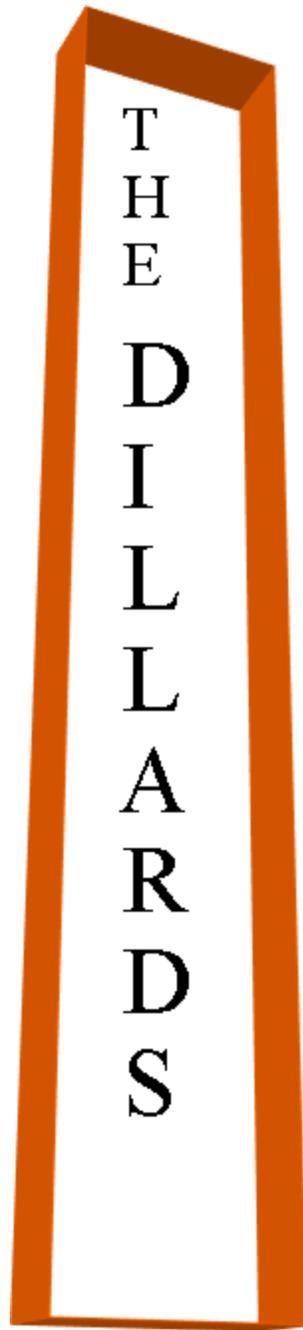


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Preface
Bouvard Pécuchet

The “Dillards” were written in Gianna De Persiis Vona’s Flash Fiction Class, which meets at dadada on dada at da. And you may say, “Oh, these are only exercises,” but after you’ve read these free-writes, you’ll expect Dillard to appear in your doorway.

The stories were written in under forty-five minutes on June 3, 2005. On this day, locally, the Kansas City Royals extended the Giants’ misery; on the national scene, General Motors was planning massive job cuts (and I am reminded that what’s good for GM is good for the nation); on the international scene, George Bush and Tony Blair denied they “fixed” the intelligence for the Iraq war. Oh, yes, and due to a surprise decision by the Justice Department, the tobacco industry avoided a huge federal penalty.

Just another day in the world of smoke and mirrors, but herein, while the world went to hell in a shopping cart, seven writers laid down cosmic fire and illuminating, mirror-like wisdom.

Dillard I
Rampujan

Dillard gives up on living simply. He throws away his hiking boots (which were giving him blisters anyway). He moves back to the city. He even gets a job selling popcorn balls to high school students at lunchtime from a Mexican bicycle vending cart. He calls up his old friends and acquaintances and makes dates with them: an ex-girlfriend in one case, and in another case, a young male student who is a whiz kid mathematician.

He plays chess with the ex-girlfriend. He tries to seduce the student. Other friends appear, an old neighbor who’s a triathlon runner. Dillard sits with this fellow in a coffee house and tries to start a political argument. He unearths another old friend, a guy who was into urban community gardens. With this friend he wants to drink beer and watch videos.

Then he calls up his best friend’s wife. He’d heard that they were splitting up and he has always been attracted to this lady, a financial district office worker. She agrees to meet him for lunch.

After the first month of bold experimentation, he lays in bed sleepless, wondering where it is all going. Am I doing this because I’m bored? The answer comes to him from out of the dark in his gloomy residence club bedroom. Well, it’s working. I’m not bored.

He imagines there is no turning back. In spite of his general hetero bias, he has a taste for young men and he finds himself lusting after the mathematician, a 17 year old Thai fellow who politely, demurely rebuffed his advances on their first connection at Golden Gate Park. At the same time

he wonders what he will do if his best friend's wife, with whom he's just had a very engaging lunch, decides to pursue him, which she undoubtedly will, as he knows her well and would like to take her to bed, maybe even fall in love. She's a dreamy romantic type with long auburn hair and a taste for wet-look lipsticks.

Dillard's beginning to develop a web of mutual obligation with these recently rejuvenated friendships. He's promised to dogsit for the triathlon runner while the fellow is away at a race. He's going to give the young mathematician a massage if he can borrow a massage table. He's signed up to do a volunteer workday with the urban gardener, who is trying to grow corn on the slopes of Bernal Heights.

