

## Melvin and Helen and Max and April

Melvin and Helen and Max and April were bad at everything. Melvin always got fired. He arrived too late or wore the wrong tie. He called one boss a cocksucker. Helen married the wrong men. The fourth arrived on Monday and left on Thursday. Max's three sons only telephoned to say he was a son of a bitch. April had no friends except for Melvin and Helen and Max, and they were not good at being friends. When they went to the movies they argued about which one to see, and then went to the one movie nobody wanted to see about a man reincarnated as a beagle. Around them people laughed or shed a tear. Melvin and Helen and Max and April just stared down at their Twizzlers and popcorn. Then April had an idea. On a Tuesday night she rented a conference room at the Arrow Motel. Helen brought chips. Max brought a block of cheddar cheese and a plastic knife. Melvin brought salty crackers. "What is this?" asked Helen. "It's not a party," assured April. They all knew they were no good at parties. They didn't like to dance to music and they were all bad at small talk. Max snapped a switch on a broken lamp. April stared into a dirty mirror. "We just need some kind of name, um, for what we are," said Helen. "Yes," said April with a look approaching a smile. Melvin nodded in agreement. Helen and Max opened their mouths. They could feel new words coming and a delightful eagerness filled the room. It might take hours or days, but they would find it, this new name for themselves lurking there, somewhere in the dark.

## Lunatics

"Are these tweezers sharp?" I asked Ralph. "And what about this nail clipper?" "Sharp enough," he said. Then we saw the belts, nylon rope, and bed sheets. Emily was resourceful. We rented a U-Haul and carried out her couch and lamps and end tables and all the sharp stuff – scissors and knives – we had dropped in pillowcases. We came back and Ralph handed me a brush, and we painted the windows black. "We're her best friends, aren't we?" asked Ralph. "I think so," I said. "But how good? Emily never told us her heart was full of sorrow. If a friend can't talk to us about her sadness, how can we call her our friend." "I don't know," Ralph answered. "I think we need to do better." "Yes, absolutely," I said. "We can't be so complacent." Suddenly the door opened. There was Emily in lovely blues and pastels. Her wrist wrapped in a bandage. "Where the hell is all my furniture?" asked Emily. "We put it in storage," I said. "Why?" "The doctor told us to not leave anything dangerous in your apartment," said Ralph. "But a couch isn't dangerous," said Emily. "Not unless you set it on fire," I noted. Emily looked around her apartment. She saw all that was left was the bare mattress on the floor. "We wanted you to be able to rest your head on something soft," said Ralph. "What's wrong, Emily?" I asked with tenderness. "Why did you try to take your own life?" "I didn't," shouted Emily, "I slipped and fell on an open tuna can." "Is that like saying you walked into a door?" I asked. Emily furiously punched numbers into her cellphone. "What are you doing?" asked Ralph. "I'm calling 9-1-1. I've been robbed," shouted Emily, "by two imbeciles." Then Ralph and I were running down the block, the siren getting closer. The sidewalks were crowded with people. Lunatics everywhere.

The doctor tapped my chest and elbow. "Is something wrong?" I asked. "Oh, it's your flumbox." "What's that?" "A little organ that floats around inside you." "Can you fix it?" "Sure, I just scoop it out with a special tool." "How do you get ahold of it if it's always moving around?" "There's a little bit of trial and error, but I'm very good at it. I'm a flumbox expert." I told my wife Anne that I had never heard of a flumbox. "Of course not, because you never pay attention." "I'm afraid of the operation," I told her. "It sounds painful." "You don't need an operation." She pushed some pepper up my nose. I sneezed, and the flumbox landed on the table. It looked like a tiny cardboard box. Brown and soggy. "Don't touch it," said Anne. She scooped up the flumbox, dropped it in a jar of vinegar and put it in the refrigerator. "In the morning you have to say hello to it." "What if I forget?" "You'll be turned into a horse and spend the rest of your life in Farmer Tim's fields." At work Jeff and Angie were missing. I heard whispers about a flumbox epidemic. People were afraid. They kept to themselves. I washed my hands frequently. On the way home from work I stopped by Farmer Tim's. I had never seen so many horses in his corral. I shouted, "Hey Angie! Hey Jeff!" Two horses ambled over and nuzzled my hands. Then Farmer Tim stepped out from behind a tree. "What are you doing touching my horses? Are you some kind of dumbass?" "I wish you wouldn't call me that, Farmer Tim. Sure, there are some things I don't know, but I don't want to fight with you." "Of course you don't. I have a knife." When I got home Anne was feeding hay to a horse standing in our driveway. "He just wandered over." "Well, we can't keep a horse. We live in the suburbs." "Sure we can. We got a nice yard and the kids already adore him." Jerry and Charlene came out of the house wearing cowboy hats. Jerry was carrying a saddle. "We love Frisbee," said Charlene. "Who's Frisbee?" I asked. "Don't be stupid," said Jerry. "Frisbee's our new horse." "Well, I had had enough name-calling for one day. I got in my

