

the alley, way six floors down, he could see a cracked flower pot scattered over a spray of dirt and something pink sticking out of a green paper bow. It was down six floors. Smashed down six floors.

Old Dudley looked at the man who was chewing gum and waiting to see the throat pop. "You shouldn't have put it so near the ledge," he murmured. "Why don't you pick it up?"

"Why don't you, pop?"

Old Dudley stared at the man who was where the geranium should have been.

He would. He'd go down and pick it up. He'd put it in his own window and look at it all day if he wanted to. He turned from the window and left the room. He walked slowly down the dog run and got to the steps. The steps dropped down like a deep wound in the floor. They opened up through a gap like a cavern and went down and down. And he had gone up them a little behind the nigger. And the nigger had pulled him up on his feet and kept his arm in his and gone up the steps with him and said he hunted deer, "old-timer," and seen him holding a gun that wasn't there and sitting on the steps like a child. He had shiny tan shoes and he was trying not to laugh and the whole business was laughing. There'd probably be niggers with black flecks in their socks on every step, pulling down their mouths so as not to laugh. The steps dropped down and down. He wouldn't go down and have niggers pattin' him on the back. He went back to the room and the window and looked down at the geranium.

The man was sitting over where it should have been. "I ain't seen you pickin' it up," he said.

Old Dudley stared at the man.

"I seen you before," the man said. "I seen you settin' in that old chair every day, starin' out the window, looking in my apartment. What I do in my apartment is my business, see? I don't like people looking at what I do."

It was at the bottom of the alley with its roots in the air.

"I only tell people once," the man said and left the window.

Flannery O'Connor, in The Complete Stories
(Faber & Faber, 1990), written pre-1947.

The Barber

It is trying on liberals in Dilton. After the Democratic White Primary, Rayber changed his barber. Three weeks before it, while he was shaving him, the barber asked, "Who you gonna vote for?"

"Darmon," Rayber said.

"You a nigger-lover?"

Rayber started in the chair. He had not expected to be approached so brutally. "No," he said. If he had not been taken off-balance, he would have said, "I am neither a Negro- nor a white-lover." He had said that before to Jacobs, the philosophy man, and—to show you how trying it is for liberals in Dilton—Jacobs—a man of his education—had muttered, "That's a poor way to be."

"Why?" Rayber had asked bluntly. He knew he could argue Jacobs down.

Jacobs had said, "Skip it." He had a class. His classes frequently occurred, Rayber noticed, when Rayber was about to get him in an argument.

"I am neither a Negro- nor a white-lover," Rayber would have said to the barber.

The barber drew a clean path through the lather and then pointed the razor at Rayber. "I'm tellin' you," he said, "there ain't but two sides now, white and black. Anybody can see that from this campaign. You know what Hawk said? Said a hunnert and fifty years ago, they was runnin' each other down eatin' each other—throwin' jewel rocks at birds—skinnin' horses with their teeth. A nigger come in a white barber shop in Atlanta and says, 'Gimme a haircut.' They throwed him out but it just goes to show you. Why listen, three black hyenas over in Mulford last month shot a white man and took half of what was in his house and you know where

they are now? Settin' in their county jail eatin' like the President of the United States—they might get dirty in the chain gang; or some damn nigger-lover might come by and be heart-broke to see 'em pickin' rock. Why, lemme tell you this—ain't nothin' gonna be good again until we get rid of them Mother Hubbards and get us a man can put these niggers in their places. Shuh."

"You hear that, George?" he shouted to the colored boy wiping up the floor around the basins.

"Sho do," George said.

It was time for Rayber to say something but nothing appropriate would come. He wanted to say something that George would understand. He was startled that George had been brought into the conversation. He remembered Jacobs telling about lecturing at a Negro college for a week. They couldn't say Negro—nigger—colored—black. Jacobs said he had come home every night and shouted, "NIGGER NIGGER NIGGER" out the back window. Rayber wondered what George's leanings were. He was a trim-looking boy.

"If a nigger come in my shop with any of that haircut sass, he'd get it cut all right." The barber made a noise between his teeth. "You a Mother Hubbard?" he asked.

"I'm voting for Darmon, if that's what you mean," Rayber said.