He meets a shady looking Sicilian in a burrito joint on Haight Street and makes a plan with this stranger to expand his popcorn ball vending business to include other items desired by high school students. Tattoos and piercings? Marijuana? Maybe other recreational drugs. No, don't use that word *drugs*. Dillard is still under the illusion that he's a good boy, a happy-go-lucky ex-buddhist who's getting a little experimental slant on life without unrolling his faithful yoga mat.

This weekend, while dogsitting, walking the dogs in Dolores Park, a big white one who like to tug on the leash and growl, and a sleek pit bull who seems to attract girls, human girls, not girl dogs. Dillard comes across one of his high school popcorn customers, a computer nerd and would-be hacker named Lionel. Lionel has a plan to break into the computers at the National Security Agency, a foolproof scheme that Dillard doesn't quite understand.

"Let's get together and talk some more about you-know-what," he tells Lionel. Lionel shows up at Dillard's residence club while Dillard is giving his would-be male lover a massage. At the same time Dillard's best friend rings up on the cell phone, demanding to know what Dillard's intentions are regarding his wife.

"She was getting ready to get back together with me, but not since you two had lunch," his former best friend complains.

"Let me put you on speakerphone," he says. "I've got my hands full here." He is trying to massage the Thai boy's peccs.

Lionel stands there in the doorway. "I'm sure you said to come at three," the hacker says mournfully, "But you're kind of, you know, busy."

Suddenly Dillard wishes for the pure empty space of a ten-day Vipassana Retreat where one welcomes the nothingness, the silence, the gradually slowing mental spin. And he begins to question this new life for which he has given up simplicity. It could take years to get out of the tangle he is enmeshing himself in. In this moment, Dillard resolves to do a disappearance, to walk away from this new life, to drive his 1962 Dodge Dart off into the sunset, to leave town, to go into silence, to become a poet, an elusive anonymous vegan mystic, a conundrum, a seer. He wants to go back to the mountains, camp on the lakeshores and observe the birds and the insects, to follow winding forest trails up into the hill, to watch the snow melt in the high colors, to hear coyotes and owls, to sleep under the night sky alone, and free.

He books a flight to New Zealand.

Dillard II
Myokun

Dillard has given up on living simply. It simply did not work. He gave it time, almost eight years, but instead of unfolding in an easy gentle rhythm, it eventually smacked him sharply in the face. You might ask, "How?" but Dillard, slightly sloppy in his communication abilities would merely shrug and slink off. I can tell you though, come, and take a seat.

Now the thing you need to understand about Dillard is tied up in his lack of anything resembling a work ethic. Sometimes I would just stand and get lost watching him do absolutely nothing in the midst of the rush and bustle of others working around him. I was struck with the experience of watching really, really great Chinese ping pong players in a furious rally while a snail slowly made his way across the table. The fact that he was not smashed by that smashing ball was not due to the snail's skill in avoiding it, but rather in the skill of the players. It was truly an amazing sight, worthy of watching.

Anyway, Dillard believed in money, he liked it, a lot actually, but he felt it was owed him, just because... Part of Dillard's plan for living simply involved having money so you can imagine how many things might already be falling apart. For Dillard living simply meant living in an apartment where the utilities were included, he used the neighbors phone line by using a splitter and bringing the line out the neighbors door and into his, hidden by hangings and dark tape over dark wood, this was a great setup! He also got out of yard work because frankly, if you want the simple life who wants to mow lawns and pull weeds? So part of his simple life entailed enjoying the jungle his landlord's garden had become. He put out tiki statues in the taller bits and placed a large rock in just the right spot and called it perfect! Ah, the simple life was so, so simple...

