

DeWitt Henry

What If?

Here I am, running, sixty-five, shorts and t-shirt, beautiful fall day, one of my rare runs anymore outside of the gym. I have run down two blocks from my house, crossed the bridge over the Charles River, then headed right and down the new bike path through woods along the river, the yellow, orange, red, and green leaves closing the sky, all glowing with sunlight, the river visible through gaps in the bushes and trees, with maybe some scattered geese swimming. I pass people walking, older people mostly, some with dogs. From behind I hear bikes coming, and make room, and a man and a woman sweep past. But mostly I'm alone, and after three or five minutes of jogging, trying to keep my eyes up, as if a balloon were lifting my chest (for form), I need to slow to a walk, enjoying the scenery, then start up jogging again. In all, the wood path goes one mile, crosses the river again on a walking bridge, continues close to the river and shielded by foliage and landscaping from industrial buildings, then ends up a hill behind the Stop and Shop supermarket and emerges onto a busy road. Left, over another bridge, and across the street, the path continues towards Waltham for another two or three miles. I don't want to go that far. I could turn around and retrace the path, enjoying it again from a new direction, heading home. But I decide to turn right, jogging down the sidewalk and then up to lights at the busy intersection with Pleasant Street, where I cross and follow the sidewalk for half a mile along Seyon Street past the dreary, low industrial buildings on both sides that have been abandoned by Raytheon and only partially re-tenanted. Walking again, I cross over the intersection at Seyon and Waltham Street and turn right, quickening to a jog along the sidewalk that borders the Gore Estate, its waist-high stone wall and densely planted woods to my left. Thirty yards ahead I see a woman pushing a baby carriage towards me. We are strangers. Me the senior citizen and grandfather, enjoying the day, enjoying my vitality and sweaty in mid-jog, her the young mother (I can see she is young, my daughter's age or younger, smiling and proud). Distance closes. I know to watch my step. I remember there is a metal stub somewhere ahead in the sidewalk, perhaps four inches high, where a sign-post has been removed. The sidewalk is narrow, but there should be room enough to pass the carriage without stepping into the street. I am preoccupied with

my run, strong again. Drawing closer, I mean to smile, to bless the baby as I pass, and she pushes the carriage as close to the wall as she can, when suddenly I've tripped and everything slows down. I've fallen before on runs, tripping over dog leashes or roots, and tried to break the fall by rolling on my shoulder. I've opened gashes and bruised shins. My choice is either to twist away and spill hard onto the edge of the curb and into the street, the way of serious injury; or, in mid-fall, to lurch the other way, and crash into the carriage. I twist toward the carriage. I am crashing full weight into the carriage and in some awful, irreversible way, into the baby. But the mother halts in time and somehow I manage to recover balance, only partially jarring and folding myself over the front of the carriage, as my left hand catches and braces against the wall. I stand back, flushed, and apologize, heart racing. She asks am I all right? I'm fine, I say, thank you. The baby is undisturbed, as she fusses and hovers over it. I nod, smile, and step past them, starting to jog again, as if nothing's happened. But we both know something could have happened. That despite the beauty of the day, despite beneficence and pride of being, out of nowhere, in a blink: the unthinkable was possible. Lives could have been forever altered.