

## Our Place on O Street

*Jeff Wasserboehr*

Just over eight months had passed since Jini's decision to leave Washington D.C. and return to Seoul with our newborn, Lily. Her announcement came on one December morning after I'd sat down at the kitchenette table to wrap my head around the bills that had accrued before us and started devising strategies on how to go about paying them—which ones deserved immediate attention, which could be put off another month, which, if any, required minimum payments only. Jini had her arms wrapped over my chest, her lips pressed to my head when she delivered the news. She held me in that way for a while and, behind us, the kettle boiled over onto the stovetop. The kitchen was frigid. We couldn't afford oil that winter and the only space heater was in our bedroom, on high, keeping our infant daughter warm. Our financial situation had been gradually trending downward for a while, but, with the lack of work for cameraman contractors in the winter months, it had taken a significant plunge. After an apartment shift to Southeast D.C., Jini and I found ourselves submerged in a genuine fiscal crisis.

Not a divorce, a separation. "We'll be gone in three weeks," Jini'd said.

Back then our apartment had only two rooms: a living room slash kitchenette and a bedroom. Lily slept in her crib at the foot of our bed. Unlike where we'd lived before, the Capitol Building wasn't within walking distance. There was no view of the Mall. You couldn't even sense, from our brick building on O Street, that people were milling about merrily some three miles northwest. We were on the second floor of a three-story affair, crammed into a single building with at least seven other families. The unsmiling neighbors were mostly non-English speakers, families in which entire sets of relatives lived in with the tenants. Every one of them made Jini nervous. At night, I worried over the safety of my car out on the street. I wondered if I'd wake up and find the thing hoisted onto cinder blocks, the tires extracted, the windows smashed in and the stereo carved out. On the odd day when I got contracted for a corporate videotaping at my minimum going rate, I'd leave the house worrying incessantly about the safety of my wife and our daughter.

Our place on O Street had horrifying acoustics: post-midnight, a loud drunk coming home sounded like a bowling ball dragging up a flight of stairs, and, at all times, other unsettling noises passed through the sheathing—noises like that of our male neighbor pissing. A taurine force from a fire hose. Around the clock, ambulances sped westward up M Street toward the capitol. In the confusion of the night I sometimes mixed up the wails of the emergency vehicles with the crying of my daughter and I'd untangle myself from the sheets and move quickly to the end of our bed to check on her. On those nights, I'd pull her out of the crib and cradle her teeny body against my chest. She was the size of a football then and I squeezed her and kissed her helplessly. I'd stand there, rocking and watching her breathe until I grew tired enough to fall back asleep. Then I'd crawl back into bed, this time sleeping upright with my back against the wall, my arms folded across my chest like a night watchman. But I never slept long. Something would always wake me. It was never, as it had been in the other places where we had lived, the quiet wee hours of night. People were always passing below our window, hooting gibberish. Cars thumped by with their basses pumping at absurd levels. Outside, our neighborhood never took on a full darkness. Yellow streetlamps glowed, inviting, like mosquitoes, swarms of thick-jacketed men to convene underneath them. Down the street a couple blocks the lit 7-11 storefront served as an excellent locale for drug deals. Here, the late-night world of unseen crime thrived. Working girls patrolled the even-brighter streets nearby. The first time we heard gunshots go off in our building, Jini and I leapt out of our bed and ran to our daughter. Always to her. I was first to grab Lily. Jini peed herself. Stunned, we moved together into our bathroom where we regrouped—me on the toilet and Jini on the tub floor with our daughter. It took fifteen long minutes before we heard the first sirens. That night, huddled as we were in the bathroom, I thought of the things we'd gather in a total state of emergency—one in which we suddenly had to flee somewhere—and the list I assembled wasn't long. In a pinch, I reasoned that these things could be packed into a duffle: passports, the under ninety-dollar "rainy day fund," a week's worth of diapers, the laptop, the Sony XDCAM (something I could sell if need be), a week's worth of Gerber's vegetable and turkey baby food, and a box tab folder filled with our family's essential papers. Sitting there, thinking about it some more, I learned that if such a situation did present itself, most of these things were expendable. I realized that I was expendable, too, when I mused even further. Not long after the night the shots had been fired, I started having a reoccurring dream. In the dream I was riding on The Screwdriver, a famous rollercoaster from my childhood, a rollercoaster, well known, of course, for its screw-like spirals. Except, in

the dream, I wasn't a kid riding my favorite rollercoaster, I was me, in full father form, and the seats were not secured by the hydraulic safety restraints as they are presently—no—in the dream, the seats had regular old buckle-style seatbelts, the kind installed in common automobiles. But everything was going as usual until the rollercoaster made its infamous 360-degree whip-around and flung us into the corkscrew segment. There, upside-down and in the midst of the breakneck tumbles, I managed to peel my eyes down to my white and bloodless hands gripping the seatbelt and—just then—I watched my index finger poise over the red push-release button. I knew, that with any sudden urge, I could press the thing and go flying to an uncertain death somewhere over the trees. In bolder dreaming states, I'd press the release and then feel all of my weight become lighter, my limbs become flightless flesh pieces succumbing to gravity's tug. Then I'd jolt awake, sweating, my arms swimming, looking for a surface to brace onto. When later I told Jini about the dream, as any troubled and decent man would confess to his wife, she was facing the bathroom mirror, straightening her hair with an iron. In the ten years I'd known her, she had always kept her black hair long and very straight. "Life's that hard?" she asked, passing through our bedroom on her way to the kitchen. "Don't tell me these things."