One thing that had always complicated Dillard's life were his attempts at finding a girlfriend. Christ, every time he just wanted a little fun he'd have to shave and shower and clean and cut his nails. He would have to find clean clothes, and he'd really have to work on his teeth for at least a week before his breath would be somewhat passable. What a hassle, easier just to rent some movies and drink a six-pack of beer. Yes, that was the simple life, so that is what he decided to do. That made life so much simpler, just like that. It cut down his laundry runs, the cost of shave creams and razors, toothpaste, and the cost of having his hair cut professionally. Yes, this was just fine with him. He was getting this simple life thing down. Work was smooth; he was tolerated; home life was a little rough and messy but simple. Eight years of bliss but then one day the postman came to his office with a registered letter. "What is this?" he asked the postman. The postal carrier looked up at Dillard from his dark bushy brows and cracked a toothy smile and replied, "I don't read 'em mister, I just deliver 'em." Dillard clumsily scratched his name on the peach stock paper form and handed it back to the carrier. "Yeah, thanks," he mumbled under his breath as he grabbed the proffered, very legal looking 3 by 9 tan envelope. The return address read, "The Law Offices of Dunn and Kent, 14729 Capital Street, Floor 27, suite B, Chicago, Illinois."

I was there when Dillard received this letter. You should have seen his face, the shades of white to pink to red then back to pink then white. I could see his hands as they shook. It took nearly 2 minuets of fumbling before I took mercy on him and patted him firmly on the back while saying, "Here, let me." To say he released it to me would not be accurate, I don't really think he actually had the manual dexterity to hold it... so it released easily into my possession. I walked the six steps to my desk, pulled out the top center drawer and deftly grabbed and slashed and then returned the envelope to Dillard's still trembling hand. "There you go bro." I said without malice, "Anything else I can do?" Now please excuse my lack of compassion, but the guy was a lazy jerk on many levels and I was, I admit, kind of enjoying this little scene before me. He had no family that I knew of so I was not concerned about a death, but while I was mulling over his dilemma he looked up

at me from his before fixed glare at the envelope in his hand and said, “Jerry, can you read this for me?”

I reached over, first pausing to rest my hand on his arm before then reaching further to take the tan envelope from him. I looked at the return address, noticed *The Law Office of...* and pulled the thick matching tan pages from their nest. I slid my thumb and levered the pages open so they rested flatly within my grasp. It read: *Dear Mr. Dillard McCoy*. I read these words slowly while I glanced up and down the page and then was stuck motionless. “What??” whined Dillard, “Tell me!” I looked up at Dillard then; our eyes connected for only an instant, but within that briefest of moments we both knew Dillard’s life was not going to be simple any more.

Dillard III
Dave Reynolds

Dillard has given up on living simply. It was, you know, not a large garage. But it had some room in it, once. Now, with the boxes of stuff, five boxes high along the complete length of the walls and boxes of stuff like cardboard mortuaries lined up down the concrete center slab and boxes of stuff on the work bench top, covering even Dillard’s father’s old cast iron vise—well, it was obvious his life was no longer simple.

He had always had too much stuff. But life had been simpler, once. Once, it had only been his stuff. It was really easy after the divorce. The kids took their stuff to college and then to Healdsburg and then to Stockton. Dillard’s former wife didn’t take a Yamaha spinet piano which was too heavy and the wrong color for the stuff she had in her new house with her new husband on the hill. And anyway, her new husband had a full sized deep mahogany finish grand piano in the living room and size matters when it is up against a 240 degree view of the valley and parts of the downtown. Location, location, location.

So, for awhile, right after the divorce, life was simpler, sparser: a special dolly to wrench under the piano and a U-Haul to roll it into and boxes of used silverware and aluminum pots and pans and a worn out futon...not much. But then people started dying.

First, it was Dillard’s mom. Got a closet full of Teddy Bears and blankets she had crocheted. Then lamps from a good friend of Dillard’s who passed on, bequeathing Buddhist bells and pink chairs. Then, Dillard’s office died. So he got the aging electronics, now part of his Famous Wall of Obsolete Electronics teetering in stacks bedrocked by the dead office desk at the far south end of the garage where you used to be able to drive into and scratched up office desks that you land aircraft on.

Post 2000, a blizzard of stuff: aircraft flight manuals from 1944, helmets from the 50s and steamer trunks full of uniforms from his dad. Dillard’s Dad’s passing created a whole new wave, no tsunami, of stuff with whiplash frenzy of garage and house consolidation. Dillard’s still looking for a place to put the 4 foot square cherry wood globe, bought in 1961 from a German craftsman back when there were 8 marks to the dollar. Still has the paperwork in it just in case it needs to be returned under the life time warranty. Books, like *Ivanhoe* and *A Connecticut Yankee*, things like

that. Boxes of stuff. Crates of stuff. Closets and garages and dens, full of stuff.

