

MIDNIGHT IN OSLO

Drew Calvert

It was early April, and Quinn Weltd was bungling his taxes. He bungled his taxes every year, but this was a special season indeed: penalties owed in two states, missed payments, fiscal slaughter up and down the balance sheet. For a while, he'd worked as ghostwriter for business professors, helping them publish book chapters and articles in "venues" such as *Forbes* or *Harvard Business Review*, but recently, for reasons having to do with spiritual health, he had made the decision not to offer his services anymore, which meant the revenue stream had ceased to flow. It was, in part, a matter of pride. While doing his taxes, he'd tallied payments received for drafting two-thirds of a business book, *The Trust Paradox*, and seen that he was owed an extra five thousand dollars—money he hadn't received despite contributing his labor, money that would have been useful for reducing his student loan balance and then, theoretically, pursuing the life of a novelist. The professor whose book he'd written disagreed about the payment and the two of them had exchanged increasingly legalistic emails before Quinn had finally given up. Still, he sensed there might be a way to reduce the amount of tax he owed for the previous year. He needed help.

And so, in early March, he'd made an appointment with H&R Block in Sycamore Mall, in Iowa City, and met with Sharon, a tax analyst, who, after a brief review of his 1040s and 1099s, as well as his self-employment receipts, mileage log, and list of deductions, made an ominous whistling sound and said that it was a good thing he had come to see her. At first, he worried she might overcharge, but after ten minutes or so he knew that he could trust her, or felt that he could trust her, or simply *chose* to trust her as a token of his abiding faith in the nation's social fabric. (It was 2017.) It helped that she had trophies, photos, and stuffed animals on her desk, which signaled competence and warmth, and it helped that when she reached into her desk drawer for a stick of gum, she offered him a fresh piece. In fact, this simple act of kindness may have won him over. It put him enough at ease to make a joke about the IRS and the irony that President Trump appeared not to have paid any tax, despite his very obscene wealth, and Sharon had laughed appreciatively in a way that didn't necessarily prove her affiliation but that left him with the sense that she was sane and reasonable. He gave his folder of documents to

her to study in more detail, made an appointment for April 5 to file his tax return, and went back to writing his novel.

Quinn still hadn't finished his novel, his first, despite having mentioned it to friends, colleagues, his younger sister, his seatmate on a domestic flight, an Uber driver, a bookish uncle, a handful of Airbnb hosts, and, of course, the literati, the gatekeepers of fellowships and grant money and summer retreats. In fact, he knew his novel was dead. It was set—unconvincingly—in 1890s Chicago, which allowed the author to satirize the America of the 2010s. Fictional gurus delivered crazed speeches from their platforms at the 1893 World's Fair; fictional entrepreneurs invented comically useless products; a fictional William Jennings Bryan traveled around the country with his fictional jaded speechwriter, a stand-in for the novelist. Wall Street panics, corporate titans, socialists, novel spiritual cures—the book was about the "New Gilded Age" set in the Gilded Age. It didn't make a lot of sense. He'd written mostly out of spite, and now he could see that his spitefulness had overshadowed the book's humor and even its moral conviction. It was a record of despair. He tried to explain the nature of the problem to Maja, his ex-girlfriend, who now worked as a nurse in LA. Although she was sympathetic, he could hear the familiar note of exasperation in her voice, which inspired the realization that to tell a former girlfriend about an unfinished novel is to orchestrate a meaningless collision of dark matter. The more he described his satirical book, the more clearly he could see that he had written a failure. It wasn't even an interesting failure, like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* or Herman Melville's *Pierre*. It was an unredeemable failure, like his last romantic relationship. When, in a fit of childish pique, he said he thought it might be time to burn the entire manuscript, Maja calmly suggested he recycle it instead, so as not to cause even more damage. In any case, it was on the cloud.

