

Abstract

TAYLOR, EUGENE ARTHUR. *Three Deaths on the Lot and Other Stories*. (Under the direction of Angela Davis-Gardner.)

This collection of 10 short stories attempts a variety of styles, structures and sizes. Stories range from short shorts (such as “Souvenir,” an exercise in exactly 100 words) to a novella-length triptych (“Three Deaths on the Lot”); from first-person narration (“Pictures of an Afternoon”) to third-person close (“Here for You”) to third-person omniscient (“Everyone Talks about the Weather”); and from fairy tale (“The Blanketing Snow”) to murder mystery (“Murder on the Orient Express”) to memoir (“Pointing the Finger”) to more experimental forms (“Mrs. Marple and the Hit & Run”). The collection further recognizes various anxieties of influence, specifically in “Episodes from the Story of Evgeniy von Diderit,” based on Anton Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog.” While striving for variety, the collection also seeks some thematic continuity, whether through persistent ruminations on faith or love or betrayal, or through examinations of various degrees of guilt, or through explorations of the pleasures and perils of the imagination — the imagination too often in conflict with itself.

**THREE DEATHS ON THE LOT
AND OTHER STORIES**

by
ART TAYLOR
(Eugene Arthur Taylor III)

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

ENGLISH (Creative Writing)

Raleigh
2003

APPROVED BY:

Chair of Advisory Committee

Biography

A native of Richlands, N.C., Art Taylor is a 1986 graduate of the Episcopal High School in Alexandria, VA, and a 1990 *cum laude* graduate of Yale University. He currently lives in Raleigh, where he works as communications officer at the North Carolina Museum of Art. A member of the N.C. Writers' Network since 1992, Taylor chaired the Network's Fall Conferences in 2000 and 2002, and currently serves as president of the Network's Board of Trustees.

Taylor's fiction has appeared in several regional literary journals and national publications, including *Aries One*, *Cities and Roads*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *The Lone Wolf Review*, *Red Herring Mystery Magazine*, *Spout*, *Wellspring* and the *Raleigh News and Observer's* "Sunday Reader" section. In 1999, his fiction earned him a role in the N.C. Writers' Network's Blumenthal Readers and Writers Series — one of 20 North Carolina writers chosen to participate.

Taylor's nonfiction work has appeared in *Spectator* magazine (where he served on the editorial staff from 1994 to 1999), in *Metro* magazine (where he currently serves as a contributing editor) and in a variety of other regional and national magazines, including *The Armchair Detective*, *Fifty Plus*, *Murderous Intent*, *Mystery Scene*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *The Oxford American*, *Taste Full* and more. His *Fifty Plus* article "AIDS: A Disease That Knows No Age Barriers" received a bronze award at the National Mature Media Awards in 1998.

Taylor is also an active member of the Mystery Writers of America and a member of Carolina Crime Writers.

Acknowledgements

For their faith and support, I am grateful to Tracy Marion; to Gene, Jenny and Jason Taylor; and to the faculty of N.C. State University's graduate writing program: Angela Davis-Gardner, John Kessel and Wilton Barnhardt.

Grateful acknowledgement is also made to the following for passages excerpted in "Episodes from the Story of Evgeniy von Diderit":

Chekhov, Anton. "The Lady with the Dog." Trans. Constance Garnett. *Later Short Stories: 1888-1903*. Ed. Shelby Foote. New York: Modern Library, 1999. 568-585.

Hall, Owen. Libretto. *The Geisha: A Story of a Tea House*. Lyrics by Harry Greenbank. Music by Sidney Jones. Ed. Fraser Charlton.
<<http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/fraser.charlton/geipage.html>> 9 Oct. 2002.

Versions of stories in this collection originally appeared in the following publications: "Murder on the Orient Express" in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*; and "Pictures of an Afternoon" and "Souvenir" in the "Sunday Reader" section of the *News and Observer* [Raleigh]. Additionally, "The Blanketing Snow (A Fairy Tale Revisited)" has been accepted for publication in the anthology *One Paycheck Away* (Main Street Rag Press) in Fall 2003.

This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.

Contents

Souvenir	1
Pointing the Finger	2
The Blanketing Snow (A Fairy Tale Revisited).....	16
Murder on the Orient Express.....	19
Episodes from the Story of Evgeniy von Diderit.....	33
Here for You.....	63
Three Deaths on the Lot	69
Pictures of an Afternoon.....	115
Everyone Talks about the Weather.....	117
Mrs. Marple and the Hit & Run	144

Souvenir

A year after the Knoxville World's Fair, some of the mountain towns still carried keepsakes.

"I went," Phillip boasted. "When I was at camp."

His younger brother, Jeremy, turned the glass dome to watch the silver specks fly like wishes. "Get this, mama."

"You can't have a toy from a place you never went," Phillip sneered. "And there wasn't any snow."

Jeremy rubbed the smooth glass. "It's only a dollar."

"We'll get you something from Tweetsie," said their mother, leaving the store.

Jeremy lingered close to the wonder, sliding the souvenir into his pocket before he ran out after them.

Pointing the Finger

The carpenter lost two fingers on the project — which two, I don't think any of us ever knew. I certainly never saw the hand that lost them, though I've sometimes imagined it since, just as my mind still conjures up today, even as I write these first words, the memory of another unforgiving finger, and the person wagging it so sternly in my face.

My father had bought a boat, his latest in a series of some half-dozen he'd owned in the eleven years since I'd been born. A twenty-three-foot Mako it was — custom ordered with an Evinrude 225 outboard engine and all the options: live bait wells near the stern, LORAN and a depthfinder affixed to the helm, a bimini top blocking the sun overhead. Dad had carefully chosen each of the options himself, but the salesman insisted on detailing the model's benefits once more on the early spring Sunday we met him at the marina — a morning hardly promising for our maiden voyage. Though the sky remained cloudless, a

strong breeze was pushing inland, bringing with it a particularly briny smell. The waterway churned with small whitecaps between the mainland where we stood and Bogue Banks, the thin ridge of barrier islands across the sound. The docks were not empty, as I remember it — among others milling around, some scrap of memory recalls a bearded man in a navy pea coat carrying a coil of rope — but we seemed the only ones preparing to go out on the water: the salesman, my father and my older brother Will. And me, of course.

I say “of course,” but my presence wasn’t, in fact, a given. I hadn’t wanted to come, had protested coming — didn’t want to be there at all. As the three of them tested the LORAN, I only half-listened, glancing over only occasionally. As they examined compartments packed with life vests and an extra anchor, I sat in one of the vinyl-cushioned chairs mounted at the center of the boat — swiveling the chair with a push of my foot and counting the number of times it would revolve with a single shove.

Dad and Will were the summer yachtsmen, not me. They were the weekend fishermen, venturing out in search of prey and returning with a cooler full of spot and croaker, pompano and sea bass — and a haughty pride on their sunburnt faces as they gutted their catch. If they came back without fish, they boasted instead about their patience — how they sat for hours with their lines in the water, waiting for that first nibble. How they bided their time munching on tins of sardines and cans of Vienna sausages, which my father pronounced “VY-eeen-ah.” Or how Dad had tested Will’s dexterity at tying a half-hitch or his memory of radio code letters — “Alpha! Bravo! Charlie! Delta!” — skills my brother had learned at a boating class the two of them had taken together.

I had not been invited to take that class, perhaps because they knew I would have had no interest in it anyway. I was the one who liked to stay home with a book — with “my nose stuck in a book,” as my dad said. The fish I liked best were the ones that decorated the

sunroom of our beach house: the colorful, comical fish portraits that hung on the wall and the white line drawings of fish handpainted on the blue fabric that covered the table at the center of the room. The fabric had been imported from Peru, I was told, and my mother wouldn't let me set my Coke down on it. But I didn't mind. I felt privileged to read in a room decorated with such a treasure, and would have preferred to be sitting there on the morning Dad picked up the boat instead of swiveling in circles on that vinyl chair.

I'm not certain about the title of the book I was reading that weekend, but I believe it was something alliterative: *Tales of Terror* perhaps or *Stories of Suspense*. I do, however, remember vividly its black cover, rimmed with an orange border and decorated with a headless horseman, rising astride his angry steed and brandishing a ghoulish jack-o-lantern high above his head. It was a collection of classic horror stories: Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Poe's "Black Cat" and "Tell-Tale Heart," James' "Turn of the Screw" and five or six others. I had smuggled it into my pocket that morning for the boat ride, though I doubted I'd have much chance to read while on board.

"And I see that you got your man to fix this up for me too," said my father, examining a wooden cupholder tucked into a narrow space near the throttle. Dad had sketched out the design for this custom addition himself and offered forty dollars to have it built, bragging on his own ingenuity and eager for a place to put his beer.

"Tough story there," said the salesman, shaking his head. He stuck his hands into the pockets of the yellow rainslicker he often wore in the off-season, fair weather or foul. His name was Mitch and he'd sold dad several boats. "Guess I oughta tell you," he said, lowering his voice. "The fella that made it lost a couple of fingers putting that piece in." His whispers had, of course, drawn Will and me closer, and we'd heard everything he said.

My father winced. “Lost his fingers?” he repeated, his brow furrowed. He had unconsciously clenched his own fingers into tight balls and now shook them in empathy.

“Ouch,” said Will, without exclamation. “How’d *that* happen?”

“Well, it was tight work in that little space,” said Mitch. “The saw just slipped. Hazard of the job, you know?” He shrugged, sheepishly. “Tough break, though.”

My father nodded grimly in response, but neither man said anything more. The boat swayed slowly under the rise and fall of the waves. The breeze gusted once or twice. A chill settled on my neck, then crept down the back of my shirt.

“So,” Mitch said, finally breaking the silence, “you boys ready to take her out on the water now?” Smiling broadly, he reached over to tousle my hair, then moved to the stern to untie one of the lines while my brother jumped up to unwrap the one at the bow. Soon, my father steered through the marina’s “no wake” zone, standing tall as he navigated the markers toward the waterway.

“Red! Right!” he called out loudly to my brother, the first part of their chant about how to navigate the channel’s markers.

From the bow, Will called back, “Returning from sea!” He sat in the front of the boat, straddling one of the rails along the bow, his feet hanging over the edge.

“So when we’re leaving port?” my dad asked.

“We keep the red markers on the *left* side!” Will replied with enthusiasm.

Once their exchange was done, Mitch began talking again about how this was the best boat my father had bought yet. “That Evinrude’s a real powerhouse on a vehicle this size,” he said. “And those saltwater wells... you just don’t see those on every model these days.”

I only heard snatches of their talk. My own attention was elsewhere — focused intently on that small piece of teak mounted near my father's hip.

My eyes roamed each tier of the small cupholder. I studied the graceful curves where the carpenter had smoothed out the angles that would cradle the beer can. I examined the anchor design he had carved into one of the supports, careful but not elegant, precise but simple, almost childlike.

Where was the small gash that would show me how the saw had slipped? Was there still some speck of blood lingering along one of those shallow grooves or seeped deep into the pores of the teak? I imagined that there was but that it was invisible to the eye. Not only did I believe it was there, but I imagined that it had been, in some way, *purposefully* hiding — constant in its blame and fierce in its bitterness, each drop a curse on the cupholder and on that sleek new sea craft and, yes, on us too.

Admittedly, the Poe may have gotten to me. I won't deny that I took some giddy, gruesome pleasure in the idea of the accident. Even now it's easy to picture my fingers tracing the edges of the book I'd smuggled aboard as my mind reeled with images of dismembered body parts haunting their places of loss. Scenes gothic in tone and thick with gore filled my head. A severed finger inching along a coil of rope in the bow of the boat. Or better yet, a severed *hand*. And not inching but *clambering* — emerging from the water's depths and clambering up the anchor's line. It boarded the boat and twisted a stray piece of rope into a noose. It stalked along the topsides of the vessel, lugging the noose behind, seeking one of us to pull down to a watery grave, earning some dark, final vengeance....

But such pleasures were short-lived. Even as the story took shape in my head, I felt guilty for how I'd toyed with the stranger's loss. Though the lushly golden teak would age to a mottled, silvery gray over the years my father owned the boat, that graying never fully

bleached the blood I found in the pores of the wood that day — and I've never forgiven my imagination for having put it there in the first place.

And oh, how I had let my imagination reel. It wasn't just the Poe and the fantasy of that stalking hand. All at once, I pictured Thing from *The Addams Family*, emerging from his black box, and the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* I'd sneaked out of my bed late one night to watch, with a crazed gambler cutting off people's pinkies. I thought about my dad watching his own favorite shows — *Mannix* and *Columbo* — and about how much I enjoyed the moment when the detectives fingered the killer, even when I couldn't follow the plot. I couldn't follow the idea either when I first heard an older friend of my brother's talking about *fingerin* a girl. It would take days of pleading for Will to tell me what his friend had meant, and Will was also the one who taught me, proudly, how to give someone the finger — a hand gesture that appalled my mother when I showed her what I had learned.

Mom had scolded me at the time, and perhaps it was that scolding that led me to another memory, of a boy in my first grade class so many years before. Blake was his name, and his father had worked construction, helped build houses — a carpenter himself, which makes another connection to that day on the boat, and to the cost of the cupholder. One weekend, Blake's father had crushed both his legs in a car accident — *pulverized* them, that was the word we used — and found himself unable to work. There were problems with insurance, as I remember it, and the class took up a small collection for the family — nickels and dimes, some token of help.

Blake and I were not close friends — we just happened to share the same teacher — and not knowing what to say to him about the accident, I had said nothing. But I heard others talking. The accident had been the father's own fault. There had been liquor on his breath. The mother had moved out, someone said, had taken the boy with her. The family had run

out of money. They were *destitute*, a word I didn't comprehend, and as soon as the paperwork went through, the boy would be switched to free lunches, a phrase whose connotations I did understand. I don't know now how much of that talk was true, but for several days the boy did stop eating lunch when we went to the cafeteria, and I remember clearly the moment that he came up to me and asked if he could have some turkey I had left uneaten on my tray.

As the boat bounced through the waves, I looked down at my hand, bending my index and middle fingers at the knuckle, and then my middle finger and ring finger, to imagine what the stubs on the carpenter's hand looked like now. I wondered how much of the cupholder he'd finished building when the accident happened, and whether he'd had to get someone else to complete the job. I wondered if he could still be a carpenter without his fingers, and I wondered if my dad would think about the other man's loss each time he slipped his own hand around a cold can of Bud.

Along the waterway, the whitecaps had begun to crest higher, colliding one into the other, crashing more solidly against the hull. Despite the choppiness, my father kept us speeding along faster and faster — perhaps testing out that powerhouse of an engine Mitch had bragged about — and the spray had become so strong that my brother scampered back behind the windshield. The three of them huddled around the steering wheel, still talking, but the wind was so loud that I couldn't hear them from where I sat, only a few feet away.

“Not the best day...,” said Mitch, loudly, the end of his sentence trailing off in the roar of the wind, and my father nodded. Dad's response was mostly cut off too, except for the word *turn*. As he said it, he twisted the wheel to the left, arcing the boat in a half-circle, tilting us all into a forty-five-degree angle, not slowing down. My side of the boat dipped

toward the waves, and I resisted an urge to hold my fingers down in the cold water, now close enough to touch — some penance for the maimed carpenter's loss.

In the middle of the turn, the engine sputtered once, and then again as my father straightened our path, before catching hold once more. We all looked back toward the Evinrude at the rear of the boat, and my father eased the throttle back.

“May just be the engine breaking itself in,” said Mitch. Now that the boat had slowed, I was able to hear him more clearly again. “Or something about that turn. Not to worry. If it keeps happenin’, we’ll pull it into the shop and check it out.” My father nodded again, and pushed the throttle forward once more.

But something about the sound of the engine had changed, some shift in evenness, some dull struggle hidden beneath its growl. Was I the only one who could hear it? And had no one else noticed that oily smell? I started to say something, but as I did, the engine sputtered again, more loudly, and then simply quit. The boat slowed abruptly, then drifted forward on its own inertia. The roar of the engine gone, all we could hear now was the sound of the waves slapping irregularly against the hull.

“Just a second, Mr. Peterson,” Mitch said to my father and then hurried past me, toward the engine. “Probably just a loose connection somewhere, or something tangled up in the propeller. Press the button on the dashboard and let’s tilt that motor out of the water.” As the electric tilt grinded the outboard up, Mitch leaned out over the outboard’s top shell, reaching down to spin the dripping propeller, which turned easily enough. Stepping back, he pulled the shell off the top of the outboard to inspect the connections within. The engine was too hot to touch, but Mitch darted from one side to the other, muttering words like *mounting flange* and *throttle shutter*, *reed valve* and *carburetor bowl*. “Nothing wrong that I can see,” he said finally, replacing the Evinrude’s cover and turning his attention to the gas tank.

“Surely the boys back at the marina filled it up, but it’s worth a look.” After he confirmed that the tanks were full, he checked the clamps on the fuel hose, tested for secure connections, shimmied his fingers along the rubber tubing.

“Well, there’s the problem,” he said, turning to me. I hadn’t realized how closely I was watching him, hovering over his shoulder. “Looks like the fuel strainer may have a puncture, ’cause there’s something got stuck in the hose, clogging it up.” And lifting it up so we could all see, he pressed tight a section about three inches long, which bulged fiercely against the sides of the tube.

In the peripheries of my vision, I saw my father and brother on either side of me, leaning in to stare at the clogged fuel line.

“That shouldn’t be too hard to fix,” I heard my father say, just behind my left shoulder.

“No, not at all,” said Mitch, still kneeling by the engine. He hadn’t turned to face my father but had kept his gaze firmly on me. “Here, son, you look eager to help,” he said and motioned for me to settle down beside him. “I’ll let you do the honors.”

“I can do it,” said Will, trying to muscle past me, but my father stopped him.

“Your brother’s already got this,” Dad told him, as Mitch placed the clogged tube in my palms. My hands were limp, but even without pressing my fingers around it, I could feel the presence of the thing stuck inside.

“But—” said my brother, and I wanted to protest too, wanted to give him the tube.

“Just go up front and let him handle it,” said my father again, sternly.

“We’ve got it, tiger,” Mitch said with a smile. “You man the helm, how ’bout it?” As my brother slunk away, Mitch showed me how to wriggle it out. “Just grab a-holt of the line here,” he said, cupping his hands around mine and closing my grasp tight against the tube,

“and keep pressing that hunk of trash along its way. And while you do that, I’ll unhook the line from the tank, and together we can push it right out — whatever it is.”

But I didn’t need to push it out to discover what it was. I already knew.

Here, of course, was the black cat mewing from behind the wall, here the tell-tale heart throbbing beneath the floorboards. I thought I had moved past any prurient fascination with the story. Yet I felt as helpless as one of Poe’s characters to decline the role being forced upon me. Inch by inch, my fingers nudged the blockage down the line.

My brother had moved back to the helm and pushed the controls to lower the outboard back into place. When the propeller had dipped back into the water, he told us he was going to try to raise someone on the CB radio — “just in case what y’all are doing doesn’t work.”

“Fine, fine,” my father said, and I heard Will talking into the receiver.

“Breaker, breaker,” he said, and after earning no response, he switched the channel and tried again: “Breaker, breaker.”

Mitch kept talking to my father. “I knew it couldn’t be anything mechanical. Not with as fine an engine as we’ve got here.”

“It’s a fine boat,” Dad replied, as he looked over my shoulder. “I’m not worried, Mitch. Not worried at all.”

“Alpha! Bravo! Charlie! Delta!” my brother called into the static of the radio. “Echo! Foxtrot! Golf! Hotel!” No one seemed to hear him, not even Mitch or my father, who hadn’t moved from his watch over what I was doing. Even though he didn’t know it, a part of me was being brave for him, and I kept pressing the tube, urging the thing along its way. I could feel its mix of sponginess and firmness. It was solidly in place but so soft that my own fingers could easily indent its edges through the rubber tubing. Soon it would be out.

I couldn't bear to think about what would happen then, how it would look or feel. Instead, I thought of Blake, the boy from my first grade class, the one in the cafeteria — his pleading, bitter eyes and the glimpses of hunger that I didn't understand. I was unaccustomed to this sense of need, naïve and embarrassed to be in its presence. His eyes were unwavering, and I felt our classmates watching me as well.

"I don't think it's allowed," I had whispered, nodding toward the teacher, willing her to come over. "I don't think she'd want us to." When I moved the tray of turkey away from him, pulled it closer to me, the boy's eyes lost their pleading, and only a raw bitterness remained.

The carpenter who'd severed his fingers — he had a son too, I felt certain. And I knew that it wasn't just a finger that was lodged up in that fuel line but some chunk of that same stark bitterness I'd seen on my classmate's face those years before. It wasn't the father's bitterness. He knew the hazards of the job. It was the son's. The son who didn't have a sunroom like mine to sit in, a place to read and look out over the ocean. The son who couldn't ride around in a boat like ours, but just had to watch them landlocked on trailers in the backyard, the boats standing there in the grass just long enough for his father to install a few wedges of teak trim or a fancy cupholder. And maybe the boy asked some days to play catch and the father said he didn't have time. "Gotta keep working," he said. "Bills to be paid." There was disappointment on both sides, and a determination not to show it. And then, one day, a slip of the saw.

"Almost there," said Mitch. "You've almost got it."

It must have been the boy who finished the cupholder after the accident. That was why the anchor looked so childlike. The father with the bandaged hands had asked him to finish it, and he had. "The bills have to be paid," the son had reminded himself as he

pencilled an anchor onto the side of the cupholder and dug the knife into the teak. Then, the night that the project was finished, the night before the trailer would be hauled back to the marina, the son had taken one of his father's fingers — the fingers that the father had brought home from the hospital in a Mason Jar since they couldn't be reattached, not wanting to part with them entirely, not yet — and sneaked out into the backyard and climbed up the boat's trailer and over the hull, and unhooked the fuel line and stuffed it into the fuel hose, pushing it as far as he could up the tubing so that we would have to work to get it out again, so that *I* would have to work to get it out. It was a reminder of what we'd cost his father, and his family, and as I reached the end of the tubing, just one push away from seeing the pallid stub of finger emerge, I knew that the punishment was deserved.

“Yep, just as I thought,” said Mitch, reaching down to pull it free. “A piece of seaweed that got sucked up into the lines.” And he held up the flopping chunk of kelp for all of us to see.

* * *

About halfway through writing this, I phoned my dad to see how much he remembered about what happened, and as soon as I mentioned the cupholder, he piped up about the accident. Except that my father remembered that the man had lost one finger, not two. And, as we talked more, it turned out that he was remembering a different boat entirely: a 14-foot McKee Craft, light blue, a boat that he had bought for my brother and me to use, a more manageable size for young boys. Whichever boat it was, dad didn't remember the clogged fuel hose, and when I called my brother, Will didn't even remember the incident at all.

Which boat was it? How many fingers did the carpenter lose? And is he still a carpenter today? How did the details of an accident that forever changed a man's life simply become vague and even forgettable?

As I sit here now, I stop tapping my fingers against the keyboard, and hold my hand up, bending down the fingers of my right hand — first the index and middle, then my middle and ring. To be honest, this is the first time I've done this. I didn't really look at my fingers this way back on the boat ride all those years ago — at least I don't think so. I didn't really think about the boy in the cafeteria, who wasn't actually the son of a construction worker, though some version of that story really did happen. Also, my brother is younger, not older, and I was the one who took a motor boating safety class with my dad while he stayed home and watched TV. Though he's never necessarily been the favorite child, it often strikes me that I've been jealous of him in other ways. Sometimes, even without the faults of memory, I don't know where the truth is.

But I believe it has to be somewhere, and if nothing else, there are some small things I know for sure, like the fact that I don't like fishing and never have, that my father has always had a boat of one kind or another and that he does pronounce Vienna "VY-eeen-ah." He's actually considering buying a new boat these days — a cabin cruiser this time.

There is indeed a table in our sunroom covered in expensive blue fabric, hand-decorated with white fish and imported from some South American country, though I can't remember which one. There are plush white chairs, a sisal rug and a ceiling fan in there too — elements that give the room a certain idleness, though I seem to be the only one in my family who can't quite relax there. Whenever I read a book, I read it in another room.

And that teacher in first grade? Even a quarter-century later, I can still remember the look of confusion and disappointment on her face when she finally came over to the table

and discovered what had happened. I can still see her shaking her finger in my face and hear her telling me, “If you’re not going to eat the turkey, why not let *him*? Why *not* let him?”

The Blanketing Snow
(A Fairy Tale Revisited)

After midnight, the snow began to fall more heavily—puffs of white wonder, glistening in the bright, night sky.

Lying awake in the bed beside him, she couldn't see the snow, but she could imagine it clinging fast to the roof, burrowing into the shingles' cracks, weighing down the tender branches of the sapling just off the front steps, smothering the yard. The weatherman on the news had promised six to nine inches by morning, nine to twelve by early afternoon, and the drifts, she knew, would be even deeper in the woods surrounding the house. No, she couldn't see the snow, but from the cold air straining through the caulking around the windowsills, she felt certain it was falling faster and that the wind had grown more brisk. Their home was no longer tight.

“This means we can get new windows soon,” he whispered, as if reading her mind. She wasn’t certain whether to be comforted or not by the fact that he too was still awake.

The news had talked as well about the mounting layoffs, the shrinking economy. Construction had already slowed down; carpenters were hardly in high demand. And she knew he was sometimes careless, never the best worker on the site. Who knew how long it would be before he was hired on again?

The cold air blew accusingly around the windowsill by the bed. He had patched it up, but new windows were needed. Sills and sashes didn’t come cheap. And turning up the heat didn’t help; the old boiler was far from efficient and they couldn’t afford to raise the temperature. Putting food on the table came first. The only way to afford the sashes and sills and higher energy bills was to put less food on the table, and there was barely enough bread to go around now.

Tomorrow would be a busy day. At seven, they planned to pull back the bedcovers in the next room, pile them into some crumpled semblance of anguish and loss. Her husband would rush into the snow while she called the neighbors, the nearest of them a mile down the road. The house would soon be filled with people from this remote corner of the county, while police led others in a search of the woods. And what would she say when it was over? *They must have seen the snow from their window, run out to play in it. That’s why they were dressed only in pajamas, wasn’t it? No, the door wouldn’t lock. The key had broken off in it last week. No one ever comes out here. We didn’t see any rush to fix it. We never heard them leave.*

She remembered watching her husband breaking the key in the door when the forecast called for snow. He’d used pliers to arrange the alibi, control where the key broke so

that he could fix it himself later. No use buying new parts. *Every penny counts*, he'd told her. He'd assumed as well that the neighbors would chip in for the funerals.

The wind stalked once more around the fissured sill, searching out her hair and her neck, crowding against the blanket she was suddenly embarrassed to have wrapped around her.

Had it been only an hour since they'd awakened the twins to see the blizzard? Sleepy eyes had grown wide at the sight of it. Outside after dark? Hide-and-seek in the snow? A special night! Their faces were aglow with wonder.