Then, an auntie of Dillard's passed. Here came the family everyday dishes the aunt had gotten from Dillard's mom. Not the china, the crystal or the Hummels, but stuff he had mixed his cheerios up in back in the days when there was only one kind of cheerio. Mismatch forks that speared Mom's special Hungarian goulash and spoons that ladled Campbell's chicken noodle soup. Industrial grade English dishware with little round blue Wentworth circles that Dillard found out survived thirty years of worldwide military transportation, through a war and several sort of near wars, and the special hell of military, low bidding movers, but, he discovered, dishwashers easily and quickly cleaned off the intricate bone china design.

Stuff. Everywhere. Along with the mower, the edger, the brooms, rakes, shovels and assorted poisons to keep the yard juiced up—crammed into the cracks between the stuff in the garage. Remember back when the only thing in the bedroom was Dillard's bike and the futon? Now there are boxes of old model planes, kid's report cards, left over participation ribbons from fairs long past.

The walls were simple and bare. The corners sharp and clear. You could hear yourself think in the cool, quiet evening. The night moon's full light would soak the cool counter tops with a chalky grey film. And the only memories came on the oddist rays of time. Unbidden, unwelcome. Simple. Cool. Anesthetic. Straight edged, to the point.

Now the dust grows on the boxes. Opening stirring up stuff; verification of past stuff, stuff that really happened. Stuff that really mattered. A model of a plane Dillard's Dad flew in the bookcase, the nose wheel broken off, a bear made by Dillard's Mom (you could tell the store bought bears as they had to have a label affixed in accordance with Federal statutory law). A small, black batting glove from Dillard's son's Cinderella minor league baseball season—stiff with the old sweat and red clay from sliding on the base paths. A trophy from Dillard's daughter's M&M's under 10 soccer team, a hard won third place finish. A heart hung on a tiny shepherd's crook with little chimes that ring in the slightest cooling breeze.

The moon's chalk dust drops through the western kitchen window. It is gathered in by photos of 3 and 6 year olds with Kermit the Frog t-shirts and red two-wheelers with training wheels, pictures orphaned and waiting for their frame, waiting for their place. Plastic champagne glasses toast the night as the stuff of life bubbles past, chaotic, irresistible, and wonderful.

Living simply, Dillard thought, and before he finished his thought, he pushed his favorite English Stonehedge mug from his favorite (and only) overseas vacation back on the counter top in the name of safety and preservation and remembered the semester abroad with his daughter in London, their trip to the Tower and the Inns of Court and the club his underage daughter bought him an Irish beer...living simply, he thought again, is highly over rated.

Dillard IV
Kyle Rudderow

Dillard has given up on living simply because no matter how hard he tries, it simply never works. Last year he even went so far as to take the advice he read in a Good Housekeeping magazine while waiting for his daughter at the Orthodontist's office.

“If you can live without it for a year, you can live without for a lifetime,” went the motto of the article, which was written by a “Professional Organizer” from New Haven, Connecticut. Dillard could just imagine her poly-cotton blend blouses that made ironing obsolete—one less thing to keep track of. She probably wrote at a tidy desk with a detailed daily planner at her side.

After reading that article Dillard picked up some Chinese food for his fourteen-year-old daughter, Veronica, and himself and then headed home eagerly to begin making *keep* and *give away* piles in their apartment.

He began to survey the apartment while he and Veronica opened the white cartons on the table and dished up their dinner onto two mismatched plates. He made a mental note to get rid of all the old plates and get six matching ones in a neutral color palette that would work for all occasions. He could barely concentrate on his food as he realized how uncomfortable the couches were and that they usually sat on the floor anyway, so why not get rid of them altogether?

“Won’t this be great Ronnie?” he asked his daughter excitedly. “Our lives will be so much more simple when we get rid of all this clutter!”

