

FRAMESHIFTS

Richard L. Rose

*Rejoice. What talent for the makeshift thought
A living corpus out of odds and ends?*

—*W.H. Auden, "In Sickness and in Health"*

In memory of William W. Watt,
Professor of English, Lafayette College
(“pewlagers”)

This is a fictional work. Resemblances are coincidental.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This novel was a long time in the making. Over the years, I have received help from Edward Brown, Hayes Walker, Susan I. Rose, William Rose, Robert Rose, Kathleen Rose, Goran Dosen, many others, and from the works of authors mentioned in the text. Thanks also to the staff of CreateSpace. The faults of the work are mine.

Associated with FRAMESHIFTS is the set of operas, which I wrote under the name of George Sakalas Smeltzer, known as the *Marginal Notes Project*. Thanks are also due to the many casts and directors of these works, especially Larry Clark, David Barker, Barbara Wilkinson, and Chris Hatfield. We made music, conveyed our message, and raised funds for several charities, some listed below.

I also appreciate readers and have eliminated my royalty on the book to lower the price. If you would like to respond by making a donation to one of the following organizations, it would multiply the influence of this book in promoting life-fostering concern, mutual compassion, and creative engagement instead of consumption, acquisition, and the careless disregard of habitats. And you would confirm your commitment to what Professor Henry Randall calls the *Fellowship of the Attentive*, the audience for whom I wrote both the music and this odd book—not quite poem, mystery, fantasy, memoir, treatise, or novel, but a threnody made of all these.

For more information, or to let me know about your donation, see my website marginalnotesinwordsandmusic.org.

Richard L. Rose

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Introduction

In this last volume of primary sources for the *History of the Northern Region*, I have compiled six semi-fictional accounts representative of the Regional Realignment Period, both before and after the defedding of Year 1, RRT. Students will find these ancillary materials to provide not only a background for the events in my text but also a vivid sense of daily life during this period. The first four accounts, originally collected under the title *Problems with Authority*, were written in the “cozy mystery” genre, popular with textually-dependent readers in the decades prior to Intentional Realignment. These stories may have been written by a newspaper reporter from Holburn, one of the river towns submerged in catch basins as part of the stabilization of the Potomac. The last two stories were written by Henry Randall, formerly emeritus Professor from Holburn University, who provided many of the sources and first-hand accounts of events upon which I drew for the *History*, although his description of my internment and realignment in Fairall (*Primary Sources*) was somewhat fanciful. Ever imaginative, Professor Randall also suggested the title for this volume, which comes from the original Salvolution Corporation studies done by Dr. Avery Crawley, before he moved his research and development work to the Ark facility in Fairall. As Professor Randall wrote, making a comparison to earlier technology,

“Camera angles are familiar to everyone now—so think of frameshifts that way. Switching from one frame of reference to another is like changing camera angles. Or cameras zooming in and out. Or maybe it’s like switching musical forms within a suite. Or changing masks in a shamanic dance; or switching scales of observation from macrocosm to microcosm; or regrouping beads, base-pairs, or words in a string; or, say, looking at a pine cone from a crystallographic perspective and then from a demographic perspective; or shifting voices in a mythic narrative. Of course, you learn more about frames of reference when you embody a frameshift through personal realignment, but one needs time for that—maybe even a lifetime or two. Inter-cutting stories or camera-shots gives you the idea.”

Perhaps for the last time, Henry went to sleep earlier this year. His teaching, guidance and friendship will be dearly missed. Irene Brooks, Ph.D., 155 RRT

PART ONE

DEATH WEARS A TRICORN

CHAPTER ONE

It was the time of month when the heels of the loaf meet, creditors bubble up, and petty larcenies seem feasible. This is not to say that Harry Pettiford had larceny in mind as he rounded the corner of Broad and Washington Streets, but he wondered how long he could float credit payments and post-date checks before Gerald Nuffield finally decided to pay him.

After a long campaign for Holburn Town Council, Candidate Nuffield was once again Councilman Nuffield, and Harry was ready to be shed of the whole business. If he hadn't been strung out on debt, Harry would never have returned to Holburn to be Jerry's factotum, or glorified gofer. When he was dismissed decades earlier as the station manager for WZDC in Washington, Harry had left Holburn vowing never to return to the D.C. area. Now here he was again, arranging radio and cable spots, planning meetings and hoping he could be a hanger-on long enough to find another job. So much for the elegance of the retirement years. His annuity was not keeping pace with medical costs and his daughter's graduate school tuition. Given what Jerry had spent to keep his Town Council seat, however, Harry knew that he was less likely to be a hanger-on than left hanging.

Gerald Nuffield was padding around his hotel suite wearing only underwear and a tricorne hat given to him by the party chairman after his acceptance speech the night before. After what he had been through today, he just needed to kick back. Everybody needed that, he told himself. Nugent had made it a damned hard race. Even the bastard's name was like his. Getting a higher profile had cost a bundle. Jerry had been on the Town Council for twelve years, but did it matter to anyone? People had no loyalty. They all had to be bought. Without an expensive, aggressive campaign, the choice would have been between an old Tweedledum and a young Tweedledee. And Jerry had no illusions about the way the vote would have gone, even without his promises to the Hispanic Coalition. He'd had to climb out on a limb to outspend the bastard.

He looked out the window of his hotel campaign headquarters, now strewn with leaflets and deserted. Seven floors below was Holburn Plaza, the town's controversial sculpture garden. From this height, the statue of Revolutionary Colonel Charles Holburn, gazing across the Potomac to Washington, D.C., looked like a teetering stack of dominoes. Some of the more virulent critics had said that this sculpture did represent exactly the capitulation of tiny Holburn to its sprawling neighbors, Alexandria and Arlington. How appropriate, they said, that a town named for the nonentity who surrendered early in the war and returned to his estate to raise roses would be represented by a vague, angular stick-figure leaning over the river. Nugent had called it "Up-Chuck Holburn" during the campaign and blamed the two million dollar cost on Jerry. Well, now the name-calling was all over.

Jerry turned back into the room, his hairy paunch overhanging checkered boxer shorts. All that remained of the final telephone blitz was half a dozen desks littered with soft drink cans, Styrofoam cups and receipt spikes stuck full of pink phone slips. Now he needed to chill out, but he couldn't get one phone call off his mind. He wondered what the caller really knew. He went to the bar and poured

himself a whiskey. No, what did it matter? He was still in the game. Rena would soon be along. He needed to kick back.

Harry was shaving before the evening event at Demeter's, a Friday-Saturday conference and showcase by local businesses for "event managers." Passing himself off as an "event manager" would be eased by the free registration he'd received as a member of Nuffield's staff. If he could make some contacts, he might land softly when Nuffield dropped him. As he trimmed his ears, he stared out into the twilight onto St. Giles Lane. He'd gone to parochial school not far from the house where he now rented a room from his elderly aunt, Clarisse Pettiford. It seemed that the more hair he lost from his head, the more sprouted from his ears. Harry was a large, beefy sixty-year-old with twinkling eyes and surprisingly nimble movements. As a courtesy, the conference organizers had invited the staffs of both Nuffield and Nugent. Like most two-day conferences, the first day was for business and the rest of the time officially scheduled with meetings that were unofficially unattended. It was an opportunity to network. Event managers, caterers, travel agents and economic development types were an ever-hopeful breed. Harry was ready to share someone else's hope.

A figure wearing a hooded sweatshirt and carrying a package slipped into the service entrance behind the Holburn Plaza Hotel. None heard the quiet mantra being mumbled for a reminder and for courage:

"Sometimes you just have to follow your gut. You know what's right and how the plan will end. You are the means, even if you're not around to see it all play out. Keep to the plan. Sometimes the only difference between triumph and disaster is the brave act of a single individual, an individual to whom things matter, to whom ideas matter, to whom the People matters."

Carrying a thin, flat box, the figure rode the elevator to the top floor, ran quickly down the empty hallway and slipped into an alcove to change clothes.

“Ideas are our hearts. If we aren’t true to them, who are we? If we don’t work for our own ideas and for the People, then others will take our place. If someone doesn’t care enough to say ‘No,’ then the future will die stillborn. Someone has to keep faith, to believe, to act. Wait now for the right time to move. Watch the watcher and keep to your plan.”

Harry parked in one of the underground lots near Demeter’s, rode the elevator to street level, and walked a block to the riverside high-rise with the restaurant on the top floor. As he had raced out of his room to arrive at the conference by the 7:00 p.m. social hour, the phone rang. The answering machine came on as he ran downstairs and out the front door. That call had interrupted his train of thought. Recently he had become more forgetful. He wondered what he had forgotten to do this time, but put it out of mind as he entered the building.

A year ago, he’d booked Demeter’s for Nuffield’s fundraiser. The banquet room looked over the Potomac with an excellent view of the coal pile at the power plant and the Blue Plains sewage treatment plant on the D.C. side of the river, a view full of civic responsibility. After once being lost in the warren of underground parking lots for almost an hour, Harry had learned where to park and had ever afterwards parked in the same place. The guard in the lobby looked up from her magazine long enough to examine his invitation and nod him toward the elevator. The burnished silver doors of the elevator slid noiselessly apart to reveal the black and white tiling of an Art Deco interior that made Harry think of the bath house in a KOA campground where Bea and he had stayed on a visit to Quebec. They were so surprised to find such an elegant latrine in a campground. As the elevator rose, he hoped that the maximum load computation had taken all of the tiles and potted plants into account. Just as the door was closing, he had seen someone in uniform rushing toward the elevator, but the doors closed and the elevator effortlessly swept him alone to the lobby. Demeter’s was named not for its wrought-iron statue of a man running from

the restaurant but for Michael Demetrios, the corpulent owner who stood imperious, grinning and flat-footed beside the hostess.

“Congratulations, Harry! We have Nuffield back and avoided another big spender, yes?” Demetrios said, parroting some of Harry’s own campaign rhetoric.

“Thanks, Michael. And thank you for all you did to make it happen.” Harry pointed toward a sign pointing to the Event Management Symposium in the Banquet Suite. “That’s where I’m headed.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Demetrios, taking him by the elbow. “They’ve already begun. I’ll seat you on the side.” He looked behind him. “Join us, please, Colonel.”

Harry turned and saw the Air Force officer who had fallen in step behind them. Demetrios took them down a service hallway between the walls dividing the large banquet room. They both sat down immediately at a table near the door. The podium at the front of the room, which faced across the river to Blue Plains, was occupied by the main speaker, whom Harry had hoped to avoid by coming late. He’d heard him before. His enraptured message was that “every event is a message.” If he had something else to say, Harry missed it as he scanned the crowd. Barbara Nuffield, Jerry’s wife of thirty years, was sitting at the front table, perfectly coiffed, with Leiber handbag just visible. Beside her was Sheriff Lester Stihl. He always drawled, “Yeah, ‘Stihl,’like the saw.” He had run unopposed as usual, and tonight he wore his festive cowboy formal wear with a bolo tie and snakeskin boots. June Brightman, a reporter from *The Holburn Transcript*, was seated across the room and had waved when he came in. Her broad, Swedish face was always a pleasure for Harry to see. She had known Bea and him in Roanoke before Bea’s illness. Harry forced himself to look away from her and listen to the keynote speaker, a curly-haired man waving his arms and occasionally mentioning that he would be signing copies of his book in the lobby afterwards. This was a dynamic speech, Harry decided, not because of anything that Curly was saying, but because all of his listeners were so pleased to be together and given a title like “event managers.” Harry even felt some of their exhilaration at finally knowing who they were and what

they had been doing. When the speaker concluded, predictably, with the words “so every meeting is a message,” there was thunderous applause. Harry looked at the program under his glass of water and was pleased to see that the social came before the workshops. He turned to introduce himself to the officer beside him, a tanned, lean-faced bird colonel named Connors, who seemed equally unimpressed by the speaker.

“Think we missed anything by coming late?” Harry asked.

“No comment, sir,” Connors grinned. “Out of my field.”

“You’re not an event manager, Colonel?”

“I’m here for the workshop on mission development,” he said.

“You have an interest in that area?” Harry said, vaguely wondering what they were talking about. He suddenly wondered whether some of the workshops were classified for spooks and special ops.

“I’m giving the workshop,” said Connors. He smiled at Harry’s puzzled expression and handed Harry a business card.

“Colonel Connors, I’m not going to ask you what ‘mission development’ is all about, because I don’t think I would remember it past the social hour, but I wish you all success.” Harry reached into his pocket for his business cards and realized that he had no more. He shook hands with Connors and stepped away from the table to meet June Brightman.

“Harry, how are you? It’s been a long drag for you to get Nuffield back onto the Council. He couldn’t have done it without you,” June said with the kind of warm gaze that made you think you were the only one in the room.

“That’s kind of you, June. I know that I didn’t always make it easy for you,” he said.

“Look, we were both doing our jobs,” June said. “My business was to pry and yours was to win. I think we both succeeded. You’re staying for the social?”

“That’s why I’m here, June,” he said. “I’m hoping to stumble into a new job.”

“That should be no problem,” June said. “How’s Bea doing?”

“There’s not much change from day to day,” Harry said quietly. A bilateral stroke had left his wife of thirty years helpless in a nearby nursing home, and the expense of it was rapidly stripping away what was left of their savings. “At least she doesn’t know anything.”

“What about you, Harry?” June said as they walked up to the bar.

“Hey, I’ve been pumped ever since that balloon went into my coronary,” he said, pointing to a bottle of herbal tea. “And no more hard stuff.” He unscrewed the lid and poured the contents into a glass of ice.

“Yeah, sure, Harry,” June said, gazing at him knowingly.

Harry knew to be careful around June because he always wanted to say more than he should. A flattering gaze like hers was a gold mine for a reporter. People probably stopped her on the street just to bask in that gaze and tell her their secrets.

“So you won’t be working for Councilman Nuffield?” she said. “Seems like he would want to hang onto you.”

“No, he flies solo now,” Harry said.

“And tries to pay off all his debts?” She was still fishing, but Harry was not going to give in. “OK, Harry. No shop talk.”

“June, you know that in D.C. all talk is shop talk.” Harry sipped his drink.

“Like for that duo?” she said, nodding toward Barbara Nuffield and Lester Stihl, who were standing by the podium and engaged in an animated discussion.

“Well, Lester may not like our party or our man, but he’s a pragmatist,” Harry said. “He knows that he’ll need every Council member if he’s going to sell community policing.”

“He’s already sold it,” June said. “The question is can he pay for it.”

Harry nodded. “Looks like Barbara’s finished. I think I’ll have a word with her. Catch up with you later, June.” Harry was relieved to get away from June’s wide-eyed gaze before she had made him talk. Colonel Connors ought to have June Brightman give a workshop on making prisoners confess. That would be a message worth hearing.

Barbara’s glittering red jacket of Swarovski crystals matched her Leiber bag and red sandal high heels. Why be a winner if you couldn’t dress like this, Harry thought. She strode eagerly toward him.

“Oh Harry, I’m glad to get away from that man. Just say anything.”

“Is Jerry still at the Hilton?” he asked.

“Yes,” Barbara said, “he told me this morning that he would be late again. He wanted to box up some things before you clean out the suite tomorrow morning. He sent me here just to show the flag.”

And to show off that fancy jacket, Harry thought. Barbara loved to be seen.

“I didn’t know that you were going to become an event manager,” Harry said, smiling. Suddenly he thought of Bea wearing the same jacket.

“What about you?” she asked the same question June had asked less than five minutes ago. Did he look stricken?

“Oh, I’m just here for the free quiche,” he said.

One of the Nuffield staffers, Renate Brown, suddenly appeared beside Barbara. Harry had heard the other staffers talking about the way that Renate aped Barbara Nuffield. Here she was, dressed almost identically to Barbara, with the same hairdo, jacket and handbag. Everything matched but the shoes.

“What lovely shoes, Barbara!” Renate said. “Where did you find them?”

Harry had no doubt that Renate would be at Lord & Taylor’s first thing tomorrow morning. As Renate guided Barbara away from him, Harry glanced around the room for other staffers. Half a dozen of them were gathered around the roll-ups and cheese dip, probably plotting their next portfolio experience. He hadn’t had much in common with that group, but they had certainly worked hard for

him. Harry had never encountered such a calculating group of young people. Most of them were recent graduates of Georgetown or Yale and clearly aspired to greater things than a Holburn Town Council seat. Nuffield was a small spongy step on their paths to greatness. Nuffield owed his re-election more to these earnest young staffers than to his well-heeled contributors or to his last minute promises to Holborn's growing Latino community.

The white-jacketed employees of Demeter's were already dividing chairs between the sides of the room for the two workshops. Harry was beginning to think that he should have come earlier to make the kind of contacts he needed. He wouldn't be able to talk to anyone once the workshops began. It was already almost 7:30 p.m., and he was losing time as the social drew to a close. He noticed that Ernie Banks, a balding, elfin reporter for the local cable channel, was closing in on Barbara with a camera man. She looked desperately toward Harry, who nimbly intercepted the khaki-clad Banks. With Harry planted in front of him and the crowd squeezing around on both sides, Banks was going nowhere, so the diminutive reporter abandoned Barbara and stuck his microphone at Harry.

"OK, Harry. Looks like I talk to you," said Banks.

"Who knows, Ernie. You may learn something," Harry said cheerily as he watched Barbara turning to talk with Colonel Connors while they walked toward one of the workshop rooms. Renate Brown stood by the exit, looking wistfully after them. Banks shook his head and turned off the microphone, sending the cameraman on break and taking out a cigarette. Harry pointed to the NO SMOKING sign above the coffee urns.

"Just chewing on it, Harry. You gonna hang around, now that the election's over? It's not as if you can reclaim your old territory after the scandal about B & V Home Development at WZDC."

"You remember that? That was more than thirty years ago!"

“Oh yeah,” Banks said knowingly with a smile that revealed his yellow teeth and lips. Harry wondered how many cigarettes he had chewed under NO SMOKING signs. “One station had the ‘Joy Boys of Radio’ and WZDC had—what did they call you? ‘Petrified Pettiford.’”

“The ‘petrified’ part referred to the redwood scam, not to my backing down,” Harry said.

“Oh right. If anything, it was getting your back up that got you canned. Am I right?”

Harry wrinkled his nose as if smelling an overcooked shoe. “I’m sure that your reportorial acumen serves you well in other spheres, Mr. Banks, but in this instance you’re off mark. No one at the time, including the station, doubted that B & V Home Development was running a scam, but investigative reporting in those days had not been refined to the delicate instrument you now wield so ably for Holburn Cable News. Neither listeners nor management were prepared for the station to dig into one of its own sponsors.” Harry could see that Banks didn’t buy this and was undeterred by sarcasm.

“The commercials promised ‘A fine, aged redwood deck with every dream home,’ not mentioning that the fine gray wood was not redwood and that it would disintegrate after the second winter, provided the rest of the dream lasted that long,” Banks rasped.

He says it like the rat that he is, Harry was thinking as he smiled benignly down on Ernie Banks’ bald head. Banks enjoyed being able to recall the mistakes and embarrassments of others. “And when you aired it on your own initiative directly after a spot for B & V, all hell broke loose. Am I right?”

“Youth pays for its initiatives,” Harry said.

“Hmm, the way I heard it, they gave you up easy as a cow breaks wind,” said Banks as his cameraman reappeared with two cans of soft drink.

“It was a good time to try something else,” Harry replied.

“Yeah, you left without a bleat. Am I right?” Banks was still chewing on the cigarette while drinking his soda. “Never got that. It’s why I remember it. The company was sued and Vernon left them. They changed the name to Briggs Construction. Me, I would have stayed on and made ’em pay for the

hassle.” Suddenly Banks snorted and choked on the remains of the cigarette he had sucked down with the last swig of his drink.

“Ernie.” Harry gave him a powerfully satisfying thump on the back. “Some of us know when to stop before we choke. Am I right?”

The cameraman had left immediately when former Council candidate Duane Nugent entered the room. Banks hurried after him, spilling his drink and coughing. Nugent would doubtless be the lead for Holburn Cable News when they aired to their audience of insomniacs at 3:00 a.m. Banks loved to interview victims and losers.

Harry steered around a circle of blue-haired ladies listening vacantly to a codger in a checked suit recount all of the ways that he avoided back-ups on the Beltway. He called to Harry, “Don’t you just exit anywhere if you know a jam’s ahead?”

“Yes, I always take any available exit,” Harry replied, continuing to move forcefully toward the buffet. The man in the checked suit was vindicated, but Harry’s job-search was going nowhere. The long buffet line wound around the perimeter of the room. Harry wondered why Demeter’s had not put the buffet table away from the wall so they could serve on both sides. Harry checked himself. He hadn’t planned this event, and he wasn’t likely to be planning anything in the near future bigger than Scrunch’s dinner. He suddenly thought of Scrunch, his Boston terrier, a black and white scoundrel with bowed legs and a mashed face. What about his dinner? That’s what he’d forgotten! He’d said nothing to Aunt Clarisse about feeding or walking him tonight. And she would make Harry pay for the oversight.

Jerry Nuffield was gazing down on the street lights of Holburn. If he’d made it this long without hearing from the police, he was probably safe. The Council seat was his for another round. He only needed one more term to make things right. That’s why you got into it, to make things right. But then, what you had to do...

Nobody understood what you had to do. And nobody understood why you needed relief sometimes, a chance to get away from it all. There was a knock at the door. Eight o'clock meant Rena. A figure hiding in the laundry alcove watched them embrace in the doorway.

Harry was in a foul mood. Clarisse had gone to her Garden Club meeting, leaving Scrunch to make a mess on the carpet. Scrunch looked up dismally at Harry. What a waste of time the whole affair had been. The codger in the checked suit had caught up with him in the buffet line. He had a dozen more Beltway short-cuts to recommend, but Harry had left the line as the other conferees carried their plates and drinks into the two workshops. There was no point in staying. Aunt Clarisse and he had arrived home at the same time and Scrunch had greeted them at the door, hopping on his hind legs. After cleaning the carpet under Clarisse's close supervision, Harry went up to his room and dialed Nuffield at the hotel but got the answering machine. This was the story of the day: frustration and reminders of the past. He could have done without talking to that nasty Ernie Banks. Tomorrow was already beginning to look grim.

CHAPTER TWO

George Winslow woke up staring sadly at the tattoo of a *Cannabis* leaf on his massive stomach. Despite his regret about it, he did derive some satisfaction from the fact that, wherever Lida Jean had gone, she still had a matching tattoo to remind her of their weekend in Atlantic City twenty years and countless arguments ago. He heaved himself into a sitting position and looked at the alarm clock on the floor. It must have gone off after all, although he didn't remember swiping it off the bed stand. He'd stayed up until three in the morning talking on a chat room about a new book on the role of the urban underground in the Cuban revolution of 1959. He slowly rose from the bed and waddled to the bathroom. Urination was painful; the squeezing sent a fiery spasm straight up his back. Before long, he would be throwing another kidney stone, but he had no intention of going back to the hospital and their bungling goons with catheters. After splashing his bearded face in the washbasin and sweeping the stringy gray hair from his eyes, he waddled back to the bedroom.

There was time to stop for bagels with cream cheese. The early-bird government class began in an hour and forty minutes, and he had no more desire to be there than his students, a group of lame-duck seniors at Wando High School who had already received their college acceptances and simply needed to finish his class in order to graduate. Today he was covering search and seizure and criminal procedure in the Boyd, Silverthorne, and Miranda cases. Maybe he'd pull out his stuff on the Branch Davidians in Waco. He'd made five or six videos and collected several notebooks of newspaper clippings, not that anything short of MTV really interested those kids. He rummaged in a malodorous pile of clothes for a pair of trousers that still fit. Suddenly he remembered that he was supposed to go early for a parent conference. So much for the bagels. His head throbbed as he bent over to pull on his socks.

He was to meet with the parents of Timoteo Ortega. What a handful he was, George thought. Not like his brother. Timoteo was spoiled and arrogant. Maybe it was because, unlike his brother, he had never known what it was to live outside the states. His brother's class had included several students who knew first hand what it was to flee for their lives. They were grateful, not arrogant. That had been an unusual group of earnest, well behaved and high-achieving children of well educated parents who refused to bring up their children in the little enclaves of Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico that were flourishing in Arlington, Holburn, and other municipalities around D.C. Instead, they settled in Wando, to the great surprise of the tony fox-and-hound set, the rural red-necks, and the torn-jeans clique of pampered children of pushy commuters. What a surprise to find themselves racing to keep up with an ambitious group of aristocratic Latinos. In Wando, as in many small Virginia towns of the upper Piedmont, the community was accustomed to thinking of Latinos as the itinerant farm help who mysteriously arrived, crowded in pickups and early model Chevrolets, just in time to pick grapes or apples. They didn't think of them as academics, engineers and diplomats whose children had already received the equivalent of a year of college before coming to Wando High. It was no surprise that these few students became leaders of clubs and student government, but by the time that they graduated, their

younger siblings had discovered a lower common denominator of behavior and achievement as well as the importance of MTV and the Gap. They fit imperceptibly and with complete indifference into the student body. They had arrived.

Timoteo, or Timmy, was a perfect example. He was flunking Winslow's history class. He never took notes and was absent at least once a week. Winslow had already met with the Ortegas once this year. They couldn't understand why Timmy was doing so poorly when his brother had been a star. Winslow wasn't sure that he could tell them that Timmy was dropping out precisely because his brother had been a star. Like his brother, Timmy would engage Winslow in long classroom arguments, but Timmy's arguments were not about separation of powers or the failure of the United States to accept international law. They were about why he should have to take this stupid class—arguments just like those of any other good American student.

Winslow managed to find a tie that wasn't spotted or wrinkled and put on his plaid sports jacket. His school uniform never varied. Since Lida Jean had left him, he had been piling his laundry on a chair for a month or so at a time until he was forced to wash it. He followed the same regime with dishes and, for that reason, did not even look in the kitchen as he stepped onto his newspaper-strewn front porch into the early morning light.

CHAPTER THREE

June Brightman was walking along the bike path by the river. The sky was overcast and the gray water choppy under the bridge. The gentrified waterfront looked across the river to Anacostia. June lived in one of the colonial-style condominiums between the shipping terminal and yacht club. She was glad she had taken the job in Holburn. After her divorce, Roanoke was not the same. There were too many reminders and too many explanations. Best just to leave. The *Transcript* wasn't the *Washington Post*, she knew, but it paid well. And just as she was making herself over, Harry Pettiford arrived, reminding her of everything she'd wanted to forget.

The Domino Man was just ahead, surrounded by yucca plants and looking like someone retching into the river. This was where she turned around, now walking into the wind. She had known Harry from the university, where she had been an adjunct professor of journalism and he had been program director for economic development and public information officer. He was gallant, old-fashioned, and completely devoted to his wife. It had been a good idea to leave Roanoke. Now it would be smart to forget Harry Pettiford all over again, but she knew she wasn't going to do that.

June climbed the flagstone steps to her condominium and sat down on the white patio chair in front of the French doors. Jim Brightman had been all the things that Harry was not. He was dashing, volatile, exciting, and a risk-taker. For five years, they'd led an exciting life as he moved from assignment to assignment with an international news service. He loved to surprise her with a trip to Puerto Vallarta or Las Vegas, but he would also surprise her by disappearing unaccountably for days at a time. He always had reasons but they never matched the charges on their monthly credit card bills. When she worked in classified ads, June had always wondered what could bring people to post public announcements disclaiming any debts incurred by their own children or spouses. After five years of high flying with Jim Brightman, she understood only too well. If he wasn't losing bets on dog races or football games, he was buying gifts or taking trips that they couldn't afford. Living with Jim, June learned a whole new vocabulary about refinancing, repossession, and general financial retribution. The last straw was his secret use of her credit card to secure a loan for a venture capital investment that had flashed on and off like a dying firefly and left them with a twenty thousand dollar debt at twenty-two percent interest.

It had been a Thursday morning when Jim reluctantly told her about it. Unable to speak, she had simply walked out of the house and numbly driven to the university, where she was to teach a journalism class that afternoon. She'd passed the Public Information Office and seen Harry sitting at his desk, as he did every morning at seven thirty, and as he had done for the seven years she had been teaching. Something about his utter predictability and stability in that moment made her sob uncontrollably. Harry had brought her into his office and listened to the whole story. Even as Jim had told her what he'd done, he had begun to weave another scheme about how they could quickly recover their losses. She told Harry that it would have been easier if Jim had been unfaithful. Leaving him seemed as cruel as abandoning a puppy or a young dog grown too big to be cuddly and too rowdy to be endearing.

Several months later, after avoiding the garnishing of her wages by refinancing and after releasing herself in every other possible way from Jim Brightman, June realized that she had not just happened to talk to Harry Pettiford on that Thursday morning. She had gone looking for him. In a way, it was he that caused her problems. She wanted the kind of life with Jim that Beatrice Pettiford had with Harry: easy confidences, lingering looks, quiet affection and courtesies. She had wanted to show Harry that she could have the same kind of life. But she didn't. She couldn't have it without him.

June watched a catamaran capsize on the river and the two would-be sailors in yellow life jackets bobbing beside it. She slipped off her shoes and went into her apartment through the French doors. The room was furnished with a low futon, shag rug and large Tiffany lamp. With no chairs or other furniture than a bed, she used the spare bedroom for storing boxes and ate her meals standing at the kitchen counter, but she was debt-free. Getting away from Roanoke and taking the job with the *The Holburn Transcript* had cleared her debts and cleared Harry from her thoughts. When she had covered his first news conference as Gerald Nuffield's spokesman more than a year ago, she had actually been angry at Harry for upsetting her new life and not allowing her to forget him. If he had been aware of her feelings, he didn't show it. When he told her about Bea's stroke, June was too practical to deny to herself that she not only felt sorry for him but hopeful and guilty for being hopeful. How could she feel otherwise? The question was not what she should think but what she should do. As Jim was always fond of saying, she needed a long term plan and a short term plan. Poor Jim. His plans had never anticipated bankruptcy. June's long term plan was unclear, but in the short term, she would simply be Harry's friend and continue to do her job at the *Transcript*.

An old linotype machine was displayed in the reception room of *The Holburn Transcript*; above it were photographs in black and white and sepia showing the early history of the newspaper. June usually came in every morning through the front door from Washington Street. By passing through reception and weaving her way past all of the cubicles to her desk in the back of the building she

reminded herself of her place in the whole organization. It was somehow less depressing than scurrying in like a beetle from the back door to her PC. Her own cubicle was still unadorned with photographs, flowers or knick-knacks. This was where she didn't have to think about her personal life, so why have reminders? She pulled up the attachment about the Convention Association's Event Management Symposium that she had e-mailed to herself on Friday night. Even though she had not returned home until after 11:00 p.m., she had transcribed all of her notes before going to bed, a habit left over from the days of wearing miniskirts and covering local crimes. She always told her students that the sooner they wrote out their notes, the more accurate they would be and, more importantly, the more likely they would catch mistakes or gaps in the story before it went to press. There were certainly gaps in last night's story, but none she could print.

She wondered, for example, why Barbara Nuffield was so short with her after earlier promising her an interview at the end of the conference. She was flushed and distracted, and June noticed that the top of her jacket was unbuttoned or missing a button. And she wondered where Harry had gone. At 7:40 p.m. she'd seen the backs of Barbara Nuffield and him in the buffet line. Five minutes later they were gone. June had taken photographs of the speakers and organizers and talked with most of the Nugent and Nuffield staffers. Most of them were graduate students doing internships for their political science programs. They were going back to their campuses this morning. June e-mailed the copy to her editor and considered doing a human interest story on Harry to help him catch the attention of a prospective employer. Of course, she wouldn't tell Harry that was why she was writing it. On the other hand, maybe she should just leave Harry alone.

Her editor had received her message and e-mailed her a reply, "Glad you're in so bright and early on a Saturday morning, June! This looks good. If you have a chance before you leave this morning, please do a follow-up on the Nuffield story. We've got the lead but still need a human interest piece."

“Harry it is,” June whispered to herself, dialing his home phone number.

“Pettiford residence,” said Clarisse Pettiford.

“Miss Pettiford, this is June. May I speak to Harry, please?”

“June, dear, Harry went to the hotel very early this morning. He left me a note about what that dog had done to my dahlias. Said he’d fix it when he came back. I don’t see how he can fix it. The stalks are broken. I think he just slipped out to avoid having to tell me about it. And then he left me instructions about the dog needing to be let out! I’ve never had animals, you know. My brother was always giving Harry dogs to make up for the time he didn’t spend at home. If you ask me...”

June interrupted as delicately as possible, “Well, I’m sure Harry will take care of things when he returns. I have to go now, Miss Pettiford. Thank you for the information and have a good day.” She hung up without waiting for a reply.

CHAPTER FOUR

Harry had not slept well, rising well before the alarm. In the mirror he examined the fine, blue lines in his nose and his permanently flushed cheeks. Scrunch hadn't helped him sleep. About 4:00 a.m., the dog had seized the bed sheet in his slobbering mouth and begun dragging it across the room. Harry let him out the kitchen door into the back yard. Aunt Clarisse's light came on. She knew "that dog" was in her dahlia bed. Afterwards, Harry had not slept. He had gone to the conference instead of visiting Bea last night. He wondered whether she would even know.

He'd wanted to be free of the Nuffields of the world, the opportunists and smiling manipulators. Bea and he were finally going to have some time for travel and for each other. That was their plan. Then she had the stroke, and here he was again, sweating in the early morning hours without a single course of action except to beg Nuffield that he might stay on in some capacity—without seeming to beg. He looked out on the bleak Saturday morning. For him it was a bleak ending; for Nuffield, a blissful beginning. Harry remembered Father Berman, his teacher at St. Mark's School, whose red slate roof he could just see from his bedroom window. Father Berman never said what he had sacrificed to teach

small boys, but his wistful comments suggested past glories. “Boys, never let a day pass in which you do not discuss goodness,” he often said. When Harry later learned that this statement was by Socrates, it didn’t matter. Only Father Berman could have said it.

The way it looked, he was unemployed as soon as Nuffield signed the last payroll checks and gave them back for Harry to distribute to the staff. Harry’s short career in public relations had already stalled and begun to plummet, and his thinking had stalled at the realization that he was already diving toward some subsistence level of employment, maybe serving happy meals. No sooner had he sunk into his overstuffed armchair than Scrunch, who had been wiggling around his feet, abandoned all restraint and bounded into his lap. Harry leaned sideways to reach the bottom drawer of the bureau, where he kept his shaver and packages of dry dog food. Scrunch immediately jumped down to look into the drawer. Leaning back in the chair and closing his eyes, Harry began to shave as Scrunch snuffled and snorted over the bone-shaped pellets in his bowl.

Scrunch was again curled up on his rug by the time Harry quietly closed the front door behind him and turned right up St. Giles Lane toward town. Harry passed by the storefront churches, the small *mercados* of the Latino community, and the dance hall now advertising *cumbias* and *bachatas* that used to be a small candy store where his mother would send him after school to buy a pack of Tareytos and, for a nickel, a Hershey bar for himself. In summer, he came to the same store for a cold bottle of orangeade, sunk in the icy water of the ice chest on the sidewalk outside the store. Now the dance hall was closed until seven in the evening, when it would rapidly fill with gyrating Columbians, Hondurans, Bolivians and others seeking an oasis from the gringo world. With over four hundred and thirty thousand Latinos now in the Washington metropolitan area, more than any other metropolitan area in the United States, such places were no longer oases but regular features of the terrain.

Past the grocery and dance hall, on the corner of Ketchum’s Alley and Washington Street, was a small drug store. Harry remembered the independent druggist who had once owned the store and how he

would hand down his mother's medicines to a grim clerk with a severe hair style. She gravely gave the medicines to Harry and warned him to go straight back home and not to open the medicine bottles. He didn't imagine that children were sent out to buy cigarettes and morphine any more. Now an elegant restaurant, the Pomme du Pin, was across the alley from the drug store.

Harry thought that he might take June Brightman some time to the Pomme du Pin. It had been good to see her again during the campaign, despite her pointed questions in news conferences and even though all they had ever talked about was Jerry Nuffield's latest news release. Last night, she had dropped her "friendly but professional" tone for the first time and Harry didn't know what to make of it.

In Roanoke, June always seemed to be turning up unexpectedly, almost as if she had been looking for him: in the supermarket check-out line, or on a bench in the mall outside a department store when he was waiting for Bea, or in the early morning at the university, when he sometimes went in early to prepare for special events. He had begun to wonder if she were stalking him when she finally told him about her spendthrift husband. He had called Bea, and she had insisted on having June for dinner and giving her some free CPA help with her accounts. Bea had shown her how to avoid bankruptcy and how to disentangle her affairs from Jim Brightman's. June had apologized, thanked them profusely and later even given them a gift, a small plaque "to my friends," before she left Roanoke. Jim Brightman had stayed in town. The last Harry had heard, he was part-owner of a cell phone business. Where he had come up with the capital for another start-up was unclear, but Harry surmised that Jim had fallen back on his talent for persuading others that his interest was in their interest.

Harry needed Bea's bookkeeping skills and her advice now more than ever, more even than when he had left Holburn and the radio station in D.C. behind him and floundered into Roanoke, almost thirty years ago. He'd met Bea at a lunch counter on her break from her job in the hotel accounting office. In one afternoon, all his debits were transformed into assets. Bea and he were married a few months later, and Harry himself had been transformed into a booster of the City of Roanoke. Both of

them had become actively involved in the downtown renovation project and in those years, both worked for the hotel. Harry was in public information and Bea was ultimately the chief of accounting. Now Bea was beyond all accounting, he reflected, and beyond his reach.

Twenty minutes after leaving home, Harry was enjoying his omelet at *La Pomme du Pin* on Washington Street, a short walk from the hotel. If he were to have a last meal, it would be a cheese omelet. The French farmhouse decor of the restaurant reminded him of a childhood holiday he had spent at a small farm outside Orleans, a poor farm with wooden rakes and draft animals. The village *boulangerie* sold little sponge-cakes and long loaves of bread into which he would plunge his fist to make a hole for cherry jam. This must be his “second childishness.” Harry wondered which of the “ages of man” he had entered. It was easier to think of the past than of what he could possibly do next. The small trust from his father was the first money to go; then he had sold the house in Roanoke, and then surrendered his life insurance. Now he had his annuity and whatever work a sixty year-old man with minimal computer skills could find. He finished his omelet and continued on his way toward the waterfront.

On Saturday mornings, the waterfront of Holburn was filled with shoppers, most of them tourists checking out the D.C. area. Holburn was not Georgetown, but it had a small picturesque riverfront and many of the antique shops and galleries favored by the tourist trade. Harry remembered when there had been several hardware stores and a Woolworth’s with a lunch counter on the east end of Washington Street. Gentrification had not yet made the town as totally useless to residents as it had in other places, but it was clearly headed in that direction.

Harry entered the Holburn Plaza Hotel and took the elevator to the penthouse suite. All of the staffers had returned their keys earlier in the week. Only Harry and Nuffield were still going in and out. The hotel management wanted the rooms cleared by 2:00 p.m. today. Harry opened the door on the same disorderly room he had left the day before. There was certainly no evidence that Jerry had cleaned up

anything. Fast food wrappers, soda cans, file folders and phone log slips were scattered around the room. All of the small desks that they had brought in were still littered with the detritus of the last two weeks. It looked like the staffers had dumped their trashcans onto the desks. He thought of his daughter Nina's dormitory and how shocked he had been to see the wreckage in which she lived. These were normal living conditions for the young staffers, he supposed. A tricorn hat was on the floor. Then he saw a bare foot on one of the chairs. Going around the desk, he found Jerry Nuffield lying on the floor in his underwear with his heel on the chair and a memo-spike in his neck.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Not much blood. That was good. No one saw anything. The back entrance of the hotel had been as deserted as it was earlier in the evening. Wearing the plastic gloves was important after all. They somehow gave the courage needed to carry through with it. Planning is everything. Now there is only one more thing to do.”

Wilson Briggs had built an empire on digging holes. From excavations to home development, to prefabricated air ducts and fittings, to general contracting, to owning hundreds of acres of commercial and rental units along Cameron Run, his fortune had rocketed. From a one-dump truck operation to a half-billion dollar empire with a fleet of trucks across Northern Virginia, Briggs had spent forty years becoming the prime developer and contractor in the region. His office in one of the dark, glassy buildings overlooking the Federal Court in Alexandria provided a panoramic view that included the ziggurat-like Masonic Memorial, the town of Alexandria, the Potomac River and Washington, D.C.. He

looked across the region, dotted with Briggs Construction projects, with proprietorial pride. Between Holburn and Alexandria, he could just make out the old Winterthorn development. If the rest of the deal went as smoothly as it had gone so far, they should have it cleared and be ready to break ground next spring for Corazon Estates. Situated at a key intersection, it would draw D.C. commuters with its upscale condos and health spa. This was going to be his last project before retiring to the Outer Banks. Young Wilson could take it from there.

A small flag fluttered from the crane boom revolving in slow motion beside his window. In a few weeks, after he'd finished developing the site next door, he would no longer be able to see down river. A small cutter was skipping by the stem of a cargo vessel slowly raising its derricks to unload paper onto one of the newspaper company's docks. A catamaran had capsized near a pylon of the Fourteenth Street Bridge and was tossing back and forth like a marble in a cup as it caught the wake of the cargo vessel. It looked like such a gentle rocking motion from this distance, but Wilson could easily imagine the struggle to keep the tiny boat away from the pylon. When he had taken a small cutter once in North Carolina from Whalebone Junction through Pamlico Sound to find a cheaper berth at a private wharf on a small cove on the sea side of Bodie Island, he had been caught in the wake of a speedboat and, in a moment of utter foolishness, allowed the boat to capsize. Squirring around under the jib and trying to catch his breath, he worked his way hand over hand along the rail back to the transom, where he kept a radio. Embarrassed and sorry that he'd ever put up the sails just to move the boat to a less expensive berth, he'd dangled in the water for half an hour, as the traffic rushed by on Route 12, until his sons had responded to his distress call. They were full of questions about why he had raised the sails without them aboard.

Secretly, he had enjoyed it all. If you don't do anything unnecessary on a vacation, why take a vacation in the first place? Raise the sails and see what happens. What happened, unfortunately, was that

he had lost his wallet. Ultimately, that cost him what he would have saved by keeping the cutter on Bodie Island.

He'd had a chance to develop some beachfront property near Okrakoke but decided that when Ann and he finally went there to retire he didn't want to be bothered with another project. He just wanted to walk the beach and go out on the water whenever he felt like it. He'd had his fill of Northern Virginia and its crazy pace, pushy patrons, dare-devil drivers and political correctness. He would leave as much of that behind as he could. Otherwise, he thought, why leave and why take more projects to North Carolina?

The light flashed on his intercom. Mrs. Holscomb, his secretary, was signaling him that it was time for his medicine. Ann had insisted on this when it had become obvious that he wouldn't remember to take it. He enjoyed worrying them about it, just as he enjoyed twisting the arms of city officials about change-orders and proffers. Pulling off a site-development plan was like bringing in a sail fin, as he had done off Baja many years ago. Eleven feet of wiry muscle running with the line and diving. You just hold on and let him exhaust himself. Briggs never came out of a negotiation with less than he was prepared to give away because he never entered a negotiation without setting things up ahead of time.

The intercom light on his desk was flashing and Mrs. Holscomb was knocking gently at the door. He disliked the buzzes and chirps of electronic devices and had insisted on inaudible signals, but it often failed to catch his attention, so that Mrs. Holscomb would have to knock to remind him to look at his flashing signal. He picked up the phone.

“Yes?” Briggs said.

“Mr. Briggs,” Mrs. Holscomb said. “It's a caller who refuses to identify himself. He says it's about your arrangement with Councilman Nuffield.”

“My arrangement?” Briggs' bushy eyebrows bristled. Only Nuffield was supposed to know. The voice was almost too soft to hear.

“We are alike. You go in where they don’t expect you, and before they even know you’re there, you’ve already scored. Show them your dark side, but then fade back. But when the people finally understand, they will no longer follow the sell-outs to the Corporate Order. At the right time, even the people can be dragged into the conflict to cut through the lies. At every Turning Point there is an individual who acts swiftly and decisively. The time for you and Nuffield is over. Now it’s my turn. Catch it on the evening news.”

The caller hung up, leaving Wilson Briggs staring across Alexandria at the distant tip of a crane over the Winterthorn site in Holburn.

CHAPTER SIX

June had seen the blue lights flashing in front of the hotel when she stepped out of the newspaper office. Three cruisers, one of them on the sidewalk, were blocking the hotel entrance. Sheriff Lester Stihl was talking to one of the officers. June shouted to him across the hood of one of the cruisers.

“Sheriff Stihl, what’s happened?” June said.

“Can’t say just yet, except that Mr. Nuffield is dead,” Stihl said, quickly going into the hotel. Lester Stihl looked more like a banker than a policeman. Gone were the snakeskin boots and bolo tie. His work clothes were dark tailored suits and Italian shoes. He refused to look like a small town policeman. Stihl had hoped that Nuffield’s death would turn out to be accidental, but the reporting

officer and medical examiner had little doubt that it was a homicide. It would have been hard to arrange to fall on a spike so that it pierced the throat and carotid artery from the back of the neck, causing internal hemorrhage. There were no stains at the scene, but Nuffield's mouth was full of blood. The uncovered bed in the adjoining room was being examined by the crime lab team when Stihl came into the suite. He quickly crossed the room to look at the body. If he had fallen onto the spike, there would have been other bruises, perhaps on the shoulders or the back. As the examiner had said, there were none. Jerry Nuffield had been struck with the spike, perhaps while seated at the desk. Looking at the tawdry appearance of the corpse, Stihl was glad he had voted for Nugent.

Harry had been told to wait in the room next door, the police having sealed off the end of the hall. Looking out once, he had come face to face with a very large German shepherd. The dog must have considered him inconsequential, for he immediately turned back to nosing through some hotel towels in an alcove across the hall. Harry closed the door and sat down again under the Tiffany swag-light by the window. After dialing 911, he had felt Jerry's cold neck one more time. It had a spongy, mealy texture. He'd felt weak and sat down beside the desk. The PC screen saver was still on, showing Nuffield's campaign motto, 'A heart for all Holborn's people,' under a photo of Nuffield holding a Latino child. Looking around the littered room, Harry could not see anything in it that had changed from the day before with the exception of the corpse and the sheets piled on the bedroom floor. Nuffield's smarmy heart was always going out to the voters or young women he was trying to seduce on any occasion. He had kept his appetites in check for the campaign, but last night he must have been celebrating in his own way and had to pay the consequences. A policewoman was escorting Barbara Nuffield down the hall when Harry left the campaign suite. Barbara was wearing a stylish pants suit, a matching pearl necklace and bracelet, and just a hint of makeup. She did not so much show shock as pity, a pity for failings often observed but beyond her control to change. Her handkerchief matched her cream blouse; as she went

into the suite, she glanced at Harry, smiled and sniffled. Harry couldn't help wondering whether she was mainly disappointed that she would no longer be able to display her wardrobe.

Sheriff Stihl rapped at the door and quickly walked across the room to sit down beside Harry.

"Don't get up, Harry," Stihl said. "Let's just sit here and talk for a bit. You found Mr. Nuffield at 6:45 this morning? Why were you here so early?"

"I had come to finish cleaning up and to remove the files and phone logs. The hotel wanted us out by 2:00 p.m. this afternoon," Harry said.

"I guess that you were at the conference last night between 8:00 and 11:00 p.m.?"

"Well actually, Lester, I left after the opening. It was about ten to eight. I went straight home."

"You're still staying with Miss Pettiford?" Lester said.

Harry and he had gone to school together, played on the same ball teams and both had belonged to the Sixth Presbyterian Church since infancy. Harry had even kept his membership while living in Roanoke. He always thought that Lester's collection of dark suits must rival an undertaker's.

"Yes, Aunt Clarisse and I arrived home at the same time." Harry nodded.

"She was at the Garden Club?"

"You know about that?" Harry said.

"Yes, Doris is a member." Stihl looked out the window at the statue of Colonel Holburn. He turned back and looked through the glass-topped table at his box-toed shoes. "Harry, we think this is murder. Do you know of any threats against his life? What about a disgruntled Nugent supporter?"

"Anything is possible," Harry said. "I knew of no threats. From the way it looks in the bedroom and from the way he's dressed, doesn't it look like an accident in the, uh, midst of something else?"

"As you say, anything is possible, but I think that the forensic report will exclude accidental death." Stihl closed his notebook. "Given how it looks, however, do you know of anyone he was seeing?"

“Nuffield was always trolling,” Harry said. “He liked the young staffers but they stayed to themselves after hours and, of course, Barbara was usually here. Maybe you should talk to Gina Barber. She hasn’t been around for the last few days.”

“OK.” Stihl nodded. “Most of the staff personnel were college students?”

“Yes, graduate interns,” Harry said. “There were a few exceptions like Gina Barber, Renate Brown, and Daniel Reston, younger students who worked for us full-time along with other local people who volunteered part-time.”

“You screened the staffers and did the hiring?” Stihl stood up.

“Yes.” Harry waved toward the door. “The personnel files are in the banker boxes next door. Guess you’re going to keep all the files?”

“Until the investigation is finished.” Stihl nodded. “What about phone calls? Only Nuffield’s cell phone was in the room.”

“I collected all of the cell phones after the campaign,” Harry said. “The phone logs are the slips on the...”

“The spikes,” Stihl said. “Yes, we’ll need to keep the room sealed off while we search for evidence.”

“Well, you’re going to find all of our fingerprints.” Harry shrugged and wondered how much longer Lester would take.

“Yes, we’ll need to take the prints of everyone who worked on the campaign.” Lester sat down again and opened his notebook. “Now, back to those phone logs. They mostly seem to be outgoing calls.”

“We’ve probably called every one of the 35,000 households in Holburn at least once during this campaign.” Following Lester, Harry sat back down. “I don’t know how to narrow that down for you.”

“Right, right.” Lester paused. “Well, in cases of this sort, it’s usually someone closer”

“You mean Barbara?” Harry said defensively. “I don’t think so. She tolerated Jerry’s dalliances.”

“Even the most longsuffering spouse has a kindling point, Harry,” Stihl said gravely.

“But she was at the conference,” Harry said. “You saw her.”

“It’s a fifteen minute drive. She could have slipped out and returned.”

“That still doesn’t explain the apparent fact that Jerry was meeting someone here,” Harry said.

“Well, maybe Barbara knew about this tryst and confronted him. It might be that one of your young staffers was here and saw the whole thing.”

“Maybe so.” Harry shook his head. “What else do you need from me?”

“Harry, you knew more about what was going on here than anyone else, so we’ll need to talk some more after I’ve completed a preliminary investigation,” Lester said. “Just stick around.”

“Here? I’d really like to leave.”

“Sure, sure,” Lester said. “I’ll call you at home. Just stay here a little longer so that we can take your prints.”

Twenty minutes later, Harry was walking through the hotel lobby when June Brightman, wearing a red knit jumper and her hair tied back in a short ponytail, appeared alongside him.

“Buy you a drink?” she said.

“Coffee will do,” Harry said. “Let’s get out of here.” He strode quickly out the door, maneuvering around the circle of police cars, and heading back to *La Pomme du Pin*. They stood in the cafeteria line and brought their drinks back to the same table he had used earlier that morning. “It was an age ago when I sat here this morning for breakfast,” he said.

“That must have been an early breakfast,” June said. “Your aunt said you were gone before dawn.”

“You called Clarisse?” Harry noticed that June was not overly careful about gathering up all of the stray hairs into her ponytail.

“Yes, I was, uh, following up on last night. You certainly disappeared quickly!”

“No reason to stay. I went there to see if I could land a job. That wasn’t going to happen, so I left. I decided that my best course was to stay with Nuffield, if I could convince him that he needed me. He doesn’t need me now.”

“What happened up there, Harry?” June said quietly.

“Hard to say. Stihl thinks that Nuffield was murdered. I guess it’s unlikely that he would accidentally fall hard enough to push a ten penny nail through his neck.”

June winced. “Does Stihl have any suspects?”

“Most of the people he asked me about were either back on their campuses or at that conference last night, but he’s just begun the investigation.” Harry stiffened slightly. She was pumping him for information. “You’ll have to ask him, June.”

“Certainly,” she said, looking down at her coffee. “But what about you? What will you do now?”

“I hate to be crass, but I must somehow see Barbara Nuffield so that all of the staff can be paid, including me. Jerry insisted on personally signing all of the checks, but he also procrastinated. Now Barbara will have to sign them at a time when she shouldn’t have to think about such things.”

“She seems to depend on you,” June said, slightly raising her eyebrows. “I noticed you both leaving together last night.”

“Leaving together? I didn’t see Barbara when I left.”

“You were both in the buffet line and you both disappeared at the same time. It was about 7:40 p.m.,” June insisted.

“Well, I didn’t see Barbara leave,” Harry said defensively and increasingly more irritated at the direction taken by this conversation. He put down his coffee and stood up. “June, I have to go now, and it sounds to me like you have some information that the police ought to hear, so we had both better be on our way. See you later.” He turned and quickly exited the restaurant, leaving June feeling embarrassed.

She had wanted to tell him that he could count on her for help if he needed it now, if there was something else about this story that he had to keep quiet. Who was she kidding? She was the last person Harry Pettiford would tell any secrets. She couldn't even trust herself to keep a story quiet. Friendship didn't come into it, if they were friends. She had to tell him that the story didn't matter when it came to them. She hurried to catch up to him, but as she looked down Washington Street, he had already disappeared.

CHAPTER SEVEN

George Winslow parked his peeling Gremlin with its cracked rear window in the Wando High School parking lot beside a new silver Audi. As he slowly made his way up the steps, the custodian in the front hall eyed him suspiciously. Winslow wheezed at the top of the stairs, and the custodian swung the door open for him.

“Thanks, Rudy,” Winslow said, looking at the next flight of stairs he would have to climb to the social studies wing. The custodian fully expected Winslow to croak some time on his shift. He’d seen the same kind of fat legs and purple ankles on his brother-in-law just before he croaked, and he didn’t care to be around to witness another fat man suffocating under his own weight.

“Hello, Mr. Winslow,” he said. “Early this morning?”

45

45 “Yes, Rudy,” Winslow said, pausing and gasping. “How’s it going?”

“Can’t complain,” Rudy muttered, turning to sweep down another hall. Winslow slowly started up the next staircase, taking one step at a time and pausing on each step to catch his breath. Actually, Rudy had a number of complaints, not least of which were the new graffiti about Winslow in the boys’ bathroom upstairs, but he leaned for a moment on his broom handle, took another plug of tobacco from the can in his back pocket, and moved on down the hall.

As soon as Winslow got to his room, he flopped into the rolling chair behind his desk. The rest of the day would be spent in this chair, rolling from desk to overhead projector, and back to the blackboard. In this chair he lectured, admonished students, and ate lunch, rolling around the room like a huge shop-vacuum, puffing and wheezing. Most students would have been surprised to see George Winslow stand up. He pulled a pile of student papers off the corner of the desk into his lap and read the names aloud.

“Medina, Michaels, Morales, Nance, Nichols” He impatiently heaved the stack of papers back onto the desk and rolled around to another stack, where he found the folder of Timmy Ortega. Glancing at his watch, he realized he was late for the meeting in the guidance office downstairs and reluctantly heaved himself from the rolling chair. He waddled out of the room unwrapping a candy bar he’d discovered under the folders.

“So when is he coming?” Enrique Ortega said. He was a thin-faced man wearing wire-frame glasses and a charcoal grey suit. Dolores Ortega, as thin and tense as her husband, also wore wire-frames

and a dark grey outfit with a gold necklace, and was obviously refraining from saying what she wanted to say.

“*Hasta pronto,*” Ginny said. The guidance office secretary wore a red scarf around her plump neck and had been uneasily trying to look busy at her desk as the Ortegas, seated directly in front of her, had stared at her for the last half hour ever since Ms. Simms, the guidance counselor, had left to find Mr. Winslow. Ginny’s attempt to speak their language was not well received, so she continued in English, “Ms. Simms should be back with him any time now.”

Neither husband nor wife made any movement.

Ginny knew from past experience that they wanted no doughnuts and no coffee.

The Ortegas were both physicians in the ophthalmology department of a medical school in D.C. They had a long, unpleasant commute from Wando to Bethesda every morning and were in no mood to indulge a teacher who could not even manage to walk across the school to be at a meeting on time. Perhaps they would have been less tense if Winslow hadn’t been late for the last three conferences.

George Winslow filled the doorway, closely followed by a red-scarved Carmen Simms. The Ortegas stood up at once and Carmen shepherded the group into her office, asking Ginny to bring Timmy from the office, where he had been told to wait. Carmen initially had a strategy. She was first going to take the Ortegas into her office, a dimly-lit room painted in brown earth-tones, with Carmen’s own brown landscapes on the walls and a faint background of harp music coming from speakers near the ceiling. After exchanging pleasantries and talking about how the meeting was going to proceed, the Ortegas would be calm, and she would bring in Timmy. Then they would have a calm discussion about how they could all work together to support Timmy. They could get in touch with their feelings without becoming disagreeable. That was her plan before George Winslow failed to show up.

Racing around the social studies wing, she’d been unable to find him in his room or in any of his familiar haunts like the teacher’s lounge or where he smoked behind the cafeteria. Rudy had not seen

him come in. She had gone back to guidance to see if Winslow had slipped in while she was looking for him and seen the Ortegas sitting stiffly in front of Ginny's desk. When she passed Rudy again, he told her that Winslow was back upstairs. By the time that she had returned to his room, he had already left for the meeting. She didn't even have time to turn on the CD of soothing harp music. She had just enough time to catch up with him as he squeezed sideways through the office door. Now the Ortegas were not even looking at Winslow, and it was just as well, because he was completely unapologetic and even a little sullen about having to finish his candy bar too quickly before going into the office. Carmen looked back at Ginny as they entered the office, rolled her eyes, and shut the door.

The Ortegas found the hardest chairs in the office, leaving the low, soft armchair for Winslow, who sank into it like a bean bag into a pudding. Carmen patted her neck scarf and looked up at her silent CD player on the bookshelf. Enrique Ortega had begun speaking before they were all seated.

"Let's be clear. I want to know when Tim is not in class. If I have to come back during the day to find him and bring him in, I will do it."

There was a tap at the door and Ginny showed Timmy Ortega into the room, carrying his back pack and ball cap. He immediately sat as far in the back of the room as he could. His father frowned and Timmy stared down at his unlaced Nikes.

"I've had to find him before," Enrique said, twisting off the words with a snap of his chin.

"We are all seeking Tim's best interest, Dr. Ortega," Carmen said, looking at Winslow sprawled in the armchair and staring at the doughnuts on her desk.

"Yes, but we don't understand why there was no warning about this history grade," Mrs. Ortega said suddenly, the words tumbling out and her eyes flashing at Winslow, who had laid his grade book on his chest and looked like he was about to fall asleep.

Carmen reached for the chain holding her glasses around her neck. “Mr. Winslow.” She raised her voice slightly so that George would look up. “What can you tell us about Timmy’s class work since our meeting at midterm?”

George slowly turned the pages of his grade book as the gaze of the two doctors in the Ortega family went through him like a spit. Timmy rolled his eyes. Winslow finally looked up from his book, coming eye to eye with Enrique Ortega, as a whiskery sea lion might peer above the ice at a harpooner. “Looks like about six absences,” he wheezed. “Along with several late assignments and zeroes on the quizzes for the days he missed.”

“You averaged in the zeroes and did not tell us about the absences?” said Enrique from the edge of his hard chair.

Carmen intervened gently, wishing her harp sounds were filling the awkward silence and pressing a button under the corner of her desk. “I’m sure that Mr. Winslow is willing to work with us on this.”

“If you average zeroes,” Enrique continued, undeterred, “Tim will never catch up before the end of the year.”

George had a stunned and sleepy expression. As he spoke, he rolled his head from side to side. “I expect my students to come up to my standards. You can’t pass American history by going to the mall.”

When Ginny, sitting outside the conference room, saw the flashing amber light on her desk, she quickly rapped on Carmen’s door and looked inside. “Ms. Simms, Mr. Amber wants to see you about an urgent matter.”

Carmen nodded and pushed her chair back from the desk. “Timmy.” She waited until he looked at her before continuing, “You know that you and Mr. Winslow can get back on track before the end of the year, can’t you?”

Timmy’s nod was barely perceptible.

“And you’re going to be coming to see me each day to report on how you are doing?” She held up his folder.

Timmy sighed.

“Mr. Winslow wants the best for all his students and he’s willing to work with you, but you must come to class.” Ms. Simms turned as Timmy walked to the door. “Understood?”

Timmy nodded.

Winslow snorted and almost spoke.

Carmen continued quickly, standing up as she spoke to the Ortegas. “It was good of you to come in. We will certainly keep on top of this and keep you in the loop concerning Timmy’s progress.”

The Ortegas stood while Winslow struggled to get out of the deep armchair, his feet wiggling above the floor. Carmen stared at the backs of the Ortegas as they stiffly departed. She relaxed. No harpoons were thrown today.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On his way back home, Harry had stopped at a Rite Aid drug store to buy milk. He was waiting in line behind a small, dark man wearing an army fatigue jacket, sweat pants and sneakers. The man was pulling one cart and pushing another, both of them filled with soft drinks. The short, pudgy clerk could not see over the counter, and she would not accept his count of the number of cartons. Harry wondered whether she could even understand the man's heavy Pakistani accent. The clerk and the customer increasingly raised their voices as they tried to be understood until the manager arrived, her price-tag sticker in hand. She quickly counted the cartons and went back to tagging merchandise. The clerk rang up the sale, and then the customer complained that it was too much. These drinks were supposed to be

on sale. The manager returned. Harry began to wonder how long this would go on. There didn't seem to be another line.

The manager explained that one only received a discount for bringing in coupons. It seemed for a moment that the man was going to pay or at least leave, to the relief of everyone in the line, which now weaved around into the cosmetics aisle. But he left his carts in front of the cash register, quickly picked up a coupon flyer from a stack by the entrance, and returned to the counter. He then proceeded to page through the flyer, tearing out the coupons for each beverage. The clerk again called the manager to help her correct the total on the register.

Harry began to think again about what June had said. What did she see when she thought she had seen him and Barbara leaving together? He had been so irritated when her concern about his welfare turned out to be a probe for more news-copy that he hadn't thought about it clearly. Now he realized what she had seen.

"Go ahead, mister!" someone behind him was saying. The customer with two carts had finally left, and Harry was first in line.

Barbara Nuffield asked for a drink of water and sat down near the door of the campaign suite while Sheriff Stihl consulted with a member of the forensics team. Stihl wanted to ask her a few more questions before she left and asked her to wait. She sat very properly, ankles crossed and head erect, a handkerchief in her lap, but she was staring at the floor. From the corner of his eye, Lester Stihl noticed that she was not simply staring demurely into the middle distance. She was looking at something on the floor, something tiny and sparkling. Suddenly, her eyes closed and she pitched forward in a faint. The policewoman who had been standing by the door came in and knelt beside her. Barbara was already trying to get up.

“No, Ma’am, just stay here for a minute. Get your bearings,” the officer said.

“I’m all right. I just didn’t eat breakfast this morning.”

“That’s all right, Barbara. Sergeant Wayne will take you next door to lie down for a bit and maybe have some orange juice.” He nodded to the officer. “I’ll be over in a minute.”

After they had left, he looked at the floor. The tiny, sparkling object was gone.

When Harry walked into the living room with his hard-won carton of milk, he was surprised to see Aunt Clarisse and June Brightman sitting together on the sofa, with Scrunch in June’s lap. Scrunch did not even look at him. Clarisse stood up briskly.

“You have a visitor, Harry,” she said, taking the milk to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” June said with the wide-eyed gaze he couldn’t resist. “Old habits, you know. You’re more important than the story. Will you accept my apology?”

“Sure, June. Sorry I got angry. I just wasn’t up to being pumped for information. Anyway, you were right,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“You did see me and someone like Barbara leaving the conference,” Harry said. “You didn’t see her face, did you?”

“No, now that you mention it,” June said with a puzzled expression, “I only saw her back. But I was sure it was Barbara.”

“It was Renate Brown,” he said. “They were almost identically dressed, and I remembered seeing her going through the exit to the stairway after Barbara had gone into one of the sessions.”

“But I looked for Barbara and didn’t see her,” June said. “Then when the sessions were letting out, I saw her again and tried to talk, but she was obviously upset and cut me short.”

“Well, I can’t account for Barbara’s absence,” Harry said, “but the way that Renate sneaked down the stairs does bother me, knowing how Nuffield died.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, let’s just say that maybe it was while he himself was *in flagrante delicto*.” Harry said.

“You mean, with Renate?” June said.

“Let’s not speculate too wildly, June, but yes, I have to wonder if Renate is involved. Nuffield always called her ‘Rena.’”

“And you think Barbara is involved?”

“Maybe. But the main thing is for you to talk to Lester. Tell him what you saw and let him do the investigating. OK?” Even as Harry said this, he knew that June was not about to let anyone else do her investigation.

“OK, OK. Look, Harry, why don’t you let me take you to dinner tonight? I’ll talk to Sheriff Stihl and we can compare notes. What say?”

“Fine, June. I’ll look forward to it.” Harry heard Clarisse shuffling around in the next room. She was making just enough noise to be heard but not enough to prevent her from listening.

“Seems like the only time we talk is when one of us has a bastard to deal with,” June said, touching his sleeve.

“Hmm, your bastard or mine?” Harry said, smiling. “Not much of an invitation, is it?”

“Nuffield and Jim did seem to share some rather slimy traits.” June nodded. “The real question is why did we fall for them?”

“Well I don’t know about yours, June, but mine was a marriage of convenience,” Harry said, pulling his trouser pocket inside-out.

“Not much difference there,” June retorted gaily. “I also had bills to pay. The only thing was, Jim seemed to be paying them.” She paused. “You know, I can’t joke about it. Day after day, night after night, Jim had lived with me as if everything were fine until that Saturday when the Volvo had disappeared and Jim refused to call the police, saying vaguely that he had loaned it to someone. Later

that same day, my credit card was refused and, when I tried to call Jim about it, the cell phone didn't work.

"June?" Harry asked his eyes wide with concern.

"I went off, didn't I?" she said.

He nodded.

"Jim had that effect and still does." She cut off a sob. "I get lost wondering how I trusted him for so long while he gutted my savings and ruined everything. He was a one-man economic crash. He swept through my life like a whirlwind. Money I'd saved from my very first job, since the time when I'd decided I'd probably never marry—I lost it to him because he seemed to make everything different. He was so full of hope and optimism. 'What's mine is yours,' we said. He couldn't help himself, but knowing that didn't help me. It was only you that helped, Harry—you and Bea."

"We just did what we could, June. We ..."

"No, Harry. You didn't even know me. Before I broke down in your office, we had never spoken more than two or three words in an elevator. I barely knew you, yet I trusted you more than I did my own husband. I still trust you, Harry," she said, wiping her eyes and patting his hand.

"Well, you're back on track now. Right?" Harry looked down, concerned about where this conversation was leading and equally concerned about Aunt Clarisse listening around the corner. As he often did in uncomfortable situations, he fell into a pattern of speech suited to civic boosterism. It was the sort of hearty tone and patter that he deployed for ham and biscuit breakfasts with the Ruritans or Odd Fellows. "Things are looking up now," he said.

June stiffened slightly, sitting up and tucking her handkerchief back into her purse.

"You've got a good job with the paper?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure, Harry. It's a good job." A job, she didn't say, that kept her only marginally ahead of an intricate debt-repayment plan. A job, not the career she had once had.

Harry smiled broadly and sat back on the sofa. “Way to go!” He said.

Clearly, June agreed, as she drove back to the *Transcript* office, they had a long ways to go.

CHAPTER NINE

Officer Tim Berry, two weeks out of police academy, had been told to interview Gina Barber. He checked his 3X5 card for the list of questions to ask. This would be the first interview he'd done on his own. Climbing the porch steps of the tiny corner house on the west end of Washington Street, he noticed that lights were on inside. It was one of the old flounder houses, so named because they were so narrow that their windows, like a flounder's eyes, were all on one side of the house. Berry had learned this bit of trivia working as a summer tour-guide during college. He had driven a purple Holburn Port Authority minibus from the plaza on the waterfront in Holburn to the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, where the elderly visitors would pile out of the bus to wander through the art studios and shops on King Street. Then they would climb back onto the bus with their plunder of macramé bags, stained glass jewelry and

pewter cups for a ride down the George Washington Parkway and across the river to more shopping in Georgetown. It had been Tim Berry's job to provide a continual flow of patter about the monuments, streets, houses and, particularly, the businesses that sponsored the bus ride. In the hundreds of trips he had made past this flounder house, he had never stopped. His continual pounding on the door was getting no response.

The front of the house was about nine feet wide, providing a bare allowance for the door and one narrow, mullioned window with small glass blocks for panes. The Sheriff had insisted that he get information from Gina Barber before the press got the story on Nuffield. Berry looked through the letter-slot without seeing much but picking up a faintly pungent odor from inside the house. He walked around the corner of the house. On the street side, there were no windows, but to the side of the alley-door was a small, high window, through which Berry was able to peer by standing on the lowest rung of the wrought iron porch railing. Looking through a collection of bric-a-brac in the window to the pale yellow interior of the kitchen, he saw a cup of coffee on the counter; beside it were a toaster and a fork. Berry leaned over the porch rail to get a better look at the whole room. On the floor, just around the corner of the narrow kitchen counter, he thought he could see a head with blond hair.

Harry was watching the evening news in his room upstairs as he prepared to go to dinner with June. After the story about Jerry Nuffield, a reporter was shown standing in front of a small, familiar-looking narrow blue cottage with breaking news of an unidentified woman found dead inside. Police were withholding her name pending their investigation and notification of next of kin. As the street was panned, Harry recognized the neighborhood on West Washington Street. It was Gina Barber's house. The phone rang. June asked him if he had seen the news.

"Wasn't that the house of one of your staffers, Harry?" She said. "I think that it was the same place that you gave a reception for the press back in August. It was so small that we had to file through

and exit quickly. I thought you'd arranged it that way so that we wouldn't get to ask Nuffield too many questions."

"Yes. It's Gina Barber's house," Harry said, ignoring his irritation about June's comment. "She was one of only a few full-time staffers who lived in Holburn. The other staffers were college students and most of the other local residents were part-time volunteers."

"Look, Harry," June said slowly, "I'd like to check with the police about this. Something's going on. Could I have a rain check on..."

"Our dinner." Harry said. "Yes, get your story, June."

"Dinner tomorrow?"