And they were still out there now, hiding behind some fallen tree or huddled in some shallow ditch amongst a flurry of silly giggles as the air thickened with falling flakes and the snow overwhelmed the land. No breadcrusts to cover here, only her husband's purposeful, hurrying strides and her own only faintly faltering footprints. But what frigid blasts could muffle the radiant mirth of her children calling after her, perhaps still merrily calling into the emptiness: "We're ready! Come find us! Come find us now!"

Murder on the Orient Express

Caroline leaned weakly on Edward's arm as they were herded along endless cement walkways and down another flight of stairs. Edward, standing tall to offer better support, had twice glimpsed the sparkling blue and gold train, but he worried that it was taking so long to reach it. After the champagne kir and the delightful bottle of Chateau de Gaudou on the Pullman carriage and the mysterious blush which they had been given in the reception area in Folkestone, the SeaCat's turbulent crossing had been less than acceptable. Caroline had seemed to turn an even whiter shade of pale when the little English girl across the aisle had thrown up into a paper cup, and with the woman behind them, another American, quietly chanting that she was going to be sick, going to be sick, in perfect time with the rise and fall of the ship, Edward had himself felt ill — both nauseous and annoyed.

The next turn in the hallway brought them to the end of the labyrinth and the beginning of two short lines. Edward chose the one on the right because at the rear of the left one stood the Boxer. At least that was how Edward had thought of him with his crew cut and his squat bulky build and his arrogant cockney accent. They had heard him earlier at Victoria Station, talking brashly to the woman with him, a blond frizzy-haired piece. Edward had heard the word “kissy-face” and the two of them had puckered their lips at each other in such a way that he was certain that her name was Felicia or Patsy or Krissy with a K. And he was certain now, looking at the man again, that the Boxer would not be a boxer at all but just a boxer’s sparring partner or perhaps merely an actor playing one, an extra who had a cartoon name like Brutus and only got to stand in the back and frown. They were at the head of the line then. The customs official gave a perfunctory glance at the passports — a courtesy which Edward attributed to the woman’s sympathy for everyone’s pallor — and they found themselves on the platform at last.

“Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits,” said Edward, stopping to read the shining gold letters in a fine French accent. “Des Grands Express Européens.” The sun was beginning to set over Boulogne and in the twilight, the train appeared exceptionally regal. Its gleaming white roof seemed recently polished and its deep blue sides shone even more brightly up close than in his glimpses before. White-gloved porters stood attentive near the ends of each car, ready to assist with a small bag or a lady’s boarding, and a bright red carpet stretched before them along the length of the platform. Edward pictured himself and Caroline as characters in a Fitzgerald novel — but only in the happier scenes — or perhaps a story by James. This was much better, he thought and said as much aloud.

“Beautiful,” echoed Caroline, and Edward looked down to find her face still pale beneath her short blond hair, her eyes still closed. She hugged herself closer to him and

scrunched up her tiny nose. “Can we find our cabin? I’d like to wash up.” She seemed so pitiful that he felt a softness fall over him and a desire to comfort her. He began immediately to move along the walkway.

Though they were only going to Paris, he was pleased they had been given a cabin instead of a table in the dining car — the usual custom waived due to the availability of rooms — but as he followed the letters hung on temporary cardboard banners from the windows of each car, he wondered why they hadn’t used the four-digit numbers or the names which were already there, lettered in gold along the panels. He would much rather have been searching for “Carrozza-Letti” or even “3555” than looking for the prosaic “B.” His only other thought as he walked his new wife along the platform was his hope that she would open her eyes: the red carpet seemed to pass so swiftly beneath their feet.

* * *

They had been married for less than a week and he had swept her a world away from the Church of the Good Shepherd and the reception at the Cardinal Club on what he hoped would be the trip of a lifetime. This was their first excursion to Europe together and he made sure their stay in London was an elegant one. They had taken a suite at the Berkshire and shopped at Marks and Spencer down the street and strolled through Harrod’s. They had eaten in the cozy intimacy of Veronica’s and, at the suggestion of the concierge, had taken in *Don’t Dress for Dinner* at the Duchess, though Edward would personally have preferred the revival of *An Inspector Calls*. They had been pressed for time before the show and had stopped at The American Grille — their only lapse from more local cuisine — because it was quick and Caroline had felt a sudden taste for a cheeseburger. Edward regretted eating his with his hands when Caroline told him that an English couple two tables away, eating theirs with fork and knife, had snickered quietly at them. Except for that and the fact that they had

missed the exhibition of royal wedding gowns at Kensington Palace by fifteen minutes, Edward had taken their time in London as a personal success.

But today was another matter: the centerpiece of their honeymoon, the highpoint of their trip. So far, it had gone only half and half, the channel crossing all but completely erasing the excitement of the Pullman earlier in the afternoon.

In the cabin, Edward hung up their evening clothes and settled onto the seat with its brocade of light green and black while Caroline opened the washbasin cabinet to refresh herself. He pulled out their copy of *Murder on the Orient Express* — not the first printing, which a bookseller friend had tried in vain to find, but a small 1955 Crime Club edition still well-suited to their purpose; he didn't want to forget to take it to dinner or to have the cabin steward sign it. A unique souvenir, he thought, and Caroline had been engrossed in reading it on the plane over. He placed it on the seat beside him. A packet of stationery and a trio of postcards lay on the mahogany table before him and he flipped through them while he waited.

“Do you wish that we were going all the way to Venice?” he asked, looking over a postcard of Canaletto's *Regatta on the Grand Canal*.

“We've never been to Paris together.”

“But if we could come back to Paris?” He was thinking of midnight in the bar car, breakfast in their cabin, the brochure of the Hotel Cipriani that the two of them had admired. “We could leave the curtains open when we went to bed tonight and gaze out at the Alps.”

She turned and smiled, a little of the rosiness returning to her cheeks, a little of the sprite back in her blue eyes. “We would be sleeping on bunk beds,” she said and came over to hug him. “And there's no shower. I couldn't leave the cabin without a shower.”

“Who says we would need to leave the cabin?” He smiled and winked. He was thinking of her trousseau and each of the evenings in London, pleasantly surprised by a side of her that he had never seen. He would have taken her again right there except for the steward just outside the door and the fact that someone else would be coming into the cabin in Paris. He worried that they would know.

* * *

The train bucked from side to side as they made their way down the hallways toward the bar car. The continental train was speeding along much faster than the British train and Edward was afraid that the movement would upset Caroline’s system again. She held her hands up as she walked, bracing herself between the window and the wall, and when they reached the passways between cars, he stepped ahead to open the doors while she held on to the siderail.

He moved up again when they reached the bar car and found himself looking at Brutus, the Boxer, through the small window, the vulgar man sitting with his leg stretched out in front of the door. Edward was so unnerved by the obstruction that he found himself fumbling to turn the handle properly.

Brutus opened it for him. “Ey, mate,” he laughed. “Havin’ trouble with the door?” Felicia, sitting beside him, laughed as well and Edward felt himself blushing and unable to speak as he let Caroline step through before him. *Boxer*, he thought. *Extra*. The man had carried the word “door” out to what seemed like a full three syllables and didn’t even pull his feet in when they walked past. As Edward stepped over the ill-mannered legs, he felt a pat on his back and heard the cockney whisper: “Don’ worry, friend. Just havin’ a bit o’ fun.”

Edward’s back stiffened but he didn’t comment. Instead, he continued to the bar, ordering a martini for himself and a small Coca-cola for his wife. Turning, he saw that

another couple had joined Brutus and Felicia, and the party now seemed to take up the whole end of the car. Brutus had lit a cigar and was puffing big billows of smoke into the air, gesturing broadly, and bellowing like a hyena. Felicia leaned suggestively against his shoulder, breathing in his fumes and echoing his laugh. Edward thought for a moment how his position had been reversed; in novels, one always read about the genteel Englishman and the bellicose American. And yet, there they were.

The four of them crossed paths again an hour later. Felicia and the Boxer were seated across the aisle from Edward and Caroline at dinner — the early seating for those passengers disembarking in Paris — and Edward wished once more that they were continuing to Venice so that some part of the journey might take place without the Boxer's incivility.

Edward had expected the evening to be the pinnacle of excellence, both in terms of the food and the atmosphere, and he and Caroline had changed for the meal: Edward into the tuxedo he had worn at their wedding while Caroline wore a lavender evening dress which she had chosen just for the occasion and a string of pearls which Edward had given her at their rehearsal dinner. She also carried a small black purse to hold the novel which they hoped the chef would sign; Edward, afraid that bringing the book alone might be improper, had preferred they be discreet.

Despite the recommendation of black tie for dinner, few of their fellow diners had gone to as much trouble as they had. The East Asian woman two tables down appeared elegant enough but her husband only dressed to the extent of a dark jacket and taupe pants, and a quartet of businessmen diagonal to them huddled in the charcoal suits they had worn throughout the afternoon. The Shrimptons, whom they had met on the Pullman that afternoon, were dressed in church attire further down the car; he worked with the Bank of England and it was their twenty-fifth anniversary, though they hardly seemed to Edward that

much older. Felicia and Brutus were still wearing their casual clothes. The Boxer's khaki pants were wrinkled and the tie he had added was a smidgen too wide. Felicia's outfit was so tight and red that Edward thought it just short of tawdry, tolerable for the afternoon but entirely out of place as evening wear. The two of them had been seated at a table for four and were soon met by the couple who had joined them in the bar — a rough-looking pair as well. The four of them had continued to smoke and carry on.

Edward tried his best to ignore them and was pleased that Caroline as well pretended to be unfazed by it all. Her color had come back and she had told Edward that she felt well enough to share another bottle of wine. He saw the steward — a large Italian — at the next table and glanced over the menu to help with his decision.

Neither of them would touch the smoked eel appetizer but the steamed lobster and leeks with foie gras sounded delicious, and the same was true of the entrée: a fillet of lamb in spiced wine and red currants, with sautéed potatoes and vegetables. The usual cheese would follow the meal and then a chestnut pancake and mignardises for dessert. The wine steward was stepping over to take their selection just as Edward turned to peruse the *cartes de vins*.

“And then this namby-pamby-lookin' Yank gent comes strollin' along the way they do,” came the cockney voice quietly from the table across the aisle, and Edward felt certain that the Boxer was talking about him. He closed his menu even as the steward was approaching. “*Buona sera, signora, signor.*”

Over the next few minutes, Edward realized that his ears had somehow managed to hear the empty part of both conversations. His wife, upholding his opinion of her as a model of discernment, took it upon herself to ask the steward for his recommendation. But though he heard her tell him that she didn't like anything too dry, he did not hear the name of the wine suggested. And though he heard the Boxer speaking of wanting to “mash” the namby-

pamby “right there” and his companion’s question as to why he didn’t, Edward could discern no further evidence that he was the one being discussed. There had been a “laughing,” he knew, and “words passed” and the “namby-pamby” hadn’t stood his ground, but by the time they seemed to be moving to the crux of the story, he found himself listening to his wife as she gave her assent. “*Grazie, signora,*” said the wine steward and passed between Edward and the party across the aisle.

“And all this happened right there on the street?”

“Right there, not a stone’s throw from the Bow Bells, mark my words.”

So they had not been talking about him, thought Edward, relieved, and added under his breath that Brutus the Boxer looked like one who might have thrown stones.

“What?” asked his wife.

“Oh, nothing,” said Edward. “Just talking to myself.” He adjusted the napkin in his lap.

The eel was brought then with a small dish of caviar, and the wine arrived almost immediately after, though the Italian broke the seal and removed the cork without Edward’s being able to see the label. He felt certain that he would be given the opportunity to examine the bottle and taste it before it was served, but the man poured the wine into Caroline’s glass instead. Flustered, Edward glanced quickly around at the other tables. The Asians were still examining the menu and the businessmen were engrossed in conversation, but he could almost feel the Boxer’s eyes cutting his way. He pretended to be looking at the lacquered ebony wall panels where painted yellow pelicans dove for fish. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Caroline taste the wine and nod her assent.

It was a Bordeaux he saw, peeking under the linen once the bottle had been left in its cooler: Sauternes. He had always thought of it as a dessert wine and wondered at the waiter’s

choice as he touched the glass to his lips. It looked gold and thick like olive oil; it tasted like honey.

“Is it all right?” Across the table, his wife wrinkled her forehead.

“Excellent,” he nodded, scanning the wine list again, guilty for not having paid the proper attention. He would undoubtedly have chosen the '91 Pouilly-Fuissé, he thought, closing the menu, and cringed when he saw a bottle of it standing at the Boxer's elbow, which rested on the table as if it belonged.

The fish course appeared next, the red and white lobster centered in a creamy yellow sauce, with the leeks laid in a tic-tac-toe pattern across it and the pâté placed delicately to the side. He ordered a bottle of Pellegrino water from the waiter and sipped the honey again, watching the Boxer point his cigar at his dinner companion and imbibe his own wine with obvious pleasure. The waiter had served the four of them their lobster and Brutus continued to rail on as he ate. Edward could see the flesh of the lobster as the man chewed and talked, and as the meal wore on into the next course, Edward watched the lamb and the potatoes turn into a mash between his teeth. At one point, the Boxer's mouth was so full as he spoke that a chunk of lamb flew from his mouth and landed on the table. “Whoops,” he said, bringing his hand up in a puerile gesture of covering his mouth. Behind it, his lips were stretched into a schoolboy's grin. Felicia popped his arm lightly with her fist.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Caroline. “You've hardly said a word all dinner, and you've barely touched your food.”

Edward turned back to look at his wife and in a glance detected that she was as crestfallen as he was. Her eyes, fairly shining with disappointment, seemed to plead with him for something that he feared he couldn't provide. “I had just wanted this evening to be perfect,” he said and knew that there was nothing to be gained by ordering another bottle of

wine this late in the meal — that there were no other tables to move to and no possibility of asking Brutus to cease his ill manners.

Caroline reached across and took his hand. “Everything’s fine.” Her touch was warm but he could hear her lack of conviction, and he wished again that they were continuing to Venice. Those fortunate passengers were already moving through the first dining car on their way to the second seating. They were all dressed in crisp tuxedos and evening gowns, and two Scotsmen had worn dinner jackets over bright formal kilts. Edward was certain that the dinner for the people continuing to Italy would be different and that the extra time aboard the train would give the journey time to redeem itself. But it was too late now to change their plans; someone had already claimed their cabin for the balance of the journey, and Edward and Caroline had months before made their own reservations at the Ambassador in Paris.

“I had just planned,” he sighed again, “on everything being so perfect.”

The chestnut pancake arrived then: a crepe-thin puff folded up like a flowerbud and drizzled with a light orange syrup. As the dessert was served, the chef entered the car in his dress whites and moved from table to table greeting the guests. Edward lacked the enthusiasm to ask his wife for the book but she was already handing it across.

“*Le diner, c’est merveilleux,*” Edward told the chef with a good show of sincerity. He handed the book to him. “*Votre signature, s’il vous plaît. Pour souvenir.*”

The man glanced at the title and smiled, his tall white hat bobbing with his nod.

Pour souvenir. Le chef de cuisine, Ch. Bodiguel, Edward read after it was handed back and the chef had moved to the next table. He glanced over the other names from the afternoon: Alan, their waiter on the Pullman, who said he traveled to the States once a year for the Kentucky Derby; the Shrimptons, who had offered *Best Wishes from 25 Years Ahead* and signed their names *David and Rosemary*.

He turned to the title page then, because he had heard Brutus call out “What’s ’at?” and wanted to wait for him to ask a second time. Even without looking, he could see in his mind the Boxer pointing his fork at the book, a grotesque image of smacking lips and of teeth dripping with the pancake’s orange syrup. As he reread the title a fourth and then a fifth time, he entertained the thought that there *would* be a murder and Brutus the victim. *When he asks me again, I’ll tell him that we call it a book, he thought and he overenunciated the word book in his mind. And then if he’s insolent enough to ask the name, I’ll pass it across to Caroline without showing it and tell him it’s The Origin of Species and that he should be familiar with it.* Edward was well into the copyright page when he thought that the sarcasm might be too subtle and then he realized that the dining car had gone quiet and slowly became aware that the Boxer had begun to choke.

Suddenly everyone was standing, either moving toward the flailing man or stepping back in horror. Felicia was screaming and jumping up and down, her face twisted in shock, her arms flailing helplessly as her body shook in fear. The Boxer’s arms were spinning as well, striking the glasses from the table, thrashing at the people around him, on his right hand a single finger sticking out like it was pointing at something in the air.

“Heimlich maneuver,” shouted Edward. “A doctor, a doctor.” The wine steward had already managed to wrap his arms around the Boxer, and he lifted the bulky man up in the air, jarring his body, pulling and pulling against his chest until finally, a lump of pancake flung itself forth from his mouth. But Edward could see from the Boxer’s color and his puffy face that help had come too late.

* * *

Soon, they were back in their cabin. Caroline sat by the window, staring out at the lights which passed so slowly in the distance. Edward had opened the cabinet again and was

washing his hands in the small porcelain basin. In the mirror, he caught sight of himself and noticed that his hair was going prematurely gray.

Brutus was dead, and Edward, despite all of his attempts at rational thinking, had been unable to dismiss his sense of responsibility for the death. He could see it no other way, given the malice he had felt and the timing. The dead man had been choked while trying to wash down his pancake with the wine Edward had envied so greatly — choked while trying to ask a question which Edward had pretended not to hear — and Edward felt sure that the Boxer's pointing finger had been aiming for him. The Boxer's real name, it turned out, was Henry Doppler and Felicia's name was Margaret and they had just been married. She had still been in hysterics when Edward and Caroline left the car and no one had been able to learn any more than that.

Edward could not help but feel guilty, and neither could he escape the thought, obviously secondary, that he had not only killed a man but, in doing so, had ruined his and Caroline's special evening completely. His selfishness in thinking this sent him into an even deeper state of guilt and he feared, for a moment, that he would be unable to find his way out. But they would be in Paris soon, he thought — pulling into the Gare de L'Est, taking the cab to the Opera Quarter, walking under the chandeliers of the Hotel Ambassador. He felt a little strengthened by these images and hopeful that the darkness of the evening would disappear against the glitter of the city.

“Do you think he was poisoned?” asked Caroline, and he realized the question carried the first words she had spoken since they returned to their room.

He wiped his hands and turned to look at her. Even from that distance, he could see the strange twinkle in her eye.

“I don’t know why,” she went on. “I guess it was his looks, the shape of his head, and the way he acted, and my reading that book on the plane — but I had a notion from the first moment I saw him that he was a British gangster and that the woman with him was his moll. I thought that the other couple in the bar car were a part of his gang or the other man the leader of a friendly gang and that they were planning something together. And when he began to choke and point that finger like a gun, I was certain that it was a double-cross and that the other man had poisoned his food while he asked you about the book. Or maybe the chef was really with British Intelligence and had laced the dessert with arsenic before it ever came out. After all, didn’t you think it tasted more like almonds than chestnuts?”

She stood up then and rushed quickly to hug him.

“Oh, darling, I’m sorry he’s dead, but wouldn’t it have been romantic if we *had* gone on to Venice and the murder had happened in the Alps and the train had been stuck in the snow and the murderer still on board. And you could have solved it! Or we could have solved it together! Or we could have just stayed in our cabin until they interrogated us, caught up helplessly in the drama of it all.”

She looked up at him then, and he saw a thrill in her features that he had never seen before. She seemed transported by what had happened.

“Can you believe it?” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. “I even made names for them. He was called Guido and she was Delores.”

It was at that moment that Edward felt released from the crime and forgiven of his guilt and, what was greater, believed himself a success once more. He didn’t know how he had done it, but he was suddenly glad that he had killed the young man. He felt more alive because of it, more gallant, more virile — so much so, in fact, that he felt sure he would have

taken his new wife right then and there if the train hadn't been pulling into the station, if the cabin steward hadn't been just outside the door.

Episodes from the Story of Evgeniy von Diderit

And Anna Sergeyevna began coming to see Gurov in Moscow. Once in two or three months she left S—, telling her husband that she was going to consult a doctor about an internal complaint — and her husband believed her, and didn't believe her. In Moscow she stayed at the Slaviansky Bazaar hotel, and at once sent a man in a red cap to Gurov. Gurov went to see her, and no one in Moscow knew of it.

— Anton Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”

Philip turned once more through the notes he had made over the last few days.

LADY/LAP DOG: FROM HUSBAND P.O.V., he had written in capital letters at the top of the first page, and then beside it: (*EXERCISE? FULL NARRATIVE?*).

His eyes darted through the pages, rereading passages from Chekhov's story copied verbatim in his own handwriting, studying the notes penned in red ink all along the margins. *Only one sentence Chekhov hints at husband's point of view — 'believed her, didn't believe her, Philip had written early on. Elsewhere, he'd jotted, Anna's 'internal complaint' intended as double entendre?* The red ink threatened to overwhelm the black.

A list of facts and conjectures about the husband filled an entire page: *Surname p. 574 is Von Diderit.... First name not given: perhaps Aloysha, Evgeniy (nickname Zhenya),*

Gavril, Piotr.... Crown Department or Provincial Government? Anna does not know. Check Britannica for background.... How large is their house? How many servants?

Another page contained a diagram of the story's scenes: Yalta where Anna and Gurov meet, the city of S— where *The Geisha* premieres, Moscow where the affair continues....

As he stared at the words and figures, Philip's mind raced to pull the pieces, the possibilities together.

“So, how are things with the Russians?”

Catherine's voice, behind him. How long had she been in the room? Philip detected a floral scent and hints of fruit — pears perhaps? grapes? She couldn't have been standing there long, or he would have noticed it — unlike his wife to wear perfume. She usually smelled of finger paints and crayons, carried home from the art classes she taught at Ligon. He hooked his pen through the top of the clipboard, closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. Grapes definitely.

“It's so dark in here,” she said, and he felt her hands on his shoulders. “But I'll bet you haven't even noticed.”

“I hadn't really.” He opened his eyes again. Except for the glow of the computer screen — Britannica.com — the only light came from the mica-shade lamp on the desk, shining down on the open copy of Chekhov. Through the window, he saw that the sun had gone down and the night was pitch black, and he was reminded of Chekhov's own counsel: *Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on the broken glass.* The windowsill was steeped in shadows from the streetlight. A blur of buds bloomed on the bush beyond. Still, no moon. The CD had run out as well — how long before, he didn't know. Monk he'd been listening to. “In Walked Bud,” “Round Midnight,” “Evidence.”

“But the Russians are good.” He leaned his head forward as she kneaded his shoulders. “Or at least the one I’m working with. I’m really still just making notes. Looking for the key into the whole thing.”

“But you’ve been in here for hours.”

“Oh, it couldn’t have been that long,” he said. “After all, what time did we have dinner?”

She laughed. “I ate some leftover pizza about a half-hour ago,” she said. “But unless you have a stash of food in here....” And she was right. He couldn’t remember having eaten.

“Oh, well,” he shrugged. She stopped touching him.

“Well, try to eat something. I’m going out for awhile.”

“Anyplace special?” he asked, turning in his chair to see her. She wore a bandana print skirt, sleeveless denim top. Black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Scant light came from elsewhere in the house through the open doorway behind her, falling lightly on the edge of the bookcase, a pile of mail, the guest bed that shared this room. Catherine herself was caught half-in, half-out of the mica-tinted glow, and he tried to think what word she might be: not *luminous*, not *scintillant*... *evanescent*?

“I don’t know,” she said. “Target, maybe? We don’t really need anything, but I’m just feeling a little restless tonight. Just want to get out a little.” The top edge of her face was shadowed (he knew this word: *chiarascuro*; she had been *captured* in *chiarascuro*), but from the turn of her chin, he imagined that her brow must have furrowed. “I may stop by Borders afterwards, flip through some magazines, get a cup of coffee. Maybe pick up a new book for the kids at school. They stay open pretty late, right?”

He nodded. “New perfume?”

“It’s French,” she said. “Annick Goutal. It’s called ‘Ce soir ou jamais.’ The woman at Belk’s described it as Turkish rose gardens, wildflowers and black currants. You like?”

Black currants. He hadn’t been far off with grapes.

“I feel... *enthralled*,” he said, grinning. “Fragrance is a seductive thing.”

She leaned over to kiss his forehead. “I left a couple of pieces of that pizza for you in the microwave,” she whispered. “Don’t forget them.” And then she was gone.

Her scent lingered in the air as he picked up his pen, and for a moment he was unable to remember where he had been in his notes. Then, turning a new thought over in his mind, turning the key he had found, he once more began to write: *Fragrance is a significant thing.*

* * *

Evgeniy von Diderit enjoyed his breakfasts with enthusiasm. He savored the smell of frying dough almost as much as the vareniki themselves, plump with eggs and cheese or tucked tight with minced mutton — the latter his own twist on tradition. He liked dipping his curly sausages in black currant jam, and after he finished his meal, he liked to swirl a dollop of that same jam into his tea as well. As the cup cooled, he stroked his small side-whiskers or caressed the tips of his nostril hair, reading yesterday’s edition of the *Kiev Telegraph* and thinking eagerly about the meetings scheduled for the day ahead. In the shadow of a good breakfast, with his wife seated just across the table and the servants bustling through their morning duties, Evgeniy believed briefly, firmly that little could disturb the world he had created for himself and his wife — indeed, for the entire village of S—.

“I am going to Moscow today,” said Anna Sergejevna. “I think I told you. For a few days. I will be taking the morning train at eleven.”

Von Diderit looked up from his paper. His wife stared dully out the window, her fair hair pinned against her head, her breakfast plate nearly untouched. He did not speak, waiting for her to turn her gray eyes back his way.

“Your food has gotten cold,” he said finally, when she failed to look at him.

“I’m not hungry,” she replied. “I don’t feel well.”

“Is it your.... Is it the ‘internal complaint’ again?” he asked, and the phrase became bitter in his mouth, tainting the sweet aftertaste of his meal.

Anna Sergeyevna gave a slow nod.

“You know,” he continued, his voice even, unperturbed, “we have very good doctors here as well. That is part of my responsibility, the responsibility of my committee on the zemstvo, to ensure the presence of excellent doctors here. Perhaps they are not as plentiful as they are in Moscow, but they are well-trained and eager to help.” They had traveled this path before — as many times now as the number of trips she had made to Moscow — and both of them knew the way. “I am happy to arrange for you an appointment.”

“Zhenya,” she said, his nickname a plaintive sigh, and Evgeniy at once resented her pleading, pitying tone. But before he could speak, one of the servants came in to clear more plates. The couple remained silent while the young scullion tidied the table, and after the girl left, Anna Sergeyevna quickly assumed a firmer tone once more. “I have already made an appointment in Moscow,” she said. “With the doctor I have consulted there. He already knows my situation. I trust him.”

“And yet despite your trust in him, your many visits have not alleviated this internal distress, am I correct?” He smiled broadly. “Perhaps you should trust me instead this time?” Such questions were more palatable to him.