“Whatever Dad, but my room is off limits,” she said.

Dillard was unfazed by her lack of enthusiasm because his mind was already miles ahead, opening the hall closet and ripping things from their musty little hiding places. Things that were wedged in and forgotten until the next move or, worse yet, until his death. He could just hear his relatives clucking about what a pack rat old Dillard had been.

No, he would never let it come to that. So he began a mental list of what would stay and what would go—it would be like giving his life an enormous enema, he thought. He didn’t dare voice this epiphany while Veronica smeared plumb sauce on her Moo-Shoo Chicken pancake, but it motivated him even further and he thought about taking everything off the walls and scrubbing the dingy paint job until it shone.

Once he got going after dinner, he found it hard to stop. In fact, his daughter found him at 2:00 a.m. sitting amidst piles and piles of their belongings, like a soldier amongst the sand bags at the front line of a battle. He was holding a hot glue gun in one hand and a bag of glue sticks in the other.

“Oh my God Dad, what are you still doing up?” she asked. She saw his bleary eyes and said, “You should go to bed,” before padding off to the bathroom to pee.

Dillard was stuck. Not physically to the glue gun, but to its memories, or rather, his memories of it. The pack of glue sticks was nearly full, only one or two missing. The first and last time he had used it was for a Halloween costume for Veronica when she was in Kindergarten. She’d had her heart set on being a Koala Bear that year and Dillard had looked high and low for a Koala Bear costume but couldn’t find one. So, he had taken matters into his own hands and gone to a fabric store and bought four yards of gray, furry material the day before Halloween. That night he traced an outline of Veronica’s body on the gray fur and began cutting.

In the late afternoon of Halloween, after telling his daughter to pee one last time, he hoisted her up on the kitchen table and began gluing her costume together and hoping to God that he wouldn’t scald her with any dripping glue. It took a good two hours but by six o’clock he reckoned she looked as much like a Koala Bear as she was ever going to. She was pleased.

“I’m sorry that you can’t go to the bathroom for awhile,” he said.

“That’s o.k. Daddy,” she beamed, “Koala Bears don’t need to pee.”

How could he get rid of something so memorable, he wondered. In fact, how could he get rid of any of this stuff? He might need it again to jog his memory some day when he’s old and depleted and living alone, when Veronica is making costumes for her own children. He climbed up on one

of the uncomfortable couches and had the best sleep he'd had in a long time.

Dillard V
Richard Denner

Dillard had given up on living simply. He moved from his cabin in Weston, Massachusetts, and headed for California. He had been living near Walden Pond in a carriage house behind his daughter and son-in-law's farmhouse. A place has power, but when Dillard first set foot in the carriage house, he knew it would not be his final home.

"You'll like it, Dad," Joy had said. "It has an indoor pump and a catalytic toilet."

"What's a catalytic toilet?" Dillard asked.

"They use them in Alaska, where they have permafrost and can't dig a hole for an outhouse. It fries your turds in a metal box. Anyway, you won't have to disturb us by coming in and using the bathroom, and you'll have the whole place to yourself during the day, while Sam and I are at the lab and Tim and Con are at school."

"Well, it's good of you to give an old man a place to rest his weary bones and get his bearings."

"Now, Dad," Joy said, consolingly, "I'll make us some coffee."

What I have, Dillard thought, *what I have is a great family in this time of terror and promise. The world is collapsing, and the cities are vomiting up their loneliness, and even as I recognize the rot, and the years pass, I still find I have a stubborn joy.* He puffed through his nose at the pun on his daughter's name. The stars were coming out—huge, remote eyes in the sky. Dillard needed something new, to know nature in its muddled leafiness.

The smell of coffee awoke Dillard from his dim vision. A car passed on the highway, and there was the sound of a bird that sounded like a bird imitating a seagull. Dillard couldn't see this bird hidden by dense leaves, but he was sure if he saw it, it would be big. Real big.

The screen door clattered. "Here we are," said Joy. "You know, Dad, you'll be living just down the road from Walden Pond, where Henry David Thoreau stayed. They've rebuilt his cabin, and what with donated materials they managed to keep the cost of building it to his original budget of \$29. So, you can live here like Thoreau. Hoe a few bean rows and think transcendental thoughts."