car and drove to the nearest bar. As I was finishing my beer, a woman asked me if I was ready for the Flurrycane. "Oh, come off it," I said. "There's no such thing as a Flurrycane." "Are you some kind of moron?" she asked. "There have already been two down south. At least seven are dead." I'll admit I was terrified. The siren rang. Jerry, Charlene, Anne and I hurried down into the basement. Anne brought out a bucket full of wet towels. She wrapped one around each of our heads. In the damp darkness I heard my children talking worriedly about Frisbee. I rubbed one hand down my thigh wondering what sort of whatchamacalit I never heard of was floating around inside me. When the wailing of the siren stopped, we stepped outside. Our lawn was covered with sparkling blue fluff that looked like it came from the inside of a pillow. As I reached down to touch it, Jerry slapped my hand aside. "Jeez, Dad, don't be an idiot! That stuff will sear your flesh down to the bone." Frisbee walked over to our lawn and began to lick the blue stuff from the grass. "Don't you just love Frisbee?" asked Charlene. Frankly, I wasn't sure what to make of Frisbee, but that afternoon Charlene and I rode him bareback through the park. We trotted past the swings and leaped over a seasaw. A police officer appeared and waved us to a halt. I was nervous before the law. He reached into his back pocket. I was sure we would be given some kind of summons for disorderly conduct, but he pulled out a carrot and fed it to Frisbee. "Aren't you a nice little horsey," he said.



## Paper Scraps

The wife waved a grocery receipt in front of her husband. On one side was a telephone number. "Is this important?" she asked. The husband hated when his wife rummaged through his paper pile. He was reading a novel and didn't want to be interrupted. "Is there a name?" asked the husband. "No." "Well, why don't you call and find out." She took out her phone and made the call. "Hello," said a young man. "Hello," said the wife. "Who's this?" "Mark, I'm a cashier at Amiable Foods." "My husband, Allen, has your telephone number. I found it on a receipt. Does he know you?" "Well, I touched his fruits and vegetables." "But don't you touch everybody's?" "Sure, but you are the first person to call. Tell me your name." "Irene." "Irene, I'd like to invite you to go apple picking with me tomorrow. Will you come?" "Sure," said Irene. Mark was handsome and amiable. Irene didn't understand why he would have to go out of his way to meet people. Together they filled a basket with fresh apples. Irene bit into one and found a small piece of paper lodged in the apple's core. She unfolded the paper and there was another number. "Oh, you seem to be very much in demand," said Mark. Irene called the number and met Lucy for coffee. "My husband has been bedridden for over two years," said Lucy. "Thank you for helping me get out of the house. Sometimes I'm so depressed I have trouble doing the simplest of things." "I found your phone number in an apple," said Irene. "That's odd," said Lucy. "I don't much care for apples. I'm more of a pear person." "What's the difference between a pear person and an apple person?" asked Irene. "I believe it's a profound difference, but I don't think I could find the words to explain it." When Irene walked home some leaves pressed up against her shoes. When she looked down there were also several scraps of paper, and she could see more numbers. "My god," exclaimed Irene. "This is just too much." But Irene couldn't resist, and she called each one. The last person she spoke to, Angela, said it was important to meet a new person every day. "Did anyone else call