"You ever heard Hawkson talk?"

"I've had that pleasure," Rayber said.

"You heard his last one?"

"No, I understand his remarks don't alter from speech to speech," Rayber said curtly.

"Yeah?" the barber said. "Well, this last speech was a killeroo! Ol' Hawk let them Mother Hubbards have it."

"A good many people," Rayber said, "consider Hawkson a demagogue." He wondered if George knew what demagogue meant. Should have said, "lying politician."

"Demagogue!" The barber slapped his knee and whooped. "That's what Hawk said!" he howled. "Ain't that a shot! 'Folks,' he says, 'them Mother Hubbards says I'm a demagogue.' Then he rears back and says sort of soft-like, 'Am I a demagogue, you people?' And they yells, 'Naw, Hawk, you ain't no demagogue!' And he

comes forward shouting, 'Oh yeah I am, I'm the best damn demagogue in this state!' And you should hear them people roar! Whew!"

"Quite a show," Rayber said, "but what is it but a . . ."

"Mother Hubbard," the barber muttered. "You been taken in by 'em all right. Lemme tell you somethin' . . ." He reviewed Hawkson's Fourth of July speech. It had been another killeroo, ending with poetry. Who was Darmon? Hawk wanted to know. Yeah, who was Darmon? the crowd had roared. Why, didn't they know? Why, he was Little Boy Blue, blowin' his horn. Yeah. Babies in the meadow and niggers in the corn. Man! Rayber should have heard that one. No Mother Hubbard could have stood up under it.

Rayber thought that if the barber would read a few . . .

Listen, he didn't have to read nothin'. All he had to do was think. That was the trouble with people these days—they didn't think, they didn't use their horse sense. Why wasn't Rayber thinkin'? Where was his horse sense?

Why am I straining myself? Rayber thought irritably.

"Nossir!" the barber said. "Big words don't do nobody no good. They don't take the place of thinkin'."

"Thinking!" Rayber shouted. "You call yourself thinking?"

"Listen," the barber said, "do you know what Hawk told them people at Tilford?" At Tilford Hawk had told them that he liked niggers fine in their place and if they didn't stay in that place, he had a place to put 'em. How about that?

Rayber wanted to know what that had to do with thinking.

The barber thought it was plain as a pig on a sofa what that had to do with thinking. He thought a good many other things too, which he told Rayber. He said Rayber should have heard the Hawkson speeches at Mullin's Oak, Bedford, and Chickerville.

Rayber settled down in his chair again and reminded the barber that he had come in for a shave.

The barber started back shaving him. He said Rayber should have heard the one at Spartasville. "There wasn't a Mother Hubbard left standin', and all the Boy Blues got their horns broke. Hawk said," he said, "that the time had come when you had to sit on the lid with. . ."

"I have an appointment," Rayber said. "I'm in a hurry." Why should he stay and listen to that tripe?

As much rot as it was, the whole asinine conversation stuck with him the rest of the day and went through his mind in persistent detail after he was in bed that night. To his disgust, he found that he was going through it, putting in what he would have said if he'd had an opportunity to prepare himself. He wondered how Jacobs would have handled it. Jacobs had a way about him that made people think he knew more than Rayber thought he knew. It was not a bad trick in his profession. Rayber often amused himself analyzing it. Jacobs would have handled the barber calmly enough. Rayber started through the conversation again, thinking how Jacobs would have done it. He ended doing it himself.

The next time he went to the barber's, he had forgotten about the argument. The barber seemed to have forgotten it too. He disposed of the weather and stopped talking. Rayber was wondering what was going to be for supper. Oh. It was Tuesday. On Tuesday his wife had canned meat. Took canned meat and baked it with cheese—slice of meat and a slice of cheese—turned out striped—why do we have to have this stuff every Tuesday?—if you don't like it you don't have to—

"You still a Mother Hubbard?"

Rayber's head jerked. "What?"

"You still for Darmon?"

"Yes," Rayber said and his brain darted to its store of preparations.

"Well, look-a-here, you teachers, you know, looks like, well. . . ." He was confused. Rayber could see that he was not so sure of himself as he'd been the last time. He probably thought he had a new point to stress. "Looks like you fellows would vote for Hawk on account of you know what he said about teachers' salaries. Seems like you would now. Why not? Don't you want more money?"