"Well, let's see. Bye now." He hung up, once again irritated with her and with himself. June had, of course, gotten it just right about the fund-raiser at Gina's house. Nuffield's idea of creating an event where the press and donors would have to file quickly past the candidate and then depart had been a puzzle until Harry heard Gina talking with Renate about her tiny flounder house. She had taken the house, despite the fact that it forced her to keep most of her belongings in a ministorage outside of town, because it seemed stylish for a young single woman to live in a tiny house that was eighteenth-century outside and Swedish-modern inside. Most of the flounder houses had originally been the homes of domestic workers who couldn't afford much; now they were prime real estate with the cachet of being historical landmarks. Gina had been delighted to show off her newly decorated house, and Jerry had been pleased about having an event in the west end of town, where he wasn't particularly popular because of his voting record on development issues. Jerry had always wanted the press to show him mixing with the people on the street or attending local events, never at his palatial house on the other side of town, so Gina's house was perfect, although Renate had not seemed too happy about the attention that Nuffield was now paying to Gina Barber.

June was undoubtedly going to dig it all up about Gina and Nuffield. After that fund-raiser, the two of them were obviously involved with each other, to the distress of Renate Brown and the disgust of the other staffers, most of whom seemed ready to return to graduate school midway in the campaign. Harry had spent hours arguing with some of them about the importance of sticking with a candidate even though one might not admire everything about him. The problem with Jerry was, the more you knew, the less there was to admire. He was clearly trying to keep both Gina and Renate in his love life, apparently while Barbara Nuffield looked on. It was an awkward situation for Harry to persuade idealistic staffers that venality and deception at a personal level do not necessarily translate to venality and deception at a public level. When Gina and Nuffield would disappear for hours at a time, it had fallen to Harry to keep Renate and the other staffers on the phones and to provide an excuse should Barbara Nuffield appear unexpectedly. While not a part of his job description, it was an implicit condition for keeping his job.

In the last week of the campaign, Jerry had gone home with Gina every night. Although Harry had last seen Jerry at the hotel, he would not have been surprised to learn that Jerry had been with Gina on their last night. Was there really someone angry enough about the two of them to commit murder? Barbara would be a likely suspect if she had ever shown any concern about Nuffield's dalliances, but in all of the small talk that had flowed between them, Harry had never detected any concern of hers about or for her husband. He was simply a means to an end. She was amused by Harry's increasingly intricate attempts to explain why Jerry had disappeared. On one occasion, Barbara simply told him, "Harry, I know where he is."

Given Barbara's indifference to Nuffield, she seemed an unlikely candidate for Sheriff Stihl's special attention, but Harry was willing to concede that he was easily mystified by female inscrutability, whether that of Barbara Nuffield, June Brightman or of Clarisse Pettiford. Aunt Clarisse had been strangely quiet after June had left. Harry had expected to hear much more about Scrunch and the dahlias.

At the very least, he had expected her to complain about the disturbance created by all the phone calls he had been receiving from former staffers and the press since the story broke. Closing Scrunch in the bedroom, he went quietly downstairs and found Clarisse watching the same news program he had been watching upstairs. She had a tray on her lap with coffee and her bird-like hands fluttering over a plate of ham and green beans. Despite his attempt to go quietly through to the kitchen, Clarisse immediately looked up.

“Well, Harry, since you and June are not eating out, you’ll want some green beans and ham. I left it on the stove. There are biscuits in the basket. You get something to eat, now.”

“Inscrutable,” Harry muttered to himself.

CHAPTER TEN

Wilson Briggs was watching the local Saturday evening news, as his mysterious phone-caller had directed him to do. The local reporters were forever previewing what they were going to say in the next five minutes. Briggs seldom watched the program because of the confusing *mélange* of previews and commercials that buried every story. So far, Gerald Nuffield had been mentioned two or three times, but now, as the newscaster picked up a sheaf of paper and looked straight into the camera, it looked like the teasing had come to an end and he was finally going to report the story. Then came a commercial break.

What bothered Briggs was that his son, Will, might have overlooked something, since the Corazon account had been the first proffer he'd handled on his own. Briggs had called Will immediately after getting the phone threat, but Will had no idea how anyone could have known about the arrangements with Nuffield unless Nuffield had told them, and he wouldn't have exposed it. So it wasn't Will. Briggs had made sure that Will had understood the ins and outs of special proffer arrangements early on. He didn't want him to learn the hard way, as he had.

For Briggs, writing proffers was a source of pride, like a well played poker hand. The key to all arrangements was that the customer pays. One could provide streets, lighting, community centers and libraries so long as the customers pay. When and how they pay should never be written into the contract. The basics of this game were the same ones Briggs had learned forty years ago, traveling up and down Route 1 while doing roofing estimates for Ace Custom Roofing, Inc. He'd come back to the company office in Del Ray to leave his measurements and then, two days later, he'd return to the customer with an estimate that routinely doubled all of the costs and included a special monthly payment plan. By the time the customer had his customized asbestos-shingle roof with the galvanized sheet metal trim and flashings, he had paid not only twice what it was worth but interest on the loan he'd had to take from the roofing company. Briggs had figured out pretty quickly that he could do as well on his own as with Ace Custom Roofing. Soon after leaving the company, Vernon and he had bought their first truck.

Proffers were the same kind of deal except that they had a sheen of civic gallantry about them. The contractor was not simply building, he was contributing to the community. What others chose to believe about it was their concern. Wilson Briggs was in business to make money, not to give it away. The commercials finally ended and the newscaster's talking head was in a tiny box in the corner of the television screen. Police cars were shown in front of the Holburn Plaza Hotel.

“In a strange conclusion to the recent Council election in Holburn, one of the newly re-elected Council members has been found murdered this morning in his suite at the Holburn Hotel. Going live

now to Danielle Yates in Holburn.” The reporter was standing in front of the hotel marquee. The camera zoomed in on her beautiful brown face.

“Early today at his campaign headquarters in this hotel, Councilman Gerald Nuffield was found murdered by a person or persons unknown. Sheriff Lester Stihl tells us that there are no suspects at this time, but it is early in the investigation. Mr. Nuffield had been re-elected to Council on Tuesday after a close and often bitter race with Duane Nugent, who has expressed his sorrow at today’s events. Others expressing their sympathy to Mrs. Nuffield and her family were Oscar Menendez of the Hispanic Coalition and Mr. Nuffield’s friends in Masonic Lodge Number 47. A sad story here today for the people of Holburn. Back to you, John.”

Briggs pressed the mute key on his remote and sat in silence in his high, dark office surrounded by the lights of the city. Another reporter was now on the television screen, standing in front of a narrow blue house. Briggs was now sure. It hadn’t just been a crank call. He had been talking to a murderer. Only the murderer would have known about the story in advance and only a murderer who bore him a particular grudge would want him to think about this. Somebody like that crazy Oscar Menendez and his crazy coalition. Well, he wasn’t going to hang around town to find out what some crazy person would do. He’d report it all to the police, get his fishing gear from the ministorage, and take Ann to their beach house in North Carolina.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Timmy Ortega was drinking coffee with a skateboard on his lap as he waited in a coffee shop in the mall across the highway from Wando High School. He had taken off his cap this time. Wearing a cap backwards seemed to signal the managers of the stores in the mall that he was an escapee from Wando High, and that the authorities should be notified. He was waiting for Pico, another escapee. They usually met in the video den but the manager there had begun routinely reporting them whenever they appeared during school hours. They were going to board behind the mall on a loading dock. As he waited, Timmy had been watching the customers in the shop, most of them elderly women with

shopping bags and big purses. They sat with each other at the round, glass-topped tables and shouted over the radio music into each others' hearing aids.

A trio of well-dressed Latina women sat near the door. They had finished their coffee and were not talking. Timmy noticed that they seemed to be watching the tables around them. Pico appeared at the shop window and Timmy got up, passing by the quiet trio close enough to hear them softly speaking in Spanish.

Once out of the shop, Timmy motioned for Pico to follow him to a bench across the mall from the coffee shop. Pico was wearing his old gray cap backwards and carrying his board. He didn't want to sit down, but Timmy had made up his mind. He wanted to see what would happen next. After a few minutes, the three women came out of the coffee shop and briefly stood by the door as the one in the middle handed some cards to the other two. Then they calmly walked off in three directions.

Timmy nodded and picked up his board. As Pico and he were going to the parking lot, he started to tell Pico about the women when he saw a familiar figure, wearing a striped suit and red scarf, and coming toward them.

"Oh man!" Timmy moaned, "It's Ms. Simms."

"Come on, boys," she said breathlessly. "When I saw Pico heading toward the mall, I knew that you both were at it again. And you, Timmy! Even after that conference with your parents."

Timmy wiped the perspiration from his rudimentary mustache and fell in line behind Ms. Simms and Pico. He wondered if she would tell them to hold hands crossing the street.

Back in the guidance office, Ms. Simms turned on the harp music on her CD player and had Timmy to sit down. Pico had been sent back to class but Timmy was to receive the harp music torture. He had been in Ms. Simms' office often enough to know the books on her shelves--the guidance journals, Ortiz's *The Tao of Music* and bound copies of *The Harp Therapy Journal*. Ms. Simms had left Timmy sitting on the edge of a deep armchair in which he was determined not to be comfortable.

Meanwhile, the quiet plucking of harp strings emanated from the speakers near the ceiling. His skateboard had been confiscated. After Timmy had endured an hour of harp music and dimmed lights, Ms. Simms finally came back to the office, followed by a tall, stylishly dressed version of Timmy, his brother Daniel, who looked perplexed and irritated.

“Why you call my brother?” Timmy blurted out, putting his hands behind his bowed head and staring at the floor.

“You’d rather she called Dad?” Daniel asked, sinking into one of the chairs. Ms. Simms quietly closed the door and sat down with them in front of her desk.

“I hoped you would talk to your brother. You certainly didn’t have anything to add to the conference with Mr. Winslow.”

“That blimp just likes to hear himself talk,” Timmy snapped.

“Hey, don’t disrespect Mr. Winslow. He could really help you if you let him,” Daniel said, pulling his chair closer to Timmy.

“Yeah, like he helped you and your retro friends Preppy Renate and Miguel the Weird, Mr. Reston,” he sneered.

“Look, you know why I changed my last name. Let’s not get into that.”

“No, let’s not get into that. I don’t want to get into any of your, uh, stuff.” Timmy glanced at Ms. Simms. “Like you passing for anglo and sucking up to that blimp Winslow.”

“Slow down, Timmy,” Ms. Simms interrupted. “This isn’t why we’re here.”

“Yeah, like I care why we’re here,” he snarled, wiping his tiny mustache.

“It’s not easy for me to be here right now. OK?” Daniel said. “Something’s happened.”

“What? Renate run out on you again?” Timmy smiled, seeing he had scored.

“No, it’s something at work. I need to be there but I drove here right away because you’re my brother. And you can do better than this.”

“Don’t give me another sermon. You already tried to be president here once and Renate made better campaign speeches. And she already gave you a consolation prize. Isn’t that enough? Leave me alone! Anyway, I told you already that I didn’t want Winslow’s course or those pony AP courses you made me take.”

“What you gonna do, run a *burrito* stand?” Daniel shot back.

“Better that than hang with you and Miguel’s FARC posse and that loony wannabe, Renate.”

Carmen Simms was wondering whether sending for Daniel had been a mistake when suddenly the brothers stopped trading insults and stared at each other. Finally, Daniel spoke softly.

“You know it isn’t for me.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Timmy, glancing at the wall clock hanging beside one of Ms. Simms’ earth-tone paintings of vaguely realized landscapes with people like trees and trees like people. “Look, I’ve got Driver’s Ed. now. It’s the one class where I’m getting an A.”

“OK, Timmy,” said Ms. Simms, “but I see you every morning in this office or I come looking.”

“And no more teacher reports or visits to the mall,” Dan said.

Timmy nodded slightly and quickly left them, disappearing into the stream of students crowding the halls as they changed classes. Daniel watched him put his cap on backwards and move down the hall. He wished he could disappear into that crowd of students instead of returning to Holburn and the conversation he would have to have with Renate about Mr. Nuffield.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Scrunch followed the canonical hours, waiting until six in the morning to begin snuffling and jumping at Harry's bed. In Roanoke, Bea had always taken Scrunch for his Prime walk, and both Harry and she were always glad that the dog slept through Matins. Harry slowly pulled on his corduroys and sweatshirt, slipped his bare feet into loafers, and grabbed the coat and leash from the overstuffed chair where he had left them the night before. Scrunch was dancing around him, snorting and growling. He picked up the dog and carried it down to the front door at the bottom of the stairs. On days like this, you don't have big plans; you simply do whatever must be done next.

The street lights were still on along St. Giles Lane. Most of the houses were two-story brick colonials and, like his aunt's home, ivy-covered and surrounded by trees. In mid-November, there were still dahlias and a few roses in front yards, but mostly it was mums of all kinds: rusty reds, white daisies, and yellow cushions. Bea would have known all their names. It had just rained, leaving the sidewalks glistening and the overhanging branches dripping. Harry had not noticed this until he felt water in his shoe and looked down just long enough to be swatted by a wet branch. Meanwhile, Scrunch was tugging at the leash and looking back impatiently. They turned the corner, making their way around the block, and Harry was wishing that he had brought a hat.

He remembered when Bea had noticed that Scrunch followed the canonical hours. He had been telling her about Father Berman's classes at the academy. "Remember your daily office, boys," he had said. "This is your defense against pewlags." Bea had asked him to explain about the canonical hours and then said, "It's very natural, isn't it? Like Scrunch's calls of nature every three hours." Not so long ago, they had laughed about this and ever afterwards had joked whenever Scrunch called them 'to prayer.' Sometimes Bea would shout upstairs to him, "Your turn. *Oremus*—let us pray." Like his daily office, which Harry now honored mainly in the breach, his guard was down against the deadly sins, the "pewlags" of pride, envy, wrath, lechery, avarice, greed and sloth. Yesterday had certainly presented him with a posy of pewlags.

Scrunch and he rounded the next corner, Scrunch pausing at his usual place and Harry looking up the side street. Usually the city street-sweeper would pass them, and Scrunch would bark at the swishing brushes. Today was Sunday, a day to regret past omissions and commissions, a day to wonder about the consequences of one's failings. As they reached the black iron fence around Clarisse's house, Scrunch pulled the leash away from Harry and ran to the porch. Harry took off his shoes as they entered and dried his feet on the living room rug as they went to the kitchen for breakfast. Scrunch could prance and do his minstrel act as much as he wanted, he would still receive only the regulation canine breakfast.

The veterinarian had been very blunt about snacks and large portions. Harry's doctor had been similarly blunt. This morning's human breakfast was butter pecan-flavored nutritional drink which Harry drank slowly to make it last.

Aunt Clarisse would want him to take her to church, so Harry slowly went back upstairs with his small can of drink. Scrunch, who had already finished eating, followed sadly behind him. As he was showering and getting dressed, Harry reviewed the events of the last two days.

On Friday night, while Harry was trying to be an Event Manager or at least to strike up a conversation with a potential employer, Jerry Nuffield, wearing only his underwear and a tricorne hat, was entertaining guests. Apparently the guest or guests, or someone else, had killed him with the nearest available sharp object. It seemed like a crime of passion. He wondered whether Barbara Nuffield had that kind of passion. Maybe for clothes. Harry just didn't think that she would have risked getting blood on her outfit to do Jerry in, but he had to allow that June and Stihl were justified in their suspicions.

Jerry was not loved, but no one wanted him dead. Duane Nugent wanted him out of office, but Nugent was at the conference with the rest of them. He was there for a while, anyway. None of Nugent's supporters really showed any belligerence during the campaign. If anything, they seemed to be a hang-dog bunch that was going through the motions against a shoe-in incumbent. Only Nugent and Nuffield really believed that Duane might win. That was what led Jerry to talk to Oscar Menendez about the housing situation for legal and illegal immigrants.

He needed a plank in his campaign that would bring in a nontraditional sector of the population. "Housing For All Our People" was to be Jerry's ace in the hole. Harry doubted that it had made much difference. There were few voters in this sector. Jerry might have a "heart for all Holburn's people" but most of the immigrant workers were working their hearts out on two jobs a day, living in crowded apartments, sending half their incomes back home and thinking very little about who was going to be on

the Town Council. If Jerry had really wanted to know more about this, he could have asked his own locally-residing staffers, Renate Brown and Daniel Reston.

Harry looked through the index cards in the file box on his dresser. Renate's former name was 'Torres' and Danny's was 'Ortega.' There's was a name worth noticing: Daniel Ortega. Harry slipped his wallet into his inner coat pocket and combed his few gray hairs back one more time.

Given the way that Renate had slipped away from the conference and gone down the side stairs, Harry couldn't help suspecting that Jerry Nuffield's research on her was of a different variety. Maybe he went too far in his advances and Renate killed him accidentally. Harry doubted that she would have committed such a passionate act and then calmly returned to the conference at Demeter's. It seemed even less likely that she went there expressly to murder him. June had said that Barbara seemed upset later in the evening. Perhaps she had seen the murder. Surely she would have reported it. Thinking of Renate and Jerry together was strange. If Harry had been asked, he would have said that Nuffield was interested in the blond, willowy Gina Barber, not Renate, who dressed and looked like his wife. And now it seemed that Gina was also murdered.

She hadn't been to work for the three days since the election, but Harry had chalked it up to a need for decompression after the big win. Several of the other staffers had also missed work. There simply wasn't that much to do after the campaign ended. It seemed incredible that she had been dead all of this time. Harry wondered whether Nuffield and Gina Barber were killed by the same person, and whether Renate or Barbara had anything to do with it. Surely impulse could not account for both murders.

Of course, Renate and Barbara might have done it together. Harry wondered whether Renate's copying of Barbara would have gone this far. Lester Stihl could think about all this. Harry needed to get Barbara's signature on the payroll checks. The young volunteers and half-timers might not depend upon a paycheck, but he certainly did.

Scrunch was curled on the throw-rug, and Harry quietly walked around him to the landing. He could hear his aunt downstairs in the kitchen. She would want to leave soon so that they could attend the “traditional” service at 9:30 a.m. He didn’t feel like going to church, but since he was going anyway, maybe he would pray for insight.

The Sixth Presbyterian Church of Holburn had an early “traditional” service and a midmorning “contemporary” service. Aunt Clarisse, who still wore a small black hat with a veil, insisted on going to the early service because of the music. She particularly despised the guitar and drum-set in the contemporary service and refused to stand up and wave her arms above her head like the other congregants. Harry agreed with her about the arm-waving; he suspended judgment on the guitar and drums. The Sixth Presbyterian Church was a typical Federal-style building with a white, spare interior. The elderly organ coughed a bit in the balcony, but on the whole, the traditional reformed service was smoothly executed, and the elderly crowd quickly dispatched well before the chancel had to be cleared for the microphones, drums, electric guitars and portable keyboard needed in the next hour. Gone were the days of the rail and screened enclosure which was to be entered only by the pastor and elder.

Harry and Bea had attended a very similar church in Roanoke. They favored the somewhat austere but less formal Presbyterian service over the liturgically self-conscious Episcopal and Lutheran services. After having been sent to a Roman Catholic parochial school as a boy, Harry could appreciate liturgy best when, like Achilles’ spear, it was less obvious and more— The word was “synecdochal.” Father Berman would be proud. At least he would be proud that he’d remembered some Shakespeare, if not proud of his choice of churches. Perhaps where Father Berman was now, however, such things mattered less. Harry noticed that the service had ended, and Lester Stihl, wearing one of his charcoal black suits, was edging down the pew toward him.

“Miss Pettiford, how are you?” He nodded to Harry.

“Quite well, Mr. Stihl. We did so enjoy Doris’s centerpiece at the Garden Club on Friday.”

“Yes. Well, she spent a lot of time on it. Good to see you. Harry, I wonder if you could drop by the office later this afternoon. There are a few more questions you may be able to answer.”

Harry knew that this was not a request. He nodded and then watched Lester slide back to the aisle and head quickly to the door. Stihl was clearly trying to get ahead of the other worshippers and to skirt the crowd shaking hands with the pastor. Standing directly in his path, however, was Wilson Briggs, one of the trustees, a small man with a deeply wrinkled face and large, gnarled hands with big knuckles, hands that had known manual labor. Wilson also happened to be the richest man in Northern Virginia and a generous donor to the Sixth Presbyterian Church. Whatever Wilson had to say to him had made Stihl hold up his hand to stop him from saying more. They quietly exited together through a side door.

After fixing lunch for Clarisse, who was feeling tired after church, and checking on Scrunch, Harry went back downtown to the police station, a plain, white block building near the more handsome neocolonial Department of Motor Vehicles. Behind the police station were parking places for jurors and police cruisers. A small jail in the back of the station opened onto an area enclosed by a high fence topped with coiled barbwire. Inside the enclosure, Harry saw a few inmates playing basketball. He pressed the buzzer to signal the officer inside and heard the bolt snap back. Once inside, he faced a tiny counter behind which two dispatchers and a civilian secretary were seated. Everyone seemed to be very busy. Harry quickly stated his business and was sent through a metal-detecting gate to the sheriff's office, just as Wilson Briggs was leaving. He'd met Briggs at one of Nuffield's fundraisers and suspected that Jerry and Briggs had done some horse-trading, but Jerry never confided in him. Briggs stopped and spoke to him for a moment.

“Terrible thing about Jerry Nuffield.”

“Yes, Mr. Briggs. We were all shocked,” Harry said.

This seemed to be the end of the audience he was granted, so Harry stepped aside and let Briggs pass. Inside the office, Lester Stihl was writing in one of the small, spiral notebooks he always seemed to carry.

“Come on in, Harry. Glad you could make it.”

“I didn’t think that I had a choice,” Harry said, looking around the tidy office. Everything was in order on the room’s white shelves and counters, and Lester’s desk was bare except for his day-planner and small spiral notebook. The room reminded Harry of the white panels and polished pews of their church. A green computer screen behind the desk offered the only color contrast to the grays, whites and blacks of this Presbyterian sheriff’s office.

“Coffee?” Lester smiled, refusing to comment on Harry’s quip.

Harry nodded and received a large mug of coffee from Lester’s shiny black coffee maker.

“You have some wealthy customers,” Harry said.

“Wilson’s upset, but he doesn’t want to tell me the whole story. Maybe you can fill in some of the missing pieces.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I’ll help if I can.”

“He said that he had received a threatening phone call that the same thing that happened to Gerald Nuffield could happen to him. He wanted police protection. There didn’t seem to be much he could give us to go on. Of course, we can have his phone calls monitored, but I think that there’s something old Wilson isn’t telling us.”

“Well, I don’t know much about Wilson Briggs, Lester”

“What about Briggs and Nuffield? Was something going on between them?”

“I think there was. Briggs attended a fundraiser at Gina Barber’s house back in the summer, and Nuffield spent most of the evening talking with Briggs. Jerry kept it to himself, but I know that Briggs

Construction made a campaign donation. The only person who might know more about it is Barbara Nuffield.”

“Barbara, yes.” Lester leaned back in his swivel chair. “I understand that you and Barbara left together from the conference around a quarter to eight on Friday evening.”

“You’ve been talking to June Brightman,” Harry said, sipping his coffee. “I left and went home, arriving the same time that Clarisse was getting back from the Garden Club meeting. Barbara didn’t leave with me but Renate Brown, who was dressed the same as Barbara, did leave about the same time that I did. She took the stairs and presumably went out the side exit.”

“Only one problem with that, Harry,” Stihl said, sitting up in his chair. “I have a hotel clerk who saw Barbara leaving the hotel at a little before ten o’clock that night and I have to go with evidence, not presumptions.”

“I can’t help you except to say that I find it hard to believe that Barbara would be a murderer.” Harry leaned back in his chair.

“Are you saying that Nuffield did not have affairs?” Stihl said.

“No, but he seemed marginally discreet about it, and Barbara seemed to accept his behavior.”

“So it wouldn’t surprise you to know that Nuffield was with Gina Brown on Thursday night?”

Stihl began writing in his notebook.

“Well, yes it would,” Harry said. “I thought she was sick or relaxing after the election. We hadn’t seen her for three days. Of course, Nuffield was always hanging around her desk and she seemed to find him attractive, but there was nothing overt.” But then, Harry thought, Jerry Nuffield knew how to keep secrets. He’d made a career of secrets and promises.

“From the evidence at her house, it would seem that they had more than a passing relationship,” Stihl said, looking down into his empty cup.

“You’re not saying that Gina was killed by Nuffield?”

“No, only that he was there.” Stihl looked at a report on his desk. “She was electrocuted by a frayed wire in a toaster. More people should have ground fault interrupters. You have no idea how many deaths we see from electrical hazards. Of course, with women it’s usually because of cheap hair driers.”

“You think that Nuffield left her that way?”

“Goes to character, Harry.” Stihl swiveled around to his coffee-maker. “Another cup?”

“No, thanks. Character?” Harry said.

“Yeah.” Stihl nodded. “In that situation, would Nuffield have been more concerned about getting her emergency services or about his public image?”

Harry hesitated. “Nuffield was a political animal, but I’d hate to think that he just left her like that.”

“We see it all here,” Stihl said. “It happens. I think that is exactly what Mr. Nuffield did. And I think that the following evening he had another big date, but this time he was the victim. Barbara has not yet admitted being at the hotel, but it’s just a matter of time. I remember that jacket she was wearing. It was covered with sparkling red sequins or crystals. Right?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, when she was waiting for me in the campaign suite at the hotel, she spotted one of those sequins on the floor and faked a faint to be able to retrieve it. I can’t prove anything about the sequin, but I can confront her with the witness of the hotel clerk. She’ll cave.”

“Well, what if she were at the hotel?” Harry said defensively. “That doesn’t make her the murderer.”

“No,” Stihl said, “but her denial of the fact makes her a suspect. Maybe she knew about Nuffield and Gina Barber; maybe she also knew about other women, like Renate Brown. And maybe she had become fed up.”

“OK, but why would she call Wilson Briggs?”

“Oh, it was a man who called Briggs,” Stihl said. “Probably some crank who has a grudge against Briggs and was trying to scare him. It was from a public phone over on West Broad. The caller didn’t provide any information that could not have been obtained from the evening edition of the newspaper.”

“Unrelated, then?” Harry said.

“I’d say so. You know, we always scrutinize family members. I’m sorry to tell you this, but we’re bringing Barbara in for more questioning. We probably will not charge her yet, but she is definitely the prime suspect.”

Harry shook his head. “Well, thank you for telling me. There are several loose ends left from the campaign and I will need to talk to Barbara.”

“No problem, Harry. As I said, she will probably not be charged yet. We will be sending her back home for the present time.”

“Can I get back into the campaign suite to retrieve the personal effects of some of the staffers?”

“Yes, we’ve wrapped up over there, and the hotel management would like you to do the same as soon as possible.” Stihl stood up. “Thanks for coming in.”

Harry left the police station and spent the rest of the afternoon going through the desks at the hotel. The only personal items left there belonged to Gina Barber, Renate Brown, Daniel Reston, Jerry and him. As he was leaving, his cell phone rang. It was June, inviting him to dinner at Nero’s in Alexandria.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Harry had reluctantly agreed to meet June at Nero's and driven the short distance from Holburn to Glebe Road, the most direct route to Alexandria. He parked in back of the restaurant and walked around the building to the green canopy over the front entrance on Duke Street. Passing by the windows, he had seen June, already seated inside. She wore a plain black dress and a red scarf fastened at the shoulder with a gold clasp. In the candlelight, her eyes shone as she rose to greet him. Harry was beginning to feel less reluctant about seeing her again. They ordered wine and a pasta dish with chicken and penne and began to talk as soon as the waiter had decided they could be left on their own.

“You didn’t think I was going to call you back, did you Harry?” she asked, smiling mischievously.

Harry smiled weakly, suddenly at a loss for words; he picked up the menu. “What is pasta is prologue,” he said.

June wrinkled her nose.

“It’s the best I can do,” he apologized.

“Puns are minor offenses.”

“Unlike murder,” he said soberly.

“Guess you talked to Sheriff Stihl.”

“Yes. Saw him this afternoon. I gather that he also saw you.”

June nodded and Harry sipped his wine.

“He seems determined to believe that Barbara murdered Jerry, but I can’t accept that. He just didn’t matter to her that much or in that way. However sleazy he might have been, they had a good political marriage. She fronted for him, handled public relations, personnel and some of the finances, so that he could wheel and deal. They understood each other too well.”

“But she was there on Friday night,” June said.

“Apparently so. And apparently there were no fingerprints or other evidence to indicate that a stranger might have been there.”

“No, at least not inside the room.” June drained her glass and waited for Harry’s reply.

He only raised an eyebrow.

“Well,” she said, “It seems that the hotel maids and porters recalled someone waiting in the laundry alcoves. No one got a good look at this person, however. This person seems to have moved from one alcove to another. They were only sure of it because some sheets were pressed down in the corner

where the person had been sitting behind the laundry bins and because a porter had seen someone leaving the hotel from a rear entrance.”

“Stihl told you about this?” Harry looked around the empty dining room.

“He told me after I told him what the maids had told me.” June smiled broadly.

“You’re on thin ice with the police,” Harry said. “And I imagine that he told you so.”

“Oh Harry, Lester is a teddy bear!”

“A teddy bear with hand-cuffs. You shouldn’t interfere in a police investigation,” he warned.

“Even you don’t believe he’s on the right track,” she protested.

“But it isn’t my job to correct him,” Harry said. “Anyway, from what you’ve said, he has another suspect, a stranger.”

“Or it could be that the person waiting in the alcove was Barbara or one of the staffers from either Nuffield’s or Nugent’s campaigns. After all, we know that Gina Barber was involved in this in some way,” June said.

“Involved with Nuffield, you mean,” Harry countered. “His fingerprints were in her apartment.” Seeing June’s surprise, he added, “But it was an accidental death. She was apparently electrocuted by a kitchen appliance.”

June raised her napkin to suppress a laugh. “And you say that I pumped Lester Stihl for information!”

Harry blushed. “I wasn’t going after the information. He just told me. Anyway, it was just that I don’t see that Barbara would have done it.”

“Wait a minute,” June interrupted. “You mean that Jerry Nuffield was with Gina Barber the night before he was murdered? That he found her dead in the kitchen and then just left? What a low-life! His precious reputation would have been damaged by the revelation of his adultery with a staff member, so he simply pulled up his pants and drove back to the hotel.”

“That’s about it,” Harry said, poking at his salad. “Nuffield was always holding forth on what he called ‘human capital theory.’ According to him, people made decisions based on how much they had personally invested in a particular course of action or cause or person. If you’ve spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a successful political campaign that positions you for powerful and lucrative enterprises, you will not jeopardize that investment.”

“Merely for an act of human decency,” June added.

“That was Jerry Nuffield.” Harry shrugged.

“A real black hole of empathy. Not only did he feel nothing for others, he used their sympathy to his own advantage.” As June tipped the glass for the last drop of wine, the wine steward reappeared with the bottle. “Yes, all right. Why not?” she said, holding out her glass defiantly.

Harry noticed that June’s cheeks were flushed. He had accepted a glass of wine but did not intend to finish it. He wanted to get off the topic of Jerry Nuffield because June seemed to have become angry about it in a way that he couldn’t understand. She had hardly known Jerry, so he suspected that her anger was displaced, maybe from him. He wondered why the entree was delayed.

“See,” June said, who had already finished half of her third glass of wine, “a guy like that is always calculating and always figuring the odds, always wondering how far he can go without getting caught. What did you call it? Human capital theory? Just another name for selfishness. That’s all it comes down to. He just used whatever and whoever was handy to get what he wanted in order to satisfy an appetite or show off. You know, Jim just blew off ten or twenty thousand showing off. He redecorated our living room and had a swimming pool put in just so that he could throw a pool party. I thought it was generosity and spontaneity. It was what attracted me to him –his easy laughter and impulsive surprise trips and outrageous gifts. There was a kind of masterful ease about everything he did for you, a glow of reassurance, as if you were the center of his world and he couldn’t do enough for you.

I should have understood at that pool party when I saw him going from person to person with the same glow of sincerity and concern.”

The waiter arrived with a top-off, but this time June covered her glass. “After the pool party,” she continued, “I found out that he had approached several of my friends for loans. They came to me to ask what was wrong, and I had to tell them I knew nothing about it. Not long afterwards, Jim’s entire plastic world crumbled down on top of us. Down came his high risk investments, his gambling debts to loan sharks, and his so-called venture capital company. Jim really believed that he had been a businessman, and so did I. Even as we sat on the one sofa left in our empty house, I believed his reassurances. I still believed him, Harry!”

Her eyes filled with tears and Harry quickly looked down at his lap. The waiter finally brought their meal, enabling them to fill the uncomfortable silence.

“This penne is actually pretty good,” Harry said, after a few minutes. “It ought to be, after the wait we had. You know, June, some people, people who have used us, just need to be forgotten. They deserve nothing more, no more of our worry or attention, no more of our embarrassment or guilt.”

June bit her lower lip and stared at her plate. Harry searched for words. “Nuffield is like that for me,” he continued. “Once this business is over, I want nothing more to do with political campaigns, Barbara Nuffield, or any other connection to our former councilman. It was only after I had worked for him for half a year that I realized what he was like. The hustlers of the world thrive on the generosity and kindness of others.”

“And the self-delusion of others,” June said. “The stupid willingness to be deceived because it’s exciting or titillating. Or maybe we’re hoping for some big pay-off. Maybe we’ll be lucky, like the old man in the news yesterday who won eight million from a quarter slot-machine. Our own greed gets into it. We want to believe. And that, Harry, means we have ourselves to blame,” she said, smiling sadly. She

pushed back her chair and gazed thoughtfully at Harry as he finished his chicken. “You were saying something about Barbara before I interrupted you.”

“Oh, only that I couldn’t see her waiting in a hotel alcove. What would she have been waiting for?”

“Maybe she was watching to see who went into the room. Maybe she wasn’t as complaisant about Nuffield’s affairs as you believe. Assume for a moment that she knew someone was meeting Nuffield that night and had decided to confront them.”

“Maybe she thought he was meeting Gina Barber,” he suggested.

“Or maybe Renate Brown.”

“You think that both of them could have been here?” Harry was aware of the waiter hovering over them. “Dessert menu, please,” he said hurriedly.

“Suppose they were. Barbara had a key to the suite. She walks in on them or she waits until Renate has left and then confronts Nuffield.”

The waiter had returned. Harry ordered two tiramisus. “So, given your assumptions, Renate might be a witness.”

“Or the murderer,” June said.

“We need to leave this to the police, June.” Harry shook his head. “No more speculations.”

“So you don’t care about the calls that Nuffield made or received on Friday?” June teased. She was enjoying this, and Harry was once again becoming irritated with her.

“The police know that Nuffield called Renate Brown’s number at 11:00 a.m. and received a call from Daniel Reston’s number at 3:00 p.m.” She took a bite of the tiramisu.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me how you found that out.”

“Actually, I told Sheriff Stihl that I’d be seeing you this evening,” June said. “He asked me to tell you.”

“Why?” Harry said.

“He wants you to tell him what you know about Renate and Daniel. These were practically the only noncommercial calls on Nuffield’s phone record for Friday and Stihl thought it would save time for me to let you know about it. He had meant to ask you about it this afternoon.”

“You must be camped out at the police station,” Harry said. “Why didn’t I see you there?”

She ignored this remark and asked her question again. “What about this Daniel Reston?”

“He’s a hard worker.” Harry hesitated. “Daniel went to high school with Renate and hangs out with her, but lately she seemed to be distancing herself from him. He’s very serious and idealistic. His parents came from El Salvador.”

“With a name like Reston?”

“Actually, both Renate and Daniel have changed their names. Her name is Torres. His is Ortega.”

“Daniel Ortega.” June smiled.

“Exactly. He does not want to be associated with his Sandinista namesake. I’m sure that those calls just concerned some minor business left over from the campaign. There were only a few full-time staffers who were local residents, so Jerry would have known that he could reach them at home. Most of the other staffers had already returned to campus. The calls were probably about some local errands that Jerry wanted them to run for him. He was always calling us at odd hours. I’ll see Lester tomorrow.” Harry called for the check.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” June asked.

“I will be returning to the staffers and to Barbara what I collected at the hotel today. I’m hoping that Barbara will be able to write out the last paychecks for everyone so that we can bring everything to a close.”

“What are your prospects now, Harry?” June said as they walked out of the restaurant under the canopy.

“Not good. I need that check right away and then I’ll need to find some source of additional income within a month.”

“Look, Harry, I know it can’t be easy for you right now and I’d be glad to help you out until you get things sorted out.”

“June, I appreciate it, but I can’t take a loan from you. I really appreciate the offer but I’m sure that something will come up. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Well,” she interrupted, “if you need it, let me know.”

“Thanks, June,” he said, shaking her hand. “It’s getting cold.”

“Yes, and I have to get back to the office,” she said.

As she turned to walk across the street, Harry noticed that she wobbled slightly in her high heels, an unaccustomed change from her usual flats or running shoes.

Harry drove to the Fireside Nursing Home and rode the elevator to the nursing care unit on the second floor.

“Hello, Flora,” he said to the large, red-haired Cuban nurse sorting the medications on a stainless steel cart.

“Hello, Mr. Pettiford. Mrs. Pettiford been real good today. She’s awake,” she said, gesturing toward the room and then turning back to the medicine cart.

Harry picked up the newspaper from the counter of the nursing station as he went into Bea’s room to sit by the bed. Bea never looked at him or at anyone else. Except for the steady rise and fall of her chest, occasional blinking, and small movements of her fingers, she was immobile. Harry always sat where she could see him. Her face had grown thin in the months she had been here. It was hard to

believe that two years ago she had played tennis, sung in the church choir or beat him at gin rummy. He brushed a hair from her forehead. Now for the final daily office, thought Harry. Now for compline.

“*Oremus* Bea,” he said. Slowly and deliberately, so that she could hear him if she were listening, he began to read aloud from the newspaper.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Now that Timmy had a learner's permit, Pico and he could cruise around Wando after school before his parents got home to discover that he had taken out their new silver Audi. Timmy pulled into the mall parking lot and drove slowly along the sidewalk, fishing for the attention of several girls they knew from school who were standing by the entrance where they could show off their tight jeans and short halter-tops. The girls strolled by with no apparent interest in Pico and Timmy and then laughed as the car passed by. Timmy was about to circle back for another hand of this game when he saw two familiar-looking women in front of the same coffee shop where he had seen them before. He pointed them out to Pico.

“Look at that. What do you think they’re doing?”

“Who? Those old women?” For Pico, any woman over twenty was old.

“Yeah. Look at what they’re doing with cards or something,” said Timmy.

“Si, like they’re divvying up, like.” Pico’s eyes widened.

The two Latina women were well dressed, one in a grey suit and the other in a yellow print dress with a pearl necklace. They calmly walked away from each other into the parking lot. Timmy drove slowly at a distance behind the woman in the yellow dress. She drove off in a black Honda Civic, and Timmy followed her.

“Hey, what ’sup, man?” Pico shouted. He had expected another pass by the girls waiting on the sidewalk. “I saw Luz Ruiz waiting for us to cruise by again.”

“I wanna see something,” said Timmy, who seemed suddenly very determined.

The black Honda turned out onto the Interstate. Timmy had never driven this far on his own. He had to wait at the access ramp for a tractor trailer to move out. Meanwhile, the Civic sped ahead westward toward the low foothills of the Piedmont. When he finally got onto the highway, he quickly moved into the far left lane and raced to catch up. Pico put on his seat belt. The cloudless sky was a deep blue ribbon above the black highway, lined by two green strips of woodland and interrupted occasionally by the red-leaved dogwoods and yellow hickories of early fall.

“Oh man, let’s go back,” said Pico.

“I wanna see where she’s going,” Timmy insisted.

“Hey, it’s your funeral. You get too far away from town and you won’t be able to return this car before your Mama gets home.”

“I’ll worry about that!” Timmy said, pulling the brim of his cap to the front and thinking that it wasn’t his mother that concerned him.

“Yeah, well. You keep driving like this and you will have plenty to worry about,” Pico said as he watched the speedometer. The silver car effortlessly muscled its way from lane to lane to keep up with the black sedan. Timmy seemed oblivious to the harried commuters speeding home on every side. A giant outlet mall appeared ahead, and the black sedan turned off without signaling. Timmy took the next exit, which was also a mall entrance. The sedan was nowhere to be seen. He parked and got out of the car and, with Pico trailing him reluctantly, walked into the mall.

“Now what are we doing?” Pico complained. “It’s getting late.”

“She hasn’t had time to go far. We’ll see her in the mall,” Timmy said as he scanned the crowd for the yellow dress.

“She could be anywhere by now,” Pico said, as he saw a flash of yellow going into a discount shoe store. “Maybe there,” he said, wishing he hadn’t said it.

She took a shopping cart to the aisle of athletic shoes and began to fill it with boxes, paying no attention to the shoe sizes. When the cart was filled, she hurried to the check-out line. Pico and Timmy strolled past her and left the store as she handed the clerk her credit card. As they waited nonchalantly in the mall for her to come out, Timmy looked back toward the entrance. Dr. Enrique Ortega had just come through the door, and had immediately seen what he was looking for.

The following afternoon, George Winslow was waiting in the school library for the school Attendance Committee meeting to begin. So far, only Ed Lashley and he had arrived. George had just come from the boys’ restroom, where he had had excruciating pain while standing at the urinal and looking at a crude picture of himself depicted as an obscene blimp that someone had recently carved into one of the tiles on the wall.

“I hope this doesn’t take too long,” said Lashley, a rather nondescript veteran teacher with plastered hair and heavy, dark-framed glasses. “I promised Pinky, my housekeeper, a ride to her church this afternoon.”

“I should have a housekeeper,” Winslow said vaguely, trying not to think about the shooting pains in his back. The two teachers stared out the library windows at the flagpole and parking lot in front of Wando High School. Timmy Ortega was getting into the back seat of a silver car with his parents in the front seat.

“Guess you heard about that one,” Winslow said, waving toward the silver Audi driving past the flag pole. Lashley shook his head, looking puzzled. “Timmy Ortega—one of the reasons we have an Attendance Committee, I guess,” Winslow said, shifting in his tiny chair. “Seems he went joy-riding yesterday and got grounded. His parents are leaving work early every day just to pick him up and keep track of him. He also lost his learner’s permit for driving without a licensed driver in the car. I saw his brother Danny up here this morning. He was pretty worked up about it. You remember Danny Ortega? He’s changed his name to Reston to advance his political career.”

“Yeah, he used to hang around with Renate Torres and Miguel Fuentes, those Hispanic kids who came in after some regime change in Costa Rica or Bolivia or somewhere.”

“Ed, you need to bone up on your current events,” Winslow said, who had stood up to lessen the stabbing pains he was getting by trying to fit into the hard, tiny library chair. “Well, maybe being grounded will rein Timmy in and make him think about school.”

“From what I’ve seen of Timmy, I don’t think that school is ever likely to occupy much of his time.”

“No, he certainly isn’t anything like Danny.” Winslow paused and looked around at the empty library. “Ed, even the librarians have left. Let’s go”

The doors beside the library check-in counter burst open and five teachers entered and passed through the electronic gate, followed by the committee chairman, who was carrying enough paper to occupy them for the next three hours.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On his way to Daniel Reston's apartment on Monday morning, Harry considered June's conjectures about Barbara and Renate. While he wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Jerry Nuffield had seduced Renate, he felt certain that if Barbara knew, she would have done little more than confront Jerry and warn him about ruining his image for all of the middle-aged women who continually volunteered for his campaigns and voted him back into office. These were women Barbara knew very well. She had worked the civic organizations, garden clubs, health clubs, parent organizations, book clubs, support groups and voter leagues from Holburn's subsidy housing on the Potomac side to the elite West-end communities with their cul-de-sacs of million dollar "McMansions," as they were derisively

called by community activists like Oscar Menendez. The grass roots of Holburn were its women, and without Barbara Nuffield, Jerry would have been disconnected from them, little more than a fund-raiser without a cause. From time to time, Jerry might like to “kick back,” as he put it, but he always knew the limit, and Barbara was there to remind him when he didn’t remember.

Harry couldn’t make sense of what he had learned so far. Apparently someone had hidden in the alcove outside the campaign suite. That didn’t sound like Renate or Barbara. As for the calls on Nuffield’s phone, Lester hadn’t seemed very interested when Harry had called him earlier in the morning. Of course, all that Harry could offer was his speculation that Nuffield’s conversations with both staffers concerned some final tasks or errands related to the campaign. Concerning the relationship between Renate Brown and Daniel Reston, he could only tell Stihl that they had dated since high school and were now both students at the local community college. Reston seemed to be the more politically ambitious of the two, but tended to be socially inept, while Renate modeled herself on Barbara Nuffield. Maybe, Harry had to admit, that extended to sleeping with Barbara’s husband. Stihl had seemed unimpressed with both the speculation and the information. Harry sensed that Lester had already picked his murderer. What the connection was to Gina Barber’s electrocution or the threatening phone call to Wilson Briggs was puzzling but probably irrelevant as far as Lester was concerned. Harry tried to forget about all of it as he drove into the parking garage for the apartment complex off West Broad Street, where Daniel Reston lived.

Señora Maria Elena Garcia Gonzalez de Torres was not accustomed to waiting patiently. She paced her daughter’s tiny apartment with an expression like Carmen reading the Tarot cards. It was evident that Renate had not slept in the room and that she had again been using her mother’s credit cards to buy clothes, this time a sparkling red jacket. Her college notebooks were practically empty. That was no surprise, considering the midterm report the college had sent to her home address. It was very fine for Renate to call herself “Brown” and to talk all the time about “the people” and how she, unlike her

mother, the Deputy Ambassador, had not “sold out.” It was all very well for her to talk about not selling out while she ran up her mother’s credit cards, failed at school and worked for old lechers who got themselves assassinated.

Maria Elena had never doubted her first impression of Gerald Nuffield. He might have been dressed up in a three-piece suit and wingtips, but he was a rank type of man with whom she was very familiar. Renate and her friends were so foolish about him. They weren’t going to “sell out the people”, but they worked for a low-life like Gerald Nuffield. She sat down in a wicker chair by the balcony window. She could not understand what these children thought that they knew of politics or of hiding in the almond grove while police sweep through your village. Sometimes Maria Elena thought that it had been a mistake to settle in Wando, where Renate had been so different from the other children that she became attached to Maya, Daniel and Miguel, all of them foolish. If they had gone to Arlington, Renate would have been surrounded by Latinos and not developed such foolish ideas about “the people.” Maya had not even finished high school. She was probably now on some coca farm near the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. She said so much nonsense about “the people.”

When Renate returned from wherever she had gone, her mother was taking her home. She had already packed Renate’s clothes in the suitcases on the bed and told the manager to keep his deposit. It didn’t matter. She would wait as long as necessary. Papers were scattered on the end table by the chair. One of them caught her eye, a slim sheaf in a clear plastic binder, entitled CORAZON PLAN. That was Renate’s problem all right. She had too many plans for her heart and none for her head.

Daniel had reluctantly let Renate off at the fountain in front of her apartment building. She insisted that she knew nothing about what happened to Nuffield, but he didn’t promise the same thing to her. She pulled away from his embrace and slammed the door after getting out. Then she saw the long

black car with a diplomatic license plate parked outside her building. Her mother was waiting inside. She ran around the fountain to the taxi stand and hailed a cab. It was all happening too fast. The last thing she wanted now was another scene with her mother.

Even as the cab was pulling away on its way to Wilson Avenue, or whatever she had said, she realized that she didn't know what to do or where to go. She only wanted time to think. Time away from Daniel and her mother. Daniel had been so angry when they found that report about the housing project. She knew that she could persuade Nuffield to change his mind, but Daniel made her promise not to see him. But she knew how to get around Nuffield and told Daniel she only wanted to go to the conference to make contacts and find another job now that the campaign was over. She didn't know how he had found out about her slipping out of the conference to see Nuffield at the hotel. But if he had been following her, he also would know that she didn't stay with Nuffield very long. That is, she wasn't alone with him very long. Nuffield wanted only one thing that night. He didn't even bother to come to the door fully clothed. Drunk and disgusting, he had pulled her into the bedroom and started to paw at her new dress before she could push him away. He was in no condition to talk about the report or anything else. Then Barbara Nuffield came in and drew her own conclusions. The scene that followed was not something Renate wanted to remember, but now Barbara and she understood each other. Barbara must know that she was no Gina Barber. Once Barbara had left, Nuffield just sat speechless on the bed. When she left him, he was still wearing that ridiculous hat. The cab had stopped at a light in front of Lord & Taylor's. Now Renate knew how she would pass the time until her mother decided to leave.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Driving into the West Broad apartment complex, Harry noticed that the buildings were placed so close to the parking garage that each level of balconies almost touched the corresponding parking level. He supposed that this was yet another example of optimizing space in service districts—another triumph for Briggs Construction. He walked down the steps back to ground level and boarded a creaky elevator that chugged slowly up to the tenth floor. Knocking at the door, he was greeted by a short, muscular young man with brown skin, jet-black hair and dark brown eyes. He was wearing jeans and a carefully ironed white dress shirt.

“Harry Pettiford,” he said, extending his hand. “I’m here to see Daniel.”

“Come in, please. I am his roommate, Miguel Fuentes,” said the young man, smiling broadly. “Daniel has stepped out, but he will be back soon if you would like to wait.”

The apartment was small and disorderly, with two rooms and a small kitchenette littered with pizza boxes and unwashed coffee mugs. Fuentes led him into the room on the right. Daniel’s desk and small bookshelf of used college texts stood in one corner of the room. Posters of Jennifer Lopez and Mexico City hung over an unmade sofa-bed on the other side of the room. They sat down on folding lawn chairs by the sliding doors to the balcony, its view completely blocked by the parking garage only a few feet away. Fuentes picked up trousers and socks from the floor and tossed them onto Daniel’s bed.

“We use Daniel’s room for a living room when we need one,” he said.

Which isn’t often, Harry thought. “How do you know Daniel?”

“We went to high school together. He graduated the year before me and came here to work and go to school. I work nights delivering pizzas to save enough to enroll next semester. We’ve been here two and a half years. You must have come about Mr. Nuffield.”

“Yes, I have some of Daniel’s belongings,” Harry said, referring to the package on his lap.

“The police have already been here asking questions,” Miguel said. “Do they know who killed him?”

“Not that I know,” Harry said. “We were all shocked about it after working on his campaign.”

“Yes, Daniel and Renate were up all night talking about it. He just took her home.” Miguel gestured toward the door.

“You know Renate?” asked Harry.

“Also from high school. She’s here all the time seeing Daniel, you know. They thought they were launching their own political careers.”

“Together?” Harry said.

“Oh, *si*. Always together, you know.” Fuentes smiled broadly and suggestively rubbing his hands together. “Ever since high school, they have made such plans about how they’re going to change the world, you know. And always such wonks, even in high school.”

Daniel Reston came in carrying a sack of fast food. He stopped in the doorway when he saw Harry, as if considering whether he could leave again without being noticed. Wearing Dockers and a Ralph Lauren shirt and coat, he was tall with strong features and an aquiline nose. Some day he would make a handsome candidate, Harry observed. After briefly hesitating, Daniel came in and shook hands with Harry.

“Mr. Pettiford, thank you for coming.” He handed the fast food to Miguel, who left the room.

“Here are the things from your desk, Daniel. The police have finished examining the suite. A lot has happened since last week.”

“What happens now?” Daniel shut the door to his room and sat on his bed. His face was unshaven, his eyes red. “The police were here asking me about some phone call. I didn’t remember making one, but maybe I did.”

“I’m sure they’ll sort it out,” Harry said. “Meanwhile, if you know anything that might throw light on what happened to Mr. Nuffield or to Gina Barber, you should tell the police.”

When Harry mentioned Gina Barber the pupils of Daniel’s eyes grew wide in a flash of panic. He quickly looked down.

“Daniel, do you know something about Gina?”

“No, no. It’s just the shock of having both of them” Daniel would not look at Harry.

“Yes. Well, it’s been a shock all right,” Harry said, standing up. “And I won’t outstay my welcome. The only other thing was that there may be some delay in getting your final paycheck, but I’ll do what I can. Thanks so much for all of your hard work on the campaign and good luck to you in your studies.”

They shook hands and as Daniel led him out, Harry looked into the adjoining room. Miguel Fuentes was sitting on the bed eating a sausage biscuit in his small, neat room.

Once Harry had left, Daniel returned to his room and partly shut the door. He could think of no way the police could connect him to Gina or Nuffield. Miguel had been in the apartment the whole time and would say so. He had told Miguel he was going to bed, closed the bedroom door, and turned off the light. Then he had waited for a while and climbed over the balcony to the ledge of the parking garage. He had returned the same way.

He shouldn't have called Nuffield, but the police had no way to know what he had said. A pay phone would have been better, but he hadn't been thinking clearly. How could Nuffield have done that to Gina, leaving her on the floor like a broken doll? He had to let Nuffield know that he had been seen. After leaving Gina's house, he had gone to see Renate and tried to tell her everything. But that meant telling her why he had been following Nuffield in the first place. And that morning, sitting with her on her bed, he almost told her about Gina but the phone rang. She tried to hide it, but he knew it was Nuffield calling her and he heard her whisper that eight o'clock was OK. That's when he decided to call Nuffield himself and let him know he wasn't getting away with anything. He planned to wait for her at the hotel. And she came, but everything didn't go as he had planned, except that Nuffield got what was coming to him. He just hoped that Nugent wouldn't call the police. That call was the only thing he regretted.

Daniel stared out the window. Pettiford suspected something, but Daniel thought that the old man lacked interest and initiative and would probably just shrug it off. The campaign was over, after all. And Renate would settle down. They were back together. After it was all over, she had promised him that nothing happened between her and Nuffield. Everything would be just like it was before. Daniel

assured himself that when he was a senator or representative he would be the opposite of Gerald Nuffield, a plastic man who cared nothing for the people. He thought for a moment about Gina lying on the floor and how he had decided after watching Nuffield leave that it was probably too late to call a rescue squad. Yes, it must have been too late. He turned from the window to see Miguel standing in the doorway, sipping a coke and watching him.

“I forgot to tell you,” Miguel said, “your brother called while you were out. He said he needed to borrow your car.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Timmy had to have a car if he was going to prove to everyone that he was telling the truth. There was no way his father would believe him and, of course, his mother always went along with Enrique. Everyone went along with Enrique if they wanted to avoid his shouting and curses. Even Pico wouldn't talk to him. Maybe they'd pay attention to him if he ran away like Maya Estrada, one of the "true ones" according to Miguel and Daniel. But Timmy had no intention of running away in order to be "true," whatever that meant. He needed a car to find out if he was right about the three women in the mall. He called them the "three sisters," and he was sure that he could find them again because he knew who one of them was. The "true one," Maya Estrada.

She had on so much make-up that she looked forty years old, but he'd finally realized who she was when Pico and he passed by her in the shoe store. He knew that Daniel would lend him his car even though Timmy didn't have a license any more. All he had to do was tell Daniel about Maya. Everyone, his parents, Ms. Simms, his Driver Ed teacher, and even Pico, were convinced that he had been joyriding. As soon as Danny brought the car, Timmy would drive him back to Holburn and then return to Wando to look for the three sisters. Everybody would see that he was telling the truth.

As Harry left Daniel's apartment, he was beginning to form a very different opinion of Daniel Reston than he had had during the campaign. If Jerry had seduced Daniel's high school sweetheart, Harry thought, the serious Mr. Ortega-Reston would have taken some action. He was too intense and self-involved simply to walk away. Reston also seemed to be hiding something about Gina Barber, and Harry couldn't help wondering if the mysterious phone call was Reston calling Nuffield to tell him that he knew about Gina. If Reston wanted to inflict serious damage on Nuffield for taking Renate away from him, he could have called the media with the "Gina & Jerry Story." Maybe the murder was the result of a bungled attempt at blackmail.

Driving back home, Harry decided to see whether he could find out any more about Renate and Daniel. He would not be interfering in police business because both of these were staffers. This would be like an exit interview, except that it was an exit background check. Once he was home, he called out to Clarisse before going upstairs. She didn't answer. Scrunch raced down the stairs, his tags jingling. Harry let him outside for a few minutes, and then the two of them climbed the stairs.

The file cards on both Renate Brown and Daniel Reston listed Wando High School, a public school in a small rural town west of Holborn. Harry had received recommendations from several of their teachers, one of whom, Ed Lashley, Harry had known from a brief stint as a consultant in the Wando branch of the community college. He pulled Ed's file card and dialed his number.

“Hello. Ed Lashley.”

“Ed. Harry Pettiford in Holburn. You remember my calling you about some former students who were applying to be staffers for Gerald Nuffield?”

“Yeah. How are you doing, Harry? Must have been a shock”

“Yes, it was. I’m trying to tie some loose ends and wonder whether you could ask around about those two staffers. You know, I’d like to see if there’s anything we overlooked.”

“Daniel and Renate? You think they were involved in Nuffield’s murder? They were both such preppy kids. You know, Wando is not a pony environment, but the kids in that crowd behave like they wear school uniforms and are preparing for Yale and Harvard. They take all of the Advanced Placement courses, participate in school government, and do community service to improve their resumes. But what was different about Daniel, Miguel and the others was that they came from proud middle class immigrant families. You know”

“Yes, I could see that they were driven.” Harry said.

“OK,” Lashley said. “I’ll see what I can find out for you. You know, I teach science. It’s not their favorite subject, so I didn’t see those students very much. They hung out with a government teacher who sponsors the senior class.”

“Sure. Thanks, Ed. I’d appreciate it.” Harry threw the phone on the bed. He didn’t have time to ponder this information, because Scrunch was tugging on his trouser leg. It was dinner time. They went downstairs for the dog food and found Aunt Clarisse sprawled between the dining room and kitchen door.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Harry kneeled down to feel for her pulse and saw that she was still breathing. He had dialed 911 immediately and could already hear the siren from the fire station a block away. Scrunch had raced into the kitchen. Clarisse was dressed in her suit and pearls as if she had been planning to go out. She seemed to be very groggy rather than unconscious, just as Bea had been during her stroke. Harry heard the siren stop in front of the house and ran to the front door.

Two young men and a woman wearing blue uniforms and yellow vests with blaze orange stripes and carrying medical kits rolled a gurney into the foyer and down the hall to the kitchen, passing the china cabinet filled with Aunt Clarisse's mother's crystal. They gently put a cuff on her arm, checked

for fractures, looked into her eyes, and handed Harry her pearl necklace as they rolled her out of the house. Harry picked up his coat and ran upstairs to get his cell phone before leaving. When he got to the door, he was met by a fireman wearing a canvas coat with bright fluorescent green stripes. Looking behind him to the street, he saw that a lime-green fire truck with all its lights flashing had parked behind the rescue vehicle.

“Sir, did you hear what I said?” the fireman said.

“What? No, I’m sorry,” Harry said, backing into the house. “Come in.”

“Thank you, sir. We have to check them for every call.”

“Check them?” Harry said.

“The smoke detectors.” The fireman, a young man with a black mustache, waited a moment and then asked, “Can you tell me where they are?”

“I don’t have any idea,” Harry said, watching Aunt Clarisse being loaded into the ambulance. She was so small that the gurney looked empty.

“We’ll just have a look around,” said the young man with the mustache. He went into the house followed by a woman with short curly hair. After a few minutes, they came back out to the porch and told Harry he needed to replace the batteries in all smoke detectors. The young woman handed him a new smoke detector in a sealed plastic bag and a handful of batteries.

“You should put this near the basement furnace,” she said. He must have looked helpless or feeble, because she looked at him a moment and then said, “I can install it for you.”

“No, no. I can do it. Thank you.” He put the detector on a stand in the foyer, shut the door and ran down the steps to the departing ambulance.

Driving behind the ambulance to Holburn Hospital, he remembered that he hadn’t fed Scrunch. Then he began to think about the hospital. They would want him to fill out all sorts of forms and he had no information. He needed to go back to the house, but if he went back he would not be there when she

was admitted. But he was already caught at the traffic light on Washington Street, watching the ambulance disappear ahead of him, so he turned right and went around the block back to the house. Once inside, he heard metallic sounds and someone moving around in the back of the house. He had read about burglars who followed rescue vehicles and robbed homes when everyone had left. The sounds became more distinct, and as he crept toward the kitchen, he knew what they were. In the kitchen, Clarisse's purse was on the counter and Scrunch was playing on the floor with the dog food can he had just emptied. Aunt Clarisse must have opened it to feed him before she left. It was the last thing she had done.

Several hours later, Harry was still waiting outside the emergency room in Holburn Hospital along with an elderly woman whose husband had emphysema, a group of young children wearing flip-flops and mismatched outfits, and the many Spanish-speaking relatives of a knifing victim. The mother of the young children had somehow dropped a glass table-top on her foot, requiring over a hundred stitches. Their father slouched in a corner, unshaven and unbuttoned, and did nothing to prevent the children from crawling on the floor, racing down the halls or pulling cigarette butts from the sand-pots by the entrance. The television, mounted on the wall above Harry's head, had been running continuously since he had arrived. It was a talk show in which women described their affairs while their husbands listened offstage. Then to the laughter and jeers of the studio audience, the husbands and the boyfriends were introduced. Harry noticed that everyone except the children seemed to be watching. Holding Clarisse's purse on his lap, he closed his eyes, leaned back in the chair and tried to take a nap.

It was like the night that he drove Bea to the hospital and waited until two in the morning before the doctors straggled out to provide him with obvious facts and inevitable assurances. When her vital signs were stable and he finally reached the bedside, she had the raised eyebrows and slightly parted lips of someone just about to speak. And that was how she had looked ever afterwards. He opened his eyes.

A social worker was talking with an English-speaking relative of the knifing victim.

“Emma, why did your cousins fight?”

“No reason. We were all at home.”

“At the Winterthorn Apartments,” the social worker interrupted.

“*Si*, yes. But we can’t stay there much longer; Ramon was saying that Cecile and her family would have to leave. When Manny heard him say this to my mother, he said if anyone was going it would be Ramon,” said Emma.

“Why did Ramon say this?” The social worker said.

“It was the manager, Mr. Greene. He said the whole building was coming down, and we all had to leave.” Emma said. “Ramon says if we must move, he doesn’t want to live with twelve in one apartment any more, you know?”

Emma was trying to hold onto a four-year-old who was becoming curious about the other children playing with cigarette butts.

“So Ramon and Manny fought about this?”

“It was so stupid. If we have to leave, we’ll never find such a cheap apartment around here. We’ll need even more family, not less, to live with us.”

A police officer carrying a small clipboard came through the double-doors from the emergency room and sat down with the social worker. Harry got up and went to the vending machine for a cup of coffee.

Two hours later, Harry was sitting on the couch and still holding Clarisse’s purse. The waiting room was empty. He had turned off the television as soon as everyone left. A tiny Filipino woman in a white uniform carried a tray out of the emergency room and set it down in the nursing station. Harry presumed that she was yet another of the innumerable technicians who had been going through the lobby

over the last four hours. As she talked to the nurse, she looked back over her shoulder at Harry; then she came and sat down beside him.

“Mr. Pettiford, I am Dr. Aguillar, the neurologist.”

“How is my aunt?” Harry said.

“She is stable now,” said the doctor.

Harry had heard all of this before. Bea had been stable for two years. He didn’t know what he was going to do with both Clarisse and Bea in nursing care. Clarisse had no other relatives. She was his father’s youngest sister. All the others in the family had passed away. He missed what the doctor was saying and asked her to repeat it.

“It was a transient attack, called a transient ischemic attack, or TIA. Not exactly a full stroke. The condition can be managed with medication.”

“Is she awake?” Harry said.

“No, she is sedated now, but she should be back to normal in the morning. Because of her age, we’ll need to monitor her condition in the hospital for several days; then she can return home,” the doctor smiled. She led Harry through the double doors into the emergency room and, going to one of the cubicles and pushing the curtains aside, showed him where Clarisse was sleeping, connected to both an intravenous drip and a heart monitor.

Harry waited with Clarisse until she was taken to her hospital room and returned to the house at 4:00 a.m. After he shut the front door, he stepped on a pile of envelopes and bright red sales circulars, yesterday’s mail. Picking up the pile, he sat down on the steps to look through it. Scrunch came down the steps and pushed his wet nose against the back of Harry’s neck. Most of the mail was for Clarisse. Harry wondered whether he would have to start paying her bills. He found a letter addressed to him from the bank. It was about a check he had written earlier in the week, a notice of insufficient funds. He tossed the pile back on the floor and went upstairs to bed.

Four hours later, Harry was standing at the foot of Clarisse's hospital bed as she dictated a list of the things he was to bring from home. She was sitting up in bed, remarkably bright-eyed and talkative. A nurse's aide had brushed her hair, which hung to her shoulders instead of being rolled in a bun. She looked like a school girl. As he drove home, he resolved to see Barbara Nuffield before he received any more notices from the bank. There was a car parked in his usual spot in front of the house, so he parked further down the street and walked back. June Brightman got out of the car and met him in front of the house.

"You've been waiting?" Harry said, surprised.

"Yes. How is your aunt?" June said.

"She has recovered. But how did you know?"

"Harry," June said. "You have neighbors who notice things like ambulances and fire trucks. When I stopped by to see you, the man next door was working in his yard. He would make a good reporter." June squeezed his arm. "How are you doing?"

"Not sure at the moment. Need to shave, run some errands" Harry said vaguely as they went into the house, and Scrunch raced out between their legs to the front yard.

"You go upstairs and I'll make us a breakfast," she said, waiting at the door for Scrunch to come back. Harry didn't protest.

Upstairs, in his room, he lay down on the bed and thought of going back to sleep. He couldn't do that with June downstairs. He sat up, pulled off his coat and shirt, and went into the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, he felt presentable enough to go downstairs. Noticing the flashing light on his answering machine, he realized that he had not played back messages for days. There were several calls from June and from staffers concerning Nuffield. And there was one call, the one that came as he was leaving to go to the conference on Friday night, from Duane Nugent, asking him to call back. Harry dialed the number and Nugent answered.

“Duane, this is Harry Pettiford. Sorry I haven’t called back earlier, but things have been busy around here.”

“Indeed they have, Mr. Pettiford,” Nugent said. “I was calling about one of your staffers, a Daniel Reston?”

“Yes,” Harry sat down on the bed.

“You know, it was very peculiar.” Nugent said. “It was a little after three o’clock on Friday afternoon that he called me. He said that he had something to tell me about Gerald Nuffield and would I consider taking it to the news media. He wouldn’t say what it was. I don’t know whether he expected me to offer to pay him for the information and it was unclear why he was calling after the campaign was over. Frankly, he seemed confused and seemed to change his mind as we were talking.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Mr. Nugent.” Harry lay back on the bed. “I don’t know why Daniel called you, but I guess it doesn’t matter now anyway.”

“Well, just wanted to let you know.” Nugent hesitated for a moment and then added, “Pettiford, I also wanted to tell you that you ran an impressive campaign for Nuffield and if you would ever consider doing some work for the other side, please give me a call.”

“Oh. Well, thank you. I can’t say right now, but thank you,” Harry sputtered. As he hung up the phone, he wondered what Daniel Reston was up to. Harry lay back on the bed again for a moment to think about it. Reston had certainly been making the phone calls, one to Nuffield at 3:00 p.m. on Friday, another to Nugent after that, and maybe another one to Briggs after the murder. But Stihl had said that the call to Briggs was from a public phone on West Broad Street, where Reston’s apartment was located. He wondered why Daniel would make the calls to Nuffield and Nugent from his apartment but go to a public phone to call Briggs.

Downstairs, June had quickly found everything that she needed in Clarisse’s well-organized kitchen. She had opened cartons of fat-free eggs for an omelet and also made toast and coffee. Waiting

for Harry, she had picked up the mail from the steps and brought in the newspapers. Her articles about Nuffield were on the front page and in the feature section. She had barely made press time after her editor had talked to her like she was a twelve-year-old about the difference between writing a feature and covering a crime story. He wanted to know why she had taken it upon herself to do the headline story instead of getting back to him so that he could assign it to the regular crime reporter. Nonetheless, it was her story that appeared on the front page.

After an hour, she became alarmed about Harry and went upstairs. Both Scrunch and Harry were stretched out, asleep on the bed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After Wilson Briggs had eaten breakfast at 5:00 a.m. and taken his insulin, he drove his shiny black Lincoln across town to one of the EZ Self Storage parks that he owned. As renters throughout the region had been forced to pay higher and higher amounts for diminishing space, they were also forced to rent storage space. Briggs profited from both kinds of rental enterprises, but preferred the low maintenance and simplicity of renting storage units. The manager had not arrived yet, he was pleased to see. He inserted his pass-card into the slot at the entrance and the gate rolled slowly back. When he turned right and then left again to go down the long file of lockers to his unit at the far corner of the

yard, he did not notice that another individual, wearing a hooded dark sweatshirt, had entered before the gate closed.

Briggs opened the padlock on his locker, leaving his keys in the lock, and tugged on the rope to send the garage door sliding upwards to the ceiling on its tracks. He turned on the light and walked in. The locker was triple the size of a garage and filled with old farm equipment, saw-horses loaded with chains and tackle, and several woodstoves. There were shelves to the ceiling piled with shears, pincers, cold chisels, back-saws and other shop tools. Around the walls, ancient apple-boxes were stacked and filled with the rusting remains of presses, harrows, crank-plates, disk-wheels, manure-spreaders and other implements of the days of farming with draft animals, as his grandfather had done. Never willing to auction off this equipment and later see it hanging on the walls of some restaurant along with the family photographs, he had simply stored it all and put it out of mind. Without the disking and harrowing and haying and back-breaking stumble behind a horse-drawn plow, his family would never have kept the farm that Briggs had later sold for such a fortune to launch his career in construction. Wilson Junior would just sell it all, or junk it, once Briggs retired. That would probably be just as well.

He sat down on the seat of an old thresher. At home, they'd called it a "thrasher." He remembered that using this one was only slightly easier than using a flail. Whenever the Corazon deal was finished, maybe he would donate these things to some place like the Smithsonian. Call them "agricultural antiques." Maybe they would make an exhibit and put up a plaque with his name on it. If he had it all appraised, the gift would make a sizable write-off for income tax. It would be better to make the donation before the end of December, but that would mean doing it while he was still working on Corazon Estates. But maybe there wasn't that much left to do.

He finally saw the fishing tackle box he wanted, wedged between a rototiller and its attachments in the back of the shed. He weaved around the boxes and implements to get to the shelf and began to clear off the top of the box so that he could pull it out. He had a suspicion that the caller was Oscar

Menendez. It certainly sounded like him. Menendez was one of the many reasons that Briggs was going to be glad to leave Northern Virginia. Things just weren't the same any more. You couldn't just develop a property; you had to dance around the Board of Zoning Appeals, the town council, the eco-nuts, and all kinds of ad hoc citizens groups like the Menendez crowd. When he was younger, he loved to mix it up with his adversaries, but now he was more than ready to sign it all over to his boys. Still, if Menendez or one of his supporters had been the caller, maybe the same person had killed Nuffield. Why would anyone be so opposed to clearing off an eyesore like Winterthorn and putting in a nice, clean-looking apartment complex like the ones he had built over on West Broad? From what he could tell, Menendez was just trying to turn a buck out of rabble-rousing and telling people how bad off they were and how he could change things. The man was a menace. Briggs had had to listen to his complaints every time he went for an exception before the BZA. Only when Nuffield had quieted him down had Briggs gotten any peace and finally been able to get approval of the site plan. Yes, it must have been one of Menendez's people who called. They had figured out what Nuffield and he had done. But it didn't matter now.