“I have already made the appointment,” she explained again, not raising her voice. “I have already purchased my ticket. I have telegraphed Petersburg as well. My sister is meeting me in Moscow. We have made plans to attend the theater.”

“Your sister...,” began Von Diderit, thinking of the questions he could ask next — *What time will your sister’s train be arriving? What play will you be seeing? Which day?* — and of the requests that he would make upon her return: *I have read about that play; remind me about the story. And: Where did you dine in Moscow? I have eaten there myself; did you speak with Taraykin?* She always had the correct answers, delivered without hesitation. When he checked the timetables later, he found that the Petersburg train was in fact scheduled to arrive at the time she had said. There had indeed been a performance of *La Corsaire* at the Bolshoi or *Dyadya Vanya* at the Art Theatre. No, she had not seen Taraykin at the Prague (so there was no way for him to confirm who had accompanied her), but she had ridden the new electric tram from Strastnaya Square to Petrovsky Park — a unverifiable, and therefore useless, detail.

Evgeniy closed his paper, rose from his seat. Walking around the table, he stood over her. “Very well,” he said, believing, not believing. “You may go.”

He leaned down to kiss her cheek, and past the dense smell of sausage still permeating the room, he discovered, as he had dreaded, the odor of jasmine and bergamot behind her ears and around her neck. *Novaya Zarya*, he knew, the scent that he’d bought her at the parfumerie on Nevsky Street during one of his own trips to Moscow — and he despaired to think that she now wore it only when she was making the same contemptible journey herself....

* * *

Philip wrote a question mark over the word *contemptible*. Would Chekhov have really used the word in such a context? Or anything so bald as *despair*, except in dialogue? And the problem wasn't just the individual words but the whole approach. It had been three days now since he first found his key into the story, and what little he had accomplished. The details smacked of too much research. Chekhov himself would have called it "the newspaper," not the *Kiev Telegraph*. He would not have bothered with the names of restaurants or the brand name of the perfume. The reference to *Dyadya Vanya* was too self-consciously clever. And Chekhov would have crafted the entire exchange with more subtlety, kept the emotions even more restrained. "When you want to touch a reader's heart, try to be colder," Chekhov had written in one of his letters. "It gives their grief, as it were, a background against which it stands out in greater relief."

Evgeniy leaned down to kiss his wife's cheek, and discovered the odor of jasmine and bergamot behind her ears and around her neck. He recognized it as the perfume that he'd bought her on one of his trips to Moscow, and he knew that she now wore it only when making the same journey herself.

The doorbell rang — just past seven p.m. Catherine had gone out to an early dinner with friends, and Philip was once more alone in the house. One of the neighbors? A door-to-door salesman perhaps? Their friends rarely dropped by unannounced.

Philip leaned over to glance out the window. A green Land Rover sat by the front curb — not a vehicle he recognized. He turned back to his notes, waiting for the person to go away.

The doorbell rang again, the person pressing longer on the button. *Insistent*, thought Philip. *Or is it persistent? Persistently?* He laid down his pen and got up, then grabbed his copy of Chekhov and stuck his finger between the pages as he stepped into the living room.

The detail would let his visitor know that he'd been interrupted. Through the window inset into the front door, he saw a man's head in profile, cocked back at the neck. The man's lips were pursed as he blew a stream of smoke into the air. Insistent and noxious. Persistently pernicious.

"Can I help you?" Philip asked, opening the door only enough to lean out.

"Hi," said the man on the porch. He shifted his cigarette to his left hand and held out the right. "You must be Philip."

The man stood slightly taller than Philip, trim and athletic. Tanned or, rather, ruddy — his red hair made him ruddy. One too many buttons loosened on the front of his Oxford, the hair thick on his chest. With the Land Rover framed above his shoulder, he looked like a commercial, but for what, Philip wasn't sure.

"Do we know each other?" Philip asked, opening the door wider and reaching his free hand out.

"No, I don't think we've met," the man said. Shake, release. "I'm a friend of Catherine's. Buddy Shelton — well, Robert really, I'm trying to get back to Robert, but back in college it was Buddy, so...." He laughed lightly. "Didn't Catherine mention I was coming by?"

"Catherine's not here. She's gone out to dinner with some friends."

Buddy smiled. "Well, I guess that would be me." Cigarette to the mouth. A deep drag. He shook his head slightly, blew the smoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. I must have misunderstood about where we were going to meet. I thought we were all getting together here first."

They were meeting several classmates from school, Buddy explained. He had just moved back to Raleigh recently, rented a house over in Vanguard Park. He was in

pharmaceutical sales, and the Triangle... “well, it’s about the capital of the world for that, you know. You’re teaching at State, right?”

“Close,” Philip said. “Wake Tech.”

“Well, gotta start somewhere,” Buddy shrugged.

It was nice to be back in the area in general, he went on. It hadn’t taken him long to run into some friends from school, and the next thing you know plans were being made. “Of course, it’s just like me to get the plans wrong somehow,” Buddy laughed, but Philip detected no real lapse of confidence. What was the connection between *self-effacing* and *self-assured*? Philip assumed it just depended on the *self* involved.

“Well, nice meeting you,” Buddy said, stepping off the porch. “Guess I’ll just try to catch up with everyone.” Then halfway across the yard, with a quick turn, walking backward for a moment: “Hey, wanna join us?”

“No, I’ve—” Philip started to hold up his book and explain that he was working, or protest that he was only wearing a t-shirt, shorts and sandals, but then he realized that he wasn’t expected to say yes. Buddy had never even stopped walking. “No,” Philip called after him. “You all have a good time.”

“Oh, I’m sure we will,” said Buddy, and he thumbed the cigarette butt into the street as he climbed in the truck. A wave from the window as he rounded the curve.

Philip started to turn back inside, but instead walked out and sat for a while on the porch swing he and Catherine had only recently found time to install. Soon the sun would go down, and even now there were few people on the street — a pair of joggers, a couple pushing a stroller, a bicyclist in streamlined shorts. The chains supporting the swing creaked, the grass in the yard had begun to wither, paint peeled on the perimeter of the porch — little chores neglected. From somewhere in the neighborhood came the dull, distant roar of a

lawnmower, or perhaps a hedge trimmer. Philip's thoughts wandered back over the conversation with Buddy, and he found himself troubled by the cigarette butt in the middle of the street. The joggers, the couple with the stroller, the cyclist — none of them seemed to notice it. Finally, Philip walked out to pick it up, deposited it in the trashcan on the side of the house and came back to the porch. He opened up the Chekhov collection.

The theater scene in S—. Gurov and Anna rushing away from the crowds at intermission. They walked *senselessly along passages, and up and down stairs*, came to rest on a *narrow, gloomy staircase*.

“I am so unhappy,” she went on, not heeding him. “I have thought of nothing but you all the time; I live only in the thought of you. And I wanted to forget, to forget you, but why, oh, why have you come?”

On the landing above them two schoolboys were smoking and looking down... Gurov drew Anna Sergeyevna to him, and began kissing her face, her cheeks, and her hands.

“What are you doing, what are you doing?... I beseech you by all that is sacred, I implore you.... There are people coming this way!”

Some one was coming up the stairs....

Philip closed the book in mid-scene, bothered as always that the “someone” never arrived. Who *was* that someone? And why had he or she stopped? A similar event in Yalta — Anna and Gurov sitting at breakfast: *A man walked up to them... looked at them and walked away. And this detail seemed mysterious and beautiful, too.* But what more did the detail signify? What did Chekhov intend? Simply some reminder of the outside world barging in, ever-threatening to discover the affair? And how early would Von Diderit himself have known that his marriage had gone terribly wrong?

* * *

Evgeniy shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Anna Sergeyevna glanced toward him, away from the stage, her furrowed brow asking, *Is there something wrong?* He smiled and shook his head, patted her knee. His wife smiled in response before turning her attention back to the scene before them — the Tea House of Ten Thousand Joys. A parade of kimonoed figures with thickly powdered faces danced in unison, strummed lutes, poured tea for lounging British sailors. Evgeniy's wife tapped the tip of her fan against the bridge of her lorgnette, the latter a trifle he had bought her — unnecessary since their regular stall was on the third row, but she was always pleased by such precious accessories. "Men make love the same in all countries," the Frenchwoman on stage had said. "There is only one language for love." And when the wizened Wun-Hi replied, with those troubled r's, "Yes, me know — good language before malliage, after malliage, bad language," everyone laughed.

Evgeniy had paid little mind to the plot — a stew of misguided passions, flirtations, jealousy.... a song about a goldfish. It was easy enough to let one's attention wander.

And ever as my samisen I play
Come lovers at my pretty feet to fall,
Who fancy — till I bid them run away —
A geisha's heart has room enough for all!

Yet love may work his will, if so he please;
His magic can a woman's heart unlock
As well beneath kimono Japanese
As under any smart Parisian frock.

Evgeniy turned his eyes once more toward the Governor's box, but still saw no one but the Governor's daughter seated in front, leaning forward, her elbows on the coping. He had nodded in the direction of the box during the bustle before the start of the play, aware from the parting of the curtains behind her and the partially glimpsed hand on the sash that the Governor himself stood back there watching — that perhaps the Governor had in turn seen him. Evgeniy hoped that at the interval between acts he would have the opportunity to

speak with the man. It never hurt to remind a superior that you were there, that you existed at all.

At last the first act ended. The curtain fell.

“Excuse me, my darling,” Evgeniy said, standing. “There are several people I must speak with.” And he stooped over quickly to kiss his wife’s cheek before leaving her in the stall, proud that everyone could see what a model marriage they had. She was indeed his darling, his plum, his precious baby bird. In the aisle, he encountered Pyotr Alexeitch, and the two men began speaking as they walked toward the door outside, where several other gentlemen had already gathered to smoke.

But he had barely caught the smell of tobacco drifting through the door when, as he happened to turn his head, a brisk movement across the room seized his attention — a woman rushing hurriedly through the crowd. A mere flash of a moment, but enough for him to recognize his wife’s gown, the particular way she pinned her hair back and that familiar, though now hurried, gait. Had a problem arisen? Perhaps she had suddenly taken ill. Was she searching for him?

“I beg your pardon, Pyotr,” he said, with a slight bow. “I fear there is something I must attend to.” It was, he considered, no breach of manners to look to your wife in her time of need.

He walked through the laughing, chattering crowd, heard a person humming one of the refrains from the play, saw another stifling a giggle as she stiffly mimicked the bow of one of the Geisha girls.

His wife had gone through this door surely, he thought, and it opened up onto a busy passageway leading around the auditorium. A glimpse of her gown to the right, and as Evgeniy moved in that direction, he saw that another man was following closely on his

wife's heels. Who? And why would the man be chasing her? Was it someone envious of his position, at odds with one of his policies, and now threatening his family?

"Excuse me," he said to each person whose elbow he jostled, "pardon me." He eased as swiftly as he could through the crowd without disrupting them too terribly, without drawing too much attention — casting a quick smile or a friendly nod to those he knew, striving at the same time to keep his eyes on the figures ahead. They seemed to move endlessly along passageways, and up and down stairs. At times Evgeniy gained on them, at others he fell behind, until at a last turn he reached the base of a narrow, gloomy staircase, hidden from the crowd. The sounds of his wife's voice echoed down the stairs — "I beseech you by all that is sacred, I implore you" —and Evgeniy mounted the first step hastily, primed to defend his wife's virtue, his own honor, until he heard an unexpected tone in her next words: "There are people coming this way!"

He stopped in mid-step. There was an urgency in her tone that had struck him strangely, a desperation, a passion, a—

"You must go away.... I will come and see you in Moscow. I have never been happy; I am miserable now.... I swear I'll come to Moscow. But now let us part. My precious, good, dear one, we must part!"

A moment passed in silence, an emptiness in which Evgeniy's imagination trembled. And then he heard them coming down the stairs rapidly, and he slunk back along the passageways ahead of them, once more fighting the throng as he struggled toward the security of their accustomed stall.

* * *

Near midnight, Philip sat alone in the living room, his gaze wandering from one object to another. The weave of the fabric on the couch, marred by a stain whose origin he

couldn't remember. The air conditioning vent in the corner, rattling intermittently as the system switched on and off. Over the mantle hung an abstract painting that Catherine had completed in college: Two broad, bold, s-shaped swaths of color: red and purple. Divergent at each extreme, they curved closer together in the middle and even touched lightly at various points. What was the name of it? *Duet* something? *Romance*? *Romantic Red Pairs* *Passionate Purple*? There was a precious cleverness to the title, Philip recalled, but his mind was too muddled to remember it clearly. Densely chaotic jazz murmured from the stereo's speakers, the volume turned low so as not to disturb Catherine's sleep.

They had kissed soon before he left their bed a half-hour before, and her lips had tingled at the time with the mint of her toothpaste, masking the faint aftertaste of her evening out. But now it was the undertones of those tastes that lingered in his memory. The briny lure of tequila, the sweet tang of limes. Residues, cast-offs. Like the bracelet she had discarded on the end table when she walked through the door, or the pocketbook standing like a challenge on the other chair.

"Did your friend Robert find you?" he had asked her after she came home.

"Robert?" she said. "Oh, you mean Buddy. Why? Did he call here?"

"He stopped by looking for you. He assumed you were meeting here first before dinner."

"I wonder why he would have thought that," she said, and she appeared to be genuinely puzzled. No, he hadn't mentioned stopping by, she went on to explain, had just apologized for being late when he got there and joined them at the table. How many others? Oh, five or six — let's see... Miriam and Alex, Ken, Alice, Lucy.... Buddy, of course. So how many is that? Six? Seven, including Catherine. "You know, just a bunch of us who'd been together back in school."

“Sounds like fun,” Philip had said, and in his mind now, he emptied out the pocketbook sitting across from him: lipstick and powder, several tissues of Kleenex, her wallet, a tampon, a cell phone, her Palm Pilot.

“Excuse me,” Evgeniy said to each person whose elbow he jostled, “pardon me.” He moved as swiftly as he could through the crowd without disrupting them too terribly, without drawing too much attention — struggling to cast a quick smile or a friendly nod to those he knew, to maintain some equilibrium outside despite what was falling apart within.

“Well it’s great that you got the chance to catch up with him,” Philip had gone on. “Good that Buddy’s turned up here in town.”

“It really is nice,” Catherine said. “I’d forgotten how much I missed him.”

“How long has it been since you last saw him?”

Years and years ago, she replied. They had been such good friends when they were in school — had taken several classes together, gone out to the same clubs. But once graduation came, so many people headed their separate ways. Buddy had moved out to the West Coast, to Sacramento — a job he couldn’t refuse. Catherine had promised to come out and visit, had really meant to. She hadn’t been particularly pleased with her own job then, She’d felt aimless, unambitious... unhappy really.

I will come and see you in Sacramento. I have never been happy; I am miserable now. I have thought of nothing but you all the time; I live only in the thought of you....

“But I never went out to see him,” she said. “Eventually, each of us got so busy. I got the job at Ligon. There was gradually more time between phone calls.... You know how easy it is to lose touch.”

Soon, Catherine prepared to go to sleep — removed her make-up, brushed her teeth, pulled on a pair of Philip’s boxers. By the time he joined her, she had already settled

between the sheets, was nearly asleep. He turned out the light and felt his way into the bed, recognizing in the darkness the scent of the new perfume he'd first noticed several nights before. She leaned over. A kiss. Lips redolent with mint, the taste lingering as she pulled away. They lay for awhile in the half-darkness together, in the glow of the streetlight through the window, under the faint outline of the ceiling fan overhead. Philip tried to catch the dim sound of its motor spinning amidst the silence.

“Did you ever?” he finally asked her. “I mean, with your friend Buddy?”

A long pause. His imagination trembled. “You men,” she said after a few seconds, “the way you...” and he heard the hint of a low chuckle. Indulgent? Indignant? Indecipherable. A long sigh followed. “Once or twice,” she said finally. “It was back in college. It was years ago.”

“Excuse me,” Evgeniy said to each person whose elbow he jostled, “pardon me.” He moved as swiftly as he could through the crowd without disrupting them too terribly, without drawing too much attention. Surely what he'd seen wasn't what it seemed. Surely the man following his wife wasn't.... Surely the man from Yalta wouldn't dare to.... Evgeniy had been able to excuse that indiscretion, an isolated mistake, but he could not condone this, not abide such, not here in his own town. No, this was untenable, this was....

They didn't speak after that, and soon Catherine's breathing settled into a regular pattern. He listened to her for a few minutes, then realized he would be unable to sleep himself. He went downstairs, put on an Ornette Coleman CD and sat down on the sofa to stare at the air conditioning vent and the painting over the mantle and the pocketbook on the chair with her Palm Pilot within.

What was the name of that painting? he asked himself again, and this time it came to him, a conversation years ago, emerging from some tucked-away place in his memory. *Twin*

Passions Twined, she'd called it, remarking to Philip that it was like them, wasn't it? like love *should* be? She wrapped her arms around him in the memory, they kissed, they... but no comfort in remembering that embrace tonight. Other thoughts intruded. She'd actually painted it in college, hadn't she? And who had the purple swath represented for her then? What had she written down in her Palm Pilot for tonight — "Dinner w/friends"? "Dinner w/Miriam, Alex, etc."? "Dinner with Buddy"? What was listed for the evening she went to Target and Borders a few nights back? And had she even gone to those places at all?

* * *

It was at the theater that Evgeniy first saw Gurov with his own eyes, but this was not his first awareness of the other man, despite his many attempts to suppress that knowledge. Looking back over all that had happened, Evgeniy realized that he had likely already lost Anna in Yalta, or even before, and he was ashamed to have arranged a witness to his humiliation.

Yalta was his wife's first holiday in the two years since they had been married. She had grown up in Petersburg, and he knew that moving to the provinces had been an adjustment for her. He had sensed that she was sometimes restless with their surroundings, restless with the days that he spent away from her while at council and the evenings he spent building relationships to ensure a successful career. He imagined her staring all day at the gray fence opposite the house, or chasing idly after that pesky little dog she loved so, and he felt responsible for the drabness he had begun to see in her eyes.

"Why don't you take a trip, my darling?" he had asked her one evening when she complained of not feeling well. "A change of scenery will invigorate your spirits. You could travel to Moscow maybe, or to Petersburg to see your sister. Or someplace new. To Yalta perhaps. You might enjoy some time at the coast. You can stay for two weeks or a month or

even more.” And though she had been hesitant at first, she had eventually acquiesced. A trip was planned for late summer. She bought some clothes for her journey, a new beret, a new parasol as well. Even the preparations seemed to return some glimmer of light to her soft gray eyes, and Evgeniy felt his own spirits relieved as well. At the end of her stay at the coast, he might come down personally to fetch her. They could spend a few days together. It would be a second honeymoon.

The week before her trip, he had summoned Zhmuhin, the hotel porter, to his office. Evgeniy found Zhmuhin a despicable person in many ways. The man was gaunt and angular, with a bent nose, and Evgeniy had often sensed something smug and sneering beneath his show of truckling diffidence. Plus, Zhmuhin perennially mispronounced Evgeniy’s surname as “Dridirit” — intentionally, Evgeniy believed. But Zhmuhin also possessed the keen eye and discretion necessary for his post. He was precise in his tallying of new arrivals to and departures from the town, encompassing in his recognition of small details. It had even been rumored years before that Zhmuhin was an outside agent for the Okhrana, the imperial police, and though the idea had quickly been dismissed, Evgeniy had often wondered at the possibility and as a result continued to cultivate some familiarity with the other man. As if recognizing this, Zhmuhin sometimes dropped his pretensions around Evgeniy, and too often took advantage of being treated as an equal.

After the porter had settled into one of the wingchairs opposite the mahogany desk, Evgeniy offered him a glass of cognac, asked him about who had checked in most recently at the hotel, laughed that the man was always on duty, always so much work, and didn’t he ever need a holiday? And when Zhmuhin replied that he arranged to go to Petersburg each May and November, the former in honor of the Emperor’s birthday and the latter to commemorate the Dowager Empress, Evgeniy commented that such respect was very noble,

wondering beneath his words if the man's trips to the capital might have more to do with some duties for the secret police.

"But perhaps you would also like to take another type of holiday, and sooner," continued Evgeniy. "Perhaps somewhere warmer, perhaps to a coastal climate? Perhaps to Yalta?"

A sly smile emerged at one corner of Zhmuhin's lips. "And why would I choose to go to Yalta?" he asked, tugging at the lapels of his gray porter's uniform. "Is there some specific reason for such a trip?"

"I have always said that you are a clever man," replied Evgeniy. "That you are intelligent beyond your position, and such you are." He gestured as if doffing a hat to the porter, though he wore no hat at the time. "You are correct. It is my wife. I have decided to send her to Yalta for a holiday herself, and I would like for you to go as well."

Zhmuhin's smile vanished. "That sounds little like a holiday, Mr. Dridirit," he replied, enunciating the last word. "To carry bags and open doors. I can do these things here. And you yourself have servants for such tasks. Send them along instead." He started to rise.

"You misunderstand," said Evgeniy, "please sit, please," careful to maintain his cheer, lacing his fingers together. "That is not at all what I'm asking. Even here you are too wise for such duties, I have always thought you so. No, I do not want you to accompany my wife but to attend to her at a distance. You have a watchful nature, everyone knows this. I simply want you to keep such a watch over my wife while she is away."

Zhmuhin's eyes narrowed. He returned to his seat.

"What need is there to keep a watch over your wife?" he asked. "When I look at your wife, I see a grown woman who does not need a guardian. Don't you agree, Mr. Dridirit?"

That sly smile had returned and Evgeniy detected some hint of salacity behind the porter's comments. He chose to ignore the man's mispronunciation, his studied insolence.

"Before our marriage, my wife was surrounded by her family in Petersburg," Evgeniy replied instead, "and here she enjoys my guardianship, of course. Certainly she is a grown woman, but I have discovered that she is so young still in many ways, simple in her thoughts and her amusements, a naïf. Often I have called her my baby bird, merely a term of endearment, you see, and yet it is appropriate in so many ways that I had not intended...." He stared down at the blotter on his desk, at the inkwell and the calligraphy pen, the papers, his political responsibilities — another world in which his wife would surely be lost, and he treasured her all the more for that. "This is her first time away on her own, you see, and perhaps I fret over her well-being too much."

They had completed their deal after that. Zhmuhin was merely to watch from a distance, not to intercede unless he found Anna Sergejevna to be in some danger. Evgeniy in turn paid for Zhmuhin's transportation, his lodging and meals, and a remuneration of 100 rubles for the six weeks' work — more than half again his salary at the hotel for the same period, but the extra would ensure his attention and discretion.

During the first fortnight that his wife was away, Evgeniy began to receive short letters from her. She wrote of her walks in Verney's pavilion and in the public gardens, of the roughness of the seas in the days and the strange light upon it in the evenings, of how everyone gathered in the harbor for the arrival of the steamer. Evgeniy smiled over her letters, envying such simple pleasures, the easy amusements that he had never been the type to enjoy. He was grateful for a wife who could appreciate them so.

Then one morning, a messenger delivered a telegram to his office. The words carried no clear meaning and the message itself was unsigned, but Evgeniy knew who had sent it. In

ways that he could not describe rationally, the block type itself bore a familiar insolence, and despite his incomprehension of the telegram's meaning, the words at once sent the blood rushing to Evgeniy's face.

“Baby bird has found her wings.”

* * *

Two nights later, Philip sat in a rented Buick half-a-block from his own home, staring at the Land Rover that had just pulled to a stop at the curb, watching another man escort his wife across the lawn and into the front door. As he had throughout the evening, he struggled with the word *stalker* and its connotations. He wasn't stalking. He had no intentions to do anything. He was merely surveying. He was simply watching the story unfold.

He had told Catherine that he needed to go up to Charlottesville for the weekend for research on the story he was working on. Just a quick trip. The Center for Russian Studies at UVA was the best research facility in the area. Plus, a friend from college lived there, someone he hadn't seen in a couple of years. “So I'll have a place to stay for free,” he explained. “And it'll give the two of us a chance to catch up.” He'd used the last phrase deliberately — the same that he'd used when talking to Catherine about Buddy — but she hadn't seemed to notice. Instead, he was left alone with the words and with a bitter taste in his mouth.

At work over the last two days, he had accomplished little. Barely reading his student's papers, grading them perfunctorily, sleepwalking through his own lectures. In between classes, he surfed the Internet: estimated driving time to Charlottesville, to get his story right for Catherine; the rates for various car rental companies. Enterprise was the cheapest, and he thought that was appropriate. He was enterprising in his methods, after all,

enterprising his endeavors. He embarked on an enterprising exploration. He edged uneasily toward the evidence.

Fearful that he would pass Catherine somewhere on the street, he had taken irregular routes in the rented Buick and toward Buddy's neighborhood, a series of squat bungalows half-a-century old, now freshly painted, freshly landscaped, with oversized SUVs parked out front. Buddy's house was greenish-gray with dark shutters. His grass was trimmed. Begonias bloomed in painted flowerpots on the front stoop. His porch swing was already up.

Philip had followed Buddy's Land Rover across town to Glenwood Avenue and to 518 West, and had then crisscrossed the streets near the restaurant — Jones to West, Lane to Boylan, the parking lots adjacent to 42nd Street Oyster Bar, Southend and RiRa — until he found Catherine's beige Camry on Harrington.

An hour-and-a-half had passed and darkness had fallen before he saw them emerge from the front door of 518, stepping into the glow of the lights fronting the building. Even from a block away, Philip had recognized his wife's walk, her ponytail, the sleeveless teal top that she often wore when they were going out. It was definitely Catherine. And Buddy too, of course, right behind. Catherine held her head low, looking down toward the sidewalk. Buddy leaned his face down to meet her eyes better, gestured for her to stay there, walked around into the parking lot. Then Catherine stood alone in front of the restaurant. Her head held low with regrets? or with shame? lost in her thoughts? lost in anticipation? Philip imagined that she had been drinking, that she was drunk, and that Buddy was taking advantage of her condition. Didn't it seem she was struggling to maintain her equilibrium? But no, her balance was complete, her stance never swayed. He could imagine the scent of her new perfume behind her ears, along her neck. Suddenly she looked up. In the direction of

Philip and the rented car? No, toward the tip of the Land Rover, waiting to turn out of the parking lot.

And now they had entered the house together, the story unfolding not as Philip would have chosen but, unfortunately, as he expected. It was worse to imagine her betraying him in the bed that they shared.

A song ended on the radio and the announcer came on. Bob Rogers. WSHA. “The Blues is the Blues is the Blues,” Rogers said, his tone folksy, soothing. Philip thought of evening deejays in empty studios, alone with their passions. He thought of the people who listened to those deejays and about the shape of such a shared solitude. He had always felt apart from people — shy and self-aware — but Catherine had been patient with him, indulged his eccentricities. And what had he given her in return? What had he failed to give her that had sent her away?