you?" asked Irene. "No, just you Irene. And I'm so glad you did. Your heart is warm and generous." When Irene got home Allen was still on the couch reading a novel. She sat beside him and looked outside at the clear night sky. A scrap of paper drifted past the living room window. Her husband opened it and grabbed the paper. She could see there was something written on it. "What does it say," asked Irene. "Oh, this one's for me," said Allen. "How do you know?" "Earlier today I thought, 'Wouldn't it be funny if I got a message from God.'" "But you don't believe in God." "I didn't until today." After Allen stepped into the kitchen, Irene could hear him talking on his phone and rummaging in the refrigerator. "What's in the bag?" asked Irene as Allan stepped out the door. "Some pears. I'll see you later." Irene realized her husband was going to be away for a long time. She opened the window and found a scrap of paper on the sill. There was an address. Irene put on her coat, walked a short distance and knocked on a door. A young girl opened the door. "She's here," said the girl. The girl led Irene to a living room full of people, all dressed in bright colored clothes. "I'm Edgar," said a balding man with a kind voice. "Irene." Edgar led Irene to a turntable next to a stack of old LPs. "So, Irene, you pick the songs, we do the dancing?" "Okay," said Irene. She slipped an LP out of its sleeve, set down the needle and a song poured out of the speakers. The people flung their arms and legs around like wild animals. Irene smiled and cranked up the volume.

## A Modest Amount of Misery

During the funeral, for no reason he could understand, Jack thought about canoeing down a stream with his best friend, Kevin, when they were twelve. This serene memory brought a smile to his face and that made Emily, Jack's wife, angry. His father-in-law had died. He had been generous and kind to Jack, but Jack could not muster up any tears. At Jack and Emily's home people came to pay their respects. His wife was still angry. "This is a time of great sadness and you're smiling like a clown," Jack tried to keep to himself. He wanted to support his wife in her feelings of grief. When Jack first learned of his father-in-law's death he was quite upset. He had uneasy dreams and trouble sleeping, but these feelings passed quickly. Now he sat on the toilet and looked out the bathroom window. Girls and boys were running around at a playground, laughing. I should just take a walk, thought Jack. He wandered into a park and was mugged. A very large man pushed Jack violently to the ground and pressed a knee into his back. His wallet stolen, Jack chased after the thief who ran into a store — one Jack had never seen before. When he got inside he couldn't find the thief. He wondered how he had escaped. The store was peaceful and orderly. On the shelves were boxes, jars and cans. Jack looked at the labels. Melancholy, Unhappiness. A small box was labeled: A Modest Amount of Misery. Jack asked the clerk if he could have a sample. But the clerk said she was sorry. The merchandise was difficult to come by, and she couldn't give any of it away. Jack asked the woman if she had tried any of the stuff. She said she had a tablespoon of Deep Sorrow and cried so violently she felt a cathartic change come over her, a new appreciation for her boyfriend, Anthony, a real estate attorney. She asked him to marry her the next day, and he agreed. Jack wanted to buy some Sorrow, but he didn't have a dollar on him. "How late are you open?" "Only a few more minutes," said the clerk. "What are your hours tomorrow?" "I'm sorry. This is our last day. We're closing up shop

and moving to a new location in Canada." Jack was desperate. He grabbed a can of Melancholy, ran out the door, sat down in an alley and drank it all down. Almost immediately he started crying. But soon he wondered if he was only crying because he couldn't cry at his father-in-law's funeral, or because he had been mugged, or because he had stolen a can of Melancholy with a price tag of just three dollars and forty-five cents, and it tasted surprisingly like Sprite. An elderly woman walked up to Jack. "Do you need a hand?" she asked. "I don't think so," said Jack, tears running down his cheeks. "Have you noticed you have quite a few gray hairs on your head." "No," said Jack. "Well," said the woman. "You're just getting older. I wouldn't worry about it." "You wouldn't?" "No, you'll get used to it. It's not so bad." The old woman turned around and left the ally, taking small careful steps with the help of her sturdy walker.