Winterthorn would be gone by the end of the year and, given a favorable hearing with the Board, they would break ground before spring. He really didn't expect any trouble, unless Menendez and those other hotheads made a stink. Even if they did, it wouldn't come to anything. He hadn't really needed Nuffield unless one of the other board members had been replaced. With everyone re-elected to the Town Council, all of the Zoning Board members would retain their appointments. Nuffield had just been insurance. He probably shouldn't have even bothered with him. The light had changed in the room. Briggs noticed that the single light bulb, high in the ceiling, had gone out, leaving the room lit from the doorway, where a dark figure was pulling on the rope to close the garage door.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Maria Elena had pushed her daughter's suitcases onto the floor so that she could lie down on the bed. She had called her husband at the embassy to tell him not to wait for her. She refused to call Daniel Ortega. She knew what her daughter was doing. But sooner or later, Renate would have to return. She sat up on the bed and looked through her daughter's CD collection, most of it trash. Here was the Christmas gift she had given Renate, still in its shrink-wrap, a collection of *albados* from New Mexico. If she must be kept waiting, at least she would listen to something worthwhile.

People like the Ortegas were only interested in themselves. What happened to the less fortunate who had escaped from *barrios* only to end up in the *colonias* of Texas was none of their concern. While

Maria Elena and her husband worked every day for the people of their country, the Ortegas and their kind wanted only to melt into their safe Anglo communities. She smiled when she thought of the expressions on their faces when they met her at the first home-owners' association meeting and discovered that their next-door neighbor was from the same village they were trying to forget. Unfortunately, Daniel and Renate had taken up with each other from the beginning. Daniel, Miguel and that wild Maya Estrada were always coming over to the house. All through middle school, they were inseparable, even after Maria Elena had prevailed on her husband to move across town. It made no difference. Renate would be gone until three in the morning and give no explanation. All through high school, it was the same. The teachers were always telling them how wonderful and talented Renate was, but Maria Elena was forever sick with worry and continual agitation about what Renate was really doing. It hadn't ended with high school. And it was all because of that Daniel and his parvenu family. They were *advenedizos* who feel no obligations except to their own garish existence.

Harry was enjoying his omelet and so was Scrunch, prancing around the table and gladly accepting anything that came his way. June poured two more cups of coffee. When she found that Harry had fallen asleep, she had quietly stepped out of the room and started back downstairs. Then Scrunch had looked up and barked. Harry sat up sleepily and seemed puzzled about why June was standing in the doorway of his bedroom. Ten minutes later, they were staring through the kitchen window at two squirrels leaping from limb to limb of the leafless dogwood tree in the garden as Harry finished his coffee and told June what Nugent had told him about Daniel Reston.

"There's probably a pattern to all of this," he said. "But I've got enough to think about. Let Lester Stihl connect the dots."

"If he can." June said.

"I suppose that you want to help him." Harry sipped his coffee.

“Well, I just wonder whether he’s looking in the right places.” From the purse hanging on the back of her chair, June took her small notebook. Harry shook his head. “Look at what we know so far. OK?”

“OK, but let’s not take too long,” Harry said. “I want to see Barbara Nuffield this morning and I also need to get back to the hospital. Clarisse was doing OK when I left, but Dr. Aguillar says that she could have another TIA at any time.”

“Harry, I’m so sorry all of this is coming down on you. Look,” she said slowly, pushing her notebook aside, “I’d like to help. It’s the least I can do after what you and Bea did for me. Let me do a little cooking for you and keep you company until Clarisse is better.” There, she’d said it. She knew she was taking advantage of the situation because Harry had seemed groggy and dazed ever since coming downstairs. He frowned a moment, stared out the window again, and then turned back to her.

“Thanks, June. I don’t, well, maybe I do need a little help right now. It’s kind of you to offer, but...”

“No buts,” she said, refilling his cup. “We’ve got to keep you going, right? And, anyway, I always keep close to my sources,” she smiled, picking up her notebook. “Here goes, then,” June said pushing her hair behind her ears and pulling up to the table. “Nuffield sees Gina Barber some time between Thursday night and Friday morning and...”

“Face it, they spent the night together,” Harry said.

“Gina is electrocuted by her toaster and Nuffield leaves.”

“Either before or after the electrocution.” Harry nodded.

June shook her head. “It’s more likely to have been afterwards. Why was she using the toaster? To make them breakfast.”

“Maybe,” Harry said.

“Well, anyway, then he went to the hotel or maybe back home first. Barbara could tell you why.”

“If I asked her. Which I won’t,” Harry said.

“Nuffield then called Renate Brown at about 11:00 a.m. and then he was called by Daniel Reston at 3:00 p.m.” June read from her notebook. “It makes you think that Daniel Reston knew about Nuffield’s and Renate’s plans for the evening.”

“But Daniel was very vague about that call,” Harry said. “He said nothing about calling Nugent a few minutes later concerning Nuffield’s Big Secret, whatever that is.”

“Later that evening at about 7:45 p.m., Renate is seen leaving the conference at Demeter’s.” June laid her notebook down.

“Before that,” Harry said. “My call from Nugent must have been about 6:30 p.m.”

“OK.” June said. “Then someone was hiding in a laundry alcove across the hall from Nuffield’s hotel suite. Someone wearing red sequins went into the room.”

“It could have been Barbara or Renate.”

“But it was Barbara who picked it up while Stihl was watching and it was Barbara who was seen leaving the hotel around 10:00,” June insisted. “And it was Barbara who was too upset to give an interview after the conference.”

Harry reflected on what he had just said. “It could have been Barbara or Renate, or both of them.”

June raised her left eyebrow. “Yes. How do we know that both of them were not there, maybe even at the same time? Maybe they planned this together. Maybe that’s even why they dressed alike.”

“But why? And what about the person hiding in the alcove and then disappearing out the back door?” Harry fiddled with his teaspoon. “I suppose that Barbara and Renate, wearing their fancy outfits, were sitting in the laundry chute together?”

June laughed. “It doesn’t seem very likely, does it?” She paused. “But maybe they did both visit the hotel suite at different times.”

“And for different reasons,” Harry said.

“Both of them wanted to appear to be at the conference. While secretly...”

“Now we’re back to Nuffield’s Big Secret.” Harry leaned back in his chair, rubbed his ears and yawned. “I just don’t think there was any big secret.”

“We know about one secret. Think about it.”

Harry sat up. “You mean Gina Barber?”

“Exactly,” June said. “What if Daniel Reston knew about Gina Barber?”

“That could explain his reaction when I mentioned her name.” Harry noticed that June was writing. “Are you taking notes on this?”

“It’s how I make sense of things, a kind of Pavlovian response.”

“Remind me not to ring any bells,” Harry said, looking at his watch. “I really need to get on.”

“But what about Briggs?” she said.

“What about him?” Harry said.

“He was called by a man who threatened that he would meet the same fate as Gerald Nuffield.”

“A man who called from a public phone near Daniel Reston’s apartment.” Harry nodded.

“Suppose it were Daniel Reston,” June said.

Harry shook his head. “Maybe, but why would he use his own phone for the other two calls and a public phone for the call to Briggs?”

“Think about it,” June said for the second time, to Harry’s irritation. “The call to Briggs was a threat, unlike the other calls.”

“Yes, it makes sense. But given the hard work and idealism that Daniel and Renate have put into Nuffield’s campaign, it’s hard for me to see them as accomplices to murder or making phone threats.”

“Oh, I don’t think that they worked together,” June said confidently.

Harry leaned forward, his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands. “Speak on, O Muse from Oreb and inspire!”

“I’m going to ignore that,” June said, pushing her hair back behind her ears. “Look, Harry, or should I say, Mr. Milton, did it ever occur to you that Daniel and Barbara were both at the hotel for the same reason?”

“That reason being?”

“Renate!” June said. “They both knew that Renate and Nuffield were having an affair. They both went to the hotel for a confrontation and...”

“Got more of a confrontation than they had expected?” Harry said.

“Maybe,” June said.

“You mean there are more convolutions to this speculation?”

“Maybe Daniel was Barbara’s look-out and paged her when Renate arrived.” June stood up to put her cup on the drainboard.

“You think that Barbara hired Daniel Reston to murder her husband?” Harry said. “It doesn’t make sense. Why would he have called her to come to the hotel?”

“Maybe it didn’t start as a murder plan. Maybe they were only going to confront Nuffield and Renate, and then Daniel’s jealousy got the better of him. With both women watching, he struck or pushed Nuffield and killed him.” June hesitated, feeling that her idea was on shaky ground. “None of them wanted to report this to the police, so they agreed on what they would say and left separately.”

“Well, I’d have to say that Barbara did not seem to be surprised about Jerry’s death,” Harry said, standing up to take his dishes to the sink. “But this version of the story does not account for Nuffield’s Big Secret.”

“But it does,” June said. “The same anger and jealousy that unhinged Daniel Reston that evening had made him call Nugent earlier in the afternoon. He wanted to harm Nuffield in any way he could.”

“OK, but the call to Briggs still doesn’t make sense,” Harry said, pulling open the door to the dishwasher. June brought her dishes to the sink and gently pushed Harry to the side so that she could fill the dishwasher.

“Well,” she said finally. “Maybe Sheriff Stihl was right about that. Maybe that call was just made by some wing nut with a grudge.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Timmy was sitting behind the wheel of Danny's car and watching the coffee shop at the mall. He had gone to school for first period, so that he would not be on the absentee list, and then slipped out. He had watched Maya and her two friends go into the shop and sit at their usual table, but from the parking lot, he couldn't see much of what was going on. After about an hour, they came out, divided the credit cards among themselves, and quickly departed in three directions. He followed Maya's black Honda. This time, he knew where she was going. She wasted no time getting onto the highway and heading for the discount shoe store. After putting two bags of shoes in the car, she visited several other stores and, when her car was full of merchandise, she raced out the parking lot and took the west exit back onto the interstate. Timmy hesitated to keep following her, but he had to know where she was going, so he stayed

behind her. To keep up with her, he had to drive faster than he wanted, but he didn't see any police cars. He wrote down her license tag number, just in case the police appeared and forced him to drop back. Danny hadn't thought much of this idea, but he wanted to know about Maya Estrada, and Timmy knew why.

* * *

The storage garage seemed colder than when Briggs had entered. He had left his coat in the car along with his cell phone. When the garage door slammed down, he had rushed toward it and stumbled over something in the dark. As he picked himself up, he heard the padlock being closed on the door and then his car driving away. He hadn't bothered to shout. Feeling his way along the wall, he made his way to the light switch by the door and flipped it on.

Briggs had built this storage unit larger and better insulated than the others in the park and had made certain that it would be as far as possible from the gate to minimize the risk of vandalism or theft. Even though the manager had arrived by now, Briggs knew that he did not patrol the whole yard or regularly check all of the locks. The manager would simply walk to the ends of the lanes between the blocks of storage units nearest to the Manager's Office. After glancing down the lanes and looking at the large, round convex mirrors at the corners, he would return to the warmth of the office, where he could survey the whole yard on the minicams. The minicam surveillance system had paid for itself many times over, when one considered how much it would have cost to pay for watchmen to walk the yard twenty-four hours a day.

Standing directly under the dim light bulb, Briggs examined his arm. He had fallen on the side of the thresher. A bruise was spreading out on his forearm, but he hadn't cut himself. That was a relief. He pressed on the bruise as he sat down again on the thresher. No one knew that he was coming here and the only clue that he was here, his car, had been removed.

* * *

Timmy had not expected Maya to go this far. He had followed her through Pennsylvania and into New York. She had taken the exit into Plattsburgh and was now sitting in a doughnut shop. Keeping his eye on her car, Timmy had used the opportunity to fill up at a nearby gas station. He went to the restroom and hurriedly came out half-expecting to find that she had driven off, but her car was still parked at the doughnut shop. Another black Honda was now parked beside it. Timmy parked at the other end of the lot, wrote down the tag number of the other car, and casually went into the doughnut shop, his cap pulled down to hide his eyes. He paid for coffee and a bear claw with the last of the money Danny had loaned him and sat down in a booth. Maya and another woman were seated across the room. After a few minutes, they got up and went out to the cars, but each one drove off in the other's car, Maya going back to the south exit onto the Interstate and the other woman heading north. Timmy decided not to waste any more time following Maya. He'd been gone for hours longer than he thought it would take. Instead of going home, he would call ahead and then go straight back to Danny's place in Holburn, leave the car off, and hope that his parents would listen to him this time. With Danny on his side, he knew they would be more likely to hear him out.

Daniel couldn't believe that Maya, Miguel's crazy girlfriend, had really never left to return home and "fight for the people," but had instead become a credit-card thief, preying on old ladies in coffee shops. Timmy imagined what Daniel and the others would say when he had proved what kind of person the "true one" was. She didn't even seem to be a very smart thief, Timmy thought, because she never varied her routine. Her ring of thieves would sit in the same coffee shop day after day. How long did they think they would go undiscovered? She returned to the same stores to make her credit card purchases. Didn't she think that someone at the store would begin to wonder why her identity was always changing? If he had figured it out, how long would it take the police? Maybe she was being careless because she was just desperately trying to make enough to be able to leave the country, like she did when she got into trouble before. Danny didn't know that Timmy knew about Maya and Miguel's

botched attempt to sell cocaine. They had some big plan about using the money to pay for their own revolution, but Maya's mother had discovered the stash, flushed it down the toilet and put Maya on restriction. It was after that when she disappeared. Danny said Miguel had told him that he hadn't heard from her again, but now that they knew she was still in the area, it was hard to believe that Miguel was telling the truth. As he entered the city limits of Holburn, Timmy was finding it hard to stay awake, and he had not been paying much attention to his speedometer. A blue flashing light appeared in his rear-view mirror. Here he was, after driving all the way to Plattsburgh, New York and back, being stopped by the police on West Broad Street in front of his brother's apartment. A tall, curly-haired policeman looked into the car and showed him his badge.

“I'm Officer Berry. Would you please show me your license and registration?”

Timmy had nothing to offer, but then again, maybe he did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was a cold, overcast November day. Harry had brought a raincoat but decided to leave it in the car, as it was a short walk from the Visitors' Lot to the hospital entrance. As he was getting out of the car, he saw a small card on the car floor near the brake pedal, the business card of Colonel Dan Connors at Bolling Air Force Base. Laying the card on the dashboard, he got back into the car, shut the door and keyed the number on the card. Colonel Connors answered.

“This is Harry Pettiford. We met at the Event Managers' Symposium last week.”

“I'd be glad to send you the package if you'll just give me your address,” said Connors hurriedly. He'd obviously been receiving more calls than he had expected.

“The package?”

“On mission development based on sampling design. I described it in my presentation.”

“Oh. I’m not calling about that,” Harry said, “I just wanted to ask you a question about someone who attended your presentation.”

“I really didn’t know anyone.”

“The lady in the red sparkling jacket?” Harry said.

“Oh yes,” said Connors. “But which one? There were two and they seemed to be attending my presentation in relays.”

“Were both of them ever there at the same time?”

“Only at the end of the evening.” Connors paused. “Look, why are you asking about...”

“They are people on my staff,” Harry said disingenuously. “I was just trying to track them to see if they were where they should have been. Well, thanks so much. You’ve answered my question.” Harry quickly pressed the power key and leaned back against the driver’s seat, his heart racing. He closed his eyes. He had no business making such a call. What if Connors now called Lester Stihl? Harry took a deep breath and got out of the car. From the back seat, he removed Aunt Clarisse’s suitcase and took it into the hospital.

The hospital lobby was a bright contrast to the dark clouds outside. At the reception desk, Harry asked an elderly lady with a tightly curled perm for his aunt’s room number and was surprised to learn that she had been returned to Intensive Care. He rode the escalator to the second floor, where a long hallway served as a gallery of paintings and photographs of hospital notables, the largest painting being one of Wilson Briggs. A small plaque beneath the painting listed his donations: a special wing for diabetics, the intensive care unit, and a long tenure as donor and board member. Harry hoped that if he ever had a portrait made, the artist would give him the same healthy glow that Wilson Briggs had. Even the wrinkles of his face seemed more like fine old tapestry than the skin of an eighty year-old.

Harry recognized one of the nurses from the day before, a small, no-nonsense RN of the old school. She wore official white shoes and a starched uniform, unlike some of her colleagues, who wore sloppy sweaters and running shoes. She wore a tiny gold lapel pin that Harry suspected was not awarded before one had clocked at least forty years.

“My aunt?” he asked, “Clarisse Pettiford?”

“Yes, Mr. Pettiford. She came back to us about an hour ago. Another TIA. But she’s stable now. You can see her.” She led him behind one of the curtains and went back to the nursing station.

Clarisse was even more pale and gaunt than she had been the night before, but her eyes were bright as a sparrow’s, and she immediately asked him whether he had brought what she wanted from home.

Harry opened the suitcase on a chair and handed her a brush.

“Let me have that sweater, too,” she said. “This place is as cold as a meat locker.”

With the sweater draped over her shoulders, her hair brushed and her proper glasses on, she looked more like herself.

“Did you bring the paper?” Clarisse said.

“You wanted a newspaper?” asked Harry.

“Of course. I told you that last night. I’m not going to be one of those vegetables that loses track of the world. Get me a newspaper.” Clarisse shook her head.

Harry took the escalator back to the lobby and bought a newspaper in the hospital gift shop. June’s byline was under the headline story about Jerry Nuffield. He sat down in the lobby to read the article. He half expected that some of June’s speculations would have crept into her reporting but found that she stuck to the facts, even to the point of stepping over backwards to cite her sources so obsessively that opinion seemed to be squeezed out of the piece. He bought a cup of coffee at the lunch bar in the gift shop and sat down to peruse the rest of the paper. There was the usual town news about

schools, sports and society events. Under “East Holburn News & Comments” was a letter to the editor from Oscar Menendez about the plight of the residents of rent subsidy units at Winterthorn. It seemed that a new owner had a different plan for the property. Menendez warned of dire consequences when the immigrants currently living in Winterthorn were compelled to leave and seek housing elsewhere.

The problem is that there no other housing available for these residents and B.C. knows this. It was their plan all along to rid this pseudo-elite, gentrified community of the sight of the immigrant workers who do all of the jobs that no one else will do. These residents will be forced to live in substandard units both in the city and at greater distance in rural suburbs like Haymarket or Wando. Then the cost of transportation will devour their paychecks! This is why the Coalition plans an action.

Harry always thought that Menendez’s activism would be more credible if Menendez himself had a job. Oscar seemed to generate activism in the same way that discount stores generate sales. He always had a special offer. Whatever the full truth concerning the story about Winterthorn, it was not going to be disclosed by Oscar Menendez. Turning to the Society page, Harry found an article about the Garden Club. It described the meeting that Aunt Clarisse had attended on Friday evening and listed all of the participants. Folding the paper back to display this article, he returned to Intensive Care, where he found his aunt asleep with the hairbrush in her hand.

It was raining hard when he walked out of the hospital and then raced back to his car. Just the weather for a visit he didn’t want to have with Barbara Nuffield. The Nuffield house was known to the neighbors as the “Little White House” for its portico with white columns. Inside, the effect was also that of a house on display rather than inhabited. Its halls were hung with gold-framed oil paintings, its massive mahogany furniture polished to high luster, and its rooms furnished with bright crystal chandeliers. Occupying two corner lots, the house had sufficient yard space for a boxwood-surrounded parterre that seemed to be colorful in every season. As Harry parked on the circular driveway in front of the house, he began to wonder how much Barbara would be receiving from the insurance company and

other sources to continue to live in this style. Jerry had preferred to hold political events at hotels or modest homes like Gina Barber's rather than his own home because he didn't want to call attention to his life style. A man of the people would not have a chandelier in every room.

Barbara Nuffield came to the door immediately and welcomed Harry into the sitting room.

"I'm so glad to see you, Harry." Barbara patted her nose with a delicate pink handkerchief that matched her blouse. "I thought it was Lester Stihl coming back. He's been so persistent."

"Yes, once he gets onto an idea, Lester holds on. He's hard to turn aside."

"The way he keeps asking me where I was and what I did, you'd think I was the murderer."

"Don't fret, Barbara. It's his job, and I'm sure that he'll soon be leaving you alone." Or at least long enough for me to pick up the paychecks, Harry thought.

"It's all over the newspapers, you know. But at least they didn't report the obvious." she looked down at her lap. "You know, about Jerry and other women."

Harry remained cautiously quiet.

"Women, you know, like that Gina Barber." She looked up at Harry, her eyes barely moist. "He must have been at her house on Thursday night. I didn't see him until Friday morning, you know. And then he left right after breakfast."

"You know that Gina's death was accidental," Harry said.

"Oh yes, that's what they say, Harry. But it's very strange. And once the newspapers find out that he was at Gina's the day before he was murdered, they'll never leave me alone."

That's for sure, if they're anything like June Brightman, thought Harry. "I'm sure that things will brighten up after a while," he said. "Now, I've come today to see how you are and to tie up some loose ends from the campaign"

"Oh, yes." Barbara said. "Joe Griggs was here earlier about the campaign. He certainly didn't waste any time, did he?"

Harry assumed that this was probably a *pro forma* expression of condolence that Griggs, as party chairman, felt that he owed the widow before announcing the party's choice to take Nuffield's place until a special election could be held. To distract her from this grim topic, Harry handed her the box of Jerry's belongings from the hotel.

"Mostly paperwork, but I thought you'd want it," he said.

"You're very thoughtful, Harry. I didn't offer you any coffee."

"I can't stay long. Thanks, anyway. There is one other thing, however." As delicately as possible, Harry explained that no one had been paid for the last month, including himself, and that, with Jerry gone, only she could sign the checks, which he handed to her. She hesitated long enough for him to wonder whether she was going to burst into tears or throw him out of the house; then she simply signed the checks.

"And Harry," she said, filling out a check that he had not prepared, "here's a bonus for your work. I know that Jerry would have wanted it, and, knowing what we know about Jerry, I'm sure that you understand why I want you to have it."

Without wondering too much about the meaning of Barbara's cryptic remark, Harry thanked her and left, checks in hand, to make his way as quickly as possible to the drive-in window of Holburn Bank and Trust Company. Once he had made his deposits, he decided that there was still time to see Renate Brown before returning to the hospital.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

June Brightman had gone to see Ernie Banks at Holburn Cable News. The studio was in a dingy yellow stucco building near the train yard. Seated at a desk stacked high with videotapes, Ernie Banks, wearing his usual dirty khaki uniform, was eating fried chicken from a greasy bag.

“Junie! What say, girl?” He paused and then pointed a chicken wing at her. “You want something. Am I right?”

“Hello Ernie.” She spoke carefully, trying to disregard everything that she found disagreeable, which, in Ernie’s case, was everything. “I’m wondering whether you could help me to sort something out.”

“Let it roll, kid,” Ernie picked his teeth.

“It’s about the conference we covered last Friday at Demeter’s.”

“Yeah, what a drag that was. A total waste of time.” He blew his nose.

“You didn’t get anything from it?” she asked.

“Does that mean you didn’t watch our program this morning?” Ernie pushed back his chair from the desk and put his feet up on the bag of chicken remains. “Have a seat,” he said, pointing to a wobbly cane chair.

“That’s OK. So, uh, you have a tape that I could see?” June tried not to seem very interested.

“What you lookin’ for, Junie?”

June checked a strong urge to kick his legs straight up and send him skittering on his back into one of the editing machines where the employees in this office who worked were sitting. Instead she told him that she just wanted to check some facts for a feature story. Her expression must have been sufficiently servile because he stood up, went back into the editing room and came back with three tapes.

“These are uncut tapes from the general session and the two seminars. We have all we want, but we need ’em back for archive. Frankly, it’s your misfortune that you have to look at them.”

“Thanks so much for your cooperation!” June shouted as she hurried out of the office.

Sitting in another office across town, and hoping to bargain his way out of a traffic ticket, Timmy Ortega was explaining to Officer Berry and Sheriff Lester Stihl how he had followed Maya Estrada from Wando to New York. His brother had not stayed long after his parents arrived, grimly expecting the worst as they all entered the white block police station. Daniel had not wanted to become

too familiar to Sheriff Stihl, who was clearly interested in him for other reasons. Timmy had just brought more attention to him at a time when he least needed it. As he drove home, Daniel wondered whether to tell Miguel about Maya.

When Timmy hadn't been at school or at home, the Ortegas had gone to Pico's. Standing in his doorway, Pico had faced the serious, wire-rimmed gazes of the two Doctors Ortega. He said he hadn't seen Timmy all day, but, he added, reluctantly, when he saw the stern expression on Enrique Ortega's face, that Timmy was probably doing surveillance.

"Surveillance?" Enrique shouted. "Surveillance of what?"

"He's been watching these women, like," Pico said.

"Women? What do you mean?"

"They take cards and buy stuff, like," Pico mumbled.

"What stuff? You mean drugs?" Enrique's nostrils flared.

"No, shoes, stuff like that, over at the mall. His brother knows about it. I gotta go." Pico said, shutting the door.

On their way to Daniel's apartment, the Ortegas had realized that when they had caught him at the outlet mall and he had told them about following someone who had been stealing things, Timmy might have been telling the truth. Now, in the Holburn police station, as they watched the sheriff and his deputy recording Timmy's statement and taking notes, they were surprised and even impressed by Timmy's careful descriptions of Maya and her accomplices, the exact details about the stores they visited, their purchases, and the cars they had used. Timmy's professional account of his surveillance was more like that of a policeman than of a potential drop-out from Wando High School.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Renate had come back to her apartment three times. Her mother's car was still there, and clearly she was not going away. With great reluctance, Renate picked up her shopping bags from Lord & Taylor's, walked around the fountain, went into the lobby, closed her umbrella, and rode the elevator to her floor. Outside her door she heard dolorous singing of dirge-like music coming from inside her apartment. Sad women were singing over sad guitar accompaniments about *duende* and other cheery topics.

"Mother, I'm not dead yet!" she said, slamming the door behind her. "Please turn off that funeral music."

“True songs of our people. Not funeral music,” said her mother, sitting up suddenly. A stray lock of her blue-black hair came loose from her elaborate coiffure. “And sometimes daughters do die to their mothers. It is the fate of mothers to bear this sorrow”

“Mother, will you knock it off!” Renate kicked off her shoes. “What do you want here? We agreed that I needed space.”

“And we agreed to some other things,” Her mother, the Deputy Ambassador, said. “For example, that you would live within your means, go seriously to college, avoid political foolishness, and stay away from Daniel Ortega.”

“His name is ‘Reston’ now.”

“His name will always be ‘Daniel Ortega.’ And you are coming home.”

“No!” Renate shouted, throwing down her Lord & Taylor’s bags, which spilled onto the floor. A red sandal-stiletto-heel shoe hopped out of a box and lay down between mother and daughter.

“How did you pay for THAT?” shouted the Deputy Ambassador.

“I need those in my work!” Renate said.

“What work? Is this work?” Her mother threw her midterm grade report onto the bed. “Is this work?” She then threw down the stack of papers with the CORAZON PLAN on top. “Is this work?” she said, finally, handing her daughter the newspaper with its headline, “COUNCILMAN SLAIN,” over a picture of Gerald Nuffield at his last public appearance, wearing a ridiculous, tiny tricorne hat.

“I can explain, Mama,” Renate shouted weakly, her mascara beginning to run.

“No explanations until we are home. We are leaving. You are leaving. The agreement is finished. Terminated.” Her mother screamed. Then there was a knock at the door.

Renate dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and looked through the peephole at Mr. Pettiford standing outside her door. He held a manila envelope.

“It is my boss,” she said.

“Back from the dead, I suppose,” Maria Elena sneered, reattaching her loose lock of hair, turning off the CD player and sitting down in the proper way to receive guests. “Show him in.”

Harry had heard the screaming, singing and shouting from the time he left the elevator, hoping that it was not coming from Renate’s apartment. He stood outside the door for several minutes waiting for the storm inside the room to abate. Finally, he knocked and Renate, with some hesitation, let him in. It was suddenly very quiet. At first, he thought that she had two black eyes, but then noticed that the black color was coming off on her tissue as she dabbed her eyes. Another woman, a dark beauty with a rather severe expression, seated in a wicker chair by the balcony window, stared sullenly at the rain outside. She turned to face Harry.

“It is an evil day, is it not?”

“Well, it’s certainly wet,” Harry replied. “I’m Harry Pettiford, with the Nuffield campaign?”

“Indeed,” said the woman by the window. She turned away and continued to look at the rain.

“Here is your paycheck, Renate,” Harry said, handing her the manila envelope.

“Won’t you sit down, Mr. Pettiford?” Renate said, and then realized that the only place he could sit was on the bed. Carefully pushing the papers to one side, Harry sat down.

“The envelope also contains other items that were in your desk at the hotel.”

“The hotel!” The woman shouted.

“Mother!” Renate screamed.

“What work were you doing in hotels with high-heels and fancy clothes? And where have you been for hours and hours? Tell me that!”

“The campaign headquarters was in the Holburn Hotel, Mama.” Renate said. “That’s where we called voters. Please tell her, Mr. Pettiford.”

“That’s right, Mrs. Brown.” Harry said.

“De Torres!” Maria Elena shouted.

“Yes, uh, Torres. Sorry, uh” Harry stuttered.

“De Torres!” she shouted again.

“Mother, please!” Renate whispered.

“Tell it all and tell it now!” Her mother said.

“There is nothing to tell,” Renate said reluctantly. “I was with Daniel all yesterday. We were so upset after Mr. Nuffield was killed. We could not sleep. We talked about it all night. When Daniel brought me back here, I saw your car and couldn’t face you, so I went shopping.”

“With my credit card,” said her mother.

“You are right! I’ve broken our agreement. I’ve broken promises.”

Harry noticed one of Jerry’s position papers on the bed, one he hadn’t seen before, entitled CORAZON PLAN.

“You are too quick to confess! There is more. What else are you hiding?” asked her mother, the Deputy Ambassador. Seeing her daughter’s knees go weak, she got up and forced Renate to sit down while she stood over her, holding the arms of the wicker chair.

“I...I was with...with—” Renate blew her nose.

“With Nuffield on Friday night,” Harry said calmly.

Both women looked at him.

“Is this true, Renate?” said *Señora* de Torres.

“Yes. He asked me to see him. I should not have gone. Then I would never have...”

“Never have what, Renate?” Harry said.

A loud knock at the door made all three of them jump. *Señora* de Torres opened the door to an officer in the brown uniform of the Holburn Police Department. He showed his badge and identification, asked to see Renate Brown, and informed her that she was coming with him to the police station for further questioning concerning the murder of Gerald Nuffield. Renate grabbed her purse and the two of

them left, leaving behind *Señora* Maria Elena Garcia Gonzalez de Torres, the Deputy Ambassador, and Harry Pettiford, former gofer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Barbara Nuffield loved to polish her silver. It always cheered her up to spread a sheet across the dining room table and lay out a complete set at a time, with the dimmer-lights of both chandeliers turned on fully—reflecting in the mirrors around the room. She would work her way around the table, rubbing and wiping each piece until every place setting gleamed. Jerry was always so funny about entertaining at home. She had often asked him why he wanted such a home if he didn't want to entertain. It seemed that for him the possession itself was nine-tenths of the reason. One in his position simply had such a home and therefore having such a home showed that he was the right man for such a position. To entertain in his home, however, would expose him to criticism of the wealth he had accumulated through public

service. Barbara thought this was nonsense. Gracious living was not about wealth or ostentation but about making others comfortable. Jerry never stopped calculating the next deal long enough to think about living—graciously or otherwise. Of course, now he had stopped thinking of anything.

Barbara liked to imagine how she would seat people around the table. So much could be accomplished by proper seating, lighting and good food served graciously, and she would coordinate her outfit with the setting to complete the effect. Seat the activist and the councilman in front of the same flower-arrangement; serve them the same *rosbif au jus* with fresh warm rolls. Guide the conversation to their personal interests and families and have a local string quartet quietly playing Schubert in the library. Make comfortable arrangements in the same way that one guides the branches in bonsai and, in time, only agreements will remain. Jerry just battered away at causes, promising anything to win and not caring about much beyond seeming engaged and successful, anything to win flattery and attention. What is the proper drape for the casket of a philanderer? The spikes and garish orange berries of *pyrocantha* and the rubbery leaves of *philodendron*.

She loved the feel and the heft of the old silver her mother had left her more than the slender Nuffield pattern, not that she had been able to use either one of them as much as she wanted. Once Lester Stihl had decided to leave her alone and go after that Brown woman, it would all be over. He'd soon enough prove that Renate was the murderer, and Barbara would never have to admit that she had seen them embracing, or admit to anything else. She wished that she hadn't been so upset that night, so upset that she'd gotten sick to her stomach and spent half an hour in the hotel restroom. But she still made it back to the conference in time to have an alibi. Lester could just be as suspicious as he wanted to be. He had no proof.

The front doorbell rang, its chimes echoing in the hall. Barbara took off her apron and went to the door. Sheriff Stihl and a deputy were standing on the front porch.

George Winslow had tried to go to bed early, but the pains in his back kept him awake. Maybe he'd make an appointment for the afternoon of the teacher work day. He hated to return to that medical chamber of horrors, but he had to do something. He looked in at the chat room where he had the discussion about the Cuban underground. They were on some other topic that didn't interest him. He swiveled away from the computer to the table behind it, heaped with the primary sources for the dissertation he'd never finished. He had original transcripts from some of the meetings of the InterAmerican Economic and Social Council of 1961 and a copy of Guevara's 1960 handbook on guerilla tactics, with an English translation he had gotten from one of his students. He had never quite been able to pull it all together, and Lida Jean had certainly not been much help. As soon as she left, he'd promised himself that he would finish, but so far, he'd only managed to pile his sources onto a card table. Winslow picked up the student's typed translation of Guevara's handbook and paged through it. Some handwriting was on the back cover:

The people now need a new handbook. The old enemy is still undefeated. The corporations and monopolies and mass media still oppress us. Only individuals matter. Only the revolutionaries, individuals who have not sold out, individuals whose thinking is reborn and reinvented, individuals who will fear nothing because they do not worship property. Only these revolutionary individuals can defeat the oppressors of our people. One at a time, we can make revolutionary justice and reclaim all that has been taken from us. The people now need a new handbook because guerilla warfare must now be fought in the board rooms, the universities, and the election campaigns.

Winslow wished that he still had some students who would be willing to help him with the translation of his primary sources, but it seemed that most of his students now were either know-it-all seniors or trouble-makers like Timmy Ortega. He rolled his chair back over to the bed, got up, and lay

down again. He wished he was small enough to curl up so that he could escape the pain shooting from back to groin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When Harry had parted with Señora de Torres after the police had taken Renate away, he casually took with him the position paper on the CORAZON PLAN. Once in the car, he leafed quickly through it. It was not a position paper but the description of an upscale housing development to be built by Briggs Construction on the site currently occupied by the Winterthorn apartments. It had clearly been Jerry's. Its cover was like one of Jerry's position papers, and he recognized Jerry's handwriting in the margins of the paper—the dates that the site would be cleared and when the construction would begin. From the drawings, it looked like Briggs was trying to recreate Georgetown. The handwriting angrily scrawled on the last page was not Jerry's.

“So the people are betrayed again. Nuffield promised the Coalition more housing at the very same time he was working with Briggs to take away their homes. Is this what we have been working for?”

Harry decided to pay Daniel Reston another visit. It was a short drive to the West Broad Apartments, but in the late afternoon the roads in Northern Virginia fill with commuters, and Harry found himself caught behind a slow panel truck, unable to pass because of bright orange cones in the other lane. He could not see around the truck but surmised that there was an accident somewhere ahead. Jerry had said nothing to him about making a deal with Briggs, but he must have promised something because Briggs had made a handsome contribution to the Nuffield campaign. The Zoning Board would have final say over whether the site would continue to be used for affordable housing, but Jerry and the other Council members appointed the commissioners to the Board. His promises to Briggs were unlikely to have thrilled Menendez and the Hispanic Coalition, particularly when Jerry had been selling himself as the friend of all immigrants. Daniel and Renate knew about this. Maybe last Friday they had confronted Jerry, gotten into an argument, and accidentally killed him. If it were an accident, then Daniel would do well to turn himself in and tell Lester Stihl everything before the police had to pick him up. Given his observations of Daniel and Renate over the last year, Harry was sure that it must have been an accident and now they were too scared to come forward. After half an hour, the sun had set and the street lights come on. The line of traffic was finally guided by an impatient policeman around an overturned pickup. After a few more minutes of stop-and-go traffic, Harry pulled into the visitors' parking lot.

Daniel, wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt, was surprised to see him again. Surprised and not very pleased, Harry thought, noticing the usually confident Reston was stooping, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. After staring at him for some time, Daniel finally asked him in.

“We need to talk, Daniel,” Harry said, showing him the Corazon document and nodding to Miguel as he swept into Daniel’s bedroom. Daniel followed him and closed the door behind him.

“I found that last week.” Daniel said.

“So I gathered, Daniel. It surprised me, too.” Harry said.

“We worked so hard for him, and he lied and betrayed us, all of us.” Daniel stuck out his lower lip.

“And you and Renate went to see him.” Harry disregarded Daniel’s show of temper. “You confronted him about it? Was that why you were at the hotel on Friday night?”

“I was here! Ask Miguel! I already told the police. I was sleeping right here.” Daniel pushed his hair back and sat down on the couch.

Harry looked out the window at the adjoining parking garage. “I don’t know, Daniel, but it seems possible for a young man like you to go from your balcony right over to that parking garage without anyone knowing that you’d left the room.” Daniel looked at his bare feet. “And I don’t think that the police will be slow to figure that out.”

“OK, but I didn’t go there with Renate.” Daniel protested.

“No, the two of you planned to meet there.” Harry suddenly realized why they had gone to see Nuffield. “You had been following Nuffield since you found out about his deal with Briggs. You had seen Gina Barber and him together in her house, and you knew that he had left her there on Friday morning. Maybe you even thought that he had killed her. So you called him and told him that you knew about Gina, and then you and Renate went to blackmail him. You would say nothing about Gina to Nugent or the press in exchange for his dropping the Corazon deal. Is that what happened, Daniel?”

Daniel was sitting very still, staring out the window, his jaw set and his eyes harder than Harry had ever seen them. Harry began to wonder whether he really knew this boy well enough to have

accused him. If Daniel had deliberately murdered Nuffield, what would prevent him from committing murder a second time?

“You’ve got it wrong, Mr. Pettiford,” he said finally, relaxing and turning to face Harry. “I knew about Gina Barber, and when I called Nuffield, he lied about it. Well, I almost told Nugent everything.”

“But then you decided to see Nuffield face to face?” Harry suggested.

“No, I gave up on Nuffield. I decided that he wasn’t worth it.” Daniel jutted out his jaw and looked fiercely proud. “When it’s my chance, I will not betray the people. I didn’t need him any more.”

“But you went to see him anyway.” Harry said.

Daniel started to protest again, but looking out at the parking garage just beyond his balcony, he hung his head. “It was because I had to know about Renate.”

“You went to the hotel because of Renate?” Harry said.

“I heard her talking to him on the phone planning to meet him. She was always sucking up to him, doing favors, dressing like his wife. I don’t know what happened to her. But now...”

“Now, with Nuffield dead,” Harry said.

“No, that’s not what I mean!” Daniel shouted. “It’s just that we had a talk, and now we are back together. She never meant it. At least, I don’t think she meant it.” Daniel wiped his eyes.

“OK, Daniel,” Harry said calmly. “You have to tell the police everything. Tell them what you know about Gina, and the calls you made, and why you went to the hotel. You are better off telling them now than having them to come for you. They have just taken Renate into custody and I’m sure that you will be next.”

“The police have Renate?” Daniel stood up.

“Daniel, all I can say is that you must come forward and tell everything you know about this to the police.” Harry slowly backed away towards the door. “I can help, if you want, but you must go to the police with everything you know.”

Daniel took a white shirt from the closet.

Harry continued, “Include the threat you made on Wilson Briggs.”

“No, not that,” Daniel said sullenly, pulling on his socks and avoiding Harry’s eyes.

“So you’re going to the police?” Harry stood and walked to the door.

“Yes, Mr. Pettiford, I’m going,” he paused. “Actually I’m going back to the police.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A group of carolers from Sixth Presbyterian Church was walking down the hospital corridors singing “Good King Wenceslas.” Harry wondered why they were doing this in November but then remembered reading in the church newsletter that the month of December was fully booked at the hospital by carolers from other churches. Harry recognized several of the singers, one of whom was Millie Coleman, an elderly choir member, married to a retired dentist. She still wore a page-boy hairdo, dyed her hair dark brown, and made the most of every moisturizer and face cream on the market. When she saw Harry heading for the escalator, she left the choristers and grabbed his sleeve.

“Oh, Harry! We were just up to see Clarisse. She insists that she’s ready to leave and the doctors don’t know what they’re doing! But how is she?”

“She’s doing fine, Mrs. Coleman. If she weren’t cranky, we’d know there was something wrong.” He said this as cheerily as possible.

“Millie, Harry. And how are you doing? It’s just terrible what happened to Gerald. We all just admired him so much. Barbara and he have done so much for the community”

“Yes, it’s been rough, Mrs., uh, Millie. We just have to do the best we can and go on.” And now I’d like to go on, Harry said to himself, noticing Mrs. Coleman’s crooked lipstick line.

“Yes, first Gerald and now Wilson. Makes you wonder, doesn’t it? That’s why it’s good to get out and bring some cheer,” she said, looking down the hallway, where the carolers were turning the corner into Medical Records.

“Wilson?” Harry asked.

“You haven’t heard? He’s disappeared. Ann hasn’t seen him since yesterday morning. The police are searching for him. Well, I must catch up with the group. Good to see you!” The bells on her Christmas scarf jingled as she trotted back to join the carolers, and Harry went up the escalator to see his aunt.

Aunt Clarisse had been eating her dinner with one of her fellow docents from the Holburn Society, and Harry stayed only long enough to get her latest list of items to bring from home. The members of the Holburn Society kept up the Colonel’s colonial rose garden, his house having crumbled away since 1798, along with his reputation. Even though the Holburn Society and the Garden Club were the same people, they liked to maintain the distinction. Clarisse and her visitor didn’t notice when Harry left.

Before going home, Harry stopped by the Fireside Nursing Home to look in on Bea. Nurse Flora Martinez stopped him at the desk.

“Mr. Harry, you know about the consultation?”

“I thought that we just had one this month, Flora,” Harry said. He was not fond of sitting in a circle with Bea’s “care providers.”

“You know we have two in November to make up for not doing consultations during the holidays,” said Flora. “Mrs. Pettiford will have her consultation tomorrow afternoon at the usual time.”

“OK, Flora. I guess that I knew that, but thanks for the reminder.” Harry noticed that Flora had been hanging plastic holly garlands over the file cabinets in the nurses’ station.

He slipped down the hall, ignoring the shouting of a bald, toothless man sitting in a wheelchair with his bathrobe twisted uncomfortably around him. Bea’s room was quiet, as always. She was wearing her white flannel nightgown with small pink rosebuds on the bodice. Harry looked carefully at her eyes. Her pupils responded feebly when he turned on the bedside light. He had tried asking her to blink or to tap her finger once for “yes” and twice for “no,” but she seemed unable to understand or to do it. Her breathing was calm and regular, her lips slightly pursed as if she were just about to say something.

“Tell me, Bea,” he said softly. “Tell me what I should do about Nuffield, Daniel and Renate.” He took her hand and studied her fine, tapered fingers and her perfect hand that just fit inside his hand. “Did I tell you that Aunt Clarisse is better now? It seems that we got her to a hospital soon enough for the medication to do some good.” If only he had come home earlier or if Bea had come with him, he would have been able to get her to a hospital in time to make a difference. Instead of finding her working in the kitchen when he returned, he’d come home to a dark house and nearly stumbled over Bea on the living room floor. “Tell me, Bea,” he whispered, “what is to become of us?”

Harry remembered that when Father Berman taught the boys at St. Giles about Socrates' trip to the oracle of Delphi, it had been as if he were describing a pilgrimage to some holy shrine. His eyes shone as he handed the boys the tiny black and white photographs he had taken in Phocis, pictures he seemed to treasure even more than those of the Holy Land, or Sacred Grotto, or Isle of Patmos, where St. John received his revelation. The boys didn't understand much about oracles; they were too well cared for and too young to have grieved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

June was making a casserole. She had actually found an old recipe for tuna casserole, gone to the store for the ingredients, let herself back into the Pettiford house with a key that Harry had given her, and, much against her nature, begun cooking. She told herself that she was doing nothing more than the Circle ladies at her mother's church in Roanoke would have done for a family having trouble, but she knew better. When she had asked Harry for a key, she had expected him to put her off and say he didn't need help. Instead, he seemed relieved. He also seemed a little confused. Why wouldn't he, after finding Jerry Nuffield dead and his aunt nearly dead within the space of a few days? And she knew that he was more worried than he let on about his financial situation and his wife's care. June hoped that Harry

would not have eaten before coming home. Maybe a good meal would make up for some of the grief she'd given Harry during the election campaign.

Clarisse had every sort of cooking implement and June had almost enjoyed grating the lemons. Almost. It was getting later and later and the casserole was now on the Salton warming tray. Of course, there was no reason for Harry to call; it was silly of her to think that he should call. She had even taken a day of personal leave, which the editor had seemed overly happy to allow. She'd brought some clothes in her tote bag, just in case they stayed up late talking and Harry should suggest that she stay in the guest bedroom. Just in case.

She pushed her hair back behind her ears. What was left to do? She'd set the table, poured the wine, made a salad and had a tray of rolls ready to put into the oven. Scrunch had wiggled around her legs while she worked until she finally gave him something to eat. She sat down in the living room and stuck one of Ernie Banks' videotapes into the VCR; then Scrunch ran through the room to the front door, just as Harry came in.

The smell of food reminded Harry that he hadn't eaten since breakfast and June meeting him at the door reminded him of Bea.

"You shouldn't have done anything," he protested.

"Well you shouldn't have given me a key, then," she said.

Later on, as they were having coffee and the strawberry-rhubarb pie that June had warmed up for dessert, June told him about her visit to Ernie Banks, and Harry told her about his visits with Daniel and Barbara.

"I'm back in the black," Harry said, "although Barbara gave me that bonus almost as if she were paying me to be quiet about something."

"Not just something," June said, "she wants your silence on his philandering."

“Well, Lester Stihl is already way ahead of her. Barbara will sooner or later have to accept the fact that people had figured out what Jerry was all about. It comes under the category of ‘accepting what we cannot change.’”

“I think that Barbara may come under the category of ‘changing everything that is unacceptable,’” June said.

“The pie was great,” Harry said, finishing off the last forkful. “Thanks for dinner. I didn’t know I was so hungry.”

“My pleasure,” June said, smiling broadly. “What about Clarisse? Will she be back soon?”

“Soon, I think. But I think she’s beginning to enjoy being in the hospital. She has a steady flow of visitors and she has me to order about.”

“Well, it’s a bit of an anticlimax now that you’ve convinced Daniel Reston to turn himself into the police, but do you want to have a look at the tapes I got from our friend Mr. Banks?”

“Sure, let’s see them. Colonel Connors said that Barbara and Renate seemed to be attending his workshop in relays.”

The hours and minutes were displayed along the bottom of the tape as it played, so that it was possible to see Harry and Renate leaving the crowd at 7:46 p.m. The tape of Connors’s workshop occasionally showed the audience. In one shot, early in the workshop, Barbara Nuffield was sitting on the side, near the accordion-divider that separated the two workshops. The time shown was 8:10 p.m. She was missing when the camera panned the crowd at 8:50 and 9:08 p.m., although Renate was present at the latter time. She seemed to be paying more attention to her compact than to the speaker. Finally, when the camera panned the audience for the last time, at 10:50 p.m., both women were present.

“The workshops ended at 11:00 p.m.,” June said, writing in her notebook.

“Could I see part of that first tape once again,” Harry said. June rewound it; then Harry fast-forwarded it to the buffet sequence.

“That doesn’t have Barbara or Renate in it,” June said.

“No, but there’s something else of interest here,” Harry said, stopping the tape and rewinding it. “I’d like to borrow this tomorrow.”

“Sure, there’s no hurry in getting it back to Ernie.” June dropped the other tapes into her tote bag and looked puzzled. “You know, it wasn’t really a relay,”

“No,” Harry said, “they left and came back at different times.”

“But they were also both missing at the same time, which means that whatever happened, they were together.”

“And Daniel was there, too,” Harry said.

“Did he actually admit to murdering Nuffield?”

“Not in so many words, but I didn’t want to press him,” Harry admitted. “Not my line of work, you know.”

“That was a dangerous thing to do, Harry,” June said solemnly.

“Funny I didn’t think of it at the time, isn’t it?” Harry felt a cold nose on his foot. Scrunch had arrived with his leash. “I guess if nobody notices, you sometimes have to do things for yourself. Don’t you, Scrunch?”

“Yes, I guess you do, Harry,” June said, picking up their plates. “I’ll clean up while you walk Scrunch.”

“It’s too late to be in the kitchen, June. Say, why don’t you just spend the night in the downstairs guest bedroom? Clarisse is always fussing over it even though I’m the only guest I’ve ever seen around here.” Scrunch tugged at the leash when Harry opened the front door.

When they had left, June took her tote bag to the guest room. Yes, she thought, if nobody notices, sometimes you have to do things for yourself. She hoped she hadn’t overdone it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

June rose early to fix a breakfast before leaving for work. Obligated to get up rather than sleep in as he would have preferred, Harry dressed and went downstairs to the kitchen.

“You should have stayed in bed,” June said, putting a plate of toast on the warmer and straightening her red sweater over a tartan skirt. “Only some of us have to get up”

“I couldn’t let you do all the work while I slept away,” Harry protested.

“Well, we do need milk,” June said, holding up an empty carton.

“I’ll go to the convenience store up the street,” he said, going out the back door.

Having June in the house had made him comfortable as he had not been since living in Roanoke. The sidewalk along Giles Lane undulated over the roots of the basswood trees that lined the street. Lights were on in most of the houses. When he had retired from the university, he had briefly felt calm and distant from the bustle of work and decision-making. He had begun to enjoy being an observer on the sidelines, getting up and going to bed when he wanted, and taking long walks with Bea. Those times were over too soon. He entered the store.

The only other person present was the small, plump clerk he had seen the last time he was there. She had pulled her glasses on top of her head as she struggled to change the tape in the cash register. Harry picked up a half-gallon of milk and came back to the counter, where the clerk was still working on her machine. He looked at the rack of tabloid newspapers. The local tabloid, *The Holburn News*, fancied itself as Holburn's answer to *The National Inquirer*, although manufacturing exposés every week from what occurred in Holburn must have required extraordinary creativity. The Wednesday headline was "DOUBLE MURDER LINKED TO KIDNAPPING." Harry picked up the paper and continued reading.

Death in Love Nest followed by murder of Councilman and disappearance of local contractor. Three suspects were taken for questioning in regard to the murders of Gina Barber and Gerald Nuffield and the disappearance of Wilson Briggs, a prominent local contractor. Sheriff Lester Stihl stated that police have apprehended three suspects who may have conspired to...

"Do you want to buy it, Sir?" the clerk asked. Harry looked up.

"What?" Harry said.

"Do you want to buy the newspaper?" The clerk said again.

"Yes. And this milk." Harry shook his head.

When June saw the newspaper, she shook her head and said, "Ernie Banks."

"The cable TV man?" Harry said.

“Yes. He moonlights for this rag.” June pursed her lips. “He must have figured there was something up when I borrowed those tapes, and then staked out the police. He doesn’t care how close his story is to the truth as long as he’s first on the street.”

“Look, it says that Gina Barber was murdered.”

“Which we know is false,” June said as she poured their coffee and took the toast off the warmer. “And this bit about Wilson Briggs is just as bad.”

“Well, there may be some truth to that,” Harry said. “I saw Millie Coleman at the hospital last night and she mentioned that Wilson was missing.”

“You didn’t say anything about that last night,” June said.

“I guess it just didn’t register,” Harry said apologetically.

“I’ve got to hurry now,” June said, looking at her watch. “When my editor sees that headline, he’ll be livid.”

“Why should it matter? You said they never get it right.” Harry said.

“Harry, you’ve been out of the business too long! The point is not that they didn’t get it right but that they got it at all!” June bristled and immediately regretted it. “I’ll have to go now,” she said, leaving Harry sitting at the dining room table. She picked up her tote bag and overnight pack from the living room and rushed out the front door, upset and guilty at realizing that if she hadn’t been distracted by Harry, she would have been on top of this story.

On Wednesday morning, Wilson Briggs had wrapped himself in a tarp and lain down on the cool concrete floor of the dark storage unit. He was semiconscious and could hear the morning traffic roaring by on the nearby Interstate highway. The light bulb had gone out during the night, so that he could no longer see his watch. His efforts to ram the door with various farm tools had only tired him out and

bruised his arms. Once, when he was younger and the diabetes had just been diagnosed, he had gone for two days without insulin, just to show that he could do it and later realized it had been a stupid thing to do when his legs began to burn as if crawling ants were biting them. Now he was 40 years older, and his diabetes had led to a heart problem and the loss of peripheral vision. These were hardly unexpected problems for a slightly obese man in his eighties. Over the years, he had wondered how he would die. Would gangrene claim his legs, or would he be blinded and suffer kidney failure? He had hoped to just push off and go fishing some morning in a Jon-boat on the Outer Banks and not come back. Dying on the floor of a self storage unit had never occurred to him.

After giving Scrunch his breakfast and a walk, Harry gathered up the latest items demanded by Aunt Clarisse and drove to the hospital. June had left in a huff, and he didn't see any reason for it. Harry wondered whether June expected him to call in to her all the stories of any gossips he happened to meet. He couldn't figure her out sometimes. She seemed to want to help, even to make him a personal loan, but she also couldn't refrain from manipulating him to get a story. It was not a lovable trait. Better to forget about June for the rest of the day, he thought. It was a bright, crisp November morning with a few wisps of clouds scudding east across a pale blue sky. It was the sort of day that Bea and he might have driven up to Mountain Lake and spent the afternoon looking for high-bush blueberries or hiking the easy trail through the woods to the icy pool at the foot of the Cascades waterfall. If it hadn't been for Bea, he would never have stayed in one place long enough even to be able to retire. She had encouraged him to stay on in the Community Relations office at the university, and after a dozen years or so, he became the Director. Bea had made it happen by simply holding him in one place. She gave him a reason for staying. At the gate for the Visitors' Lot, he pressed the button for another ticket.

The hospital had a real scam going at its parking lots, as far as Harry was concerned. Not only did it charge outrageous fees for medical services inside the building, it even made you pay to park in

their lots, as if parking were another “procedure” that could be added to the bill. It was like paying the pardoners and then paying again for absolution by the priests. Maybe the next protestant reformation would be against hospitals and health maintenance organizations. Making sure that he had a newspaper in the tote bag for Clarisse, he walked the quarter mile from his parking place to the entrance, deliberately ignoring the sullen attendant in the hut by the exit gate.

On his return to the nursing station outside Clarisse’s room, Harry was stopped by one of the nurses, who told him he would have to go to the waiting room with Miss Pettiford’s other guests. All of the members of the Garden Club had arrived and were being permitted into her room two at a time. Everyone looked up when Harry entered the room. Practically all of the seats were filled with elderly ladies holding small flower arrangements in their laps. He took a chair between Doris Stihl and Millie Coleman.

“Good morning ladies! I know that Aunt Clarisse is enjoying your visit and these lovely arrangements.” Harry hoped that he wouldn’t have to say much more.

“Oh, Doris always has the best arrangements. Who would have thought of using zinnias like that? It puts the rest of us to shame!” Millie said with great finality. Harry was wondering how to gainsay this remark without insulting Doris Stihl when another club member spoke up from across the room and behind a display of miniature yellow roses.

“We’re not competing in a show, Millie. We’re here to cheer up Clarisse.”

“Well, some of these will certainly make her laugh,” Millie said, who seemed to be the sort of person that could find fighting words in any situation.

Harry intervened. “You certainly have been busy, Millie. It must have been hard to put together these geraniums after caroling up here last night.”

“Oh, I just picked them from under the grow-light,” Millie snapped. “Guess you saw on the news that what I told you was true.”

“About Mr. Briggs?” Harry said.

“Yes, and Ann Briggs says he doesn’t have his medicine.” Millie brushed her flowers with her hand as if smoothing a child’s hair.

“They found his coat in the car, you know. It had his pills in the pocket. He just disappeared from his own driveway.” Millie shook her dyed brown hair and glanced around the room, knowing that everyone was listening from behind their plants. “It makes you afraid to go out into your own yard.”

Harry noticed that Doris was shifting uneasily in her seat, the zinnias bobbing up and down. The nurse looked in and wearily asked for the next two visitors. Millie stood up immediately.

“I just have to get on, if you all don’t mind. Trudy, why don’t you come with me?”

The fact that Trudy had the smallest arrangement in the room may have accounted for Millie’s choosing her, Harry thought. When the two of them marched out, all of the plants in the room rose with a sigh of relief. Doris Stihl touched his elbow and lowered her voice to talk to him. “Lester certainly appreciated your persuading that boy to turn himself in. He said it saved him hours of interrogation because Lester could see the others were going to stick to their stories. But when the girl saw her boyfriend, she broke down and admitted what had happened.”

“I guess I felt some responsibility for them,” Harry said, “because they worked for me. Still, it’s hard to believe that they would have done such a thing.”

“Oh, it was the boy who did the murder. He still hasn’t admitted it or said what he did with Wilson Briggs, but Lester knows it’s just a matter of time. The boy had some kind of grudge against Gerald and Wilson and, well, I guess you know about Renate and Gerald.” Doris did not say this with any relish. Unlike Millie, she was usually very reserved and unassuming, a modest woman with salt and pepper hair in a French twist and simple, elegant clothing.

Harry nodded. “So Daniel went after Jerry when he saw the two of them together.”

“Not just two,” she whispered, aware of the plants around the room nodding toward them. “Barbara was there, too. She came in on the two of them after following the girl there. The boy must have been watching all of this, because he came in when he heard Barbara shouting. Barbara and the girl left at the same time, leaving the boy in the room with Gerald. They all insist that Gerald was alive when they left.”

The nurse returned to the waiting room and signaled the next visitors. An arrangement of statics and carnations left with a frosted glass vase of hellebore. Doris sat up very straight, as if she were seated on her organ bench at church. Harry knew that she had more to say and was surveying the room until the remaining club members returned to reading their magazines.

“The only admission the boy will make,” she continued, “is that he was there for the same reason Barbara was: to confront Gerald and the girl. He also saw Gerald and Miss Barber, but didn’t witness anything criminal.”

“Unless it was criminal for Gerald to have left her dead without calling anyone,” Harry said.

“Well, Lester said that the crime team found that she’d probably been dead for at least an hour before the boy saw Gerald leave,” Doris said quietly, again stopping to survey the room. A pocked-face blonde with a gladiolus was now the only club member left besides Doris.

“Guess she had gotten up early to fix him breakfast,” Harry said, thinking of June. He noticed that Doris’s neck and ears were pink. She lowered her voice even more and spoke hurriedly.

“I really shouldn’t have said anything, Harry, but you know these people, and I don’t think Lester would mind.”

“I appreciate your telling me, Doris. I’d hate to believe there was some kind of conspiracy or that Barbara was involved.”

“Oh Barbara’s released,” she said, turning to face him directly. “Both the girl and she were cleared as soon as they accounted for all of the time that they were missing from the conference at

Demeter's. I guess they had little choice when confronted with the videotapes that Holburn Cable Company had made of the event.”

Harry reflected that there was not enough time for June to have given her tapes to Lester Stihl. More worrisome details! He supposed that Ernie Banks gave another copy of the tapes to the police and, knowing Ernie, he also informed them that June Brightman had a copy.

The nurse signaled for the last two club members to make their visit and then spoke to Harry.

“Mr. Pettiford, as soon as those ladies have finished their visit, it will be time for your aunt to go back to our Imaging Department. Then she will be working with a therapist for about half an hour. You can see her briefly in about two hours, provided that the visit doesn't run into her nap-time.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Wilson Briggs was driving along Route 12, the beach road, just south of Currituck. He pulled off the highway into a marshy area, unhooked his Jon-boat and let it slide into the water. He was soon pushing through marsh grass out into a channel, some periwinkle snails dropping into his lap from the grass as it swished across his face. A fiddler crab sidled across the bottom of the boat. It was a cloudy day and seemed perfect until the midges descended. His legs and hands were on fire from their biting and his ears pounded with the roaring, beating engine sounds of some huge powerboat coming down on him.

He awoke in a sweat and thirsty, his feet and legs itching unbearably. Still lying on the floor of the storage unit, he had twisted out of the tarp onto the cold, rough floor. A repetitive, chugging sound

was coming from the garage next door. Someone was working next door! In a way, it sounded like a log-splitter, but it was too fast; then he heard words. Some kind of chanting or singing. He sat up and was immediately so dizzy he became nauseous. The noise, like a car being started over and over again, made him feel even more nauseous. The incessant chanting or babbling didn't help. He tried to shout above it, but was too dizzy and weak and finally fell back exhausted onto the floor. Twenty minutes later, the rap fan next door got onto his motorcycle and drove away from his storage unit with his motor and loudspeakers still roaring.

In his brief audience with Aunt Clarisse, Harry had received a lecture about his not coming to see her earlier in the day. She wanted her newspaper before breakfast and she had definitely needed her make-up and a proper bed jacket before seeing all of those visitors. She couldn't understand how Harry could have let them come in before she was ready. The food had no flavor, her feet were always cold and the staff must have trained as veterinary attendants considering the way they had treated her. She wanted Harry to talk to her doctor again about her release and she wanted the entire set of flower arrangements removed today. With plants circling her bed, she felt like the corpse in a viewing. Harry didn't ask any questions or overstay his welcome.

Now he was on his way to the police station. While waiting for Aunt Clarisse, he had called the Sheriff's office to find out if Lester wanted to see him. Better to turn himself in for concealing evidence about the videotapes and interfering in an investigation than to have the police coming after him. The deputy on duty seemed to have trouble hearing what Harry was saying. He shouted for someone to be quiet, had Harry repeat what he had said, called back to the Sheriff and then curtly said that they did indeed want him to come in. When he arrived at the white block, flat-roofed building, Harry found it surrounded by network TV trucks and satellite dishes on tall poles. Several reporters, including the stylish Danielle Yates from one of the D.C. stations and the khaki-clad Ernie Banks from Holburn Cable

News, were milling around the entrance with their camera crews. Harry went to the side of the building and, finding the door locked, tapped on the window to get the attention of the deputy sitting behind the dispatcher's desk. Surprised to see Harry behind him, he immediately came to the door. Harry noticed that the deputy's name was "Berry" and that he looked like a ninth grade high school student who had just begun shaving.

"Thank you, Officer Berry," Harry said. "I thought I'd better try a different door."

The young policeman nodded, obviously pleased to be called 'officer.'

"We haven't established a perimeter yet for the media people," he said.

"Well, I'm Harry Pettiford and here to see the Sheriff."

Officer Berry had Harry wait at the counter while he pushed a button on the speaker phone.

"Yes?" Lester's irritated voice came over the intercom.

"Mr. Pettiford, Sir."

"OK, Tim."

The electric lock buzzed and Harry went in. Lester's office was littered with file folders, empty fast food containers and cups of cold coffee. It was not the tidy place it had been a few days before. Two small televisions in one corner were turned on but muted, and most of the chairs were stacked with folders. Most surprising was the appearance of Lester Stihl. He wore no coat or tie, needed a shave and looked like he had been eating and sleeping in his office for days. He cocked his head as Harry came in.

"See if you can find a place to sit down, Harry. Thanks for coming in to report on your investigation."

"Look, Lester. I never intended to interfere."

"You know, we got a call about you from Colonel Dan Connors over at Bolling Air Force Base. Said you were asking suspicious questions about a couple of people in his workshop and he got to

wondering whether it was related to our murder investigation. He wanted to know how you were involved in our investigation, Harry.” Lester stopped to drink some cold coffee.

“Lester, about that, I didn’t mean...”

“That got me thinking about how we could objectively account for the movements of Renate Brown and Barbara Nuffield.” Lester looked pointedly at Harry. “Then I remembered that cable news was covering the event, so I went to see Ernie Banks and guess what he told me?”

“June and I were just...”

“I knew that you two were working together,” Lester said with a tired smile. Harry sat back in his chair and relaxed.

“So you’re not going to throw us in a cell?” Harry said.

“Not yet.” Lester reached for his tie. “But there had better not be any more surprises. Wilson’s disappearance just takes all. We were monitoring his phone but never considered that he might be kidnapped. It just didn’t seem likely. But you try to explain that to the public. There’s no hiding the fact that he came to me before it happened.”

“He came to you,” Harry said, “with precious little information about why he might have been threatened. You’ve now seen the Corazon Plan that Daniel got from Nuffield?”

“Yes, and thanks for persuading Reston to turn himself in. You took a chance.”

“At the time I didn’t think about it. He was more than willing to see you once he knew that Renate might be charged.”

“Yes, he gave up his alibi without forcing us to check it out, but he hasn’t admitted to anything beyond being there, and now his parents have found a lawyer.”

“Well, I guess he did it, but it still puzzles me,” Harry said.

“How’s that?” Lester asked as he looked at his watch and took a cordless shaver from a desk drawer.

“Daniel’s motive. The reason he was at the hotel that night was to see whether Renate and Nuffield were really having an affair.”

“She betrayed him, so he killed her lover.” Stihl slipped on his black suit-coat.

“Except it wasn’t that simple.” Harry said. “Apparently his rage also extended to Wilson Briggs because Nuffield and Briggs had cooked a deal to develop the Winterthorn property and put its low-rent residents on the street.”

“Another betrayal.” Stihl gathered up some wads of paper from his desk.

“But it puzzles me that his jealous rage did not abate after killing Nuffield.” Harry said. “Why did he then risk kidnapping Briggs? It’s particularly puzzling because he didn’t seem to know about the call to Briggs, and he didn’t even seem to be upset about Nuffield’s lying, only deeply disappointed. He really was scared, however, about Gina Barber. He must have thought that Nuffield had killed her.”

“Yeah, I see where you’re going, Harry. It seems like the first killing was in the heat of passion and the second, well, kidnapping, was politically motivated. It’s unusual for a cold-blooded murder to follow so closely on a crime of passion, but not impossible. Anyway, we don’t know for sure what has happened to Wilson. These incidents may be unrelated. Maybe he’ll see one of the bulletins on TV and call in to tell us he’s been playing poker.”

“You sized it up pretty well,” Harry said. “I guess it’s just a matter of persistence. Sooner or later, Daniel will tell the whole story.”

“That’s police work,” Stihl looked at his watch again and stood up. “Let’s see what’s happening out there.” Stihl nodded to Officer Berry and told the dispatcher to pick up a stack of press releases and come with him. “Shark food,” he quietly said to Harry.

The crowd of reporters, camera-crews, and onlookers outside the station now filled the parking lot and spilled into the street. As Harry and the Sheriff stepped from the building, they were immediately assailed by a gang of interrogators.

“Mr. Pettiford.” Harry recognized his interrogator as a reporter from the evening news. “As chairman of Gerald Nuffield’s campaign, how do you respond to allegations of impropriety between the councilman and Briggs Construction?”

“This is an ongoing police investigation,” Harry said, who didn’t see how to get through the crowd without answering some questions. “As you know, it is essential to distinguish allegations from evidence. When there is sufficient evidence for a suspect to be charged, the name will be released and I’m sure that you will get the full story.”

“What about that murder in the Love Nest?” asked Ernie Banks, chewing on a smoldering cigarette butt.

“That was creative tabloid writing, as I think you know, Mr. Banks. The death in question was ruled accidental by the Medical Examiner. Other information will be released as it is confirmed,” Harry said, shouldering through the crowd. The stylish Danielle Yates met him at the perimeter. Harry glanced back to the station house to see what had become of Lester.

“Mr. Pettiford, what were the relationships between your staffers that led to these horrific murders and the disappearance of a prominent citizen in our community?” Miss Yates asked Harry this question, but she was not looking at Harry. She looked straight at the camera.

She’s concerned about shadows crossing her lovely face, Harry thought. He also stared into the camera. “To date, Miss Yates, only one murder has been alleged, and no one has been charged. Stay tuned!” Harry trotted a few feet to his car and got in quickly. He looked back one more time and saw Lester Stihl standing inside the station door with his arms folded. Meanwhile, the dispatcher was handing out the press-releases and Officer Berry was carrying some orange cones out the side door, to establish a perimeter, no doubt.

June tried to reach Harry before he drove off but was caught off guard by a crunching, concussive sound as one of the television vans on the street tipped its extended satellite dish against a

power line. Sparks showered over the crowd and a fire broke out inside the van. A crew member leaped out the back door of the van with his T-shirt on fire. Suddenly, a pony-tailed woman from another crew raced past the crowd with a fire-extinguisher and, as the driver of the van lowered the dish, all of the TV cameras turned toward the street to record the scene.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The consultations at Fireside Nursing Home always began promptly at 3:00 p.m. They were organized by Louise Watkins, the Home's social worker, and attended by the patient's family, physician, therapists, and nurses. Harry rushed through the entrance at 3:05, ran up the stairs to the second floor conference room, and found the one empty chair in the circle.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

"No problem, Harry. We were just beginning." Louise smiled. She was wearing her usual silver and turquoise jewelry on arms, neck and ears.

Harry sometimes thought that this kind of medicine was like a Southwestern Indian sand-painting ceremony with Louise Watkins officiating to make sure that every sand painting had a happy face.

The house physician, the lean-faced Dr. Phillips, recited the current list of medications he had prescribed for Bea—Prednisone, Tegretol, Cytosan and other hopeful remedies. Neither he nor anyone else could say how Bea was feeling. He could only say that her condition was stable. So is the condition of Aunt Clarisse's dahlias, Harry reflected.

"Flora?" said Louise, nodding for the nurse to speak.

"Yes, Mrs. Pettiford doing real well. She give us no problems. Sometimes she seems to watch what we're doing."

How does she do that with facial paralysis, Harry wondered. He had never seen Bea's eyes track anything. In a previous session, he had asked Phillips if she might have cortical blindness, but Phillips didn't think so. It was as if each of them simply poured in some sand of a different color.

"How about physical therapy, Nina?" Louise said.

"Mrs. Pettiford is keeping good muscle tone, not too much wasting. We are working with her three times a week, the maximum for her plan," the plump physical therapist said.

"How much longer can she receive this therapy?" Harry said.

"We'll have to check with accounting, Harry, but I'm sure we will be able to work something out," Louise smiled and flicked her long blonde mane. Harry noticed that she was also wearing a concha belt.