He picked up the cell phone and dialed their home number.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said when Catherine answered, careful to keep his tone light, intent not to betray his emotions.

“Hey,” she said. “Are you almost to Charlottesville?”

“Almost,” he said, pulling up the car a few feet, watching which lights went on in which rooms. “I’m driving into the city limits now. What have you been up to this evening?”

“I’ve been out, just got back in,” she said. “I got a call soon after you left and ended up meeting some people down at 518. But about halfway through the meal, I felt sick to my stomach and ended up just coming home.”

An internal complaint, Philip thought. He searched for the shadows of movement between the half-closed blinds. “Well, I hate that I’m so far away,” he said. “I hate for you to be sick and all alone like that.”

“Yeah, I really do feel awful,” she said. “But I’ll be all right. Buddy ended up driving me back here, and Miriam said she’d come over and stay the night if I wanted her to.”

“Buddy’s there?”

“Yeah, he said he’d stay with me for a few minutes to make sure I’m OK.” A light went on in the room where Philip worked. “And he hadn’t seen the house yet, so this gives him a chance to see our place.” The light went off again.

“Do you want me to come back?”

“You’re hours away, hon,” she said, her silhouette appearing at the living room window. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, do you want me to call you back in a little while?”

“I’ll be fine,” she repeated, and he watched as she shut the blinds tightly. “Don’t worry. It was just something I ate. You’re almost there and I know you want to catch up with Mike. I’m just going to turn down the ringer and go to bed in a few minutes, just as soon as Buddy leaves.”

Turn down the ringer. Go to bed. Catch up. Half-truths easier to tell than lies.

“So.” His mind scrambled in vain for a new strategy. “I guess I’ll just talk to you tomorrow then.”

“All right, hon. I’ll give you a call on the cell when I get up, OK?”

“OK,” he said. And he saw the light in their bedroom come on. “Well, good night.”

“Hey!” she said then. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?” he asked.

“How about, maybe, ‘I love you’?”

“I love you too,” he said, relieved that she had said this in front of Buddy. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Feel better. Good night.”

But his hopes gradually faded as the minutes stretched on. And it was more than an hour before the other man left the house and the Land Rover pulled away from the street.

* * *

Zhmuhin began to send letters after that, penned in his own awkward hand, bearing information about Anna Sergeevna's indiscretions: how she had retired with the stranger to the sanctity of her hotel room; how the couple had shared a cab to Oreanda, where they had sat near a church and held hands as they stared at the sea; how they now took their meals together regularly; how they stole kisses in the square.

Zhmuhin was fastidious in his details: There was cream in the crab soup they shared at lunch on Tuesday; the wine they drank after dinner on Thursday was a Madeira, uncorked just for them; Zhmuhin had walked past them near the church in Oreanda, but had recognized no remorse in the man's eyes; the couple's kiss in the square was fleeting, the one in the garden approximately half-a-minute in length. Gone was Zhmuhin's insolence, but his cold precision and simple matter-of-factness were perhaps more brutal, giving Evgeniy's grief, as it were, little room for relief. Evgeniy wept like some sniveling child. His eyesight became bleary with tears. His face turned so red that he stayed home from the office. He caught the servants exchanging glances when he passed them in the house. What a poor excuse for a man he had become!

And what a poor choice he had made for handling this crisis. He should have traveled to Yalta at once, he would think later. He should have challenged the other man to a duel. He should have punished his wife for her indiscretion with the same firm justice with which he might forgive her for it afterwards. But instead he had written her a letter. *There is something wrong with my eyes*, he had explained. *Please come home as quickly as possible*. A weak lie

to avoid a scandal. A coward's choice. He had signed it *Your husband* as if he needed to remind her of the fact — a thought whose shame he would also long bear.

Even as he dripped the wax onto the envelope and reached for his seal, he knew that any choice he made was a mistake. If he didn't confront the situation now, he would be unable to do so later. How could he admit to her in years to come that he had known all along, that he had borne her adultery in silence? And yet what ramifications would ensue if he acted rashly? His public might acquit him of any action he took now in defense of his home, but could they avoid looking upon him differently once they'd discovered him a cuckold? How would they ever trust him as a leader if they suspected that some mismanagement of domestic affairs had sent his wife into the arms of another man?

Such was simply not possible. He sealed the wax and sealed his fate.

* * *

Sealed the wax and sealed his fate? No, Philip thought, as he steered the rented Buick along another lonely street, no, that last line was all wrong. Too self-consciously dramatic, too much a flourish of meaning. It judged too harshly. He would have to figure something else out later. There was still time to flatten out the tone, keep the presentation matter-of-fact. And yet difficult even now to contain his growing antipathy for Evgeniy. Was *antipathy* the word? Abhorrence, detestation, repugnance, pity — judgment again.

WSHA had gone off the air at midnight, and hours of cold, dry static had whispered through the speakers as Philip drove restlessly through the night, still crafting the stories in his mind, distracting himself from what he had seen, from the muddle of other images. The Land Rover at the curb, the light in the bedroom window, the cigarette in the street... the stale aftertaste of tequila from Catherine's kiss, the feel of her lips light on his forehead several nights before... the passions in her painting, the pizza in the microwave... her

admission that Buddy was there when he called, her admission that she had slept with him before. Another man's hand rested on her hip, caressed her breast. Her fingers wandered in the hair of his chest, their lips met, their bodies twined.... Or had it happened that way at all?

Chekhov had been right at the end of "The Lady with the Dog." Each of us does have two lives, one open and seen by all, another full of secrets but perhaps more truthful to itself. But Chekhov had missed the inevitable despair of never truly being able to know the other's secret existence, balancing trust against doubt. Gurov had found some prurient irony in the idea of secret lives, Anna Sergeyevna had been torn asunder by her two worlds, and Evgeniy von Diderit... But it wasn't Evgeniy's story, after all, Philip knew. Anna's and Gurov's was the grand, conflicted passion. Von Diderit's life was static, negligible. Philip had simply chosen the wrong character. And while another man had been wooing and perhaps winning Catherine, Philip had stuck himself away in 1890s Russia, missing the chance for any significance in his own story.

No more. He would not make same mistakes that von Diderit had. He would not be a bit player.

He drove the rented Buick back to his own house, parked it on the curb where the Land Rover had stood the night before. Dawn had broken, and the neighborhood was now lit in soft tones. Sprinklers were rotating in a lawn down the street — set off by automatic timer. In another yard, a cat stalked some animal unseen. As Philip walked toward his front porch, he heard the neighbor's door open and then saw her step out to pick up her paper. She stopped when she saw him, and even from a distance he could sense her hesitancy, her apprehension. Did she not recognize him? He saw that she didn't have her glasses on. The Buick must have confused her too. Perhaps she suspected an early morning burglar?

“Good morning, Mrs. Rosen,” he said, with a wave. “Just me. Philip.” And he turned his key in the front door, pushed it inward, not waiting for a reply.

But once inside, he still felt an intruder, as though he actually were breaking into some strange house. He saw even the most familiar objects as if for the first time: a piece of pottery he and Catherine had picked up in Chatham County, a photograph of them on their honeymoon in London, Catherine’s purse on the chair. The painting over the mantle seemed darker than usual. He noticed that the fabric of the couch didn’t quite match the floor. A Mingus CD he had left in the player had been swapped out for Moby. An empty bottle of Pinot Noir stood on the kitchen counter. Two glasses sat in the sink.

Had Buddy touched this newspaper on the counter? Which chair had he sat in? The carpet runner in the hallways had been kicked up at the corner. The hand towel in the bathroom had a streak of grime. Was that another man’s piss on the rim of the toilet?

In their bedroom, the rising sun crept around the edges of the window, leaving the room in morning twilight, and Philip detected the scent of black currants again, of wildflowers. Beneath the sheets wrapped around her, Catherine’s breasts rose and fell in easy rhythms. Her black hair strayed out across the pillow, and a mascara stain marked the case, almost in the shape of an eyelash itself. Someone had propped a condom against the edge of the alarm clock. Durex. Unopened.

Sitting down in the chair in the corner of the room, Philip absent-mindedly twirled the condom in his hand, occasionally pausing to examine the edges of the wrapper, the expiration date, phrases from the package: “super thin for more feeling,” “nonoxynol-9,” “if erection is lost before withdrawal....” It was from a box of twelve in the bathroom, he knew, and he started to go count the ones that remained, see if others were missing, but he couldn’t

remember with any certainty how many had been in there before he left. It had been awhile since they made love, he realized with regret, with shame.

Catherine shifted her weight, stretched an arm out to her side. Philip clasped the condom in his hand, and moved up to the bed to sit beside her.

“Catherine,” he said. “Are you awake?” He laid his free hand on her arm. “It’s me. Philip.”

“Philip?” she mumbled, still half-asleep, leaning into his touch. Her eyes parted just slightly. “It’s too early, Philip, it’s—” Her body tensed, her eyes opened wide, she looked up at him bewildered. “Philip?” she said again, sitting up sharply. The sheet fell away from her bare breasts. He saw her glance toward the clock, her confusion deepen. “Where...? It’s seven in the morning. I thought you were—”

“You said you were sick,” he began. “I came home because—” And even before he said them, he knew the words weren’t right, that there was no purpose in disguising the truth, that the very next moment would determine everything after. “I never left,” he began again. “No, I’ve been in Raleigh the whole time. I’ve used up two tanks of gas, Catherine. I’ve been driving, I’ve been thinking.... And I don’t know what to make of it all. I don’t know where I belong anymore. And what does *this* mean?” He opened his hand, let the condom fall on the bed between them.

He watched her face, but her expression betrayed nothing. She stared down at the condom for a moment and then lifted her head to meet his gaze. She pushed her hair behind her ear, nodded gently.

As with everything else in the house, Philip had the vague sensation of seeing Catherine now for the first time, too: the cleft dividing her chin; those faint clusters of freckles across her cheeks, usually masked by powder; the uncommon color of her eyes. Her

irises were a deep, impenetrable green, her pupils unfathomably opaque. He thought of the painting above the mantle, those swaths of color brushing against one another, connecting, parting.

“Philip,” she said finally, reaching out to take his hand in hers, “I have something to tell you,” and he knew that whatever she said next he would believe, he wouldn’t believe. And it was clear to him that no matter what happened, the most difficult and complicated part of it was likely just beginning.

Here for You

“Do you mind if I stop by?” Lila asked Randolph on the phone early one Sunday evening, and from the noise of traffic in the background, he knew she was calling from her car. “I have something I need to ask you.”

He tried in vain to dissuade her from coming over. There had been too many bitter exchanges between them already, the same accusations heaped against him each time, the same guilt deposited once more on his doorstep. But she promised that she wasn't angry this afternoon and that she wouldn't be long. Randolph barely had time to take down the photographs of his girlfriend before she arrived. “Princess Samantha,” Lila had often smirked — still better than other names she'd tried. During the most venomous stages of their divorce, Randolph had more than once endured Lila's attacks on “that husband-snatching whore.”

“I was wondering if you could take care of Nutmeg for a while,” Lila asked him after she settled down on the sofa. Nutmeg was their Scotch terrier, or had once been theirs, and the object of vicious discussions when they divided their possessions. “She misses you.”

Lila had apparently been to the beach for the day, and the smell of suntan lotion now spread through the living room — all cocoa butter and ripe bananas. But she hadn’t applied enough of it, and the places where her fair skin had reddened, the tips of her nose, the tops of her cheeks, were already threatening to peel.

“If you want me to take care of her, you must be going somewhere,” he replied, confident already about how Lila was trying to trick him.

“Somewhere,” she said with a wry smile and a shrug, and he knew he was right. Next, he was expected to ask about her vacation plans and then who she was going with — her way of telling Randolph that she had a new man in her life, letting him know that she’d moved on. Catching a glimpse of her swimsuit top through the thin white t-shirt, he wondered what the man looked like, how serious it was, what their sex life was like.

But as he continued pressing her about where she was going, she became increasingly vague, evasive, contradictory. Soon, her speech began to slur and a smoky glaze eased over her eyes. “Someplace where you won’t need to worry about me anymore,” she finally told him, and he knew then that something truly terrible was happening.

The night Lila found out about the affair, she had threatened to cut her wrists, and Randolph had refused to leave her alone even for a minute, keeping his arms wrapped tight around her as she wailed and spit at him, a Gillette razor clutched tightly in her hand. Weeks later, after he’d moved out, she told him on the phone that she despised him, that she despised herself, that she simply didn’t want to live anymore. That time, as he paced the floors of his new apartment, a mutual friend went over to their old place to find Lila in the

kitchen and the garage filling with fumes. She claimed to have forgotten the car was on. She began seeing a therapist after that. It had been over a year since then.

“Tell me where you’re going,” he demanded now, keeping his voice firm but calm. “Tell me what you’ve done.” But she didn’t answer, just smiled and waved at him, then lay down on the couch. “Lila!” he called loudly, moving over to shake her shoulders. “Talk to me, Lila!” Her body felt heavier than he remembered, her arms loose and her skin moist. Up close, she smelled sweaty and tropical and he was briefly reminded, despite the urgency of the moment, of their own trips to the beach, of those easier times. Then drool began to seep from one corner of her lips, dripping onto the cushions of the couch.

“Why do you do this to yourself?” he said, snatching up her purse. “Why do you do this to *me*?” He dumped the contents on the floor: several tubes of lipstick, her cell phone, a condom, her rabbit’s foot... an amber pill bottle, nearly empty. The pharmacy’s number was listed on the label. He grabbed Lila’s cell phone, punched in the number, listened as the line rang again and again. When he slammed down the phone, Lila shifted on the couch, pulled herself into a fetal position, the same smile still on her face. He rushed to the phone book next, searching out the number for the doctor who’d prescribed the pills. “My wife,” he screamed to the woman who picked up the phone, an answering service. “She’s taken some pills. My ex-wife. I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know how to help her anymore.” And when the ambulance and the fire truck and the police car crowded into the small cul-de-sac, the neighbors all came outdoors to watch.

Lila’s overdose wasn’t fatal, it turned out. Even if Randolph had just left her there in his living room, she would have been fine. The bottle of antidepressants she had taken would have caused little more than a long, long nap and a prolonged bout of constipation. Samantha

would laugh about that later in the evening, just as she laughed at Randolph for taking those photographs down, for caring at all about what his ex-wife might say.

Randolph went over to Samantha's after he left the hospital, stopping only briefly to check on Nutmeg at the house he'd once shared with Lila. As Samantha undressed for bed, she told him that he shouldn't have gone to the hospital and shouldn't have stopped by that house. "Sometimes I think you like that knight in shining armor bit," said Samantha, then reminded Randolph about all the ways Lila's damsel in distress routine had made his life miserable. The way she used her unhappiness to coax Randolph to get married because it would make everything better. Nagging him about a baby and when they were going to start their family, because she felt things were incomplete. Withholding sex when he told her it wasn't the right time for that yet. *You can have me again anytime you're ready*, Randolph remembered Lila saying, *and you know you'll need it before I do*. But Randolph had found Samantha instead.

"Hell," Samantha said, unclasping her bra. "Lila couldn't keep her man then and she can't kill herself now. What *can* she do right?" She shook her head, tossed the bra onto the chair in the corner of her bedroom. Her breasts were taut, her stomach sleek. "How you ever got mixed up with someone so needy, I'll never know."

Standing in the doorway of the room, Randolph watched Samantha smooth lotion across her abdomen, sliding her fingers under the waistband of her panties and then shimmying out of them completely before climbing into bed. Samantha never mired herself in any melodrama. She was always clear-eyed and clear-cut. She hadn't even asked how he felt about his ex-wife's latest attempt on her life. "So are you coming to bed or are you going home?" she said then, one hand on the pullswitch of the lamp, and though he'd always been

captivated by her indifference, he now wondered if she would always remain just out of reach.

* * *

Everything had been shades of white in the room just off the E.R. earlier that evening. The sheets were crisp at the far edges of Lila's bed, but damp beneath her body from the sweat seeping through her shirt. She had awakened once they arrived at the hospital, and hovering between delirium and sleep, she had talked about a new man she was seeing and a fight they'd had at the beach, about how the house was so empty when she came home. After she'd taken the pills, she hadn't known who else to turn to.

"Well, you know I'm here for you," he told her, the old habits quickly returned — trying to say the right thing, whether it was true or not. When they were married, she might have asked him, with pointed sarcasm, exactly where *here* was, or attacked him again for all the times he hadn't been there for her at all. Now, she simply nodded up at him from the examining table and mouthed the word *Thanks*.

One of the nurses brought Lila a styrofoam cup filled to the brim with an ashen liquid, vaguely chunky. "Better than the pump," the nurse warned. "Drink at least half." It smelled like charcoal, and Lila offered a trembling hand to Randolph as she drank the first mouthfuls. Her grip tightened as she vomited into the basin they'd provided, and then relaxed as she lay back on the bed.

By now, her sunburned skin had truly begun to peel, and small shards of her face and shoulders flaked onto the pillow. Sweat plastered her wispy blond hair limply against her head, and her cheeks had grown even more pale. Tendrils of gray mucous nestled in the corners of her lips.

Randolph stared down at the frail fingers resting absent-mindedly on his arm — surprised by the warm, tender touch and then by Lila herself, suddenly all the more desirable for his having betrayed her.

Three Deaths on the Lot

Businessmen are our only metaphysicians, but the trouble is, they are one-track metaphysicians.

— Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

By early in the summer of 1991, King's Town already seemed diminished. This was just months after the end of the Persian Gulf War and Operation Desert Storm, but many more months had passed since the men and women from the nearby base had first been deployed half-a-world away. Though the war had seen few deaths, there were casualties nonetheless, even on the homefront; one pilot's wife had packed her clothes and her kids just weeks after her husband's departure, seen her chance and moved back to Kansas. But life largely went on as before both on the base and in town. Children still went to school and to birthday parties, did homework or played computer games. Adults still clocked in each morning, out each night, drank cocktails or had friends over for dinner, worked in the yard on weekends. Couples still shared in the chores or didn't share, made love or didn't make

love, bought new clothes or, more often, watched their budgets. Still, changes could be seen. With the slimming down of the town, the current recession had been felt more keenly, and many people were also tightening their belts. Grocery stores adapted easiest to the decrease in business. Restaurants adjusted with varying degrees of success; only one, an independent Mexican eatery by the name of El Burro, was forced into closing its doors. And one weekend early that summer, Carl Wilson Chevrolet switched to one-price selling.

On Saturday afternoon, after Horace and Jimmy, his only two salesmen, had closed their offices and headed out for a short weekend, Wilson loaded the dealership's big black invoice book into the passenger seat of his Caprice Classic. Into the back seat he piled a large desk calculator, three new black magic markers and two stacks of cardboard signs, orange and yellow, designed to hang securely from a rearview mirror. On Sunday morning, after he'd assembled himself a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich with a runny yolk— a breakfast his wife would have denied him if she had been in town — he plugged in the calculator at the kitchen table, opened the big black book and worked up bottom-line selling prices for each car and truck on the grounds of his dealership. New cars? Invoice minus holdback, plus 3.75 percent, plus 100 dollars. Wilson wrote the resulting figure on the orange tags, and if there was a dealer incentive, he wrote that on the tag as well with the word "REBATE" beside it before writing down the new total. Used cars? Blue book average retail value, plus options, minus his own cost in the vehicle, divided by two, rounded to the nearest ten dollars, then added back to his cost. He wrote these figures on the yellow tags.

These formulas were of his own devising, formulas he'd mulled over day after day. By this time there were simply too many cars on the lot and too few customers buying. Some mornings, the only foot traffic came from the tabby cats that occasionally wandered up from

a house down the street, jumped on the bumpers of the pick-ups, skulked around the tires of the cars.

Wilson believed that the new bottom-line pricing structure would open a new day for his dealership. It was a novel selling tactic but already successful elsewhere in the country, and he was the first in this part of the state to try it. The move might strengthen his exposure, attract curious customers, hopefully increase sales. The new policy would streamline the selling process in the interests of everyone's time, decrease customers' disgust with hard-sells and prolonged negotiations. It would also — and Wilson knew this to be his most cherished reason for the change — go far in combating the persistent cliché of the dishonest car salesman.

Wilson was no fool, of course. He was not blind to the truth behind that all-too-accurate stereotype. Other dealerships allowed and even encouraged slick salesmen to do whatever was necessary to keep business booming. Sell below invoice to a sharp customer? At least it would move the inventory, and you could make up the profit on the next customer, the one who wasn't quite as savvy, an old woman maybe, or a young college kid. Just double-charge for dealer prep, pick up profit on undercoating, tack on high insurance payments the customer didn't need. Wilson wouldn't tolerate such a lack of scruples. Just two years before, he had overheard one of his salesmen lying about rebates to an 83-year-old widow, planning to pocket the \$1500 himself. Wilson had fired the man on the spot, and fired others too. He nagged still others for coming in late or ignoring customers, for not knowing the vehicle specs and options, for thumping cigarette butts onto the pavement or piling half-filled coffee cups on top of the trashcan by the side door, and many had decided the job wasn't worth it. Now the row of offices sat empty save for Horace's, Jimmy's and his own. The times, he knew, were turned against him.

“Twenty-five years ago,” he often said, “being a car salesmen was an honorable profession. But now...” And his mind became so vexed with recent memories that he couldn’t finish his sentence. Couples dashing back to their cars and tearing off down the road when they spotted him coming out to greet them. A woman who spit defiantly on the ground at his feet when he told her how much he’d give her for her trade-in. Other people — so many others — who arrived on the lot with anger in their eyes, fresh from battle with another salesman, braced for the next war.

“We can restore a sense of integrity to this business,” he had told his two salesmen the week before, briefing them for the transition. “Our bottom-line prices will be posted for all to see. Our manner will be always courteous and patient. Our sense of principle will be apparent, our approach *transparent*, our ethics *transcendent*. Our legacy will ultimately be one of pride and honor.” And later that Sunday afternoon, as he gathered the keys, unlocked the doors and hung each small banner on its respective rearview mirror, he believed that what he had proclaimed would come to pass.

But even after the shift, the vast majority of customers still taunted and tested, sniffed around to see what the angle was, where the cheat was, how the deal worked against them.

“If you’ll take one dollar less than that, I’ll buy it,” challenged one man, and when Wilson wouldn’t indulge the customer’s sense of superiority, the man had shook his head and walked away.

“I found that same pickup for \$25 less up in Winston-Salem,” said another man. Wilson pointed out that it would cost him far more than \$25 in time and gasoline to travel four hours to get it, but that customer bought the other truck anyway, and three days later drove back and forth in front of the dealership’s front door for ten minutes, revving the engine and pointing at Wilson each time he passed by.

“That’s the best price I come across yet,” admitted a woman who claimed to have test-driven 17 red, manual-transmission Cavaliers at 17 different dealerships. “But I know if it were your lowest, you wouldn’t be offering it up front. And if you say otherwise, I’m gonna tell everyone I know that Carl Wilson’s as big a liar as he is a thief.”

Some evenings, around eight-o’clock or so, as the sun was finally drooping down at the end of that summer’s long, hard days, Wilson would lock the doors of the building and climb into the raised sales tower in the center of the showroom. Looking out over the grassy front lot and toward the bypass beyond it, he would remember himself as a young boy, wearing shoes with holes in their soles, eating mustard sandwiches, his family unable to afford any more than a rusted-out ’44 sedan. His classmates, meanwhile, had drunk Pepsi-Colas every day after school and savored their bright orange, store-bought nabs. *Their* parents drove brand-new Impalas and Ford Galaxies and DeSotos, sported around town in Corvettes or hot little T-birds.

As the twilight hit its peak and the cars on the bypass became a blur of headlights against the deepening dusk, Wilson sometimes imagined that he saw himself out there in the distance. He’d be sitting tall in a ’55 Bel-Air Convertible, turquoise and white, the top down and that big V-8 just humming along, and he’d be waving in slow-motion to the crowds, to the men, women and children who had gathered along the highway to watch him, who knew his name and who would remember it long after he’d cruised out of sight, along down the road and far, far away.

I. Horace Blanton’s Smile

“You still think I’m just some conniving nigger,” the woman said, her lip curled out defiantly while the little boy back in the child’s seat sat wide-eyed with wonder. “I done

showed you my money and it'll spend just as green as yours, don't matter what color skin I got. Here's a hundred dollars insurance, you thinking I'm gonna steal your car."

From the driver's seat, she stared Horace down, her gaze hard and unblinking, but he refused to let his smile weaken. He was proud of always being able to maintain a smile, no matter what the circumstances. Sunshine or thunderstorm, paycheck or bill, good sales day or bad. Smile. It was the second principle of Dale Carnegie's "Six Ways to Make People Like You." Right there between "Become genuinely interested in other people" and "A person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language."

"The expression one wears on one's face is far more important than the clothes one wears on one's back," wrote Carnegie, and Horace had taken the words to heart, greeting each day, each person, each reward and obstacle with the same expression of pleasantness. He knotted his smile on each morning with his tie, smoothed it in place as he smoothed his blazer lapels, fine-tuned it in the mirror as he combed his graying hair. Then he gave it to the pretty cashier at the Winn-Dixie. He gave it to his accountant each year at tax time, no matter what the news. And (as he had said on more than one occasion) when his wife had finally packed up and left him, well, by golly, he had turned to her with a broad smile and sincerely wished her well.

No, this woman — this angry customer sitting beside him now — would not end his smiling streak, though he had respected the challenge from the moment she burst through the door into the showroom, large and seeming even larger than she was, her purple dress fluttering in her own wake, a little boy in tow, maybe three or four years old.

"Do you folks not wait on us coloreds?" she had bellowed, loudly enough that Jimmy and his customers, a black couple signing contracts behind the closed door of his office, had turned in their chairs to stare at her through the office's glass walls. Horace, who had just

come in from helping other customers out on the lot, gave the couple in Jimmy's office a nod and turned toward the large woman striding across the floor toward him. "I've been out there looking at that car for sixteen minutes," she said, hardly lowering her voice.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Horace had said. "There are only the three of us here and we were all with other customers. Hasn't been all of us busy like that in quite a while. I'm Horace Blanton." She didn't shake the hand he held out toward her, so he knelt down to offer it instead to her little boy, who wore a small pair of denim shorts and a red T-shirt that said "My Mama Loves Me." With his right hand vanishing into his mother's grasp and the thumb of his left stuck firmly in his mouth, he didn't shake Horace's hand either, but the corners of his lips did turn up into a little grin on either side of the sucked thumb.

The boy might have been slightly won over but the mother was not. When Horace explained to her the dealership's one-price, bottom-line policy, she had dismissed him with small "hmmph." When Horace invited her into his office to prequalify her for purchase, she had stood her ground, snatching out a wad of hundred dollar bills from her pocket and telling him bluntly, "I'm paying cash." When he had asked to make a copy of her driver's license before the test drive — a dealership policy, he'd added — she had snorted hard, adding, "Bet you pick and choose who you gonna fingerprint too." And when he'd walked her out onto the lot, unlocked the Caprice she was looking at, helped her strap the child's car seat into the back, removed the orange bottom-line price from the rearview mirror and then slid into the passenger seat beside her, she had openly balked at his joining them, spitting out the words "conniving nigger," the reference to how green her money was, the "hundred dollars insurance" — leveling her cold, hard stare.