"More money!" Rayber laughed. "Don't you know that with a rotten governor I'd lose more money than he'd give me?" He realized that he was finally on the barber's level. "Why, he dislikes too many different kinds of people," he said. "He'd cost me twice as much as Darmon."

"So what if he would?" the barber said. "I ain't one to pinch money when it does some good. I'll pay for quality any day."

"That's not what I meant!" Rayber began. "That's not. . . ."

"That raise Hawk's promised don't apply to teachers like him anyway," somebody said from the back of the room. A fat man with an air of executive assurance came over near Rayber. "He's a college teacher, ain't he?"

"Yeah," the barber said, "that's right. He wouldn't get Hawk's raise; but say, he wouldn't get one if Darmon was elected neither."

"Ahh, he'd get something. All the schools are supporting Darmon. They stand to get their cut—free textbooks or new desks or something. That's the rules of the game."

"Better schools," Rayber sputtered, "benefit everybody."

"Seems like I been hearin' that a long time," the barber said.

"You see," the man explained, "you can't put nothing over on the schools. That's the way they throw it off—benefits everybody."

The barber laughed.

"If you ever thought. . . ." Rayber began.

"Maybe there'd be a new desk at the head of the room for you," the man chortled. "How about that, Joe?" He nudged the barber.

Rayber wanted to lift his foot under the man's chin. "You ever heard about reasoning?" he muttered.

"Listen," the man said, "you can talk all you want. What you don't realize is, we've got an issue here. How'd you like a couple of black faces looking at you from the back of your classroom?"

Rayber had a blind moment when he felt as if something that wasn't there was bashing him to the ground. George came in and began washing basins. "Willing to teach any person willing to learn—black or white," Rayber said. He wondered if George had looked up.

"All right," the barber agreed, "but not mixed up together, huh? How'd you like to go to a white school, George?" he shouted.

"Wouldn't like that," George said. "We needs sommo powders. These here the las' in this box." He dusted them out into the basin.

"Go get some then," the barber said.

"The time has come," the executive went on, "just like Hawkson said, when we got to sit on the lid with both feet and a mule." He went on to review Hawkson's Fourth of July speech.

Rayber would like to have pushed him into the basin. The day was hot and full enough of flies without having to spend it listening to a fat fool. He could see the courthouse square, blue-green cool, through the tinted glass window. He wished to hell the barber would hurry. He fixed his attention on the square outside, feeling himself there where, he could tell from the trees, the air was moving slightly. A group of men sauntered up the courthouse walk. Rayber looked more closely and thought he recognized Jacobs. But Jacobs had a late afternoon class. It was Jacobs, though. Or was it. If it were, who was he talking to? Blakeley? Or was that Blakeley. He squinted. Three colored boys in zoot suits strolled by on the sidewalk. One dropped down on the pavement so that only his head was visible to Rayber, and the other two lounged over him, leaning against the barbershop window and making a hole in the view. Why the hell can't they park somewhere else? Rayber thought fiercely. "Hurry up," he said to the barber, "I have an appointment."

"What's your hurry?" the fat man said. "You better stay and stick up for Boy Blue."

"You know you never told us why you're gonna vote for him," the barber chuckled, taking the cloth from around Rayber's neck.

"Yeah," the fat man said, "see can you tell us without sayin', goodgovernment."

"I have an appointment," Rayber said. "I can't stay."

"You just know Darmon is so sorry you won't be able to say a good word for him," the fat man howled.

"Listen," Rayber said, "I'll be back in here next week and I'll give you as many reasons for voting for Darmon as you want—better reasons than you've given me for voting for Hawkson."

"I'd like to see you do that," the barber said. "Because I'm telling you, it can't be done."

"All right, we'll see," Rayber said.

"Remember," the fat man carped, "you ain't gonna say, goodgovernment."