Quinn had decided that April 5 would be a day of errands. He didn't work on his novel at all; he left it in the cardboard box beside the other cardboard box in which he'd kept his tax forms before surrendering them to Sharon. Instead he went to the grocery store, and the hardware store, and the post office. He even got a haircut. Perched aloft in the wide leather swivel chair at Great Clips, he listened to the hairdresser tell a story about her son, who had served five years in the military but hadn't received the benefits he was promised by the VA. Her son was a disciplined man, she said, but he could also be playful. Whenever he took her to dinner, he would

offer the crook of his elbow in a gesture of mock gallantry and refer to their handicapped parking spot as “the VIP section.” Oh, but that was long ago, she said. He hadn’t done that in years. Quinn watched in the mirror as the hairdresser paused, scissors in hand, to remember how it felt to link elbows with her son. He tried to think of something to say, something kind yet unsentimental. But he was at a loss, and he sensed the hairdresser drifting back to her own sphere of melancholy. Finally, he said he hoped the VA got its act together. The hairdresser nodded and asked if she should use the number five clipper guard. The rest of the haircut proceeded in silence. Afterwards he walked across the mall to H&R Block and rang the little bell.

The woman at the front desk looked under-slept and overwhelmed, her mottled skin and frizzy hair exposed to the harsh fluorescent light. She greeted Quinn with a yawn and asked for a confirmation number, which she typed incorrectly several times before getting it right. He had been through the same tedious process during his last visit and had found it no less depressing. But Sharon had been a pleasant surprise; he’d been happy to work with her. Her smile and reassuring tone reminded him of an organized and kindhearted aunt—approachable, a problem solver. She was the only person alive who knew how thoroughly he had failed to become a solvent adult. When he’d shown her the letters from the Illinois and Iowa Departments of Revenue, she’d told him not to worry so much, that money was “pictures of dead people.” And then she’d explained some subtle tricks for gaming the federal tax code. She had made him feel, if not relaxed, then at least not fatalistic.

The receptionist was frowning at her screen. She clicked, scrolled, and clicked again, but the frown only intensified. She asked if he had come to file his tax return with Sharon. He had, of course, and he told her so. He showed her the email and text message confirming the appointment. The receptionist frowned again and said that Sharon was out of the office that week on “personal emergency leave.” She was in Norway—or maybe Denmark. The receptionist couldn’t remember which. The upshot was that Quinn would need to make another appointment with a different tax analyst. Alternatively, he could schedule another filing appointment with Sharon, though he’d have to wait until she returned from her personal emergency leave.

Quinn was determined to stay calm, despite his strong conviction that the receptionist was mistaken. After more clicking and scrolling, he learned that Sharon’s next available slot was April 21, three days

after the national deadline to file his tax return. This was extremely discouraging. The receptionist urged him to speak with one of their other veteran analysts, Bill, but Quinn was not convinced that Bill was anywhere near as adept as Sharon at calculating quarterly payments, maximizing deductions, or even making sense of what he called his “terrible algebra,” a private joke alluding to a line from a Henry James letter nobody gave a shit about. Also, whatever his qualifications, there was a more enduring problem: it was Sharon, not Bill, to whom he had entrusted his tax documents; it was she with whom he’d consulted about his grim filing status. He made this point as cogently as possible to the receptionist, whose demeanor and body language was by now fairly rigid. She explained again, slower this time, that Sharon was dealing with personal issues, and not on US soil. Quinn began to lose his patience. He asked if they could search for his file. The receptionist said she felt uneasy snooping around a colleague’s desk. She raised the prospect of Bill again. Quinn was staunchly anti-Bill. He tried to explain that he had made an appointment with *Sharon*, not with Bill. The receptionist, now ice-cold, apologized for the inconvenience.

Standing at the receptionist’s desk, Quinn tried to appreciate the absurdity of a tax analyst fleeing to Scandinavia during the one month of the year when she was most urgently in demand. He decided almost instantly that she was in Norway, not Denmark, and that she was merely vacationing. He needed this poetic license to focus his mounting rage. He pictured Sharon in Norway, reading guidebooks, tasting the local cuisine, fishing for bills in her fanny pack, her conscience totally clear. He imagined her going in search of her “roots”—a large, chatty woman in her forties with an abstract claim to European pedigree, snapping tasteless selfies next to ancient churches and pristine fjords. He tried counting backwards from ten. Then he made a final attempt to explain the severity of his case, pointing out that he now had his own “personal emergency.”