"Mrs. Washington," smiled Horace. Principles number two and three. He ignored the green bill balanced on the armrest between them. "Remember when I told you that my boss,

Mr. Wilson, requires us to get a copy of a customer's driver's license before a test drive? Told you that his insurance requires it? Well Mr. Wilson also asks us to ride with our customers — not because we think anybody's gonna steal a car, but just so that we can explain some features, answer questions, serve — well — serve as a guide to help families like you and your son find the car that best suits their needs." He glanced at the boy in the back seat, gave him a quick wink.

"I already know that this is the car that suits our needs," she said. "Do *you* remember when I said I'd been out here for sixteen minutes waiting for your sorry ass? That sure gave me plenty of time to look at that label on the window back there and read all about the gas mileage, the air conditioning, the tape player, the cruise control, the power seat that I adjusted when I sat down here and even the rear window defroster, which I already know is gonna be a real big help when we go visit my sister up in Pennsylvania. I already know that this car suits my needs. All I wanna know now is whether it feels good when I'm driving it down the road. And it sure ain't gonna feel good with you tagging along."

Horace stayed seated. "Mrs. Washington, Mr. Wilson is—"

"Fine." She opened her door, got out, slammed it shut and opened the back door. "We'll just find another salesman who can treat us with more respect."

Horace sat silent for several seconds, staring through the windshield, listening to the woman as she fiddled with the seatbelt to release her son. He counted to 10, and then to 10 again, unfastened his own seatbelt then and stood up, leaving the hundred dollar bill inside.

"Ma'am, I haven't meant any disrespect. And I'm not gonna argue with you." He smiled, closing the passenger door. She stopped trying to unlatch the child's carseat. "I'll wait here and answer any questions I can when you get back."

“Should have done that in the first place,” he heard her mumble as he walked back toward the building. Near the door, he turned and watched the Caprice pull out of the space and curve toward the road. The little boy in the back seat, having switched his right thumb into his mouth, gave a shy, furtive wave toward Horace. Surprised by the gesture, Horace raised his hand to wave back, but the car had already turned onto the service road.

“Cute kid,” said Jimmy, coming out the door to stand beside Horace. He held a can of Mello Yello. The lot, for the moment, was empty again.

“Yeah.” Horace put his hands back in his pockets, scuffed the bottom of his shoe against the curb, intent on scraping off nothing. “Mother’s a piece a work, though.”

“I know. We heard her in the office. Not the happiest customer we’ve had lately, huh?”

“Well, I reckon she came here from over at Edwards.” He pointed down the bypass in the direction of another dealership some twenty miles away. As he motioned, the Caprice rolled past on the highway, headed in the direction Horace pointed. “You know how some of those fellas over there can be — some customers more equal than others.”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy. “Maybe she did run up with them.” He sipped his soft drink. “Even so, I imagine that might be the least of her burdens. Some things’ll turn even the best person mean sometimes. Who knows? She may be a good person at heart, good mom to her kid.”

“All God’s children, huh?” Horace elbowed him. Jimmy was a born-again. He didn’t respond.

An old pick-up passed through the lot, two men looking out their windows at a line of new half-ton trucks. They slowed but never stopped.

“Did I ever tell you me and my ex always wanted a little boy?” Horace asked.

“No. Can’t remember that you did.”

“Well, not always.” Horace looked down again at the bottom of his shoe, began working the sole against the curb once more. “Early on mostly, I guess. Always thought it would be nice to have a little one, you know.” He nodded. “Way things turned out, probably best it didn’t happen.”

He looked up at Jimmy and smiled.

“Never too late,” said Jimmy.

“Aw, hell,” Horace laughed. “Forty-seven now, and can’t even get much of a date.” He shook his head. “Not in the cards for this one. No, sir.”

They stood quiet together, watching the rows of empty cars, the bypass beyond. Despite his words, Horace imagined what it would have been like to have a son. He saw himself getting down on the floor with the boy and playing with Matchbox cars or Tonka trucks. He imagined feeding him with a little spoon, changing diapers. Maybe his name would have been Horace Jr., but they’d have called him Harry. And Harry would have been Horace’s little pal from the word *go*, and sometimes they’d exchange secret glances behind Mom’s back, loving her each in their own way. Before long, Horace would be teaching Harry his ABC’s, how to ride bikes, how to drive. He would help him to grow up to be a good man. Better than he’d turned out, at least. Someone to be proud of.

Soon, the Caprice appeared on the other side of the highway, headed back, turning onto the service road. Jimmy was paged over the loudspeaker and stepped inside to catch the phone. Horace waited until Mrs. Washington had parked to walk over.

“How’d you like it, Mrs. Washington?” he asked as she unfastened her son from his seat.

“Drove fine,” she said, turning to look at him. “Suits our needs just like I expected, and I like it. I don’t mess around, don’t do anything lightly and wouldn’t have come here if I wasn’t planning to buy. Now we just have to settle on a price.” She turned back to her son. “Now you stay in there and play nice,” she told the boy. “I’m gonna have my eye on you, and you leave this door open so you don’t lock yourself in, you hear?”

Released to play, the boy climbed eagerly across the front seat and stood behind the wheel himself, his whole demeanor altered. Calm and reserved before, he now pretended to drive the car, sliding his small hands around the edges of the wheel, tugging on the gearshift, flipping switches on the dashboard. His thumb removed from his mouth, he made small motoring sounds as he danced happily from side to side behind the wheel and climbed from the front seat to the back.

“So how much are you asking for this car?” Mrs. Washington jutted out her chin. “And how much you willing to come down from that price there?” She pointed to the orange sign resting on the dashboard.

Horace shifted his attention from the boy. “Well, Mrs. Washington, as I explained when we met inside the showroom, we work on a one-price policy, giving you our best bottom-line price up front.”

“You telling me you’re not willing to come down one penny off the price?”

“No, ma’am. I’m telling you we’ve *already* come down off of the manufacturer’s sticker price so that you know where we stand up front. The price on that orange sign is already more than \$3,000 off the factory’s MSRP. Plus, as you can see, we’re passing along the current rebate, for an additional \$2,000 savings.”

“Hmmp,” she said, digging in her purse again for the wad of money. “But I told you I’m paying cash. I want your best *cash* price on this car.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Horace watched the boy in the car climb into the backseat and then return to the front again. The child sat down and then stood up, sat down and stood up, went back to steering the car.

“Cash price is the same as if you were financing,” Horace said. “Either way, most of the money goes to the financing company anyway when we pay off what *we* owe on the car.”

“Credit’s just paper money,” she said. “You can put this in the bank.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know we can,” he said. “But tomorrow we’ll just have to take most every bit of that cash back out of the bank to pay off the company who’s handling the floorplan on all of these cars.” He swung his hand out to encompass all the vehicles on the lot. “So whether it’s a cash sale or a credit, that price is the same.” He pointed inside the car and saw that the boy was no longer behind the wheel, had apparently crawled once more into the back seat. “And I’ll bet that you can go to any other dealership around and you won’t find a better price than *that*” — he pointed again at the orange sign — “on a car like *this*,” and with as broad a smile as ever, he brought the palm of his hand down firmly on the hood of the Caprice.

And that’s when the car started to roll.

Horace would later say that he heard the “yelp” first, claiming sometimes that he heard it even before it happened. Mrs. Washington — Martha Washington, that’s what it had said on her driver’s license, Martha Sinclair Washington, a name he would never forget, though he wouldn’t have forgotten it no matter what it had been — Mrs. Washington simply hadn’t seen what had happened, and despite how it all turned out, he would later defend her in that moment to anyone who would listen to the story again. She’d been looking away from the car. She hadn’t been the one to lay her hand on the hood, didn’t feel how the car had shifted backward, so slightly you could hardly tell it at first. She didn’t feel the slight

hesitation as the car hit resistance, then overcame it and crushed backward just a few inches more before it came to a stop. Even before Horace felt that movement, that hesitation, even before he heard the “yelp” and turned his eye from his customer to the car, somewhere deep in his mind’s eye he had already seen what had happened. The boy had shifted the car into neutral, he had leaped into the backseat, then back into the front, he had climbed down by the accelerator and the brake, he had slipped out of the driver’s door and wandered behind the car, and then Horace had tapped his hand against the hood and—

And at the same time that Horace saw this process unfolding in his mind, saw it with awful certainty, he felt just as acutely the dismantling of his smile, the muscles of his cheeks and chin gearing themselves down, the corners of his lips uncurving themselves. As the foundation of his face collapsed, he felt too the sparkle and the luster flee his eyes, his forehead begin to furrow, the muscles in his neck tighten in agony.

He understood then that Mrs. Washington had stopped talking, had finally heard the pitiable “yelp” or had perhaps seen in Horace’s face that the “yelp” was on its way.

“Whoa!” he screamed. “Stop! Stop!”

“Trevor!” cried the woman.

Each of them rushed down the side of the car, struggled to push past each other, slammed closed the driver’s door as they fought toward the back wheel. And there, of course, half tucked under the tire, lay the crushed body, still struggling for life, still scratching at the air, still mewling — one of the tabby cats which occasionally wandered up to the dealership from the house down the street.

As they stood above the animal, staring down at its broken body, Horace heard the sound of crying emerge from inside the car. Mrs. Washington yanked open the driver’s door.

Huddled there in the foot of the driver's seat sat Trevor, his eyes wet with tears, his body trembling but fortunately intact.

"Oh, my poor baby," Mrs. Washington cooed. "My poor scared baby." She gathered her child into her arms, rocked him back and forth. "Everything's OK," she whispered, stroking her fingers gently through his hair. "Everything's gonna be OK."

Watching the mother and child together, the tenderness they shared, Horace couldn't help but think that Jimmy had been right. The woman's fierceness seemed to have melted away as she comforted her child, and Horace easily believed that she might be a good mother to her son, cooing to him as she changed his diapers or fed him strained carrots, buying the little boy a Matchbox car with the same determination that she'd shown about the Caprice. Watching the boy's face nestled into the crook of his mother's neck, Horace caught Trevor's eye, and as they exchanged a secret glance, Horace felt his own features suddenly beaming with a smile that did not need to be fixed or smoothed or fine-tuned, that was not commanded by Dale Carnegie or created through any force of will. Without thinking, Horace found himself reaching over to pat Trevor on the back. He felt the boy's warmth on his fingers, his little body still rising and falling with breath. He wrapped his arms around the woman and her child and held them both tight.

"Get off me!" shouted Mrs. Washington, shoving Horace away, thrusting him hard against the hood of the Caprice. "Get off me! Get away from me and my child!"

Horace put his hand onto the fender, tried to regain his balance but couldn't. He fell to his knees by the front tire.

"What kind of sorry devil takes advantage of a person's fear and grieving to sell a car? You think you gonna lull me into thinking you some human? Make me think you my friend? Nice white man not too big to hug a black woman and her child?" Her features raged

with a new fury. “You get away from me, you beetle-minded bigot! You conniver! You—you *car salesman!*”

“Mrs. Washington—” Horace began to plead, then stopped when he saw the frightened, bewildered look of the child in her arms. For a moment, just a flash of a moment, Horace saw himself through the small boy’s eyes: a gray-haired old man, scrambling around on the ground, reaching up to the boy’s mother, trying to paw and grasp at the woman and at her child, frightening her, making her shout in fear and anger, frightening the boy himself. As if sensing Horace’s horrible recognition, Trevor let out another scream, writhing violently in his mother’s arm, fighting to turn both head and body away from the man on his knees before them.

In that exchange of recognitions, Horace found his balance once more. Slowly he stood up, straightened his tie and slid a hand through his hair, smoothed the lapels of his jacket.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Washington,” he said, hardly raising his voice to be heard above the crying child. “I was wrong about the price of this car. In all actuality, I won’t be able to sell it to you today at *any* price.” With a slight bow of his head, Horace turned and walked inside.

Behind him the shouts of the woman and the wails of the child grew louder, but Horace didn’t hear. In the reflection on the glass door in front of him, he didn’t see Mrs. Washington behind him, waving hundred dollar bills high in the air, and neither did he see the look of confusion and anger on Mr. Wilson’s face when the door opened and Wilson came rushing past him. How could he see and hear all this? How could he see or hear anything when every ounce of his being was focused on maintaining his balance, putting that next foot in front of the other, struggling to keep the corners of his lips curved up high?

II. Jimmy Bradford's Faith

Some days the Lord brought Jimmy Bradford more sales than others, but some days lately He had brought Jimmy none at all. One afternoon, the Lord brought him Mrs. Edna Trott.

Jimmy had never before thought of himself as a bad salesman, and he didn't think of himself as a bad salesman now. He'd been selling cars for 14 years at one dealership or another, been working in car dealerships in general for longer than that, and often during that time, whether he was cleaning the cars, stocking the front shelves in the parts department or ultimately handling contracts and titles, customers had said that there was a steady worker, an up-and-comer, a man you liked to do business with, might come back to do business with again. At 32, still wearing a boyish face even if he wore a few extra pounds as well, he had long since learned that he succeeded best with people who could look down on him as a good fellow — faithful, trustworthy, enduring.

But Jimmy had also learned that “slow and steady” doesn't always win the race. He had never been the star salesman at any of the dealerships at which he'd worked, and he wasn't one here at Carl Wilson Chevrolet either, even though there were only the three of them — only two in fact, if you didn't count Mr. Wilson. Though it went against the fundamentals of his beliefs, he had to admit that he had sometimes envied his co-worker Horace's easy confidence and easy banter, the way he greeted each customer with a firm handshake and a persuasive smile, the way he turned so many prospects into purchasers, and so quickly too. Even the other day when he'd had a run-in with that Mrs. Washington — with Mr. Wilson himself having to step in and fix things and the boy from the washpit having to come scoop up that dead cat — Horace never lost his smile. He just shrugged the

whole thing off as a personality conflict and moved smoothly to the next customer, never once missing a beat.

Jimmy knew he could never be that way, and his sales figures reflected it — just steady enough that a few months ago he had been considering how to buy a pair of used cars for his twin daughters, but never stellar. And with the latest downturn in the economy, he had begun to think that they might have to share a car, or might have to share his Buick Century with him.

But though he sometimes pictured for himself a future in which his finances withered away, his car refused to start, the stability of his life vanished — though he wondered, sometimes aloud, that this might not be the business for him — Jimmy maintained faith that there was just as much purpose to the slow days as to the successful ones. He sometimes imagined that he was like some modern-day Job, that he was somehow being tested by the advancing adversity, and he felt certain that his faith would ultimately be rewarded. He knew that if he was meant to move on, God would give him a sign.

Jimmy had received such signs throughout his life, though he hadn't recognized them until he had been born again with new eyes. Looking back over the years, he could see the signs that had visited him, the blessings bestowed upon him. And he had not failed to notice that many of these signs and blessings had come to him in car dealerships. When he was sixteen, for example, working his first job, washing cars at Frank Dooley Ford, the washpit at the back of the small dealership faced directly across the street into the bedroom window of a pretty girl just a year older than he was. Wasn't the way she'd called out to him each afternoon a sign of some kind? Some had said that being a teenaged father and husband and then an ex-husband and single father had ruined his life. *How you plan to finish high school with a wife and them twin babies to support? How you ever gonna go to college and get a*

decent job? But didn't he have two wonderful daughters now, almost grown themselves? And a few years later when he was twenty-one and working as a salesman, hadn't he been passing down the hallway of that same dealership when Frank Dooley himself tacked up a poster for the local community college? "We want you!" the poster had said, with a porpoise — the college mascot — pointing its fin at him. Wasn't "porpoise" just a few letters from "purpose"? And hadn't Dooley, who was on the board of the college, arranged for Jimmy's tuition so that he could get his degree? These were signs as well. Jimmy was certain of it.

Second only to Jimmy's faith in Christ was his faith in Amway, which he had also found at a dealership — not Dooley Ford but a Buick business he'd worked at before coming to the Chevrolet place. The customer who introduced him to Amway, a man by the name of Burton Pickett, hadn't bought any of the cars they'd test-driven, but Jimmy believed that the profit he would ultimately gain from that encounter would by far outweigh any commission he might have received if Pickett had simply purchased a car himself.

In the meantime, Jimmy dutifully reported to work each day. He always wore the same blue blazer, thin at the shoulders, rubbed shiny at the elbows, a little snug these days; his only jacket, it matched some of his pants better than others. He always greeted each customer with the recognition of the hard life they might have led. And he began each morning and afternoon, commemorated each meal and ended each day, with a prayer that God would guard him against misfortune as he traveled life's journey, lead him along the right path when the road offered up a choice, show him the signs that would light the way.

And so it came to pass that Jimmy met Mrs. Trott on the lot one sunny July Monday about mid-morning. He hadn't seen her car pull up, didn't see her car at all, in fact. She just appeared from nowhere, a small woman somewhere in her late sixties, gray hair pulled back in a small bun. She pointed out the vehicle she was interested in — a no-frills blue Lumina,

standard equipment — and he made a quick copy of her license before they took a test-drive. Afterward, as they walked back inside the showroom, Jimmy discovered that Mrs. Trott had taken a cab to the dealership, and though she confessed that she didn't have any cash for a downpayment, he assured her that they could use the rebate in its place. The pre-qualification had in this manner become a post-qualification, but now that she was now in the office, he felt sure she was on her way to owning a new car.

“We just need to finish out this credit application, Mrs. Trott,” Jimmy said after copying down as much info as he could from her driver's license. He adjusted his glasses, clicked his pen closed, then open again. “Now, where do you work?”

“Oh, I don't work,” she replied, smoothing the creases on her blue skirt but never looking away from Jimmy's eyes. She sat straight up, her back not touching the back of the chair.

“Well, then, what is your main source of income?”

“I have a social security check that I get each month.” She smiled.

“And how much is that?”

“Four hundred and fifty-nine dollars.”

“Four hundred and fifty-nine dollars,” Jimmy repeated, raising his eyebrows, laying down his pen. “And do you have any other income besides that?”

“Oh, no. Not now.” She shook her head. “But I've always lived a very simple life.”

“Ma'am,” Jimmy said, leaning forward on his desk, putting the fingertips of each hand together as he spoke. “I'm sorry to tell you this, but I'm afraid that your income might not be enough for you to purchase this car.” He turned to punch some figures into his calculator. “Putting just the rebate down, you might be looking at.... well, at least \$260 for your monthly payment, which would make your payment more than half of your income.

And I know without even faxing in this application that the bank won't finance that." Mrs. Trott continued to smile blankly at him. Jimmy felt his face reddening, embarrassed for her. "In fact," he went on, "even with the cheapest new car on the lot here, you may still be looking at close to \$200, and some of the used ones will run just as much because of the shorter financing schedules, and, well, Mrs. Trott, based on your income, I just don't see how you could manage such a car payment."

"Oh, I'm not worried about car payments," she replied calmly, dismissing his concerns with a backward wave of her hand.

Jimmy breathed deeply. "I understand that *you* may not be worried about meeting your car payments," he said. "But the financing company will be." He nodded, hoping she understood. "I just don't see any way it's going to happen."

Mrs. Trott nodded back at him. "I don't know how it's going to happen either. I just know that it *will*," she said. "God's going to provide me a car. He told me so last night."

Jimmy felt his spine tighten. He looked through the windows of his office at the back of Horace's head. Had Horace put this woman up to this? He liked joking around about Jimmy's being a born-again, and usually Jimmy could brush it off, but this went too far. Jimmy was overcome by thoughts that he knew were decidedly unchristian. Though his sense of embarrassment for the woman had fled, he felt his face still hot and red at the joke being played upon him.

"God told you so?" he asked.

"Yes, He did," she replied. "He came to me last night in a dream and told me to take a taxi to Carl Wilson Chevrolet this morning. I was told to wear the blue dress I always save for Sundays, and to look for a blue car and a salesman in a blue jacket. And I was told that this car would be provided to me."

“Provided?” Jimmy asked. “Provided how?”

“I wasn’t told,” she said with a quizzical look, as if this was the first she’d considered the question. “Perhaps I *will* be approved for financing despite what you say and then God will send me the money later to pay for it. Perhaps my sister will call me here and tell me that the mailman has delivered a check. You know, I’ve been reading in the paper how the state government up in Raleigh has just hundreds of thousands of dollars in old money just waiting to find who it belongs to. Or maybe someone will just decide to give me the car. God sometimes works in mysterious ways.”

Jimmy picked up the pen, chewed on the end of it.

“What did God look like?” he asked.

“He didn’t look at all,” she replied quickly. “He *sounded*. He was a voice.”

“OK, then. How did He *sound*?”

“He sounded like Billy Graham,” she told him. “But with an echo when He spoke and a little more country-sounding.”

Jimmy removed the pen from his mouth and laid it on his desk.

“Mrs. Trott, is this a joke?”

She leaned away from him, stared at him with suspicion and disbelief.

“Do you not believe that God created the heavens and the earth?” she asked.

“Well,” said Jimmy. “Yes, in fact, I do.”

“Do you not believe that He created man out of nothing more than the dust off the ground? And that He created woman from the rib of that man?”

“I do.”

“Do you believe that He covered the whole world with water, and that He first delivered a message to Noah so that his family and two each of all the animals of the earth would not be consumed by that flood?”

“Yes, yes.”

“And do you believe that He parted the Red Sea for the Israelites, just whooshed it right up for them, and that He gave His only begotten son to provide a chance of redemption to each of us and to give us the opportunity of life everlasting?”

“I do,” said Jimmy, “but—”

Mrs. Trott raised a single finger to hush him. “Then why do you think the Lord can’t afford a mid-sized Chevy?”

Confronted by the steadfastness of her faith, Jimmy agreed to fill out a financing application and fax it through to several of the crediting companies. When the forms were complete, he asked her to wait back in the customer lounge.

“Thank you,” she said, shaking his hand. “You just come find me when you get the word. I don’t mind waiting.”

But it didn’t take long. Within minutes, GMAC faxed back a negative response, with a cover note that stated, “We are very busy here. Please do not waste our time.” While he was reading the fax, his phone rang and the account rep at First Union asked, in nearly the same tone that Jimmy had himself used, “Is this a joke?” The other responses were less vehement but equally negative.

“Is my car ready?” Mrs. Trott asked when Jimmy appeared in the doorway of the customer lounge. A few customers from the service department sat waiting with her, flipping through copies of *Reader’s Digest* or *Jet*, watching *The Price Is Right*.

“Well, no, ma’am,” said Jimmy. He noticed that a burly man in overalls had turned to listen to their conversation. “But if you’ll step up to my office....”

The woman didn’t budge. “Did they not approve our application?” she asked, crinkling her brow.

“No, ma’am,” Jimmy replied. Giving the overalled man a sidelong glance, he lowered his voice. “Would you like to step up front so that we can discuss it?”

“It sounds as if there’s not much to discuss at this point.” She smiled. “But the day is still young.” She turned her attention back to the TV.

Jimmy knelt down beside her chair. “Mrs. Trott,” he said, almost in a whisper. “We’ve heard from all of our financing sources and they’ve all said no.”

“I understand, and I want you to know that it’s not your fault,” she said. “But keep the faith. And don’t worry about me. I’m fine to wait here for now.”

“Mrs. Trott, I don’t think you understand.” He wrapped his fingers around the arm of her chair. “There isn’t anything else to wait for.”

She smiled down on him, patted his hand. “Well, whether or not we agree that there’s anything to wait for, I’d prefer to wait anyway,” she said. “Who knows what might happen? And you wouldn’t mind if I just watched TV here in the meantime, would you?”

Jimmy glanced around the lounge. It wasn’t full. There was no lack of space. The burly man still watched, as if waiting for an answer himself.

“No,” Jimmy said finally. “No. You’re welcome to watch TV. Stay all day if you want.” He stood up to leave. “Just let me know if I can get you anything.”

Closing the door behind him, he heard her say, quietly, confidently, “You just let me know when my car’s ready.”

Throughout the balance of the morning and the long afternoon, as the sunny day began to cloud over and the threat of rain began to loom in the west, Mrs. Trott ambled up to the front of the building several times. Sometimes, sitting inside his office on the phone or working on the computer, or else outside working with a customer, Jimmy caught sight of her looking at the rack of brochures or at the window stickers of various cars and trucks. Once, she sat in the front seat of one of the cars in the showroom and stared for several minutes through the windshield — at what, Jimmy couldn't see. When Jimmy was not otherwise busy, Mrs. Trott asked him if he'd heard any word yet about her car. And when he told her that he hadn't, she asked him instead about where he was born and if he was married and if he enjoyed being a car salesman, or else she just nodded her head and thanked him and headed back to her seat in the customer lounge.

Once during her long wait, Jimmy also stepped back to the lounge to speak to Mrs. Trott. An hour after he first told her that her applications had been turned down, he stopped to talk with her on his way out for lunch. Remembering that she had come by taxi, he offered to pick her up a sandwich from Wendy's. She thanked him, said she wanted a baked potato from the 99-cent menu instead and counted out a dollar and seven cents in dimes and pennies from her change purse.

But this was not the only time that Jimmy went back in search of Mrs. Trott. And when he sat in his office watching her travels around the building and outside, he wasn't always working on the computer or listening to his customers on the phone.

Twice that morning and then often during the afternoon, Jimmy made trips to the parts department or the service department when he could just as easily have called them on the phone. He walked back to the cashier's office to get change for a dollar though he had no plans of buying anything from the vending machine. He visited the men's room, though he

had no need to go; once inside the restroom, he found some purpose instead in washing his hands or looking at himself in the mirror for a minute or two. And each time he passed by the lounge, he snuck a glance at Mrs. Trott's profile through the small window or even stopped and stood at that window, staring at her openly, blatantly, though she never looked up at him. He watched her like some exotic creature, a fabulous bird perhaps, not foreign, not otherworldly surely, but somehow beyond Jimmy's ability to easily comprehend. Was she a fool? Was she a prophet? Had she actually received some divine visit? She seemed somehow unencumbered by the constraints of everyday living, or at least free from understanding them. Jimmy admired the seeming surety of her faith, wished in some small measure that he himself could experience such passionate confidence in his beliefs. Still, he couldn't help but feel that the whole thing was futile. No matter how long she waited, there was clearly no way short of a miracle that she would get her car. Anyone could see that, couldn't they? And yet there she sat, apparently filled with an equally strong certainty that God would deliver on the message he had sent her.

Jimmy didn't dare bring up his concerns to Horace, who was himself busy that day making prospecting calls, trying to drum up some new business. Mr. Wilson had been in his office all morning, frantically making phone calls, emerging just long enough to send drivers out to exchange inventory with other dealerships. Just past two, Wilson's wife Pat, the business manager, had come up from the accounting office in the back and sent him home, asking Horace and Jimmy to handle the showroom while her husband got some rest.