Dillard had figured it out. With no rent, he would be able to get along on his Social Security check and the interest payments on his modest investments. He could walk along the Ol' Post Road and dream of the Redcoats coming. He could sit in the tavern and josh with the locals. Like Thoreau, he could wonder, "By fronting Nature, what truths are revealed?" So, he settled down to a simple life.

7:00 Joy has her son, Tim, standing by the stone fence, awaiting his bus. He kept a journal.

7:30 Joy drives Con to his pre-school.

8:15 Sam heads for work at Brandise University in nearby Waltham.

8:30 Joy takes the second car to her laboratory where she and Sam do research in neurobiology.

"What exactly does *plasticity of the synaptic and intrinsic properties of cortical neurons and circuits* mean?" he had asked. After a few minutes listening to Joy trying to explain, he wished he had never asked.

Both Joy and Sam had recently been promoted to full professorships—two jewels in the University’s crown of academic achievement. Dillard asked, “Well, Ms. Professor, what are you going to do after you figure out how the neuron functions in the synapse?”

His daughter smiled. “Oh, I might just give up science and write a novel or become a full-time environmental activist.”

And this is the novel—the novel I’m writing about my Dad. I feel like I’m inside of a coffin. The inside of this coffin is slightly longer than my father’s corpse. Imagine if it was the other way around.

So, as I was saying, my name is Dillard Adam Street, and I have been dead for a long time, and my daughter is writing a novel about me. At first I didn’t like it, dying, but now I like it. I’m only sad that everyone can’t be dead at the same time. But that’s ok. It’s ok that people come and go.

Finally, I had to go back to California. Simple enough. I couldn’t die near Walden Pond. Just not right for me. I tried to live the simple life—cut my coupons, count my change, putter around the garden, be a grandpa—but it wasn’t me. Certainly, a story must not reference itself, and neither should an old man. “The skeleton of a story shouldn’t show through,” my editor said.

Dillard VI
Kathleen Dawson

Dillard had given up on living simply. He’d gone through stages. For awhile he could put everything he owned into one duffel bag. During those years he shared a room in a co-op house near the university, sleeping on the floor in his sleeping bag. It was not the university he had attended, but he liked the ambiance of college towns with their book stores, their free lectures, and their art movie houses, so he settled into the house quite happily, his only luxury the bicycle he began to build for himself.

After two years living at the co-op, he needed the trunk of a car to hold his stuff, the dishes and household items, his clothes, his sports equipment, his boom box, and the futon he now slept on. His bicycle he put on a rack outside the rusty maroon Beetle he’d finally bought.

By the time he met Sunny, he had replaced the Beetle with a used Datsun truck so he could haul around his kayak and his new, hand-built mountain bike. When he moved in with her, his belongings filled the small truck.

After they had lived together for more than a year, Sunny yielded to pressure from her parents to bring Dillard back to Massachusetts to meet them. They professed not to mind that their kindergarten-teacher daughter was living with someone, but when she mentioned the possibility of marriage, Maybelle and Harry insisted the two come to Boston for a visit. Sunny warned Dillard that her father was a banker and her mother greatly attached to the country club.

“I can handle it,” he said.

For the flight east, Dillard hauled out the old blue duffel, piled in his clothes and some books, and fastened a rope around it because the zipper was broken.

Sunny eyed it, frowning, but it was too late to do anything about it. Dillard didn't notice her silence as he drove her neat green Subaru to the airport, because the traffic was heavy and he was lost in his anxieties about meeting her parents. He dropped Sunny and the bags off at Departures and went to park the car in the long-term parking lot, unaware of trouble brewing.

Maybelle and Harry were not impressed with Dillard. Shortly after Dillard went up to bed the second night of the visit, the two took Sunny aside for a little talk.

"He wears sandals, for God's sake!" Harry said. "What kind of a provider could a guy like that be?"

Maybelle chimed in, "He came to dinner in a wrinkled shirt and no tie. How can I take him to dinner at the Country Club? You can't take such a person seriously."