There was no cheery note on which to end this session, but Louise was looking for one. It seemed that there was less and less to say at each consultation. Earlier sessions were devoted to making sure that Harry understood about such things as cerebral vasculitis, facial paresis, durable power of attorney and medical directives. He wanted to shout that he now understood. He wanted to ask them

what more there was to say about it. Stop these sad ceremonies, and let Bea pass away with some dignity. Of course, dignity was what the ceremony was about, so Harry thanked everyone, as usual, for doing their best and, as usual, was hugged by Louise Watkins before he could leave the room.

As he waited by the elevator, he heard a familiar voice on the television in the residents' sitting room at the end of the hall. The room was empty, and on the television June Brightman was being interviewed by Danielle Yates in front of the Holburn police station.

"It was a tremendous cracking sound," June said. "One minute we were interviewing the police and the next minute, after the explosion, we were putting out the fire in the van so that we could get to the man caught in the back." Danielle's brown face filled the screen again.

"That's it, John, for this breaking news from downtown Holburn." She smiled broadly and disappeared from the screen. Then she reappeared, this time interviewing Harry. He noticed that his eye and face were more contracted on the left side, as if trying to compensate for the flat, wide-eyed expression on the right side of his face. When you thought very much about strokes, you began to see signs everywhere. He hurried back to the elevator, walked briskly back to the car and drove to Demeter's.

After he'd seen the story on TV about the fire at the police station, Marvin Jones was surprised to see a police bulletin with a picture of his boss on it. That was old man Wilson, all right. Wonder what he did. Marvin hardly ever saw the old man at the EZ Self Storage. As a matter of fact, in the time that Marvin had managed EZ, he had actually seen only a handful of customers. Most of the people who

rented storage units arrived either after-hours or on the weekends, and Marvin didn't stay past 5:00 p.m. or work on weekends. He turned the volume up on his remote and ate another corn curl.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Cranberry juice?” The bartender said.

“Yes,” Harry said. “The days of Scotch and Vodka are behind me in the blurry past.”

Under the overhead rack of up-ended wine goblets, Harry sat at the bar waiting for Michael Demetrios to finish a phone call in his office. The restaurant was almost empty except for a few early drinkers at the bar. The televisions at both ends of the room were playing his interview at the police station--this time with another reporter. Where had Lester Stihl gone during that interview? Harry wondered. The interview came across as if he were a spokesman for the police.

It was hard to believe that only a few days ago he had been planning what to say to Jerry Nuffield to convince him that he would still need a spokesman once re-elected. He wondered if Nugent had been serious about wanting to hire him; he also wondered whether Nugent had the money to hire him. From the look of Nugent's staffers at the end of the campaign, the warm glow of being a volunteer had cooled appreciably. At some point, people had to be paid.

"Harry, sorry to keep you waiting," Michael Demetrios said, running his hand through his curly black hair. "Always problems—staff problems, food spoiling, calls from angry customers." He waved his pudgy hand toward his office. Harry slid down from the barstool and picked up the videotape from the counter.

Once seated in Demetrios's comfortable office, Harry handed him the videotape. Demetrios raised his eyebrows, puzzled.

"What's this?" Demetrios said.

"Have a look at it, Michael." Harry said. "It's from last Friday night. I've already advanced it."

Demetrios inserted the tape into the VCR of a wide-screen television and pushed the PLAY button. The image, at first grainy and indistinct, then clearly showed the buffet line from the conference of the previous Friday. Waiters were refilling the bowls and warmers on the buffet table and taking the empty containers back to the kitchen. The elderly man with strong opinions about short-cuts around the Beltway had captured two or three listeners who glanced back occasionally at the buffet tables.

"What a character he was," exclaimed Demetrios. "Did you talk to him?"

"I tried not to," Harry said. "Watch, Michael." He pointed to one of the waiters. "Notice what's in the warmer he's taking back to the kitchen?"

Demetrios stopped the video, rewound it and played it again. This time, he watched intently.

"It's a purse!" Demetrios shouted. "He took a purse!"

"If you keep watching, you'll see him bring it back and drop it in a chair," Harry said.

“My employees are stealing!” Demetrios’s upper lip curled back, showing the gold fillings in his teeth.

“There’s more on this tape, Michael. You should see it all. It’s from Holburn Cable.”

“They know about this? Ernie Banks knows about this?” His eyes grew wide.

“No, they’re focused on other things right now. I think you’re safe.”

“If this got out...if this is publicized”

“Michael, I really don’t think that you need to worry about it. It’s hard to see on the tape, and anyway, the cable news people probably deleted this segment. It’s no news as far as they’re concerned.”

“It’s certainly news to me,” Demetrios clenched the arms of his chair. Harry stood up.

“You keep the tape, Michael.”

“Thanks, Harry. You’re one in a million.” Demetrios took Harry’s hand between his two pudgy ones and shook it like a dust mop. Harry exited quickly, not wanting to be around when Demetrios called in his waiters.

Oscar Menendez had been folding leaflets at a table in the dayroom of the firehouse when his pager went off and the radios began to squawk. The siren was shrieking as the firehouse doors rolled open and the ambulance driver shouted to the only EMT on duty.

“Menendez, you got your gear?”

“Straight. Let’s go!”

The two of them were the rescue squad for now. A third member of the team had just gone out to buy *pupusas* with *cortidos* for their dinner. She would hear the siren and get the message on her pager, but she might not join them until it was all over. The police dispatcher had sent two cars ahead. The

ambulance driver was new and had not often driven on the northwestern corner of town. He was peering at the street signs and trying to make out the numbers on the buildings as the van rushed through red lights and screamed around turns.

“Look, you don’t have to be looking for the numbers like that,” said Menendez. “Most of these old warehouses don’t have them anyway. Just watch your driving and look for the blue neon sign: ‘EZ Self Storage’.”

“I guess it was,” shouted the driver.

“What?” asked Menendez.

“Easy for the old coot to store himself. Right? Otherwise we wouldn’t be coming out here.” The driver laughed at his own joke.

“Didn’t you see him on the news? He was kidnapped.” Menendez said.

Their conversation ended abruptly. Following the blinking lights of the police cars, they drove to a storage shed in the far corner of the park where a policeman with bolt-cutters was already snapping the padlock off the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Harry wondered how June was doing but didn't know where she lived, so he drove home. Scrunch met him at the door, wiggling his hind end, his toenails clicking on the tiles in the foyer. It was definitely time for a walk. Harry looked at his watch: 6:00 p.m. or Vespers. They followed their usual route, going to the end of the block, up to Washington Street, and turning right at the Rite Aid. A pair of racing police cars with their sirens beeping and blue lights blinking met them at the corner. Scrunch ran behind Harry, wrapping the leash around his legs. Harry unwound the leash only to have the yelping dog encircle him again when a screaming ambulance chased past. They turned right down the next side street, a quiet neighborhood of white frame houses turned pink in the twilight. All of the trash barrels

had been pulled out to the street for tomorrow's pick-up, a chore Harry had forgotten to do. He really hadn't done any of the usual shopping or chores, like repairing one of Clarisse's antique chairs that he had sat on instead of just admiring it. Scunch had settled into a contented trot by the time they were back on St. Giles Lane. Clarisse's next-door neighbor was setting out his trash as they came up. Harry rolled his own trash barrel out to the street and nodded to the man, a balding retiree from the federal government named Malik who always seemed to wear the same plaid shirt and old corduroy trousers.

"Saw you on TV today," Malik said.

"Well, I didn't really want to be," Harry said.

"Terrible thing about that camera man being electrocuted." Malik pushed a bundle of twigs into his trash can.

"He was killed?" Harry said.

"Yeah, right in front of the police station. You didn't see it?" Malik said.

"No, I'd left by that time." Harry started to go back in.

Malik picked up some more sticks from his sidewalk. "Guess you haven't heard about the man in the Self Storage. What's his name? Mr. Big?"

"Briggs?" Harry turned around to face Malik.

"Yeah that's it," Malik was clearly happy to have a story to tell. "It seems the manager over at the Self Storage saw Briggs' car leaving when he came to work on Monday morning. He didn't think anything of it until the guy turned up missing and the police started their manhunt. Somebody locked this Briggs guy in a storage unit, drove his car away and left it parked in Briggs' driveway."

"Did Briggs make it?" Harry said.

"Yeah, they just took him out of there." Malik finished carefully tying a string around his last bundle of twigs. "The TV said he was almost in a coma. I got it first on the police radio; then I saw it on

TV.” Malik went on to tell Harry about listening to the police, the weather service and the airport on his radio and how he’d found this radio secondhand at one of the thrift stores on Washington Street.

“Well, we’ve got to go in and have some dinner now,” Harry said.

“Reckon your friend from the newspaper has already made your dinner.” Malik turned slowly back to his dark house. “Say hello to Miss Pettiford for me,” he said over his shoulder as he climbed his porch steps.

Harry hurried into the house, smelling food as he opened the door. Scrunch had smelled it before they even got to the door and ran away from him to the kitchen before Harry could unsnap the leash. June came out of the kitchen with a relieved expression on her face. Her hair was pushed back behind her ears, and the sleeves of her red sweater were pulled above her elbows.

“You’re back! I was afraid there was something wrong.” she said.

“I was worried about you when I heard about the explosion.” Harry said.

“It was such a shock.” June sat on the arm of the couch. “One minute we were all covering a story and the next minute we were the story. That poor man”

“In the TV van?” Harry said.

“Yes, he was killed immediately,” June said. “Some woman with a fire extinguisher put out the fire inside the van right away. But the technician sitting at the computer in the back of the van under the satellite dish was already dead. They pulled him out of the van. His forehead was charred. It was awful.”

“I’m sorry.” Harry said. They sat down on the living room sofa.

“I was looking at the poor man on the ground as the steam poured out of the truck and then I turned around to see all of the videocams pointed at us like piranhas gobbling up one of their own when they see it sick or wounded. It made me sick. If we hadn’t all been so hell-bent on beating each other to the story, the accident wouldn’t have happened.” June wiped her eyes with the dish towel and stood up.

“You were just doing your job,” Harry said.

“Some job,” June said bitterly. The phone rang and Harry took it in the kitchen.

“Harry, it’s Lester Stihl. Hope I didn’t interrupt your dinner.”

“No, it’s OK. What’s up?”

“Guess you’ve seen the TV?” Stihl said.

“Well, some of it,” Harry said.

“You did a fine job.”

“What?” Harry said.

“You did a fine job of speaking for the department.”

“Well, thank you. Of course, I wasn’t really speaking...”

“For the police department. Yeah, I know,” Stihl said. “But I’ve been thinking. You know about the community policing project?”

“Your ‘neighborhood cop’ idea?” Harry glanced at June and raised his eyebrows.

“Right.” Stihl said. “Well, part of the grant that we have for the project can be designated for a part-time public relations position, someone to speak for the department and describe what community policing is all about, someone who isn’t afraid of microphones.”

“You want me to be a spokesman for the police department?” Harry said.

“You handle yourself well in front of the media. I think you’d do a great job.” Stihl paused. “You know, our press releases are not enough for them any more. You saw how the press surrounded the station. It was a feeding frenzy. The rescue squad almost ran over a couple of reporters when it pulled into the lot to pick up the injured technicians. The power company is still working on the line. I’m staying here at the station until they finish.”

“How is Wilson Briggs?” Harry said.

“The doctors say he’ll make it. He’s dehydrated and semiconscious, but with his heart problems and diabetes it could have been worse,” Stihl said. “Another day in that garage, and it would have been

worse. We can't talk to him yet, but I'm hoping he will be able to identify Daniel Reston so we can wrap up this whole matter. Anyway, back to my question. You'll think about it?"

"Sure, I'll think about it. I appreciate your asking." June had come up behind Harry as he was talking on the phone.

"Sheriff Stihl?" She asked.

"Yes, Lester wants to hire me to be a spokesman for the police department," Harry said.

"Do you want to do that?" June asked skeptically.

"Spin control, you mean?" he said.

She nodded. "Yes, would you want to go through what you did today on a regular basis?"

"Well, no. But how often does Holburn have councilmen murdered and wealthy contractors locked away in storage units?" Harry sat down at the table.

"Sounds like you're defending the job already," June said, pulling down the oven door slightly. "Dinner's ready."

"Is that a roast?" He said.

June was about to show it to him when the phone rang again.

"If this is one of those telemarketers—" Harry wearily stood up again.

"Harry, this is Michael," said the caller. "Michael Demetrios. You're not having dinner, are you?"

"Well, no. Not yet," Harry said, as June closed the oven door. "How did it all work out, Michael?"

"There were two of them, Harry. One was my sister's son, Tony, so I didn't take it to the police. But they will not work again in Northern Virginia. They did it together, see? One slips out with the purse while the other watches the owner. Sometimes, maybe, he stands between the table where the purse was left and the owner in the buffet line. It's really the customer's fault for leaving her purse in the

room, but you can't say that. I know now why I was getting calls from people saying they lost their credit cards, money and other stuff. So much of my time is spent working out problems with customers, advertisers, expeditors, and staff. But say, you don't need to hear about that. Listen now, thank you for what you did."

"My pleasure, Michael," Harry smelled the roast, green beans and corn muffins.

"And there's something else," Demetrios said. "You're good at this, you know."

"What's that?" Harry said.

"You know, the little things. What people notice, setting up events, public relations, maybe even security, huh? I watched how you handled all the details for Nuffield's events up here, you know. And I saw you on TV tonight. You really know how to handle the questions, and you don't miss anything."

"What are you getting at, Michael?" Harry said.

"Just wondering, Harry. Would you be interested in working for me? It would be a public relations-event management-security-kind of job. I'd have to think about what to call it. What d'you thinks?"

Harry sat down again. "I'm flattered Michael."

"Tell you what. You think about it. Regardless of what you decide, I'm sending you a little thank-you check in the mail. It's yours to keep—whatever you decide." He hung up.

"Two job offers! That was Michael Demetrios offering me a PR position at his restaurant."

"Congratulations! This is your day!" June said. "We'll have to have some wine to celebrate."

"Maybe a little," Harry said.

After dinner, Harry and June took their wine to the living room and sat down in front of the television. They again watched themselves being interviewed and saw the story about the rescue of Wilson Briggs.

"I came right here after leaving the police station," June said. "I was sure you would be here."

“Mr. Malik probably recorded your arrival.”

“He does seem to keep up on the neighborhood,” June nodded.

“I feel like we live next door to a listening station, you know, like the United States had in Turkey to keep track of the Soviet Union during the Cold War?” Harry leaned back in his chair and swirled the last of the red wine in his glass.

“Well, at least it’s all over now,” June said. She stretched, extending her arms above her head and then running her hands through her hair.

“I guess so,” Harry said. “But somehow I don’t think that we know everything that happened in that hotel room last Friday night.”

June’s eyebrows wrinkled. “Like what?” she asked.

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be wondering about it,” he said. Scrunch had noticed Harry’s hand hanging down and moved his head into position for a rub. Harry obliged.

“Look, you’re the one always telling me not to interfere with the police,” June said.

“I don’t want to interfere with the police, but the story doesn’t make sense, particularly now that Renate Brown and Barbara Nuffield are out of the picture. Here you have Daniel Reston,” he said, pointing to Scrunch, who wanted the head-rub to continue. “He’s passionate, jealous, and angry. So he kills his sleazy boss, a man whom he had previously admired. Despite this crime of passion, however, he had taken the precaution of concocting an alibi. This already makes it seem like a deliberate murder, doesn’t it?”

June nodded. “I suppose so, but maybe he was secretive because he was just embarrassed to be so upset about Renate. He may even have feared what Nuffield would do to her. Remember that he probably thought that Nuffield killed Gina Barber.”

“Good point,” Harry said, “but notice what he’s supposed to have done next. After committing a crime of passion and being interrogated several times by the police, he gets up early on Monday

morning to do some harm to Wilson Briggs. He follows him to a Self Storage park and seizes the moment to lock him inside one of the garages. I guess he could have done it, but it doesn't make much sense."

"Crime is often the act of someone who refuses to make sense," June said.

"A good line, June. Maybe I should just leave it at that."

They sat for a while looking at each other across the living room, him sitting in the armchair he'd brought from Roanoke and her curled up against the arm of the sofa with one of Clarisse's granny-square throws over her feet.

"It's getting late," she said. "I need to be getting home."

"You can stay again in the guest room," he said.

"No, I didn't bring anything. Besides, I've got chores at home."

"Tell me about it," Harry said, sitting up. "I haven't done anything around here for the last week. Look at those batteries on the end table. They've been there since the fireman handed them to me when Clarisse got sick."

"Batteries?" June said.

"Yeah." Harry said. "It seems that the fire department automatically checks smoke detectors in houses where the rescue squad has been called."

"A good idea. Maybe they've found that the houses where rescue squads are called are frequently the same ones that later catch on fire."

"Assuming a pattern of carelessness, maybe," Harry reflected.

"Maybe it's just a matter of convenience, Harry." She paused and looked at him. "You're thinking about Reston again."

"Yes, I was thinking that if he is the murderer, he is a strange combination of carelessness and deliberation. Maybe Renate and Barbara and he have nothing to do with any of this. Some things are so

habitual that we don't notice them. Maybe Renate, Daniel and Barbara were so conveniently available to mislead us that we didn't notice some mundane fact that would reveal what really happened."

"Which was?" June said, putting on her coat.

"If I knew that... Harry put down his empty glass.

She put her finger on the tip of his nose. "You wouldn't be wondering about it. I know! See you tomorrow. Good night now."

He watched her walk down the steps to the street and wondered whether Mr. Malik was getting a clear view.

Another Holburn resident had also just watched the evening news.

"So the old man survived. But he got the message. He couldn't have seen me. I pulled the door down too fast for him to see me. Now I can just wait it out. Don't show anything. They have no evidence to prove anything. But Pettiford is a problem. He keeps checking the story and asking questions, and even showing up on TV. I could just wait it out if he would stop asking around, but it may not be that easy."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Wilson Briggs woke up with stripes of sunlight on his bed covers and people standing around him. Their faces were blurred but none of them seemed to be the short, dark man who had pulled him back into the boat. Floating in the water so long that he'd grown tired and begun to sink, his legs had felt heavy and he'd just wanted to sleep. He had just wanted to sleep on the floor and then the man, Menendez, they called him, fished him out of the water and put him in his cabin cruiser. Wilson felt a hook in his arm.

"No, Will." His wife sat by the bed and held his hand. "That's the IV. Don't pull it out again."

"It's caught on my arm, Ann. Help me get it out." Briggs shouted in his sleep.

“Will, listen to me. You’re in the hospital,” she said. “They found you. Everything’s all right.” Ann Briggs, a chubby, cheerful matron who loved her husband, her grandchildren and her kitchen, was thrilled to see him revive. “We thought we’d lost you, Hon.”

His vision cleared. He saw her face and asked, “Did I catch anything worth eating?”

One floor below, Harry Pettiford was listening to a sermon from Aunt Clarisse, who had spread the newspaper out on the bed in front of her.

“Well, at least you got here before breakfast with my newspaper this morning. What day is it, anyway?” She said.

“Thursday morning, Aunt Clarisse,” Harry said dutifully, without reminding her to look at the newspaper.

“So the Nuffield funeral is today?” She had already asked him twice before.

“Yes, Aunt Clarisse.” Harry said.

“I told you that you never should have worked for that man. But Mr. Nugent was such a sweet man. You know, he spoke to our club.” Clarisse brushed her hair as she talked, counting the strokes to herself. “Of course, you can’t trust any of them.” She paused, set down the brush and, raising her bony elbows, began inserting hairpins. “But you didn’t say anything to me about being on the television, Harry. One of the nurses had to come in here and turn it on for me, and there you were, your hair flying in all directions and your necktie undone. I thought that June Brightman looked nice, though.” She tucked under the loose strands of hair around the back of her head.

She is so small, Harry thought, she could be a twelve year-old putting her hair up for the first time.

“And when you were here yesterday, you didn’t tell me anything about Wilson Briggs.” She said. “I had to get it all from Millie.”

“She was probably happy to tell you about it,” Harry said.

“You saw those leggy geraniums she brought?” Clarisse put her brush on the bedside table. “It looked like she was just trying to make room under her grow-light. Did you take all of those arrangements home the way I told you?”

“Yes, Aunt Clarisse.” Harry had unloaded them from the car after June left the night before. With Scrunch dancing around him every time he opened the front door, he made at least twenty trips back and forth to the car. The house had smelled like a florist shop when he’d left it in a rush thirty minutes before. He’d wanted to see his aunt before the change of shifts at 7:00 a.m.

“And you watered them?” She said.

“Yes, Aunt Clarisse,” Harry lied.

“Well, they say I may leave here tomorrow, so we’ll see,” she said, suspicious about her plants. “Now let the breakfast people in, Harry. Move over! Let’s see what they ruined today.”

Barbara Nuffield met with the caterers at 7:30 a.m. and set them to work in the dining room and conservatory. It would probably be warm enough for the guests to go outside on the parterre. The family would want to sit in the den. She had called her yard man to come over and straighten up the garden. From her bedroom window on the second floor, she watched him park his truck and carry a rake into the back yard. The florists knew to bring the flowers to her house directly after the church service and set them up in the conservatory while the funeral party was at the graveside. Barbara had decided to accept the offer by Joe Griggs for her to serve in Jerry’s place until a special election could be held. She wasn’t surprised when he offered it. At the campaign rally after the election, he’d told Jerry in front of everyone that he ought to be putting the tricorn hat on Barbara’s head for all of the work she’d done. Everyone laughed but Barbara knew he wasn’t joking. Of course, she wouldn’t announce her plans today. Better to wait until next week. She needed to call someone from the press to come to the reception at 11:00 after

the funeral. Maybe it would be the feature reporter from *The Holburn Transcript*, June Brightman. Everything was coming together nicely.

Harry was surprised to see June at Barbara's "little White House" after the graveside service. From the way she was frowning, he could tell that she was concentrating on trying to remember who was there without being obvious about it by writing their names down. Barbara was in stylish mourning, as he expected. She leaned on the arm of one of her grown sons, a banker from Falls Church. Drinks and finger-food were in abundance, and the atmosphere was jovial after the austere ceremony in the Sixth Presbyterian Church. More people had come to Gerald Nuffield's funeral than the combined congregation of both Sunday services. Several of the staffers had come to the reception. Harry was amazed to see *Señora* de Torres and her daughter going down the receiving line. Renate wore a simple blouse and skirt, almost like a parochial school uniform. Harry wondered what had happened to her Nuffield wardrobe collection. Looking all around the room after expressing her condolences, *Señora* de Torres fixed her gaze on Harry and walked straight to him with Renate in tow.

"Mr. Pettiford," she said, extending her hand.

"Mrs. de Torres," Harry said, seeing no escape.

"My daughter wishes to apologize to you. Renate!"

"Mr. Pettiford," Renate said, looking at the floor, "I'm sorry for what I did. If I hadn't gone to see Mr. Nuffield, none of this would have happened." She stopped, putting her hand over her mouth.

"And?" said *Señora* de Torres curtly.

"And I can't accept this." She handed Harry the check he had given her.

"Renate." Harry spoke slowly, aware of her mother's scrutiny. "It is important to accept responsibility for our actions and I appreciate your apology." He thought that her mother relaxed slightly, if she ever relaxed. "But you were not responsible for what others did. As for this check, you

did earn this. Use it for your tuition.” He handed the check to her mother, who seemed satisfied with the gesture. As they walked to the door, Harry suspected that if he ever saw Renate again, her last name would again be “de Torres.”

“Harry!” June had finally caught up with him. “Look like we’re talking.”

“OK, but what are we really doing?” Harry asked, taking a sandwich offered by one of the servers criss-crossing the room.

“I need time to download,” she said, writing secretively in her notebook. “There are enough feature items in this room to fill my column for the next three weeks.”

“Well, since I’m supposed to look like I’m talking, you may be interested in what I’m doing tomorrow,” he said.

“Tomorrow?” June said, continuing to write.

“Yes. I got an e-mail from a friend of mine out in Wando. He asked me out and offered to buy lunch, so I decided to take him up on it. It will be good to get away from here for a few hours.”

“Yes. Well, maybe we can get together tomorrow evening if you’re back,” she said vaguely. “I want to follow up on something you said last night. Let me get back now.” She put her notebook back into her purse and walked off.

I’m not holding you, Harry thought. Looking around the room, he didn’t see why he should stay any longer. He left as unobtrusively as possible.

June watched Harry getting into his car, driving to the end of the driveway, and waiting for a pizza-delivery car to pass before pulling into the street. She regretted having to cut short their conversation.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Bea had finished breakfast and had a bath by the time Harry arrived at Fireside Nursing Home. The room smelled of wintergreen and baby-powder. Harry picked up the newspaper, closed the door and sat down beside the bed.

“Well, Bea, I’ve just been to Jerry Nuffield’s funeral: a large crowd but little grief. It was more like a retirement party for an unloved administrator. Everyone was glad to see him go, the ceremonial send-off notwithstanding. The paper says that Joe Griggs, the party chairman, will soon announce the name of an interim replacement until a special election can be held. That’s an election campaign that

they can run without me on either side. Oh, I didn't tell you that Nugent had offered me a job. He's probably got a clear shot at it now."

Harry stared out the window at the leafless tree-tops against an overcast sky and the steam rising from a vent on the roof of the adjoining building. The room was quiet except for Bea's breathing.

"I've had several job offers, in fact," he continued. "Strangest one was from Mike Demetrios to do PR at his restaurant. I don't think that's a serious offer, though. He was just grateful for my giving him some help. Then there was the offer from Lester Stihl to serve part-time as a spokesman for the police department, one of those positions paid for by a grant. Usually you end up spending half your time trying to keep the grant, whether by finding matching funds or just by self-promotion. June Brightman said this was my day. You remember her from Roanoke? My day! Jerry decreases and I increase. Father Berman would have had something to say about profit at others' expense. Of course, working for Lester Stihl might turn out to be less about profit than about endurance." He read from the newspaper.

John Thomas and Oscar Menendez were the first rescue team on the scene when Wilson Briggs, a prominent local contractor, was discovered in a rental storage unit at the EZ Self Storage on the northwest side of Holburn. Local police and rescue officials stated that an unknown person or persons were seen driving away from EZ Self Storage in Mr. Briggs' car early on Monday morning. The car was returned to Briggs' home, and Mr. Briggs remained in the storage unit until Wednesday afternoon. He is reported in stable condition at Holburn Hospital.

Harry smiled. "There's a twist. Briggs was rescued by the community activist who's been protesting that his latest construction project will put immigrant families out of their homes. Did I tell you that Briggs' hospital room is on the floor right above Aunt Clarisse? By the way, she said that she might be coming home tomorrow."

Harry looked at Bea, resting quietly and unmoving. "I wish you were coming home," he whispered. He continued reading aloud from the newspaper.

Sheriff Briggs went on to say that the person of interest currently held in connection to the murder of Councilman Gerald Nuffield is local resident Daniel Reston, who worked on Nuffield's campaign staff. He said that formal charges against Reston were pending. Arlen Gallagher, Reston's attorney, has complained that his client is being unjustifiably detained. When asked about Reston's involvement on Nuffield's campaign, the campaign manager, Harry Pettiford, said that he was surprised that Reston had been involved but otherwise had no comment.

Another newspaper reader, who had already read the story in two other papers and watched the reports on several television stations, opened *The Holburn Transcript* to continue reading the article on the inside. He noticed that Harry Pettiford's name was mentioned two more times in the article and that he was shown in a picture taken in front of the police station. Pettiford still seemed to have doubts about Daniel, doubts that were slowing down the police investigation. Pettiford had been in the nursing home for an hour and a half already. The newspaper reader couldn't wait any longer and drove off.

Everything was ready but he hadn't heard from his contact. She'd always phoned before. Between them, they had saved enough to pay their tuition so they could return home and start a revolutionary cell in the university. While he waited, he spoke aloud in a soft sing-song voice. He had found that speaking aloud helped him to think through problems and to remain focused on his objective.

"The revolutionary individual, the re-created and renewed thinker and freedom fighter, will make his own way. With Daniel finally trapped by selling out the people, we can be gone before anyone notices, if only Pettiford would not try to believe Daniel's pitiful story. The people have to understand who their true enemies are. People like Daniel and Oscar Menendez are full of talk. They would talk forever. Even when they have the means to destroy the enemy."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

June knew that Harry wouldn't approve; neither would her editor nor Sheriff Stihl, for that matter. But she had returned to the hotel to find the maid who had previously given her the lead about someone waiting in the hall. She didn't want to call attention to herself, so she had planned simply to walk through the hallways until she came upon someone doing housekeeping. After exploring five floors, however, June had almost decided that she had missed coming at the time of day when they were working. When the elevator door opened on the sixth floor, she saw a cart at the far end of the hall in

front of an open room. As June walked toward the room, the maid came out. It was her previous informant, Sally Jenkins.

“Miss Jenkins,” June shouted, trotting toward her. Sally was a plump young black woman who wore a red head-band and an earpiece. She didn’t hear anything but her music until June touched her shoulder.

“You back?” she said, pulling on the cord dangling from her ear.

“Yes, I forgot to ask you something.” June smiled.

“You’re not police. Why you asking more questions?” She scowled and held her earpiece impatiently.

“Just trying to get the story right for the newspaper, Miss Jenkins.” June spoke as sweetly as she could manage.

“What is it, then? I’ve got my rooms to finish.” Miss Jenkins continued to scowl.

“It’ll just take a minute,” June said. “I wondered if you could tell me again what you remember about last Friday night.” June smiled broadly.

“Ma’am, I’ve done this now for you and again for the police, and then again for the police. It hasn’t changed.” Miss Jenkins raised her eyebrows.

“Please, one more time,” June said, still smiling.

“OK,” she said, rolling her eyes and putting her earpiece into her pocket. “I was finishing my shift.”

“Eight o’clock?” June took out her notebook.

“Yeah, it was between eight and eight thirty,” Miss Jenkins said, impatient to tell the story in her own way. “I was pulling a cart to the elevator and I heard something behind me and turned. I thought I saw a guy going into the alcove, shadowy-like.”

“You didn’t go back to check?” June said.

“No! I went down on the elevator,” she said, shaking her head at June.

“But you came back.” June nodded.

“Yeah, for the other cart. And when I looked in the alcove, the guy wasn’t there, but I noticed a pile of sheets and towels. It looked like somebody had been sitting on them. And that’s it!” she said, turning back to her cart.

“One other thing” June said as Miss Jenkins pulled a trash bag from the cart.

“That’s it, I said.” Miss Jenkins was holding the twisted trash bag like a garrote.

“Could you think for a minute about the things you usually see along the halls at that time of night. You know, what do people usually do? Just for a minute?” June gave her most earnest and hopeful bright smile.

“Well, people are always setting their dinner trays outside their rooms at that time. Uh, then there are late-comers, people checking into their rooms. Sometimes they send for pizzas instead of going out again.”

“Like Friday night?” June nodded to extract more information.

Miss Jenkins nodded. “Yeah, there was a pizza delivery Friday.”

“Around eight o’clock?” June said.

“Yeah, maybe later. Those pizza guys are always going in and out.”

“Do you remember anything more?” June said, immediately realizing that she had used up her capital as the face of Miss Jenkins slowly hardened.

“Look, I’m going now,” she said. “I’ve got work to do.” Miss Jenkins pushed her cart forcibly to the next room and did not look back.

June walked back to the elevator thinking of what Harry had said the night before: “Some things are so habitual that we don’t notice them.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Early on Friday morning, Harry and Scrunch had breakfast after their walk at Prime and then left for Wando, a rural Virginia town west of Holburn. Harry had stayed for several months in Wando while working on a school-community coalition project. Most colleges and universities were busy establishing off-campus centers throughout the state, and Harry had been delegated to cooperate with Wando School District. Scrunch was enjoying the view of the passing countryside and the bright, clear day. Harry was feeling greatly relieved to be leaving Holburn behind, even if only for a few hours. He would have to be back by early evening to bring Aunt Clarisse home from the hospital, but there were no other urgent responsibilities.

Beyond Fairfax County, the housing developments thinned out and open farmland appeared with several ranks of rolling hills beyond. High on a white stone bluff to the south, Harry noticed a tall grist-mill made of fieldstone, with a state road at the foot of the hill, running parallel to the interstate highway on which Harry was driving. Scrunch had his flat face against the window in rapt attention to the spinning tires, fluttering flags and enticing odors they were passing.

During their brief visit to Wando, Bea and Harry had stayed in a bed and breakfast on Main Street, explored the county roads, and tried out most of the local restaurants. Their guide had been Ed Lashley, a local science teacher whose interest in flora and fauna extended to the inhabitants of Wando and their sometimes exotic behaviors. Ed was a dumpy, middle-aged bachelor with thick glasses and an inability to turn down anyone who asked for help, no matter how little it was needed. He lived in the house where he had grown up and taught at Wando High School. Luckily for the Pettifords, Ed had been with them on the day they were climbing a hill of modest grade to stand on a greenstone outcrop and survey the valley below. Full of enthusiasm for showing his guests the full extent of the inland sea that had once covered Wando in Triassic times, Ed had plunged ahead and was surprised, just as he reached the outcrop, to hear Bea shouting behind him far down the hill.

That was when Harry learned about myocardial infarctions and angioplasty, the little balloon that opens a blood vessel. And it was in Wando Hospital, with Bea and a chagrined Ed Lashley looking on, that Harry woke up to a new life of skimmed milk, blood thinners and more walking than he had done in the first sixty years of his life. Scrunch arrived the following Christmas, Bea's guarantee that Harry would keep on walking. Like a proper curate in his black suit and white collar, the Boston terrier had kept Harry faithful to his daily office ever since.

Miguel Fuentes awoke late on Friday morning in the bright sunlight streaming through the balcony window. In Daniel's absence, he had been sleeping on the large sofa-bed. His last pizza delivery had been at two in the morning and he was still tired. He still had heard nothing from Maya. Leaving the room in the same mess that Daniel always left it, he closed the door and went to his own room, furnished only with a desk, chair, neatly-made bed and small picture of Che Guevara in the desk drawer. It was the room of a true revolutionary. Reaching in the back of his closet, he removed a black spiral notebook and sat down at his desk to write.

“Pettiford is finding out too much. If he hadn't scared Daniel into confessing, I would only have been known as Daniel's alibi. Now it's more complicated—even though Daniel doesn't know what I did. It's only a matter of time before Pettiford figures out that I could have known what Daniel was doing. Then it will all fit together for him. Daniel is too much of a wonk and sell-out himself to have ever done anything about Nuffield and Briggs, even though he stole the plan about Corazon and knew what they were going to do. He has no guts. All he cares about is Renate, that stupid whore. It was so easy to follow him and to know he would go over the balcony into the parking lot. He thought it was so clever. It was so easy to finish what he should have done. It was all so easy. Too bad about Briggs, but Pettiford's accident will be more successful.”

Harry and Scrunch were walking down the deserted hall of Wando High School to the room of Ed Lashley. When Ed had called, he said that since Friday was a teacher work day, he wondered whether Harry would like to come out to Wando for lunch. He had some information about the students but he wanted to introduce Harry to someone who knew more about them. Holding a stapler and a long

roll of red paper, Ed was standing precariously on a stool in front of a bulletin board when Harry entered the room.

“Harry! Good to see you. I was just thinking about you,” said Ed, teetering on the stool as he turned around. “You’ve become a TV star.”

“Hang on, Ed. I don’t want to have to take you to the hospital,” Harry said.

“This is less hazardous than what I’m usually doing,” Ed said, stepping down and shaking hands with Harry. “Who’s this?”

“Scrunch.”

“Good name--with a face like that!” Ed put his pictures and stapler on a file cabinet.

“Bea gave him to me after my heart attack,” Harry said. “We’ve walked many miles since then.”

“How is Bea doing?” Ed said.

Harry gave his standard reply as they sat down at one of the black lab tables. Outside the window was a pasture and beyond that, the distant foothills of the Blue Ridge.

“Glad you could come out, Harry.” Ed pushed up his glasses, which then slid back to the tip of his nose. “We’ll go to the diner for lunch after you’ve met George Winslow, one of our history teachers. Guess you’ve been having a busy week in Holburn.”

“Well, you’ve seen the TV. In the next day or so, Daniel Reston will probably be formally charged with the murder of Councilman Nuffield.” Harry gazed out the window at the open farm land.

“It must have been a shock.” Ed said. “You found him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, a week ago today. It’s also a shock that Daniel may have done it. He doesn’t seem like a...”

“Like a murderer?” asked Ed. “Well, maybe that’s just a matter of our being unacquainted with many murderers.” Ed stared out at the pasture. A pair of turkey vultures was flying in spirals above a distant object in the field. He turned suddenly and said, “Ready for lunch? Let’s go see George first.”

George Winslow's bulletin boards were filled with pictures and objects. Harry was surprised to see a rifle mounted on a school bulletin board, but it turned out to be a full-sized photograph of the weapon used by the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. Left alone in the room while Ed went to find Winslow, Harry looked at the displays that filled the walls and counters of the room. Under a copy of the Stuart portrait of George Washington was the caption "Freedom fighter or Terrorist?" The cover of Plato's *Republic* was pinned next to the cover of a book about Saddam Hussein, *The Republic of Fear*. A large photograph of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo was surrounded by photographs of the crumbled remains of Sarajevo following the Bosnian war. A familiar photograph of the bearded Che Guevara had apparently been on the board long enough to fade.

"So, you see my collection!" Winslow wheezed.

Harry turned to face a huge, grey-bearded man wearing a flannel shirt, overalls and suspenders. In a booming voice, he introduced himself as George Winslow and explained that he was wearing his "teacher-work-day clothes." Ed came quietly into the room behind him, and the three of them sat down at a round table piled with old magazines. Winslow sat in a rolling chair with squeaky casters.

"I'm starting my unit on revolutions. You know, explaining how guys like the Green Mountain Boys are 'freedom fighters' if you're on one team but 'terrorists' if you're on the other. You know—that kind of thing. See here," he said, pulling a stack of old newspapers across the table, "I've saved all of the coverage from the Kennedy assassination."

"George, why don't you tell Harry about the kids?" Ed said.

Harry was relieved. The man had a voice like a jack-hammer.

"Oh, yeah," he said, lowering the volume slightly. "Miguel, Renate and Daniel. They were good students. Renate and Daniel were class officers, president and vice president of the senior class. You could see where they were headed, but Miguel was more creative, more intense, you know."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

“Never satisfied with answers on the surface. You know, the kind of white-washes that governments always hand out. Iran-Contra, the Warren Commission, that kind of thing. Miguel always probed for the real truth, the conspiracies underneath all the crap, you know. He was no sell-out. I’ve still got a copy of his project,” he said proudly. Winslow leaned down with great difficulty and rummaged in the bookshelf behind the table, finally retrieving a black spiral-bound album. Winslow stood slowly, gripping his knees and wheezing. He handed the album to Harry. It was the same kind of book he had seen Miguel reading in his neatly kept room. It was no training manual for pizza deliverymen.

“It’s about Che Guevara?” Harry said.

“Yeah, he does a good job of showing how Che got a bum rap from all the negative propaganda about him. Another Hispanic student, Maya Estrada, and he even did a translation for me of Che’s handbook on guerilla warfare. He really made a great collection of source material,” Winslow said proudly. “Then he updated the handbook. You know. I told them to suppose that Guevara were writing it today, after the overthrow of Allende, the Waco and Oklahoma City bombings, the NAFTA agreement and the IMF demonstrations. The assignment was to imagine what he would write. It was kind of like the Turner diaries.” George rolled around to search for something else on the shelf. Ed Lashley was watching Harry’s alarmed expression as he leafed through the album. Harry looked up and their eyes met.

“Well, George, thanks so much for the info,” Lashley said, quickly walking toward the door. “We’re going for lunch before Harry leaves.” Harry rose to join him, shaking hands with Winslow.

Once back in the hall heading for the exit, Harry asked, “That is American history?”

“Well, George is eccentric, particularly about his favorite units, but his kids do well on the AP exams,” Lashley said.

“They may also excel at guerilla warfare,” Harry said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t put it on George,” Ed said. “That kid Miguel had an agenda from the first time I ever saw him. Like George says, he was intense. ”

“Yeah. Well, I think that living with such sell-outs as Daniel and Renate for the last year and listening to them talk about Nuffield’s campaign may have moved Miguel from ‘intense’ to ‘incendiary,’” Harry said.

Scrunch tugged at his leash when he saw the door to the outside. Harry wished that he didn’t have to stay for lunch. The sheriff needed to know about Miguel Fuentes.

“I need to make a phone call and give Scrunch a walk before we go,” Harry said, taking out his cell phone.

“Sure, I’ll go to the office now and meet you in the parking lot.” Ed said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Miguel was coming back from the grocery store when he saw the police cruisers outside his apartment building. He calmly drove past them back to the street and onto an entry ramp for the Interstate. Now he needed time to think. He always kept a bag packed in his car, so he didn't have to return to the apartment.

“Always be ready to leave at any time,” he said aloud as he congratulated himself on always keeping his passport, cash and papers in his pockets or in the bag in the trunk, the bag where he also kept a small handgun. He couldn't wait any longer for Maya. She knew where to meet him if she were still going with him. “The true revolutionary is always alone,” he shouted, weaving the car away from

the median strip. He would need more cash to buy a ticket at the airport, maybe from Pettiford's ATM card. Let them search the apartment. They won't find anything. "By the time they find this car, I'll be in Mexico City."

He took the left exit back into Holburn and, reaching out the window, stuck his pizza sign on the roof of the car.

Harry had left Wando immediately after having lunch with Ed Lashley. He had a bad feeling about what might be happening in Holburn and, although he probably couldn't do anything about it, he wanted to get back right away. On the outskirts of Falls Church, he was caught in a traffic jam. Like most back-ups in Northern Virginia, it was likely the result of rubber-necking rather than anything more serious than a twisted bumper. He was impatient enough to lean on the horn and shout out the window, but thought better of it. What bothered him was that June was involved, but he didn't know how. When he had told Lester Stihl what he had discovered about Miguel Fuentes, Lester had said that Fuentes must be the pizza delivery man that June had told him about. He said goodbye to Harry and hung up. Harry had then tried unsuccessfully to reach June at home and work.

He hadn't been exactly gracious the last time they talked, but what did she expect? Every time he began to relax his guard around her, she turned into a reporter. Maybe she couldn't help it, but he didn't need another uncertain relationship. With Bea's condition and Clarisse maybe coming home an invalid, he didn't need another high maintenance person to care for. But that wasn't fair. She had been taking care of him. She couldn't help being a reporter, but she also seemed to think that her work on this story was going to help him. And what if she were following up on Miguel Fuentes?

Creeping through Falls Church, he again dialed June's number on his cell phone. This time she answered.

“Harry? I got your message but when I called you...”

“You were calling my home number,” he said. “I just wanted to be sure you were OK.”

“Yes, a lot has happened since you left.” Her voice rose.

“So I gather,” he said. “Look, I’m on my way home. Let’s meet.”

“I’ll try to swing by,” she said hurriedly, “but I need to make a couple of stops. I’ve been trying to keep track of what the police are doing since they released Daniel Reston. Sheriff Stihl is so tight-lipped.”

“He’s a Presbyterian,” Harry said.

“Look, maybe we can talk over dinner. I’ll come by as soon as I can.” June said.

“OK, but just don’t get ahead of the police. I’m bushed from driving in this traffic. I may take a nap when I get home.” Harry said. “Aunt Clarisse will be discharged at 6:30 this evening. Maybe you could give me a hand.”

“Sure. I’ll come by as early as I can. Bye now.” She hung up before he could ask her about Lester’s remark. It had been so good and such a relief to hear her voice that he didn’t even mention Miguel, but if he had done so, June would have gone looking for him. Harry was looking forward to lying down.

Ed Lashley was driving George Winslow to Wando Memorial Hospital when a pair of state police cars raced ahead of him into town. Carmen Simms, the guidance counselor, was running down the front staircase when Ed had returned to school after lunch with Harry. Winslow had just had an attack of some kind while she was talking to him. Ed and she, holding the groaning Winslow between them, staggered down the steps and put him into Ed’s car.

As Ed took the turn-off to the hospital, he noticed that the two cruisers had pulled over a black Honda with a female driver who looked very much like a middle-aged version of Maya Estrada.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

An hour later, Harry parked on St. Giles Lane, picked up the newspaper from the sidewalk and waited for Scrunch to examine the azaleas. The mail was piled inside the front door. On top was an envelope from Michael Demetrios. Harry opened it, took out the enclosed check and was astounded by the amount. He had to return this to Demetrios. True, he needed the money, but he couldn't take on the obligation that such an amount entailed. Demetrios was not just thanking him, he was trying to buy him. The nap could wait.

Leaving Scrunch in the living room, Harry scribbled a note to June and taped it to the front door. It was short trip to Demeter's. He parked hurriedly in an unfamiliar part of the underground parking lot

and walked briskly to the elevators. Seated at one of the tables, Demetrios was having a serious discussion with a couple of very young waiters. He waved at Harry and asked him to wait in the bar.

“Cranberry juice?” asked the bartender, recognizing Harry from the day before.

“You know my poison,” Harry said, sitting on the stool and looking up at the television.

The afternoon news was finishing up with the weather report but it was followed by the beginning of another afternoon news program, anchored by a different news team. The lead story was the search for Miguel Fuentes, whose picture was shown. Harry didn’t think he looked much like Che Guevara, even with the hat. Saying that he was sought in connection with the investigation of the death of Councilman Gerald Nuffield, a harried-looking Sheriff Lester Stihl would only add that another individual previously held for questioning had been released. Harry felt a great sense of relief. Daniel Reston was a bit mixed up, but he would not have murdered anyone. Soon the police would have the right man in custody.

“Harry, you’ve decided to join us!” said Demetrios, grabbing his shoulder. “Come on,” he waved Harry into his office.

“No, Michael,” Harry said, taking the envelope from his pocket once they were seated. “It’s about this. I can’t accept this much from you. What I did”

“What you did was to save me a great deal of money,” said Demetrios. “When I began to calculate the costs of employing thieves—the insurance, the legal excursions, the losses from the till, and the loss in confidence of my customers, there was no doubt. You earned it. And, as I said, you earned it whether you take my offer or not.”

“Well, I don’t think that I can take the job.” Harry protested.

“It doesn’t matter. I didn’t think you would,” Demetrios smiled. “You’re retired, right?”

“I’ve retired several times, but it doesn’t seem to last,” Harry said ruefully.

When June arrived at the Pettifords' house on St. Giles Lane, she saw Mr. Malik raking twigs from his flowerbed. She nodded at him and started up the steps.

"Not there, you know," he said to the twigs.

"What's that?" June stopped and looked at Malik.

"Harry came and then left right away. Funny thing, too," he mumbled.

"What do you mean?" June asked.

"Well, see, there was a pizza deliveryman here before."

"Before what?" June said, alarmed. She walked across the yard to hear him more clearly.

"Before Harry came, this pizza man came up with a pizza box and knocked on the door. Of course, no one came and he went back to his car and sat there. Waiting, I guess. Then Harry came home, stood in the doorway a minute and turned around and left again. Funny thing." Malik took off his cap and studied the hat band.

"What do you mean?" June said, wondering if the man would ever get to the point.

"The pizza man. Instead of taking Harry the pizza while he was standing in the doorway, he just waited in the car. Then, when Harry left, he drove off behind him."

Malik was amazed at how quickly June Brightman left him and ran up the steps into the house, pausing only long enough to rip a note from the front door as she hurried inside.

CHAPTER FORTY

On the car radio, Miguel had been listening to his name on the news bulletins. “Always be prepared to change the plan,” he whispered to himself. With no safety at airports or anywhere else in Northern Virginia, he needed cover, somebody’s car that he could drive to his cousin’s place in Florida, maybe. From there, he could get a boat to Puerto Juarez or maybe Tampico. No problem with the passport. According to that, he was Pico Estrada. Hunched low in the seat of his car, he waited for Pettiford to return to his parking place. They would soon be on their way.

Harry already knew what he would do with the check from Demetrios. It was just what he needed to get the additional physical therapy for Bea, about an extra day a week for the next year. If he did take the job that Lester offered him and could stay on with Aunt Clarisse, then Bea and he should have enough to make it for a few years, or however long Bea needed. The Art Deco interior of the elevator matched the walls around the elevator doors, and the black-and-white tiled walls looked the same on every floor of the parking garage. Harry realized with a start that he had entered in such a hurry he had not parked in the usual place. It was after 6:00 p.m. already. Aunt Clarisse would be looking for him and he was lost again in this warren of parking lots that extended under the streets and buildings of the whole riverfront of Holburn. There was nothing to do but search for his car on every floor. At least he knew that the car was not parked very far from the entrances to the elevators, provided he could just find the right entrance in a reasonable time.

Miguel began to wonder if Pettiford knew he was looking for him. It was taking so long. What was he doing? It didn't matter. All that mattered was to be ready when the time came. He took his bag from the trunk and quickly got back into the car, sitting on the back seat behind tinted windows. Pushing empty pizza boxes aside, he realized the pizza sign was still on top of the car. A couple walked by the car on their way to the elevator. He lay down on the floor. As soon as they were gone, he tore the sign off the roof and closed the door again--but didn't latch it. He put on his black sweatshirt with the hood. The revolver was in the pocket. He had parked close to Pettiford's car and near a column where he could hide as Pettiford opened his car door. Rehearsing how he would pick up his bag in one hand and his gun in the other, he counted the steps to take between the column and Pettiford. As soon as he saw Pettiford look down to insert his key in the lock, he would take four steps and then drop his bag and stick the gun into Pettiford's fat neck, pop the lock on the back door, throw his bag inside and force his driver to take

him out of town. What he would do with Pettiford after that didn't matter. As he counted the steps over and over, he kept his eyes on a lighted place near the exit sign where Pettiford would have to walk to reach his car when coming from the elevators. When he saw him in that place, he would push open his unlocked door and then wait. Pettiford would look down to insert his key. Then he would take four steps.

Harry decided he had traveled too far from the elevators when he made the unpleasant discovery that elevators in some of the other buildings served by this monstrous parking lot were identical to the ones in Demetrios's building. He had lost his one reference point and was beginning to think that the only way to get home was to go back to street level and get a taxi. He began walking back in the direction he thought he had come from, but he couldn't help wondering if he were going farther away from his car.

At 6:30, Miguel wondered if Pettiford was coming back. Even if he'd gone to a restaurant he should have finished by now. He kept watching the spot of light near the exit and counting the four steps he would take, ducking out of sight behind the front seat every time headlights passed. The lot was almost empty now. If Pettiford knew he was waiting for him, if he knew he was being followed, maybe he had left the car and called the police. "Wait patiently," he reminded himself. "Be ready to act. Only the individual action can make a difference for the people." He would wait. "Don't change a good plan out of fear." He would wait a little longer. Then maybe he would look for Pettiford.

A security guard was talking on the phone in his tiny office under the power company building and watching a heavy-set man in an overcoat wandering around the entrances. He put down the handset and walked cautiously toward the man, who saw him and immediately came up, waving his arms excitedly.

“Can you tell me where Demeter’s is?” Harry asked.

“What say? Meters?” said the guard, who didn’t speak much English.

“You know, the restaurant! Demeter’s.” Harry frowned.

“This area closed.”

Harry shook his head. “I’d be glad to leave but I’m lost. I want to go to the restaurant.”

“No restrooms here. You take elevators.” The guard pointed to the elevator entrance, told him again that the area was closed and returned to his office. Harry watched him sit on his stool in the doorway, pick up the telephone, and resume his conversation in some language with an abundance of K’s.

At least the elevator was working. He had found one entrance where the elevators were shut down for the night. Once on the street level, he went outside to see where he was. Warehouses surrounded him. It didn’t look anything like Demetrius’s building. He felt like a bug caught in a giant’s sleeve. Trudging around the perimeter of the building, he finally reached a place where he could see the river. A hundred yards away was the mountain of coal behind the power plant. He had wandered at least two miles from Demetrius’s building. He had the passing thought that it would be easier just to take a taxi home, take a nap and later get a ride back with June. No, it would be foolish to pay for a cab when he could take his car. Besides, he didn’t want to tell June about getting lost.

When June called the sheriff’s office, Officer Berry answered. He didn’t seem to be very concerned about Harry until she mentioned the pizza deliveryman. All she could tell him was that Harry had said he was going to Demeter’s Restaurant. He told her to stay home. She hadn’t had a home to stay

in for years, she thought, and this house belonged to Clarisse. It wasn't even Harry's home. She looked at her watch. It was six thirty-five and Clarisse was waiting for somebody to pick her up from the hospital.

* * *

Miguel had to do something. Cramped in the back seat of his car, waiting in the dark without knowing what was going on, he could not delay any longer. Finally, he said aloud, "To hell with Pettiford. I'll just take the next car that's parked down here." To take Pettiford would have been better, he thought. Pettiford was like Nuffield, a corporate manipulator, a pawn of the World Bank System that is out to dispossess the people. Taking Pettiford would have been more just, but now Miguel would settle for a car and some cash. Just as he decided to leave the car, he saw Harry Pettiford walking into the spot of light by the exit and pausing to take off his overcoat.

Harry was beat after walking back from the power plant. Along the way, he had wondered whether his heart was really up to all of the walking he had been doing. Wasn't it just as likely to overstrain his heart by misguided efforts as it was to help it? His legs and knees ached and he was hot and sweaty under the heavy overcoat. When he saw his car, he was so relieved that he just wanted to sit down in it and do nothing for the next half hour. He stopped to pull off the overcoat and looked uneasily around the deserted parking lot. He searched for the key in his overcoat pocket and, walking slowly toward the car, he beeped the lock. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone step from behind a column and run toward him. He threw his overcoat over the attacker, pushed him down, ran back to the entrance and pushed an elevator button. The door to the elevator he had just used began to open slowly, much too slowly. He ran in and pushed the button for Demeter's. The overhead lights slowly blinked and, as the doors inched shut, Miguel Fuentes appeared, shouting something about "corporate imperialists." The elevator doors were clearly not closing fast enough. Harry wondered if June would take care of Scrunch.

EPILOGUE

June wore a white sweater decorated with gold sequins that matched her shiny blonde hair and sparkled like her smile. Harry held her chair as they sat down to a table in *La Pomme de Pin*.

“It looks like you’re taking fashion tips from Barbara Nuffield,” he said.

“Not at all.” June said. “I’ve had this for years. I just never had a reason to wear it. You know what Barbara’s doing?”

“No, but I bet you’re going to tell me,” Harry said.

“She’s going to take her husband’s place on the Council until they can have a special election. Joe Griggs will announce it later this week.” June sipped her wine.

“Just as long as she doesn’t expect me to cater her events, she can do what she wants,” Harry said. “I’ve had enough of political campaigning to last a lifetime, or at least whatever time I have left.”

The restaurant was filled with its luncheon crowd of Washington tourists, babies in strollers, and pairs of elderly ladies on a midday outing. Harry sipped his coffee as he stared at the traffic outside.

“Where are you?” June asked, wrinkling her brow.

“I was thinking about Jerry. He didn’t really bring it on himself.” Harry said.

“Nobody deserves to be murdered,” June nodded.

“Miguel Fuentes would disagree with that. Lester told us that they had found quite a manifesto in his car. Full of revolutionary exhortations and inspiring quotations from Castro, Mao, and other men of the people.”

“He had a gun, Harry.” She put her hand on his arm.

“I didn’t stay to look at it,” he said.

“But you grabbed him.”

“All I could think was that the elevator door was closing too slowly to keep him out. Then I realized I didn’t want to keep him out, I wanted to send him on a trip.” Harry wiped a crumb from June’s shoulder.

“So you pulled him in.” June said.

“Pulled him into the potted plant and bruised my elbows leaping out of the elevator head first,” Harry said, rubbing his elbows. “Those doors still seemed to be closing in slow motion, but they did shut, and by the time Miguel had extracted himself from the philodendron and the doors had opened again...”

“He was facing Lester Stihl.” June said.

“Thanks to you, June,” Harry said, resting his hand on hers. “Well, maybe Miguel Fuentes made his point after all. From what Ann Briggs told Aunt Clarisse yesterday after church, Wilson Briggs has backed off the Corazon project.”

“A change of heart?”

“Well, he was moved by the fact that Oscar Menendez rescued him.” Harry pushed back from the table. “But mainly, according to Clarisse, he just decided it was time to retire and go fishing.”

“Nothing like a near-death experience to change your priorities. Right, Harry?”

“June, I never thanked you for taking care of Aunt Clarisse.”

“She wasn’t happy about it. By the time I got to the hospital, she had been waiting for almost half an hour. When we finally got home, she saw all those wilted plants in her bedroom”

“I heard all about it.” Harry said. “She even scolded me about not feeding Scrunch.”

“What about her dahlias?”

“When faced with a common enemy, you forgive and forget,” Harry said. “Aunt Clarisse and Scrunch are now allies.”

THE END

SPEARPOINTS BRIGHT

*...how not think of Xerxes, how he reviewed his troops
and wept to think that of all those thousands of men
in their brilliant armor, their spearpoints bright in the sun,
not one would be alive in a hundred years*

—Katha Pollitt, "Night Subway"

Dull Sword:

*Any unexpected event involving a nuclear weapon/component
Errors are committed in the assembly, testing, loading or transporting of equipment.*

—*Encyclopedia of the U.S. Military* (1990, 501)

0400 hours

Monday, 21 July 1969

Kirtland Air Force Base

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Dan's first discrepancy report earned him back-to-back shifts, a tactical warning alert called at three in the morning and a surprise meeting with two snarling black and tan Doberman Pinschers when he went to check the igloos where the nuclear devices were stored. Only a red line on the basement floor separated him from copper eyes and massive jaws snipping shut like bolt cutters. He wondered where the Air Police were. Somewhere he'd read that you don't stare, so he backed away, head down, watching them from the corner of his eye. This posture seemed to assure that they would be on his back before he ever saw them

coming. He wondered if they could tell that he was opening a penknife in his pocket. The larger one was prancing and rearing. On his hind legs he was a foot taller than Connors and when he came down it was not with the soft clicks of a dog's paws but with a heavy slap. They were barking hard enough to raise the veins in their necks and faces. When Dan's heel touched the bottom step, he began backing up the stairs. Their smart, cropped ears swiveled toward him like radar-assists on an artillery site, and he was in the cross-hairs. He spun around and raced to the landing. They rushed forward. Tugging at his foot, he slammed the door shut. Dan looked at his left shoe. The heel had been bitten off.

Airman Owens, a tiny kid with glasses and curly hair, was at the phone in the orderly room doing his Algebra homework. He closed the book when he saw Captain Dan Connors. He stood up and stared at Dan's hand.

Dan looked down at three bleeding fingers.

"Owens," Dan said, "where are the AP's downstairs?"

"Sir, when they patrol the area they leave the dogs at the gate. Did the dogs do that?"

"No, I did this to myself," Dan said, wrapping a handkerchief around his hand. "Anyone you couldn't reach?"

"Only Colonel Stafford, sir." Owens looked down the hall toward the Colonel's office. "The others are coming in."

Stafford was the bird Colonel who had become CO only sixteen months before Dan had been assigned to the group. He had been a flier for SAC, most recently doing standardizing runs to check instruments out of Ellsworth in Rapid City. He'd never been in Defense Atomic Support but had been given preference for this command during the last tour before his retirement in September. Maybe DASA looked like a soft landing after some flap. He called them the "Class Six," the liquor store.

"Try the Bachelor Officers' Quarters," Dan said. From what Dan had seen, Stafford could only take home-life in small doses.

Twenty-four on, twenty-four off. One shift was always on alert. Stafford had called Dan almost ten hours earlier to keep him on as OIC for the A-shift.

"Lawrence has a bug. And we don't call in Major McKee," Stafford had said. "Anyway, we need your eye for detail, Connors."

Dan knew he had been smiling.

"If there's an alert, I want you behind the clipboard. Got it?" Stafford hung up without waiting for a reply.

"Yes sir," Dan said as he hung up. He had his laugh. After flying B-29's in Korea and B-52's for SAC, Stafford considered this unit a low class of bean-counters, auditors and desk jockeys. What they called an "alert" was little more than a quartermaster's inventory. To Stafford's way of thinking there was no reason to keep watching these weapons as if something were going to happen while they sat on the rack. It was like watching bottles of beer in a liquor store.

On the previous Friday, Dan had brought him the quality statistics on some outliers for a battery component in one of the lots of weapons from a supplier in Hobbs. Such discrepancy reports were expected whenever a sample procedure found significant deviations within an inventory. Stafford had scowled as he looked over Dan's data tables.

"I see why they would call this a 'Dull Sword' rather than a Broken Arrow or Bent Spear," he had snarled, referring to the standard description of errors involving assembly and testing of nuclear components. "It is dull, Connors. You're saying that because three fuzes out of this sample made by Chronotics contain defective batteries we may have to recall all three hundred weapons in the lot?"

Dan had started to explain the significance of the standard errors involved when Stafford had erupted, telling him that for a Captain with only five weeks in the unit and six weeks in DASA, he still had a lot to learn. Before issuing any recall of the devices from the twenty-two different installations, he was going to need "more proof than piss in a boot." At such times, Stafford's pale blue eyes had a hollow

quality that dared a reply. A day and a half later, Dan was sure that Stafford was the one who had called the tactical alert. All of this was just for Dan's benefit, in case he wanted to report any more discrepancies.

Connors went behind Airman Owens through the striped swinging door with the one-way mirror into Command & Control, a dark hangar lit by blue computer monitors. The Air Police guard just inside the door had pushed it open when he saw Dan coming. Jack Carty, the wiry Chief Master Sergeant everyone called "Top," had things well in hand. Top had a degree in mathematics from the University of Maryland and a degree in common sense from a military career going back to World War II.

"What's the status, Top?" Dan asked.

"All units reporting, sir." Top looked at Dan's hand and shoe.

"It's all right. I was just getting better acquainted with our dogs," Dan said. "Mr. Bailey not in yet?" They looked at the one empty desk in the gym-sized room.

"Well, these civilians..."

"Yes, after arriving on time for the first few alerts, they relax. Tell him to see me when he comes in," Dan said.

"Yes sir." Top said. "Too bad you couldn't get back to Denver this weekend."

"Thanks, Top. It didn't work out, but even when I'm there I can't do anything." For a few minutes, the dogs had driven Jacey from Dan's mind. Now his throat tightened and he bit his tongue to keep his mouth from going dry. "Call me when Colonel Stafford comes in."

"Yes sir." Carty turned back to his monitor at the middle of the blue Command and Control panel that ran the length of the room. A dozen officers and airmen were seated facing their stations along the panel and the black wall behind it. Mounted above them on the wall were a dozen read-out screens showing the data from their installation and from the control center in Cheyenne Mountain. This system had only been on line for a few months. It had required over a thousand man-years of nationwide programming by specialists like Top and the others in this room.

Command and Control, like the RAND Corporation and like the Air Force itself, was the culmination of a systematic reorganization of thinking about warfare. A world situation map glowing on the far wall was studded with tiny circles connected by crossing lines. These were all of the nuclear and intelligence installations under unified command, from listening posts in Turkey to hydrophones floating off the Pacific coast and sending their messages to communications satellites.

"Captain Connors," Top said, nodding toward the door.

Stafford was coming in with his rolling stride, walking on the outsides of his spotted shoes. His eyes and nose were red. Following him was an older man, wearing civilian clothes and a security clearance badge. Stafford took off his hat, revealing a pink scalp with a periphery of straw-yellow bristly hairs.

"All the bottles counted, Connors?" Stafford said, raising his bushy eyebrows. "I won't need to use the red phone, will I?" He laughed and looked back at the civilian, a plump, red-haired man with a high forehead and an expression of embarrassment. "Captain Connors is Officer in Charge this morning," he said to the civilian, who held out his hand to Dan.

"Milton Gaines from Ambertech Industries," the man said.

"Dan Connors."

Gaines's hand was moist and limp.

"Show Gaines the drill, Connors. Give him a tour," Stafford snapped as he gave Dan his "Got it?" stare and clenched his teeth in a threatening smile.

Dan hesitated.

"I'll take charge," Stafford said, as if telling Dan and Gaines to run along and play. He walked over to Top, leaving Dan with the bulbous businessman.

"Uh, this is Command and Control for our Group," Dan said, glancing back at Top and Stafford, who was pointing at the duty roster.

Mr. Gaines seemed at the same time embarrassed and obviously gratified at the attention. Dan decided to make the tour brief. "The data on the panels are from the Cheyenne control center for SOSUS, SAC and NORAD."

"For..?" Gaines seemed puzzled.

He didn't know the acronyms and yet had clearance, Dan thought.

"They combine information about submarine movements, Strategic Air Command and intelligence from the North American Aerospace Defense Command, real time data from line-of-sight listening posts, satellites, aerial reconnaissance, hydrophone-arrays and other intelligence. This is a tactical alert, which means that we assume that a launch of enemy missiles is imminent or in progress."

Gaines nodded gravely and began asking questions intended to show what he knew rather than to get answers: Where were the data from "commsats like Vela-Hotel?" Did they get transmissions from Apollo? What did Connors think about Mutually Assured Destruction?

Dan led him to the map, meanwhile watching Colonel Stafford, who was on the phone across the room. "This map shows storage and preparedness installations in different theatres of command. The large circles are air squadrons, the small ones are storage sites. Here's Kirtland. It's still shown as Manzano. The lines connect the various sites with control centers. Of course, this doesn't show ELINT or SAC's airborne control."

Gaines was about to ask another question when the klaxon sounded the all-clear. Stafford picked up his hat and took Gaines by the elbow. "See you tomorrow afternoon, Connors," he said, hurrying his visitor out the door. He turned away but then looked back. "You fix that shoe, now."

1300 hours

Monday, 21 July 1969

Dan knew he was dreaming, but he didn't want it to end. Jacey had tumbled over him, her chestnut hair smelling of shampoo, her legs between his. They were in bed or in the bathtub of their small walk-up near Ramstein. An ancient cylindrical electric water heater hung on the wall near the bathtub, which stood on four fat legs. Then he woke up, turning off the clock radio and letting the music play. He sat up and looked through the open blinds at the afternoon traffic on San Mateo Boulevard. Jacey's bathrobe lay across the bed.

Jacey lay in a bed in Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Denver. The fatigue she'd felt since coming to Albuquerque had meant something. Something he should have noticed. But he didn't see it until she sank her fingernails into his arm early in the morning a week ago. Her gown was drenched. Her breath came in short gasps. Dan ran for the insulin in the kitchen but when he returned she was sitting on the end of the bed putting on her shoes. "Fever. Something else. Don't need insulin." She stood up, buckled at the knees and dropped to the floor.

Eight hours later, Dan had stood outside her room at Fitzsimmons, listening to a Major Jackson, an internist from Lowry Field. "This kind of meningitis will respond well to the INH, Isoniazid, but the real problem is the miliary tuberculosis complicated by diabetes. The INH together with two other medications will control the infection but her diet and insulin dosage must be carefully monitored. Has she been losing weight?"

"Yes, I should have noticed. She's complained of weakness and fatigue since we came back from Germany."

"History of TB?"

"All her family in Murphy, Tennessee. Emphysema, pleurisy, pulmonary TB. Pasteurization came too late for her parents. She was raised by aunts and uncles. She never seemed to get it herself."

"She's had it for some time, Captain Connors," the doctor said. "A chronic, progressive infection. I want you to have a tuberculin test before you leave."

"Leave? "

"You've done what you can," he said. "Judith's going to be with us for a while."

"Jacey——Judith Corinne," Dan said. "How long is a while?"

"A month, to begin with. Then we'll see where to go from there." He stared at Dan for a moment. "You know, Captain Connors, we're also part of the defense team. Jacey is safe with us." Dan didn't know what it was in his expression to make the doctor say that.

A masked nurse had reached for Jacey's arm under the oxygen tent. A yellow sign over the window read "ISOLATION." The nurse wore the gloves and green gown that didn't leave the room. Watching through a narrow window like the one-way mirror on the door to the C & C room in DASA headquarters, Dan couldn't see Jacey's face. Her thick chestnut hair was tied back with a hospital bracelet.

Outside, he had walked on a shaded path toward Colfax Avenue and looked back through the trees across the park with its shaded benches and grass. There was no way to see her window.

Her scratch on his arm was beginning to heal. He raked off the scab and watched it bleed. The music had ended for the news on the hour. The words of Armstrong had been repeated hourly since the moon landing: "One small step for a man..."

Stafford was letting him report at fourteen hundred hours today. Big of the old man after giving him an extra shift, calling an alert at three in the morning and then canceling it an hour and a half later. The paperwork for the readiness report Dan wrote afterwards took longer than the alert itself. He didn't leave until oh-seven-thirty hours. If Stafford were trying to exhaust him, he had succeeded. As Dan was taking a shower, he noticed a deep cut on his ankle. What if Jacey recovered only to find he had died of rabies, he wondered.

Top was in the orderly room. He had gotten less sleep than Dan did but looked like he'd come in from the parade field. "Good afternoon, sir. Mr. Bailey is here." He nodded toward the back corner of the room where the gigantic Mr. Bailey was curled over his typewriter.

"Give me a minute, then send him over. Thanks, Top," Dan said.

Les Bailey looked like a basketball forward. He was always crouching through doorways. When he sat and faced Connors across the desk with his hazel eyes and crew cut, Dan was still looking up.

"Mr. Bailey, about the alert," Dan said.

"It won't happen again, sir," Bailey said in a voice so tiny and high it always surprised Dan. "I was not at home. See, Sunday night I went to Tucumcari to see my folks."

"Bailey, being on call means you are available," Dan said. "We need you here, not in Tucumcari. I'm hoping this will be the last time we have to discuss this."

"Yessir." He said, waved a hand as big as a frying pan and swallowed hard.

"Look at this." Dan gave him a copy of the discrepancy report he had shown Stafford on Friday. "Go over these data again. Carefully. This is important. Look at the sample design. Recalculate the stats. Verify the original data. See that you check all of the serial numbers. Call around if you need to."

"Yessir," Bailey rolled the chair out of his way as if it were a piece of doll furniture. Dan knew that he didn't need to give Bailey a deadline. He wouldn't leave until finished.

Dan looked at his copy of the report. Stafford was right: he did have a lot to learn. It had been only five weeks since he had finally been assigned to DASA, his father's old outfit. But he had been doing statistical sampling for the last eleven years, nine years for ad agencies in New York and almost two years for the U.S. Air Force, starting with inventory work for the Air Matériel Command.

He had met Jacey at Wright-Patterson in Dayton. She had left Tennessee to find a job in accounting. She'd heard about work with National Cash Register in Dayton. When she graduated from technical college in Crossville, she packed and went north. She was the first in her family to leave Tennessee and the Temple of Faith Independent Bible Fellowship in a storefront on Main Street in Murphy. She was only with NCR for a few months before coming to Wright-Pat. Dan had walked into Personnel one morning to finish his processing on a National Agency Check for security clearance and come face to face with a slim brunette in a yellow dress. A shout ended Dan's daydream.