Facing the situation alone, Jimmy reached inside of the pocket of his blazer, pulled out a small Gideons' Bible in a green plastic cover, and on and off throughout the day flipped through the pages to which he had turned so often when confronted by the perplexities of life. In the front of the book, the Gideons had included a table of easy

references to helpful verses: teachings about conceit, covetousness or greed, and lessons about Christian virtues — endurance, patience, sincerity.

What do you do when discouraged? Jimmy turned, as directed, to the Psalms: “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall.” What of the virtue of faith? “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.” Jimmy’s Bible also told him that “whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” But he knew that such lessons were not literal. The mountain would no more throw itself into the sea than the Lord himself would come down and sign the title of Mrs. Trott’s car. The righteous in this case might well fall, at least far enough to have to call a cab and pay her own way home. The Gideons provided no index for the material rewards of faith, no cure for the misconstruction of belief.

Just past 5:30 p.m., after Jimmy had nearly given up searching through his Bible, he took once more to the path he had worn past the customer lounge, but this time Mrs. Trott walked out of the door just as he was glancing through the window. Jimmy felt as if he had been caught.

“Have you brought word?” she asked, a hopeful look in her eyes.

Jimmy shook his head. “Mrs. Trott, I have to know. As many times as you’ve asked me today if anything has happened, what is it that you’re expecting to happen?”

She tilted her head and looked off into the blank wall. “I’ve been thinking about that myself this afternoon,” she said. “And I don’t know. But something’s going to happen, I feel sure.” And he could hear the surety in her tone, see it in her face.

“Well, Mrs. Trott,” Jimmy began. “I certainly admire your faith, and I have faith myself, but I’ve been thinking as well about this whole idea of yours, thinking about it a lot, and I have come to feel even more certainly that nothing is going to happen.” He chose his words carefully, not wanting to offend her. “I just don’t think that God necessarily works in handing out cars, no matter how faithful any of us are. Our faith does help us to earn God’s rewards, but I don’t think that those rewards are really of the material sort. I think that the miracles He works are more subtle, less visible. And I think the greater rewards will be ours in the next life. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I do,” she replied. She’d been smiling at him all the while he spoke, and he saw in her expression the patient, indulgent look of a teacher for a struggling student, of a parent with a child who doesn’t yet see the truth. “And I think that you’re right. But the Lord works in more dramatic ways as well. What about when those people on TV win the Publishers Clearinghouse sweepstakes and that Mr. Ed McMahon gives them that big check? Do you not hear them thanking God for their fortune? Or people who win the lottery and find their lives changed forever in a flash? ‘It’s a miracle!’ they say. And it truly is.” She closed her eyes and nodded. “Each day when I go out to my mailbox, I wonder what miracle it might have brought me. Each day, I think that there might be a big check in there waiting for me.”

“But when there’s not a big check?” Jimmy asked.

She opened her eyes wide. “Then there’s always tomorrow.”

“But Mrs. Trott,” Jimmy said, “even if those are miracles, I don’t think that God expects us to wait on them to come to us. I have faith that God has a plan for me, but I come out here to the office every day to work. I try to live a virtuous life, and hope that doing so will build good relationships with my customers and bring me success. But I can’t wait at

home and expect God to take care of me. We work to earn things, just as our faith works to deserve God's love."

"He came to me in a dream," she said firmly, raising her voice just slightly, just enough for Jimmy to hear the change in her tone. "He told me what to do. And I've done what He required. I have the faith in His promise to me. He won't let me down." She adjusted the buttons on her suit, readjusted her tone. "Now, Jimmy, if you'll excuse me, I think I need a breath of fresh air."

He followed her down the hallway, watched her walk through the showroom and out the door. She pulled a handkerchief from her purse and laid it down on the curb, then sat on it. Just beyond her sat the blue Lumina they'd driven six hours before, and beyond that the clouds filtered the sunlight into clearly discernible rays which fell here and there across the lot.

Could the Lord, in fact, afford a mid-sized Chevy? Jimmy climbed into the sales tower and turned again, but with fading hope, to the small Bible. He looked up "Needing Guidance" and was sent to a verse in the 32nd Psalm: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you." When he searched for "Trust," he found two verses in Proverbs Chapter 3: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Once again, though he understood the message behind these words, he found in them no suitable solution.

But on the same pages as each of these verses, his eyes divined the words "poor" and "wealth" and he was drawn to them like a thirsty traveler toward water.

"The poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all troubles," Jimmy read in the 33rd Psalm. "The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek

the Lord lack no good thing.” And in the Proverbs he found an even more direct command: “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”

As he absorbed the words, Jimmy was filled anew with a sense that his encounter with Mrs. Trott was a sign, and he suddenly understood what that sign was. Her faith was indeed to be rewarded and Jimmy himself was to be the messenger of those rewards — more than that, an instrument of God’s heavenly will here on earth.

Sliding the green Bible back into his pocket, he stepped down from the sales tower and returned to the desk in his office. He jotted down his own name, address and financial information on a credit application, added in the appropriate box that the car would be titled in the name of Edna Marie Trott, and faxed the form through to three of the dealership’s credit companies.

Afterwards, he pulled from another pocket of his blazer the small black book in which he logged his daily expenses and upcoming bills, his salary from the last paycheck and his anticipated commissions for the next one. He calculated in his head how long his old Buick might last and how much repairs might conceivably cost and when he might be able to afford another car for his daughters. He jotted numbers down, figured various possibilities. He calculated numerous outcomes, added lucky windfalls, subtracted potential pitfalls. He measured once more his investment in his own faith and multiplied its returns tenfold, a hundredfold. He thought of Noah building his ark and riding high upon the waves. He thought of Abraham and Isaac, the chances taken and the rewards received, of Job’s financial ruin and his greater reimbursement. He thought of Moses and the Red Sea, of Daniel in the lion’s den, of David slaying Goliath, and he imagined himself stepping out of the showroom soon, the keys in his hand, his arms in the air, a shout on his lips. “I bring good news! Look

here! Here is the car you were promised! Here is your faith rewarded! Here is my own faith confirmed!”

But as the minutes ticked by for Jimmy to receive his own good news from the financing companies, his confidence in his plan began to fade. No matter how he did it, he feared that the numbers wouldn't work. The figures of faith too quickly clashed with the figures of his finances. After all, had Noah needed to pay for Shem or Ham or Japheth to go to college? What if Abraham had to face buying cars for all of his children when they turned sixteen? He imagined them bickering over who would use Abraham's car next, over having to share an old Buick at all. Jimmy thought of birthday presents he'd like to buy his own children, prom dresses, wedding dresses, the cost of weddings in general. Job kept his faith, but would Job have *chosen* that path toward his destiny? Jimmy thought again of these men and of Moses and Daniel and David. And he knew that his name would not be among them.

He closed his black book and climbed back up into the sales tower, watched the woman outside as she in turn watched the dimming sunset. The clouds now covered the sky more completely, thickening, blackening, chasing the sun as it began to descend behind the row of pine trees in the distance. He heard the phone ringing in his office, but he didn't step down to answer it. He heard it again in a few minutes and then the fax machine soon after that. He shifted in his seat, but didn't leave it. What did it matter the response? the approval or denial? He was unable to take the leap he knew his faith requested. He shifted again in his seat, his body restless, his insides empty, gnawing. *Hunger*, he thought. *Long time since I went to Wendy's*. And still Mrs. Trott sat, unmoving if not even unmovable, becoming a silhouette and, soon enough, even less than that as the darkness descended.

Jimmy finally picked up the phone and called her a taxi, stepped down from the sales tower and walked out toward her. He opened the door, he spoke. She shook her head. He shrugged.

“There’s always tomorrow,” she reminded him.

“Sometimes faith may just not be enough,” he heard himself speak. The words were distant, his tone flat. His voice sounded as deadened as his spirit felt. “Mrs. Trott, I don’t think you should come back.”

In the distance, the thunder rumbled, sheet lightning flashed, Jimmy smelled the coming of a hard, hard rain. He reached in his wallet and pulled out seven dollars, handed it to her for cab fare. She refused, then accepted as the headlights of the taxi came into view. And as she departed, the thunder shifted from a rumble to a roar, bolts of lightning spread out in fingers across the black night sky.

The rain came down in heavy drops but Jimmy didn’t run for cover. He held fast against the downpour until his clothes were drenched and his glasses were smeared and weighted with water, until he could barely see the cars on the lot or make out the borders of his own hand in front of him. Even when he finally headed toward his Buick and fumbled for his keys, he didn’t believe that he deserved any shelter from the storm.

III. Carl Wilson’s Legacy

Despite the shift to bottom-line pricing, sales at Carl Wilson Chevrolet had continued to decline over the course of the summer. Competition for customers in the area had become fierce, with many dealers selling off their inventory at almost any price just to keep the product moving. One dealership less than 30 miles away had closed its doors in July. It was a smaller franchise, Wilson told himself. The dealer there didn’t have enough drive and

ambition, lacked good business sense. But Wilson couldn't rationalize away the phone call he received from the bank almost every weekday morning, letting him know what that day's overdraft was and how much cash he had to raise before 2 p.m.

Today, he needed to raise \$62,308.28. The call came at 9:07 a.m. He had four hours and fifty-three minutes to find the money — four hours and thirty-eight minutes if you subtracted the time it took to write up the deposit and drive from the dealership to the bank.

As he did each day, even in advance of the phone call he'd learned to expect, Wilson had already tallied a list of income sources and possible revenue-generators on the top sheet of his yellow legal pad. He now wrote *\$62,309 Needed* at the top of the page. At 9:09, he called Chuck, his body shop manager, and asked which customers might pick up their cars that day, which insurance companies should have mailed in payments. At 9:21, Chuck called back and Wilson wrote down \$3,854 beside *Body Shop*, adding a question mark — no guarantee about what the mail might deliver. While waiting on the body shop, Wilson had also called the parts department and service department, and written those totals down. Done with Chuck, he picked up the phone again but hesitated to dial the extension, tell his wife Pat back in the business office. He laid the receiver back in its cradle.

With all this debt, the daily calls from the bank, Pat had stopped sleeping much at night, and he could tell when she'd been crying during the day, eyes red, mascara smeared where she'd tried to wipe it off. She understood as clearly as he did that one overdraft not covered would be enough to shut the dealership down. If a check to GMAC bounced, the floorplan would be revoked and Wilson would simply have to close his doors. She worried as well about the way he pushed himself. *Six days a week*, she reproached him. *Isn't it enough that you have to raise all this money every morning? Do you have to write up all of those signs yourself when Jimmy or Horace could do it? Out there directing that landscaping*

crew when they move the cars to mow the grass. Do you have to do it all? She worried most, she said, about his health. *Do you remember your heart attack? Almost ten years ago, ten years ago this month. And what the doctor said about your weight, your stress?* But didn't she know that her worrying only made his stress worse? He'd never let her down before, and yet now she treated him as if he was a disappointment, a failure. She had lost all confidence in him, and he felt his confidence in himself being undercut as well. He knew it would be better for her — better for both of them — if he just didn't tell her, if he protected her from the truth. But that wasn't an option. And he also knew that calling her was easier than walking back there and facing her in person. 9:28. He dialed the business department extension, heard her pick up.

“Pat,” he said. “How much do we have ready for the deposit this morning?”

Her sigh was audible, but just barely. He heard the clicking of the calculator keys. “Almost \$1,600,” she said. “\$1,567.” He wrote down \$1,567 beside *Accounting*. “How much is it today?” she asked then, and he heard her voice break slightly.

“Not too much,” he said, trying to sound upbeat. “Just checking in with you to—”

“How much?” she repeated.

“We'll handle it,” he said, firmly, sternly. “I promise you.”

The line hung heavy with silence. He looked at the books on the shelf behind his desk. Books teaching better management skills, guides for financial security, inspirational bestsellers. *I'm OK, You're OK* and just beside it *On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors*.

“How much?” she asked a third time, soft-spoken but with an undercurrent more firm than his tone had been. He debated which would be worse: her knowing the truth or her

worrying that it was even worse than it was. He subtracted the amounts he'd written so far: more than \$55,000 still to raise.

“\$55,000,” he said, his fingers crossed. Not entirely untrue.

He heard her let out a long breath. “We can't keep this up anymore,” she whispered, harshly. “*You* can't keep this up anymore.”

Wilson closed his eyes, and was struck by a memory. It was back in the eighth grade. April or May? The hallway of his junior high school, breaktime. He was sitting atop a cold radiator, swinging his legs out toward Cindy Findiesen, watching her blond hair, her sweater. He swished the tip of his foot along the back of her thigh, once, then again. Turning quickly, she grabbed his legs, held them tight. What had she said? What had he said? He didn't remember. Only the way she smiled as she began to back away from him, pulling his legs out straight and then stretching his body, him propped up on his arms, which strained out behind him, his hands on the radiator. He couldn't tell her to stop; everyone was watching. And he could feel from the trembling in his arms that he couldn't hold out for much longer; within seconds his muscles would give. But the closer to his breaking point he was stretched, the more he found that he wanted to let go. It made no sense: if he let go, his head would crash to the floor — or worse, hit the radiator first. Yet the impulse was so strong that he saw himself doing it, and instantly felt at peace. No matter what happened, it would be easier than holding onto the radiator, a relief to let his muscles relax. Smiling at Cindy, he felt himself, against all reason, loosening his grip. That was when the bell rang and Cindy stepped forward, moved him back to where he could sit safely on the radiator once more.

“I've got to go,” Wilson said. “I have to start making some calls.”

“Let me know what I can do,” Pat said. He heard her lay the receiver down before he could tell her he loved her.

The time was 9:35.

He picked up his pen and looked once more at the figures on the yellow legal pad.

Sales, he knew, would provide almost no help. Customers did not provide large amounts of cash quickly, and very little profit in the end, if at all. A hefty downpayment might certainly provide fodder for the afternoon deposit but would never be enough to cover the entire overdraft, and with most customers using trade-ins or rebates as their downpayments, sales rarely produced any cash flow at all. In fact, they often put Wilson deeper into debt. Sell a little S-10 Blazer for \$18,000 or so after a \$1500 rebate, pay off GMAC \$19,000 on the note for the vehicle and meanwhile you're left waiting up to two months in the red until Chevrolet reimburses you for the rebate and gives back the \$500 profit. And trade-ins meant no money at all until the trade-in itself was sold.

No, what Wilson needed was a sale with no financing — sometimes several of them, cash, check, didn't matter. He'd have to pay off GMAC immediately, of course; there was no extra money in it for him. But the gap between depositing one check and delivering another was just enough to float the business through to the next morning's phone call.

He pulled out his NCADA dealer list, scanned once more down the list of dealerships. Davis Chevrolet, McDaniel Chevrolet, Sturmman Chevrolet-Olds. He calculated in his head round-trip driving time, eliminated those who were more than two hours away, eliminated others who also financed through GMAC, eliminated still others whom he'd called on too often recently, saving them as a last resort. He'd done this every day for weeks and it came quickly now. He scanned his memory for the names and faces of dealers and sales managers at the remaining dealerships, estimated how cooperative each might be, how quickly they could be counted upon to answer or return his calls. He narrowed his list further and logged onto the computer to run the inventories of the dealers left. He looked over these

printouts for big-money vehicles — Caprices, big 4X4 pickups and SUVs — looked over his own inventory for similar cars and trucks, then picked up the phone. Depending on how well he knew the other dealer or sales manager, he might tell them, “Thinking about trading out some inventory and saw you had a....” If he knew them well, he might begin, “Terry” (or Pete or Denny) “I need your help.”

“George?” he said today. “Carl Wilson here. I think we met at the last NCADA meeting, down in Georgia. Remember? Yes, that’s right, at The Cloisters. Think our wives played a game of tennis together. Anyway, George, I was just looking at a nice Caprice you’ve got in your inventory — burgundy color, leather seats? Well, I’ve got one just like it but in gray-green. Beautiful car but I just haven’t found a buyer yet and was thinking about switching up my inventory a little. Didn’t want anything getting too stale. Wondering if we could make a trade?”

He made this first call at 9:45 — others at 9:53, 9:58, 10:05 and 10:12. The conversations didn’t always work out as planned, today or any day. Sometimes a car or truck he asked about had already been sold. Sometimes the person he needed to talk with simply wasn’t in, or couldn’t return the call until later in the day. Some hesitated, tried to put him off — “I’ll get back to you tomorrow about that car” — not knowing that the car wasn’t what he wanted at all. Some *did* know what he wanted and took advantage of the situation, held him up for nicer cars; any sales manager would give up a Caprice if he got a four-wheel-drive pickup or a nice Suburban in return.

Wilson didn’t have the upper-hand here; he needed the trade in the short run no matter how bad the loss of strong inventory hurt him in the long run, because in the meantime the dealer exchange brought in quick cash. He sells the other dealer a car; they sell him one. Checks are exchanged; money is deposited. The bank is happy, at least for a few

hours. Too soon, Wilson knew, the checks clear and the cycle inevitably begins again, as it had morning after morning for weeks now, weeks he feared would soon build into months, each day fighting for survival.

He emerged from his office at 10:18. “Oscar,” he called out to one of the retired men in the showroom. He had learned to keep them on standby each morning — a group of drivers ready to make a run. “I need you, Clement and Bull to pull the green Caprice, the extended-cab Silverado — the 4X4 — and that little red Blazer off the lot. Gas them up and come back here for the directions.” They’d learned the drill: pick up the invoice, the check for the other dealership and a cell phone; drive there as fast as you can; pick up the other vehicle; drive back as fast as you can. Be back by 1:30, no later than 1:45. Don’t forget to call when you’re on your way back. Don’t stop for lunch. And don’t forget the check.

Wilson always asked them about that when they called in: “Do you have the check?” Sometimes he would ask them to read off the amount, checking it against the figures he’d already penned onto his yellow legal pad, making sure they had the right amount, making sure they would get back in time.

By 10:35, Oscar, Clement and Bull were on the road, fanning out in all directions, bearing with them that day’s hopes for the survival of his business. Wilson still didn’t feel relaxed. Two of the dealerships were within an hour’s drive. No problem there; even with possible delays, they’d be back by 1 p.m. easy. But Oscar had almost an hour and a half each way, and that left just over 10 minutes to spare for exchanging cars, less for any unforeseen delay. What if Oscar got held up at the other dealership? It had happened: bookkeeper out to lunch, hasn’t done the paperwork, the driver has to wait. What if the Highway Patrol pulled him for speeding, or if he ran out of gas? What if any of them ran out of gas? Everything

hinged on too many details. It was all too close for comfort. He went back to his office to add up the figures one more time.

10:45 — Wilson calls his wife to reassure her that everything's handled, the drivers are off, the checks will cover the overdraft with over \$1400 to spare. "But what about tomorrow?" she asks.

10:48 — Wilson revises a list of people he'd jotted down on the corner of his legal pad, friends and selected business acquaintances he would call if time got tight, seeking short-term loans — as much as he needed that day, as much as he dared beg.

11:15 — Wilson realizes that the showroom and the lot are actually busy today. Horace and Jimmy are each working with customers in their offices. Wilson steps out to show a woman and her young daughter a used Buick station wagon; she says she'll bring her husband back to test-drive it later.

11:31 and 11:38 — Phone calls from Clement and Bull, on their way back.

11:45 — A group of wholesale dealers show up to see if Wilson wants to shed any of the used car inventory they've seen sitting out there for so long. They're vultures, but they're right. Wilson sells a Geo Tracker for \$100 more than he has in it, a Beretta for \$200 less because of repairs he hadn't anticipated. Net loss, but another \$12,000 to subtract on his yellow pad, and he hadn't remembered a single customer who had looked at those cars in weeks.

12:12 p.m. — Oscar calls, on his way back.

12:20 — Wilson finishes the paperwork on the Tracker and the Beretta. The wholesalers ask him to lunch but he declines, knowing he needs to be here when the drivers return. After they leave, he buzzes his wife and asks if she can run out and pick up sandwiches for the two of them.

12:38 — Bull returns. Wilson glances over the package from the other dealership, confirms the amount on the check, leaves the paperwork in his wife's chair for her to add to the deposit.

12:46 — Wilson and his wife eat, sitting in his office. They don't discuss today's overdraft or tomorrow's either. Halfway through his sandwich, Wilson sees a customer alone in the showroom and steps out to help the man. The man browses for 20 minutes, says he'll think about it. Wilson's sandwich is cold when he returns. His wife has gone back to her office.

1:07 — Clement returns. Wilson checks over the paperwork, the check, sends the man back to the business office. Even with two drivers back and the wholesale buys, the deposit is still short.

1:11 — Wilson calls Oscar on the cell phone, gets no answer. He calls again at 1:16 and at 1:22.

1:23 — Wilson catches his wife watching him through the glass, the look of concern on her face. Until he sees her watching him, he hasn't noticed the sweat gathering on his forehead, beading across his upper lip. Had he just been tapping his fingers on his desk? When did he start pacing? He wasn't aware of himself until she turned to walk away from the glass window, but now it is as if he can even hear his own heart beating.

By 1:28, Wilson had made two more calls to Oscar and was still unable to reach him. A part of him wanted to jump into a car himself, drive up the bypass, following the route that Oscar would have taken, looking for him. But he knew that was no use. He subtracted all the figures he'd written so far. Still over \$3,000 short if Oscar didn't make it. And too late now to call anyone for a quick loan. He stepped out of his office, walked to the front door,

scanned out west along the bypass looking for the blue S-10 Blazer Oscar would be driving. It wasn't in sight.

But just beyond the used car lot, Wilson did see a late model Pontiac Firebird parked on the service road. He didn't see the customer at first, then spotted him kneeling behind an '89 Corvette, apparently checking out the tires. Horace and Jimmy were both helping customers. Wilson stepped back inside and pulled the key to the Corvette from the locked box. He would handle it quickly. Find out if the man was a real buyer or just looking for a little thrill from a fast car. And Wilson could spot Oscar better from out front anyway, then turn the customer over to Horace or Jimmy when one of them got back.

Despite the heat, the customer wore boots and leather pants. His face was sharp, like a ferret's, and he wore mirrored sunglasses. His long black hair was tied into a ponytail. Wilson glanced over the man's car, a late model Firebird, nearly new. There was a cowboy hat sitting on the dashboard.

Extending his hand, Wilson introduced himself.

"Your name up there on the sign, huh?" said the cowboy.

"The buck stops here," said Wilson, as always.

"Pleased to meet the man in charge, then," said the cowboy but didn't give his name.

He had a toothpick in his mouth. People who didn't give their names rarely bought cars. People with toothpicks never, ever bought them. They'd always just come from lunch or from dinner, stopping by the lot just to kill time.

Wilson nodded his head toward the Firebird. "That's a nice vehicle you have there," he said. "Looks almost new. Is that yours?"

“Is now,” said the cowboy, walking around the Corvette, running his fingers along the fiberglass, peering in the windows. “May not be in a few minutes. Especially as nice as this Corvette is.”

“If you owe much on your Firebird, we may not be able to trade,” said Wilson bluntly, with a glance at his watch, anxious to get back inside. “With newer cars, you may not have had time to build up equity and your payoff may be too much for us to do business.”

The cowboy laughed. “Oh, I don’t owe anything on that car,” he said. “This one ’ud be a clean trade.” He turned his dark sunglasses toward Wilson. “Mind if I take a look inside?”

Wilson reluctantly opened the door, watched the man ease into the driver’s seat.

“Nice vehicle you have there,” said Wilson again, looking past the Firebird, staring west down the bypass for the little Blazer. “’91, is it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Why are you thinking about trading?”

“This old girlfriend,” said the cowboy. “She’s— Hey, mind if I crank her up? Like to hear how the engine sounds, check out the stereo.”

Wilson hesitated, looked down into the mirrored sunglasses. Should he challenge the man more emphatically? Wilson imagined himself asking the man point-blank, *Are you just wasting my time?* But he felt that an argument might take even longer than standing here with the customer for a few minutes. He handed the keys across. The cowboy cranked it up, revved the engine a little, switched the radio station from rock to country.

“I’m on my way to visit this old girlfriend,” he went on. “We’re getting back together. That Firebird’s nice, but a car like this’ll...”

Wilson wasn't listening. The cowboy was clearly not there to buy, and Wilson didn't have the time to chat about old girlfriends, to let the man listen to the radio. He should have just turned and walked off instead of giving the keys, but he hadn't. And now he knew what was coming next: *Can I take a test drive?* Joyride, more like it. He dreaded wasting more time getting a copy of the man's license, riding out with him, possibly missing Oscar when he came back. He looked around to see if Horace and Jimmy were free yet, but Jimmy still had a customer and Horace was apparently out on his own test-drive. He looked down at his watch — 1:38 — then turned to see the cowboy's shades staring up at him.

"Am I holding you up, pardner?" said the cowboy.

Wilson shook his head. "I'm just expecting someone in a few minutes," he said. "I was hoping that I could call one of the other salesmen to help you."

"Rather deal with the man in charge," said the cowboy, pointing up at the sign. "Tell you what: I'll make this simple." He jerked his head toward the Firebird. "Even swap?"

Wilson rubbed his chin. "I doubt we could do that," he said, then caught a glimpse of a blue S-10 Blazer away down the bypass. Oscar? Wilson squinted his eyes. "But let me try to get another salesman for you and we'll see what we can do."

On the bypass, the blazer pulled to the side of the road and came to a stop. No one got out.

"Take her for a test-drive in the meantime?"

Wilson turned once more to look into the mirrored sunglasses and saw his reflection, a look of panic and exhaustion that he didn't recognize as his own at first. What had the man said? Oh, yes, he'd asked about a test-drive. For a moment, divided between watching the Blazer parked on the side of the road and trying to talk to the cowboy, Wilson had forgotten what he was supposed to say.

“I’ll just need to get a copy of your license, Mr.... What was your name again?”

The cowboy didn’t answer, but reached into his pocket instead. Down the highway, the driver of the Blazer had jumped out of the truck and was running along the side of the road. Wilson felt sure it was Oscar now, though from this distance he couldn’t see well enough to make out the man’s features. Wilson’s watch read 1:44. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. In a moment, the cowboy would hand him the license, and Wilson could run inside, find out what was going on. The deposit could still be made at this point, he felt sure. If only the man would hurry up and hand over his license.

“Well, pardner,” said the cowboy. “Don’t think I can give you my license. How ’bout we just do even swap like I asked you and I let you keep these instead?” And he dropped the Pontiac’s keys on the ground at Wilson’s feet.

* * *

Even from the other side of the building, just as he opened the door of a pick-up after a test-drive with a customer who’d once been an old hunting buddy of his, Horace Blanton heard the tires screeching against the pavement, heard Mr. Wilson’s shouts echoing around the corner, reverberating against the metal of the cars.

Jimmy heard the screeching and shouting too, sitting in his office with a couple whose worried faces perused a payment schedule, and he and the couple both turned to catch sight of Wilson running across the grass.