The receptionist sighed the way one does when forced to explain a complicated story to a child. She said that Sharon’s fiancé had left her three weeks ago and that Sharon had booked a one-way ticket to Norway—or Denmark—on a whim. The truth was that nobody knew when or if she would return. They hoped to get a message soon.

Quinn felt a sudden rush of tenderness for Sharon. Despite himself, he made further inquiries into her situation. He learned that Sharon’s fiancé was an unbelievable asshole. The fiancé had moved to a suburb of Des Moines with Sharon’s best friend, who was pregnant

with their child. The receptionist said she'd always known the fiancé was an asshole. She enumerated his many faults while Quinn made audible tutting sounds to signal his disgust. As if in conclusion, he said that men were not a very kind species. The woman agreed wholeheartedly.

Quinn lingered and chatted for another five minutes or so, mostly about the special kind of pain that results from betrayal, but soon there was nothing more to say, and he had other errands to run. He needed to contact his landlord with an update on the lease. He needed to buy a gift for a friend who had recently given birth. And he needed to do his annual sweep of Facebook to ensure he hadn't missed other births or deaths. He took a seat on the wooden bench outside H&R Block, logged in to his Facebook account, and scrolled through his friend requests. Many were several months old. His younger sister's boyfriend, who was a nice guy, and good for her, had sent a request back in September. Now they were friends, seven months late. The process had taken less than a minute. But where did it end? Where? There were hundreds of emails he could be writing to friends and family around the world, emails that would likely do more good than any novel of his, emails he could not write on a chipped bench in Sycamore Mall with his two idiot thumbs. He decided he would finish his errands and then bike to Prairie Lights to draft his belated emails.

Quinn checked the to-do list in the Notes app on his iPhone. He called Wells Fargo and disputed a purchase he hadn't made. He called his landlord and left a message. He walked to another part of the mall and bought a pink onesie. He was accomplishing many things, but not the main thing. The day of errands had been built around the filing of his tax return much as a great basketball team is built around a towering center. But he would need to put his financial situation out of mind, or nothing else would get done.

As he biked along Summit Street, heading towards the café, he tried to remember which writers had bungled their taxes extravagantly, and what their fates had been. Edmund Wilson came to mind, but there were probably others. David Foster Wallace had written a whole novel, or most of one, about the IRS before he'd hanged himself in his garage. It wasn't a great precedent. Still, Quinn could appreciate the link between taxes and literature: both were abstractions of civic engagement.

Biking north on Gilbert Street, Quinn tried to convince himself that it wasn't exactly a *moral* failure to fail at writing a novel. It was

actually very common—but then so was moral failure. Maybe he had saved himself from a terrible profanity. Was that it? Was he too profane? Or was he not profane enough? He was very conflicted about the sacred and the profane, about whether a novel should “vex the world,” as Jonathan Swift had once written, or whether it should make a single reader's heart go pit-a-pat. Recently, he had read a book called *The Preparation of the Novel*, which wasn't really a book at all but a series of lectures Roland Barthes had written *instead* of a novel. He thought the lectures were wonderful, but he couldn't say why. Surprisingly, it almost made him want to become a Catholic again, which certainly wasn't Barthes's intention. The night he finished reading the book, he called Maja, who, like him, had once belonged to the Catholic Church, and asked if she thought they'd turned their backs on God prematurely. She said she didn't think so and reminded him that the Christian vote had swayed the recent election. Then she told him a story about a woman who'd broken both arms in a fall and cried in her hospital bed because she couldn't scratch her nose. Maja scratched it for her, but the woman still cried. *It's not being scratched*, the woman said, and this became a catchphrase for their post-relationship. *It's not being scratched*, Maja would say, as she went through her depression. *It's not being scratched*, he would say, on the days he failed to write. For a while he stopped writing altogether and spent his days reading Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, which recommended similar feats of imaginative empathy but had a more splendid goal: to make the spiritual exerciser a better human being.