"I won't say anything you can't understand," Rayber muttered and then felt foolish for showing his irritation. The fat man and the barber were grinning. "I'll see you Tuesday," Rayber said and left. He was disgusted with himself for saying he would give them

reasons. Reasons would have to be worked out—systematically. He couldn't open his head in a second like they did. He wished to hell he could. He wished to hell "Mother Hubbard" weren't so accurate. He wished to hell Darmon spit tobacco juice. The reasons would have to be worked out—time and trouble. What was the matter with him? Why not work them out? He could make everything in that shop squirm if he put his mind to it.

By the time he got home, he had the beginnings of an outline for an argument. It would be filled in with no waste words, no big words—no easy job, he could see.

He got right to work on it. He worked on it until suppertime and had four sentences—all crossed out. He got up once in the middle of the meal to go to his desk and change one. After supper he crossed the correction out.

"What is the matter with you?" his wife wanted to know.

"Not a thing," Rayber said, "not a thing. I just have to work."

"I'm not stopping you," she said.

When she went out, he kicked the board loose on the bottom of the desk. By eleven o'clock he had one page. The next morning it came easier, and he finished it by noon. He thought it was blunt enough. It began, "For two reasons, men elect other men to power," and it ended, "Men who use ideas without measuring them are walking on wind." He thought the last sentence was pretty effective. He thought the whole thing was effective enough.

In the afternoon he took it around to Jacob's office. Blakeley was there but he left. Rayber read the paper to Jacobs.

"Well," Jacobs said, "so what? What do you call yourself doing?" He had been jotting figures down on a record sheet all the time Rayber was reading.

Rayber wondered if he were busy. "Defending myself against barbers," he said. "You ever tried to argue with a barber?"

"I never argue," Jacobs said.

"That's because you don't know this kind of ignorance," Rayber explained. "You've never experienced it."

Jacobs snorted. "Oh yes I have," he said.

"What happened?"

"I never argue."

"But you know you're right," Rayber persisted.

"I never argue."

"Well, I'm going to argue," Rayber said. "I'm going to say the right thing as fast as they can say the wrong. It'll be a question of speed. Understand," he went on, "this is no mission of conversion; I'm defending myself."

"I understand that," Jacobs said. "I hope you're able to do it."

"I've already done it! You read the paper. There it is." Rayber wondered if Jacobs were dense or preoccupied.

"Okay, then leave it there. Don't spoil your complexion arguing with barbers."

"It's got to be done," Rayber said.

Jacobs shrugged.

Rayber had counted on discussing it with him at length. "Well, I'll see you," he said.

"Okay," Jacobs said.

Rayber wondered why he had ever read the paper to him in the first place.

Before he left for the barber's Tuesday afternoon, Rayber was nervous and he thought that by way of practice he'd try the paper out on his wife. He didn't know but what she was for Hawkson herself. Whenever he mentioned the election, she made it a point to say, "Just because you teach doesn't mean you know everything." Did he ever say he knew anything at all? Maybe he wouldn't call her. But he wanted to hear how the thing was actually going to sound said casually. It wasn't long; wouldn't take up much of her time. She would probably dislike being called. Still, she might possibly be affected by what he said. Possibly. He called her.

She said all right, but he'd just have to wait until she got through what she was doing; it looked like every time she got her hands in something, she had to leave and go do something else.

He said he didn't have all day to wait—it was only forty-five minutes until the shop closed—and would she please hurry up?

She came in wiping her hands and said all right; all right, she was there, wasn't she? Go ahead.

He began saying it very easily and casually, looking over her head. The sound of his voice playing over the words was not bad. He wondered if it were the words themselves or his tones that made

them sound the way they did. He paused in the middle of a sentence and glanced at his wife to see if her face would give him any clue. Her head was turned slightly toward the table by her chair where an open magazine was lying. As he paused, she got up. "That was very nice," she said and went back to the kitchen. Rayber left for the barber's.

He walked slowly, thinking what he was going to say in the shop and now and then stopping to look absently at a store window. Block's Feed Company had a display of automatic chicken-killers—"So Timid Persons Can Kill Their Own Fowl" the sign over them read. Rayber wondered if many timid persons used them. As he neared the barber's, he could see obliquely through the door the man with the executive assurance was sitting in the corner reading a newspaper. Rayber went in and hung up his hat.

"Howdy," the barber said. "Ain't this the hottest day in the year, though!"

"It's hot enough," Rayber said.