Wilson’s wife had the best view, however. Moments before, she had been sitting in the back, watching the time, the deposit book open as she waited for Oscar to arrive with the check. Suddenly and inexplicably, she felt that she needed to go to the front. Almost unconsciously, she sped up her steps as she traveled down the hallway, past the customer lounge and toward the showroom. As she came around the sales tower, she heard the tires

wail and she rushed to the door just in time to hear her husband scream, “Stop, you! Come back here, you son of a bitch!”

Running between the scars that the Corvette’s rear tires had cut in the grass, Wilson raised his fist, pumping it in the air, then he clutched his chest, staggered against a late-model Cadillac and collapsed, out of view except for the glimpse of gray slacks and black loafers sticking out just beyond the bumper.

Oscar saw what happened as well, but from a greater distance. It had indeed been him in the Blazer which had pulled to the side of the bypass. Focusing so intently on the time as he raced along the highways to get back by 1:45, he had failed to notice that the truck’s gas gauge was nearing empty. By the time he did, he was afraid he would lose precious minutes stopping at a station, so he had simply crossed his fingers — literally kept one set of fingers crossed as he drove the last 30 miles, betting against himself that the truck would make it all the way back. He bet wrong. Within sight of the dealership, the truck sputtered and choked. Oscar steered it to the side of the road, pulled the keys and searched behind the front seat where the package with the check had slid. Once he’d found it, he jumped from the truck, and he had just begun running toward the building when he saw the Corvette peeling off the lot.

Oscar never stopped running, but it didn’t matter. That day’s deposit was not made. Several of the dealership’s checks bounced, among them a payment to GMAC, which set into motion a process that eventually led to foreclosure against the dealership’s vehicle floorplan and then ultimately to the sale of the business. Out of some respect, GMAC waited until after the funeral to send representatives down to start preliminary investigations into the accounts.

The thief who stole the car, Ricky Davis, a 26-year-old ex-Marine from Myrtle Beach, S.C., had indeed been en route to visit his ex-girlfriend, Sheila, and try to win her back. Ricky had stolen the Firebird he was driving from a friend of his in South Carolina, believing that if Sheila saw the sports car, she would understand that he had changed his ways, found a job and success, and she would come back to him. He had driven first to New Bern, where Sheila's roommate gave him the bad news: his ex-girlfriend had gone off for a long weekend in Asheville with a new boyfriend. The roommate reported this with disdain in her voice, and the whole episode troubled Ricky mightily. As he drove west, he realized that the Firebird might not be enough to win her back. When he'd seen the Corvette from the bypass, he'd understood immediately that he had to have it. He was eventually caught, tried and briefly imprisoned.

Pat Wilson testified against Ricky at the trial. She did not fight GMAC's inquiry into the dealership's finances, but neither did she cooperate. She never set foot again in the dealership that bore her husband's name, declaring long into her old age that the business had killed him. She never married again, never dated. She loved the memory of Carl Wilson until the day she died.

As time passed, the grass grew over the twin scars that the Corvette had left, but the skid marks on the asphalt could never be removed. In the weeks after Wilson's death, the boy from the washpit scrubbed them with soap and water, doused them with hot lye and finally tried raw battery acid, but the marks resisted. Rains came and then snow, a hurricane the following year. Future washboys were given the tire marks as a challenge. Bets were placed. The tire marks became a legend, then a joke.

In the meantime, children still went to birthday parties, adults still worked in the yard on weekends, couples still shared or didn't share in household chores. But there were some

changes, of course. The Carl Wilson Chevrolet sign came down from the front of the dealership, as did the orange and yellow tags hanging from the rearview mirrors. A new sign went up — Reynolds Chevrolet. New salesmen were hired, the offices began to fill. Cigarette butts gathered on the asphalt in front of the showroom's side door, coffee cups overflowed from the trashcan at the corner of the building. Horace stayed, Jimmy left. Widows and college kids were double-charged for dealer prep, paid high prices for undercoating that was never put on the cars, bought levels of insurance they didn't need at exorbitant rates. Savvy customers took advantage of great bargains. The cars and trucks moved quickly off the lot. Business boomed.

Pictures of an Afternoon

My friend Mary Ruffin brought a camera on her first visit to Goldsboro. M.R. was taking a photography class, and we spent the afternoon seeking subjects.

A cemetery provided the chance to line up tombstones and statues, play with apertures and focal points. She stretched across the leaves to bring a cannon and an obelisk together in one frame. She practiced different framing techniques on a freshly dug hole, a waiting grave.

We drove through federal housing projects and M.R. bounded out of the car. Eager children crowded against us, smiled and posed near a ditch. From the back of squat brick buildings, parents cut suspicious eyes, moved their lips, and paced. “I feel like a *LIFE* photographer,” said M.R., who hadn’t seen.

At Cherry Hospital, the county's mental institution, she took pictures of empty benches and lonely buildings through the chain-link fence. M.R. snapped a shot of a white-clad figure shivering along a breezeway, talking loudly to himself while a burly orderly followed just a few feet behind.

We pulled up near a wooden shack on George Street next, an old service station, because M.R. liked the rusty gas pumps lingering outside, the Pabst Blue Ribbon sign above the door. "Icons of the rural South," she told me. "There's poetry here too, don't you think?"

From the car, I watched her shuffle through the dust and saw a stubble-chinned man lean out the door to pose. He sat on the steps, he rubbed his face, he walked toward the pumps. She shook her head at first, then held up one finger as he pulled her by the elbow inside. The clock read 4:05 and I gave her five minutes, breathing easier when she came out at 4:09. "Get me out of here," she said through her smile and she waved casually toward the man staring after us from the doorway. "He wanted me to meet his friends. He said he loved to see a pretty girl, said he'd love to take my picture too." She imitated his sinister laugh and told me about his grimy hands and putrid smell and how he'd begged to kiss her — just once, just on the cheek, pretty please, pretty girl?

We stuck to safer subjects after that: train tracks, a silo, the old County Building downtown, Griffin's Barbecue. We ate hushpuppies and drank sweet tea, reveling in the taste, the formica booth, the smiling waitress, these simpler things.

Everyone Talks About the Weather

On Monday it was merely a difference of degrees.

* * *

“Drive time this afternoon, we’ll see highs in the mid-60s, which is about average for this time of year,” said Brent Spivey, careful to maintain a broad smile. *The new face has to earn the viewers each day*, he reminded himself, *the new man has an uphill battle but success is at the top of the hill*. He clicked a button on the controls, dwarfed in his palm.

“And looking at WTEA’s exclusive seven-day forecast,” he glanced at the studio clock, 7:28 a.m., his timing as crisp as the press of his suit, “we’ll see some clouds lingering over the next few days and then a *slight* warming trend, bringing in some great weather this weekend, with mostly sunny skies and temps in the mid- to upper-70s. I know our viewers are glad to hear that. And now back to you, Marva.”

“Thanks, Brent,” said the morning anchorwoman. “Recapping our headlines as we close out this half-hour...”

* * *

“This afternoon’s high reached 66 and we’ll see a repeat of that tomorrow,” said Jonathan Albritton, nodding gently toward the eye of the lens. The camera operator was signaling twenty seconds until the commercial break at 6:24 p.m. “But expect tomorrow’s skies to be more cloudy,” Jonathan continued as he stepped off-screen, feeling again that dull ache in his knees, the years catching up, “with WTEA’s exclusive seven-day forecast showing the possibility for continued cloudiness, perhaps even a sprinkle or two over the weekend and highs touching the low- to mid-70s.”

The cameraman’s fingers counted down three, two, one. “And we’re out.”

* * *

“Did you hear that, Judith?” Frank Odom cocked his head, aiming his voice over the edge of his recliner and toward the kitchen.

“What’s that?” his wife called back. “I couldn’t hear you over the water.”

“Channel 7 says rain over the weekend.” He tried to keep his tone flat, waited a moment for her to respond. On the screen, a beer commercial showed women in bikinis crowding around a middle-aged man. Frank glanced down at the empty Coors can on the table beside him. “Wasn’t this Saturday the day you’d set us up for that canoe thing with Roy and Brenda?”

“Well that’s odd,” said Judith, wiping her hands dry as she walked in the room. “This morning that new weatherman said sunny skies.” She laughed. “Oh, who knows? I bet it’ll change six more times between now and Saturday.”

“Likely so,” said Frank, picking up the beer can and peering into the dark opening. The next commercial was for the game on Saturday, broadcast live from Baltimore. He laid down the beer can. *Let it rain, let it rain, let it rain*, his thoughts chanted, just as he planned to cheer for his team from this same recliner come Saturday afternoon.

* * *

Early Tuesday morning, Brent ran the National Weather Service computer models again, both the ETA and the AVN, comparing the trajectory of each forecast. Each time he ran the solution, the clouds cleared, the temperatures rose, the sun came out. He looked back over the synoptic charts, checked the placement of the prevailing front and the current movement of the nearest airstream, examined the upper-air data. So where had Jonathan come up with precipitation? Brent shook his head and entered his password into the adjacent computer. Once the graphics program loaded, he would erase Jonathan’s forecast from the previous evening and reconfigure what he himself had predicted yesterday morning. He would change the website graphics next, keeping all of his forecasts consistent. And he had already printed up the readouts from the various trajectories — materials which he could use to convince or, if necessary, to defend.

* * *

“This afternoon’s commuters are enjoying clear and sunny skies right now,” said Jonathan, stepping away from the blue backdrop and watching the traffic-cam image spring up on the monitor beside him. He rubbed his chin, realized he’d hadn’t shaved closely enough. *Have to shave again before the 11 p.m. news*, he thought, then let out a quick snort. *Or maybe I won’t. After all, who’s to say I shouldn’t grow a beard? Who’s to say whether I comb my hair up front or part it behind?* He pressed a button on the controls in his hand. “But that cloudiness I talked about last night looks like it might actually intensify over the

next few days, with the seven-day forecast showing about a 30 percent chance of showers by the weekend. And we'll be watching this developing pattern closely to—”

* * *

Shelley sat at the island in the center of the kitchen, her math homework spread out before her. Her eyes went back and forth from the TV on the side counter to her mother at the stove. Her mother faced away from her, stirring a bag labeled “Chicken Alfredo” into the shallow pan. Shelley heard the click-clack of the frozen ingredients knocking together, the low sizzle of the steam.

“Thirty percent isn’t much,” said her mother, as if reading her mind was as easy as sliding the top on the pan or turning down the heat.

Shelley curved out her lower lip and crossed her arms. “It’s going to rain, you know it is.”

“Well, if it *does* rain, we’ll just have it inside,” her mother soothed. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it special no matter what happens. And you can have your party outside next year.”

“But I’ll *never* turn *10* again,” said Shelley, watching the gray-haired man on the TV screen, hating the TV, hating him. She let out a low, guttural growl. “Nothing *ever* goes right for me!” she shouted, imagining the rain coming down on the picnic table in the back yard, and her friends staying home because it was supposed to be an *outside* birthday, and what did it matter since Harrison said he couldn’t come that day anyway?

It was her mother’s fault. Her mother never planned anything right. All of their food came from bags and boxes in the freezer. Everything in her life tasted the same.

* * *

Jonathan sat by the weather console, the computer models playing themselves out in continuous loops on a screen to his right, jaunting forward 60 hours in time over and over again. Jonathan didn't see them. He was watching the infrared satellite imaging instead and the Weather Tap for current radar conditions across the region. He was looking at the temperature of cloud tops hovering over the Midwest, held there by a slow-moving front. He examined the dew point and the surface barometric pressure for several small airports in Tennessee and Alabama. He remarked on the wind direction in Amarillo, counting the full barbs and half-barbs along the wind shaft symbols at stations along intervals of about fifty miles. A sideways 8 beside the station in Portland, Oregon indicated haze. It was also the symbol for infinity, he knew, and for a moment he imagined, as he had before, the long-term effects of infinite haze. Then in Portland, Maine, Jonathan found slight amounts of freezing rain — marked by a sideways *S* curved around a period. He returned to his desk against the far wall and began jotting notes. Behind him, the computer models continued rotating unnoticed into the future.

* * *

“And now a look at the forecast,” said Marva, turning her wide smile toward Brent. “Seems like we have some disagreement in our weather staff these days, Brent. So are you sticking to sunny skies, or is our *chief* meteorologist right about the rain in our future?” She caught his quick grimace at her comment, a combination of surprise and irritation, just before the red light on his camera went on and he smoothed his face into a smile.

“Well, there may be storms in *our* future with comments like that,” laughed Brent. “But for our viewers, I have nothing but sun and fun ahead. Before we get to the forecast, though, let's take a look at the patterns we've seen developing along the Eastern Seaboard over the past 48 hours. Here we see....”

Watching him on the monitor, Marva laughed lightly to herself, admiring his snappy comeback and quick recovery. She shouldn't have tried to get a rise out of him while they were on-air, she knew that. But she'd been teasing him since his first day on the job six weeks ago, and she found she couldn't help occasionally upping the stakes. Like what she'd said earlier that morning, when she'd caught his *Damn, damn, damn* as he was hunched over the computer. "You need to watch that mouth, kid," she had reprimanded him from the doorway, and then added slyly, "I know I am," before walking down the hallway. How could she have said such a thing? especially being a married woman? She had felt her heartbeat racing just from trying to carry off that studied nonchalance.

Marva looked away from the monitor at Brent's profile. "Kid" she'd called him since his first week at the station, even though he was likely only a few years younger than she was — late twenties to her 33, she expected. But he wasn't a kid, she knew, looking at his 6-2 frame, those broad shoulders and trim physique — not a kid at all.

On the monitor, Brent moved his hand along a line of blue pennants and red semi-circles, then waved toward the eastern side of the map. Watching him, Marva didn't regret her earlier innuendo, but she was sorry that she'd teased him on-air. Later, she'd stop by his desk to apologize, maybe ask him to explain what those pennants and half-circles actually meant. Men liked it when you showed an interest in their work.

* * *

"I don't know why they tell us all that anyway," said Terry, pointing to the TV perched high in the corner. Mack turned and saw that the noon news was on. The two of them sat at the slim counter where they'd eaten most every day since they'd started working together at the site. Some others from the crew sat at their own stools to either side. "Cold fronts coming this way here, high pressure there. I wish they'd just come out and say, 'Hey,

y'all, it's gonna rain tomorrow' or whatever, you know?" Terry picked up the first of his hot dogs off the wax paper in the plastic tray. "Earline, can I get another of those little co-colas?" he asked before the waitress moved away.

"More to it than that," said Mack, emptying a small bag of sliced banana peppers onto his hot dogs. The lunch counter only served mustard, chili, onions and slaw; Mack liked mustard and peppers, so he brought his own. "Nature is an awesome, magnificent thing. Weather has a process. Understand the processes and you've unlocked one of the wonders of the world." He sealed the empty bag, the insides slick with the peppers' juice, and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"Well, I don't doubt that it can be awesome," said Terry. "Thunderstorm coming across the field is an awesome sight, anyone who sees it knows that. But do I need all that mumbo-jumbo up there for them to tell me a thunderstorm is on its way — or for them to tell me that it's already here or that the sun's shining? If you want to know the temperature outside now, just walk outside. If I see it's raining outside the window, why do I need to watch the TV to tell me that?" He swallowed, then took another bite of his hot dog. He ordered his dogs all the way and they were piled high with ingredients. "I don't need to know the how or the why. I just need to know what they say it's going to be like tomorrow and whether I'm gonna need a jacket or an umbrella or my suntan lotion, you know?"

"I carry an umbrella with me every day," said Earline, sliding the Coke across the counter.

"That's just responding to the elements, Terry," said Mack. "Any animal can seek shelter from the storm. But cognition separates man from the brutes." He bit into his hot dog, then said, between chews, "It's a gift not to be taken lightly."

“Are you calling Terry here a brute again?” laughed Earline. “Well, I told you *that* the first day you two came in here.” Mack heard some of the other men at the counter laughing. Earline wiped the counter, moved along.

“What I’m saying,” said Mack, “is that the process of understanding provides an order to the world — a meaning, even.”

“Meaning of life,” laughed Terry as he chewed. “Meaning of life from the TV weatherman. Now that’s a good one!” As he laughed, a speck of chili flew from his mouth onto the counter, but he didn’t notice and Mack didn’t point it out.

* * *

“Jonathan?” Brent knocked on the open door. The older weatherman’s back was to him. “Do you have a minute?”

The two men hadn’t spoken to one another since the previous week, and Brent felt nervous about what he needed to say. Though it had never been officially stated, Jonathan was in many ways Brent’s supervisor, and Brent had learned at his last station how difficult it could be to correct your supervisor. Their shifts overlapped by one hour, and the first few weeks Brent was there, the two of them had used that hour to go out to lunch together several times. *What are they teaching at school these days?* Jonathan would ask. Or *Did you see that system working up over the Dakotas?* Now, Jonathan simply said hello when he came in, and Brent said goodbye when he left.

“I’ve noticed you’ve been changing my forecast each evening,” said Brent, as Jonathan swiveled the chair around to face him.

“And I notice you’ve been changing mine each morning,” replied Jonathan. The office was small, but one of the few that had been given to the on-air team. On a shelf above the desk sat a row of regional Emmys Jonathan had won over his career, as well as numerous

AMS commendations. Over 40 years in the business, Brent remembered, and suddenly the office seemed even smaller.

“Well, yes, I have,” said Brent. “But there’s a difference, I believe, at least from my perspective. I guess I understand why I’ve been posting my forecasts and I just don’t understand yours.”

“How so?”

Brent found the question perplexing. “Well, I’ve checked the National Weather Service models and they’ve consistently supported my forecast. I’ve made some adjustments to test other factors’ impact on the prevailing patterns, but I still get the same result. I thought maybe you were checking some information that I wasn’t, so I looked into NOGAPS and the Canadian models and even the information from the European forecasters, but not one model suggests that there’s any chance of rain in our area. Frankly, based on everything I’ve investigated, I can’t find any evidence for what you’ve been forecasting.”

Jonathan nodded his head, pushed the fingers of his right hand through his hair and, in the same motion, began stroking the stubble on his chin. Several people in the station, Brent included, had been talking about Jonathan’s thickening facial hair, but to Brent’s knowledge, no one had asked Jonathan himself about it.

“Two years ago,” Jonathan began, “all of the models predicted a snowstorm was going to blanket everyone in our viewing area with up to a foot of snow, and I dutifully passed that information along to our viewers. But the days passed and it never snowed. Then one year ago, the models made the same prediction again, but I noticed that the factors were in this case the same as they had been the year before when the computer gave us a false prediction. So *this* time, I once more told our viewers what the models were predicting, but I also told them my *own* expectations for the forecast, a forecast which completely

contradicted the computer's prediction. Again it didn't snow, but my forecast showed I'd learned well from my mistakes." Jonathan paused. "What we have to avoid is the danger of looking at these models as the gospel. What we have to remember is that it's all fiction until it happens."

* * *

"And now a brief look at the forecast," said Marva, turning her wide smile toward Brent. "Seems like we have some disagreement in our weather staff these days, Brent. So are you sticking to sunny skies, or is our *chief* meteorologist right about the rain in our future?"

Brent felt his muscles tighten as she spoke. So she was siding with Jonathan, was that it? And not just behind-the-scenes but on the air as well? Making him look bad in front of the viewers? He realized, sadly, that he shouldn't be surprised. She'd been undermining him in little ways ever since he arrived — calling him "kid" as if he was some inexperienced child, too young to know what he was doing. And just that morning, she'd caught him cursing as he rushed to switch the forecasts around yet another time, and she'd told him that he'd better "watch his mouth" before striding away in a huff. Had that been a threat of some kind? Was she going to complain about some "inappropriate behavior"? What else was it she'd said under her breath as she walked away?

"Well, there may be storms in *our* future with comments like that," Brent struggled to smile, but felt sure his expression betrayed his irritation, his concern. "But for our viewers, I have nothing but sun and fun ahead." He clicked the button in his hand, looked toward the monitor to line up his gestures against the blue screen as he pointed toward the seven-day forecast. But the rows of glistening suns that he'd inserted earlier weren't there. In their place were clouds, rain, bolts of lightning. "Well, that's not the right set of graphics," he said, blushing. He clicked the button again: satellite loops, a chart of record highs and lows,

current temperature readings around the area. He could have talked about any of them, but where was the page he'd prepared? He looked desperately toward Marva, who met his gaze with a blank smile.

Had she distracted him so much that morning that he'd forgotten to save his changes before the show started? Had that been what she'd meant to do? Or worse, had she gone back in and changed it herself, sabotaging his work to help Jonathan?

Brent stared numbly at the screen, clicking the button in his hand, flipping from image to image until the producer finally cut to commercial.

* * *

Once more, Sam Holbrook walked the well-worn path from his home to the small house where he had grown up, the small house where his father lived — or had lived until two weeks before. Behind him, Sam's pregnant wife was already asleep in their bed, exhausted from the latest of their arguments. Beside him lay the fields that his father had tilled and planted, tended and harvested, season in and season out — acreage the old man had bartered for, mortgaged against, spared no effort or risk to acquire and maintain... a legacy of sweat and blood that was now Sam's own, his burden alone to bear.

He looked up toward the midnight moon for some hint of the gathering clouds that the weatherman had been talking about a half-hour before. He watched the news each morning before he left for the textile factory and each night before he went to bed, hoping for... he knew not what — only that he ultimately felt as addled as the two men who couldn't agree about whether it would rain.

Before he died, Sam's father has turned the soil, but the planting still needed to be done: Sam was already behind on the corn and the soybeans, and next month tobacco season began. Working alone with the help of only a few hired men, his father had held out as other

farms consolidated under the control of big landowners. No money to farming at the scale his father did, nothing to earn but the pride of persistence, the right to keep the land and to call it your own. But now his father was gone. The estate hadn't been able to pay off the mortgage, especially after the meager crop sales from last year's drought. And if the land couldn't pay for itself....

Reaching the shadowed yard, Sam passed by his father's empty house and went toward the barn out back, opened the doors and watched the outline of the John Deere appear in the darkness. He climbed atop the tractor and placed his hand on the steering wheel, trying to adjust to the feeling, preparing for Saturday morning.

"We'll meet you at daybreak," his father's men had told him, "make what headway we can, provided the weather holds and the fields don't wash to mud."

"We can take it off your hands," said the McKenna brothers, with their fleet of tractors, their steady supply of migrant labor and all their time to focus on the business. "We'll pay top dollar, just like we offered your daddy."

"And you better just sell that land," his wife had told him more than once, and each time he had heard a more powerful bitterness brewing in her voice. "You'll have job enough already at the plant without spending your weekends away from me and the baby too."

Sitting in the driver's seat atop the tractor, Sam knew that no matter which path he chose there would be disappointment and regret. But at least he could atone to his wife and child in other ways; there was no way around the disappointment of the dead.

Unless, of course, the decision is taken from me, he considered again. *After all, if the fields do turn to mud....* But even thinking this seemed a betrayal. Even alone in the silence of the barn, in the dead of night, he still couldn't bring himself to pray for rain — not now,

not yet at least — and so he contented himself instead with wondering in vain whether the arguments might not go better next time.

* * *

“I need to talk to you,” Brent said, storming through the doorway into Jonathan’s office, not bothering to knock. “Do you give one shit about how you’re compromising the integrity of my forecasts? Do you know how stupid you made me look this morning?”

Jonathan swiveled his chair around to face the younger man. “I wasn’t here this morning,” he said. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know exactly what I mean,” said Brent. “You’ve been changing my forecasts each evening when you come in.”

“And you’ve been changing mine each morning,” said Jonathan calmly.

“At least my forecast is backed up with evidence,” Brent raised his voice. “I’ve got consensus on that from the National Weather Service and the Naval model and the Canadian model and the European model.” He ticked off the list on his fingers.

“A regular United Nations of weather agencies allied against me,” laughed Jonathan. “But evidence? If you want evidence, then walk outside this Saturday evening and you’ll have all the evidence you’ll need.” He turned his back on the man. “Just remember your umbrella. I’d hate for you to get rained on.”

Brent felt the fury rising in him as he stared at Jonathan’s back. “You know what, Albritton?” he said. “I hope it *does* rain. I hope it rains on *you*. I hope your house floods. And I hope a bolt of lightning comes out of the sky and strikes you dead.”

* * *

Marva’s expression was stern and somber as she faced the camera. “Throughout last week, WTEA’s senior meteorologist Jonathan Albritton predicted the onset of inclement

weather. The sudden storm which struck the area at midnight on Saturday not only left property throughout the region damaged, with falling trees and flooded streets, but also left Albritton himself dead — the victim of a freak meteorological event.” Jonathan’s headshot filled the right side of the screen, while the left side showed trashcans twisting across sodden lawns, cars hydroplaning through puddles or veering off the road, shutters flapping around the windows of homes, tiles ripped from rooftops. “Albritton, an award-winning meteorologist, was killed when a bolt of lightning pierced through the window of his home at 412 Chestnutt Street and struck him while he slept. A neighbor saw the broken window on Sunday morning and informed the police after receiving no answer at the door.” The image cut back to Marva’s face, with Jonathan’s headshot hovering above her shoulder at the upper-right corner of the screen. “Albritton began his broadcast career in his hometown of Sarasota, Florida, and had been with WTEA for more than two decades,” Marva continued. “He is survived by a son now living in Arizona and daughter in Alaska. A memorial service is scheduled for Tuesday afternoon.”

* * *

Jonathan poured himself a bourbon and ginger ale when he got home and sat down to reflect on the curses Brent had leveled at him earlier in the day. A flooded home? A bolt of lightning? Jonathan’s forecast had, in fact, escalated into the severe weather category that evening, with predictions for isolated thunderstorms and the potential for high winds, but Jonathan truly felt that he had the high ground — in more ways than one.

Sipping the bourbon, he listened to the silence around him, listening for some settling of the house, the type of creak that he sometimes pretended was his wife coming around the corner or ascending the stairs for bed. But the silence was complete, and his dread descended once more in advance of another restless night ahead, the memory of his lost love and the

children who never called. There was little that held him to this life now except for the job, the old habits of work, those ever-dimming passions. So much had changed, especially in the last weeks. There had been a time when his co-workers turned to him for advice and guidance, but those days were gone. He'd helped Marva to get her job years ago and she'd once been like a daughter to him, but now she barely gave him a passing nod. Her loyalties had changed — everyone's had — and what a paltry thing they had chosen to want: a shallow eagerness, a handsome young face... nothing more.

"I hope the clouds do clear," he said aloud, raising the glass into the air as if in toast. "I hope the sun shines so bright that it burns holes in your hide."

* * *

"Melanoma!" said Brent, sitting bare-chested in the dermatologist's office, feeling the crawl of his flesh. The doctor had already outlined options for surgical removal of the cancerous moles and surrounding tissue on his shoulder and torso, excision of several lymph nodes, a regimen of chemotherapy and radiation to treat the affected areas on his face, but Brent still couldn't believe it. "How can I have melanoma at my age?"