"But, Mom, he's a poet. You don't expect a poet to be ordinary do you? He's really sweet. He cares about the earth."

"He's a bum," Harry said, "a bum with pretensions, but still a bum. Where has he been published?"

That shut Sunny up. It was something she asked herself all too often. Dillard was well over thirty. How could he be so completely without any evidence of success in his chosen field?

She stewed about it all the way back to California, but in the end the poison got her. When they arrived back at their small house, she said, "I can't be with you any more. You have to get a place of your own. Take your stuff and leave."

Dillard was heartbroken, so completely shaken he stalked out, leaving everything behind, his Hitachi boom-box and all his cd's, his metallic-maroon kayak, his five-year-old HP computer, the black leather chair he had bought at Ikea, the Mikasa dishes he had bought when he first lived in the co-op, most of his clothes, and even his beloved electric-blue-metallic, Ventana mountain bike. Had he not had a recent paycheck from his job at the video store in his pocket, he would have walked out without money, too.

Sunny raced after him. "Dil, I can't keep your stuff. What am I going to do with it?"

"Sell it. I don't care," he yelled at her. "It's just stuff."

She stared after him, biting her lip, her hands shaking. His yellow truck, its exhaust noxious because it needed a ring job, disappeared around the corner.

He found a room in a cheap motel and disappeared in it with a case of beer, but he couldn't stand being drunk, even the first day, because his head hurt and he hated the taste in his mouth when he woke up. He got up, pulled on his shorts, and went for a run. He ran about five miles, as far as he could until he collapsed, sweating and dehydrated, under an apple tree in a farmer's field.

He sat there a long time, light-headed. He leaned against the rough trunk of the tree, his mouth dry as if filled with sand, his eyes closed at first. As his heart slowed, he opened his eyes and stared at nothing, beginning to think.

He thought about his writing, which he had decided he was no good at and had been too scared to admit to either himself or Sunny. He thought about his stupid job at the video store. Who was he kidding? He was a loser, a nothing. He should just walk away and start again.

Then he finally thought about Sunny, about how life with her had been about a lot of good stuff but also about insurance and taxes and regular hours, stuff he hated. He thought about how she wanted kids and how that meant doctor bills, orthodontia, Little League and the need to live where there were good schools. Lastly, he thought about all the stuff he owned, about how once he had needed only the blue canvas duffel bag to hold it. Did he want to regain that simplicity?

Rested, he started back again, stopping at a gas station for a drink of water. His muscles loosened, and he ran again, running back to the motel, back to his truck, back to Sunny and his things.

Maybe she hadn't sold them yet. Today was a school day. Maybe she was waiting for him to change his mind about his stuff. Yeah, he'd like his computer. Maybe he would never succeed as a writer, but he liked the net. And for sure, he wanted his bike. He'd built the whole thing with a bunch of expensive European parts, top of the line. And yeah, he'd need his sleeping bag. He could always share a room back at the co-op.

But the rest, the kayak and the scuba gear, the household stuff and even the chair—he'd loved that chair, but he could live without it—Sunny could keep or sell it all, even the boom box and his cd's. No, he'd grab the box and all the jazz, too, but Sunny could deal with the rest.

As he pounded along the road getting closer and closer to the house they'd shared, he began to wish--no, to hope—that Sunny would be waiting for him, saying, "Dil, I made a mistake." But he knew her, the most reasonable, patient, organized and all-around-sweet woman he had ever known. She would have thought long and hard before she let her doubts sink them. She would not now change her mind. Even if he changed, got a better job, he and Sunny were over.

Well, he would change anyway. He would make a new start with his truck, his bike, his computer and not much else. Living simply was a snap, desirable, even. But his picture of himself had changed. No more reaching for what he could never have. No more seeing himself as a starving artist while he amused himself with expensive toys. This time he would do it right. This time he would do something useful. He wouldn't let his stuff get in the way, no more than he would scorn it. He would reach out, be like others, but only if he could be of help.

His decision made, he took a shower at the motel and went to get his stuff.