"Hunting season soon be over," the barber commented.

All right, Rayber wanted to say, let's get this thing going. He thought he would work into his argument from their remarks. The fat man hadn't noticed him.

"You should have seen the covey this dog of mine flushed the other day," the barber went on as Rayber got in the chair. "The birds spread once and we got four and they spread again and we got two. That ain't bad."

"Never hunted quail," Rayber said hoarsely.

"There ain't nothing like taking a nigger and a hound dog and a gun and going after quail," the barber said. "You missed a lot out of life if you ain't had that."

Rayber cleared his throat and the barber went on working. The fat man in the corner turned a page. What do they think I came in here for? Rayber thought. They couldn't have forgotten. He waited, hearing the noises flies make and the mumble of the men talking in the back. The fat man turned another page. Rayber could hear George's broom slowly stroking the floor somewhere in the shop, then stop, then scrape, then. . . . "You er, still a Hawkson man?" Rayber asked the barber.

"Yeah!" the barber laughed. "Yeah! You know I had forgot.

You was gonna tell us why you are voting for Darmon. Hey, Roy!" he yelled to the fat man, "come over here. We gonna hear why we should vote for Boy Blue."

Roy grunted and turned another page. "Be there when I finish this piece," he mumbled.

"What you got there, Joe?" one of the men in the back called, "one of them goodgovermint boys?"

"Yeah," the barber said. "He's gonna make a speech."

"I've heard too many of that kind already," the man said.

"You ain't heard one by Rayber," the barber said. "Rayber's all right. He don't know how to vote, but he's all right."

Rayber reddened. Two of the men strolled up. "This is no speech," Rayber said. "I only want to discuss it with you—sanely."

"Come on over here, Roy," the barber yelled.

"What are you trying to make of this?" Rayber muttered; then he said suddenly, "If you're calling everybody else, why don't you call your boy, George. You afraid to have him listen?"

The barber looked at Rayber for a second without saying anything. Rayber felt as if he had made himself too much at home.

"He can hear," the barber said. "He can hear back where he is."

"I just thought he might be interested," Rayber said.

"He can hear," the barber repeated. "He can hear what he hears and he can hear two times that much. He can hear what you don't say as well as what you do."

Roy came over folding his newspaper. "Howdy, boy," he said, putting his hand on Rayber's head, "let's get on with this speech."

Rayber felt as if he were fighting his way out of a net. They were over him with their red faces grinning. He heard the words drag out—"Well, the way I see it, men elect. . . ." He felt them pull out of his mouth like freight cars, jangling, backing up on each other, grating to a halt, sliding, clinching back, jarring, and then suddenly stopping as roughly as they had begun. It was over. Rayber was jarred that it was over so soon. For a second—as if they were expecting him to go on—no one said anything.

Then, "How many yawl gonna vote for Boy Blue!" the barber yelled.

Some of the men turned around and snickered. One doubled over.

"Me," Roy said. "I'm gonna run right down there now so I'll be first to vote for Boy Blue tomorrow morning."

"Listen!" Rayber shouted, "I'm not trying. . . ."

"George," the barber yelled, "you heard that speech?"

"Yessir," George said.

"Who you gonna vote for, George?"

"I'm not trying to. . . ." Rayber yelled.

"I don't know is they gonna let me vote," George said. "Do, I gonna vote for Mr. Hawkson."

"Listen!" Rayber yelled, "do you think I'm trying to change your fat minds? What do you think I am?" He jerked the barber around by the shoulder. "Do you think I'd tamper with your damn fool ignorance?"

The barber shook Rayber's grip off his shoulder. "Don't get excited," he said, "we all thought it was a fine speech. That's what I been saying all along—you got to think, you got to. . . ." He lurched backward when Rayber hit him, and landed sitting on the footrest of the next chair. "Thought it was fine," he finished, looking steadily at Rayber's white, half-lathered face glaring down at him. "It's what I been saying all along."

The blood began pounding up Rayber's neck just under his skin. He turned and pushed quickly through the men around him to the door. Outside, the sun was suspending everything in a pool of heat, and before he had turned the first corner, almost running, lather began to drip inside his collar and down the barber's bib, dangling to his knees.