Stafford was standing impatiently in the doorway with Mr. Milton Gaines. "Connors, today after you've briefed Mr. Gaines on your operation, you and Ricks take him to Grants. Ricks will get the car."

Suddenly it was only Dan and Gaines again. Gaines's sleek red hair and bobbing head reminded him of a seal. He held the same leatherette monogrammed notebook he had used the night before, the morning before, that is.

"Well, Mr. Gaines." Dan almost said that he'd thought to have seen the last of him.

"You're in my line," Gaines said, his head bobbing.

"Oh?" Dan said.

"Quality control. I run sample surveys for Ambertech," Gaines continued.

"Yes. Well, I don't actually run them here. That's done by my counterpart in AEC, the Atomic Energy Commission," Dan said.

"Yes, I know that one, Dan," Gaines nodded. "I talked with them on Saturday."

Dan wondered why exactly Mr. Gaines was visiting them. "Have a seat, Mr. Gaines."

"Milt."

"Milt. Perhaps if you would tell me your interest, I could focus better," Dan said.

"Just tell me about your operation, Dan," he said, easing back in the chair. Dan didn't like telling Mr. Gaines anything, and he didn't like Gaines calling him "Dan" every other sentence. This was going to be a long afternoon.

"For example," Gaines said, "was that alert this morning part of your usual routine?"

"Mr. Gaines—Milt—as you know," Dan said, "we must limit our discussion to what's authorized. When I came here about a month ago, I was cautioned about discussing what we do here, except with those who need to know. As I recall, our briefer told us that failure to do so would result in a ten thousand dollar fine and twenty years in prison. Milt, I don't have the time or money for either."

With that understood, it became easier to talk with Gaines about the sampling plan for parts from Ambertech. Dan even managed to sit him down with some recent data and let him work on his own in an adjoining room.

Finally Dan could get to his IN box. Andy Perez had called. He was a high school friend who still lived in Albuquerque. Dan had run into him coming out of Base Headquarters the week before when Major McKee was showing him around the post and checking him in, not that McKee ever actually said more than a half-dozen words that whole morning.

Just as Dan remembered him, Andy had high cheek-bones, jet-black hair and a solemn expression totally incongruous with his playful eyes. He wore a bolo tie with a gray pinstripe suit. When he had grabbed Dan's shoulders and begun talking, McKee disappeared into the mail room.

He had called Dan his "old *complice*" who had come back to be with "us *paisanos*," tapped the DASA shield clipped to Dan's pocket, and commented that he didn't expect that Dan had much to tell him, but that he might have some interesting scuttlebutt for Dan. Dan had been worried about Major McKee hearing this conversation and getting the wrong idea, but the Major had disappeared. Just as in high school, Andy was always changing subjects like a small bird flickering around hawks, but coming back to them when you least expected. He began reminiscing about taking Civics together from "old marmalade," otherwise known as Miss Arla Maden. She always began class with a quiz, so Dan and Andy would study by asking each other questions during lunch. After the quiz, the period was given over to Miss Maden's opinions about dirty commie rats.

Because of Andy's help, lunch was the only time Dan ever had to study Civics, but Andy said that was when he decided that "anything so easy should be my line of work." Just as Dan had thought the conversation was over, Andy was talking again about DASA and coming back for another sortie on his slow-flying friend. He knew that DASA was under General Packard and that Dan was working for Colonel Stafford. Dan had noticed Major McKee coming back from the mailroom. Dan had frowned and shook his head to put Andy off, but that hadn't prevented Andy from saying he knew something was up because he had been watching Dan's eyes. "Always watch the pupils of the eyes—especially those of a hostile witness," he had shouted as he handed Dan his business card and headed for the door.

Dan dialed his number. Funny how the warning about the ten thousand dollar fine and twenty years in prison came back to mind as he thought about Andy Perez.

"Conares, Ortiz, Smith and Perez. How may I direct your call?" The secretary rolled her r's with perfection but "Smith" came out "Smeeth."

"Mr. Perez, please. Dan Connors returning his call."

"Dan. Let's get together for lunch tomorrow. My place. I'm still on Candelaria." Andy said. "You remember? I promise not to ask you to violate your sacred trust. Hey, let me talk. We'll talk about old times. You may learn something. All the refried beans you can eat. See you at noon. Twelve hundred hours to you."

He hung up. Dan didn't have a chance to accept the invitation or decline it. All through school, Andy Perez was ahead of Dan. He always knew what Dan was thinking. It was no surprise to find that he had become a lawyer. Dan didn't know what Andy was working on, but Andy had clearly pegged Dan as a source. He said he'd call to talk about old times. Knowing Andy, however, Dan began to feel like a pump handle and to wonder how accidental the meeting in Headquarters had really been. Dan stared blankly at his IN box and wondered how much of it he could disregard. He sensed that someone was watching him and turned around.

Mr. Gaines, who apparently could not stay seated very long, was bobbing in the doorway.

"I have a question," Gaines said. "Captain Connors, this is a straightforward stratified sample with two classes. The high priority Class One items are a one-hundred percent sample; the Class Two items are sampled from randomized lots, two lots from each zone in the frame. No problem there. But Colonel Stafford tells me you found a significant deviation for some Chronotics components."

Dan stood.

"Oh yes," Gaines said. "Chronotics is one of our divisions."

"Well, yes." Dan sat on the edge of the desk. "It was the battery units in the fuzes."

"These are in Class Two?" Gaines said.

"Yes, lower priority but potentially a risk." Dan nodded.

"What's the history? Have you talked to the Special Projects Officer?" Gaines's questions were crisp and direct, unlike the far-flung curiosity he had shown during their early morning tour. Gaines wanted to know why the Chronotics data were not in the Ambertech file.

"I have one of our people working on it," Dan said. "He's rechecking the values. We didn't have any reason to call the SPO in Washington."

"Oh, I would. Mike Whittaker's his name. Here's the number." He took a business card from his folder. "He knows the background of the project. You need to hear that side." Gaines laid the card beside the phone and nodded toward it. "He can tell you what you need to know." He turned and waddled back next door. Dan did not intend to make this call while Gaines was around. Instead, he went to Bailey's desk next door, which was unoccupied.

"He's gone to lunch, sir." Top had come up behind him.

"At fifteen hundred hours?" Dan said, raising his eyebrows.

"He's a growing boy." Top smiled.

"Well, when he returns, please give him this number to call regarding the problem with Chronotics. And Top—" Dan looked over his shoulder to see where Gaines was.

"Sir?"

"Is there anything we can find for Mr. Gaines to inspect outside this office for a few hours?" Dan said.

"I think that can be arranged," Top winked. Within a quarter-hour, Top had an Airman bringing a staff car around to take Milton Gaines on a safari to a distant airfield to look at weapons pylons. Once Gaines was gone, Top came back to Dan's desk. "He'll be gone for several hours, Captain Connors."

"Perhaps your driver can leave him on Sandia Crest?" Dan said hopefully.

"Well, even though he's always a nuisance we have to take care of him." Top said.

"He's been here before?" Dan said.

"Comes regularly," Top said, pointing down the hall toward the Colonel's office, "Usually, he sees Colonel Stafford. But he also hangs around the orderly room when the Colonel is busy. He likes to ask questions."

"You're telling me." Dan shook his head.

Top raised an eyebrow. "But not because he doesn't already know the answers."

1730 hours

Monday, 21 July 1969

Route 117 South

Milton Gaines and Connors rode in the back of a staff car driven by Lieutenant Ricks. Gaines had not stopped talking since they left Albuquerque. His trip to the airfield seemed to have invigorated him. He wanted to know whether Dan had called Special Projects Officer Whittaker at the Pentagon, whether Dan took a summer vacation, whether Dan's wife was doing any better, when Dan going back to Fitzsimmons to see her, and whether Dan had ever been to Jackpile or Ambrosia Lake. These, he said, were his next stops after meeting with someone in Trechado. He'd never been to Trechado, he said. Dan was just glad they didn't have to drive the whole way to Trechado. They were to hand him over to some other poor GI who was waiting south of McCarty's on Route 117.

As Gaines babbled on, Dan continued to nod. He watched Ricks' neck muscles tighten and looked across the brown mesa country.

Gaines had particularly enjoyed seeing the weapons pylons. He was surprised at how far the airfield was from the rest of the base. He didn't usually have time to sight-see, he said. He took a special interest in his Air Force clients and would soon see them again. He was sure the problems with Chronotics were negligible. He wondered aloud whether there were any good motels in Trechado. Dan tapped Ricks on the shoulder.

"Pull over for a minute, will you?" Dan said. "I want to look at the map." As soon as they were off the highway, Dan signaled Ricks to get out. They spread the map on the hood while Gaines stayed in the car.

"This guy is giving me a headache," Dan said. "I needed an excuse to move up to the front seat."

Ricks nodded and rubbed his neck.

"Too bad we couldn't send him on a Shrike," he said, folding up the map and handing it back.

"I want to be sure we make the right turn," Dan said, getting in the front.

Gaines leaned forward onto the front seat and began talking to both of them.

He continued talking until they'd made their rendezvous, and it seemed that he was still talking for another ten minutes after he was gone. Then the engine began to stutter and the car coasted to a stop.

"What's up, Ricks?" Dan asked.

"Out of gas, sir." Ricks said.

"Out of gas? But the gauge shows half-full."

"Broken gauge, sir," Ricks said. "I had this car before."

"But Ricks, if you had this car before, why did you take it again?" Dan asked.

"I guess I didn't notice which one it was. Sorry." Ricks glanced down.

The only gas stations they'd seen were closed, and those were back at the turn-off from McCarty's. The land was a sheet of black basalt, the *malpais* or "bad lands." Clumps of tough brown grass and silver and yellow flowers grew on the hillsides. Only yellow-brown lichen seemed able to grow on the black rocks that spread over the countryside all the way to the headless white shoulders of Mount Taylor in the north. To the east, under wispy clouds, were the Manzano Mountains. There were no buildings in sight.

"We walk then." Dan opened the car door. When they got out they saw a huge flat-topped cloud with dark streamers reaching back to Mount Taylor. "Maybe we'd better wait here for a while," Dan said,

getting back in. The cloud was sweeping east toward Laguna, pushing a cool breeze ahead of it and through their open windows. Heat lightning crackled over Laguna, but no rain fell.

After watching the storm for ten minutes or so, Ricks opened the door. "I'll walk back to McCarty's, Captain."

"No, we'll wait a little longer and then we'll both go." There was something about this Dan didn't like. The sooner they got back to Kirtland the better. "If we can get a ride to Albuquerque, we can have the car picked up later."

Ricks was a Second Lieutenant from Pennsylvania, a coffee-black man with a serious expression and quick, precise movements. "I'm sorry, sir," he said again, looking straight ahead at the empty highway and the acres of lichen-fringed *malpais*. The storm was moving on. After a while, the only sound was their breathing. "It's desolate here," he said, still looking straight ahead. They climbed out of the car and started walking.

"Old volcano country. You have to live here for a while to enjoy it. I went to high school in Albuquerque," Dan said.

Ricks glanced at Dan, his eyes flashing in the dim light.

"You're from Albuquerque?" Ricks said with surprise.

"Not from anywhere, Ricks. We were military. My Dad was in this unit, DASA. He began with it after the Manhattan Project. It was called Special Weapons then. He'd been with 8th Air Force in World War II."

"A Pilot?"

"No, Air Support and logistics. You're from Pennsylvania?"

"Yes sir, Easton. It's north of Philly. Went to U.P." The reds and pinks of the sunset sky were eerily reflected in the black slabs of broken *malpais*. Soon it would be too dark for passing drivers to study them before stopping. There were no passing drivers. The stiff new shoes Dan was wearing resisted every step.

Ricks was silent. He marched solemnly and quickly, keeping his eyes on the road. For someone with his control and intensity, such a mistake as running out of gas must have seemed extremely foolish and embarrassing, Dan thought. The quick pace he was setting was a kind of penance, but it was Dan's feet that were suffering. Something skittered in front of them.

"What was that?" Ricks came to a stop.

"Probably a lizard or a snake," Dan said. "They sometimes lie on the warm road as the night air cools down."

Ricks seemed ready to start running.

"You were commissioned out of ROTC, weren't you?" Dan asked, slowing down.

"Yes, sir. Graduated last year." His stride lengthened. "Aeronautics."

"Like Aldrin," Dan said.

"Yes, I wanted to be in the space program." Ricks shook his head.

"Not the 'Class Six'?" Dan said.

"Yes, sir." Ricks nodded. "This assignment, the paperwork, the inventories, it's not what I signed up for. I put in a transfer request for Nellis two weeks after coming here."

Purple clouds had moved on and the mesa country spread out before them, the moon a transparent ghost in a maroon sky.

Dan pointed to it. "Now that's desolate—where they are walking."

Ricks looked at him for the first time. It was a curious expression, his eyes wide and eyebrows raised, his mouth shut but his lower jaw grinding back and forth, as if at cross-purposes with itself for a mistake he couldn't reveal.

"Sir, when I think that all that is going on while I am assigned here to—" Ricks stopped himself.

"To be the gofer for the unit?" Dan said.

"Yes, sir. I don't even have a real job, and yet I have a degree in aeronautics from Perdue. It's like I've wasted my time." Ricks said.

"Ricks, why was it that you chose the Air Force instead of civilian aviation?"

"I don't know." Ricks said. "It was a good deal, I guess. Good pay, the chance for training, seeing action, serving your country. Recruiter stuff."

The sky was black and starry, the road deserted. Somewhere in the far distance a truck was whining down a long grade.

"Then you come here and find yourself driving a desk in the desert, huh?" Dan heard him take in a deep breath. They weren't marching double-time any more.

"I guess you'd be surprised to know that I've been trying to get this assignment for almost two years, ever since joining up." Dan said.

"Sir?" Ricks slowed down.

"I was doing pretty well on the outside: Market surveys, customer satisfaction, that kind of thing. Worked for some famous clients. After nine years, though, there was something missing. Growing up, we were always moving around; always rehearsing for warfare. It came down to who I was and how I'd been raised. Duty and country, you know. Somehow, I couldn't commit my life to the unending improvement of ladies' undergarments, deep exploration of the association between libido and automotive design, or using my Master's in industrial statistics to say with 95% confidence that a commercial would sell snack food. Business was only committed to quarterly profits. That was not enough. I wanted my commitment to mean something, even if I weren't able to drive in a Wild Weasel mission."

The mountains to the east had gone from watermelon-red to hunched shapes that could as easily be slinking toward them as hiding in the darkness. The Sandias, the Watermelon Mountains, they were home to some of the earliest cave-dwellers on the continent. Like Mount Taylor and the Manzanos, they were spirit-places to the Navajos. Now, like the Black Hills of South Dakota, Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado,

and the Catoctins of Maryland, these spirit-places were the homes and shrines of the nuclear spirits. Like all spirits, Dan reflected, they gave and took away. One approached them with protocol and restraint, as Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins had approached the moon. Its forgiveness was limited. Armstrong had used most of his descent fuel reserve in retro burn searching for a different landing site; had he used more, there might have been no return. Losing track of all the bright nuclear spears in those mountains would mean no return for anyone. Helping to keep track of this unforgiving nuclear genie was something that a clumsy, four-eyed fellow with a head for numbers could do. Ricks and Dan, each occupied with different thoughts, had stopped to look at the moon.

A car was coming up. As they turned around, its lights went to high-beam and it raced toward them. Ricks shoved Dan to the shoulder. Dan grabbed his arm and they fell together into a shallow ditch. Gravel showered them, tires squealed and the car sped north, two red pin-points by the time they stood.

"Did you see it, Ricks?" Dan looked at his torn trousers.

"No, sir." Ricks said. "The high-beam blinded me. What's that?" Another pair of lights was bearing down on them. They fell back to the shoulder. Its headlights were higher off the road, and it was slowing down. The driver of an old pick-up stuck his head out the window.

"Need a lift?" They heard some animals kicking the sides of the truck. The driver seemed to be a sheep rancher who needed some shearing of his own. He wore a wide-brimmed hat with a large turquoise pin stuck in the front like a badge. He looked at their uniforms. "Look like you fly-boys got trouble."

"You might say so," Dan said. "You see that car that nearly ran over us?"

"Yeah, he was just sitting in the dark with his lights out. I didn't think he was moving. Then all of a sudden he takes off, still with his lights off. I thought I was gonna hit him," the driver said.

"You get his number?" Dan said.

"No, I had to pull over to keep from hitting him," the driver said. "Time I looked up, he was gone. You want a lift?"

2000 hours

Monday, 21 July 1969

DASA HQ, Kirtland AFB

As soon as they got back, Dan took the shaving kit from his car and hit the Men's Room. Ricks went home. Airman Owens was back at the front desk. Walking on the mesa and wallowing in an arroyo had not improved Dan's appearance or disposition. Owens had stood up when he came in but Dan did not stop to chat. No cut fingers this time, just dirt and a beard. He cleaned up, went back to his desk, and turned on the light. He sat back in the chair and looked around the room at the same half-blue, half-white walls, the same flickering overhead light in need of a ballast, and the same government-issue green swivel-chair. But

something was not the same. Their running out of gas and the near-miss by that drunken driver had changed things. There was something about their car he had to know. He called Ricks.

"How are you doing?" Dan said.

"OK, sir," Ricks said. "Trying to sew up a rip in my trousers."

"Ricks, I've been thinking about how we ran out of gas." Dan said.

"So have I," Ricks said.

"Did you take the car because Colonel Stafford told you to take it? Please tell me." Dan looked down at the small hole in his trousers.

"Yes, sir," Ricks said. "I tried to tell him. He said it was fixed."

"Thanks, Ricks. See you tomorrow." Dan paused and added, "Looks like you got some action in this unit after all." Dan tried unsuccessfully to convince himself that Stafford really did think it was fixed.

Dan sat down. There was a rectangle of dust on the corner of his desk. The IN box had been moved to the left and turned around to face in the opposite direction. Only a phone message was left in it. He didn't see Bailey's report. Dan wanted to hear Bailey's explanation for this one.

After a half-dozen rings, a high, sleepy voice answered, "Leslie." No wonder the gigantic Mr. Bailey wanted to work for an employer who would call him by his last name.

"Bailey, this is Captain Connors. I'm looking for your report."

"Oh, Captain Connors. My report. It's on your desk." Bailey said.

"I don't find it. Where did you put it?" Dan looked around the room.

"The IN box on the corner. It's on top. I was the last one out. I had to stay late to take the last call from the SPO." Bailey said.

"What did he say?" Dan said.

"I wrote it down and put it with the report." Bailey said. "It should all be in the box."

"I don't have the report, Bailey." Dan said.

"Oh. Well, the SPO seemed to want us to let him investigate." Bailey said. "He told me he was responsible to execute the contract and asked for our analysis. I told him that would have to be authorized. Sir, I did put the report on your desk."

"OK, Bailey. Did you keep a copy?" Dan wasn't prepared for his answer.

"I copied everything, Captain. Always do. It's still on my desk. Would have filed it today but I finished late." Bailey said.

"Never mind, Bailey." Dan said. "You did the job and you made a copy. I couldn't ask for more. See you tomorrow."

Stumbling over desks in the dark office next door, Dan switched on Bailey's desk lamp. There it was, complete with his notes about the call from Whittaker.

He'd pulled the whole file on Chronotics. The components they produced were all back-ups to the main fuze system. Unlike the plutonium melon or other parts of the Class One sample, the back-up systems from Class Two were sorted into sample lots from each of which a pair was randomly chosen for testing. Dan sat down at Bailey's desk. He had gone back to the original counts. Good. If this had been a survey of buttons missing holes or of TV viewers likely to buy dog food, the level of significance would have been outstanding. But Bailey's calculations showed that it was not possible to guarantee with ninety-eight percent confidence that the backup battery component would work if the primary fuze failed. All three hundred serial numbers in the manufacture lot from Hobbs were listed on a Disposition form. Half of them were still on base, deep in Sandia Mountain. Others were stored at other sites in the Continental U.S.. Bailey had put red checks beside thirty serial numbers of components that were deployed at classified locations, probably in missiles. All of the defective components had serial numbers from the first half of each lot. It reminded Dan of an article he'd been reading in an old statistics journal from the forties.

For some reason, Bailey had also pulled some reports on other components from Chronotics. He'd put another red check at the top of a discrepancy report from two months prior. It was for a different

component, some kind of barometric sensor. Bailey had clipped together three other records, going back over the last year. All were different components in backup systems; all from Chronotics. Major McKee had signed off on all of them. Dan turned off the desk lamp and sat in the darkness. His feet were aching and the five hours of good sleep he'd had since Friday night were fuel spent long since. In this state of heightened awareness, Dan leaned forward onto the desk and quickly fell asleep.

"Sir, Captain Connors." Owens shook him gingerly and stared sideways into his face. The room was incredibly bright.

"What? What is it?" Dan looked at his watch. It was past twenty hundred hours.

"A second call, sir. It was a Major Jackson." Owens said.

"Dr. Jackson?" Dan said. It was about Jacey.

"I put the first message in your box," Owens said, handing Dan a slip of paper.

"Yes. Thanks, Owens." Dan raced back to his phone.

"Captain Connors," Dr. Jackson said. "We've been trying to reach you. Your wife's gone into a coma. It's not unexpected, given her condition, and we don't want to alarm you, but you need to know."

"When was this? How long has it been?" Dan said.

"Since five thirty, uh, seventeen thirty hours," Dr. Jackson answered.

Just after they'd gone to McCarty's, Dan thought. While he was listening to that idiot Gaines, Jacey was going into a coma.

"Has she had a diabetic coma before, Captain Connors?" Jackson said. "Captain Connors?"

"What? Yes. She told me. Before they knew she had diabetes. Got sick. I don't know much about it." Dan said.

"OK. She's resting quietly. I think this will be a short episode. We'll keep you posted." Jackson hung up.

Dan looked at his IN box. There was the message from this afternoon. He'd been so concerned about Bailey's report that he hadn't even looked at it. He would take emergency leave. Where was Stafford? He hurriedly typed a leave request and ran past Owens, who was still doing Algebra problems. Owens called after him.

"What did you say, Owens?" Dan said, turning back from the door.

"Chief Carey called," Owens said. "He asked if there was a problem."

"A problem?" Dan walked back to Owens's desk.

A yellow legal pad filled with equations lay under his hand.

Yes, there was a problem, he thought. But what was it? Hardly in this unit long enough to learn names, Dan wondered if he was over-reacting to an insignificant detail, a detail that had been already noticed by McKee and Stafford and considered not worth comment. Jacey was worth more to him than this, and he couldn't help her. She was dropping deeper into some place he couldn't reach. Instead of helping her, he was trying to find something in the numbers that wasn't there. He was off on a tangent at work because he couldn't do anything about Jacey. He was losing her and finding something in the damned numbers that wasn't even there. The AEC had already gone over all of this. They were the experts. Dan was just one insignificant member of a large back-up team. No one on the team or in AEC had found anything wrong. This was an allowable risk. He wondered what he was trying to find.

Was it a risk-free component, he wondered, a risk-free world where radioactive decay and tuberculosis would not exist; where Jacey would again be watching for him from the dormer window as she used to do in Germany. He would come around the corner and stop at the flower stall. She would watch him buying flowers and pretend not to know when he came upstairs for lunch.

"Sir?" Owens looked alarmed. He was staring at Dan.

Dan was staring through a blur at the spidery writing on the Airman's yellow legal pad.

"Sorry, Owens," Dan said. "I guess the long weekend is catching up with me. You're working hard on that Algebra."

"Yes, sir," he said, not fooled by Dan's change of subject. "Next semester I'll take Calculus. But this doesn't seem to have much to do with what I want to do."

"What's that?" Dan said.

"Computer Systems Program Management." Owens said.

"Same as Top Carey?" Dan said.

"Yes, sir."

Dan hadn't noticed Owens until this weekend. Everything about him seemed in miniature: thin, delicate fingers; small, bright eyes; a careful, tiny script made with a fine-tipped pen on the yellow page as if these equations were for medieval manuscripts. Dan pointed to one expression.

"You couldn't find an expression more related to what we do," Dan said. "When you take Calculus you'll find out that the limit of this expression is e to the n -power, an important term in the Poisson distribution that describes radioactive decay, or any event with a small chance of occurrence." Like getting TB, Dan wanted to say. "Like the misprints on a page in your book." Owens reminded him of a squirrel on the side of a tree, watching to see what Dan would do next. "Well," Dan said. "You couldn't find a better example to follow than Chief Carey." Owens relaxed and smiled.

"No, sir." He paused. "Is there a problem, sir?"

"Well, Airman, I think there is, but I can't decide whether it's enough a problem to matter."

Owens started to reply.

"That's OK. See you later." Dan said.

2040 hours

Monday

21 July 1969

Stafford's house was off base. As he drove, Dan was trying to recall something about the welcome party they'd attended when Jacey and he had arrived five weeks earlier. It was something Jacey had said. Milly Stafford had invited them to dinner. Military protocol. Major McKee also came.

Milly Stafford was tanned and trim, with a carefully tended beehive hairdo, but also with the loose skin on arms and neck that come from rapid weight loss.

Jacey had worried about what to wear. She had nothing to wear for a dinner party. First impressions, she said. She hoped the officers' wives were not snobbish like the ones at Ramstein, when they found that she had been a secretary. She needn't have worried.

Milly and the others had been drinking before they arrived. Fine points of fashion would have been wasted on them. Stafford was particularly well greased. He made cracks about the "bottles" in their "Class Six Operation" and needled Jim McKee and Dan about his own imminent retirement. McKee, a southerner with a graying crew-cut and a small American flag tattooed on his forearm, had come back from Vietnam the year before. While he sat stone silent, Stafford talked about watching the Russian Surface to Air Missiles arriving in the North Vietnamese harbors.

"Sure we could see 'em. Our recons picked it all up. They arrived in bright packages. Just like a birthday party." Stafford said. "Then the party favors were all given out and we kept watching. We could see everything." Stafford tried to poke a fork load of steak into his mouth at the same time he was talking and drinking. "We could see everything but we couldn't break the rules. Oh no! Upset the party. We had to wait till the bloody SAMs were buried in the jungle, hidden in villages so we'd come off as butchers for going after them. Even though they were sending Thuds to the ground and all the first missions out of Takhli were shot down. Jim knows. He was there. We couldn't break the rules of engagement. We had to play fair and see how many of our boys they could bring down firing from paddies and oxcarts. Same thing in Korea. You don't go in to win, you shouldn't go in." He poured himself another drink. Milly sat very straight. McKee said nothing. McKee never said anything. Dan had seen more of McKee at that dinner party than he had since he'd been in the unit. Dan tried to remember what it was he was missing. There was something about that party.

Dan still didn't know much about Major McKee except that he had flown as an electronic warfare officer, or "Bear," on Wild Weasel missions. Of course, he didn't talk about that either. When they had left soon after dinner, Jacey flopped into the car and sighed. It wasn't McKee. It was something Jacey had said

that Dan was trying to recall, something about why Milly would give a dinner party just so that Stafford and she could show “their contempt for each other.”

Jacey noticed that Milly had nothing to say to Stafford or to them and didn't even make the effort. “All they had to share was their misery.” Jacey said. “Did you see how she watched him, holding her drink in both hands with her elbows on the table and staring daggers at him over the glass?”

Dan hadn't noticed, but Jacey never missed anything.

“When he started talking about the cat houses in Okinawa I thought she was going to throw her drink at him,” Jacey had then said that Stafford was really trying to hurt Milly.

Dan turned into the Staffords' neighborhood. What Jacey hadn't asked was why Dan had wanted this assignment so much. She knew the answer, and had accepted it, despite her worry about being the “next in rank” among the wives. She would be the one to arrange the Hale and Farewell when Stafford retired. Military protocol again. Whatever her worries, however, Jacey had kept them to herself.

The Staffords' large ranch house had a brown yard and two tall, scraggly yucca plants leaning on either side of the door. Milly Stafford came out wearing a housecoat and carrying a drink.

“I guess you wanna see Vern. Well he's not here. The bastard is divorcing me. He moved out yesterday. Thirty years. You tell him go to hell. I put up with crummy mice-infested houses in Mississippi and a dozen other places and waited for him all over the world, with him flying around, damn him, and me raising three kids on my own. We were always watching him land and take off; and take off and land. You never knew if that was the last of it. While he preserves, protects and defends, I'm left with the worry and the crap. The bum didn't even tell his kids goodbye. Just leaves them for me to take care of. What am I supposed to do?” Her hand fluttered up to what was left of the beehive hairdo. “I guess I can run a thrift shop or teach contract bridge. Any jobs like that you know about?” She emptied her glass. “I've taken everything from that man. Now he retires and I get cut. You tell him go to hell.” She wandered back into the house.

Dan closed the door.

2100 hours

21 July 1969

Bachelor Officers' Quarters

After a pause and some scuffling sounds inside, Stafford called out when Dan knocked on the door, "Come in! I'm on the can." The room was strewn with clothes.

Dan threw socks from the chair to a pile of underwear on the bed, pushed the shoes aside, and sat down. It was a small room. The boxes stacked along one wall made it seem even smaller. On the bedside table were a bottle of whiskey and three partially filled glasses. Water was running in the bathroom. Stafford stuck his half-shaved face through the door. "Oh, it's you. Be out in a minute. Get a drink."

As soon as he signed the leave form, Dan would pack and go to Military Airlift Command to get a hop to Lowry. He wasn't going to lose Jacey. Not like the Staffords. He and Jacey weren't going to end up

like the Staffords. Dan picked up some gravel that was scattered on the rug and began tossing it at the trashcan by the bed. It bounced off the rim. Jacey was great at basketball, but not Dan. His Dad was an athlete, but Dan couldn't sink a rock in a trashcan.

Dan remembered that Jacey took on his Dad on for a game of HORSE in the driveway when they had stopped in Tuscaloosa on their way to Albuquerque. He was still limber enough to play and make the shots. He'd been working part-time for Redstone since retirement. Dan thought his father was pleased about Dan's transfer to DASA.

Jacey won. She darted around both of them, did lay-ups, drop-shots and slam-dunks and even climbed the tree to straighten the backboard. In Ramstein she had even organized a women's league that bowled and played basketball together. It was not the usual kind of activity for officers' wives. Many of the players were high school girls or noncoms' wives.

Stafford came out of the bathroom wearing only his boxer shorts and a towel. "You tuck in Mr. Gaines for the night, Connors?"

Stafford smirked as he flopped on the bed and took a pack of cigarettes from a drawer in the bedside table. A fog billowed into the room when he opened the bathroom door. He pulled it shut behind him. His skin was red from a hot shower. The strong after-shave lotion and the shower had made no change in his disposition. He scowled as he searched for a lighter.

"We delivered him but had car trouble on the way back," Dan said.

"Oh?" Stafford sat down and picked up one of the glasses of whiskey and a lit cigarette from the ashtray.

"Ran out of gas," Dan said, staring at the gravel in his hand.

"That right? How the hell did that happen?" Stafford said.

"Ricks says the gauge was broken," Dan said.

"Hmm, what'd you do?" Clearly, Stafford didn't much care.

"Walked. We got a ride after a while." Dan said. "We got back about twenty hundred hours."

Stafford took a long pull on his cigarette, making the ash grow until it almost fell off. He tapped it into one of the glasses on the table, blew the smoke out slowly through his mouth and nose. His body was matted with grey-yellow hair that he scratched and rubbed as he stretched his legs and crossed his ankles. "Anything else?"

"Well, some drunk nearly ran us down." Dan said.

"How's that?" Stafford frowned.

"It was too dark to see its make. The car came up on us with its headlights off and forced us off the road." Dan studied Stafford's expression.

Stafford sat back again, took another drag and got up and sat on the bed. "Guess you've about had it for today, huh, Connors?" he said softly but with no change in his scowling expression. "Time to pack it in," he grinned.

Dan suspected that this was Stafford's version of sympathy, or that Stafford was checking to see what effect the near-miss had had on him.

"Well there is something else ." Dan said.

"You gonna bring up that Chronotics crap again?" Stafford frowned. "God, man, give it a rest. McKee and I have seen that kind of thing from them for months. It is not a concern."

"Colonel Stafford, that battery defect is real. If a Polaris had one of those defective safing and arming systems, it would have a significant chance of failure. I don't know what that would mean to a mission but I don't have to know. I just have to do my job, and we should follow up on this and recall those weapons. But that isn't why I came."

"Captain Connors, You are not to 'follow up' on this matter any further." Stafford threw his legs over the side of the bed, pulling sharply on the towel around his neck and staring fiercely enough to pull

Dan's eyes out, "I will have your ass for insubordination. You have done your job. You have told me. Understood?"

Dan nodded.

Stafford sank back a little and reached back for the cigarette, which had burned a spot on the table. He held it between his thumb and index finger and took a long drag on it, half-closing his eyes behind stubby straw-like eyelashes. There was a brief, gritty glitter in his pale blue eyes. "It's not war," he said very quietly. "It's some kind of damn waiting-around. Call it deterrence. I call it fooling ourselves. "Same thing in MiG Alley. Those bastards knew we had to stay on flight plan. They set their antiaircraft sights for our course and elevation and made a shooting gallery out of it. Meanwhile the MiG-15's flew out of Manchuria and made diving passes before retreating back over the line. No hot pursuit was allowed. But that didn't stop a couple of our Shooting Stars from strafing an airfield in Siberia—which got them court martialed. When we went in to hit the hydro plant at Supong on June 23, 1952, two hundred and fifty MiG's took off. But they flew the other way. We took out three more plants. They had no power left. Leave it to the frigging politicians. They made us back off." He picked up one of the drinks and tossed it down. "You know, I stood on Heartbreak Ridge once. Yeah, they had us change places with some Army officers. Improve communication, they said. It was a pile of rocks, like around here. Windy as hell. It looked like that damned Sea of Tranquility on the moon where they almost wrecked. Tranquility—hell." He stared into his empty glass. "But you don't wanna hear all this."

"Sir, I came to ask for leave." Dan handed Stafford the leave form and a pen.

"Your wife again?" Stafford asked as he scrawled his signature while holding the form on his knee.

"Yes sir," Dan took the form back.

"OK, good. You go on, kid. Don't worry about us." Stafford blew smoke through his mouth and nostrils.

Dan stood.

"Get a transport flight tonight." Stafford handed back the leave papers.

"Yes, that's what I'll do." Dan spoke very deliberately. He was lying and hoped that he had not overdone it.

"Good, good." Stafford pointed at the door with his chin and took another drink.

Going down the hall, Dan heard the clink of bottle on glass. Dan's heart was pounding. He opened his fist. He had been holding the gravel all this time, the black gravel. Basalt gravel. *Malpais* basalt.

2130 hours

21 July 1969

When he left the BOQ, Dan didn't know where he was going. He needed to talk to Jacey. He needed to explain why he couldn't come yet. Why he couldn't come even when she was in a coma. She knew him. She would know he had to do this. Jacey was all he had now. But Jacey was out of reach.

He needed to call Dad to ask whether he had ever come up against this kind of problem. But Dad had suffered a fatal stroke a few hours after they had left Tuscaloosa. By the time they had turned around and driven back, he had already been prepared for burial. The old frame house, surrounded by shade trees

draped with Spanish moss, stood empty and dark. It wasn't a place where he had grown up. There was no such one place. But it was a place of return. They always came back to his house, his father's house.

"In my Father's house are many rooms," Jacey had said as they stood in the driveway. Her voice was soft, drawling out the vowels in "house" and "rooms" with extra beats, making them "howose" and "roowums" in her Tennessee accent. She understood Dan. A house with many rooms, some of them empty, many of them closed forever. She squeezed his hand. "When my uncle died," she had said, "Preacher Jim said, 'In my Father's house are many rooms. Although they seem closed now they will all open to you in time as you think about him and remember more and more.'"

The gravel must have come from Stafford's shoes. He'd been out there with Ricks and Dan on the *malpais*. Maybe he'd even driven the car that nearly ran them down. Maybe there was more. There were several whiskey glasses on the table. And Stafford didn't come to the door. There could easily have been someone else in his room. That might have been why he had shut the bathroom door. Maybe that was why he was scowling. No, Stafford didn't need a reason for scowling. Dan started to circle back to the BOQ, but he was already near DASA Headquarters. Dan wondered why Stafford was so ready to sign off on his leave when he'd made it difficult before. "Good" was the first thing he said, as if it got Dan out of the way. Stafford's office might have some answers. Dan went back into Headquarters.

Owens wasn't at his desk. Stafford's office at the end of the hall was unlocked. Dan turned on the desk lamp. A wide green blotter and the college graduation pictures of his sons and daughter were the only things on the desk. The baskets were empty. The drawers were locked. There it was, under the desk in the trashcan, Bailey's report. Stafford didn't give him much credit. He hadn't even tried to destroy it. Stafford was getting him out of the way. Dan pulled it out of the can and looked up. Top was standing at the door.

"Is there a problem, sir?" Top said.

"Well, there may be. Why are you here?" Dan asked, realizing that it looked like he was taking something from Stafford's office. Well, he was.

"Owens called. He said there might be a problem," Top said.

"Yes, I guess if I'd been Owens, I would have called you, too," Dan said. Owens didn't miss much, and neither did Top. He was looking at the report in Dan's hand.

"This is the work Bailey left on my desk." Dan said. "It was thrown away in this office. Do you know anything about this?"

"Bailey talked to me about it before he left." Top said. "He said that he'd been checking up on something for you, and that he'd tied down all of the locations except for Guam."

"Guam?" Top nodded and Dan leafed through the report to the Dispositions Table. Five of the defective components were not in CONUS at all. They were at a Navy installation on Guam. "Subs, Top, they're on a sub."

"Captain?" Top watched him closely.

"Look." Dan showed him the table. "These are the only components from the lot that are not in storage. There's a good chance they're on a submarine. And there's a good chance that they don't work. Top, we've got to pinpoint them."

"Shall I call Colonel Stafford?" Top said.

"No, but stand by. I want to check this and make some calls." What Dan really wanted was time. But he had a growing suspicion that time was something they didn't have. He looked back at the discrepancy reports Bailey had found. The data consistently showed Chronotics components with low but unacceptable deviations. Nonetheless, both McKee and Stafford had repeatedly signed off on them. Dan went back to his desk and took down the large green notebook of Standard Operating Procedures for alert situations like a Dull Sword. A Dull Sword was an "unexpected event involving a nuclear weapon or

component in which there was a possibility for contamination, reduced yield, failure, or some other operational problem,” according to SOP.

The first person he should contact was Stafford; if he were not available, then he should contact McKee. They were the last ones Dan wanted to contact. Stafford had left no doubt about what he would do, and McKee, from what little Dan had observed, wanted a promotion or wanted too much to be left alone to disagree with Stafford about anything. Maybe after Vietnam, he was ready to get out, but he wanted to retire as Lieutenant Colonel McKee.

Who was left? Brigadier General Charles C. Packard, Group Commander, Defense Atomic Support Agency. Dan had met him when he was in college, and Packard had worked with his father at the Pentagon. Twice, in the month he'd been in Albuquerque, Dan had seen him go upstairs to his office in their building. Top was sitting at his desk in the side office off the orderly room. He was apparently reading, but Dan knew that Top was mainly watching him.

Dan closed the door and dialed General Packard's home number. So much for chain of command, and so much for his career. A maid answered. No, he was not at home. He was at the Officers' Club. There was a party in honor of the moon landing. He was entertaining some hot-shot guests from NASA. His call would be as welcome as an old boyfriend at a wedding. Packard would want to know why this couldn't wait until morning and why he wasn't hearing this from Colonel Stafford. Dan would have no answers, but he dialed anyway. A combo was playing some Brubeck piece. Glasses tinkled. The television blared.

"Packard," the General said.

"General Packard, this is Captain Connors at Headquarters. We may have a Dull Sword." Dan said.

"Connors, have you contacted Colonel Stafford? This is not SOP."

"Yes sir, but there are some problems you should know about..." Dan said.

"If I would come in." The General hung up.

Five minutes later, Owens, Top and Dan were saluting General Packard as he burst through the double doors. He pointed Dan into Stafford's office and shut the door behind them. He was short and wiry like Top, with a white crew cut, black eyes and a peppery disposition. But no one except his friends called him "Pepper" to his face.

"You're Dan Connors's son. Sorry about your Dad. He didn't have much of a retirement. What's this all about?" He sat down behind Stafford's desk.

"It's these data, sir." Dan handed him Bailey's report. The batteries in these fuzes have a significant chance of failure."

"What's their MTBF?" he snapped.

"Sir?"

"Their Mean Time Before Failure, Connors. Any component will fail. It's *when* it fails that matters." Packard said.

"I don't know, sir. It's not a value that we usually know." Dan regretted calling Packard.

"No, it isn't a value that we usually know, but it's time we started finding it out." This seemed to be about some other discussion. Packard hurriedly waved Dan on. "Go on, Connors. We're not going to solve that one tonight. Where is Colonel Stafford?"

"Sir, I haven't called him, but he knows. I spoke to him about it on Friday and again tonight. He considers it insignificant." Dan said.

"Yes, I know," Packard said.

Dan's heart sank.

Packard was in his dress blues and wearing a whole shelf of decorations. Dan was in dirty, undecorated Class A's with a hole in the knee and wondering why he had been foolish enough to think that Stafford hadn't told Packard about his green Nervous Nellie.

Packard spoke very slowly and precisely as if explaining something to a child. "Colonel Stafford has told me that you have a good eye for detail, Connors, but that you may notice details that aren't important. It's easy enough to do when you're starting out. We track so many components that it takes a while before you get a feel for the ones that matter."

"And batteries in the fuze of an atomic warhead are not important?" Dan tried to keep his tone as even as possible, but it still came out as a sarcastic interruption. The General scowled.

"Captain Connors, any component in these weapons matters. The questions here are about your judgment and why you disregarded chain of command. Colonel Stafford also tells me you've been talking with some civilian about our operations." He paused for a reply.

Dan thought for a moment. "Colonel Stafford introduced me to a Mr. Gaines who"

"Not Gaines," Packard interrupted. "A local attorney named Perez."

"I ran into him at the Post Headquarters. We knew each other in high school."

Packard shook his head. He clearly did not want to hear about Andy Perez. Dan was still standing between the desk and the door.

Fifteen minutes ago, Dan thought, General Packard had been enjoying a get-together to let off some of the tension everyone had felt about the moon-launch. Now here comes a Captain who looks like he couldn't even launch a spoon into soup telling him about shaving confidence levels.

Through the window behind Packard, Dan could see the landing lights of a transport plane. He should be on that plane going to Colorado, he thought. His leave was in his pocket. Packard was still talking.

"And without a good explanation, I'll be seeing him about you in the morning."

"Sir, here are the figures," Dan said. "The deviation for the safing batteries in this lot is statistically significant. Some of these weapons will be duds or have other operational defects. The sampling was done properly."

Packard sat very still, his palms down on Stafford's desk as if he were about to stand up.

"We have traced all of the components in this lot and most of them are in storage in CONUS," Dan said. "Half of them here on base. But..."

"Yes?" Packard's eyebrows rose slightly.

"But some of them may be on a submarine." Dan said.

Packard looked down at the report where Dan had circled the five serial numbers that were designated for Guam.

"We need more on this," Packard said abruptly.

"Yes sir, but I wasn't authorized." Dan said.

"Well I am, Connors. You showed this to Colonel Stafford?" Packard said.

"Yes sir." Dan watched the transport plane rise into the air.

Packard dialed a number on the phone. Top knocked at the door and came in. "Chief, step up our alert," Packard said. "Tell the OIC and get me a backchannel to CINCPAC. You know about this?"

Top nodded.

"We need to recall these weapons without going to Dull Sword," Packard said. "And we need to do it before oh-six-hundred hours."

"Yes sir," Top said, shutting the door behind him.

"Now, Captain Connors, let's talk." Packard sat down behind Stafford's desk.

2300 hours

21 July 1969

Packard had taken Dan to his office as the office downstairs became noisy with additional staff coming in for the alert. Flags stood behind his desk and bookshelves lined the room. Dan's father had told him that Packard had a doctorate in international politics from Georgetown. The General motioned for Dan to sit down.

"From what you have shown me," Packard said, "I do think there is a problem. That doesn't mean you're off the hook. I want to know why this problem has not previously been corrected and whether what

was happening to you and Ricks tonight has anything to do with it. But the priority for now is to retrieve those weapons. This is no time to have a nuclear incident in the Pacific."

"Sir?" Dan said.

"Well, there are three possibilities. The device is in storage at the Naval Ammunitions Annex on Guam, a submarine in port, or..." Dan took a deep breath. "It is on a sub involved in an exercise in the East China Sea, a Battle Stations Missile Drill that involves simulated launches beginning at six our time tomorrow morning."

Dan looked at his watch. For Guam, it was already tomorrow. They had less than seven hours.

"Ever since Pueblo Commander Bucher's testimony in January," Packard said, "that he had confessed to espionage under torture, and the threat to execute his crew, the North Koreans have escalated their campaign. In April they shot down an EC-121 recon plane. A carrier battle group went into the East China Sea to protect our planes. Then, just last month, only a few days before the President's meeting with Thieu on Midway Island to discuss troop withdrawals from Vietnam, an Australian carrier sliced one of our destroyers there in half, killing over seventy men.

"We cannot afford to have another Palomares incident off North Korea at just the time that we claim to believe that the Russians are no longer interested in first-strike and that we are trying to sell "peace with honor" in Vietnam. The Apollo landing has given us some real credibility with these people that we have badly needed for a long time. Any nation that can set men on the moon and recover them safely must be believed. A nuclear incident at this time would fuel the uproar over the Soviet SS9s. Who's the bigger threat? Them or our own unsafe technology? The Soviets milked the Palomares affair for all it was worth. They even claimed we never found the bomb off the Spanish coast. That's why we have to handle incidents like this so they won't be noticed. Our intelligence is so tightly coupled now to Soviet intelligence that even a change in the laundry deliveries at the submarine base in Vladivostok is analyzed for evidence of a new combat initiative."

"Like the allies' use of serial numbers from captured German weapons to calculate war production and improve targets after the Casablanca Conference," Dan said.

"Yes." Packard nodded. "If we deviate from the routine exercises that their intelligence has come to expect they will immediately move to countermeasures. It must look like business as usual."

"No Dull Sword?" Dan said.

"Especially no Dull Sword." Packard nodded.

"Sir, I hesitate to ask, but since I am already on the hook, would you consider waking up one other installation?" Dan said.

"Who?"

"Sandia Corporation." Dan said. "It's about something I've noticed in the other data from Chronotics."

0200 hours

Tuesday

22 July 1969

Twenty-four on, twenty-four off. A different crew was pulling this alert. That was OK with Dan. Colonel Stafford was standing in the hallway when Dan had come back downstairs from talking with the General. He glared at Dan and looked at the punch cards he was carrying from Data Processing at Sandia but said nothing.

Owens came between them waving a slip of paper.

"Captain Connors, you had a call from Major Jackson at twenty-three hundred hours. I took the message."

Stafford did an about-face and went upstairs.

Dan read the message:

Major Jackson. Fitzsimmons Hospital. Turn for worse.

Medication side-effects. Contact in morning.

"Owens, what does this mean about side-effects?"

"He said the medicine he was going to use could have some dangerous side-effects but it was needed because of the infection becoming worse. He wanted you to know before he began to give it. That's all I got, sir." Owens said.

"Yes. Well, thanks." Dan stood motionless as Owens hurried away to answer a phone. Dan was suddenly bushed. He needed to be there with Jacey. He had no assignment for this alert except for the one he'd given himself. For the first time since Friday, he felt relieved. Something was finally being done. He didn't have to stay.

Their control center had comlinks to track down the weapons. General Packard had used his backchannel to find out about the joint exercises being conducted with the South Korean Navy. They had quickly discovered that the weapons were not in storage but on the A-1 missiles on Polaris submarines. Of the sixteen missiles per boat, five had fuze mechanisms that were likely to fail in pre-launch sequence. Locating the sub seemed to be the main problem.

But it wasn't Dan's problem. Not his job and he was glad of it. He spread the punch cards across his desk. Each represented a Chronotics component that had been sampled over the last six months. The pattern he was looking for was somewhere in this stack of cards but his eyes were not cooperating. Another stack of cards came to mind.

Jacey had been planning a dinner party ever since they had gone to the Staffords. She had spread index cards all over the dining room table and forbidden Dan to eat there.

"If he is Guest of Honor," she had said, "he should sit at the head of the table but if they're seated only by rank, I should sit at the head with him on my right and Major McKee on my left. Which should it be, Dan?" This was their third time around the table. Jacey had tied her hair in a top-knot, was barefoot and wearing jeans and one of Dan's shirts with the tails tied around her midriff. "Dan?" she'd said.

"Honey, it really doesn't matter." Dan had said.

"It does so matter." She had interrupted him and waved her copy of the *Social Guide* at him. "It matters whether it's a guest-of-honor, a dinner party, a reception or a dining-out. It matters, it does." She sat down, pulled her feet up into the chair and hugged her knees. "It does matter."

"OK," Dan had said. "But where are we going with this, Jacey? The Staffords' dinner for us was certainly not by the book."

Dan now remembered what Jacey had said next, the puzzling piece of information he had been trying to recall.

"But it was by the book," Jacey had insisted. "Milly can't help Stafford's being a boor. The only rule she broke was in seating Major McKee between herself and her husband. But it was plain to see why she did that." Dan had not seen anything plainly. "Oh Dan," Jacey had said, "couldn't you see how they protected him? Acted like he was an invalid? You just don't understand."

While he counted bombs, Jacey had been negotiating a social mine-field. He wasn't able to affect anything directly. He worked at the end of a long forceps while she had to handle contagion. Like some lumbering, flightless bird, he sat there in his crumpled Air Force uniform unable even to lift his eyelids, much less to help Jacey. If the battery in the primary safing mechanism failed, there was a redundant safing device to prevent premature arming. Missile fuzing systems were insulated against false alarms, not like whatever the damn medicine was they'd injected into Jacey that was ricocheting in side-effects. He was

wasting his time on a fuze whose functional reliability would never sink below ninety percent and whose failure was hardly likely to be worse than one in a million. Jacey was struggling for her life. And he had left her alone. He didn't even know the odds.

Dan stacked the punch cards into groups by lot. He would leave in the morning when this was over, provided that Stafford didn't rescind his approval. Maybe Bernstein had come in by now.

He dialed his extension at Sandia Corporation. Sam Bernstein was a systems engineer whom he knew only through phone conversations. He had been on the team that ran the computer simulations for the Palomares incident in 1966. A Stratofortress had collided with its KC-130 tanker during refueling in flight over Spain. One of the four atomic weapons had fallen into the ocean. The computer simulation to locate it had included hundreds of factors such as undersea topography, wind and ocean currents, and trajectories of fragments from the collision. It continually updated information from ground and naval crews, fishing boats and submersibles like Alvin. When Dan was looking at the Chronotics data, he had remembered Bernstein's description of that simulation. No one answered.

Dan sorted each stack of cards into rows, using the frequency distribution tables from Bailey's report. It was a pointless, idle kind of thing to do, like playing solitaire. Next door, the team was hard at work getting a fix on a quarter-pound object half-way around the world. By this time they were in satellite-communication with the sub. If his head hadn't been pounding and his shoes hadn't felt like vises, he might have gone in to watch but that would have meant seeing Stafford. And they did not want to look at each other right now.

Jacey had said she had so many cards "because we will also invite noncoms, like it says here." She waved her *Social Guide*. "It promotes *esprit de corps*." Then she had coughed. A cough that wouldn't stop. She complained of something in her throat. They had sat on the floor and leaned against each other, their foreheads touching.

Dan could still feel her veins pulsing against his forehead.

Someone had come up to his desk. He looked up. Stafford was glaring down at Dan and his rows of punch cards. The Colonel's tie was loose, his face and eyes puffy and patched with red.

Dan started to stand.

"Don't bother," Stafford said, clenching his teeth. "You've got some questions to answer. But not now. McKee didn't come in. Didn't answer when they called back. We sent Owens to get him. McKee is dead."

"What?" Dan stood up.

"Shot himself with his own sidearm." Stafford gripped the edge of Dan's desk as if he wanted to turn it over. "Mister, I'll see you at ten hundred hours. You be there."

Dan stared at the identical rows of cards. McKee was dead. It didn't figure. Clearly, Stafford was blaming Dan for something. For going against orders, yes. But something more. Maybe Stafford and McKee were not involved in anything, but somehow this alert had set McKee off. McKee had also not come in for the previous alerts. Dan had never seen McKee on an alert. Had Stafford been protecting McKee from himself? Jacey said it was plain to see that they were protecting McKee. Was McKee ashamed of whatever Stafford and he had been doing? No, somehow Dan couldn't picture McKee taking his life because of a few percentage points in the confidence levels for a safing mechanism. McKee had been with him at Headquarters when he met Andy Perez. That would explain how General Packard had known about Dan talking to a civilian. Maybe the suicide was unrelated to work. McKee lived alone, hardly ever spoke. Maybe it wasn't a suicide.

Dan stepped next door to see if Owens was still around. The office was empty except for some Air Police and Lieutenant Ricks, who was leaning back in his chair against the wall and rubbing his eyes. The crew was all in Command and Control behind the swinging doors with the one-way mirrors. Dan was about to speak to Ricks when Top came out and hurriedly began to leaf through one of the fat green notebooks behind his desk.

"How's it going, Top?" Dan said.

"Not too well at the moment, Captain. Communication problem. The Navy is working with us. It seems you can't reach a sub as easily as an airplane." Top had found what he was looking for and started to return.

"What's the problem?" Dan asked, deliberately ignoring the way he was looking back at the door.

"Well, what we're after is evidently an SSBN, a nuclear ballistic missile submarine like the U.S.S. Will Rogers. It's probably somewhere in the East China Sea, although its last communication was from west of Rota." Top said.

"When was that?" Dan said.

"Several days ago." Top shook his head. "Seems that part of the shell game we play with submarines is that even we don't always know where they are. It's called a Battle Stations Missile Drill, but it may involve an actual launch because that's a standard practice after an overhaul. It only recently came off the tender in Charleston."

"There have to be checkpoints," Dan said.

"Oh, yes." Top said. "The next checkpoint in their sequence list is at six hundred hours."

"Launch time." Dan shook his head.

Top nodded. "It's too late, as far as we're concerned, unless maybe we can somehow get to them through TRANSIT." This was a system of five satellites in circular orbits used since 1964 to track Polaris submarines. "Till then, he seems to be under 50 feet of water, which puts him beyond both periscope depth radio and VLF."

"Isn't there another frequency, lower than VLF? I saw a write-up about it." Dan said.

"Yes sir, here it is." Top held up the update bulletin he had taken from his communications SOP manual. "Called 'extremely low frequency.' They're testing it at Clam Lake, Wisconsin."

"But it won't help us." Dan said.

"No sir." Top said. "Well, I need to get back."

"Top, hang on a minute. When Owens went to get Major McKee, where did he find him?" Dan said.

"Major McKee lived at the BOQ." Top said.

Dan nodded. He should have known. "Any idea why he might have taken his life?"

Top stiffened. He really did not want to talk about this. "Well sir," he paused and then rationed out the remaining words he had to say on this topic. "He spent time as a POW."

"I didn't know," Dan said.

"No sir," Top said, quickly. "The Colonel didn't want us to talk about it. Kept in tiger cages. Three months or so. He didn't talk about it."

"Or anything else," Dan added.

"No sir." Top started toward the door.

"Thanks, Top," Chief Carey was through the swinging doors before Dan had finished speaking.

"Captain?" Dan turned around to face a puzzled Lieutenant Ossie Ricks. "What's going on, Captain? I was called in, but when Colonel Stafford saw me he sent me out here."

"Ricks, right now I don't think either of us would be missed. How about going for another drive?"

0250 hours

22 July 1969

The Air Police were leaving as Ricks drove them up to the BOQ. Dan spoke to a Tech Sergeant getting into a jeep.

"Sergeant, we're from Major McKee's unit. Which room was he in?" Dan said.

"Twenty-two, sir." The sergeant's uniform was immaculate, and he had just noticed Dan's uniform as he stepped under the street light. A red-eyed black Lieutenant and an old, disreputable-looking career Captain. The young sergeant was now studying this pair more carefully. Dan quickly strode past him under the long green canopy leading to the entrance. He didn't want to answer any questions.

Stafford's room was next door to McKee's. The guard at the door was reluctant to admit them until they assured him that he could watch and that they would not touch anything. The room was bigger than Stafford's. There were two beds, both of them turned down, with a window and a chair between them. The chair was crossed by two strips of yellow plastic taped to the wall and floor. The bathroom was shared with the room next door. It was also taped off. The room was neat and spare, no pictures, no clutter on counters, no food. Unlike Stafford, McKee had used the closets and drawers.

The guard was restless, probably deciding he shouldn't have let them in. Dan stood between the beds. He wondered about hair on the pillows. What was he, a detective, he thought. As if he would be able to find a clue. There wasn't even any blood on the chair. Then he saw the gravel, just a few pebbles beside both beds. Two men might have sat on the sides of their beds facing each other and talking. From the window, Dan could see their car in the parking lot below.

"Don't touch the chair, sir." The guard said.

"Did you see Major McKee?" Dan said.

"Yes sir. He was in that chair." The guard was not going to let them out of his sight.

"In uniform?" Dan said.

"No, he was wearing a sport shirt and trousers."

So much for the idea of a ceremonial suicide in full uniform, the kind of thing Dan would have expected from McKee.

"There's no blood," Ricks said, coming up beside Dan.

"No sir." The guard looked uneasily back at his post in the hallway.

"Did you know him very well, Ricks?" Dan asked, reluctant to leave without making sense of the situation.

"No," Ricks said. "When he transferred from Ellsworth I'd only been here a week. They said this was his last rotation. He stayed in his office most of the time. He talked only to Colonel Stafford. He always seemed busy."

"But maybe just to seem busy?" Dan said.

Ricks smiled and lowered his voice. "We got to making jokes about it. You know the way he always carried that old briefcase around." He pointed to a battered brown briefcase propped against the closet door. "We'd say 'McKee's cracking the code to the upstairs latrine.' What he carried in and out every day in his briefcase was a mystery. It might have been a secret code or a change of shorts."

"So, are you about finished now?" The guard frowned. Dan shot a glance at Ricks, who was looking sheepish after his remarks about McKee. The guard was clearly not going to let them search for anything in this room, especially not for anything in the briefcase.

A door shut somewhere in the corridor and the guard went back to the doorway. Dan moved toward the closet. The guard looked back at them.

"Guess we'll be going now," Dan said.

Dan stopped on the landing as they went downstairs. "Ricks, what would you think of driving back to where we left the other car?"

"Sir?" Ricks said.

"You remember how Gaines waved us on and told us not to wait for the car that was to pick him up?" Dan stepped down to the lobby.

Ricks nodded.

"What if Major McKee were driving that car?" Dan said.

"I don't think so, sir." Ricks shook his head.

Dan thought for a moment. "What if he picked up Gaines, turned around and..."

"Tried to run us down, sir?" Ricks nodded slowly. "Maybe he tried to scare us off. But what for?"

Ricks said.

"Humor me, Ricks. Look, this was in his room." Dan showed him the flakes of basalt he had picked up in Stafford's room. "Seen that before?"

"Well, it could be from out on the mesa or around here. Who knows?" Ricks seemed skeptical. He looked up at a bat flying around the light in the parking lot.

"Look at it when we get out there, Ricks. The pebbles in this parking lot are smooth white pebbles from a stream bed, not like this at all. We might be able to find the place where the car turned around. It hasn't been too long since we were out there. If he were going to Trechado, the tracks would be going the other way."

"But why would Colonel Stafford do that?" Ricks said.

"Maybe because I have been too curious," Dan said as they stood by the staff car. He leaned on the trunk. "This car wouldn't have a problem with the fuel gauge?"

"No sir," Ricks grinned.

"Ricks, what did Colonel Stafford say to you tonight?" Dan said.

"Nothing," Ricks said. "He made a point of saying nothing to me and putting someone else at my station; then he pointed me to the door."

"OK, that sounds like a release from duty." Dan said. "Would you do something for me?"

Ricks paused. "OK," he said.

"Leave me at HQ and then drive back out to where we left Gaines." Dan said. "Check on this. See if you can tell whether that car might have turned around."

"And then come after us?" Ricks said.

"Like a bat from hell," Dan nodded. Or a cornered wild weasel.

Ricks twisted his college ring around his finger several times, looked at his feet and took a deep breath.

"Sir, where are we going with this?" he asked quietly.

"I've been trying to figure that out for the last twenty-four hours, Lieutenant. We've had two alerts called. You missed the first one." Dan didn't want to say too much to Ricks about the fuze problem, but he did deserve an explanation. "Colonel Stafford and I disagree about the importance of some defective equipment."

"The safing mechanisms?" Ricks said.

"You know about that?" Dan was surprised.

"Bailey told me about it," Ricks said. "He kept getting calls from some officer at the Pentagon."

"Mike Whittaker, the Special Projects Officer?" Dan said.

"Yes, that was him, a Major Whittaker." Dan saw that Bailey and he were going to have to have another discussion, this one about need-to-know.

"A major pain, Ricks. I don't understand his interest in this. He called several times?" Dan said.

"Bailey said he talked with him off and on for almost an hour and a half." Ricks opened the car door and sat down behind the wheel.

"Anything else?" Dan said.

"Bailey didn't tell me much," Ricks said. "But he said that this Major kept repeating that the values were within acceptable limits and that Ambertech was already investigating problems in their Chronotics Division."

How long did it take before you stopped investigating and started a recall, Dan wondered. The Chronotics record certainly showed a pattern, almost too perfect a pattern.

"Ricks," he said, "I think that there is an agreement to keep quiet about these discrepant data, an agreement between the Ambertech Company and some Air Force officers."

"Our C.O.," Ricks said, looking up at the only two lighted windows in the BOQ, McKee's and Stafford's.

"Yes, and maybe Major McKee too." Dan sat down on the passenger's side.

Ricks nodded. "When Bailey was telling me this I thought that this Major Whittaker seemed to be working more for the company than for the Air Force." They sat quietly in the car for a while. Dan looked at the cones of light around the lamps in the parking lot. The bat was darting in and out of them with all the aerobatics of a fighter pilot. It had been almost twenty-four hours since his first meeting with Milton Gaines, during a tactical alert. Dan had not sworn to protect and defend Ambertech. Neither had Stafford. Whatever he thought about Colonel Stafford, Dan didn't believe that he would have betrayed his oath. There must be more to it. Stafford had told General Packard about his report. He made no attempt to hide it. Packard only became concerned when submarines were mentioned.

"Yes, that bothers me too, Ricks," Dan said. "We have to be able to work with contractors without working for them. But I have stepped over the line already by going to General Packard. I don't need to involve you. There is no decoration for false alarms. Just give me a ride back."

"I'll go, sir." Ricks started the car. "There's something not right about all of this." He pulled out of the lot.

"Thanks, Ricks. My Dad use to say that if the SOPs covered everything you wouldn't need people." Dan suddenly remembered the incident that made his Dad say that. "He was stationed in Europe in November of 1956." Dan said, "It was when the Hungarians revolted. The Soviets were threatening Paris and London over Suez and had sent a communiqué to Washington urging a joint American-Soviet action in Suez. On the evening of the same day, our listening posts in Turkey picked up a hundred MiG-15s flying toward the Mideast. Then a British bomber was brought down in Syria. At the same time, our satellite and air reconnaissance picked up the Soviet fleet moving through the Dardanelles. If we had followed SOP and

automatically responded to our electronic surveillance intelligence, we would have launched nuclear strikes. That was in the NATO operations plan. But there were work-arounds."

"Work-arounds?" Ricks said.

"Yeah, the informal ways to get around or through the obstacles unforeseen by the manuals. More information was collected and radar data were particularly scrutinized. It turned out that the only MiGs in the area were in an escort for the plane of the President of Syria, who was returning from the Soviet Union. The other radar blips were swans, hundreds of them, migrating somewhere. The British bomber had landed under its own power to check out a mechanical problem, and the Soviet fleet's Mediterranean exercises had been planned months before. Bringing all of that information together with the threats in Suez and Hungary had created a false alarm. At the time, NATO worked around that picture by examining each incident independently. My Dad said it went to show what Hap Arnold had said years ago. His duties, he said, were his regulations on how to proceed. Sometimes your duty leads to you to a work-around, even if it isn't in the SOP."

Jacey was right, Dan thought. He didn't know that he remembered his father telling that story. He was glad the car was dark so that Ricks wouldn't see him wiping his eyes

"Sir, can you hear it?" Ricks said.

Dan heard the high, whining siren. The base had been deserted, except for an occasional Air Police jeep, until they got to Headquarters. All the lights were on, and a crowd was in the parking lot while the fire alarm wailed.

"Stop and let me out here, Ricks. You go on," he said. As Dan walked toward the crowd, he looked back and saw another car, maybe an Oldsmobile with the phony jet vents on the side, turning out behind Ricks. Dan saw Bailey in the crowd heading toward the building and ran to catch up to him.

0345 hours

Tuesday, 22 July 1969

Trechado Road

As he drove away from Captain Connors, Ricks noticed the big headlights behind him when he glanced back at Headquarters. The car followed him off base but went onto a side street before he turned left on Lomas. He didn't mind the drive. It gave him some quiet time to collect his thoughts. Maybe that was the problem, the reason he was a gofer in a staff car instead of calling ground control for taxi clearance for his Phantom, he thought. Release the brakes, check the canopy and tanks, advance throttles. You don't have quiet time to collect your thoughts in a Phantom climbing at eleven degrees pitch and three hundred fifty knots.

He had to cut this out and stop this kind of thinking. He'd get his chance, just like Armstrong, who actually flew that sinking rock of a lunar lander, gimbaling to nudge it sideways with the maneuver jets while the descent fuel dropped below ninety seconds. Four hundred feet above the surface, down at nine feet per second; three hundred fifty feet, down at four. Armstrong didn't think about it. He just did it. "Ain't no damn gas stations on the moon," Flight said from Houston. When the four feet of the Eagle touched the surface he had sixteen seconds of fuel left. Ricks looked at the barren mesa country. This was where Ossian Ricks had touched down.

Somewhere between Laguna and McCarty's, Ricks saw headlights in the rear-view mirror. The sweet smell of piñon pine smoke came through the open windows. It was the first car he'd seen since leaving Albuquerque. There was something familiar about those headlights and that fancy grille. It wasn't slowing down and it wasn't passing.

Some kid was playing chicken, Ricks thought. To get away from the other driver, Ricks drove onto the shoulder, the front-end bumping up and down as he slowed down. Not so good for the shocks, he thought. The other car was an Olds. It followed him onto the shoulder without slowing. There was no room to pass. The big Olds loomed in his rear-view mirror. He swung left, pelting the Olds with gravel as he spun the tires and climbed back onto the road. The Olds barely kissed his right fender. But Ricks didn't notice. He was looking straight ahead at the guardrail he was about to smash through.

0345 hours

Headquarters, DASA

Tuesday, 22 July 1969

Dan had just caught up with the small crowd returning to the Headquarters building as the alarm stopped and Top waved them inside. The towering Bailey was easy to spot.

“How long has this been going on?” Dan shouted to Bailey.

“Only about five minutes, Captain,” Bailey said. There must have been a mistake somewhere. Top looks disgusted.”

"Les." Dan stopped so that he would not have to keep up with Bailey, "Tell me what the Special Projects Officer told you."

"Major Whittaker." Bailey shook his head. "He said that the discrepancies in the data were within normal limits and that Ambertech was already handling it. But why would they need to investigate anything if it were within normal limits?"

"Did you ask that?" Dan said.

"Yes. He said that there were often new design developments that made one sample-lot somewhat incomparable to the previous lot. He said that meant that you had to splice the learning curve."

"What?" Dan said.

"Yeah, I asked the same thing. Then he went into this long description about his responsibility for justifying costs of subcontractors and how important it was and how specialized it was." Bailey shook his head again.

Bailey and Dan were standing alone in front of the building. Bailey looked toward the door. Dan nodded and they began walking slowly up the steps.

"He said that an SPO had to take these improved designs into account when the costs rose," Bailey said. "Because otherwise you would expect that as a contractor learned to be more efficient in making a product, the cost would go down. There would be less time spent in making more products."

"That's the learning curve," Dan said. "The less touch-labor, the less time, the lower the cost. But what's 'splicing'?"

"Well, as I understood it, splicing is when you back up on the learning curve because the product has been slightly changed."

"So the cost stays high. Let me get this straight," Dan said. "These defects in the batteries are not significant because the batteries are really improved versions and therefore their sample-lots are not quite comparable to the other lots?"

Bailey nodded. They were standing in the doorway.

"Does that make sense to you, Bailey?" Dan said.

"No sir," said Bailey, not knowing whether to look at Dan or back at Top, who was herding everyone back inside.

"Me neither." Dan stared into the empty orderly room.

"Captain, I have to return to my station," Bailey said nervously.

"Sure. Go ahead. Thanks." Dan said.

Bailey crossed the lobby in two strides and disappeared behind the striped door. Dan followed him. The chaos of a few minutes earlier had disappeared. No one but the guard seemed to notice Dan coming in. Everyone in the room was focused on a computer console or a clipboard. They didn't need his help. The fact that Ambertech kept its price up by claiming to make continuous product improvements was no more startling, he supposed, than the assertions of any salesman or front-man for cornflakes or used cars or this year's model of toaster ovens. What was disturbing was that these claims were allowed to compromise the reliability of some very special "products" on which all of them, and national security, depended. The military lived by duty and the protocols it demanded, but apparently they depended upon companies like Ambertech and SPOs who spliced learning curves.

Colonel Stafford was not in the room. General Packard held a cup of coffee as he studied the situation board. Bailey was on the phone at his station, as were most of the civilians. Top Carey had taken the place at an affydis computer, part of the Air Force Intelligence Data Handling System. One of the airmen stood behind, watching the code scroll as Top sorted out a problem. There was an aching quietness in the room, as if the only sounds allowed were the hushed voices of those on the phones.

Dan went back to the orderly room.

An Airman Green that he didn't know was at the desk. Owens had finally been relieved.

"Where was the fire, Airman Green?" Dan said.

"There was no fire, sir." He looked with disgust down the hall. "Chief Carey found that a custodian must have been washing the wall near one of the fire alarm boxes in the hall. Some of the water got into the box and closed a circuit. That set off the alarm." He pointed to a bucket in the hall near Colonel Stafford's office.

Dan nodded and walked down the hall to take a look. A sponge lay on the floor by the baseboard under the fire alarm box. Stafford's office was dark.

"Colonel Stafford is gone?" Dan came back to Green's desk.

"Yes, he went to the post fire-house and then to the Air Police Station." Green said.

"Anyone see the custodian?" Dan said.

"No sir, Chief Carey said his shift had just ended."

So just before the end of your shift you decide to wash the wall above a fire alarm, Dan thought. And you leave a wet sponge on the alarm and a bucket of water conveniently nearby. Not likely. Green suddenly looked at Dan's nameplate.