"Who's to predict such things with any accuracy?" said Dr. Withers. "We see trends. We see causes. We know the percentages. But it's all conjecture until the symptoms present themselves." He handed Brent a pamphlet titled *So You Have Skin Cancer?* "We'll do everything we can," he said. "And given your position, you can help spread the word about prevention, be a role model yourself, tell your viewers to always remember their sunscreen."

* * *

"Honey," Delores Fields said, laying down her knitting needles. "Did Jonathan Albritton have a beard earlier this week?"

“You mean the old fella there on the TV?” Her husband peered around the newspaper spread out in his hands.

“Well who else did you think I was talking about?”

“Well, hon, can’t say that I’ve ever paid him much mind,” her husband replied, turning his attention back to the sports section. “Sure looks like he has one now.”

* * *

“What the hell is going on here?” said bald and bespectacled Frederick Barston, WTEA’s owner. He’d corralled the two men near the weather desk adjacent to their main studio. “You’re predicting summer skies,” he said, tapping his finger against Brent’s chest before pointing it at Jonathan, “and *your* forecast is just short of a hurricane.” He could feel the veins in his temples throbbing. Why hadn’t he retired last year like his wife had begged him to? Wouldn’t he have been happier at the golf course this afternoon? or finally re-reading *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Herodotus and Thucydides? “You know what *my* prediction is? Ratings that’ll put us in third place after the other guys, for the first time in my 23 years at the helm of this station.”

Neither of the meteorologists spoke. Barston stared down each of them in turn, but they didn’t blink, their expressions as inscrutable as their voices were silent. He looked around the room at the TV monitors stacked into their cubbies: various computer-generated maps of the city, the South, the United States. One of them was awash in color: lime greens, bright yellows, hot reds. Another showed clusters of lightning bolts. Here was a series of ridges, a topographical map of fronts and isobars. There was a list of numbers labeled *temperature, humidity, barometric pressure, dewpoint/web bulb, windchill/heat index, rainfall*. Which of the men had read all the information correctly? Which one had truly

deciphered the mystery? Looking at their blank expressions, he thought suddenly of Pythia in her trance, sacred Delphi, towering Parnassus.

“Hell, if I knew how to work this shit, I’d fire you both and do the job myself.”

* * *

Inspiration had struck and Kate Jasper’s fingers moved quickly across the keyboard. “Tempest in a TEApot?” the Metro reporter typed into the headline field, then hit return and entered the slug for the body text before starting a new draft of her lead paragraph. “There’s a squall brewing over in the WTEA weather room, with dueling Dopplers, fast-changing forecasts and the makings of a melee that could lead to meteorological mayhem. Are gray skies gonna clear up? Are there darker clouds on the horizon? What’s really going on at the eye of this storm? Only one thing seems certain: Local industry analysts agree that this whirlwind of on-air conflict will lead to an even stronger surge in ratings for a station that’s already a consistent front-runner in this market.”

“Too much figurative language,” said a voice over Kate’s shoulder, and she turned to see her editor, Henry Welbourne, looming over her shoulder. She hadn’t heard his footsteps.

“It’s not done yet,” Kate said, sitting up straight in her chair to help block the screen.

“I hope not,” he snorted, leaning around her. “Albritton’s got *two* t’s. Look down there below.”

“I’m still shaping it,” she said firmly. “I’ll fix those typos once I get the style right. I’m just finding the right tone for the piece.”

“Journalism strives for the simplest means of communication,” he reminded her, one of his catchphrases, then segued right into another. “An *invisible* style allows the *substance* to be revealed.” He turned to walk away. “And you’d better get those so-called ‘typos’ fixed

on this one. The *next* time we have to print a correction on one of your stories will be the *last* time your byline appears in this paper.”

“Jackass,” Kate said under her breath. “I’m a writer, not a copy editor.” She looked around the newsroom to see who else might have heard Welbourne berating her, but everyone seemed preoccupied with their own work. Probably just pretending, she knew. She would overhear someone talking about it soon enough.

She highlighted the paragraph and hit *delete*. She told herself it didn’t matter. She was simply biding her time. Someday *she* would be the editor — someplace besides here — and then she would write what she wanted.

* * *

The headline of Kate Jasper’s story, as published on page 3B of the morning paper’s final edition: “WTEA steeped in weather controversy.”

The paper’s own weather forecast, page 8B: A sun partly obscured by clouds, two symbols overlapping, neither predominant, highs in the mid-70s.

* * *

“We’ve still got 64 days until summer, according to the calendar,” said Brent. He’d double-checked all of his changes to the graphics this time. “But it’s going to feel like mid-July this weekend, with temps touching the low-90s and fair skies as far as the eye can see. A day to really get out and take advantage of opportunities we don’t normally see this time of year.” A few more seconds until the break. Something more to chat up the viewers? Make a connection? Let them know he cared? His smile brightened. “And always remember to wear that sunscreen.”

* * *

“So whatcha think about going on a picnic Saturday?” Jeff asked, watching TV as Gwen twirled her fingers through his hair. They’d stayed up all night to watch the sunrise together, Gwen standing out in the backyard in one of Jeff’s button-downs and nothing else, giggling each time she lifted the tail ends of the shirt and offered him a peek beneath. When the sun finally broke the horizon, they had rushed back into bed.

“I’d love it,” she whispered. “You’re so romantic.” She nuzzled his ear. “If you’ll bring the wine, I’ll provide the dessert.”

He felt her warm breath against his neck, felt his desires rise at the way she said *dessert*. Her fingers strolled down his chest and across his abdomen, lingering there until he couldn’t wait any longer. Rolling on top of her, he wondered where they could find a secluded spot on Saturday afternoon and if pulling off her panties in broad daylight would give her as much of a thrill as going without them at sunrise.

* * *

Cracker crumbs nibbling into his legs and chest, Walter could hear his roommate Jeff in the next room. It was barely dawn and the two of them were at it again, same as they’d been on and off since they came in at 11 the night before.

Walter had been reading Spiderman comics and eating buttered saltines when he heard them the first time, and he’d turned on the news to cover the moans and squeals seeping through the walls. Storm in the forecast, he saw, and for a moment, he wished it was here already, a rolling thunder to drown out the noise, a rage of lightning, a real downpour to match the way he felt.

But as morning broke and he heard them again, he realized that bad weather would just keep them inside — and keep him trapped in his room, uncomfortable in his own house. Lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, he listened to Gwen’s soft cries, then reached his

hand down into his boxers, seeking to ease his sudden loneliness but, he knew too well, only increasing it with each slow, rhythmic stroke.

* * *

“Hurricane season, as we all know, ended nearly five months ago,” reported Jonathan, trying to feel comfortable in the new suit that he had bought earlier that day. He’d gotten a haircut as well and bought a comb for his beard. “And circumstances this time of year are unable to give rise to the atmospheric conditions necessary for tropical depressions to develop in the South Atlantic. But over the past few days I’ve been charting developments in the Midwest that have struck me as, well, frankly peculiar. A mild winter that has left ground temperatures warmer than usual. A lifting of the airstream that can’t be explained by geographical terrain. And, in turn, the development of conditions that promise to magnify the kind of vertical instability we’re used to seeing about now anyway. All of which is to say that Mother Nature may soon be making up for last fall’s mild hurricane season, and delivering winds and storms this weekend reminiscent of the worst that this state has ever seen.”

* * *

Lying alone in the bed she’d once shared with her husband, Georgia Sandling pulled the covers tighter around her neck. How many years had it been now? And yet even the mention of the word *hurricane* still knocked her insides off-balance.

She remembered the two of them lying on the floor where the air was cooler, the fourth night of the power outage, no air-conditioning, fretful sleep. They’d kept some distance from each other to keep from incubating the heat, the sweat. But she was still surprised to find that he wasn’t in the room when she woke in the middle of the night. She’d walked through the house calling his name, but no answer. And then she saw the closed door

and opened it softly to hear what he was saying into the phone, what he was whispering to the woman on the other end of the line — checking in with her, worried whether she was OK, promising that they'd be together again soon. His words had kicked the breath from her as surely as the hurricane had torn down the powerlines. Her own life had been uprooted as quickly and easily as the trees.

* * *

When Marva and her husband made love, she usually imagined a teleprompter rolling its script just over his shoulder — a series of *oohs* and *ahhs*, a *c'mon, baby* here, a *that's the way* there. It was a performance, just like any other, and she always played her role adequately, adeptly even.

But lately it was Brent's square jaw and muscular shoulders that Marva imagined instead, and she knew that her theatrics had suddenly taken on a new vigor.

While her husband grunted and groaned on top of her, Marva pictured Brent poised above her in a field somewhere, one of his large hands cupped on her breast, another holding up a bronze lightning rod. The sky trembled in anticipation of what would happen next. A pounding thunder drowned out her cries of pleasure. A bolt of lightning pierced her to her core.

But that wasn't right, she remembered after her husband had finished. As he drifted off to sleep beside her, Marva realized that she should have imagined blue skies instead, a lushly tropical day, the hot sun beating down on her skin. *That* was Brent's forecast. *Jonathan* had predicted the storm. And the word around the station was that the coming weekend's actual weather would cost one of the men his job.

Jonathan had been useful, of course. Marva couldn't deny that. Without him, she wouldn't be at the station today. But she also knew that Brent was the future, and she wanted to tie her fortunes to the fastest rising star.

As Marva laid herself into the cradle of her husband's outstretched arm, she wondered whether she would be the one to get Jonathan's office after he was fired, and how long it would take her to lure Brent in there with her.

* * *

"Your weather forecasters may *both* be right," said the voice on the general inbox of WTEA's voicemail system. A man's voice, deeply toned, with a vague accent. "But they cannot yet fathom what they are really predicting. Do they need help? Very well. Seek out Quatrain 83 of the Ninth Century, when Nostradamus tells us, 'Sun twentieth of Taurus the earth will tremble very mightily, / It will ruin the great theater filled: / To darken and trouble air, sky and land, / Then the infidel will call upon God and saints.' They are having trouble predicting the weather, because there's more at stake here than weather. Have them check the prophecies themselves to see how they can mesh their forecasts, hone their omens of all that's yet to come and finally comprehend the consequences for us all."

* * *

"Well that's a load of hogwash," Milton said to Herb as they watched the weather in the parlor of the Elysian Fields retirement home. Both men suffered from insomnia. Always the last to go to bed each night after watching the news and the late show, they were still up at 5:30 each morning to watch the early news. The first one to the parlor got the recliner and the chance to control the remote. This morning, that had been Milton.

"Well, it makes more sense than what the other one was saying last night," said Herb from the sofa.

“If you’d gotten here early enough this morning, you could have seen the whole forecast,” said Milton. “And I think you were nodding off last night anyway. It’s all about *atmospheric lift*,” he curled his forearms slightly, palms up, his right hand gripping the remote, “and lifting leads to rainfall. That young fella there doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“I think he’s got a pretty good head on his shoulders,” said Herb. “And him being younger, I expect his training’s more up-to-date. And I’m not so positive that you’re right about that lifting you talked about.”

“You don’t believe me?” Milton shook the remote in the air.

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you, Milt,” said Herb. “I’m just saying some proof would convince me more.”

“Well if you want proof, I’ll show you proof,” said Milton, kicking down the footrest of the recliner, slamming the remote down on the arm of the chair. “You just wait here.” And he headed off toward the frayed set of encyclopedias in the room next door.

Herb waited until Milton had rounded the corner and then moved over to the recliner himself, settling into the soft leather before flipping the channel over to catch a glimpse of Katie Couric, whose shining eyes he dreamed about each night.

* * *

At Penn State, Brent had been part of a test project coordinated by the National Center for Atmospheric Research to make refinements to the MM5, a fifth generation mesoscale modeling system based on the originals first used at the university in the early 1970s. Brent had read that the MM5 was now being used at more than 300 institutions in places as far away as Chile, China and New Zealand, and though he knew that his role in the project had been a small one, he was proud to consider himself in some ways a pioneer for new technologies.

He had also been fascinated by the advent of consensus theories in meteorology, in which slightly incorrect factors are inserted into real data to determine their effect on numerical forecast models — in essence testing how the end forecast might be changed by shifting factors in current conditions. If the end result forecasted by the computer stays the same despite the artificially modified data, then the meteorologist has built a consensus and can take greater faith in the forecast offered.

More than being a pioneer, Brent liked the idea of building a consensus. And he regretted his inability to build a consensus with his co-worker about the weekend forecast, his failure to acclimate Jonathan Albritton to the benefits of ever-new technologies.

* * *

The clerk at City News watched the gangly teen reading *Rolling Stone* and the fat one flipping through *Maxim*. She didn't like the way their jeans were slung low around their ass cracks and she didn't like the way they cut their eyes at her every few moments. Shoplifters, she felt sure, and she thought again how she wished the owner would let her keep a gun under the counter, so that she could raise it up for them to see and wink at them slyly and nod. They would stop cutting their eyes at her then, wouldn't they? And after all, a woman her age needed to protect herself, didn't she? especially after the sun had gone down? Just beyond the teens, she saw that the middle-age man in the "Adults Only" section had propped a copy of *Club Confidential* on the shelf and jammed one of his hands fiercely into his pocket. *Two things to worry about now*, she thought, and realized she had never wanted to shoot anyone who bought *The New Yorker* or *Martha Stewart* or *Travel and Leisure*. Not yet at least.

"I'll take these," said a small man in a brown bowler, laying three magazines on the counter. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

The clerk tried to keep her eye on the back of the store as she sought out the prices on the magazines and punched the numbers into the register: *Weatherwise... Weather... Endtimes*. She laughed at the last one.

“You know what’s funny about this magazine?” she said, not waiting for an answer. “It talks about how the end of the world is right around the corner. But when you look at the subscription form,” she flipped through the magazine and pulled out the card, held it up, “they want you to subscribe for two years. You see?”

But before the customer could respond, the clerk heard the chime of the bells hanging from the door. And when she looked toward the back of the store, the shoplifters were gone.

* * *

Late Friday evening, Reverend Bertram Tucker struggled to complete the notes for Sunday’s sermon, addressing the topic of how the Lord provides for the faithful. His problem was not finding something to say, but rather paring down his many thoughts on the subject, which threatened to overwhelm the twenty minutes he allotted himself each week. He had learned that his parishioners thanked him more warmly at the end of the service when he kept his sermons short.

As he jotted down his outline, he heard from elsewhere in the house a still, small voice. But hadn’t his wife gone to bed? And who would she have been speaking with?

He raised himself up gingerly from his desk, fighting the arthritis that had lately seemed to plague his joints even more.

“Martha?” he said, walking down the hallway. He peered into their room and found her already fast asleep, her body curled toward his side of the bed, her right hand pressed against his pillow, softly clutching it close. He smiled, relieved.

And yet still he heard the voice somewhere in the house.

It was the TV, he discovered when he entered the darkened living room and saw its ghostly glow. Martha sometimes had trouble with the remote control, and he suspected she had simply turned down the volume instead of turning it off.

Searching for the control, he caught sight of the TV screen — a map of the U.S. and a bearded man whose visage suddenly gave Tucker pause. Didn't that man look exactly like the image of Elijah that Tucker had carried in his head since his years in seminary? And if Elijah had returned, what did that mean?

* * *

Jonathan stopped in mid-sentence and stepped in front of the computer model, turning to face the camera head-on. “You know, I began my career as a meteorologist decades before we even had computers in the workplace. In fact, it may surprise some of you to know that even during my career, even recently, meteorologists have relied on Western Union — on teletype — for reports from airports across the country.

“When I first started in this business, we would lay out a blank map of the country each day,” he stretched his arms wide and pretended to flatten out some spread of paper on an imaginary table before him, “and we'd plot by hand the prevailing weather conditions from each of these stations,” an invisible pen made quick marks on the paper, “and bit by bit we'd see the patterns emerge, the truth revealed.”

He looked down at his shoes, suddenly glad that he hadn't bought new ones for his new suit. The suit, he'd discovered, was too snug under his arms and the fabric itched. But though his shoes were dingy in comparison, scarred and faded, his feet felt fine.

“Today computers can draw on all the laws of physics to calculate thousands, maybe even countless numerical forecasts,” he heard himself saying, “completing in minutes what

would otherwise take us all day to figure out, finishing in hours what it would take us a week to determine.”

He closed his eyes and imagined his worn leather shoes sprouting wings, imagined himself flying out of the studio and across the countryside and higher and higher into the air until he could see the entire state, the entire nation in one glance: the places where the sun fell unfettered or where storm clouds were gathering or where ice crystals were forming, the fronts and air masses, the processes of air damming and of lift — the invisible made visible, everything finally clear at once.

“And yet, I must say,” he concluded, opening his eyes, “that there’s nothing like the thrill of discovering something for yourself.”

* * *

Throughout the WTEA viewing area, people planned garden parties or stocked their cellars, bought freesia bulbs to plant in their flower beds or flashlight bulbs to shore up their emergency plans. They lathered themselves with suntan lotion or anointed their brows with holy water. They sought out lost loves on the internet, made last-ditch efforts to save their marriages or indulged in wanton pleasures with no thought of the consequences. They charted their lusts, gorged their fears, tried in vain to hide from their own loneliness. Some fled for higher ground; others huddled in corners. The brave stayed where they were. Regret did not rule, nor did pettiness, envy or hatred. But neither did optimism. A vague anxiety filled the land. People watched their sets, they watched the horizons, they watched the skies.

Mrs. Marple and the Hit & Run

Visiting the Elysian Fields rest home earlier in the day, Virginia Marple had reached her breaking point, lashing out at the three women sitting around the table — her oldest friends, now a twice-weekly bridge club. “I am *not* Miss *Jane* Marple,” she had declared, too sharply, when one of them had compared Virginia’s recent concerns to those of her “namesake.” Virginia pictured the spinster detective’s pink cheeks and blue eyes, her hair fixed up in a bun, the way the old woman had been content to knit by the fire, watch birds through her binoculars, tend to her garden. The comparison was enough to make Virginia turn her back on the tulips budding in her own yard, the red and purple salvia, the pink and white vincas, the lush marigolds.

And yet hadn’t their comparison been accurate? Wasn’t that why she was here tonight, her frail joints aching as she squatted behind an oak tree in a stranger’s yard, her

knobby fingers pressed against its hide? Didn't she long to prove that her own mental agility had kept her as keen as Agatha Christie's old maid?

Virginia couldn't bear the thought of being shut up in the Elysian herself, of Preston taking away her license, her freedom. And after all, she hadn't read *all* of the clues wrong.

* * *

Four clues:

The driver had wide shoulders, a frightened expression, short blonde hair, an earring. (Even in the rearview mirror, the earring had been vivid in its clarity.)

The passenger had a thin face, wide eyes, an open mouth, blonde hair, a ponytail. (Virginia had seen her from two angles, once in the rearview mirror and then in profile as the driver swerved around Virginia's Cadillac and sped down the street.)

The truck was a silver Toyota SUV. (Virginia recognized the Toyota symbol from the television commercials, and had emphasized the letters SUV to the policeman, careful to use the right term.)

The license plate was MSW 1158. (Martin Senour White: the color her husband had always insisted on for the walls of the house, declaring, "Where paint is concerned, Gin, this house is a patriarchy." November 1958: The birth month and year of her only son, Preston.)

Three extraneous details:

Moments before the accident, staring into the rearview mirror, Virginia saw that the trees along the street were thick with caterpillar nests, webby and angular, reminding her of the first time she'd seen them more than 60 years before and of the rusting rake in her father's hand, the flaming rag balanced at its tip, the small life writhing incandescently within the web, just out of her father's reach.

Virginia's knuckles had turned white as her hands locked around the steering wheel, preparing for the impact.

Drivers get younger every year.

Two assessments from residents of the Elysian Fields:

"Issues of personal responsibility are a foreign notion to young people these days," said Margaret, adjusting the gauzy scarf tied tight around her long, thin neck, picking a speck of lint from the white linen suit she often wore for Wednesday church meetings. "It's the culture they were brought up in, the world we live in today. They've become vermin. They've become slugs."

"It's the same old story: teenaged sweethearts out all night playing lovey-dovey, and then 'Oops! What light through yonder window breaks,' and 'Wake up, little Susie, we gotta get *you* home.'" Cass, a former English teacher, cinched the belt of her silk kimono, smoothed the flamestich lapels, secured the copy of *True Detective* magazine in her pocket. "Today's morals are no different from ancient times. Young boys just don't know what to do with all that testosterone. Their little peckers start growing and their brains cut off."

One camouflage outfit:

Donna Karan slacks in the perfect shade of flat black.

A black Jill St. John knit sweater generally too warm for August. Made slightly more comfortable by a break in the weather. Only slightly so, but sacrifices had to be made.

A black beret picked up years before on a Paris vacation with her late husband. Worn only once, to a theme party that one of their neighbors had hosted.

A small black handbag containing a wallet, a cell phone and a scrap of paper with the phone numbers for the police and the hospital.

* * *

Stealing across the yard toward the lighted window on the west side of the house, Virginia tried not to notice how the boxwoods looked like sentries or how the streetlights playing through the trees cast ominous shadows on the yard. She tried not to think of the phone call she'd received from James Milford, the man inside the house, or of what the policeman had told her when he finally phoned her to follow-up on the incident. She tried not to think of the images she both hoped and feared to find in the lighted window. She tried not to think that she was now closer in age to Jane Marple than to the younger women who turned up in Christie's romantic subplots, the ones she had always felt closer to the first time she'd read the books. She tried not to think of the Elysian Fields rest home, of women who sat idly in the parlor all day, staring at the television, or of their parade of walkers, wheelchairs and ailments. Most of all, she tried not to think of Nell, the third of her friends at the Elysian Fields, squat and plump in a frayed terrycloth robe, her long gray hair rolling in ringlets around her face, her hands motionless as they clutched along the edge of the table, the thickening glaze of her eyes.

The branches of the bushes scraped against Virginia's sweater as she pushed through the shrubbery. Pine needles crunched beneath her feet. Keeping her eyes focused on the sinister glow from the window further down the wall, Virginia stopped in her tracks, waiting for another light to shine suddenly or a door to open — for some voice to cry out, "Who's there? What are you doing in my yard? What do you want, old woman?"

* * *

Excerpts from four conversations, mainly one-sided, intertwined:

“You don’t understand, sugar. The caterpillars would destroy the crops otherwise.”

“Mrs. Marple, this is Jim Milford. I just got in from out-of-town and heard from my wife that you and my daughter were involved in a little fender-bender this morning.”

“The girl tried to deny it at first but the badge goes a long ways toward persuading young folks and I finally convinced her to fess up to what she’d done. Once she broke down, she also gave me the name of the other girl in the passenger seat, a friend from high school who’d stayed over the night before. The mother came home soon after that and told me that they’d been having trouble with their daughter lately —trouble at school, trouble at home... trouble all around, I reckon, because the mother looked about as wrung-out as the girl did.”

“The driver was a *girl*? Well I guess that shoots my testosterone theory all to hell.”

“For the last time, no. Burning is the only way to get rid of them. Now don’t ask me again, you understand me, girl?”

“No. I was *not* aware of that aspect. I was out-of-town until this evening, and all I knew was what my wife told me. Mrs. Marple, let me assure you that I don’t tolerate lying in my household any more than I would tolerate what happened to you this morning. And I take discipline very seriously. You just let *me* handle that issue as well as the bill for your repairs, and I promise you my daughter will sorely regret having been so careless and irresponsible.”

“I ended up not putting the hit-and-run on my report. Just listed it as an accident with the girl at fault. I’ve seen enough of these cases to know that the punishment the parents’ll give that girl will be far more effective than anything we could do to her anyway.”

“But all we had to go on was what you’d told us, and you told us it was a boy behind the wheel. I guess it just goes to show that old age plays tricks on the mind as well as the body.”

Three persistent images, one imagined:

Caterpillars fell like shards of sunlight to the ground — wriggled, wrestled, popped.

James Milford doubled his belt in his hands, snapped it tight, seethed in the hallway as he waited for wife and daughter to emerge from their hiding place in the bathroom.

Nell's gaze drifted around the parlor at the Elysian Fields, her focus never clearer than when her eyes settled on some empty spot on the wall or some vacant corner of the room.

Two questions for the men from Virginia's past — never asked:

Why can we not paint the walls in the living room daffodil yellow, or have basil green in the bathroom, or look around at rose red when we lie down for bed?

But what about the butterflies?

One series of questions from her son Preston, asked on the phone:

“Mama, are you sure that you were already stopped when that truck hit you? Are you sure you had your foot on the brake? Did the policeman seem at all skeptical that the accident was the other driver's fault? Have you ever thought that it might be time for you to turn in your license?”

* * *

Wedge behind the boxwoods, pressed tight against the brick, Virginia leaned her head back to stare up at the open window above her, its frame covered only by a lightweight screen. Voices murmured inside, but she couldn't make out their sense, could barely hear them over the clatter of Preston's questions in her memory.

“One foot off the pedal, one foot closer to the grave,” said her friends at the Elysian Fields, and Virginia knew it was true. The years pass so quickly. Inevitability breeds consent, and soon consent becomes its own inevitability. We choose a path, bide our days, slowly disappear. Was there still time to change course?

It was too late for Virginia to save the butterflies, perhaps too late for her to save herself. All too soon, Preston would ask again for her license. And how much longer would it be until he suggested that she join her friends at the Elysian? She pictured herself moving away from the Martin Senour White walls she had learned to love, and saw her lawn falling prey to leafspot and mildew, aphids and Japanese beetles, caterpillars and slugs. She imagined her hands clutched around the edge of a card table, struggling for some balance in what was left of her life. And she feared how easily her gaze might drift off from disuse.

But now there was still time to see. She hadn't gotten *all* of the clues wrong — that much she knew was true — and she felt certain that the new clues were still trying to tell her something, urging her to draw connections between all the images and ideas rushing around inside her head, to sort out the confusion between her fears for her own future and her fears for the girl inside this house. Margaret had first called the driver of the truck a slug, but now Virginia wondered if there might instead be a butterfly behind these walls, struggling to be born. And she had come to believe that the only way to save herself from being a dotty old fool was to save the girl who'd brought her into this mess in the first place.

Once more, Virginia tried to make out the voices through the window, but once more came the echoes of other words in her memory: *I don't tolerate lying. I take discipline very seriously. My daughter will sorely regret....* Pushing James Milford's cold tones out of her mind, she tried to focus instead on what she herself would say when this was all over: *Look here, Preston. I can see things well. I can see things that you don't see, that no one saw but*

me. Not only can I take care of myself but I can rescue someone else as well. And if I can do all that, then surely I can drive myself around town, can't I?

Raising herself up from the pinestraw, Virginia smiled to consider how she suddenly envied her namesake, old Jane Marple, for always being right, for always winning the day.

Gripping her fingers around the windowsill, she pulled herself up for a look inside.