the thunder that came with so much brilliant noise. One thunderclap was so aggressively fierce I jumped in my seat. Afterwards, I looked down at my dog who seemed highly embarrassed by my fright.

Then came the rain. Ceaselessly. It’s really no use for me to say how much it rained and for how long, because we all have our big rain stories. This is subjective stuff. I’ll let the fact speak for itself: Most all the subways stopped running, which is practically an unknown situation in New York City—the last time I recall it happening was after the 9/11 catastrophe, and that was no natural disaster. I can’t think of a situation before that in thirty years of living here. Most of those subways that ceased functioning were simply flooded out of commission. This caused legions of problems that day, and the news was full of stories of the rain’s havoc, and you heard them from friends and acquaintances all that day.

That’s why when I woke up the following day I wasn’t especially surprised to see a darkish, bottle-shaped patch on my ceiling. It looked damp, and had that pre-drip hue to it—the ceiling not quite saturated yet, but almost. It went about halfway across my ceiling but wasn’t too wide. It seemed, as these things go, fairly typical. The idea was, of course, to get the superintendent to come to fix it before actual water

began dripping from the ceiling onto the floor, or, in this case, onto my bed, which is stationed partially underneath the patch.

The only curious thing is that I'm on the second floor, and there are four floors above me until you get to the roof where the rain had fallen so tumultuously. But I reasoned that the occupant in the apartment above me had done exactly what I'd done so many times—left her window open when she went away for the weekend or on vacation. The storm's strength being so severe, and the quantity of rain so large, it had entered the window and created a little flood in her apartment. If it could stop the subways, it could start a leak in my ceiling. I had experienced this sort of thing before, actually.

Then I noticed the smell.

It was a rank smell. At first I thought it might be garbage. Before the Noah-like rains we'd had, it had been unbearably hot in New York City for close to the entire week. And humid. Anyone who has spent a typical August in New York has often been confronted with the penetratingly pungent odor of roasting garbage, overripe in the 90-plus degree noonday sun. It's an odor you don't soon forget and a kind of badge of honor for those with enough temerity to spend time in New York during that stygian month.

That's what the odor smelled like. Sort of. But not exactly. This odor really smelled like something you find in a crawl space, something that had once been alive and now is not. I thought perhaps the storm might have caused a squirrel or bird to have taken refuge from the noise and flash of the storm inside my open window and then had died in some obscure declivity of my room where an animal would go to die. I looked everywhere, under cabinets, behind drawers. But I found nothing. The smell was putrid. The only way I can describe it with any sense of accuracy is to say that it was the smell of death.

That's when my eyes went to the patch on the ceiling. It was a little more glossy now, had a varnish-like sheen and was a bit sticky-looking, too. Then my curiosity got the better of me. If you can call it that. I got a chair and put it under the stain. I stepped up on the chair for a closer look. My face was about a foot from the stain. It didn't seem to be water. It seemed to have a viscous texture. No, it wasn't water. I was about to touch it, to run my finger across its slick surface—I even considered tasting it—when I thought the better of it.

My heart sank at the realization. I knew for certain that this was the source of the foul smell.

After the police had come and forced opened the door of the apartment directly above me, they found the body. It was determined the lady—an older rather stout woman with an impassive oval face who walked a small dog—had been dead for four days. In this heat. My dog, the one who wasn't scared of that extraordinary thunder, and who normally sleeps in the bedroom with me, refused to go in the bedroom. I should have suspected something. Dogs know the smell of death, and do not want to be in its presence. I didn't know the lady's name, and I only saw her infrequently.

Four days dead. Perhaps I should leave it to your imagination about what, exactly, that patch was on my ceiling. Perhaps not. Maybe some verbs might help. Suppurating. Fallen. Exploding. Decomposing. Putrefying. Then some nouns: Intestines. Effluvia. Liquids.

The body was removed by the morgue, but the police wouldn't let the superintendent in to clean the apartment until the woman's daughter came and emptied it of all personal effects first. So the rank smell—so relentless in its message of death—remained. I was unable to sleep in my apartment that night. The smell of death: foul, ugly, pervasive, was ready to crawl under my skin. Since the stain on the ceiling remained, too, the idea that something might drip down from the apartment above onto my bed was too horrifying to contemplate. So I went to a friend's apartment to stay. Later that evening, I thought about what happened.

I didn't know the lady's name. She had a little dog, and I only saw her when our dog walking overlapped. She never looked at me when I passed by her. It wasn't so much that she averted her eyes as the fact that she looked past me, or through me, or around me. She simply didn't see me. Or anyone else, I imagine. This seemed to be her way of dealing with the world, of evading contact. It preempted even a small exchange of "Hello" or "Good morning." This woman did not want to interact with the world. I didn't know her name, or she mine. I still don't. I don't think I ever heard her speak. I never heard her voice.

The next few days I thought about what had happened. I realized that I hadn't come face to face with my own mortality. Who of us ever does? When someone dies, no matter how close they are to us, it's still a kind of abstraction, and we go blithely on acting as if we're

immortal. No, what I came face to face with is *how* I might die. And why. I came face to face with sadness—that this is the way some of us die sometimes, alone and rotting in our apartment for four days without anyone knowing we’re dead. Four days, and no one noticed—not her daughter, who lives four blocks away—not anyone. It seems unbearably sad. The more I thought about it, though, the more I identified with the old lady. I thought: What is it about my decisions in life that have slowly but steadily left me alone? How have I lived that I’ve ended up like this? Solitary.

The woman had a daughter. That daughter, who lived nearby, hadn’t been to see her in at least four days—maybe more. I have a daughter, too, but she’s only fourteen. She lives part of the time with her mother, part of the time with me. I ended that marriage six years ago. I think of that often. I think of the regrets I have about it. When people tell me they have no regrets, I know they’re bloody liars. Everyone has regrets. It’s just that some of us have more than others. Some of us make a career of producing regrets. I ask myself, how did I end up in this isolated situation? There are times when no one calls for days. This is partially to my satisfaction, but mostly it’s not. I want company. I want interaction. Yet I do little to change things. Do people see me when I walk my dog the same way as they see that poor old woman?

The fact is that some of us will die with friends and family at our side, holding our hand and speaking words of encouragement as we begin the last journey to wherever we must go. Some of us will have a priest or rabbi or minister near, comforting us with words we have heard all our lives in churches or synagogues. Some of us will be reassured that God is waiting for us, and that we will be joining friends and loved ones when we pass on over to the other side. Others of us, though, will die alone, without a single person beside us, and rot in our beds, leaving a stinking smell as perhaps the only reminder of our existence. I pray that someone is there with me, to hold my hand, and speak to me, as I die. Barring unforeseen circumstances, like a mortal accident or a sudden heart attack, this is to a great extent up to me. If I lead a solitary life as I have up until now, withdrawn and not engaged, and with few risks, and even fewer friends, what can I expect? How I die will depend on how I live. Maybe it’s already determined.

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When I finally was able to return to my apartment three days later, my bedroom had been painted. The patch was gone. I wondered, though. Will, someday, the people in the apartment below me look up one morning and see me, or what's left of me, seeping through their ceiling? Will they smell my stink of death? Will I be that person about whom they'll ask themselves, "Who was he? What was his name? He never said hello, he never spoke to us, he just walked his dog and didn't look at us as he passed on by."