"Sir, there were some messages" He handed Dan two phone memos. One was from Major Whittaker. He had called at two in the morning, five o'clock Whittaker's time. Let him stew for a while, Dan thought. The other call was from Bernstein at Sandia Corporation. That one Dan would return.

Top burst through the striped door, looked down the hall toward Stafford's dark office and turned to go back into the Control room. Then he saw Dan and smiled. "We got him, sir," he said.

"The sub?" Dan stood.

"Yes sir," he said. "It was touch-and-go for a while. We'd just gotten a comlink with WIMEX when a Soviet trawler must have cut one of the SOSUS lines. Then we had that damn fire-drill." He glanced at the fire alarm. "But the sub surfaced early to contact the carrier group. That's when we reined him in."

"Outstanding, Chief Carey." Even as Dan was speaking, Top was going back inside. He was not one to stand around for praise. It was just part of the job.

But Dan now suspected there had been no reason for all of this effort.

0700 hours

Tuesday

22 July 1969

After talking with Bernstein, Dan went home to pack. But once inside the door, he sank into the sofa in the living room and stared at their new wallpaper. He dared not lie down or he would be out for the next day. Avoiding sleep was one thing; getting rest, something else. His bag was already packed because he had never unpacked. He had simply dropped it by the door after coming back from Lowry. He could rest for a few minutes.

The house was left as it was the night that Jacey left. Her cards were still spread over the dining room table. The reprint of the 1947 article about tire serial numbers from the *Journal of the American Statistical Association* was still on the coffee table. General Packard had not been terribly impressed by Dan's knowledge of Second World War trivia. Jacey's clothes were scattered around the bedroom. Her sweater was next to him on the sofa. She'd bought it in Frankfurt on a cold walk from the train station.

"Next to him..." He still could not remember what she had said. She had been arranging her name cards around the dining room table when she said offhandedly, "Mrs. Stafford always sat Major McKee between them. Didn't you notice?" Of course, he hadn't noticed. His only interest at that unpleasant dinner party was in discovering the earliest possible time to depart politely. "I noticed it first at dinner," Jacey had said, "because it was so strange to have the three of them facing us across the table with the Major between them. Then, after dinner, he sat between them on the couch; or, rather, they came and sat on either side of him. Next to him. As if they were..."

"As if they were guarding his flanks?" Dan had said.

"If you want to be flip." Jacey had pouted, tossed her sweater on the sofa, and gone back to her cards. But she was right. It *was* peculiar. McKee never seemed to be given much to do, as if Stafford were also protecting him at work. McKee had always seemed to be somewhere else, except when he helped Dan to process-in and, of course, when his signature was needed. Both McKee and Stafford had come from Ellsworth. Six months apart. Maybe Stafford was not protecting him. Maybe he was keeping him quiet.

The sweater still had the "Made in West Germany" tag in the collar. Jacey even left the store-tags attached to a linen table cloth they had bought in Shannon Airport on the way back. She said she kept the tags because they show we were actually there. She was so surprised that her coat wasn't warm enough when they got off the train in Frankfurt. "You know we're almost the same latitude as Quebec," Dan had said. She was shivering. They went into some department store. And she found this sweater. She had always been thin and pale but full of energy. No listless, glassy-eyed pining-about for her. When she packed

to go to the hospital, the last thing she told Dan to do was to clean up after himself. He took the sweater to his flight-bag and zipped it into the side-pouch. He was glad that Jacey was not here to see the plates with chili stains in the kitchen and the clothes scattered around the house. He would clean it up, but first he needed to see her. No, first he had to finish.

They'd found the submarine in time. The missile components were off-line. No incident, no Dull Sword. But Dan was now willing to bet that when those batteries were removed from the safing mechanisms they would be in perfect condition. What bothered him was not that Stafford was going to use this fact to clobber him for having raised a false alarm and broken chain of command, but that this fact made the whole business about the sample discrepancies, Gaines and Whittaker, the car bearing down on Ricks and him, Stafford's peculiar behavior, and the death of McKee all even more sinister than he had imagined. Dan didn't seem to be any closer to an explanation than he had been twenty-four hours earlier.

After a shower and shave, he put on a fresh uniform, grabbed his flight bag, and went out. The phone rang just as he shut the door. By the time he had dropped the bag and let himself back in, the ringing had stopped. If it were the doctor, he didn't want to know. He'd be in Denver soon enough. Stafford or no Stafford, he wasn't going to wait until their appointment to be bawled out. They could get that over now. He threw the bag into the car and backed down the driveway.

Maybe it was Andy Perez. He couldn't take the time to see him today. He might have been calling about lunch or about whatever it was he wanted to tell him. Probably he had less to tell than he hoped to get from Dan. It was almost eight hundred hours. Andy was a late riser. When they were in school, Dan waited outside Andy's house every morning for ten or fifteen minutes. They always walked into school as the warning bell was ringing. Andy would still be in bed.

Dan changed his mind and turned down Candelaria. He decided to drop in on Andy Perez on his way back to the base. Maybe this time Dan would be the one to pump some information.

0815 hours

Tuesday

22 July 1969

Andy still lived in his mother's small white sandstone house on Candelaria, but now he lived alone and had a "P.C." after his name on the mailbox. From the porch, Dan heard a piano inside. Andy came to the door fully dressed and nonplussed. He bowed graciously and waved Dan inside as if this were precisely the time he expected to see him. So much for getting the drop on Andy Perez, counselor-at-law.

"Let's go to the patio," Andy said, turning off the record player. "Albeniz, Dan," he said, putting the record into its jacket. "The *Cadiz Gaditana*. Eh?" He shook his head. "Same old Dan. Let's have some juice. Too early for brew, but I have some Dos Esquis if you want."

"Juice is fine, Andy. Sorry to bother you so early, but I have a plane to catch to Colorado this afternoon." He poured Dan a glass of orange juice in the kitchen and led him onto the airy patio and sleeping-porch. "You added this patio?"

"Yes, in Mama's last year. She had her chaser chair out here in the morning." Andy said.

"Chaser chair?" Dan said.

"TB—chasing the cure." Andy sat down. "You know. She'd never gotten over it."

"I'm sorry, Andy. I didn't know," Dan said.

"It's OK" Andy said. "After so many years, the TB was like a little brother. At least she never had to go to a sanatorium. She died on this patio a year ago."

For just a moment, Andy Perez looked old, his handsome cheeks just a little hollow, his bronze skin a little waxy, his sharp black eyes a little dull. "So you're going on vacation. You call it TDY. And leaving your old pal." He sipped his drink.

"No, my wife's in the hospital. Jacey. You haven't met her yet. She has TB. It doesn't look so good right now." Dan said.

Andy's eyebrows rose. His eyes shone. "I'm truly sorry, Dan. Maybe it's better than you think. There's better treatment now. They used to collapse the lung in those days. Mama had repeated infections in both lungs, bilateral, the doctors call it, many relapses over many years. She was a bed case in the forties. That's why we came to Albuquerque. They used to say there were only two businesses in Albuquerque—the Santa Fe Railroad and tuberculosis. We were the only city in the country that had TB-boosters. Jacey will be OK. You'll see."

He got up, patted Dan on the back, and went into the kitchen, quickly returning with a bottle of bourbon. "It's not too early for a little maize? Good. Let's goose the juice." Dan nodded and Andy poured some of the bourbon into his glass. "We both need it," Andy said.

After a few swallows, the warmth in the back of his throat, and the accumulated sleep-debt of several days threatened to stretch Dan out on Andy's patio for the next twenty hours or so. He stood up and began pacing to clear his head.

"I should go," Dan said.

"But you don't have what you came for, *complice*," Andy said, looking unperturbed by the bourbon.

"What do you mean?" Dan said.

"Ever heard of the Tin Balloon?" Andy said.

"Something in the news about a cargo plane? Congressional hearings?" Dan said.

"Current events never were your strong point, were they, Dan? It was called the C-5A Galaxy. Last November, a whistle-blower complained to a Congressional committee about Air Force overspending. Even with a new administration, Defense Secretary, and Air Force Chief of the Joint Chiefs, the extra scrutiny has unsettled all the defense contractors. Not just the prime contractors, either. All of the little fish around here are worried too. You know, like Navaguard, Ambertech and Keneally."

"Ambertech?" Dan said.

Andy's eyebrows rose. One point for Perez.

"They're sweeping away their tracks," he said. "The Ambertech-Maynard-Chronotics Group has lost no time in mailing out flyers and surveys to all the local and federal representatives from the Four Corners States. Fat stats from fat cats." Andy sipped his drink. Dan kept quiet.

"Anyway," Andy said. "They're sending out boiler-plate to the effect that employment, profit-sharing, community involvement and, of course, their national interest, which comes from a different kind of principal than you believe in, Daniel, all ride on keeping them in business. Votes, money, leverage, anything they can use, is worth the cost. I have the impression, just as a bystander, you know, that they are now checking out their weak links. They don't want any ambivalent state officials in Santa Fe or any strains on their military links." He stared straight into Dan's eyes.

Dan kept quiet.

"That's where your Colonel Stafford comes in, I think." Andy said. "A busy man, Vern Stafford. From what they tell me in Santa Fe, Vern has been very helpful, in a very informal way, of course, in explaining the position of poor defenseless Ambertech."

"Wait a minute." Dan said. "You're telling me that Colonel Stafford is lobbying for Ambertech?"

"Just thought you'd like to know, *compadre*." Andy's solemn expression and twinkling eyes caught Dan off guard even when he knew what he was doing.

"What's your proof?" Dan said.

"It's not that easy. This is the kind of lobbying that goes on over golf and company picnics and quiet dinners at *La Placita* in Old Town. Word is that Vern may join Ambertech when he retires. Pretty soon, isn't it? You know: the revolving door. I do the contract work for the State Corporation Commission. They're very interested in Ambertech. There's an internal company feud going on that may end in a split-off of Chronotics. The name of Vernon Stafford has been coming up for the last two years, even before he came to Albuquerque."

So Stafford had met up with Ambertech in Ellsworth. Maybe McKee did too.

"Then whose name should I find," Perez said, "on Vern's staff roster, when the Post Commander finally allowed me to look, but my old *complice*, Daniel Connors."

"I've got to go now, Andy. It's been, uh, interesting." Dan said. "See you when I get back. Don't get up." Perez half-stood as Dan stumbled backwards out the patio door and walked around the house to the driveway. Dan thought he heard Andy laughing.

0915 hours

Tuesday

22 July 1969

The combined effects of the fortified orange juice and an aching sleepiness made it hard for Dan to drive with his eyes open. He tried to walk normally through the front door of Headquarters, but Owens was back on the front desk, and Owens had come to expect the abnormal from Dan.

"Sir, I heard you were on leave," Owens said.

"Yes, but Colonel Stafford wanted to see me." And Dan wanted to see him. Dan looked at Ricks's empty desk. "Has Lieutenant Ricks been in?"

"No sir." Owens said.

"No calls?" Dan said.

"There were several calls from a Major Whittaker," Owens said.

Yes, Dan thought. And he was not going to answer them. Ricks should have been back by this time. For that matter, Dan wondered where Stafford was.

"Is Colonel Stafford here?" Dan said.

"His light's on, sir, but I haven't seen him." They both looked down the hall. Dan noticed that the sponge and bucket were gone. The fire alarm had made it very convenient for Stafford to leave. The question was what was important enough for him to leave during an alert when General Packard was present and his own judgment had been questioned by a junior officer. Somehow, Dan did not believe that Stafford had suddenly gone to chat with the Post Fire Chief. Maybe he had gone back to the BOQ. Perhaps he was after McKee's briefcase. Dan wondered whether all of this sinister business was just in a day's work, or whether there had there been crimes and then other crimes to hide them.

0930 hours

Tuesday, July 22, 1969

Trechado Road

Second Lieutenant Ossian Washington Ricks dreamed he was standing back on Paxinosa Ridge, where he had biked up from Easton every Friday night after bussing in the diner. No school next day, so it was all right, his mother had agreed. Unlike the college boys who brought their dates up here or his friends from the flats who came up for the steep long ride down, Ossie came here to look at the stars. It was clear and dark and it stayed dark. No trains or trucks passed by and no heat from city streets made the faint stars

into boiling blobs in his three-inch lens. It was cool and high on the Ridge. Any people who came there to see the sun set on the countryside left the boy alone with his homemade telescope and tripod.

When he woke up, he was still alone, but he wasn't in Easton any more. He was trying to drive away the pain in his ankle and chest by thinking about those cold Friday nights on Paxinosa Ridge and those stars.

He was lying on his right side against the passenger door, where he'd been thrown when he swerved right as the car hit the bridge abutment. As the car had plowed into the small concrete post, Ricks was thrown into the wheel and then downward onto the door, where he hit his head on the stanchion. Slamming his foot down on the brake, he had heard a cracking sound as a jab of pain shot up his leg. He awoke crumpled on the passenger window. He was trying not to think about the pain that movement was causing him. He had to get out. But he had to think. He pulled on the steering wheel with both hands until he was wedged between the seat and the dashboard, or what was left of it. The driver window had been open. He would not have been up to pushing the door open right now. That would have required feet. This was a pulling operation. He could manage that, broken ribs or not.

He would pull himself through the driver's window and try to slide to the ground. He wasn't moving. Something was catching: Looking down, he saw his useless, dangling right foot caught on the passenger door latch. He kicked it loose with his left foot, scattering broken bits of glass on the door, and kept pulling up through the window. As he squeezed through the door, the car shivered and teetered. He stopped. This stopping, this hanging half-through the door with his arms straining and sides aching, was more difficult than anything he had done.

When the car stopped swaying, he pulled up enough to sit down on the edge of the roof. For the first time, he looked around. No cars. Only the black road and the black rock, like the black night sky and the stars. He looked for the other car but it was gone. There was no easy way to get down. The ditch was on the right and the road on the left. Land on the road and the car might fall on him. Go over the roof into the ditch

and he would have a long drop, probably landing on that damn black rock, and the car might fall on him anyway. He carefully pulled out his right leg and then lay lengthwise on the side of the car. Pulling with his fingers on the guttering and pushing with his left foot, he slid to the trunk and looked down. Four feet or so. He pushed off hard with his left leg, holding his head and curling his back to make a good judo fall.

It would have been a perfect fall if he hadn't landed with a rock between his shoulder blades and snagged his right trouser-leg on the bumper. He shrieked when the bumper tugged on his ankle as the car tipped and fell with a great thump and whoosh of dust.

Once on the ground behind it, Ricks could see that the car had been canted by the way it had struck the abutment. A light wind could have toppled it while he was slithering across the side. As it was, he had only ripped his trousers again. Grabbing the right rear bumper, he pulled himself up the fender to a standing position. He inhaled the strong aroma of pine smoke coming from the north side of the road, where the rocky landscape was interrupted by some small grassy hills. Brown grass, of course, not like in Pennsylvania. On one of the hills, surrounded by white bushes of some kind, two men wearing wide-brimmed black hats were standing around a thin column of smoke. They were looking his way. Then he looked down and saw the ditch and the shining green Olds lying on its side and half-buried in the bank with a cottonwood branch poking from the tire-well. A small hand was waving feebly from the driver's side. He knew that Olds. He'd seen it arrive in the morning and leave at night. It was the car of Colonel Vernon Stafford.

1000 hours

Tuesday

July 22, 1969

Dan looked down the hall and saw Stafford coming downstairs from General Packard's office. When he saw Dan, Stafford shouted across the orderly room "Connors. You're early. Good. Let's get this over with."

Dan wanted to walk out the front door onto a cargo plane. Maybe if he kept his mouth shut he could come through this, but he knew himself better than that. As he went down the hall, the eyes of the Secretaries of Defense and the Air Force stared at him from the walls.

Stafford stared straight through him when he reached the doorway. Hadn't he heard about some colonel dropping dead in front of the desk after Hap Arnold had dressed him down? Stafford sat ramrod straight with his forearms on the desk like a judge at a military tribunal who was preparing to read the sentence.

"Come in, Connors. Shut the door." Stafford barked. Before Dan had closed the door, Stafford was shouting.

"I don't think you know what you've been doing but you sure as hell haven't been following orders." The morning light struck Stafford's fierce blue eyes from the side and for the first time, Dan noticed a cloudy object behind the menacing stare. Stafford stood up and came around the desk, his face a foot away from Dan's.

"From the time you came, you've been going behind my back and making your damned reports, complaining to the civilians and noncoms, brown-nosing the brass. You go take your leave, mister. When you come back, you're gonna be spending more time in the JAG office than in the latrine. I intend to bring you up on so many charges you'll wish you'd never seen..." His voice cracked. Stafford was beet-red. Very quietly, talking through clenched teeth, he pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Captain."

Dan already wished he hadn't ever seen Stafford or McKee or any of this business. Selling leisure suits and form-fitted bras seemed like an attractive career move.

Stafford pulled his chair close to Dan's, facing away from the door that had swung open half-way. His soft speech was more menacing than the shouting had been.

"I have been covering for McKee for months. The discrepancies you found didn't amount to piss in a boot. Hadn't McKee gone through enough? Wasn't he entitled? Hell, they spat on him in Oakland, just like they thought all of the prisoners back from Korea had been brain-washed. What were you doing at the BOQ? Yes, I know all about that. The APs told me all about it. And you took Ricks off his duty station without permission, Captain Connors." He bit the words off and pushed close enough for Dan to smell the

whiskey. "When you get back, you can just clean out your desk and get ready for a trip to Southeast Asia. You couldn't stop. You put us through an alert and got old Pepper in on it. Well, I filled him in on your record. How you spent your time kissing up to civilians and wetback lawyers and tried to make deals with Gaines and Whittaker. They've got your number, too. Hell, what do you know? I've known I wanted to fly since D-Day and since I saw that B-25 smash into the Empire State Building in forty-five. Hell, that was the day I came over from the Bronx to sign up." Stafford had slipped back in his chair but he still had a white-knuckle grip on the arm of Dan's chair.

"Where were you, Connors? A piss-ant in diapers." he spat out the words. "Then they say I can't see to fly and I'm supposed to finish up on this bottle brigade with nothing to show for it, me and McKee together. Mister, you were not fit to wipe Jim McKee's rear end. He deserved better. We all deserved better."

Stafford had no peripheral vision, Dan concluded. General Packard and Owens had been standing in the doorway for several minutes, waiting for him to stop or notice them.

"Hell, LeMay had it right all along. You think we're going to ask permission from the brass and the suits so they can 'package' a second strike for us? We gonna wait around for that? Ask permission for a first strike? Hell no! Before those fatasses will let it loose they have to be scared."

Stafford stopped in mid-sentence as General Packard stood in front of him. Owens was hovering around the door.

"Colonel Stafford. Vern, there's been an accident." Packard glanced at Dan, who took the cue and left, pulling the door shut behind him. Dan's relief was short-lived. Once in the hallway, he was face to face with Lieutenant Ricks.

Lieutenant Ricks leaned on a crutch made of a short length of two-by-four. His right foot was wrapped in a towel, his shirt was torn and bloody, and his trousers were muddy. But the main thing Dan noticed was the smell. Ossie smelled like he'd been dragged through sheep-dip.

"Two Class-As in two days, Captain," he grinned. "You're spoiling my wardrobe." Ricks was wide-eyed and wobbly.

"Come sit down, Lieutenant. Let's get out of the hall." Dan said as he and Owens took Ricks by the arms and led him to Owens's chair.

"Owens, we need a medic here," Dan said.

"On the way, sir." Owens said.

"He called when he saw me," Ricks said. "Remind me to buy a wool suit next payday. I got another ride from a sheep rancher, a Navajo this time. He brought me right to our front door."

"What happened?" Dan said.

"Let's just say I touched down with enough fuel to get back, sir. But there is one thing you should know"

Two blue-smocked corpsmen appeared, wheeling a gurney between them. They had arrived none too soon from the look in Ricks's eyes. They lifted him onto the gurney. He sat on the edge and wouldn't lie down, grabbing Dan's arm. "You didn't get my call. I wanted you to see her." So it was Ricks who had called him.

"Ricks, it can wait. Lie back for these guys," Dan said.

"No, wait." Ricks pulled Dan closer and whispered. "The driver both times was Stafford's wife."

"What?" Dan said. He wanted to know more, but Ricks was being strapped down.

"Let's go." One of the corpsmen was shouting to the other. "He's real shocky."

Dan didn't get it. Milly Stafford?

"Let go, sir!" The medics were tugging Dan's hand away from Ricks, who had closed his eyes. Dan suddenly realized he was in the way.

"Sorry! See you later, Ricks." Dan started to follow them to the ambulance. Someone bumped him aside and rushed out the door ahead of the stretcher. It was Stafford, running to his car. Dan started out again and heard his name shouted.

"Captain Connors!" Packard shouted a second time. Dan suspected he would now discover the reason for the General's nickname. "One moment, Captain Connors," Packard said, leading him back into Stafford's office.

Packard sat on the edge of the desk and motioned for Dan to sit down. At least he wasn't going to be in Dan's face the way Stafford had been.

"I know that you have a flight to catch, Connors, but we have some things to sort out before you go."

"Yes, sir."

"Colonel Stafford is not satisfied with your performance." He paused. Dan had no reply. "He wants the Judge Advocate General's office in on this and I tend to agree."

Dan's heart sank. He stared at the two little bars on the cloth cap he was holding.

"But I think Colonel Stafford will be taking an early retirement before that happens." Packard frowned and studied one of the photographs hanging on the wall. It was a black and white picture of Stafford and his crew standing in front of a B-29 Superfortess. A lean Stafford, with his cap at a jaunty angle, surrounded by his crew, he had no jowls and seemed to have a full head of hair. Packard pointed to the photograph. "That was after a night bombing mission at Supong. I was there. We saw things differently then. Remember the Vernon Stafford in that picture."

It was quiet enough to hear the distant siren of the ambulance carrying Ricks to the base hospital. After it died away, the General spoke again. "I just got off the phone to Sam Bernstein at Sandia Corporation. He agrees with your evaluation of the data. He ran the data through the mainframe and says the chance that different Chronotics components would be defective in the same way, in the same

distribution, month after month, was vanishingly small. Something about a poisson. French for 'fish,' isn't it?"

"The Poisson distribution, sir. Statisticians use it all the time." Statisticians, Dan thought, like Milton Gaines. "It comes from a work entitled *Research on Judgment* by a French mathematician. But it was the serial numbers that caught my attention, probably because I'd been reading an old article about the study of serial numbers of captured German tanks and tires that made it possible for the Economic Warfare Division to pinpoint major manufacturing centers for strategic bombing in 1943. Like those numbers for tank serial bands, the numbers on the defective batteries for the safing mechanisms were not scattered throughout the sample block. They were always within the first fifty serials in a block; that made me look harder at previous Chronotics data, and that's when I noticed the Poisson pattern of the defects. It was as if someone had arranged for the data always to be slightly defective in the same way; yet the pattern was similar regardless of whether the components were in the fuze or in some other system."

"And the pattern began with Colonel Stafford and Major McKee," Packard said.

"Yes sir, I didn't find any irregularities in the previous years."

"Nor did Bernstein, Bailey, or Chief Carey." Packard nodded and stood. Dan stood up at once. So he had checked up on him. This was it.

"Connors," the General said, with a last grim glance at the old photograph, "this was fine work. Outstanding." He paused and Dan quietly exhaled. "General Eisenhower once said that this Cold War would be won by restraint. Some of us found that hard to take. But restraint is the game plan, neither caving in to the so-called peace lovers nor to the fear that would lead to pre-emptive strikes. Just daily restraint and measurement and quality work, crews scrambling into the air and aborting every mission; B-52s that have never dropped their deadly payloads. We held back in Korea and we're still holding back because only those who understand warfare can want peace enough to show restraint. When the billions we force our enemy to spend on armaments have finally made this a war of economics, we shall win it, maybe not until

the end of the century. There will be many false alarms, but we will win it. When that happens, it will be about as unnoticeable as this operation has been. Some will say it was a miracle we didn't use nuclear weapons. The last B-52 will be retired without ever completing its mission. The last ICBM will be disassembled, not detonated. And some will say it was a miracle, Connors." Packard's voice had been perfectly even, perfectly calm. He stared straight into Dan's eyes. "It won't be a miracle, Dan. It will be because thousands of troops like you and Top and your Dad have done their duty."

1400 hours

Tuesday, 22 July 1969

Lowry AFB

Sometime he should have slept. Sometime in the long wait, the flight to Lowry, and the interminable taxi ride to Fitzsimmons, he should have stopped thinking and slept. But the pieces had to fall into place; even as sleepy as he was, Dan could not stop thinking about them.

Milly Stafford drove the car. That changed everything. The whole story about their divorce was an act. Jacey had been right. She said they seemed to be protecting McKee and keeping him from talking or breaking down. He was so loosely wound that they didn't know how long he would last.

She had told Dan that Stafford was abandoning her and the children, but the children had all graduated from college. He had seen their graduation pictures on Stafford's desk. Stafford hadn't gone to the BOQ to get away from Milly. As Dan and Ricks had discovered, she wasn't that easy to get away from. She had too much invested in Stafford's career and retirement plans. They needed each other to pull it off. Milly was more vigilant than any wing man Stafford ever had.

Stafford had gone to the BOQ to keep a hook in McKee. When McKee heard what Dan had discovered, he went out of his head. It was all over and there wasn't any pot of gold at the end of his rainbow. Instead, there was a cell—another cage. Maybe that tipped McKee's shaky balance. For whatever reason, McKee lost it. And Stafford had a problem.

McKee was probably listening in the bathroom when Dan talked to Stafford after the car incident, Dan thought. He would have picked up Gaines. Gaines went along to make sure that McKee would hold up his end. After hearing Stafford's conversation with Dan, McKee went back to his room and began to unravel. Maybe that was when Stafford brought Milly over to help him with McKee. They tried to talk to McKee and settle him down, but somehow he got the gun and settled things his own way. They tried to clean up. Maybe they were looking for something. Maybe that was why Stafford set off the fire alarm. No, he would already have had a chance to go through the briefcase. It wasn't until Owens was sent to get McKee that anyone even knew about the suicide. They had had plenty of time to clean up before that.

Stafford had to leave because of something that happened later, maybe because of Dan and Ricks going to McKee's room. Maybe Milly had been left at the BOQ without a car when Stafford had to report back unexpectedly for the alert. She would have been in Stafford's room while McKee's corpse sat next door in the chair by the window. Later, she must have been in Stafford's room when Dan and Ricks visited and talked about going back to the Trechado Road.

Milly had called Stafford to meet her. She had somehow gotten out ahead of them. There had been a noise in the corridor while the guard was talking to them. That was probably when she had left.

Stafford needed to find a way to get away from the alert so that he could take her the car. Dousing the fire alarm wasn't much of an idea but it served its purpose. Stafford brought her back to Headquarters and Milly then took off after Ricks. Meanwhile, Stafford took a staff car for his visits to the Fire Station and Air Police. Whatever the deal had been with Milton Gaines, Milly Stafford had been a full partner.

Dan would not be surprised to learn that Gaines and Whittaker would profit from the purchase of shares of the Chronotics Division when it split from Ambertech. The losses in that division had probably been arranged to be spread out over several quarters. Gaines would claim that there was a continuing quality control problem in the military contracts of Chronotics.

It was just enough of a problem to lower the value and market share. The Tin Balloon scandal made it even more desirable to dispose of weak operations like Chronotics. Stafford and McKee were probably in it for the revolving door into a good retirement income. Dan doubted that they had bought any Chronotics stock. Gaines would have assured them, as he had probably assured Whittaker, that there weren't really any defects and that no one would be hurt. They just had to sign off on some low-level fictitious discrepancies of a minor component. It was just a bottle-watching operation anyway. It didn't compromise the mission; it didn't hurt anyone, and it made their futures a little brighter. In Stafford, bitter about being grounded because of his cataracts, and in McKee, still one of the walking wounded from his Viet Cong experience, Milton Gaines had found the perfect agents to help him carry out his corporate career plans.

Since Chronotics also made navigational equipment, Gaines had probably met Stafford at Ellsworth when he was coordinating the standardizing flights used to test instruments. After recruiting Stafford and Milly for his scheme, Gaines may even have suggested that Stafford should request reassignment to Kirtland for his last rotation.

Gaines was on his way to Prime. Prime rep for the prime contractor. And he had his recruits and Special Projects Officer to “nourish” those contracts. No wonder he was available at all hours and dropped by to chat and attend alerts.

Dan doubted that Milly had driven the first time. That was probably only McKee and Gaines. After Ricks and Dan had left Gaines, they waited for the car to stop, as Stafford had promised it would. Then they came after them, just to give Ricks and Dan a scare. Stafford and Gaines figured that with his wife so sick, and with the trouble he was getting for his discrepancy report, Dan would let the matter drop and go on leave. McKee didn't believe it, however. He'd done enough spying on Dan to know that wasn't going to happen. That's when he began to unravel.

"Sir, we're at Fitzsimmons. We're here, Captain," the driver said, studying his groggy passenger.

"Thanks," Dan said, shaking his head and rubbing his neck. "Guess I was dozing."

"Passed out, more like it," the driver said.

"Yeah, well, keep this," Dan said, handing him twice the fare. He couldn't get out of the cab fast enough. The automatic doors at the entrance didn't open fast enough. The elevator didn't rise fast enough. His legs didn't move fast enough. Dan raced past the nursing station to Jacey's room. The door was open. He went in.

The room was empty.

The room had been scrubbed with a strong-smelling antiseptic. He dropped his flight bag. The closet and drawers were open and emptied, the mattress stripped of bedding. A green metal Oxygen tank stood on a hand-cart in the corner; tubing dangled uselessly at its sides.

Jacey was gone.

As much as he had hurried to get to this room, Dan was now unwilling to ask anyone what had happened. He didn't want to know. You don't ask permission for a first strike. You only get one chance.

If you have to do it, you do it. There was no way to "package" the targets. He'd let her down and now she was gone. That last medication with its damn ricocheting side-effects had done it. If he'd been here instead of arguing with Stafford, he wouldn't have given permission. Maybe she'd begun to cough and choke and he could have been here to help her. If he'd been her. But he'd lost it. He'd lost her. What Stafford

and McKee had done would have been discovered without him, and even if it hadn't been, it wouldn't have mattered because the components weren't defective anyway. It all seemed pretty pointless.

"Sir, you can't wait in here." A stocky corpsman strode in to take possession of the room. "Please go to the lobby," he said. He tipped the Oxygen tank and wheeled it to the doorway. He kept his eyes on Dan and waited until he moved in front of the Oxygen tank. Dan dumbly left the room and walked back to the nursing station. No one was around.

Across the hall from the station, in a single room with the door open, the long rays of the afternoon sun fell on the long brown hair of a patient under an Oxygen tent. The hand-written nameplate on the door read "Connors."

"Quiet now, she's finally asleep." A nurse stopped him at the door, blocking his way with a medicine cart.

"I'll just sit by the window," Dan said. He restrained himself from pulling her cart and pills out of his way as he squeezed between her and the door jamb with his flight bag.

Jacey lay on her side, her chest rising and falling steadily. Dan quietly pulled a chair to the bed close enough to watch her face while she slept. He would tell her why he had not come before. Her freckles had disappeared. To hell with need-to-know. If Jacey didn't need to know, who did, he thought. As if it mattered. Work-arounds—hell, Dan thought, It had all been a run-around.

Dan knew there was little he could say to Jacey about what had happened, maybe only that she'd been wrong about the Staffords. They were certainly faithful to each other in their own way, even if they did despise each other. But there was little he could say about the rest of it. Maybe just joke that now she would only have to plan the "Hail" part of the dinner party. "What happened?" she would ask. "Oh, just some office stuff," he would say, "and, by the way, we stopped a submarine from causing an international incident, exposed an illegal operation by a military contractor, and flew to the moon."

No, he couldn't say much of anything, even if there hadn't been a ten thousand dollar fine and prison sentence. He wanted to say, "Forgive me, Jacey." But she would say, "For what?" And he wouldn't have an answer, just as his father never quite had an answer.

Dad had once taken him and his mother to an air show. His father was a Captain then. Dan didn't remember where they were stationed. After an hour or so of climbing in and out of jet cockpits and bomb bays, Dan was getting tired. Probably his father wanted to see if Dan would show any glimmer of his own fascination with aircraft. Dan must have seemed bored, because his Dad was becoming irritated. Dan only knew this because his mother was tense and quiet. Then they came to the reviewing stand where a band was playing, their brass instruments shining in the sunlight. Dan had never seen a brass band this close. He must have stared at it a long time because he suddenly realized that something else was happening. His father was gazing at the roaring sky.

A formation of Phantom jets was doing a precise roll-out maneuver. They peeled away from each other and dived, their vapor trails streaming behind them like fireworks or willow wands and their noses glinting in the sunlight like bright spearpoints. The crowd watched them until the contrails began to break up into tiny cloudlets. The thunder died and they could hear the band again.

"Can you do that?" Dan had asked his father. His father didn't answer. Dan knew he didn't fly. But how could his father explain what he did do?

"Honey, you're here," said Jacey, tugging on his shirt.

"I was going to wait here until you woke up," Dan said. "But you caught me instead. How do you feel, Jace?"

"What?" She said. "I was dreaming something about us and your Dad. I can't remember now. Dan, Dr. Jackson says the streptomycin may have damaged my hearing. He says he had to give me a big dose of it."

"That's OK, Jacey. What matters is you're better," he said, raising his voice slightly. "Sometimes it doesn't pay to think about everything that might happen when you have a job to do. What matters is not losing sight of where you're going. What matters is that you're better now."

"So what's been happening since I've been in here?" she said.

"Oh, not much," he said. "Just office stuff. Oh, and we went to the moon."

"No need for me to know, huh? Well, just give me a little time, Mister, and I'll find out everything."

Dan knew she would.

THE END

THREE MAY KEEP A SECRET

Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.

—Benjamin Franklin

A Matter of Emphasis

Children sometimes believe that their teachers live at school. Sometimes they do. Especially when an outside committee conducts a week-long administrative review. Never mind that the committee did not look at the elaborate lesson plans or School Philosophy Statement. Wando High still had to pass in review. Every committee made a presentation. Every classroom was visited. The teachers' Review Committee also entertained them, laminated placemats for their banquets, had pewter mugs engraved with the words "Wando Administrative Review Team" (privately known as the "WART committee"), and compiled a two-hundred page *School Effectiveness Summary* for Wando High for the committee's bedtime reading. By Friday night, after the ham and oyster dinner, the WART committee had completed its mission, the compilation of a document twice the size of the one given them. Ed Lashley, chair of the

Review Committee, left before the speeches. Now that it was over, he was determined to leave Mr. Lashley the Science Teacher and Committee Entertainer at school so that the slightly subhuman Ed Lashley could return to his shadowy existence in the countryside of Wando County. Like Bigfoot, he could sometimes go unspotted for days at a time. Happily flossing around his shaky molars before an early bedtime, he noticed some tiny red spots advancing across his stomach like Roman shields. No, they were more like scattered anthills. Aimless yet relentless. Using Merck's *Manual*, he decided they were less like petechiae than irregular maculas or maybe an exanthema. Maybe measles had finally caught up with him. According to the *Manual*, with measles, there should be whitish spots opposite the upper teeth. The dim bathroom light was not helping his medical examination so he went upstairs to get Pinky.

Pinky was his mother's live-in who lived on with him after his mother passed away. She was up and down at all hours but expected privacy when her door was closed. Ed buttoned his shirt and pushed gently on the glass doorknob at the top of the stairs. The door was closed.

"Pinky," he murmured, keeping the tone between a whimper and a supplication.

"What is it?" came the gravelly reply.

"Spots, uh, could you come out?" Ed said.

"What?" Pinky said.

Ed waited while the floor creaked and the door slowly opened. She had her hair up and was wearing an orange moo-moo of indefinite shape.

"It's bedtime now, Edwin." She'd said this in the same way since he was six years old whenever he had knocked on her door at night.

"Could you look in my mouth?" Ed said.

"What?" Pinky squinted and then fished her glasses from a pocket.

"Here, by these teeth," Ed said. "Look for spots."

"I was in bed." Pinky said.

"Please, I think I've got something." Ed stared at the closed door.

"What?" Pinky gave up and came out and joined him on the landing at the top of the stairs. "Oh, bend down and let me see."

Looking up was no problem for her but bending down and arching his neck back at the same time was difficult for Ed. He backed down the steps.

"Too dark," she said.

Ed reached for the flashlight on the landing but she'd already taken a cigarette lighter from her moo-moo. Taking his place back on the second step and leaning forward with mouth open and neck arched back at an awkward angle, Ed flinched as she flicked the lighter near his mustache and peered in.

The phone rang.

She jumped forward.

Ed grabbed for his mustache and realized, falling backward, that he needed the same hand to hold the rail. Switching hands and spinning around, he ran headlong down the stairs, the smell of singed hair trailing. When he picked up the phone at the foot of the stairs, he heard Pinky close her door.

It was Jaime Petrof, his next-door neighbor at the high school, chairman of the Emphasis Committee, and one of the reasons Ed was trying to go to bed early on a Friday night.

"Ed? I didn't recognize you. Look, this committee thing has come to a head. I know what you said, but I can't let it go until Tuesday. Can you come over again?"

"You mean tonight?" Ed sighed. He had hoped all the collegial advice he'd given Jaime for the last month would have had a calming influence, but Jaime was always churning up new worries.

"Well"

Ed had gone to Petrof's place every night that week after tucking in the WART Committee. Jaime could not believe that the Committee would be satisfied with the current *School Philosophy*

Statement and was hurriedly trying to draft a new one. Ed could imagine his round face, thick glasses and watery blue eyes.

"It won't take long, right?" Ed asked, knowing he was wasting his time. They had never spent less than an hour once Petrof began talking.

"I need to give you something to look at," Petrof said.

The sun was setting on Ed's unmowed wild geraniums and chickweed as he cranked up his ancient Duster for another run and stole a last look under his shirt at the spots rising like festive balloons for a grand opening in the microbe world.

Jaime always had a problem. He was inescapable; always just hesitant enough to deal with it himself that Ed would be dragged in. The charge of the Emphasis Committee was to invent a "school emphasis." Jaime was Chairman because he had just come to Wando High. Committees always reserved leadership positions for new teachers. Ed was on the committee because he was designated as Jaime's "mentor." Ed's mentorship was less Homeric than what their new principal, Dr. Runcible, had intended when he established his "guided ministry" program at Wando High. It seemed that Dr. Runcible had spent one of his many semesters out of the classroom in a seminary, where he came upon the idea of a Guided Ministry Program for Schools. When Runcible arrived from Missouri in September, he brought with him both this idea and a revelation of the Fourteen Steps to a Harmonious Interface between School and Community, or FSHIBSC. Ed called them the "fishy biscuits." It was now April and Ed couldn't help thinking that even Alcoholics Anonymous needed only 12 steps.

As Petrof's spiritual guide, Ed was to initiate him into the mysteries of the Hunter method, hall duty, scantrons and the cozening drink machine in the teachers' lounge. As this was a spiritual task, Ed could also be expected to overlook the fact that his stipend for being a mentor was a tenth that of the girls' assistant track coach.

Petrof lived in town near the school. On his salary, it was necessary either to walk to school from a rented room or to live out of a car. His room was over a garage behind the Fenstermakers' frame house on Peavine Avenue, one of the shady streets of old-town Wando. When Ed turned off the Duster, it backfired and dieselled as usual. The engine was rumbling as he climbed the steps and knocked at the door, and was still running as he began to pound on Jaime's door. A light came on downstairs and Heidi Fenstermaker, the student who had told Ed about her father wanting to rent a teacher this room, looked up from the deck.

"Mr. Petrof called me," Ed said.

She simply stared upward. Surely the Duster wasn't still running. He heard another sound and came down a few steps to listen.

"Did you leave your car running in the garage?" Ed said. Heidi stared at him without saying anything. She was never one to answer questions too hurriedly.

Ed quickly led her through her own kitchen and into a garage filled with smoke. Petrof was sitting behind the car, his back against the garage door, his face a blotchy cyan blue. Heidi screamed.

The spots on Ed's chest had begun to itch, but without fever it wasn't measles. Maybe it was something worse. Ed wondered if Petrof had wanted a witness or perhaps had really wanted Ed to stop him. If the latter, he had miscalculated. Neither Ed nor the rescue squad could revive him. Finally back home after the firemen and police had finished, Ed tried to sleep without scratching and without seeing Petrof's pale blue eyes.

In the mornings, Pinky beat Ed to the coffee pot, triumphantly dosing it with chicory-embittered Luzianne. This morning he didn't mind. Monday morning parking lot duty was enhanced by chicory or

any other weeds she cared to steep in the coffee. At school, Dr. Leroy Runcible caught him as he was leaving Petrof's last revision of the *School Philosophy* in the principal's mailbox before going outside.

"Ed," he said, staring earnestly into Ed's eyes to interface with him more harmoniously. The tenth fishy biscuit was "nurturing techniques." This meant prolonged earnest staring to project spiritual concern. Ed gazed off safely at the parking lot. The topic was not Ed's spiritual concern, as it turned out, but Runcible's master schedule.

Yes, Ed's "planning break," as Runcible called it, was during first period. No, as he hoped, Ed wouldn't mind filling Petrof's "slot" for first period this week.

On this Monday, Petrof's class was taking PSAT's in the library, but Ed stayed in the empty classroom because he expected Runcible to check up on him. Petrof's desk contained some chewed pencils and a slip of paper. He was always chewing something, usually his fingers. He had a pimply complexion and a haircut that looked like the barber hadn't finished on one side. There was a poem on the slip of paper. The poem was dated the previous Friday. Ed could see Petrof sucking the pencil nubs as he wrote it. He wondered what he meant by "maiden man" and who Jerry was. Hearing Runcible in the hall, Ed slipped the poem into his pocket. Suitably attired in gray tones with a dark pink paisley power tie, Runcible had also found a black arm band since Ed had seen him earlier. Here was one of those who cared enough to wear the very best.

"No first period today?" Runcible said.

"Testing schedule." Ed replied.

"Yes, of course." Runcible hardly changed stride as he entered the room. "Ed." Runcible used his nurturing gaze again. "You know we'll need you to chair the Emphasis Committee tomorrow."

So that was it. Ed wondered what he was missing about the importance of this committee. He'd spent yesterday with undertakers. Petrof hadn't even been buried yet, and the Emphasis Committee members were expected to continue the ramble through Education 101 as if the discovery of their

"school emphasis" would usher in the New Kingdom. The bell rang before Ed could tell Runcible that he had a medical appointment on Tuesday afternoon. The rash had spread over his chest, arms and thighs, but no longer itched.

The Emphasis Committee, formerly chaired by Jaime Petrof consisted of Ed, Jack Spellman (who was always at Rotary on Tuesdays), Sid Clemson, a guidance counselor, and Cissy Gonzalez, a P.E. teacher and softball coach. It was the fourteenth of fourteen committees made to distribute all committee work equally to the 70-teacher faculty. Of course, Petrof's death had been a numerological upset, to say nothing of the empty slots in the master schedule. Although the Emphasis Committee members were hazy on the rationale for their existence, none of them had ever asked the obvious question: "Emphasis on what?" This was because Dr. Runcible was always sitting *ex officio* at the far end of the table, casting a steady nurturing gaze in their direction. Presumably he was there because "Listening to our concerns" was another of the fishy biscuits. Sid always wanted to talk about bluefish and Cissy wanted to hurry home to curtail her escalating investment in her sitter's college tuition, but they performed their parts in the weekly meeting as if it mattered. Such signs of their solidarity with the administration were cited as "teacher input" in Runcible's reports to the School Board. No one had been more earnest about giving teacher input than Jaime Petrof, however. He converted the minutes of every meeting into a flawless manuscript. Apparently he saw something in the Emphasis Committee that escaped the rest of them, who were intrigued but uninspired by his sense of mission.

"Well, what now?" Sid finally said. "Jaime kept all the notes. You gonna chair it, Ed?"

"I'm it for a while—but I also sponsor the Rocket Club." It was as lame an excuse as it sounded. Cissy was on it like a bunt to first.

"Can we get Jaime's notes?" she snapped. Clearly, Ed's days as Chair were numbered. Cissy had enough dangerous decisiveness to become Chairwoman and ask the Question they'd so far managed to avoid. Sid moved in quickly to provide cover.

"Yes, uh, Ed, why don't you get Jaime's notes before calling the next meeting?" In this way, the meeting of the Emphasis Committee quickly stumbled to a close, and within the hour Sid was sanding his boat, Cissy was paying her sitter, and Ed was lying on Dr. Vitelli's examination table.

"This is just a nonspecific rash, Mr. Lashley."

"Nothing more?" Ed said. "There's no treatment?"

"No, it will disappear spontaneously within a week or so." Dr. Vitelli then spontaneously vanished, and Ed was left sitting on his paper towel. It was still light out when Ed left the doctor's office. Little as he wanted to do so, he decided to go by the Fenstermakers' on the way home.

Horace Fenstermaker, Heidi's father, had been Ed's student twenty years earlier—a student eager about so many other things than biology. Not only had the Emphasis Committee directed Ed to bring Petrof's notes to the next meeting, but Horace had called Ed during the day to have Petrof's belongings removed. He claimed that Jaime's invalid mother in New Mexico had asked for Ed's help, but Ed suspected that the Fenstermakers had called her to offer Ed's services. Knowing Horace, Ed expected to see the apartment back in the Rental Ads the following day at twice the previous rent. Horace wouldn't have thought twice about calling Petrof's mother, but given what Jaime had told Ed about his mother's frail health, Ed had left the phone calls to the police.

When Horace wasn't trying to wring another dollar out of his tenants or buying foreclosures, he was pushing self-improvement courses, produced and distributed by a church they attended out of town. The Fenstermakers were always telling Heidi to feel good about herself and giving her promotional literature and self-help tapes to distribute at school about the Journey of Jubilation, a late-night self-

enhancement program on television, presented by their church. When she left pamphlets in the guidance office, Sid would scoop them into the trash as soon as she left. Having a suicide at home was not a scenario covered either in Horace's *Journey of Jubilation* or his audiotapes on *Your Second Income as a Landlord*, however. Ed climbed the outside steps and found that they'd left the door to Petrof's apartment unlocked.

Petrof's suit hung from a nail in a stud of the unfinished wall. He'd worked at a card table next to his cot in the corner. There was no other furniture. Books of Spanish and Russian poetry lay open on the floor. Beside his typewriter were the *Minutes of the Emphasis Committee*. Jaime had led a cloistered existence. Everything he owned fit into a trunk. Some of his papers were stacked neatly beside the trash can. The police had found no note, but they had called Ed's attention to the ashes in the trashcan. Petrof had apparently sorted through the papers and burned those he didn't want found. There were charred flower petals in the ashes.

Heidi peeked from the kitchen window as Ed nonchalantly struggled with the trunk on the landing. She might have had to call someone had he fallen and been pinned to the bottom step, so Ed tried not to trouble her. The Fenstermakers were in a hurry. A fan was still blowing the contamination from their garage. Such unjoyful events could not be quickly forgotten as long as any evidence remained.

It was only after coming home that Ed heard again from Horace. Pinky said he'd called to say that Mrs. Petrof had died. Ed refrained from calling him back and shouting that Horace's call had killed Petrof's mother. It made no difference now. Horace was probably already airing out Jaime's room.

"Pinky, I wasn't much of a mentor for Jaime Petrof, was I?" Ed said.

Pinky was rocking with the evening crossword on her lap. She lit another cigarette.

"No," she said. "What he needed was a keeper. The dude did petit point." She pointed to her sewing basket. "Saw my basket and said he'd done a sampler. Knew his words, though. Gave me a four-letter word for 'incarnadine'."

"When was he here?"

"Last Friday."

"Before I came home?"

"Well, he wasn't here after."

"What did he say?" Ed said.

"To give you that." Pinky wrinkled her nose and pointed at a framed sampler in the basket.

"Was that all?"

"Well, they was a call today. The funeral home wants his suit for Wednesday afternoon." Pinky returned to her crossword.

Ed took the sampler into the kitchen, laid it on the table, and took one of the potted plants from the windowsill out the door into the back yard. He walked to the foot of the yard and flung it against the fence.

The sampler had hung over Jaime's cot at the Fenstermakers'. Ed remembered seeing it last Thursday when they had gone directly after school to Jaime's apartment to look at his report. Petrof had done a consummate job of explaining Runcible's fourteen steps.

"Interpretation is what I do best," Petrof had said, pointing to the books on the floor.

The sampler was intended to resemble an oriental screen. Bordered by chrysanthemums and bamboo leaves, the words looked brushed on and were written in columns like Japanese characters:

**The elders argued
which was chief in spring,
the blossom of the rose
or flowering plum,
but never challenged
fall's chrysanthemum.**

R&P

September 10, 1988

By leaving the sampler at Ed's house, Petrof seemed to be trying to tell Ed something, something he could not say directly. Ed was too straight, too obvious, and too ordinary. Petrof was a translator, dealing in subtleties and nuances. It was easier for him to leave his translations and books of poetry open to their title pages than to tell Ed he had written them. They hadn't talked about them, but every time Ed visited, Petrof had always made sure that a book was lying open to its frontispiece. It was easier for Jaime to search Ed's face furtively as he read the Emphasis report than it was to ask Ed to respond. And finally, last night, while Ed was on his way over, it was easier for Jaime to arrange a stack of papers by a can of ashes, a letter from his widowed mother on the bed –and himself propped against the garage door as a staged plea for Ed to draw his own conclusions than it was to say anything straight out.

Their PSAT's finished, Petrof's students were reading aloud on Wednesday morning. No long-term substitute had been found yet, so Ed was still taking the first period class before he had to leave for the funeral. Mercutio, reading aloud in the front row, had a Pawnee hairstyle and wore raggedy cut-offs with the pockets hanging out.

Mercutio: "Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead.

Stabbed with a white wench's black eye; shot
through the ear with a love-song; the very
pin of his heart cleft with the blind bow-boy's
butt-shaft: and is he a man to encounter Tybalt?"

The phrase "bow-boy's butt shaft" went by without a snicker. Petrof's funeral was in the afternoon. This reading was becoming like a memorial service.

Romeo: "Nurse, commend me to thy lady and mistress. I
protest unto thee."

Nurse: "Good heart and, i' faith, I will tell her as much:
Lord, Lord, she will be a joyful woman."

The nurse with the quaking voice was Heidi Fenstermaker, who had begun sniffing.

Romeo: "What say'st thou, my dear nurse?"

Nurse: "Is your man secret? Did you ne'er hear say
Two may keep counsel, putting one away?"

Heidi sobbed and looked up. Ed motioned to the door; as she was making a path around the book bags, Runcible appeared in the doorway. With twenty pairs of adolescent eyes trained on his fluttering hand, he stopped mid-wave.

"Carry on." He mumbled and strode off.

"Carry on." Mercutio sniffed, foppishly stroking his multicolored bristles. Heidi sat down behind him.

"Why's he always looking in here?" He stuck his black boots in front of Ed. "Always calling Pussy Petrof out to play."

At that, Heidi yanked on Mercutio's earring and ran back to her seat. When the bell rang, Ed kept him to give her a head start.

Ed returned to his lab next door. Runcible was standing in the hall monitoring traffic. Ed's classes were to watch a slide show on butterfly metamorphosis. The butterfly pupa had lost its false antennae and begun twisting to the left and right by the time he left.

Runcible watched him leave.

Petrof's funeral was in Fairfax off Chain Bridge road. Ed was the only one to go from Wando. The cemetery was a wooded hillside between two malls. Redbuds and white flowering pears nodded over the green awning where three mourners listened to the house minister speed-read the burial service and then say abruptly, "The graveside service is over now." It reminded Ed of the signs against lingering in some fast-food places.

A workman, already mounted on his tractor, was waiting his turn as Ed walked out behind two young men wearing aquamarine leisure suits. One looked back.

"You his Dad or Jerry?" he said.

"Neither of his parents are alive now," Ed said, somewhat annoyed at being called Petrof's Dad. "I'm just another teacher at his school, Ed Lashley." Ed held out his hand but they were not handshakers. When they had stopped in the parking lot, Ed noticed a green streak in the other man's hair.

"Looks like we're all he had left," said the streaked one.

"Looks like," Ed said. "How did you know him?" Emphasis is sometimes hard to manage. Without intending it, Ed had accented the word "you." Both men stiffened.

"Maybe because he was more one of us than one of you," said the streaked one. They walked quickly across the lot. So much for being Jaime's spiritual advisor. Wherever or whatever his spirit was now, Ed didn't seem any closer to it in death than he was in life. He didn't know Jaime Petrof.

A raw scream cut across the parking lot.

Through the wrought-iron fence dividing the cemetery's parking lot from the shopping mall, Ed saw three giggling girls walking toward Penny's. They had to scream. He wondered where else they could scream, with pavement in all directions. Like butterflies straining against their pupal walls, they had to twist violently, left and right, growing more and more folded in their confinement. Every twist was critical; every turn, decisive. Every matter of emphasis was a matter of survival. The boys in turquoise drove past Ed without nodding. Perhaps for others there were no screaming places left.

Pinky had made string beans for supper and was sitting by the dining room table with her feet propped on Petrof's trunk. She was nibbling cornbread and smoking as she looked through Petrof's papers. "Mail's in the kitchen," she said defensively, forestalling any complaint from Ed. "Who else look at this if we don't?" she added. Three letters and a newspaper clipping lay on the kitchen table—a gas bill, a prompt bill from Dr. Vitelli, and a letter from Jaime Petrof.

"Pinky, did you see this?" Ed said.

Pinky was humming to herself. Of course she'd seen it. Her hands stroked the gravy boat and her eyes glazed over with abstraction.

"I guess I did," she said.

Ed glanced at the new philodendron on the windowsill. Of course, Petrof did not explain anything. It was only a reminder to give Runcible the report. Ed had done that on Monday and already gotten back a copy from his secretary. Dated and mailed on Friday, the letter simply reminded Ed to "call in the committee report to Runcible after I've gone," as if he were going to Ocean City for the weekend. It was as if Petrof didn't want Ed to have explanations, but he did want him to know something. Then Ed read the clipping, a fall graduation announcement from a New Mexico newspaper. Names of the five doctoral students were circled:

Perkins, Jeremy A.	Computer Science
Petrof, Jaime L.	Romance Languages
Riggs, William A.	Electrical Engineering
Runcible, Leroy G.	Education
Ross, Robert P.	Business Administration

"Runcible and Petrof? Pinky, you saw this?" Ed said.

Pinky was pouring gravy on her beans. "In the trunk," she said, tapping her ashes onto the placemat. She bent down and turned up the radio. Music bellowed up from the tea cart.

"Pinky!" Ed shouted.

She turned the radio down, shrugged, and, as if she were a process-server, handed Ed a fat manuscript. "And these," she said, shuffling around the corner to the living room.

It was not one manuscript but two bound together, drafts of the dissertations of Jaime Petrof and Leroy Runcible. As Ed leafed through the documents, he noticed Jaime's handwriting on both of them. Runcible's manuscript looked very familiar. It was peppered with phrases like "harmonious interfaces," "guided ministry," "nurturing environment" and "instructional nexus." Runcible and Petrof had worked together on this long before coming to Wando High School. Ed wondered if they were the "R and P"—the "rose" and "plum" from the sampler. That made the chrysanthemum, which "went unchallenged" a "mum" or secret, perhaps. But something else was not right. The report had been typed on a different machine. Ed wondered why Runcible had not simply copied it instead of having it retyped. When Ed had handed it to him, Runcible had nodded and continued talking about his scheduling problems. And why had Jaime said to "call it in?" Ed wondered why Jaime would put it as if Ed corresponded for a news service. "Interpretation is what I do best," Jaime had said. Maybe he'd intended for Ed to interpret what he left behind. Maybe he wanted a third person in on their secret: "Two may keep counsel, putting one away."

Maybe, or maybe not. But Ed was no more inclined to be involved in Jaime's matters now than when he was alive. He certainly didn't want to explore whatever ground there was between Jaime and Runcible. It would be better simply to tell Runcible what he had found, give him his manuscript, and try to put the whole matter to rest. Ed dialed Runcible's number. It only rang twice before the message, the opening bars of the Wedding March, followed by a recording:

"This is Wyna-Jean." The machine said. "Jerry's so busy he hardly has time for himself but if you leave your name and number we'll get back to you."

Ed put down the phone. Something about the message made him reluctant to tell Runcible anything. So Runcible was "Jerry." But this didn't mean he'd had anything to do with Jaime's death. Runcible had been elbow-deep in ham biscuits and homilies at the last WART banquet when Petrof and Ed were having their final meeting. Furthermore, Ed reflected, Jaime had obviously been making arrangements for his suicide for some time. Whatever his low crimes and mystical demeanor, Runcible was not a murderer. Petrof did not fear for his life; he was too miserable for that. Runcible was at the bottom of it, but there was more involved than embarrassment about having Petrof write his dissertation.

Next morning, Ed got to school early to ask Elaine Netti, Runcible's secretary, about the committee report she had retyped. She was loading the coffee machine. She hadn't seen any reason to retype Petrof's report, she said.

"He always did such a neat job. Even on his lesson plans, not like most." She blushed. "Uh, some teachers."

"Do you have the original?" Ed said.

"It's in Dr. Runcible's office." She led Ed into the office and pulled it from a tray, and went back out to the switchboard. Petrof's manuscript was meticulously typed, as always, but some of the letters and words were in boldface. As Petrof's interpreter-by-default, Ed looked for a pattern:

*The false **dualities** of modern life, between mind and matter, man and environment, and arts and sciences are **due** to the Cartesian error of excluding the study of man and society from the respectable or "scientific" curriculum. Our schools have the opportunity to correct this error. As Toulmin (1990) has commented, the historical reasons for Descartes' statement, "I present myself masked" (**Larvatus prodeo**)*

Ed took the slip of paper he had kept from Jaime's desk and began copying the bold-faced typos. As a pattern emerged, he heard Runcible talking to Elaine in the outer office. Ed crossed the hall into the vault and stood behind a filing cabinet until Runcible had left. Ed's hand trembled. He looked down the hall: No one coming. He stepped out. Runcible came up to the vault from the other side. Ed slipped the paper into his pocket. Runcible was wearing the Thursday "WE CARE" lapel button.

"Are there any more of those buttons in the vault?" Ed mumbled feebly.

"What?" Runcible snorted. He did not have a nurturing gaze.

"I lost my button and can't find any more in the vault," Ed said, avoiding Runcible's eyes.

"They're on the front counter, Ed. You know that. Next to the sign-in sheet."

As Ed left, he wondered what Elaine had told Runcible.

Thursday afternoons the faculty met in the library. Anyone who had not worn a "WE CARE" button all day had usually found one by then, since Runcible was swimming among them with all the nurturing concern of a piranha. They cared all right.

"This is our time for feedback, both positive and negative," he said, as always, in a low sing-song rumble that almost put them to sleep when the air conditioner was running. He swallowed dissent as deftly as a bluegill rising to a worm. Comments were "sent to committee" or "noted" or "tabled for the

time being" with a splendid show of good feeling and many assurances that "I hear what you're saying" and "I'm glad we've had this chance to dialogue." Then he got to what he had to say.

"As a faculty ministry you have finally begun to pull together. I think you are going to see this when you read the *Review Team Report*. Yes, they saw some real nurturing going on here: Academic excellence, Inquiry, Winning teams. Yes, you're beginning to get it together. I had doubts earlier in the year, but once we were all on board, we began to move. We still have a long way to go, but you should take pride in the steps we have made so far. I look forward to working with you next year." He called a young woman to his podium at the circulating desk. "Some of you know my wife, Wyna-Jean."

Wyna-Jean smiled broadly, tossed her head and hugged her cashmere sweater. She had substituted in the English department to no acclaim before her marriage to Runcible earlier in the month. "The untimely death of Mr. Petrof," Runcible said.

"*Doctor* Petrof," Ed thought.

"Coming so late in the year, it has left us with a difficult vacancy," Runcible said.

"Particularly you, Runcible," Ed thought. With Wyna-Jean and without Petrof, Runcible was running on empty at both home and school.

"I've therefore asked Wyna-Jean to step in until May," Runcible continued. He paused, not so much for applause as to generate applause. The teachers dutifully clapped, their enthusiasm subsiding quickly, and followed by a general sense of malevolent benevolence as the meeting ended. The faculty filed out past Runcible and Wyna-Jean and pocketed their "WE CARE" buttons once they were outside.

Back in his lab, Ed looked again at the boldface letters and words he had copied and reassembled from Petrof's report:

du, du
you too
Larvatus prodeo
and all men kill the thing they luv
i help u even with this
tu, tu

all masks for you
but your secret does not die with me.

Ed was relieved that Petrof hadn't mentioned him, his reluctant mentor and interpreter. Jaime was too delicate to be vindictive but too righteous to die without a witness. He wanted a final interpretation. He'd had another mentor, one who had promised more than he meant to give, one who had used Jamie's gifts, love and idealism, and then dropped him. Marriage to Wyna-Jean was the final slap. Runcible still had a "long way to go" and he didn't need Jaime around to get there. Ed was staring out the window when Runcible slipped beside him.

"Still working, Ed?" He said.

"No, just making a few notes for tomorrow," Ed said, trying to fold Petrof's message and peel himself off the ceiling.

"Yes, well, we don't have to work longer if we can work smarter."

He often said this; neither of them was paying attention to what they were saying.

"Well, good night, Ed," he said. "Don't forget the Transformation Committee tomorrow at lunch."

"Good night, Dr. Runcible." Ed wondered if that was the same as the Emphasis Committee.

"Jerry, Ed." He caught Ed's eye and searched it as a bass inspects a minnow.

Ed looked away. "What?" Ed sputtered.

"Yes. Good night, Ed." Runcible strolled down the hall.

Pinky was reading the newspaper in the kitchen. Leftover cold beans and ham biscuits were on the table.

"I think Runcible knows what Jaime told me," Ed said, sitting down.

"Don't matter with him leaving," Pinky pointed to what she was reading in the evening newspaper.

Ed read over her shoulder.

"Dr. Leroy Runcible, currently Principal of Wando High School, recently confirmed rumors that he has been selected to replace retiring Superintendent Carl Guthrie. This information was released in a joint announcement by the School Board and Dr. Runcible on Wednesday."

"He was planning this all along," Dan said. "He even told the faculty today that he looked forward to working with us next year."

"It say Sidney Clemson will be Principal," Pinky read.

Sid, it seemed, had aspirations beyond blue-fishing. Pinky continued to read aloud. "Board members praised Dr. Runcible's idealism and innovative plans to guide our schools toward new understanding and..."

"Don't tell me, 'and caring.' Right?" Ed said.

"He's put the comether on them too." Pinky shook her head.

"The what?" Ed asked.

"Comether—come hither. A spell like on that Petrof boy. Always in a trance."

So Runcible was going to the Central Office. Ed might never see him again. It was like disappearing into the earth or down the drain. Ed served himself some beans. Runcible would just ooze off and flake away, just as Ed's rash was doing. Ed took a ham biscuit. Runcible would be sequestered in the central office like a poison that the body captures and packages away into some distant tissue where it can do no harm. Ed suddenly had the thought that it was the oysters that brought on that rash. It couldn't have been the ham biscuits.

"Sequestered, Pinky. Do you know that word?" Ed had another biscuit, but pulled out the ham.

Pinky slowly rose and drifted into the living room to do her crossword. The dirty dishes were his.

* * *

Next day at lunch, Ed met with Phyllis Whaley, two horticulture teachers, and two new teachers. One of them was Wyna-Jean Runcible. To be transformed, they met in the book closet.

Phyllis whispered, “Micky the Saboteur was back in Journalism today.”

Ed started to answer but the Facilitator was frowning.

After twenty minutes of discussion, his turn to speak was coming around again. Ed hoped that Phyllis would again overrun her time so that the team would not have to hear what he saw as he looked through the Window of Knowing. Runcible had divided the faculty of Wando High into a dozen interdisciplinary Transformation Teams that were to meet for an hour every other day to have transforming experiences like looking through the Window of Knowing to encounter the Deep Structure of their professional lives. The scraggily-bearded university facilitator, Professor Greeley, took notes and nodded his flaking onion head to every inane observation any one made as the polycarbonate Window was passed around the table. No more lectures for him. He was now a Facilitator of Transformation.

Ed watched the clock while Wyna-Jean found this experience even more relevant to her professional life than taking courses on Milton or grammar.

“When I, like, look down the road that lies outside my window, I see, like, little groups of people—writers like Donne and Mailer—coming together. It all comes together. Like—”

The other new teacher, Ken Wilson, was also watching the clock, Ed noticed. He had figured out what hadn’t yet occurred to Wyna-Jean. She was staying up every night planning and grading because her planning period at school had been transformed into a bird walk through the looking glass. Maybe it would come together for her. Just wait. Maybe she would work on her fishy husband, who was as transformational as a chameleon. Maybe once he had moved up, she could persuade him to shutter up the Window of Knowing.

Professor Greeley seemed to be giving them a reading assignment as Ed left. He stopped Phyllis to ask if they were still on for supper at his house, but she had lost her wallet and was desperate to find it before class began.

The Network

Over the summer, Mickey Schuster had gone from freak to redneck. Gone were the Pawnee haircut, chains, and Led Zeppelin T-shirt. Now he wore his hair long, a backwards AB Dick cap and a Hank Williams, Jr. T-shirt proclaiming "Hank Lives!" There was a creepy freshness about him as if having been once scrubbed clean, something insidious was uncovered.

Ed remembered him from the English class he'd supervised the previous spring after Jaime Petrof's suicide. Mickey had failed Biology twice under other teachers and was now entering Ed's class as a senior.

It was a Monday in late August during the second week of school. By sixth period the lab was hot and the students restless. Mickey had registered a week late and just reported from Guidance with his yellow transfer sheet. He immediately headed for the most distant desk in the room.

"My probation is over, Mr. L. You get me for another semester. And I gotta come every day. Ain't that nice? Where do I sit?"

"Try this one." Ed, pointed to a desk in the front.

"I want near the window," Mickey said.

"Please sit here," Ed said firmly.

"Oh, thank you *sir*," Mickey said. His mouth puckered, he sat down in a sulk. He tipped the desk back as if riding a Harley.

Ed didn't know which version of Micky was more annoying—the loud mouth or the sneak. It was going to be a long seventh period from now on. Ed continued to describe the night's homework, finishing just as the bell rang.

When the class had left, Ed noticed something on the floor behind Micky's desk. It was a wallet, empty but for the driver's license of Phyllis Whaley.

* * *

The car seat was hot and the traffic slow as the roads around Wando filled with school buses and cars driven by high school students, but Ed thought about his special plans for the evening.

Looking into the freezer for what Pinky had left him, Ed couldn't find any meat. Pinky had gone to visit her cousin in Marvel. Before going she had visited the Farmers' Market and packed away some dinners for him in the freezer. Ed hope to impress Phyllis with one of Pinky's dishes but there was no

meat. Zucchini bread, zucchini casserole, three-bean salad, and mixed sliced summer squash and zucchini, and a carrot cake. But no meat. He started the casserole in the oven while he hunted in the canned goods, finally discovering some soy-turkey patties. He poured tomato sauce over them and put them next to the casserole. A car door slammed outside.

Phyllis had frizzy hair and blue legs. Ed watched her coming up the drive, her crystal pendant bouncing from breast to breast. He pushed the zucchini bread beside the casserole and answered the door.

"My workshop finished early. Only two came," she said. Her eyelids were the same shade of blue as her legs.

Ed nearly looked down to compare. According to Phyllis, only two teachers wanted to know their Jungian types so that they could sample other astral planes.

Ed tried to look surprised.

"Oh, the word just didn't get out after I had to cancel it the first time. I hated to cancel it." She sat cross-legged on the sofa beside Pinky's pile of old newspaper crosswords.

Ed tossed the pile under the coffee table and sat beside her. He studied her dimples as she talked.

"Poor TM, I guess, but TM begins with flexibility," she said.

He did not think she meant Transcendental Meditation, but he didn't want to ask.

"Guess you give workshops on TM too?" he ventured.

"Only in January," she said.

"Uh, after Christmas."

"Yes. Exactly!" she said brightly. "So many people receive those managers for Christmas it's a good lead-in to TM."

Ed recalled a leather-bound time manager he had received from his mother in 1984. As he recalled, it was still in a drawer upstairs waiting to be used. "It's sort of like writing yourself a daily script," Ed ventured.

"Yes, I bring journaling into TM now whenever I see that people are into it. You know, journaling, TM and scripting are closely related."

Sometimes Ed wondered if there were any topics not closely related for Phyllis. "Like the journaling you did when poor Jaime died," she said.

"Well, yes, in a way," Ed said. "It got me thinking about him. You know, I did what you said: 'Take notes then make notes' but it hasn't put the matter to rest. I dream about Petrof. I find myself wondering about him. A summer has passed and I still can't forget. It's like the journaling brings up things I didn't expect to remember, and they bother me."

"Yes." Phyllis was leaning forward so that he could smell her perfume and something else...

"The squash!" he shouted, running to the kitchen. It wasn't burned but crisp and bubbling hot. "Well, ready or not," he started to call out, but Phyllis was right behind him.

"Oh good, no meat," she said.

"Uh, yes. And those patties are really soy-burgers." They set the tiny kitchen table and sat down.

"You know, Ed," Phyllis said. "Maybe you're too close to it. Maybe you need some distance, some perspective. Instead of writing it like a diary, why don't you use a third person narrator?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, cutting the zucchini bread.

"Just that by taking yourself out of it you might come to accept what happened."

"How can I accept it when he seems to have obliged me to remember? I want to show you something." He went upstairs.

She looked at the tiny kitchen. Ancient black pots hung on the wall. An antique gas stove stood in the corner. On the counter beside it was a pot-bellied ceramic chicken with a beakful of matches.

"Look at this." Ed reappeared with a manuscript by Jaime Petrof:

EXUVIOE

by

Jaime Petrof

"for what do we move ever but to get rid of our furniture, our exuvioe; at last to go from this world to another newly furnished, and leave this to be burned?"—Thoreau

"This is an unpublished book of verse left in his belongings along with other papers that he wrote. I mean, what do I do with this? He left no survivors. I just feel obliged."

"Hmm, 'any man's death diminishes me,' huh?" She looked out the kitchen window. "Well, maybe you don't want to distance yourself."

"Oh, no. No, Phyllis I think that's exactly what I should do. Third person—yes, that's it."

"Great zucchini bread, Ed." Her dimples reappeared.

Maybe he should give Pinky a lift to the Farmers' Market next time, he thought. Then the doorbell rang. Phyllis laid the manuscript down and they went back to the living room. Horace Fenstermaker's wide, ruddy face was staring through the little diamond-shaped window in the front door.

He carried two sample cases. "Hello, Mr. Lashley. Hope I've not interrupted anything." He looked in at Phyllis, who was sitting cross-legged on the sofa again. "Hello, Miss Whaley. What I have here may interest you as well."

"Wait a minute, Horace," Ed said. "We were just..."

"No," said Phyllis, getting up quickly. "Go ahead with whatever you both were going to do."