By the time he reached Prairie Lights, it was late in the afternoon. He found an empty table, took out his laptop, and made a list of all the people he needed to email. The list became rather daunting, so he ordered a large coffee, and while waiting for his coffee he remembered the book of poems he'd been carrying in his backpack, so he took it out and began to read. As he read, he felt a familiar cold flame near the top of his spine. The poems were gorgeous—and funny, too, his favorite combination. The poet was coming to Iowa City, so he'd have a chance to hear her read. Too often, though, he skipped the readings. He'd never mastered the art of being a literary person, despite his love for literature. Possibly he was an asshole—it was something he'd need to think about. The poems were outrageously good. He couldn't believe how good they were. He wanted to call the poet and tell her, but that would only ruin the magic. He'd learned this through experience: the week before, at an after-party, he'd heaped drunken praise on one of his literary heroes,

a novelist in her sixties with electric prose and acid wit. Nothing terrible happened, but the shame felt like a blight on his soul, and he made a secret vow not to rant about his sordid love for an author ever again. So, no, he wouldn't call the poet. Besides, he had emails to write. Maybe he could write just one and send it to the entire list? Then he could wander the earth, reading poems.

But first, the professor. Quinn was eager to have the final word. The market-based "principal-agent" relationship they'd affected over the past few years was nonsense, and he felt the need to explain why. *Principal-agent* was *master-slave* laundered through economics departments, a cute name for a shabby arrangement: psychologists working for business schools and writers—even failed writers—working for psychologists. There had to be a better way for the culture to self-reflect. As he typed out the subject line, he recalled a conversation they'd had the year before in Chicago. The professor had recommended a book, a treacly collection of personal essays, and Quinn had made the mistake of being honest about his preferences. The professor scoffed at his highbrow taste. People either want to be entertained, he said, or they want to be helped. Most novels he read were neither entertaining nor helpful. Besides, they were living in the golden age of television!

Quinn had no rebuttal at the time—the professor had a point. He himself had worried about the nature of his vocation, which involved transmuting emotions into narratives for "greater truth." He often tried to persuade himself that the process was a natural one, like the second law of thermodynamics or photosynthesis. But what if it were natural in the way theft was natural, or the way murder was natural? He'd gazed onto the unrelenting beauty of Lake Michigan, with its tidy armada of yachts by the pier, and felt himself admit defeat.

But now, ensconced in his favorite café, Quinn was determined to make his case in writing, where he had the advantage. He tried to summarize Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments. For Adam Smith, Quinn wrote, the irreducible human trait wasn't reason, or speech, or labor, or the impulse to build trade networks or joint-stock companies or design communication devices. Instead, it was our ability to respond to "sentiments," or the passions and feelings of others, which is what the novel curates in its own messy way. He explained that all of his favorite novels were basically un-filmable, that film is certainly more efficient for representing life in action—not to mention settings—but that fiction is better at offering access to

other people's minds. Factoring in production costs, it was no contest, really.

But this was a pointless exercise, as so much of his life had been. He deleted the email and started over, this time writing a terse reply announcing he'd be moving on. He wished the professor all the best, gallantly resisting the urge to advise self-sodomy, and told him he could keep the cash. When he clicked Send, he felt buoyant and fearful at the same time. He looked outside and saw the day's light had begun to fade.

He had hoped to end the day awash in virtue, errands complete, but he didn't feel that way at all. Everything was out of place. Maja was off in California, no doubt having athletic sex with solvent vegan entrepreneurs. He was freshly unemployed. Soon enough, he would be in prison, tallying days on the cell's brick wall above his bunk. And Sharon was in exile! She was probably in Oslo, he thought—walking the streets of Oslo with her fanny pack and broken heart, caught in her own terrible web. Deciding the rest of her life.

He tried to picture Sharon's life. She was a fairly heavysset woman—could that be why her fiancé had cheated? People actually did such things. People were mostly not very nice. But Sharon was nice, he knew that much. When she'd offered him the stick of gum, she'd said: *For the boredom*. A beautiful line. Now *that* was literature.