Dillard VII

Gianna De Persiis Vona

Dillard has given up on living simply. What's the point when all of his pals from *the good old days* have already begun to cave in. Just last week he went over to Mac's for a beer and discovered him completely spread out on a black leather recliner, with a new plasma screen TV that seemed to be as big as Mac's king-sized bed if it was turned up on its side. Hell, Dillard remembered when Mac's king-sized bed was the only furniture in the place, engage in any activity not involving a bed and you had to sit cross legged on the floor.

"What the hell's this?" Dillard had said, when he discovered Mac spread out like that, a TV remote in one hand, the other clutching the recliner lever as if ready for any last minute adjustments.

Mac jolted forward and said, "What?" in that same defensive tone he had used back in '93 when Dillard discovered him in bed with the girl Dillard had been trying to make the moves on ever since she blew into town on a wave of Nag Champa. Sure, Dillard had gotten her in the end, they were married now and Shelley swore that night with Mac had been a horrific, psilocybin induced mistake and that where in the hell else was she supposed to sit down besides the bed? Dillard had gotten over that one, sort of, but just the same, Mac's defensive tone put his shackles up and he felt overwhelmed by the desire to smoke a joint despite his promise to Shelly that he would give it up now that they were expecting the baby.

“What’s with the TV, man? And the recliner?” Dillard tried to control his agitation but still his voice came out tight. Shelly has taken their television to the Salvation Army only the day before, she didn’t want the baby raised that way, and now here was Mac, giving into consumerism like he hadn’t spent the last twenty years in hemp pants and Jesus sandals.

Mac shrugged and settled back down into his seat. He flipped a few channels randomly. “I threw my back out in yoga on Friday, Dillard. Jesus. Chill out man. When was the last time you got laid?”

“Life isn’t all about sex,” Dillard snapped, coming off sounding disconcertingly similar to his wife.

“Yah, right. And I’m still a Vegan.” Mac snorted and then leaned over and patted the carpet next to his recliner. “Come on, Dillard, chill the fuck out. My mother sent these to me for my birthday. You know how it is. Every year she asks me what I want, and every year I say I want a month in Tibet, and she tells me I’m a bad seed and writes me a check. Well, you know what, man? I turned forty this year and when Mom called up and asked me what I wanted I just opened up my mouth and out came the words: I want a lazy boy recliner and a plasma screen TV. And guess what?”

“What?” Dillard said. He was sitting cross legged on the floor now, which wasn’t as easy as it used to be, especially without the pot, and he was overwhelmed by a sudden craving to sit in Mac’s chair and hold the controller like it was him that owned the world and not The Man.

“This blows Tibet out of the fucking water.” Mac said, and then he pulled a joint out of his pocket, lit it, took a toke, and passed it down to Dillard.

“I promised Shelly I’d quit.” Dillard said, but he took the joint anyway and held it gingerly between his thumb and index finger.

“Hold on to your balls, Dillard.” Mac said, “Cause they’re shrinking fast.”

“I only have one,” Dillard said morosely.

“TMI, Dillard, TMI.” Mac said. Mac was dating a twenty-five year old yoga instructor and had taken to using abbreviations for things that Dillard couldn’t understand.

“TMI?” Dillard said, and took a hit off the joint.

“Too much information, Julie taught me that.”

“I figured.” Dillard said.

Driving home from Mac’s place that night, Dillard stopped at a red light alongside a powder blue Mustang convertible with the top down. The driver was a beautiful woman, like a movie star with red lipstick and these momentous breasts, the kind of woman Dillard couldn’t help wanting. And for the first time, Dillard felt embarrassed by his beat up old truck that he had converted to run on vegetable oil. He knew that when the light turned green and he accelerated, he was going to send out a plume of smoke that smelt like a deep fryer and that this beautiful woman would wrinkle up her beautiful nose and be glad she had never been stupid enough to go out with guys like him, because then she would have ended up sitting bitch in a giant French Fry instead of sitting pretty in a powder blue dream.

Fuck sacrifice, Dillard had thought as he sputtered forward. *Fuck the God damn planet. I want my TV back!* But then, maybe that was just the weed talking. The weed and Mac’s tofu twelve-grain cheddar no-meat loaf that never failed to give Dillard indigestion.