"We weren't going to do anything," Ed said.

"No, this won't take any time at all." Horace emptied his samples onto the coffee table. "And I could really use your opinions. Maybe Mr. Lashley will even be able to give me a little help."

Horace's day job was a courier service for commuters and medical lab specimens between Wando, Holburn, and Arlington, but he was always launching small business ventures, like developing rental properties. When Jaime Petrof, his first tenant, had committed suicide in the garage, Horace's wife had put an end to the rental project and a line had appeared on Horace's forehead above his nose. It surprised Ed, this serious little line.

"I represent Grumex Corporation and Edutainer Personal Options," Horace said.

"What?" Ed said. Horace frowned. Ed immediately understood that the client was not to ask questions yet. That would come later in the script.

"It's G.E.P.O. for short, Mr. Lashley," Horace said. "We sell kitchenware, rec-ware and educational products. We are a network sales operation. I contact only those referred from previous customers."

"Who recommended me?" Ed said.

"Well, uh. I just started and..."

"And you made your own list of references?"

"Yes," Horace answered sheepishly.

Phyllis was thumbing through the GEPO catalog.

"But I've already gotten some good leads and made some big sales," Horace said. "I'm really here to ask your advice more than to sell anything." Ed narrowed his eyes. "See, our main line is food-processing equipment."

"Ed, as much as you like vegetables you really ought to look at these." Phyllis slid next to him and laid the open catalog on their laps.

He felt like they were newlyweds planning the perfect kitchen.

Horace's bushy eyebrows rose. He picked up his clipboard of order forms.

"That's our model 4720. It has forty-seven functions and twenty speeds. And then there are the cowrappables." Horace reached for his sample kit.

"Did you say 'corruptibles,' Horace?" Phyllis said.

"CO-WRAPPABLES," Howard boomed. "It's all in the shrink-wrap. See, there's a special cookbook, a mandoline attachment for crinkle cuts—"

"Wait a minute, Horace," Ed said. "I really don't need this."

"Well there's model 3010."

"No," Ed said. "What was the advice you wanted?"

Horace sucked in a long breath and sat back again.

"Well, I don't have any trouble selling our main products to most people." He paused pointedly. "Kitchenware sells. So does Rec-ware like hunting knives and survival gear. It's the Edutainer educational ware that I'm not moving." Horace reached back into his sample case. Ed noticed that Phyllis was staring at the hunting knives on the coffee table. Her dimples had disappeared.

Horace took another deep breath.

"See, these are educational games for children from one year-olds through high school." Horace began stacking plastic game boards beside the hunting knives.

"Ed, I think I'd better go now," Phyllis said, drawing her blue knees together. "I have essays to grade."

Horace waited politely as Ed escorted her to the door.

"Look, Phyllis, I'm sorry about this. I didn't know he was coming," Ed said.

"That's OK," Phyllis said. "Those hunting knives just turn me off. I'll see you at school. Maybe we can have lunch."

"Yeah, sure. See you." Ed turned back to the living room. Horace looked up expectantly.

They hadn't even gotten to the carrot cake.

Next day at the beginning of sixth period, there was a fight outside Ed's lab. Weldon Washington, a huge black kid who filled the doorway when he entered a room, picked up Mickey Schuster by the shoulders, and began shaking him. Other students formed an interested ring of bystanders around the combatants.

Ed blew his whistle.

"Time out! End of the first round! Drop him, Weldon. Into the room."

Weldon went into the lab.

"Show's over," Ed said. "Go to class." He picked up Mickey's hat and motioned him into the room. "What's this about?"

"This!" Weldon shoved a pamphlet at Ed's face.

"OK, Weldon. Just sit down now," Ed said.

"The punk was passing these out in gym," Weldon said.

"Just sit down, Weldon."

Mickey had never stopped smiling, even when he was gasping for air. "My right to free speech," he said.

Ed looked at the pamphlet: "THE WHITE WAY IS THE RIGHT WAY: Reclaim your pride as an Aryan American." Ed would have thought it was a student prank except for its professional four-color, glossy appearance.

"Mickey, as I understand it, free speech does not include hate literature. Let's see what Mr. Clemson thinks." Ed left the two boys in the office with a note to Sid Clemson.

If it weren't enough that Horace had ruined the evening with Phyllis, he had also gotten Ed to go with him on a sales appointment after school. Ed had agreed and even let Horace loan him the sales manual just to be rid of him the night before. Horace picked him up at the flagpole in front of school after sixth period.

"Thanks so much for coming, Mr. Lashley," Horace said. "I know that your coming will make a big difference."

"It's OK, Horace," Ed said. "Please don't expect much. You see, the materials you left me..."

"Great weren't they?" Horace said. "Say, I wish we'd had something like that when Heidi was little. Just think of the research that went into that."

"Yes." Ed said. "About that research—"

"You may know my client, Toby Gunderson?"

"No, I don't think so."

"He was referred by several others," Horace said. "Jake Smith? Erick Shackelford?"

"No, I don't know them," Ed said.

"All seem to be hunters or fishermen. They really like the hunting knives and survival gear. I thought you might know Gunderson because he has school-aged children who are six and seven years old."

"They haven't made it to the high school yet," Ed said.

The little crease reappeared briefly above Horace's nose. "Oh. Guess not." He had pulled into Granville Estates, a subdivision near the high school. "Let's see, his place is 25 Buck Lane."

Toby Gunderson was standing in his driveway watering his sidewalk. He was thin, balding, in his late forties. Ed looked at the sidewalk as he got out.

"I like to keep it clean," Gunderson said with his eyes leveled on Ed. "You Fenstermaker?"

"No, this is Mr. Lashley. I told you about him," said Horace, coming around the car to shake hands.

"Oh, yeah. The teacher, right?" He turned Horace toward the house and they started in. Ed picked up his sample case and followed them into a knotty-pine den lined with shelves of trophies and photographs, most of which showed Gunderson in the company of groups of men or animal parts. As Ed looked around the room he identified the hooves, antlers, claws, teeth and heads of the principal inhabitants of national parks, ingeniously transformed into lamps, bookends, and ashtrays. Two small children watched the television.

Gunderson pointed first to the girl. "This is Mercy. He's Goforth."

Sadder children Ed had never seen.

"You run along. We have to talk." They ran along.

The three men sat down on a stuffed leather divan. At least, Ed thought at first it was leather, but it seemed too rough. "Buffalo hide. Got it myself. Filled the freezer. We're still eating the meat." Gunderson looked at Ed. "Butchered it myself."

Ed looked at Horace.

"Well. Mr. Gunderson. Well." Horace was finding his way. "I guess you know why we're here."

"Yeah, Mitch told me," Gunderson said. "Lemme see those knives."

"Well, uh. We usually like to show the whole product line first. So you won't miss anything? You don't mind?" Horace said.

Gunderson looked back at Ed and scowled. Ed felt his face freeze into a foolish expression. He feebly shrugged and turned his palms upwards.

"Go on," Gunderson muttered.

"Ed, why don't you start it off?" Horace said. Gunderson had picked up a bear-claw ashtray while he stared at the floor.

"Yes, uh, thanks, Horace," Ed said. "I'm not a salesman. Horace just asked me to look at the educational products. Your son and daughter are the right age for some of these products." Ed wished he were selling the son and daughter a new parent. Gunderson continued staring at the floor. "The Edutainer Division of Grumex Corporation claims to have done extensive research on the developmental needs of children."

"But not just claims, Mr. Lashley." Horace interrupted excitedly. "We've got proven results."

If Ed had still had Horace in his class he would have asked him to explain what "proven results" were.

"It seems that Edutainer tries to fit its product to the current needs of the child, and these games..." Ed began to pull the flimsy plastic game boards out of the sample case.

Gunderson stood up and walked over to the deer head above the fireplace.

"These games both teach and entertain," Ed said. "That's where the name comes from."

"Yeah, OK," Gunderson growled. "I guess that's enough. My kids learn about life the real way from scouting, hunting, and family values. My boy got a bird gun when he turned five."

"Oh, well then. You wouldn't want these games." Ed stood up.

Horace looked stricken.

"Show him the knives, Horace. I can walk back to school."

Gunderson moved toward him.

"No, thanks. I'll let myself out." Ed walked briskly down the wet driveway past Goforth, who solemnly watered the porch.

On Wednesday morning, Sid Clemson, the newly bearded Principal of Wando High slumped along the hall toward Ed's lab like a cow reluctantly leaving the barn. He wore a lumpy suit that he

seemed to drag about like a shopping bag. When Dr. Runcible, the former principal, had become Superintendent last year, Sid moved up from Guidance. Over the summer, he had grown a mousy little grey beard that outlined the sharp angles of his face in charcoal shadows. Becoming Principal was somehow associated with this beard.

Ed thought of it as Sid's victory beard. When Sid had been a guidance counselor, some of the farm boys had dubbed him "Spineless Clemson," after a variety of okra, for his tendency to disappear whenever there were problems with discipline or schedule errors. Even they knew he couldn't settle a problem. It meant taking sides. No more of that! The victory beard was the mark of a changed man.

Sid had only coached golf, but that was enough. Few teachers become principals without having been coaches. Sid's ascent into leadership was not without a few stumbles. For one thing, there were the fishy biscuits Runcible had left behind. When the mantle of this grand plan fell onto his shoulders Sid would gladly have crept from under it, but Runcible had not really left. As Superintendent, he expected Sid to be the caretaker of the fourteen committees and the "guided ministry" program he had established. Sid hated to be in a "situation," so he had insisted that all fourteen faculty committees would continue to meet but, knowing his teachers, added the words, "as needed."

Ed thought that the fuzzy victory beard represented the line of compromises Sid would walk in his new role.

"Ed, we've got a situation to handle." Sid slumped onto a lab stool. Ed looked up at Sid and the young woman following him with a camera.

This was the week for candid photos for the yearbook, so Ed wasn't surprised when the photographer, who had been tracking Sid down the hall like a speedboat purring behind a manatee, suddenly snapped him as he pulled a foot-long knife from his coat pocket.

"What in the..." Sid turned toward the second flash with his mouth open. The photographer darted downstream. "Damn candid photos. Look, Ed."

Ed turned around,

"We have a situation. This thing was found in Micky's locker after you sent him up. I'd suspend him pending a hearing by the Board on expulsion but you know that old man Schuster is on the Board." Actually, Ed did not know. "I already spoke to Jerry about it."

"Jerry?" Ed said.

"Dr. Runcible. He's afraid the media will get hold of this. Bring in the Klan and all. He wants to keep a lid on. Give the boy another chance, he said."

"Mickey Schuster? Sid, are you kidding?"

"Maybe we're not seeing the whole picture." Sid had "handled the situation" by telling Ed about it. He was already tugging his beard and looking vaguely toward the boys' bathroom across the hall. The intercom summoned Ed to a phone call in the main office.

"Mr. Lashley," the voice on the phone said. "This is Cindy Wallop of the *Wando Exponent*."

"Huh?" Ed said.

"Do you deny that your student Mickey Schuster was distributing Klan literature?" Miss Wallop said.

"Well, no," Ed said. "But..."

Miss Wallop did not need qualifications. "What do you know about Grumex Corporation and a Mr. Horace Fenstermaker?"

"What is this about?" Ed demanded.

"I'm just trying to follow a lead, Mr. Lashley. Can you help?" She appealed to Ed's sense of civic responsibility. "You know Fenstermaker?" Cindy said.

"Yes, he..." Ed said.

"And you know about Grumex?" Cindy said.

"Yes" Ed said.

"Their 'wrecking-ware'?" she asked.

"Yes, but..." Ed wanted to say that she pronounced it wrong, but after every answer from him, she moved on to the next question.

"Thank you, Mr. Lashley. You've been very helpful. I don't want to keep you from class."

Ed looked at the clock. One minute till the rush. Phyllis Whaley's Journalism room was in the 300 Wing, formerly the Foreign Language Wing, formerly the Home Economics Wing, and, at a time that only Ed and a few others remembered, formerly the Business Wing. Now it was called "Family Life Skills."

As he turned the corner, Ed noticed the photographer packing up her gear outside Phyllis's room. With the uneasy feeling that the lid had come off Sid's situation, Ed peeked in and saw Phyllis working with her newspaper staff. Her lunch was open on her desk. Red legs today. She was too busy to see him. He started down the dark staircase between the 300 Wing and the cafeteria when Mickey Schuster came up behind him.

"Hey, Lashley," Mickey said.

"Pardon me?" Ed said.

"I won't forget what you done," Mickey said. You didn't see me with that pamphlet. Just took that Weldon's word for it. My work against the word of a..."

"Look, Mickey, that's a threat."

"One that I intend to keep." Mickey jutted out his chin. "I won't forget, and neither will my old man."

"You'd better come with me, Mickey."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Mickey pushed past Ed and ran down the stairs. Perhaps Micky was late for a luncheon date or his class in Family Life Skills.

Ed couldn't spot him at any of the tables when he told Sid about it in the cafeteria.

"We'll have to keep an eye on this." Sid gazed benignly across the cafeteria.

Horace Fenstermaker was sitting on his doorstep when Ed got home. When he saw Ed's old Duster pull into the driveway, he ran to the car waving a newspaper. Ed locked the door and rolled the window up half-way.

"You seen this?" Horace shouted.

Ed shook his head as Horace held up the front page of the *Wando Exponent*, showing a photo of his lab and of Sid Clemson pointing a knife at him. This photo was flanked by two stories: "WANDO HIGH STUDENT SUSPENDED FOR KLAN ACTIVITIES" and "LOCAL MAN SELLS KLAN WEAPONS." Ed got out of the car and put the paper on the hood. Horace was shifting excitedly from foot to foot. Ed gave him the house key.

"Please go inside so I can read this." Ed read the first story:

An unnamed student at WHS has been suspended for distribution of Klan pamphlets and possession of weapons found in his locker. His science teacher, Edwin Lashley, would not deny reports that the hate literature was distributed in his class or that he knew about the "Wreck-ware" being secretly sold to local Klansmen by a representative of Grumex Corporation (See article opposite.), personally known by Lashley. Mr. Sidney Clemson, Principal of Wando High, refused to comment on the situation. Mitchell Schuster, a School Board member, said only that the incident was greatly exaggerated. School Superintendent Leroy Runcible could not be reached.

Ed glanced at the article opposite:

Knives and other equipment secretly sold to a network of Klansmen in Wando have been traced to a local representative of the Grumex Corporation. These weapons are part of their "Wreck-

ware" line. Although this paper has learned the name of the local weapons-agent, it is not our policy to divulge personal information until the individual has been interviewed.

"And after that, anything goes. Right, Ms. Wallop?" Ed had been reading aloud. The screen door slapped shut as Horace came out.

"Where did she get that?" Horace said.

"Most of it she made up," Ed said. "Ms. Wallop is very creative. It's the last time I'll take a phone call from a reporter five minutes before class. One thing she did figure out though."

"What's that?" Horace stared at the headlines.

"Why you were moving so many knives through network sales. You were being referred from one Klansman to another," Ed said.

"Not any more," Horace said. "My FSM wants my sample kits."

"FSM?"

"Field Sales Manager."

"I can't say I'm sorry, Horace, especially after meeting Mr. Gunderson." Ed stepped onto the porch.

"He was a strange one. When you left, he asked me about bayonets." Horace shifted back and forth. "Look, I can't have my name mixed up with this. Not after that business with Petrof. I'm the church youth leader. My wife..."

"Horace, your name isn't mentioned. What about me? According to this, I've been distributing hate literature in the classroom."

"Well, you're a teacher," Horace said.

"Combat veteran, huh?"

"No, I mean..."

"Never mind," Ed said. "Let's call Cindy Wallop." Ed went into the house and Horace followed.

After pouring Horace a cup of whiskey from the bottle Pinky kept with the wood polish, Ed found the only "Wallop" in the phone book.

"My name is Ed Lashley. Remember me? Are you the Cindy Wallop who writes for the *Exponent*?"

"Yes," Cindy said. "You're Mr. Lashley from Wando High. Right?"

"You're right about that, any way. Look, your story..."

"Stretches it a bit, right?" Cindy said. "My editor's gotten calls from Grumex. We're going to run a correction next week. Section B. Look for it. No names mentioned."

"But meanwhile..."

"Look, I don't know what more you want," Cindy said. "I'm only following leads. All right? Jerry said you knew about this Schuster kid; so I called you. I didn't put anything in it you didn't tell me."

"Jerry?" Ed said.

Cindy ignored his question. "Oh, and Schuster told me that buying from Grumex did not make him a Klansman and that 'wreck-ware' was misspelled. The correction will cover that. Right?"

Ed wondered how to answer her.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Lashley. And good evening." She hung up.

Ed turned around. "Horace, you're off the hook. We're all off the hook," he said dreamily. "The *Exponent* is printing a correction." Now he was shouting. "Meanwhile, we leave our phones off the hook." Horace stared into his cup.

Horace left by the back door, leaving Ed to his cup of whiskey and plate of cold zucchini. The Klan bothered him less than the fact that both Sid and Cindy Wallop called Runcible "Jerry." He scraped the zucchini into the trash. Jaime's manuscript was still on the kitchen table where Phyllis had left it. He looked for one of the poems he remembered, the one that seemed to be about metamorphosis:

Duende

*As strip by strip the skin like pastry buckles
and an impetuous wet imago
emerges, twisting from behind closed lips
like a promise claimed, I speak my name:
why would I dry and shrink to live again
in books so painfully outgrown and shed?*

People like Runcible were always shedding themselves and moving on to the next opportunity. He allowed himself to be called “Jerry” to permit others to bask briefly in the pleasure he took in being in control. To call him “Jerry” was the equivalent of happily cringing before the alpha dog. But when Jaime had called Runcible "Jerry" it was different. And Jaime was dead. He was dead not by murder but by arrangement, by a puppetry of souls. And Runcible knew that Ed understood.

The phone rang.

"Ed, I'm so sorry," Phyllis said. "I never dreamed that Cindy would print what I told her in confidence."

"It's OK, Phyllis. She's going to print a retraction."

"She came to school to talk about the new column that Jerry wants me to write for the *Exponent* as a bridge between school and community. You know, it's a way to improve the interface. Ed?"

"Yes. I see," Ed slowly answered.

"But when she arrived she began pumping me about Grumex and Horace. She'd been following him after seeing him with known Klansmen."

"Following?"

"Yes. She saw him at Schusters and Shacklefords and Gundersons, she said."

"The Gundersons," he said quietly.

"So when she heard about Mickey she knew she was onto something. She said it would be confidential, but you can never trust a writer."

"No. I guess not, Phyllis," Ed said. He looked at the dishes still in the sink from their dinner Monday night. "You can't trust a writer to be confidential." He said this with his hand over the receiver.

"Please don't be angry with me," Phyllis said. "I should have known."

"It's OK, Phyllis. Look, I'm going to take the phone off the hook now. I'll see you at school. OK?" He hung up. So her column for Jerry was going to "improve the interface." That was one of Runcible's fishy biscuits. Yes, Ed thought, it was dangerous to say anything to a writer. You might end up caught in a network and trying to shed your interface, which must be the face you keep between your real face and your outer face. Runcible had a deck of them. But if you're caught you can always "journal" in third person to imagine that this had happened to someone else. Right? Ed decided to skip dinner and go to bed.

Peaches and Dreams

*Red, like iron streams,
our flesh pours from our wills
as I pour out my dreams,
my fingers dripping off.*

—Jaime Petrof, *Exuvioe*

The following morning, Ed decided that he needed time off. With five hundred sick days accumulated, he'd earned it. He wanted time to write, time to "process," as Phyllis said, and he particularly did not want to be in school the day after the story in the newspaper. He sat down on the couch and picked up the bound notebook that Phyllis had given him. The notebook was stuffed with

scraps of paper that included newspaper clippings, some of Petrof's strange poems, and notes that Ed had made from his own thoughts and dreams over several weeks. He hadn't written much in the notebook so far, but now he seemed to need to put some of this material into the journal. He began to write.

It will take time to make sense of these notes, now that I'm ready to tell about last summer and the peaches before Pinky gets back. It was the summer after Petrof killed himself. When Pinky leaves it's as if I were the one traveling. I am so restless until she returns. The writing helps me to slow down and somehow keep everything in good order. Notes are all I have. Some notes I haven't even read since school started. "Take notes, then make notes," my journalist friend, Phyllis, advised me. So I took notes, but what do I make of them?

*Freestone, not Cling.
Caught in the trees without clothes
each garment dropped was a push
from shore: He descended into hell.
"Lashing,' isn't it?"
"No, Lashley" Lashing about.
Awake in a sweat.*

I wrote that after a dream. "To make notes takes time," Phyllis said. And I wrote this after the same dream: "The pink sheet over my face admits about as much light as is bearable this morning. It's the way skin looks in the dark when you shine a flashlight through your spider-veined red hand, hiding under the covers while the grown-ups are playing cards in the kitchen. His voice is louder than hers."

* * *

Ed laid the notebook down and got up from the couch to call Wando High School.

"Hello, Elaine? This is Ed Lashley."

"No, this is Juanita, Mr. Lashley. I can't hear you very well."

"I'm not coming in today," He said. "I don't feel well."

"All right, we'll get you a sub. Your lessons?"

"Use my emergency plans," Ed said, quickly hanging up to end the discussion. He went back to the couch and continued to write. Today he would follow Phyllis's advice about journaling. No self-criticism, he thought. Just write what comes to mind. Well, he'd give a day and see what came of it.

* * *

It was during summer school last July. I signed up to teach both sessions. Maybe I took it on because I couldn't leave yet. Petrof was buried, but nothing was settled, much less in good order. I didn't want to spend much time alone. One Saturday morning Pinky and I were gliding along the aisles of the blest in Safeway. Pinky suddenly stopped in front of the peaches. She had been shuffling along in front of the cart I was pushing, her bunions poking out of her shoes.

"I don't want Cling," she said.

"What?" I said, nearly running into her.

"I don't want Cling. Just don't like them as well as Freestone." She looked back. I looked down. I knew what was coming.

"Let's go to Earl's," Pinky said. Earl Parks was her cousin who had a peach orchard in Marvel, in the Valley. After a week of summer school, I'd hoped to finish shopping in the morning and have the rest of the day off but Pinky led me out of the produce department. "No need to buy tomatoes or lettuce here," she said.

Once home, I went to the attic while she made lunch. The air was thick and hot, musty with every particle trapped from years of the winnowing and storing away of exhalations one could not quite release. The attic was a kind of final sieve that captured unfinished business, the residues of forgotten imperatives; it caught the heat and smells and grief of spirits draining away, perhaps purified. Hot as Hades, it was also alive with mud-daubers. Sweat burned my eyes. A convex, oval photograph bulging from another time showed a baby boy in ribbons. In a later photo, framed with hard right-angles, a man in uniform looked out, also in ribbons. The peach baskets were in the darkest place, under the eaves, beyond my mother's clothes. The dust rained down; I scooped it into my nose and lungs as I inched forward on my stomach toward the baskets. Trips to Earl's always began this way.

The drive out was pleasant enough. The ancient hills looked like the knees and hips of old men lying down in faded dungarees. The sky was overcast. Earl's roadside stand past Berryville had a new sign bearing the same message I remembered, "Park and Pick at Park's." Earl Junior waved us up the

dusty road to where the peach trees climbed the hillside like a team of spiders. I parked as close as he would let me so that Pinky could walk up and pick her own while I carried the baskets. My mother gave me the same job. Once I had escaped to stand on the granite overlook, flat-faced like clenched teeth descending two hundred yards to a thread of water far below. Mother called me back.

"Don't throw the peaches into the basket, Eddy," Pinky said. "Don't drop them." The first thing she would do when we got home was to skin them and cut them up. We never ate them fresh, so why did bruises matter? Back at the stand, Earl Senior weighed our baskets. I remembered my surprise that such a black man would have a red tongue. My mother always let Pinky do the talking, but once she did talk to Earl about how he came back from the War without a leg.

"Do you have the Beefsteak?" Pinky asked.

"Most don't buy it, Ms. Cooke. I didn't even plant 'em. Try those pear tomatoes or the yellow ones."

"No, I want Beefsteak."

A man came up to us. "'Lashing,' isn't it?"

"No, Lashley. Ed Lashley," I said. It was the young man I'd seen at Petrof's funeral, the one with the green streak in his hair. An awkward silence ballooned between us. The last time I'd seen him and Petrof's other friend had been even more awkward. Nothing I could say seemed appropriate. We stood eye to eye and then he spoke.

"We buy only organic," he said, tossing his head toward his friend, who was driving up to the orchard. "Jaime usually came on Saturdays. For dinner, you know." He pushed his hair back. "We miss him."

"Yes, I miss him too."

"Look, uh, Lashley."

"Ed." I said.

"Ed, maybe you would want to come to a kind of mandala, uh, memorial service for Jaime. On Monday night." His speech was soft and crisp, his gaze unrelenting.

"Monday night?"

"You're busy?" He said.

"No." I was looking at the green stripe again.

"Well then, you can come?"

"Yes. That's all right." I couldn't say no.

The green-stripe man began writing on a card as he spoke. "Georgetown Road. Bring something to say. Informal." He handed me directions.

I stammered. He went on to the more talkative bell peppers and tomatoes.

Phyllis tells me to take notes, by which she seems to mean that I should let everything spill out, such as dreams, fears—all that has happened. "Then make a list," she said. When she told me this, she was watching her students from the doorway. "Make notes. Look for patterns. That should be like science for you, Ed. Leave everything in it at first."

She turned to answer a student's question about his tool line. I didn't understand, but we had to leave it there.

After getting the peaches on Saturday afternoon, nothing happened. I couldn't make notes about it. I tried, but there was nothing to write. We put up two bushels of peaches. Peeling, slicing, canning. What was there to write? But I still didn't sleep well that night and as usual woke up clammy at two in the morning, my head pounding, my pants wet. My new routine was to take a shower at two in the morning, change sheets, and then take notes. I wrote this when I woke up. I didn't move or open my eyes. Instead, I tried to hold in my sight what I had been repeatedly dreaming:

Downy cheek

where interns practice sutures

no gulping veins twitching under it,

a stone eye hidden in the globe;

Tugging on crumbly spurs,

knobby black fingers flowering.

into pubescent wounds.

"Never eat the skin."

"Never eat the skin," Mother said. I never did. The idea of biting into that fuzzy integument made me think of chewing a chick's down feathers, an infant's cheeks, a newborn's lanugo. The more I thought, the less I liked peaches, but Mother and Pinky had always gone to Earl's, always waited while he slowly weighed them, and then come home and thoughtlessly slit their skins. Later, when I saw medical students practice their tailoring on flaps of peach skin, the preserved peaches reminded me of the preserved specimens I set out for dissection every spring.

The baskets always had to go back to the attic. The Mason jars had to be brought down. More dust flew up, the dust of ages left for me. It was the same dust I smelled the night Mother died, when I looked in the attic for a stick to prop the window. She needed something to prop her face too, her face fallen into itself.

Someone was moving in and out of the oval picture frames, someone in the narrow angles at the eaves, silent as a dying insect. Staring from the attic, coming down the cliff, dropping to the silver thread of water, shivering from testicles to teeth, and grabbing at my teeth to hold me back from riding down that throat, I smelled the dust and felt the peach trees climbing over the attic floor.

"Swallow now, it won't hurt," Mother was saying. "It's good for you. Go and get the jar." I gasped for light. Tapering black fingers were reaching for the peaches, the bright, slimy, skinless peaches, their faces stripped but eyes closed. Drink from the death that is good for you. The stumpy red fingers were swollen like peaches themselves beneath the black skin. "Rinse them first," she said, even after skinning them. "Do not touch them. First peel your fingers, your touch itself. Peel them back. Strip the fingertips to reach the peaches underneath."

I brought the jar and held it up to the window, and Jaime's blue eyes stared out of the preserves.

I had never moved while I was writing. The bed was soaked. I got up and turned on another light. It was five o'clock now, rosy-fingered dawn. No, don't think about rosy fingers. I turned on more lights. Every pore and orifice of my body that could leak had done so. The shower was as hot as I could stand.

Afterwards, I remembered that on Sunday mornings in the summer. Mother and I had always gone to the early service because Pinky's Gospel Call radio program was hard to escape if we stayed in. As Mother grew feebler, I became accustomed to the raspy preaching, shouting and endless female vocals of Gospel Call. The preacher was gasping to a finale as I was getting dressed.

"And David say, 'Why weep?' Huh. Amen? He say. Huh. 'Why weep?' Huh. 'The boy is dead.' Huh. The boy is dead. Huh. 'He will not come to me.' Huh. 'But I will go to him.' Huh. Amen?"

"At our church, the summer choir entered without robes, as usual. I watched the procession from the door.. The last man through the door that Sunday, however, was Leroy "Jerry" Runcible, full of himself, the Superintendent and former Principal. Mother was somehow sitting with me in church as Runcible walked in with the choir, but Mother had been dead for two years.

Jaime was buried in the one suit I could find in his apartment. Runcible wore blue serge. Jaime had approached teaching as a religious vocation. Runcible had turned Jaime's ideas into slogans.

Runcible used any opportunity for favorable exposure. We could only know that he was "caring" if he showed us. He showed us often, today by opening his mouth at all the right times. I slipped out past the ushers during the Creed. Unlike Runcible, the pimply-faced Jaime was never favorably exposed. Not now, for sure. He had not found life user-friendly, a gliding movement from switch to switch, from face to face, and from surge to surge of power. I still could not believe that Jaime and Runcible had been lovers.

More useless notes. For you, Phyllis. Here's the note that Pinky left me and what I wrote afterwards, when I had another dream.

"Gone to church with Thelma. Need DeCon again. Same spot."

I lay down in the living room looking up at the white spot in the ceiling where a mouse had once chewed through. I'd patched and coated it but the spot still glowed. Thelma was Earl Senior's wife. Whenever they went to a church supper, Pinky would return late with the leftovers. I took off my shoes. I told myself that I was studying the spot to decide what to do about it. My mother had always sent me after the mice that joined our household in the fall. I would have left them alone. Anyone who wanted to live in that attic was entitled to it. Sometimes there were birds or flying squirrels to join them.

We were sitting around the coffee table. Runcible, in a glowing coat, had spread out real estate brochures, saying, "You must make room. Our Ministry of Caring demands it. The birds of the air have nests and mice have holes. You must turn over the unused portions of your home for low income housing." Two women and a man were on the other side of the table.

"How will they get in and out?" I said.

"Outside steps," Runcible said.

"The attic is too small," I said.

"We'll put in dormer rooms. You'll see. You make room." Runcible said.

"The ceiling is too weak to support such a project." I said.

Sleek developers were sitting around a mahogany conference table, the men in double-breasted suits, the women in blue stockings, like Phyllis. They seemed languid as I tried to ask another question. They only talked to each other. They wouldn't listen to me, and I could see the ceiling bulging and cracking under the weight.

"Let's go for a drive," one of them said suddenly.

"Off we go! Where?" Another said.

"Open country!" They all said.

They took me with them. We passed a burning tower that looked like a stag horn sponge, the flames visible from a distance. A testicle-processing plant, one said. Smoke was rising around us. They drove back, and we all returned to the attic.

"You did too much hammering up here last year to be a key leader." Runcible, shook his head.

Mother nodded sadly.

He began to take apart the cabinets over the kitchen sink, in which old wooden chests had been hidden with incriminating records about us from slave days. "You must make room," Runcible said. Pinky nodded sadly.

I thought I saw someone smile. Sounds of shuffling and scuttling came from above the ceiling. Maybe a deadly spray would stop it. Poke it through the spot in the ceiling. Maybe a deadly spray would stop it from poking through the dark spots in the ceiling and dropping onto us. I couldn't breathe.

The vague scuttling sounds continued. The stove door creaked and closed and a peach with blue eyes looked back through the window. Mother was shaking me. I couldn't swallow. Runcible was smiling.

"Drink it! It's good for you," Mother was saying while car exhaust poured into the room with the musty smell of old pillows.

* * *

Ed woke up with his face in the couch pillow. He'd fallen asleep with the journal on his chest. Pinky had just come in the front door. The room was dark.

"Law, what you been doing, Edwin?" Pinky said.

"I fell asleep, I guess."

"You drenched. And look at that sofa." He had wet the sofa.

A slovenly, bearded fellow with stringy hair and nicotine-stained claws sat across from Ed on the Metro. He was talking loudly to a neatly dressed civil servant, telling him how he'd changed his name to get away from paying alimony in West Virginia. The civil servant gripped the corners of his attaché case and smiled.

Unlike Ed's experience earlier in the day, this was not a dream. It was the Orange Line to New Carrollton.

Ed got off in Bethesda, surfacing in a hotel plaza. After walking in both directions on Georgetown Road, he finally found the apartment. The names on the doorplate were Artice Molloy and Noel Mosley. The man with the green streaked hair answered the door. Ed made a guess.

"Artice?"

"Ed. Glad you could make it." He showed Ed into a small living room with a dim skylight.

"Drink?"

"A coke, please," Ed said, sitting down beside his roommate, Noel.

"Ed Lashley," he said to a swarthy man in a neon gym suit.

"Ramiro Fuentes," he said, trilling the r's authentically. They continued talking. All of the men in the room could have been in Ed's Biology class only a few years ago. Ed was the last to arrive.

"OK, now that Ed's here, let's begin," Artice said. The others sat around them. "This is a time to remember Jaime," Artice said. "All of us knew him differently. All of us miss him. Noel and I saw him on Saturdays. Once he told us about growing up in New Mexico and read us the poems of Otero." The others nodded.

"I would have gone home if Jaime had not spoken for me. I was going to leave school," Ramiro said. They nodded.

"Jaime often spoke of Jerry when he saw us," said Noel, continuing the recital. "It was something he, like, could not accept. That's how he was." They nodded again.

"What was it he couldn't accept?" Ed asked.

Artice had just put on a disk of Earth Sounds. "Jerry had gone over," he said crisply. The others nodded and shook their heads.

"That was cold," someone mumbled.

"Jaime had, like, a mission, you know, to get people outside themselves—to find out who else they were or could be," Noel said. The others nodded vigorously.

"I guess I didn't know him very well," Ed said. "He taught next door to me at school. We served on a committee. I was the one that found him." They nodded. "His parents are dead; I have some of his books and papers. This manuscript was his last book." When Ed read the poems from *Exuvioe*, some of the men rocked slowly back and forth. Others hugged those nearby. As he finished, Artice began a chant.

"What is you in us we remember. What is you in us we unite," Artice said. All of them were chanting quietly. The lights dimmed and the Earth Sounds rose. Noel had slipped out and come back in with a birthday cake. Each person received a piece with a candle still burning in it. They began standing up, so Ed stood up. They each went out carrying a piece of cake with a lit candle. It made Ed think of going out of the church to sing at midnight on Christmas Eve, with every face in the congregation lit by a candle. The candles disappeared quickly along Georgetown Road.

Pinky was still up when Ed got home. She had been canning green beans. Her hair was now as white and sparse as his mother's had been two years ago. Beads of perspiration hung on her upper lip. Ed sat down at the kitchen table.

"Nice service?" she said, sitting down.

"Yes, it was. More than what I had in church yesterday. You know Runcible's in the choir?"

She wrinkled her nose.

"It made me think." Ed looked around the kitchen, his gaze stopping on the oven door. "That is, I've been remembering things. About Mother, you know. And something else."

"What?" Pinky said.

"Picking the peaches brought it back."

"That day, yes." She looked down to her left.

"What day, Pinky? Tell me. I know there is something." Ed said.

"Tell you what you Mama wouldn't?" She shook her head and lightly stroked the edge of the table. After a long pause, she spoke quietly, never looking up, "That was 1948. You were three years old. Your daddy had been back three years. Rough, though. Your mama knew he wasn't right. We were at Earl's like we were last Saturday. He here." She pointed to the stove. "That where we found him."

Parcel Post

Wando had one bus pick-up and one cab service, Raymond's Cabs. The bus came once a day and the cab when Raymond felt like it. Ed was finally on his way home after waiting an hour at the one garage in town open on Saturday morning. It was the only day of the week he could get work done during the school year. Raymond had his arm out of the window and was doing about thirty miles an hour. At least they were moving.

Things seemed to have died down by the end of the week. Ed wasn't getting any more phone threats since the newspaper had printed a retraction. Mickey Schuster had been transferred to another Biology section. Ed was surprised that the principal had gone that far, given the Superintendent's hands-

off approach to the son of a School Board member. Mickey and his friends hadn't kept their hands off, of course. All of the hate-calls seemed to be from teenaged boys chanting "clash and bash," along with a few calls from older men who believed that Ed was doing a Klan exposé.

Then Ed got a package from Mickey.

Ed saw it as the cab crawled down his street and knew at once that it was from Mickey. Raymond finally stopped at Ed's mailbox. The package, sitting beside the pole, was about the size of an unabridged dictionary. Pipe bombs came to mind as he studied the familiar scribbling. No return address. But Mickey had made a promise. Mickey was the sort who would enjoy tossing firecrackers into a crib. Raymond, waiting for his fare, turned up the static on his radio.

"Please take me back to town to the Post Office," Ed said, putting the package on the seat between them. It had survived the mail; it should survive one more trip.

Raymond was expressionless; forward or reverse made no difference to him. His top speed was thirty-five. Ed hoped there was no timer in the package.

Probably the package was quite innocent. It probably wasn't even Mickey's handwriting. Mickey hadn't been in Ed's class long enough for him to be sure. No, there wasn't clear evidence that it was even from Mickey.

No, probably not, Ed thought. They had had their fun over the telephone and putting something into Ed's gas tank. Ed had noticed that the gas cap was loose when he came out of school the day before. Just more intimidation. Ed had siphoned the tank, walked into town to get a can of gas and then made an appointment at the shop for Saturday morning.

The cab was creeping along a line of pine trees beside the highway. Ed imagined an explosion spraying needles in all directions. A weather report blurted from the static.

"Looks like we have a rain event scenario on tap for the early afternoon."

It was almost noon. The post office closed at noon on Saturdays. The pines were still waltzing by the window. Ed had never studied them in such intimate detail. Ed wondered how you could have a “scenario on tap.”

Raymond swung his arm as if making ripples from a canoe floating down a placid stream. The pines were finally behind them as they came to rest at the first traffic light in town. The Post Office was a block away. Ed jumped out.

"Meet me at the Post Office," Ed shouted back. Raymond leaned back as if Ed had snagged his trawl line.

In the post office, three were ahead of him. Only one window was open. It was almost noon. A young mother at the window was holding a toddler with one hand and trying to put stamps on envelopes with the other. Ed tried not to think about holding the box. It had survived the mail already. It probably wasn't anything. It was very light, but guncotton was also light. An elderly man was asking long questions about registered mail and not hearing the answers. He finally left. The clerk pushed a wisp of hair behind her ear, looked back at the punch-clock, and then at Ed and his package.

"First class?" She said. "Oh, it's been delivered. Wrong address?"

"No, it came to the right address." She closed her drawer of stamps as Ed talked. "I think it might contain a bomb. What do I do with it?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh." She looked back into the empty mail room; then again at the package. "This is UPS," she said.

"What?" Ed said.

"UPS. Not Postal Service." She watched Ed for some sign of life. "See these UPS stamps? We wouldn't handle that."

"But what do I do with this?" Ed asked as she began to pull down the screen.

"Well, you might ask UPS about it." The screen was down.

Raymond was double-parked in front, apparently unaware of the narrow gap he had created for Main Street traffic to trickle through.

"Let's go back to the garage," Ed said, noticing that the meter was up to forty dollars. Raymond eased off into the stream. The ticking sounds that Ed's Duster had been making would have to wait. He could see the Duster in the back lot as they pulled in.

Back in his own car after paying off Raymond, Ed spun around the corner to the florist. The only UPS in Wando was at Bernadette's Florist. The only person Ed had ever seen behind the counter in Bernadette's Florist was a scowling old man with a permanent case of hives. Red footprints painted on the floor led to the lonely UPS counter in a corner of the shop where he'd posted a long list of additional steps for customers to follow before they bothered him with packages. Once you had a package to mail, he always had to be flushed from the lilies in the cold room or the wedding arrangements sprouting from oasis blocks in the back. Bells ringing from the door and countertops were seldom enough to raise him. Ed was surprised when Bernadette appeared behind him at Ed's first shout. He'd been in the window display.

"You'll want to wrap that parcel properly before it's sent. See the rules on the UPS counter." He growled and turned back to the display of something with a chalice and floral fountain of baby's breath.

"This isn't to send," Ed said. "There's a problem."

Bernadette sighed, stood, and shook his head. "Yes, it wasn't wrapped properly." He took the package. "See how the paper sticks out here? That could catch in a conveyer."

"The wrapping is not the problem," Ed said. "I've already received it. I think it contains a bomb."

The florist was standing between Ed and the door. He simply put the box down and walked out of the shop.

It had begun to rain as Ed pulled back onto the highway going out of town. The Fire Hall, his next stop, was five miles ahead. The car's ticking had turned into a thumping sound. Traffic had stalled behind an accident near the waltzing pine trees. The rain event had become a downpour. The car was clanking and shuddering as Ed neared the accident. As the engine died, Ed pulled onto the shoulder.

A bread truck and a cab were surrounded by police and onlookers. It was Raymond's Cab, and Raymond was talking to the wrecker driver. Ed stepped out of the car and sank into the mud. Blue and red lights flashed in the mirrors. A state police car pulled over. Ed sat down again and shut the door.

The trooper took his time getting out of the car. Ed wondered whether he was hoping that Ed would go away. The trooper stretched a plastic cover over his hat. Ed watched in the mirror. The trooper was still buttoning his raincoat when he knocked on the window.

"What's the problem here? Are you involved in this accident?" When he bent down to the window, the rain streamed in rivulets around his ears.

"I think I have a bomb here," Ed said, pointing to the package. The trooper stepped back from the car and looked down the highway.

All that Ed could hear clearly were the words "back-up."

"What?" Ed shouted.

"Try to remain calm. I need you to get out and step away from the vehicle," the trooper said as he backed away. Ed got out. The mud sucked off his penny loafer.

"Slowly! Leave the box!" The trooper said this glancing over his shoulder as two more cruisers pulled up. Several troopers got out without putting on their raincoats.

"I'm Officer Allison. Let's go to my car." They walked to his car while the others opened Ed's car doors. Ed noticed that the trooper's car was spotless except for the mud Ed had tracked onto the mats.

"What are you doing out here?" the trooper said.

"I've been looking for somebody to take that package," said Ed.

The trooper's eyebrows rose. Several policemen stood around the package, which they had carried away from the accident and set down near the pine trees. "Should they let that get wet?" Ed said. "It might react with water."

"I think we can let them take care of it now, don't you?" His lips barely moved. "Your driver's license."

Ed handed him his wallet. Ed's glasses were completely fogged and his hands trembled.

"Now why do you say it will react with water? Did you make it?" The trooper carefully studied Ed.

"No, I said it might react. Like sodium," Ed said.

"It might react." The trooper wrote on a clipboard. "How do you know, Mr. Lashley?"

"I don't know. The thing came in the mail."

"How to make it, you mean?" The trooper studied Ed's face. "Weren't you in the newspaper?"

"That was a mistake. They said I'd allowed hate literature in the classroom but it was Mickey Schuster."

Another trooper had come to the car and handed Officer Allison a slip of paper. They exchanged words. Ed wiped his glasses on his shirt. Looking through the streaks was like looking between bars. Curtains of rain swept around them and pounded the car. Both doors on Ed's car were still open. Raymond's cab was being towed away.

"There was nothing in the package, Mr. Lashley," the trooper said.

"What? Nothing?" Ed said.

"Nothing but this," he said, handing Ed the slip of paper. In bold black letters it read:

"B O O M!"

Till the Multitude Make Virtue

*“Then it is the brave man chooses
While the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied.”*

—James Russell Lowell, *“Once, to every man and nation”*

Heidi Fenstermaker broke down and ran out of class during the tutoring session after school because she had to decide by the next day what to do for the rest of her life. Ed thought she was crying about Le Chatelier's principle, but her mother set him straight when she came for Heidi's sleepy brother Heywood, draped over a desk in the back of the room.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lashley." She rolled her eyes. Ed nodded. "Heidi has to make some real choices tomorrow. She has to decide what to do for the rest of her life."

"I'm sorry to hear that." said Ed.

"Oh, no, It's good for her. Yes, we believe that young people need real choices. Don't you?" Mrs. Fenstermaker's eyebrows crumpled over her nose, and one eye struck out on its own. "About their own lives, I mean?"

Ed didn't think he'd nodded, but she eagerly continued. "We've tried to get across to her how important it will be tomorrow for her to choose the right courses for next year. We've been in prayer for weeks. Her senior schedule will affect the rest of her life."

This statement was undeniable; she could see that Ed thought so. "She'll be all right once we take it to prayer. Heywood!"

Heywood snorted and looked up with puffy eyes. He was a pudgy replica of his father, Horace, whom Ed hadn't seen since the "Rec-ware" incident. Heywood stuffed his books into a gym bag and staggered out.

Ed wished that he had a real choice about the meetings he was going to attend after school: a county-wide faculty meeting and a reception for the new Superintendent, Dr. Leroy G. Runcible—"Jerry" to his friends. No doubt the faculty meeting would be about Runcible's fourteen-step plan for improving schools, No doubt he would dress for success, as he did when he was principal, and he would sport WE CARE buttons on both lapels. Like it or not, the high school staff would hear it all again, and they would swallow every fishy biscuit for their own good. Ed was taking his time walking to the auditorium. He decided to look into Howard Finney's biology lab on the way.

Howard was standing by the window. "Want to go down now, Howard?" Ed said as quietly as possible.

Startled and stammering as if Ed had caught him walking on the grass, Howard seemed to oscillate like a plucked string.

"I didn't mean to bother you," Ed said. Howard was plump and pale, with a peaked skull and short arms. He reminded Ed of a sunfish always just about to lean over too far and then float up to the surface.

"No, no," he sputtered. "N-No bother. Just thinking. Just thinking. Caught me n-napping. Ha! Just. No bother at all. At all."

It was no secret that Howard Finney was just outside of the trip-wire to La La Land. Like a night-blind soldier sweeping the ground before he plants each step, Howard had a furtive desperate look about him, as if the next step might be the one that would send him screaming down the hall. His jerky movements reminded Ed of a leafhopper never quite settling.

"The students just don't c-come to us knowing very much, do they? Not any more." Howard erased some of the writing from the blackboard. "Spend all my time on -d-discipline," he continued. "Part time students.' That's what I call them." He straightened a row of chairs and closed his desk drawer. "Everything has to be a 'good time.' No parental support." He straightened the same chairs again and then returned to the window. "How much can you do?"

Howard tried to drop his voice as they walked out of the room, but it kept rising despite his efforts. "Even Howie. Doris and I can't get him to do anything. Just lies on his bed. With that boom box. Those posters on the ceiling."

As they walked down the hall, Howard walked with a half-step thrown in every other stride. Walking beside Howard was like trying to accompany a bouncing tumbleweed.

"Have to phone Doris." Howard said. "Forgot." He disappeared into the main office and Ed turned the corner to the auditorium.

Teachers were milling in the foyer when Ed joined the line for the sign-in sheet. Every year they had one of these meetings. The entire staff of Wando County Schools would mingle and bob in the foyer, troop into the auditorium, hear a message from someone paid to be inspirational, and then troop

out. Arnie Winkler, the science department head and county coordinator, joined Ed in line. From the waist up, Winkler was shaped like a Gouda cheese. The top of his head was bright red.

"You and Sid been fishing again, Arnie?" Ed pointed to Arnie's head.

"No," Arnie said. "Sid's been too busy since becoming principal. It was just me this summer."

"Someone else too busy to relax is Howard," said Ed, pointing to Howard coming out of the office. "You talked to him lately?"

"I know," said Arnie, shaking his head. "I worked with him last year but he's fading out again, isn't he?"

"We don't want another Petrof," Ed said.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Arnie said. "Perfectionists. There's one way to do it or you bust. I'll see him." Arnie spotted another science teacher and slipped away. Winkler came and went like a man going in and out of a house to patch the roof in a thunderstorm.

For more than twenty years Ed had attended the Fall Orientation Meeting. Little had changed in that time except that in the first meetings the county's staff was small enough to meet in a classroom. Now the staff filled the high school auditorium and the Central Office people had to sit in a row of folding chairs on stage.

Sid Clemson, Wando High's principal, was at the microphone making encouraging noises to the latecomers unable to find seats in the rear. He tried to look comfortable in his baggy suit, although he was really only at ease wearing cut-offs and a sweatshirt, lying back in his boat about a mile off the Eastern shore. He delivered his introduction to the central office staff as if trying to empty potatoes from his pockets without anyone noticing. The last spud to fall out was Dr. Runcible.

He had stood at his chair while others in the row remained seated. As Sid finished, Runcible took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and went down into the audience carrying his microphone like a talk-

show host. He began to work the crowd, walking through the auditorium and looking teachers in the eyes with a "nurturing gaze," his favorite fishy biscuit. He'd done the same stunt when he was principal.

"You know, Mr. Clemson hasn't always been such a good public speaker. Runcible said. "He's had to practice. Yes, when he goes fishing he even tries his speeches out on the fish he catches. Maybe it's to make sure they're dead." Runcible paused, leaning on the back of a seat. A few people tried to laugh.

"Last summer, Sid and his wife Jan were alone in the boat when it began to rain. They went below to wait for it to blow over and Sid began whispering sweet nothings to her. As they lay down on the bed, Jan saw the fish looking at them from the ice chest. He said, 'if his sweet talk didn't kill you, this will.'"

A few more people laughed with Runcible. On stage, Sid was not finding it easy to look like a good sport. He stepped behind the curtain.

Runcible dropped his voice. "Seriously, the C.O. Team and I want to thank Sid and Wando High for hosting our Orientation this year. This is like a homecoming for me." He only "wanted" to thank them but did not actually do so, Ed thought. The "C.O. Team" twisted in their folding chairs while Runcible roamed the aisles.

"It's a new school year, a year of great changes," he said. "It's a year of stretching and growing, and a year of striving for excellence. But don't worry. We'll take it a step at a time and we'll do it together."

Positioned in the back left corner of the auditorium, Ed felt fairly safe. Then Runcible began to move in his direction.

"You know, there was once a boy growing up in the little town of Enid, Oklahoma." Runcible paused for effect. The high school faculty already knew the rest of this story. "His Daddy had been a roughneck in the oil fields, a drinker and carouser, but his Daddy's life changed when he became a

church member and a deacon. He opened up a service station, then a chain of stations. Then he built a Savings and Loan for farmers and small businessmen. As he grew up, that boy remembered the changes in his Daddy: how the drinking stopped, and the beatings; how his Mama looked at his Daddy in a different way; how fear and hatred had ended. When they walked downtown, other people shook their hands and asked them in. That boy learned what it meant to believe that 'perfect love casts out fear.' It does. I was that boy. You may be afraid of the changes coming. 'Too much, too fast,' you may say. Don't be afraid. 'Perfect love casts out fear.'"

A list of the Fourteen Steps appeared on the screen above the stage. Sid's head was caught in the corner.

"This will capsulize it for you." Runcible waved at the screen. "Once these Fourteen Steps are installed in all our schools we will be on the right track, but you don't become professional over night. I don't expect it. But I do expect for the system to move in this direction: to become more professional, more excellent and to perform more perfectly. Then the perfect will cast out the imperfect, won't it? 'When the perfect comes then the imperfect shall pass away.'" He stood beside Howard Finney, not so much looking at him as looking through him. Howard didn't move. Runcible sailed back to the front.

When the Orientation ended an hour later, the disoriented multitude trooped from the auditorium, trying to decide whether, for survival, they should make a virtue of this new faith they would have preferred to deny. A few teachers filed into the cafeteria under the WE CARE banner over the door. The reception line was made of principals, parents and members of the Wando County Council and School Board, in recognition of Fishy Biscuit Number Five, "The Helping Hands Reaching Out to the Community." Runcible came along with Mrs. Fenstermaker just as Ed was turning to leave.

"Helen has told me good things about you, Ed," Runcible didn't look at Ed, but seemed to be scanning the room for someone.

"Heidi just loves him," Mrs. Fenstermaker said. Ed felt like a Pomeranian.

"Yes," Runcible said. "We have a respectable number of really superior teachers, but that's not enough, is it?"

Ed hoped this was a rhetorical question. Happily, it was.

"It's time that every school became a franchise for excellence." Runcible looked at a nearby newspaper photographer.

Helen Fenstermaker wiggled and basked in the glory of this personal interview. Runcible expanded like a lizard in the sun.

"At the Central Office we will be studying the big picture." Runcible raised his voice so much that Ed stepped back. "We will look at the control of costs, the interface with community, and more efficient operation. How schools install the Steps, of course, is their principals' business: 'Local tactics, but central strategy.'" He quoted himself warmly. "We began at Wando High. That's when the Key People on our Point Team began to reshape this school's impact."

Ed almost nodded eagerly with Mrs. Fenstermaker, until Runcible said that the school's "impact" was being "reshaped." How was this done? Wando High School's Point Team was always urging the rest of the faculty to do something, although they had done so less urgently since Runcible's departure. Ed wondered whether one shaped an impact before or after a collision.

"Wasn't Mr. Clemson on the high school's Point Team?" Mrs. Fenstermaker said, as if it were inconceivable that he was not.

"No, Sid had other duties last year," Runcible said. "I'm sure he was very busy." A principal had been selected who had never been a Key Person. Ed noticed that the local newspaper reporter had joined the photographer.

Next day, back at the "franchise," Ed was imagining an automated school. He would be wearing headphones and going from counter to window as students drove up to meet their scholastic needs with

a carry-out, a dollop of lab work, a shake of metric system, and some warmed-over lecture notes, maybe spiked with MSG. Then he would give the greetings: "Thank you and Have a Nice Day."

As students flowed by in the hall outside his room, Heywood Fenstermaker stopped, mumbled to the doorknob, and started off again.

"What was that, Heywood?" Ed said.

"She's gone," Heywood muttered.

"Who?" Ed asked.

"Heidi," Heywood said, starting off again.

"Wait a minute," Ed said. "What do you mean?"

"Gone off with the band." Heywood mumbled as he looked down the hall.

"A band?" Ed said.

"A rock band. Guy she knows in the Reserves in Fairall. Last night."

"She's left home?"

Heywood nodded or ducked his head. It could have been either. He dissolved into the flow. Too much talking to an adult could count against him. It seemed that Heidi had made a real choice after all.

Ed's side of the hall went to lunch first. When he came back, Ed looked into Howard Finney's room and saw Howard walking across the lab tables. Swaying like a little maple tree in a storm, he stepped from table to table, his hands fluttering. The two lanky ninth grade boys sitting at the tables were not laughing. The Class was not laughing. They were watching an exotic fish bloat and bloody itself before they could throw it back in the sea. Winkler appeared behind Ed.

"Good God, Howard." Winkler whispered. "Come on, it's time for lunch."

"T-Top of it." Howard waved to them. "I'm on t-top of it all."

"Yes. OK, let's go to lunch now, Howard." Winkler stood at the end of the table to block his leap.

"Top. Top of it," Howard muttered. He climbed down. Winkler led him out. Ed waited with the students until the lunch bell rang. Winkler came back.

"He's gone to the hospital, Ed. Look, he's sick." Winkler shook his head.

"Yes, he needs help," Ed said.

"No." Winkler raised his hand. "He's sick. Sid called me at the office. Do you understand? Howard left early today because he wasn't feeling well. For now, that's enough and that's the way I'm telling it."

"But the kids..."

"Yes, the kids will tell." Winkler nodded. "But maybe we can give him more time if we don't add to the story. He needs time, Ed. OK? We're not covering for him, just giving him time. OK?"

"OK, Arnie," Ed said. Of course, they were covering for him, Maybe he reminded them of themselves, never able to get high enough to be on top of anything and suspecting that the top is being raised out of reach anyway. This, Ed thought, was how a school's impact was reshaped. With a blunt instrument.

Over Lunch

Except over lunch on Saturdays, the two secretaries rarely saw each other after Elaine had moved uptown to the central office with her boss, Dr. Leroy G. Runcible, who had become Superintendent of Wando Schools. Their voices rose as they had their second cocktails before lunch. The man being seated in the next booth overheard more than he wanted to know. For Ed, it was the corrosive kind of knowledge that leaves the powerless hearer more powerless. Not all knowledge is power.

"I'm not in,' he tells me, 'unless I've listened in and nodded that I'll take it,'" Elaine said. "Everyone has urgent business. Everyone has an opinion, but I need their compliance,' he said, 'not their opinions, so take a message unless I'm listening in.' Even with his wife."

"He listens in on her?" Juanita asked.

"He never just answers a call," Elaine said. "Not even from her. He let her tell me about their gardener without ever taking the call, even though he was listening in. He could never do that at the high school."

"Not with all the phones ringing at once and students coming to the counter," Juanita said knowingly. "But now he has a personal secretary."

"An executive secretary!" Glasses clinked. "Yes! It's my reward for last year," Elaine said.

Juanita agreed. "He'd never have even cleared his desk without you. You did everything, the Administrative Review, the budget, the reports, and press releases."

"More like a party headquarters than a school office. Mr. Clemson did his register and discipline."

"He still does it even as principal. Poor Mr. Clemson. He's gotten everything, the teachers' personnel files, the school budget, the caseworker load, and the grant applications. Most of it was shifted by Dr. Runcible to the schools from the main office."

"Yes, and at the same time Mr. Clemson is supposed to be making more classroom visits and leading all those committees. I heard Dr. Runcible once tell someone, someone in Missouri, I think, that 'if the extra work doesn't drive them out, the committees will.' He didn't know I'd heard him."

When the waitress arrived with their lunches, the flow of talk took new turns around the leafy salt-free foods and sprig-topped juices.

"How have you kept it off?" Juanita said.

"All I have for lunch is a diet milkshake," Elaine said.

"And you still jog?"

"Two miles after work. Vera used to come with me." Elaine stirred her herbal tea.

"She quit?" Juanita said.

"Not really. Dr. Runcible had her come in and tell about her job. 'Maybe I should get my job description and some work samples,' she says. 'Oh, no,' he says, 'this will just be between you and me. Very informal.' Well, he began asking her who gave her work, and how many hours she typed, and what she did on each day of the week. The whole time, he was writing down her answers. She could only estimate this, she said. And that was off the top of her head. And she could get him specific times and information if he would let her, you know. No, he says. That wasn't necessary. He just needed a 'rough idea,' you know, of what 'his people' did. You know how he is. But all the time he was writing. A week later, he shows her the Time Analysis Chart he'd had me type. It 'proved,' he said, that Vera was really working half-time. The time she spent going back and forth to the post office or answering questions over the phone or filing was not even considered."

The server returned with help no one wanted. Elaine lowered her voice, but not enough for Ed to miss what she was saying. "I heard him tell someone that people given time to justify their jobs just pad the descriptions. When Vera left, he told me to divide her workload within the pool. Two other clerks are trying to learn what Vera knew about certificate renewals, and I'm the bad guy for giving them extra work."

The server returned with the dessert tray and a prepared speech about mousse, sundaes, and pies with liqueur fillings. Something was said as the dishes were being removed.

Ed couldn't hear what they were saying until the server left.

"Oh, he's a charmer all right," Elaine said. "He hasn't tried anything with me. He's seen how big my Roy is, I guess. He does see that reporter a lot."

"Cindy Wallop." Juanita said.

"Yes. He calls it being 'open to the public.' I call it something else," Elaine said.

"But you're doing OK?" Juanita said.

"He needs me. He can't spell or write or keep track of his schedule. At the high school it was different. He could get others to do his work."

"Like Mr. Clemson and Mr. Petrof." Juanita said.

"Poor Mr. Petrof. Something happened I never understood. The week before he died, in the middle of the Administrative Review, around the time Dr. Runcible married Wyna-Jean. You remember? Dr. Runcible and he had an argument. Dr. Runcible came out of the office first, like Mr. Petrof wouldn't leave, you know?. Dr. Runcible was flushed and short-tempered. He had me to stop what I was doing and take a letter. It was a very routine letter. No urgency at all. He just wanted a reason to be out of his office until Mr. Petrof had left. I only saw him act like that one other time. It was a week later when some man came into the office asking about Mr. Petrof. Said he knew him and understood there was a 'Jerry' here. Well, I thought he meant Dr. Runcible. When I went into his office I saw that Dr. Runcible had heard everything. He was flushed again and irritated with me. He didn't know this man and he didn't want to know him, he says; I could tell him whatever I wanted, he says, but he wasn't going to see him. I went back and told him that Dr. Runcible was busy. He smiled. When he turned to leave, I noticed that he had a green streak in his hair."

Suddenly, a glass fell off the table in the next booth. A bus boy appeared with a sponge and pan.

With the Best Intentions

The heart sings for itself alone.

—Jaime Petrof, *Exuvioe*

"Ed, you're going to have to take a club next year," Sid Clemson said.

"I've always had the Rocket Club." Ed packed his papers to take home and grade.

"No, a real club, Ed. Every teacher is needed on the Team. You know about the Thrust for Excellence."

Unfortunately, Ed did know about the Thrust for Excellence, although he didn't remember which fishy biscuit it was. As Sid limped back to graze in the halls of Wando High, Ed returned to his lab. The secret of the Rocket Club was out. There were never any members once Ed had laid down the safety rules in the first meeting of the year. Safety was not what drew boys—it was always boys—to the Rocket Club. There was never a second meeting.

Rudy, the custodian, came in with his bucket and a piece of paper.

"You been out." He meant that Ed had been gone several days and he hoped he was feeling better.

"I'm OK. It was flu that I caught before Ground Hog Day. I'm back for Valentine's," Ed said.

Rudy nodded and handed Ed the paper. "Seen that?" he asked, whipping a sour washcloth from his back pocket.

It was an RIF questionnaire from the Central Office. "Look at number five," Rudy streaked his cloth across the blackboard.

Ed looked.

5. Reduction in Force of classified personnel employed ten years or less shall precede that of new personnel entering the system with more than ten years of service from a previous position.

"They hired an old guy with thirty-five years. He can't climb stairs, can't pick up anything." Rudy leaned back against the chalk tray, his paunch and grizzled chin stuck out. His eyebrows rose. "But if they cut back, I go before he does!"

"It says here they want your opinion." Ed pointed to the Likert Scale.

"Oh, I 'strongly disagree,'" Rudy said. "They want something all right. It's like asking a turkey his collar size. No way am I going to return that." He turned and slapped his cloth at the board.

As great innovators made a Thrust for Excellence, Ed thought, they had to parry opposition from their unreconstructed peers. Tightening the RIF policy was an ominous sign. Rudy turned around again.

"You heard about Mr. Finney, didn't you?" He leaned against the chalk tray.

"Out sick, you mean?"

"Nah." Rudy pushed back the two or three grey hairs remaining on his head and brought his puffy hands together as if offering Ed a special delicacy. "Central Office found out he'd been seeing a shrink." He jabbed his thumb at Sid, still standing in the hall. "Somebody here was covering for him. The Super let Finney go."

"I don't think Howard was trying to escape," Ed said.

Rudy showed his yellow teeth.

"Not a quitter, just an attriter." He rasped with a smoker's shallow laugh, and flourished his chalky rag. "An attriter. Hah!" A coughing spasm followed, and he turned back to erasing, his cloth spread across the board like a flag over Finney. Ed left for his dental appointment.

It was just what Arnie Winkler had tried to avoid, Ed thought, as he drove out of the school parking lot. By the association of psychiatric treatment with dirty habits, anyone being counseled must spend his free time looking for something despicable to do in the urine-stained back alleys of Wando's tiny underworld. Once, when he was a young teacher, Ed had carried a bag of groceries past the ABC store. The next day at school, he discovered that he'd been seen weaving down Main Street guzzling vodka from a crumpled brown bag. Ed could imagine Howard Finney's conversation with Superintendent Runcible, the Administrator Who Cares.

* * *

"We'd like to keep you on, Howard." Runcible says.

"I know that I can get on top of this," Howard answers.

"We'd like to see that, Howard," says Runcible, gazing sincerely. "Of course, that will take time."

"A week or two, maybe." Howard says.

"Perhaps," Runcible says. "But won't you need a leave of absence?"

"Well, yes." Howard says, beginning to lose the thread.

"That means hiring a replacement, Howard." Runcible says in his most caring tone.

Howard reflects on what he has just heard: "A substitute."

"No. Someone to take over. You'll need to take your time. Maybe months," Runcible says.

"Months?" asks Howard. He thinks for the first time about how all of the free time was going to put him into debt.

"Or years," Runcible says. "Treatment, you know,"

The word "treatment" had a stink that makes Runcible push back his chair. Howard takes his hands off the desk.

"Treatment," Runcible speaks quickly now—ready to finish so that he could open a window and air out the room. "Treatment takes time, often years. We will stay in touch, of course. Let us know how you are doing."

Runcible waits for Howard to get up, knowing he could stare him down, knowing Howard believes him; knowing Howard will stagger off to his Waste Treatment Plant overpowered by the stench of his own dirty habits, steeped in his wrongs, and unreminded of any rights as an employee. Runcible did it all with a smile, a cordial nod, and a firm handshake.

* * *

Ed hoped that he could remember the dialog when he finally returned to his journal. Hoses and clamps hung from his mouth as he thought of that cordial and intimidating nod of Runcible's. Meanwhile, the dentist and hygienist nodded over his open mouth. The dental secretary had called at school to tell him that it was very important to be at the office on time for this appointment, and not to be late, as he usually was. Despite being on time, however, Ed had read through magazines and pamphlets on orthodontics and the Second Coming before finally being ushered into the treatment room.

Once inside, bibbed, numbed, and connected to the first of many suckers, he was entertained by music from the new speaker system while Dr. Moriarty shuttled between half-a-dozen rooms packed for uninterrupted cash flow. He entered with his attendants, flourishing a length of floss.

"Let's get real, Ed. Look here." Dr. Moriarty clipped an X-ray to the viewer over Ed's head. The music sounded like the pounding of wind chimes, milk bottles, bicycle handlebars and an overturned trashcan, all at irregular intervals with no discernible rhythm.

"See here?" he said again, pointing to the film with a little silver sickle. "Calcification below the gum line. See? Below these trabeculae? This is a compromised mouth, Mr. Lashley."

Ed always became "Mr. Lashley" when the dentist was about to tell him the cost. The mood of the music had changed. There was a kind of duet between a deflating balloon and a thwacking door spring. The words "root canals" and "gum work" drifted down from the examination light. Ed's face was numb. He consented to everything.

Once back home, the numbness subsided and Ed's jaw began to throb. Lying down made it throb more. Ed got up and went back to the dining room, where Pinky was assembling a crime jigsaw puzzle she'd spread out among the dinner dishes. Ed found the envelope of Darvon capsules where he'd left it at dinner. Pinky hardly looked up. Ed's mother and Pinky had sometimes worked a puzzle after supper. But Pinky had always preferred crosswords. Without moving his head, Ed chased the Darvon down with cold coffee. The puzzle-making must have been in a critical stage.

Pinky worked with her mouth pursed and a bead of perspiration on her upper lip. With her hairnet cocked over one ear, she held a piece and searched the puzzle for a match. As Ed made for the door, she looked up.

"That pipe worse," she said, reminding him of his promise to fix her bathroom shower.

"I'll get to that," he said. The throbbing returned.

"Uh huh." She returned to her puzzle, holding up the glasses that hung from a bead-chain around her neck. "Hah." Letting her glasses drop, she suddenly reached out and snapped the piece in place, finishing the detail of a bloody knife. Ed returned to the couch, trying to pick up the newspaper without lowering his head.

"Solve it?" he asked.

"Not yet." she said.

"It seems like you wouldn't want to put it all away when you've solved it."

"It not the pieces, just like it not the body in a book. It how the thing holds together—how to know it the right way. Once you know, they nothing but to pack it up." She tugged at her glasses, drawing them from her lap like a bucket from a well, and installed them on her nose so that she could stare at Ed across the room. "Reckon you got a mystery of your own."

Ed thought of Finney and Runcible, of Jaime Petrof slumped against the garage door, and of Runcible with the microphone in his hand.

"Your Daddy," she said slowly. "He left you a mystery." She looked back at the puzzle and pushed slowly away from the table. "And I'm gonna tell you." She looked over her shoulder as if talking to someone else. "Despite Thelma and your Mama."

"Tell me?" Ed said, noticing that the second page of the newspaper was a "Newsmaker Profile" by Phyllis Whaley on Superintendent Leroy Runcible.

"Thelma told me let it lie," Pinky said. "Your Mama afraid, but I say to her, when he become a man he must put away childish things."

Ed imagined that he must have been the subject of discussion in the crowded kitchen of the New Antioch Baptist church while the deaconesses steamed the potatoes and the week's gossip into spiritual food for the long church suppers of the increasingly elderly and frail Christian Women's Circle.

"Childish, I told her. It childish not to tell you why your Daddy did that to himself." Pinky's hands fell into her lap.

"He was real open. Always was. Even before the War. Always letting people win at cards. Always giving presents; always with the best intentions. Generous to a fault, he was. He hired me to help your Mama when Earl and he went off to the Pacific. They weren't gone long, but it be long enough. Came back, Earl was a cripple. Your Daddy just gave in."

"You mean he gave up? He was depressed about the War?" Ed said.

"Oh, he was depressed about the War. Yes. But he didn't give up, he gave in. Couldn't help himself. He gave in to anybody who wanted heating oil, whether they could pay or not. He knew what was happening. Your Mama would try to make him collect. He'd go out in the truck to collect and then make another delivery to the same people. It got worse after the winter. Nothing was coming in and his supplier had lost patience. I stayed on, and Earl gave us free produce for a while. We all thought he would come out of it, that everything would work out and go back to how it was before. Afterwards, when she see the way you helped people and how you were studying to be a teacher, your Mama was afraid of you going the same way. Didn't want nobody talking about it. I told Thelma." She shot a sharp glance at the invisible Thelma. "People got to know things if they gonna puzzle out their lives. Old women keep secrets for nothing." She shook her head. "For nothing." She rocked herself up to a standing position and went upstairs. Ed heard the door shut.

Another suicide by good intentions, Ed reflected. A year ago, Jaime had committed suicide because his good intentions had been abused. Because he loved unreservedly, as a victim does his kidnapper or a fly his spider, he had denied the predation and pinned his existence on spending himself on works of love. The blurred image of Runcible stared up from the newspaper on Ed's lap. His Thrust for Excellence would demand "some sacrifices," Phyllis reported, "but I can give unqualified support to all our enablers as they craft a system truly responsive to learners." Talk about a compromised mouth.

Here was a barracuda swimming in a sea of the good intentions of all those who give expecting nothing in return and who often receive it. Yes, he was unqualified to support anyone. Ed threw the paper across the room and stood up.

His teeth ached in unison. He went into his mother's bedroom, inadvertently left a shrine because she had died suddenly during midterms, and after the funeral, Ed had postponed thinking about it as he helped Sid in the Guidance department, volunteered on three committees, and graded test papers.