Quinn had never been to Norway—everything he knew about the country he'd learned from the autofiction of Karl Ove Knausgaard, a man who'd achieved celebrity by violating the trust encoded in personal relationships—so he couldn't picture exactly what someone like Sharon might be doing. Whatever it was, he hoped that she would find solace on her trip—that she would encounter something on the streets of Oslo to cheer her up. He suddenly had a crazy desire to pray for Sharon's happiness, to make something manifest, to cause through sheer concentration of mind a person to sidle up to her on the streets of Oslo and say something kind, maybe even a little strange, the sort of thing Peter Walsh might say to Clarissa Dalloway, the sort of thing Sharon the tax analyst might say to Quinn.

The café was starting to clear out; it was around dinnertime. Oslo was what, six or seven hours ahead of central time? It would be around midnight there. What might she be doing? He imagined Sharon, sleepless, bereft, roaming the streets of Oslo at midnight, even though he knew she might as easily be in Copenhagen. He couldn't picture Oslo at all, except for the fjords. He knew there

were fjords. What about the city itself? He pictured the tastefully floodlit columns of banks and government buildings, of which there must be one or two. Ancient churches. Cobblestones. He pictured a town square of sorts, with a high clock tower, also lit, and Sharon crossing beneath it. Soon there were others filling the square, versions of people he'd known and loved, people he should have been kinder to, people who might have been kinder to him, some of them living and some of them dead, some clearly there to haunt and some to keep him company. He needed this scene, just for the moment, just as others needed the scene of Jesus turning water to wine. He watched these kindred apparitions mingle and stroll through Oslo's streets, admiring its cleanliness, exalting in its alien fjords. He wanted to cry out to them, embrace them, kiss them, apologize. He wanted to say he was sorry for having summoned them so pointlessly. He wanted to give them a better scene. Something dramatic, something true. At the very least, he could fill in the details, add a bit of color and light—the violet iridescence on the surface of an Oslo fjord, or, to keep things simple, stars. Stars were dramatic enough, he thought. A blizzard of stars, a spackle of pearl—even the merest glimmer would do. Surely there would be stars overhead in Oslo on a night like this. ■

ROMAINE IS NOT A BLUEBERRY

Thomas Wawzenek

When I was a kid, I always wanted to go blueberry picking. There were many times when I, along with my younger brother and sister, would ask my father to take us, but he always refused, saying that he didn't want to drive ninety minutes from Chicago to some farm in Michigan just to pick blueberries that we could just as easily buy in a store.

But there was one summer when we did pick romaine lettuce. I know you may think it strange, and wonder why we didn't pick iceberg or green leaf lettuce instead.

We were on a road trip driving through California, Salinas Valley to be more exact, when my father noticed a number of romaine lettuce farms along the way. That summer my father wanted to take the family on a road trip to the West Coast. He felt he needed a break from his job and that it would be good for our family to share some time together. Back then, my father worked for the Florsheim Shoe Company, whose headquarters were in Chicago, and he was part of the marketing team. One of his ideas, which was soon copied by many shoe stores throughout the country, was that anyone who bought a pair of shoes at Florsheim received a complimentary shoehorn. My father was a big believer in shoehorns. In our house there were five shoehorns hanging from the kitchen wall, which were designated for each family member. We didn't have those cheap plastic or tin shoehorns, but ones that were made out of animal bone with a wooden handle that was intricately carved. To this day, I don't know where my father purchased them. My father made sure my brother, sister and I used our shoehorns whenever we put our shoes on before going to school or church.

"Using a shoehorn saves the back of your shoes, and the back of your shoes is everything, think of it like the spine in your body," he would always say.

At the dinner table, he would tell us about college students who would buy a pair of shoes at Florsheim and refuse to take the free shoehorn. "I just don't understand it, what's wrong with young people nowadays?" my father would say. And when I turned fourteen, I became like those young people who refused to accept the free shoehorn. I felt rebellious and would get under my father's skin by