Ed sat on her bed. It smelled of sachets and bath powder. From here she had watched Ed working at the kitchen table, sitting with his back to the old gas stove, the same place she had found his father and dropped a basket of peaches. She knew he would remember that day.

From upstairs came a breathy piping like a Peruvian flute. It was Pinky's shower head. Even with his swollen jaw, Ed would rather have worked on that postponed pipe than sit in Mother's shrine wondering about the family curse of generosity. He lay back on the bed, pulling a couple of pillows under his jaw to stop the throbbing.

* * *

When Ed opened his eyes, Winkler and Pinky were standing beside the bed. He'd fallen asleep. It was dark outside.

"Sorry to wake you, Ed," Winkler said. He towered over Pinky like a giant Humpty Dumpty.

"You didn't hear the door," Pinky frowned and went back upstairs.

"It's Sid," Winkler said. "He's had a heart attack. Will you come with me to the hospital?"

Ed washed his face, took another Darvon, and went to the car.

"I thought you'd want to come." Winkler turned onto the highway, the steering-wheel in his big hands looking the size of a pie plate. "It had to be related to what happened in the Central Office today. You heard?"

"No, Arnie. I went to the dentist this afternoon."

"All the principals and supervisors were there, and the press. Your friend Phyllis, too. Runcible was going to unveil his Thrust for Excellence. More of a thrusting-out than a thrust forward, we were fairly sure. For weeks he's been telling us in closed sessions how many of us he could do without. You know the line: 'By freeing up our teachers we can achieve excellence.' Translated, that means he plans to undermine and remove support systems and throw the teachers onto their own resources. This would please Chairman Schuster and the No-Growth powers-that-be. And Cindy Wallop would give him top billing in the press. We went in expecting to have to smile while receiving our pink slips. What happened was something else."

"Sid was sitting beside me at the conference table in the Board Room. The room was filled, and Runcible was primed for another media event. He was showing off his organizational charts when a commotion arose in the outer office. All of a sudden, the door burst open and a wild-eyed man with a green streak in his hair ran in with Runcible's secretary in pursuit. He pushed his way to Runcible and threw something at him that splattered all over Runcible, his transparencies and everyone sitting nearby. 'Here's a Valentine from your dead lover, Jaime Petrof,' he screamed as he ran out. He'd thrown a raw beef heart.

"Cindy Wallop was spattered and ran out of the room crying. People went in all directions. Sid turned pale and began to sweat. He said he was all right, but then tonight Jan called me from the hospital."

"Only family members are allowed in Intensive Care," the nurse told them when they got off the elevator on the fifth floor. "You can wait in there." She pointed to a drink machine when they didn't go away. A voice came from behind the machine.

"Thanks, Arnie." Jan Clemson was looking out the window at the parking lot below. "I saw you coming up. Hello, Ed."

Ed nodded.

Jan looked out the window again. "He's better now. They'll do a procedure on him tomorrow. He'll need rest, and that's why I called you." She grimaced, her neck taut. "This stuff he's been doing. All those damn committees, and the register, and the Key Persons, and the reprimands for nothing but protecting his staff, and the meetings at the Central Office that keep him from finishing anything. He's got to know someone is taking care of it for him, Arnie. Someone he can trust. He needs someone to protect him now, Arnie."

Arnie hugged her around the shoulders. "We'll take care of it, Jan. It will be better when he comes back. You'll see." Winkler caught Ed's eye and nodded.

"What did you mean about it getting better?" Ed asked when they were back in the car.

"Let's get something to eat." Winkler was exuberant. He twinkled; he smiled broadly. "I saw their faces today. That's what. All the Board members were there for today's incident, as well as some of the County Council members. Questions will be asked. They must be asked for the politicians to stay ahead of the press. Runcible can't finesse himself out of this one."

They drove past the high school. The gym lights were on. The parking lot was full. Night classes were going on in several rooms. The silvery windows of the greenhouse on the hill reflected the moon, the clouds, and the town lights. Rudy stood alone in the lobby, leaning on his broom, probably muttering

to himself. The school was all things for all people. It was not a city on a hill, perhaps, but even without a Thrust for Excellence, it would go on.

THE END

DEATH WEARS A HAND-LENS

“Their life is bitter because of their usefulness. That is why they do not live out their natural lives but are cut off in their prime. They attract the attentions of the common world. I was almost destroyed several times. This is so for all things. As for me, I have been trying for a long time to be useless.”

—the words of the Sacred Oak to Shih the carpenter

CHAPTER ONE

Before this story, there was another story about a brother, a sister, and a mother who couldn't hold their father back. Whether fate or Big Dave himself had dealt all the bad hands, bad numbers and bad horses that made him drink, it was Davey who always showed up at the wrong times. A tow-head eight-year-old with pale blue eyes and dimples, he never walked when he could run. He was never quiet when he could shout.

One night, Big Dave staggered from the house and drove his Buick eighty miles per hour up the inside wall of an underpass, skittering to wedge under the roadbed and squeeze his head between windshield and steering wheel. On the same night, the surgeon who had spent six hours on Davey's battered brain called the police again to see what more they found out than the mother had told them.

The older sister had been left at home. She stared into the backyard, overgrown with scrawny bushes and untrimmed trees. She had nothing to say.

Colonel Charles Holburn hadn't been much of a hero but he was the only one the town had, so Clysta Holburn-Follette was not about to have him again turned into a stack of dominoes like the hideous sculpture that Arne Coleman had made for the waterfront plaza. As she pierced a block of Oasis with the fresh-cut Forsythia stalks forced to flower for the monthly meeting of the Holburn Historical Society and Garden Club, she rehearsed aloud what she would tell the others about Millie Coleman before the woman arrived.

"We can count on Millie to be late. She always expects us to do her bidding, but how often has she ever arrived on time for a business meeting? She expects us to give our blessing to that ridiculous statue of Colonel Holburn just because her husband received a grant from the Town Council for that obscenity. Now they're trying to get another grant for a statue in front of our library. Why, it's just another stick figure with blocks stuck here and there. It doesn't look like a human being. Even a child could have done better. We certainly don't need another one."

Clysta placed the Forsythia arrangement in a green vase on her dining room table. The table was still cluttered with name tents, pamphlets about the Society and stacks of petitions to select a different design for the statue—something that at least resembled a human being rather than a bent coat-hanger hunched over Lego blocks. Arlington had the Custis-Lee Mansion; Alexandria had Mount Vernon and the Washington Masonic Temple. Surely Holburn could have a real statue of her ancestor.

Clysta tried to calm down by turning on the radio, but the music was too loud and disturbing—a pounding beat that sounded like lids being slammed down onto jam jars flying by on a conveyor belt. Victor hadn't helped. He always had some reason to return to the office whenever it was her turn to host the meeting. She always did it by herself. None of the other officers ever turned up to help before the meetings. Everyone assumed that the hand-outs, refreshments and speakers appeared by magic. If she hadn't been a Holburn on her mother's side, she would never have remained a member. But it was her responsibility to see that the Colonel was properly remembered, even if her own husband wouldn't help.

She finished clearing the table, set out the appetizers and went upstairs to dress. The members would begin arriving promptly at 4:30 p.m.—elderly ladies who didn't drive at night and expected the meetings to begin and end on time. Because Colonel Holburn was better remembered for his rose gardening than his war exploits, the meetings provided an opportunity for the gardeners in the group to swap stories and advice. But Clysta hoped to steer the conversation away from American Beauties and

climbers to the petition drive for a real statue. Every officer was to bring a newcomer. Clysta had told them this explicitly. If they did so, there would be more than enough of them to blanket downtown Holburn with petitions. Of course, Millie would try to throw them off-track.

This was going to be one meeting that was not about Millie. As far as Clysta was concerned, Millie was only jealous of her being a real Holburn. Several members had told her as much. Jacey Connors, the wife of a retired Air Force colonel, had told her in the grocery store that Millie Coleman seemed to resent how Clysta organized everything.

“Let her do it, then!” Clysta said.

If Millie wanted to do things her way, she was going to be very surprised at this meeting. Just in case Millie arrived early or had some idea that she was going to interrupt and take over the proceedings as usual, Clysta had set aside a special drink to quiet her down. Victor would never miss the medicine. He hardly even knew when he ran out of medicine because it was Clysta who made the calls and picked up the prescriptions from Mr. Pinder at the drugstore. As a matter of fact, she had saved up fifty of Victor’s little pills for this occasion and Mr. Pinder hadn’t said anything about it when she told him she’d lost a bottle. The whitefish *hors d’oeuvres* would provide a plausible reason for choking, she thought, and she doubted that any of the elderly club members could perform a Heimlich maneuver. It should be finished up early in the meeting, leaving plenty of time to discuss the petitions.

Guests began to arrive promptly at 4:30 p.m. They were surprised to receive agendas as they entered the house, but the older members knew that Clysta was in one of her organizing moods.

“Best to let her get on with it,” whispered Clarisse Pettiford, a tiny octogenarian, her head cocked like a sparrow’s. She was the oldest member. She sat beside Jacey Connors, an auburn-haired, middle-aged woman only slightly larger than Clarisse.

Jacey nodded warily. “When I saw her yesterday in the store, she was worked up about having to do this meeting by herself. I almost reminded her that she had turned down the help volunteered at our last meeting. She only needed to vent.”

Clarisse nodded. “The sooner we get on with it, the better. Otherwise we shall have to watch what we say for the rest of the evening.”

Clysta called the meeting to order while everyone was still on the appetizers. She made a few carefully chosen comments about Millie Coleman before delegating responsibilities for handing out petitions. Then Millie arrived.

Always fond of theatrical entries, Millie had brought two props to heighten the effect, a cake topped with orchids and an arrangement of roses. These immediately set the gardeners to talking about their leaf spot, bone meal and latest tea hybrids. Not only was Millie's arrangement twice the size of Clysta's Forsythia centerpiece, it was bright, showy and imaginative. As Millie set her arrangement beside the other one for comparison, Clysta took the little cake into the kitchen and threw it into the trash compactor.

Clysta poured a generous helping of Victor's tiny pills into Millie's tea and also made her a special plate of the whitefish appetizer. When she returned to the dining room, Millie was talking, as usual.

First she had to tell them about all her winter pruning and how this was the best time of year for hawthorns and privets but one must wait until February for yews, "if one must prune the yews." She preferred to leave yews and Forsythia to grow naturally. She thought they were so much more beautiful outside than in the house. Of course, she concluded with a nod toward Clysta's centerpiece, "decorative greens were welcome at any time of year."

Just when Clysta thought that Millie had finished, another discussion broke out between Millie, Jacey and other newcomers about persistent weeds and the best times of year to attack them. No one at the table was paying any attention to the agenda. Some of the petitions had fluttered to the floor. Meanwhile, Millie talked incessantly, never touching her tea. Finally, it was too cold to drink.

Millie finished up the evening with a lecture on the proper herbicides to use around roses. She noted that one can never be too careful, as many were toxic even when absorbed through the skin.

"Of course, I've been known to use even Dalapon and Bensulide together full strength on persistent grasses. What we won't do to keep the weeds away from our babies!" She laughed, stood up, and thanked Clysta for "doing everything, as always." Everyone stood with her, cheerily put on their coats and headed for the door, leaving the petitions and dirty dishes on the table.

When they had all gone, Clysta poured Millie's tea down the drain, returned to the table, and seized the rose-arrangement. As she jammed it into the trash compactor, a small balloon at the base of the arrangement burst, puffing a nasty mist into her face.

Driving home, Millie Coleman planned her centerpiece for the next meeting of the Holburn Society. Not roses, she thought, but lemon leaves, statice and simple daisy mums would suffice. So many babies could grow once you cleared out the weeds.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Carol Chapin was sitting cross-legged on the ground under a massive copper beech tree, leafless in early spring, surrounded by her class of sophomore field botany students. They squinted into hand lenses at mulberry twigs like gem-cutters examining the details of a brilliant cut.

“The pubescence of the *Broussonetia* buds is much more obvious under your loupes. Does everyone see it?” she asked. Carol didn’t bother telling them to relax and stop squinting. As their eyes tired, they would discover this for themselves.

A student asked, “Why are the buds hairy?”

This was Carol's opportunity to lecture on plant trichomes, a special interest that she pursued three days a week in a small office in the basement of the Natural History Museum in downtown Washington, D.C.. Her definitive monographs on trichomes, or plant hairs—and particularly her discovery of how they facilitated the entry of certain viroid plant diseases that seemed to use the trichomes almost like antennae to signal each other—had earned her the position of assistant curator at the Smithsonian. The stipend was a welcome addition to her university salary as a science professor at Holburn University, in a department where all positions were taken and further advancement seemed impossible. The science department chair would retire at the end of the spring semester, but Carol had no interest in administration. Since the recent death of Gene, her husband of almost thirty years, she had no interest in departmental politics and simply gave her time to teaching, research, and occasional speaking engagements at conferences, arboretums, and garden clubs. Since Gene's death, she seldom ranged much farther than Holburn from her home in Northwest D.C. Gone were long walks along the Tidal Basin, and in Prince William Forest and Foxglove Reserve in Virginia, Roosevelt Island and the National Arboretum in D.C., and Sugar Loaf Mountain in Maryland. Without Gene, it wasn't the same. Dr. Gene Chapin had been an entomologist with the Department of Agriculture. For Carol, meeting Gene after a difficult first marriage was like coming into a clearing after a long sweaty climb through scrub. Now, when she wasn't lecturing or examining plant hairs under a microscope, she worked at home in her garden and greenhouse. She discovered more and more that this was where she really wanted to be when she retired after a few more years.

As she spoke, the undergraduates grew glassy-eyed, a few of them amused by the way Dr. Chapin's hand lens dangled from her plump neck and danced from breast to breast as she spoke with increasing animation about her favorite subject. Carol had a wide face, freckles, and wooly, sandy-red hair. A few sandy-gray hairs poked from her red knit cap. Her eyes seemed focused on a distant horizon, but she was actually scanning the group for any sign of interest. Other students leaned back against the giant tree trunk, gazed across the distant Potomac River to the Capitol, and enjoyed the hazy February afternoon as they waited for the conclusion of the side-bar on plant hairs. Carol looked around the group without finding a single listener. When Stefany Benton left in mid-semester, the class went flat. Even field study was tedious with this group, most of whom were pre-law. Carol stood up quickly, surprising the class and waking several who were dozing under the tree.

“Of course, the buds on this tree are glabrous.” She snapped a twig from the beech tree. As she did this, she began walking again, leaving students scrambling for notebooks and backpacks. She called out to one of the last students to stand up, tossing her the twig. “Wendy, start us out keying down this

specimen. Use the twig key.” The class re-opened their notebooks and returned to the business of identifying plants. Carol marched them around the massive tree. “The only other nearby specimen of this size is more than 50 miles from here at the Foxglove Conference Center in the Foxglove Reserve of Fairall County.” She scanned the group again, merrily watching Wendy squinting through her hand lens and the other future legislators looking back in their notes to find out how to use a twig key.

Dr. Bernard Benton of the Temple of Faith Independent Bible Fellowship was enraged when he read about the “politically correct” Bible. He rubbed his dimpled chin and ran his fingers through his curly black hair in disbelief as he read in his denominational newsletter, *Last Times*, that the Northern Regional Headquarters of Temple Independents was sponsoring a new Bible translation, *The Welcome Word*, that eliminated all references to God as a “Father,” “Lord,” or “King.” His denomination was actually going to distribute these books to churches. References to “dark” and “light,” to “strong men” and to homosexuals would all be changed or deleted so that the denomination could be more “welcoming.”

Dr. Benton’s jaw clenched in a way that Sarah Benton, his wife, sitting with him in the church study, recognized at once. She left quietly, but Benton noticed. She was another one who always talked about making the church more “welcoming,” he thought— as if a membership of more than two thousand were not welcoming. His temple drew members from as far away as Charles County, Maryland, to the east, and Wando and even Fairall to the west. It was the largest congregation in the denomination outside the Northern Regional Temple Fellowship in Fairall, which included all the Northern Region of the denomination, from Johnstown, Pennsylvania to Roanoke, Virginia. It was not enough that the denomination had changed the hymnal, removing all hymns that made references to spiritual warfare or were “gender exclusive.” Now they were going after the Bible itself. He stared out the window at the chubby teacher with wild sandy hair and her students under the beech tree down the hill from the church. Sarah had invited them onto church property. If the church continued to welcome the carnal world by lowering its standards it would soon cease to exist.

Sarah Benton watched her husband from the doorway. His clenched jaws and righteously furrowed brow were signs she recognized as readily as Carol Chapin could read the bud scales on a beech twig. When she met Bernie in graduate school in Missouri, she was attracted to his strong jaw, curly hair, and determined, gray eyes, but now she knew that his fixed jaw and smoldering gaze was not a signal to approach but to stay away. Whatever the reason, there would be no stopping Bernard until his

anger abated. Sarah only hoped that she was not the reason. As quietly as possible, she slipped out of the building and walked down the hill to Carol's class. She had heard about Dr. Chapin from her daughter, Stefany, a sophomore at Holburn College during the fall semester; then Sarah had met Dr. Chapin at a Master Gardener's class. Carol asked to let her botany class use the church property next to Holburn University.

Standing atop the hill, Sarah could see the long driveway going down to the gate on Washington Street. A vagrant sat on an old bicycle and leaned against the gate as he watched the class under the beech tree. She walked into the parking lot where he could see her. He got the signal that there were no hand-outs today, pushed off from the gate and pedaled away, wobbling and mumbling. His name was Burt. Sarah had turned him away from so many church dinners, socials and picnics that she knew what he was mumbling. Her mistake was having ever invited him to the church for a meal when she was working at the group home of the nearby Regional Community Shelter.

Sarah was a thin, frizzy-haired woman with a huge supply of shapeless smocks and sweaters she could quickly pull over the garden clothes she preferred to wear. Like her daughter, who had still been in Dr. Chapin's class at the beginning of the spring semester, she never let her guard down at home or church. She measured her relief in the time she spent not being a church fixture. She understood why her daughter had left home and quit college, but she couldn't help worrying about Stefany living and working on her own, or what Bernard would do when he found out.

The students stood around the beech tree as they zipped up their book bags and prepared to walk back to the campus. Carol Chapin smiled as Sarah approached.

"Thanks so much for letting us use the church grounds this semester, honey. Such a variety of plantings! You've obviously put a lot of thought into it," Carol said, squeezing Sarah's arm. Sarah loved the heartiness of Carol Chapin. Carol was as vigorous and unrestrained as the great copper beech, growing alone with enough room to spread in all directions, and not like Sarah herself—a one-sided shrub caught in the shadowy corner of a huge, inescapable building.

"Carol, I'd ask you up to the parlor for our coffee but Bernard is, uh, counseling and—"

"Don't worry about it, Sarah dear!" Carol said, patting her on the shoulder. "I have work to do. Anyway, I'll see you at the Garden Club meeting. Right?"

"I'm so glad that you're going to speak." Sarah hesitated to say more.

"It's a pleasure when others want to listen. What was it the old Greek said? 'Learning is a natural pleasure.' It will be great fun!"

"And thank you for talking to Stefany."

“She’s a serious young woman, Sarah. You’re lucky to have such a caring daughter. Wando isn’t so far from Holburn, and I’m sure that we’ll soon see her back at school once I make the arrangements.” Carol gave Sarah a jovial hug and turned to follow her students back to the campus. Sarah looked up the hill. Dr. Bernard Benton stared down on them from the church parlor.

CHAPTER THREE

With the Holburn Garden Club meeting only a few days away, the domestic tranquility of the Pettiford household was shattered. Clarisse Pettiford, the tiny octogenarian who was hostess of the club meeting, was stationed in a corner of the dining room on a stool from which she had a commanding view of the scene of engagement and the deployment of her subordinates, her nephew Harry and his reporter friend, June Brightman. They struggled to put a leaf in the antique table without breaking it or bumping into any of the hundreds of tiny knickknacks and specimens of family china that filled the sideboards and china cabinets around the perimeter of the room. Never one to be left out of a party, Harry's Boston terrier, Scrunch, had pranced into the room and begun to dance around everyone's feet, providing just the element of risk needed for a catastrophe.

"Harry, I think that we should have put the extra legs on the ends of the table before trying to pull it out this far," said June as she looked under the table, her gray-blond hair fastened on top of her head with a red plastic snap. Just then, Harry tugged on his end and the table sagged in the middle.

"Not too much!" shouted Clarisse. "You can't pull it out that far!"

Harry bent down to look under the table and Scrunch took it as an invitation to leap up and lick his face.

“Back off!” Harry scooped up the black and white dog and shut him in the kitchen. “Let’s put the leaves in while we have it open.”

“June is right, Harry. You should put the legs on first.” Aunt Clarisse commanded from the corner.

Harry started to protest, but June had caught his eye. Her straight-faced expression reminded him that they were trying to avoid upsetting Aunt Clarisse, who had had a small stroke a few months earlier.

“Where did you say the legs were kept?” he asked.

“In the basement,” Clarisse said.

Harry released Scrunch from the kitchen and the two of them went to the basement door.

“This may take a while,” he said, sadly thinking about hunting in the basement through piles of relics his aunt had collected over the last sixty years.

June watched with amusement as the tall, beefy man and tiny, flat-faced dog ruefully descended the basement stairs. She had known Harry Pettiford in Roanoke when she taught a journalism class part-time at the university and Harry was in the public information office. Moving to Holburn for a new job and a new life after her divorce, she had never expected to see Harry again, but he had retired and come back to his home town with his invalid wife, who was in a nursing home. His retirement had been short-lived. After working for a year on the political campaign of a town councilman, he had been offered the new position of Public Information Officer for the local police department. She didn’t know what she thought about Harry. He was a constant reminder that her old life had not ended. No, she knew what she thought. She still loved Harry, and he was still devoted to his wife.

In the basement, Harry was moving the suitcases and boxes he had brought from Roanoke so that he could reach the furniture piled behind them against the basement wall. One suitcase was unlocked and fell open when he picked it up, dumping its contents onto the floor, Bea’s summer dresses. One of them a bright pink pattern that he remembered her wearing as they sat at the picnic table under the huge cherry tree in their back yard in Roanoke. They had gazed up through the tree, filled with tiny streamers of pink flowers, to a deep blue sky. Now Bea’s eyes were locked in a sightless gaze and she had no need for summer dresses. Harry decided to take Nina these suitcases, whether she wanted her mother’s clothes or not. As he snapped the suitcase shut, he heard Scrunch’s tags jingling behind some cane-bottom chairs that had been shoved behind the furnace. Leaning around the radiator pipes and bedposts, Harry saw that Scrunch was sitting on a threadbare orange ottoman next to the legs for the dining room table.

CHAPTER FOUR

Harry had hurried through a quick dinner with June and Clarisse and raced out of the house to run by his office before attending a meeting in the Board Room of the town hall with a citizens' group from West Holburn. He parked around the corner of the white-block, flat-roofed police department and went in the side door of the silver trailer in back. A dispatcher from the main building nodded and buzzed him in.

“Where’s Tim?” Harry said.

“Town Hall. He needed time to check the mikes.” The dispatcher was reading a paperback. The Public Information office was probably a welcome change.

Harry’s office was simply a desk behind a short room divider that doubled as a bulletin board. He picked up a folder from the wire basket on his desk and sat down to go over the incident file one more time before walking over to Town Hall.

He had planned to word-process the scrawled notes from the small spiral notebook he carried in his coat pocket, but the computer wasn’t cooperating. An old model recycled for his use from the traffic

division, it continually informed him that another version of the application was running. When he went to the diagnostics he found it unopenable because it required a newer version of another application that seemed to be accessible only by opening it, which of course he couldn't do. This was all he needed: a computer with issues. He hurriedly went back through his notebook.

Two men, Darryl Reading and James White, had argued in the middle of West Washington Street in broad daylight. White had produced a revolver and killed Reading. The two men had argued before this incident. Earlier in the day, Reading had followed White home and slammed White's face repeatedly into the wall until White's wife came out of the house and pulled her husband inside. Reading had tired of circling the house while shouting threats and obscenities and finally driven his motorcycle back to town. White had then come out of the house with a revolver and followed him. Citizens in the area were outraged about the event because it had occurred in front of the parked police car of the "community policeman," who was absent at the time. The police department had only recently been placing police cars in specially marked parking places around town as part of its community policing program. These cars were supposedly reminders that policemen were nearby on patrol in the neighborhood. The officer in West Holburn had been responding to a domestic disturbance, but this did not lessen the crowd's outrage. It was a perfect example of the kind of "perceived" injustice that the Sheriff wanted his newly installed Public Information Officer to address. Harry was not looking forward to the confrontation, but he had noticed some other details about the incident that made him curious.

The town hall was three blocks from the police station. Holburn was a tiny town between its sprawling neighbors, Alexandria and Arlington. Holburn gazed across the Potomac to Washington, D.C. over the shoulder of the leaning statue of its favorite son, the Revolutionary Colonel Charles Holburn. Everyone called it "domino man."

Harry had grown up in Holburn and left after a brief career with a D.C. radio station. Thirty years later, here he was again, walking up Ketchum's Alley, the shortcut to Washington Street. He remembered riding his bicycle down the same alley, sometimes with a boy named Lester Stihl, who was now Sheriff Stihl, his boss. This was not what Bea and he had planned for their retirement years, but Bea's bilateral stroke had also been unplanned.

A small crowd milled around in the courtyard between the cannon and the door. Harry was too big to enter unnoticed, but he did manage to enter quickly and get to the dais before anyone could buttonhole him. A single name-tent was on the council table on the dais, HARRY PETTIFORD, PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER. Officer Tim Berry may have been the rookie in the department, but he was the officer detailed to set up sound systems or to deal with hackers on the departmental

website. Berry was tall and wiry and looked to Harry like he was about fourteen years old. He handed Harry a tablet.

“The sign-up list for speakers?” asked Harry, flipping through the print-out.

“Yes, sir.”

“There must be a hundred names here!”

“Some of these people arrived at 5 p.m.” Berry replied, rubbing his neck. Harry supposed that this duty had been added to the full day’s work that Berry had already pulled. “And the cable people have set up their cameras for live feed.” Harry looked at the videocams pointing at the speaker’s microphone, the dais and the crowd. A single cameraman sitting in the shadows controlled the three cameras from a monitor on the side of the room.

“Well, let’s get started. It’s going to be a long night.” Harry, stepped behind the council table on the dais. He made no statement except to introduce himself as the new Public Information Officer and then call the first speaker to the microphone.

Every speaker had the same message, but no one gave up a turn to speak. The crowd applauded every statement. The gist of their complaint was that the community policeman did not prevent the killing and was not present on the scene until after the incident. At 8:50, the thirty-sixth speaker, Gracie Williams, a formidably wide individual who reminded Harry of a walking tent with frizzy blond hair, took the microphone from the stand and held it as if she were a lounge singer. As she spoke, she continually looked back to the audience for their cheers and applause.

“You can buzz me all you want but I’m gonna have my say about James and poor Darryl,” she said defiantly. Harry had been using the five minute timer for each speaker. At four minutes, a red light came on; at five minutes, a buzzer. It hadn’t made any comments more concise, but served the same function as a release valve on a pressure cooker, continuously stepping down the excitement by avoiding long perorations. With her chin in the air and the microphone in her right hand, Gracie began to pace around the front of the dais, occasionally turning to the crowd with significant looks. Harry was glad to see Officer Berry standing in front of the steps to the stage.

“Poor Darryl, lying dead in the street, and he did no more than he ever done!” She glanced at the crowd and got a murmur of assent. “Where was that cop? Drinking coffee two blocks away! Uh huh?” Tittering laughter and applause. “Community police! Uh huh?”

From the dais Harry had the impression that her head was bobbing above and below the council table like a fuzzy ball in a swimming pool.

“Just last month those boys, Darryl, Toby, Bennie Cooke and poor James, scuffled out in the parking lot, and you always knew Darryl would stop. James knew that too. All they needed was someone to remind them. But our ‘community police’ was in the wrong community! Uh huh?” She swept her arm up in a half-circle and her fans from West Washington Street stamped their feet, clapping and urging her on. “It’s not as if we didn’t know when Darryl was in a mood, the way he’d come down the street cranking his bike up and sit outside my store in the parking lot. They always cooled off after a few beers, he and James. Their fights never came to nothing. Those boys been scuffling with each other since they were in school. Didn’t mean anything!”

The red light came on at the speaker’s podium, but Gracie Williams was standing in front of it, waving her finger at Harry and watching the crowd out of the corner of her eye. Officer Berry moved slowly towards her until Harry caught his eye and held up his hand.

“The community policeman should have known that, but I guess he thought his empty cruiser was gonna separate those boys!”

Gracie Williams was just warming up. Harry didn’t fancy having a scene about cutting her short. He was counting on the audience being more tired of sitting for two hours than they were eager to see what Gracie would do next. As soon as the buzzer sounded, Harry turned off the microphone, stood up, and announced a five minute recess, ending Gracie’s short career as a talk-show host.

The audience that returned after the break was smaller and more subdued. Most of the remaining speakers had left. After the last speaker had finished, Harry read his prepared statement, amended during the break.

“Your police force appreciates citizen participation. Your comments this evening will be carefully considered. You should know that the officer assigned to your community was resolving a domestic dispute at the time of the incident between Mr. Reading and Mr. White. Community policing is a two-way responsibility. I understand that Mr. Reading had quite a history of creating disturbances around Williams’ Quick Mart and the parking lot, going back even to high school. He was one of the regulars who used to stand in the parking lot, drinking and cursing at cars stopped at the intersection. Several times this year, the police had charged him and others in this parking lot with disorderly conduct and drinking in public. On one occasion he threw a customer through plate-glass. Once, he punched James White and pulled him out of his truck through the window.”

Harry looked up from the page to stare steadily at the crowd and camera. “James never seemed to have put up a fight. In fact, no one seemed to resist Darryl Reading.”

Harry looked pointedly at Gracie Williams. “On the day of incident, Darryl shoved Mr. White through the store and into the parking lot while others watched. Once he had him in the parking lot, according to numerous witnesses, Mr. Reading beat James White with his fists and a beer bottle until Mr. White ran to his truck and drove off. Reading then followed him on his motorcycle. Many witnesses along the street and in the parking lot clearly saw these events.” Harry paused, looking around the room. “*But not one witness called the police. Ladies and gentlemen.*” He paused again, weighing whether it was wise to say what was on his mind: “*There can be no community policing when there is no community.*”

Thirty minutes later, Harry was sitting by his wife’s bedside at the Fireside Nursing Home. When he came into the room, Flora, the red-haired Cuban night nurse, was giving Bea a bath, so he waited in the deserted solarium at the end of the hall. He didn’t know what Lester Stihl would think about his comments, but they had the desired effect on the crowd, who left the town hall quietly and looking a bit shamefaced. If truth were known, the demise of Darryl Reading probably came as a relief to everyone who had put up with his bullying for the last decade. The only member of the audience to speak to Harry after the meeting was a minister who lived near Holburn University. He didn’t want students and vagrants walking across his church grounds. Apparently he was unaware of the fact that the meeting he had just attended was about something else.

Flora came into the solarium.

“She finish now, Mr. Pettiford.” She wiped her brow with the back of her hand. “She’s no trouble at all.”

“Thanks,” he said, picking up his newspaper and going back down the hall. Bea’s room smelled faintly of urine and wintergreen. She was wearing one of the new nightgowns he had brought her. Her face was smooth and expressionless. She stared directly at the bedside lamp. Harry adjusted her pillow so that she stared at the dark window across the room. She didn’t move or show that she noticed him, but he talked to her as always and hoped that she at least drew some comfort from the familiar sound of his voice.

“Well, Hon, I just finished my first official community meeting as P.I.O. Depending on what Lester thinks of it, it may be my last. Not one speaker expressed relief that Darryl Reading was gone. They needed to express their outrage about him and about themselves, but directed it at the police. It’s strange how people will put up with bullying and fear for so long that they come to accept the bully, make allowances for him and assume that things will always be the same. Then, when the bully is gone,

they lash out as if they've lost a limb or been disfigured when they discover how misshapen the bullying and acceptance of fear has made them. You remember all those faculty intrigues at the university in Roanoke? We were so glad that I was out of it. I just kept to my press releases and didn't have to put up with some of the schemers who thought that achieving tenure meant that they could push people around. Remember that guy Fisk in the engineering department? What was it we called him? 'Fisk the Fink.' He treated people like they were slabs of some plastic undergoing stress tests in his lab. You remember how you coaxed his wife to carry on a conversation? She was so cowed that she couldn't open up even when he was not around."

Sometimes Harry thought he could see a flicker of expression pass over Bea's face. Perhaps it was only shadows. Spreading the newspaper on his lap between them, he read the headlines aloud and told her about Clarisse's garden club meeting and how Scrunch had barked again at the street-sweeper on their morning walk. Bea always called it his "Prime" walk because Scrunch seemed to get his urges at the canonical hours. After Harry's heart attack, Bea had given him the dog. She told him that walking Scrunch was his new daily office. The black dog with the white neck was his curate.

Flora came back into the room, set down a styrofoam cup of coffee on the bedside table and slipped out again without being noticed.

* * *

Sheriff Lester Stihl raised his eyebrows as the desk sergeant buzzed in Harry Pettiford, closely followed by a sad looking Boston terrier.

"Lester, this is Scrunch," Harry said. "We won't be here long. I just wanted to check my desk."

"Right. Uh, why don't you step into my office for a minute," Lester said.

As Harry looked around Lester's meticulously organized office and the huge desk with its mirror-like surface, he tightened up on the leash.

"Good job with that Washington Street crowd, the other night," Stihl said. "I saw it on cable."

Harry said, "They just needed to air their feelings. There is no issue for the community officer. Right?"

"Well no, for the most part." Lester handed Harry a letter. "This came in this morning. It's from a minister in the same area."

Harry studied the elaborate gilt letterhead. "Not that guy from the Temple of Faith?"

“Yeah, Reverend Bernard Benton. Says you gave him the brush-off.”

Harry shook his head. “He came up at the end of the meeting with some off-the-wall complaint about vagrants. It was hard to believe he had sat through the entire meeting and not understood what it was all about. I told him to talk with the community policeman.”

“Seems he did that already. Officer Davis had about as much time for him as you did. I’d like for you to go see him.”

Harry shook his head.

For a moment, Lester thought that Harry and Scrunch had the same expression.

CHAPTER FIVE

June Brightman's Palm Pilot wasn't working. She'd lost a week's schedule. Always before, in Roanoke, she had relied on Jim to solve her technology problems; then Jim had begun disappearing for days at a time and finally revealed to her that his venture capital business had gone under, leaving them with a tremendous debt. Then he had maxed out June's credit cards on gambling to recover his losses. Roanoke, Jim, and most of the debts were now behind her. She wished she hadn't thrown away her day-planner. Drinking her last cup of coffee before going to work, she stared out the window of her condominium at the Holburn waterfront and tried to recall the day's itinerary. Her editor had given her the Religion page for the next few weeks, while the usual reporter was on maternity leave. The Religion reporter had left June with an appointment to talk to a local clergyman for a human interest story. There was something else scheduled that she couldn't recall. She thought about her unexpected lunch with Harry and Scrunch the day before. They'd had pretzels and hot dogs on a bench in front of the Holburn Court House. He'd had Scrunch all morning because he didn't want to return home while the Garden Club ladies were still in the house.

Now she remembered. The other interview was with Dr. Chapin at Holburn University, near the church where she was going for the first interview. It had nothing to do with the Religion page. Dr. Chapin was doing some project on estuarine habitats endangered by flooding and development. A huge tract of land west of Manassas had been given as a “mitigation project” by contractors trying to offset their destruction of marshland elsewhere in the state.

June rinsed out her cup and threw her jogging clothes into the washing machine. She took off her slacks and pulled on the black dress that she used whenever she was in doubt about what to wear—such as when interviewing a clergyman.

Dr. Bernard Benton of the Temple of Faith Independent Bible Fellowship did not believe in coincidences. A reporter had called for an interview on the same day he had decided to separate from the Northern Regional Council of Temple Independent—a clear sign to make the announcement through the newspaper. This was one time that Sarah would be present—and not out with her Garden Club, or working in the yard, or playing social worker at the Shelter. He’d told her that they had to go down to the office early to make sure that Gracie had cleaned up his study, but his real reason for going early was to be sure that Sarah was present when the reporter arrived. Sarah had a way of disappearing just when he needed her. She was making coffee in the kitchen while he arranged his DVDs of the *Journey of Jubilation* on his desk. The reporter would notice his picture on the jewel box. He would have to find a copy in case she wanted one. Benton rubbed the dimple in his chin to be sure he’d shaved it clean. Checking the mirror in the desk drawer, he took off his tie, put on his collar, and ran his fingers through his coal-black hair. His 1928 Montblanc pen lay in the drawer with the nib exposed—one of the earliest nibs, engraved with 4810, the mountain’s elevation. He covered and returned it to its box in the bottom drawer, under a felt cover, with his early Sheaffers, Parkers, and the special Lamy. Sarah was always grabbing pens from his desk when she answered the phone. He had considered putting some cheap, drugstore pens in the drawer for her, but decided that she was not going to force him to lower standards.

The reporter had said the interview would be informal. Benton didn’t know what was so important that Stefany couldn’t make it, but Sarah was definitely going to be there. When the reporter noticed the tapes and DVDs on the desk, Benton would talk about his audio ministry. He’d save the special announcement for the end of the interview, when there wouldn’t be time for follow-up questions. People always pay more attention to beginnings and endings, so it would get the emphasis he wanted. If more churches would separate from the Northern Region of Independent Temples, they would be forced

to drop their blasphemous *Welcome Word* version of Scripture. They might even drop their opposition to the *Share and Save* ministry. He would have Sarah to print out liner notes, fliers about *Share and Save*, and some of the extracts he'd made from the wretched *Welcome Word*. He had pasted them in parallel with the original version. He wondered what was taking Sarah so long.

Sarah hoped that the reporter would come before she was finished in the kitchen, but she had already done everything she could do. If she waited any longer, Benton would come looking. But if she waited with him in the office, he would inevitably ask about Stefany. Sarah didn't want to lie again about why Stefany couldn't come. She heard Benton walking down the hall.

"Sarah, what are you doing?" Benton entered the kitchen carrying his liner notes.

"Just straightening up. I've made cookies."

"Here," he said. "Copy this before the interview."

Benton turned and went back to the study. She was hiding something. He was sure it was about Stefany. What she'd told him didn't make sense. Stefany had told them at the beginning of the year how happy she was not to have any morning classes. If this was so, she should have been able to walk over and join them this one time. Of course, he now understood what was going on.. He also knew why, even though Holburn College was next door to the church, they had only seen Stefany at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

She wasn't even coming to church on Sundays. But she was seeing Sarah. Sarah never told him anything, but Horace Fenstermaker, the church youth leader, told him. Horace asked her to go door to door with the youth group for the *Save and Share* fund-raiser. Stefany had told Horace that she was too busy working.

Benton wondered where she was working, and why. Her college expenses were covered and Sarah was secretly giving her extra money. Something was going on between Stefany and Sarah. He picked up an index card from his desk. He couldn't think about Stefany now. He had to rehearse his casual remarks. Reporters didn't like prepared statements, but he had written down some phrases to keep the interview on track. Benton leaned back in his chair to recall what was on the cards.

Sarah came quietly into the study, put the copies on his desk, and quietly sat on the divan. She wore the grey suit that Bernard had chosen after seeing the smock she had put on earlier. Bernard leaned back in his black leather recliner, his eyes closed and a large index card on his lap. His dyed black hair

made him look younger. She remembered how serious and earnest he seemed when they were graduate students in Rolla. Once they were engaged, she had almost changed her major from sociology to youth ministry because Bernard had wanted her to go into the college's Guided Ministry Program for Christian Educators. He wanted for them to run a school once they were married and he had been called to a church. They almost split up over her staying with her Master's program in sociology. Bernard considered the subject of sociology ungodly. He called it a dead weight on his plans for a "total church community." He let it go when she compensated for her shortcomings by running the church office and all of the women's circles.

Sarah watched him talking to himself with his eyes closed. Once amazed at how quickly he could memorize a sermon in this way, she realized only later that his concentration came from a habit of easily disregarding others. Suddenly he stared at her.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you, Bernard. I was trying to be quiet," she said.

"Have you finished in the kitchen? You certainly were there long enough. I wanted you to help me with these tapes and DVD's."

"What do you want me to do?" Sarah stood up.

"Oh, nothing. Forget it." He shook his head as if she would never understand. "I'll just leave them here on the desk." He had already decided to prop the DVD's on the desk so that the reporter would see them, but Sarah didn't need to know. Sarah had kept him waiting for the last twenty minutes, after all. "I guess we're ready—even though Stefany can't be with us. I don't understand why she couldn't be here."

"She, uh, she had to study with a friend. They have a big test."

"There's something else going on—something you are both hiding." He looked at her sharply and then returned to his note-cards.

Sarah sat down. She knew he wasn't finished.

After staring at his notes for a few minutes, he looked up at her again. "Stefany doesn't have a test," he said quietly. "She isn't enrolled any more." Benton took satisfaction from the way the color drained from Sarah's face. "There was no check." He took a gold Cross pen from his pocket and wagged it at her. "You said you'd written a check for the tuition, but there was no check. I walked over to the college and spoke to the registrar. How long did the two of you plan to keep this up?" He stood, walked around the desk, and admired the pen in his hand. "And I have to hear from Horace Fenstermaker that

she's working somewhere." He waved the pen up and down, as if pounding in the words. "She told him she was working too much to take part in the youth group. What's going on, Sarah?"

He stood in front of her, a little knot of veins raised in his left temple and his fists clenched. Sarah's mouth was so dry she could hardly speak. She didn't dare to stand up.

"She's helping someone, Bernard. You would be proud of her. She's gotten a job to meet her expenses while she takes care of him."

"Him?" Benton shouted. "Is this about Clayton again? After I went over it with her?"

"Yes, it's Clayton. But he's really sick now."

"Of course he's sick—as sick as he is depraved. How could you let her have anything more to do with him? How could you keep this from me?" Benton found himself shaking her like a dust mop. Sarah's eyes rolled back. He stopped. He didn't remember standing up or grabbing her shoulders. Sarah fell back onto the divan. Benton brushed his hair from his forehead.

The Westminster chimes of the front doorbell echoed down the hallway to the church study. Sarah gasped and sank back into the chair as Benton composed himself and strode to the door. Despite his composure, however, he couldn't hide his astonishment to find that the caller filling the doorway was Harry Pettiford, the beefy police spokesman who had ignored him at the public hearing.

"Good morning, Reverend Benton. Just following up on your call." Harry ignored Benton's disdainful expression.

"This is not the best time, Mr., uh . . ."

"Pettiford. Just call me Harry. You wanted to report a problem with vagrants?" Harry was not going to turn around and go home just because this man had some shouting to finish. He had heard the argument all the way up the path from the parking lot. It was like what Officer Davis had reported when called to the Bentons' house on the afternoon that Darryl Reading was murdered on West Washington Street.

"Oh. Come in." Benton, closed the door behind Harry. "But we can't take long with this."

"You're concerned about college students coming onto the church property?" Harry asked, following Benton down the hall to the study. Sarah rose to greet him. Harry noticed that her hands were cool and damp. "How are you, today, Mrs. Benton?" he asked.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Pettiford." She dropped back onto the divan and avoided his eyes.

“It’s the vagrants from the Regional Shelter. They wander around here at all hours. We can’t have church members afraid to come to a choir rehearsal or evening meeting because of some psychotic in the parking lot. I told that cop.”

“The community policeman, Officer Davis? Yes, he told me about his meetings with you.” Harry frowned at Sarah as she stared at the floor.

Benton glanced at her and suddenly smiled broadly. “Have a seat, Mr. Pettifer.”

“Pettiford.” Harry didn’t move. “Officer Davis assures me that most of the group home residents are recently displaced families, hospice patients, or individuals with mild cognitive conditions.”

“Yes, so he says. But he isn’t an elderly choir member having a maniac on a bicycle suddenly race past her in the dark--”

“That was just Burt.” Sarah looked up and spoke quietly. “You know him, Bernard.”

“I don’t know him on a first name basis,” Benton snapped.

Sarah gazed at her lap.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure we can work this out.”

Outside the church, June Brightman had just parked her car beside Harry’s and wondered whether to go in. It would interrupt his police business, but she might also find out what Harry’s business was. Through the glass walkway to the education wing, she could see Harry standing at the end of the hall. She decided to wait until he turned to leave. The walkway curved away from the main building to the steepled entrance in the parking lot. It reminded June of the neck and head of a crouching rhino.

CHAPTER SIX

Harry had been surprised to meet June as Dr. Benton was showing him out the door. Wearing a formal black dress with a pink scarf pinned around her neck, she had raised her eyebrows and simply said, “Why, Mr. Pettiford, how nice to see you.” This meant that, when they met for lunch, June would pump him to find out why the police were interested in Benton.

Harry was less interested in the Bentons than in the person who had reported their shouting match to Officer Davis. On her way home from her part-time work as church custodian, Gracie Williams, the star speaker at the recent hearing, had stopped by the community policing work site to report her employers’ argument. Shortly after checking on her store at the corner of West Washington Street and Vern Highway, Gracie witnessed the altercation between Darryl Reading and James White. As Harry pulled his car into the small lot beside Williams’ Quick Mart, a pair of unshaven men sat on the bench at the bus stop sharing something in a paper bag while an elderly woman with two bags of groceries stood at the curb under the bus sign. In the storefront window was a picture from the newspaper showing Gracie at the hearing, and underneath it, the words, *We Stand Up For You*. Gracie’s full head of frizzy blond curls and her huge red dress were visible at the end of an aisle of potato chips

and corn curls. She was counting stock and didn't appreciate being interrupted, preferring to address the shelf rather than look up at Harry when he spoke.

"Ms. Williams, I'm—"

"That's *Mrs.* Williams, thank you," she snarled, as she hung bags of purple corn chips onto a hook under the drink machine. "My Johnny may be gone, but that doesn't change the 'Mrs.,' does it?"

"Mrs. Williams, I'm Harry Pettiford, with the police --"

"It's about time the police got here. Look, you see that space?" Squatting close to the floor like a huge, wrinkled red medicine ball with a blond wig and flip-flops, she pointed to the empty hook beside the corn chips. "Know what that is?"

Harry didn't have time to answer.

"Robbery! They walk right off with the chips. All the time. We lose at least a hundred dollars every month. Who can find good help to catch them?" She looked over her shoulder at Harry. "Oh, it's you!" she said, heaving herself up with her hands on her knees. "You cut me off. I had a lot more to say. I had evidence."

"Uh, that's why I'm here, Mrs. Williams. It's about your evidence."

She blew a hair from her mouth and stared suspiciously at Harry.

"You see, Mrs. Williams, you saw the incident—"

"The bloody murder, you mean," she said. "Come on up here, where I can watch that new girl on the register."

She led him back to the front of the store. The small, dark, Indian girl, looked like a freshman. She clumsily lowered her cell phone.

"Put that away, Asma! You do that on your own time," Gracie shouted.

Harry said, "About your statement—you had reported a domestic disturbance to Officer Davis earlier that evening?"

Gracie squinted at him and rocked ground her teeth. As she studied Harry, she pulled on a cord around her neck and, from inside her voluminous red blouse, retrieved a pair of pink glasses. Putting them on, she continued to stare silently at Harry.

"You reported the disturbance after you left work at the Bentons'. Isn't that right, Mrs. Williams?"

"Yes, that's right," she said.

"How long have you worked for the church?"

"Since Dr. Benton came to Holburn from somewhere in Missouri."

“So when you said that Officer Davis was nowhere to be found, you knew exactly where he was, didn’t you?”

“Not as if he could have done anything about it. Those boys always like that. It was just a matter of time before one of ’em shot the other.” She started grinding her teeth again.

“And I’m sure that it doesn’t hurt your sales to be known as the defender of the community.”

Harry pointed to the sign in the window.

Gracie stopped moving her jaw.

“What I want to know, Mrs. Williams, is how often the Bentons have arguments like the one they had that night.”

Suddenly Gracie became quiet, almost demure. “Well, it doesn’t happen very often. He just gets concerned sometimes about silly things she does or about that daughter of theirs. It doesn’t amount to much.”

“But you reported it to the police?”

“Well, when you got a man shouting like that, like my Johnny used to, it doesn’t hurt for him to wonder if anyone can hear him.”

CHAPTER SIX

Pinky Cooke was awakened by a stabbing pain in her great toe. Both feet had hammer toes, but the devil lived in the right one. She got up for aspirin and chased it down with a spoonful of whiskey. The room was dark. The streetlamp shone in her dresser mirror. She had become a dark ghost, living for almost 60 years above Edwin and his mother—and now only Edwin. At one time, her head reached to the top of the mirror. Now it came only half-way. Her neck hurt when she tried to straighten up and have a look at herself, so she sat down again on her bed. Her wide face was walnut brown. She had high cheek bones that gave her cheeks a dark, coppery shine in the reflected light.

“At night the darky is a golden goddess,” she said aloud to herself. “Must be ‘resplendence’ or ‘refulgence.’” She’d used both words in a recent crossword puzzle. They captured the way the reflected light transformed her skin. “That’s what got Peter so worked up on the Mount of Transfiguration, I ’low.”

Peter and Edwin were alike—quick to act on how things seem. Edwin would want to help, but his help would get in the way. She would have to work him slowly through Elrod’s problem.

“Take it slow, so he sees all around it before he makes up his mind.”

She lay down. Her toe still hurt, but what hurt more was that the last of her little nephews and nieces had come to trouble. And no one was willing to help him but an old live-in woman who had lived out her usefulness. She couldn’t even set a table properly any more, much less set Elrod straight.

Ed Lashley heard Pinky bumping around upstairs. He sat up, but then sank back onto his pillow. The time was coming when she could not take care of herself. He would move upstairs and get her an aide so that she could live downstairs in his mother's room. She would stay in this house, her home as much as his. He didn't think that the Cookes would take her in, even though she had been "Aunt Cee" to three generations of cousins, all of whom had stayed in her room, or the room across the hall upstairs, when they weren't playing in the yard. No one talked about "day care" in those days. All the time that Ed was growing up, there were little Cookes coming and going as their mothers received free care from "Aunt Cee."

When Ed later met the Cookes in the classroom, they pretended that they didn't know him while their friends were around, but shyly approached him when they were alone. Now that he was a biology teacher in the same classrooms, he was still having quiet conversations with the last group of little Cookes that Pinky had taken in. When they reached high school, they looked upon Ed as a kind of secret uncle who could help them in the large, consolidated Wando High School, with its coded course offerings, student cliques, and written and unwritten rules. Students learned quickly that course designations like "*Biology 81*" and "*Biology 82*" were codes for ability tracks. By the end of the first week, the "eighty-twos" were already speaking derisively of the "eighty-ones."

Wando's head guidance counselor, Carmen Simms, was apparently amazed that students could figure out the codes. Every year, she warned the faculty that the codes were "internal matters," and that it was unprofessional to give this information to students. She would study Ed's expression as she said this, leading him to take off his glasses and fiddle with his mustache. He had a history. She was making a point.

Ed couldn't understand why Ms. Simms thought that he was responsible for all of the transfers of Cooke children from *Math 11* to *Math 12* or from *Geography* to *World History*, or for all the other transfers that Cooke children had made over the years. She didn't give the family any credit for having figured out the "internal code" for themselves. They had no intention of having their children in classes of fourth grade readers. The Cookes had moved on, and they were not going to have their children held back. Every new Cooke child would visit Ed secretly some time during the first week of school to have the class schedule fixed. The last of these visitors, three years ago, had been Elrod Cooke, son of Fancine.

Pinky's rocker creaked and slowly scraped across the floor above. Ed knew that every creak was a worry about Elrod, who had run off four months before graduation.

The following morning, Wednesday, February 13, 2002, Ed was rinsing his cup in the sink when Pinky came into their small kitchen wearing an orange duster and matching shower cap.

She said, "Why didn't you sleep in?"

Ed had professional leave from school to attend a state science conference. He handed her a cup of coffee.

"It seemed to me the sooner we talked about Elrod, the better we'd both sleep."

"Now, Edwin. Don't you go off on this. It's that Fancine. Why Ora named her that I never knew. Like they couldn't decide whether she was Fancy or Francine. The child to this day doesn't know who she is."

"Or who Elrod's father is," Ed said. "She once told me that Elrod 'just happened.'"

"Um, Hm." Pinky sipped her coffee and sat at the tiny kitchen table, whose leaf always bumped their legs. "Fancine is no help, but I want you to talk to her."

Ed's eyebrows rose. He gazed into his cup.

"See, now, Edwin. She won't talk to me about it. Says I tried to be his mother and how do I like it now. She just hardens her heart against me."

"If she has one," Ed said.

Something bumped the kitchen window. A breeze was blowing the Camelia bush against the window pane. It had flowered overnight into a hundred red blossoms that appeared before anything else in the garden during February. It seemed to be pounding on the windows to make them take notice.

Pinky frowned. "When you talk to her, don't tell her I sent you. See needs to think it's about his school work. She'll talk to you. She remembers how you helped her in school."

Ed noticed that Pinky had not said "if" but "when" he talked to Fancine. It came as no surprise. He'd known since her silence at dinner the night before that he'd be seeing Fancine on Wednesday morning. All that she had said was, "Elrod, that boy." He would either see Fancine or hear Pinky sigh about Elrod.

Cooketown was a settlement of modular homes in a hollow along the Wando Road two miles from Ed's house. The oldest building was a two-story, shotgun house with two additions and a screened front porch. It had the same white siding as all the other houses around the wide, sunken tract, but where the siding had come loose at the corners, the original log house was visible. Pinky had grown up there. The founders had lived in that house and built onto it until it could hold no more; then the driveway had been extended into a circular road that served the all of the lots radiating from the central tract, a broad,

well cultivated garden. These lots were given to all of the Cooke children, whose grandchildren still lived there. The wind worked through the treetops in the woods surrounding Cooketown.

Ed noticed piles of onion sets and seed potatoes beside the road. Fancine's house was half-way around the circle. A neat ranch house with white siding like the others, it was the only house with a yellow door. As Ed parked, his Duster dieselled briefly, ending with a pop that sounded like an air rifle. Fancine came out, trailed by a toddler with a jelly doughnut.

Fancine was a tall, yellow-brown young woman with soft, straight hair and two-inch, sparkly blue fingernails. A hairdresser in Wando, she seemed too young to have a senior in high school until one noticed the effort she had put into plucking, stretching, and painting around her panda-like eyes.

"Hey, Mr. Lashley," she said as Ed walked up the gravel drive.

"Hello, Fancine. I'm here about Elrod. We haven't seen him at school for a while."

"That boy run off." Fancine pushed her toddler back into the house and sat on the porch swing. "He be gone two weeks."

Ed stood in front of the porch wondering what to say next. He needed to probe, but Fancine was short-tempered. So far, he was in her good graces, but that could end abruptly if she thought he was "getting in her face."

Ed stared at the steps as he spoke. "You know, Elrod's school work is suffering. This could prevent him from graduating with his class." He gazed at the distant rototiller as if expecting it to start down a row on its own.

Fancine raised her chin and stroked her neck. She glanced back at the toddler. "Maybe he will talk to you."

Ed nodded, still looking at the rototiller. He didn't intend to talk her into anything.

She opened the door and reached inside. She tore the return address from an envelope. "This is where he is. He's with my sister, Sally Jenkins, in Holburn. She wrote me on Monday. There's no talking to him. Maybe he listen to you." The toddler came back onto the porch. Fancine picked him up and tossed the slip of paper to Ed. The wind caught it, making Ed chase it into the garden, where he stepped onto some pea seedlings.

He shouted to Fancine as she went inside. "OK. I'll let you know what I find out." As he drove away, a gray-haired man in faded over-alls came out of one of the houses, nodded to Ed, and cranked up the rototiller.

Ed did not see how he would have time to hunt down Elrod Cooke when he also had to set up the science conference for speakers, presenters, teachers, and vendors. The conference was in Fairall, west of Wando. Holburn was in the opposite direction, almost as far away as the District of Columbia. In fact, his time had already run out, because later that morning in Fairall he was to meet with the volunteers who would host sessions and register participants. Ed vowed that this was the last year he would be conference chairman for the science teachers association, no matter what Professor Henry Randall said.

Five years earlier, he had taken a graduate course from Randall in order to update his certification. One of Professor Randall's course requirements was to prepare a paper on the history of science for the science teachers' conference. Randall took his students to the officers' meeting and nominated Ed for conference chairman. Ed later learned that the chairman for the last ten years had been Hank Randall.

Pinky was calmer about the news than Ed had expected. When he got back home, she was rocking in the living room with a crossword on her lap. She was clearly relieved when he told her that Elrod was with Sally Jenkins. "Oh he's with family," she said, pushing back in her rocker with a little bounce. Being with family meant that Elrod had not really run off. He had simply gotten away from Fancine for awhile.

Ed quietly went to his room to pack. He hadn't heard the last of Elrod, but at least he could leave knowing that Pinky was not worried. It was already almost noon. Phyllis Whaley would be waiting. Phyllis, the school journalism teacher, had promised to help him again to print out labels, signs and name tags, provided he would help her again with a charity event in Holburn. With Phyllis's help, Ed was free to explain the event to the volunteers who would register and assist participants when the conference opened on Friday in the Foxglove Conference Center outside Fairall. By that time, Ed hoped to have the vendor hall, banquet room, and conference rooms all completely arranged, marked and staffed. After five years of doing the conference at various sites around Virginia, Ed knew that its success depended completely on how much he could accomplish on the two days before participants began to arrive.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Early afternoon traffic backed up as the first wave of commuters from D.C. began to take a favorite short-cut through Holburn—undeterred by speed bumps, traffic circles and other traffic-calming obstacles. Stuck in the rush, Harry was on his way to dinner with June. He was uneasy whenever June wanted to compare notes. In his new position as Public Information Officer for Holburn’s Sheriff’s Office, he was still feeling his way. He knew how June could milk a story from gestures and facial expressions. He could say “no comment” as she flashed her smile, tilted her head back, and touched the tip of her tongue to her upper incisors, but she would still get her story. Nonetheless, Harry was curious about her reaction to the Reverend Dr. Benton. When Benton found Harry instead of June on his doorstep, he hadn’t hidden his disappointment.

Harry and June had been meeting for lunch on Wednesdays at Bernie’s in Holburn or at *La Pomme du Pin* in Alexandria since he had managed the campaign of Holburn Councilman Gerald Nuffield, a year earlier. Nuffield’s murder and Harry’s assistance in the investigation had led Sheriff Lester Stihl to hire his old childhood friend to be the department’s spokesman for a new community policing program. Given the size of Holburn, squeezed between Arlington and Alexandria, the program was small, but Lester had obtained a grant to pay for Harry’s position as Public Information Officer. No one had anticipated that, shortly after taking the position, Harry and PIO’s from other localities would be explaining to the nation what had happened in Northern Virginia on September 11, 2001.

Even with all of Holburn's resources thrown into the new security effort, however, Harry's schedule had returned to normal a few weeks after the incident. It was easier for Arlington and other major localities in the region to work together on making the necessary security decisions than it was to retro-fit small units like Holburn's department, whose officers did more walking and cycling than security-screening. In a televised interview, Lester was testy about being left out of decision-making. Privately, however, he was relieved. Lester had great misgivings about the police acting as soldiers. He called some of the new quasi-military security types the "quasikazes." In fact, Lester was one of the few people who had said publicly that the September attacks were crimes, best handled by local and international police—not by soldiers and hysterical politicians. Unfortunately, Lester's comments led to some hysteria among the citizens of Holburn.

Harry's follow-up to the media explained that Lester had spoken from his years of local and military police experience. He parsed Lester's prickly comments to show that the Sheriff had really been making a professional critique of the errors made in immigration control, airport security, and ordinary policing. As the press backed off, Harry told Lester to stay away from cameras and microphones for a few weeks.

Traffic finally began to move. Harry pulled into the parking garage beside the restaurant. What had begun as a professional relationship between a political spokesman and a newspaper reporter became a friendship when June helped Harry after his aunt's stroke. Aunt Clarisse had recovered, the councilman's wife had filled his position *pro tem*, and Harry had moved on to the position of PIO for the Holburn Sheriff's Office, but Harry and June still met every Wednesday at *La Pomme du pin* for lunch.

A giant red valentine was pinned to a sandwich board by the greeter's desk in the foyer. The young woman at the desk stood up when Harry came in.

"Hello, Mr. Pettiford. Ms. Brightman is already inside."

He followed her into the dining room.

"Remember, tomorrow is our two-for-one valentine special, first drinks free."

"Thank you." Harry thought of Bea staring at the ceiling at the Fireside Nursing Home. Three Valentine's Days had passed since Bea's stroke. Harry found himself staring at a woman seated alone at a long table set for maybe a dozen people. She seemed to have some kind of blue growth on her forehead. He turned away. Someone was tugging on his sleeve.

"Harry, you walked right past me." June laughed. It was a rough, whooping kind of laughter, unlike Bea's gentle, merry chuckle.

"Sorry, June. Just preoccupied, I guess."

“You’re permitted.” When June smiled, it was impossible not to smile back. “Look, I went ahead and ordered for us because I have to get back to write the piece on Dr. Benton.”

“You’re featuring Benton?” Harry frowned.

“He does have the largest congregation in Holburn. I’m doing a follow-up piece next week on one of the church’s projects.” June moved her tote bag so that Harry could sit on her right. “Sit over here, Harry. I’ll never hear you in this crowd.”

A large group was being seated at the long table. As he changed chairs, Harry looked again at the woman with the blue tumor; then he noticed another woman who was also disfigured by a blue growth. He turned back to June. “You know the slogan of Benton’s church? ‘The end of your search for the genuine church.’”

June raised an eyebrow. She pulled her notepad from the tote. “Anything else?”

“Well, not if you want facts rather than gossip,” Harry said.

“Gossip will do for now.”

“I’d say that all is not well in the Benton household.” Harry dropped his voice. “Off the record, I’d say that the Reverend Doctor beats his wife.”

“Harry!”

“I told you this was off the record.”

“No fear. I’m supposed to profile him for a feature on the religion page, not for a incident report. Were there calls about him?”

“All very quiet. A maid told the community policeman about loud arguments. The officer made several visits but didn’t find anything. When I came up today, Benton and his wife were having a set-to. It was a one-sided contest, from the look of Sarah Benton.”

June glanced over Harry’s shoulder. He turned around. Several women were sitting down at the long table. All of them had the same kind of growth on their foreheads. He wondered if it were a family trait.

Two plates of rigatoni arrived. Harry was relieved to have a reason to stop talking. June’s smile had the effect of truth serum.

After the server had left, June waited for Harry to pick up the thread. He stared steadfastly at his plate. Finally, she spoke. “Is your aunt keeping it all together with the garden club meeting only a week away?”

He shook his head. “It would be OK if she didn’t have to think about Millie Coleman. The woman always wants the spotlight. When Clysta died, Millie called Aunt Clarisse to offer to do the

centerpiece. Clarisse told her that was not necessary, but she knows that Millie will show up with her usual challenger centerpiece.” Harry pushed away his empty plate.

“Her ‘off-centerpiece.’” June suppressed a smile, but her eyes laughed. “She uses it to move the conversation in her direction.”

“And Millie’s trying to get the club to sponsor another of her husband’s sculptures—a statue of Colonel Holburn for the town library.”

“Isn’t Arne Coleman a dentist?” June said.

Harry nodded. “That could explain his waterfront statue of the Colonel.”

“Domino Man?”

“Sure. It’s a dentist’s dream—teeth as accessible as Lego blocks.” Harry poked the air with his fork. “Anyway, I think that Aunt Clarisse is ready for Millie this time. She has ordered two giant centerpieces for the table. She is determined that the challenger should sit on the sideboard, not on the dinner table.”

June laughed.

Harry smiled. “And then, before Millie can hold forth on her latest gardening advice, Clarisse will present the special speaker, Dr. Carol Chapin, a botanist from Holburn University. It’s a plan that may even crack Millie’s make-up.”

“She does overdo the makeup.” June nodded and then frowned. The long table next to them was now full. A chubby woman had pushed her chair against the back of Harry’s chair.

Harry turned around and saw more than a dozen women seated at the table, all of them dressed in black, and all with blue growths on their foreheads. He wondered if it were some kind of cancer survivor group—the Group of Forehead Growth Survivors.

“Harry?” June was alarmed as the color drained from Harry’s face.

He pushed away from the table.

“It’s Ash Wednesday,” he said.

“Of course, that’s why—”

“I’ve got to go, June.” He stood quickly, left two twenty dollar bills on the table, and walked out, carrying his coat by the collar, like a dog that had just peed on the sofa. He bumped the huge Valentine’s Day poster in the foyer as he shoved on the door to open it against the wind.

Harry knew that he could not explain to June what had come over him as he realized that the women with the spotted foreheads had come from an Ash Wednesday service. He felt nauseated. He wanted the wind in his face—and an end to chatting, working, and behaving normally. Normal life had

been over for some time. Gone were simple routines, quiet walks, eating grilled cheese sandwiches at the lunch counter, the give-and-take of daily reflections shared in the dark before sleep. Gone were valentines, Christmas vespers, and Ash Wednesday services—except for the ashes. Bea once laughed at the way the minister had smudged Harry's nose instead of his forehead. Even facing the wind outside the parking garage, he wanted to throw up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On Friday morning, retired Colonel Dan Connors packed a change of underwear, a shirt, a bottle of medicine, and his shaving kit into a gym bag for the trip to the state science teachers' conference in Fairall. Hank Randall, another adjunct instructor at Holburn University, had asked Dan to give a presentation on sampling design. Dan and Randall sometimes talked over dinner in the university cafeteria on Tuesdays and Thursdays before Dan's statistics class. Somehow, Randall had worked their conversations around into a commitment from Dan to help with the conference. Randall was hard to refuse. He needed someone to take his place in introducing a speaker, Dr. Carol Chapin, and in giving her a ride to the conference. Randall and his wife had to go to a "pow-wow" somewhere in southwest Virginia. At first, Dan had turned Randall down; but then he thought that Jacey might enjoy getting away for the weekend

Dan and Jacey had lived in Holburn since Dan's retirement the previous year. Dan was a little older than the usual thirty-year retiree because of a prior career in business. He was a lean, six-foot, sixty-year-old with trifocals, gray hair, and a slight stoop from years of peering at columns of figures for the Air Force. Whether the figures were bomb fuzes, diodes for cockpit arrays, or hand blowers for restrooms, they were simply samples to Dan—data sets to examine for patterns and discrepancies.

Dan and Jacey tried to fit into the Holburn community. Jacey had joined a local women's club and Dan had begun teaching part-time at Holburn University. They agreed that they needed distractions. There was little family left on either side, and with Linda, their married daughter, living in California, and their son, Danny, an officer killed in Desert Storm, Dan had no more patience for long talks about what might have been. Grief was simply lodged in him like a bullet too close to the spine to be removed. It left no feeling, but Dan had always found feeling less reliable than duty. The work at the university gave him assignments, schedules, and demands. Now he graded papers instead of rating weapons systems.

Jacey Connors waited for Dan in the living room of their small townhouse. She studied her flower bed outside the front window. The *Wygelia* bush and sedum, or frog plants, would not impress any of the other members of the Holburn Society and Garden Club, but she enjoyed thinking about the delicate pink-fringed, white *Wygelia* blossoms and the deep red, tiny florets of the sedum that would soon be opening. It had been a mild winter. The *Wygelia* buds were already swelling. It was a huge bush that blocked the view and poked branches into the porch screen, but as it pushed against the window, it made its branches and buds easy to inspect. Jacey watched spiders moving on tight-ropes between the branches and the window sash. This morning, hundreds of tiny spiders quickly scattered from their hidden nest. To remain was to be eaten, Jacey suspected. You can't stay in one place.

Some spiders fell onto the green, succulent leaves of the frog plant. The *Wygelia* had come with the house, but Jacey—Judith Corinne—had put in the frog plants. She was thinking of her mother's rock garden in Murphy, Tennessee, a project assembled over years of visits with nearby kin in coves along the Caney Fork, Toe River, and other creeks where her mother could find the smooth, flat stones she liked to put between her prickly pears, *Kalenchoes*, cacti, and frog plants. The other members of the Garden Club would not even call the patch outside Jacey's house a flower bed, but for Jacey, it was enough.

Dan stood behind Jacey as she kneeled to see the branches of the bush outside their front window. Her forehead rested on the window pane. Her short, reddish-brown hair still showed no signs of gray. She was still as small and slim as she had been when they met at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base more than forty years before. All her changes had been internal—a bout with tuberculosis, two difficult pregnancies, the death of Danny, and the hearing loss that had come on recently, thirty years after her doctor had warned them about the side-effects of the cure for TB. Dan touched her shoulder.

She turned and smiled. "I was thinking about Mama," she said.

“Her rock garden.” Dan nodded.

She leaned back against his knees as he held her shoulders.

Dr. Carol Chapin was waiting outside the Holburn Student Union with her black, roll-on tote. She knew she was early, but had hoped that Dr. Randall’s substitute—some adjunct from the math department—would also want to make an early start. She hesitated to sit, but finally walked to a nearby bench for the campus bus service, and sat down. Against her better judgment, she had checked her emails before leaving. There were more attacks. The author seemed to know about the conference in Fairall. He or she claimed that Carol’s work on the Foxglove Reserve—even on the land that Gene and she had donated—was some kind of collusion with SalvoCorp. It twisted the purpose of her work on the mitigation plan into a deal to provide her scientific endorsement for the machinations of a multinational federal contractor in exchange for fame and funding for her “bogus project.” The scurrilous attacks had appeared in blogs of professional botanical associations. Carol thought it unlikely that the attacker was a student.

A tall, middle-aged man wearing a maroon pullover and jeans approached her.

“Dr. Chapin?” He extended his hand. “Dan Connors. Hank said you needed a ride.”

“Thanks so much, Dan. I asked Hank for a ride so that I wouldn’t have to think about anything but my presentation, and then he—”

“He went to a pow-wow. What is that about, anyway?” As Dan put the tote bag in the back seat, he was surprised to find Jacey.

“I moved so that you and Dr. Chapin can talk,” she said.

Carol had to extend the seat belt as far as it would reach. “Hank Randall claims that he is a descendent of the Saponi tribe, but I think that he just likes to wear costumes. You should see him at Halloween.”

Dan saw Jacey coyly watching his face in the rear view mirror. She had outflanked him. Jacey knew that he wanted them to have “girl talk” while he drove.

“So, Dr. Chapin,” Dan said. “Have you been to Fairall before? Perhaps you know a short cut?”

“Carol, Dan. Yes, I’ve been going to Foxglove Reserve for years. When my husband was alive, we camped there on weekends and even bought adjoining property. This highway is direct.”

“We camped when our children were small,” Jacey said.

Carol looked over the seat. “You look familiar, Jacey. Now I remember. You were in the Master Gardener’s class with Sarah Benton. I did the unit on mums.”

Jacey said, “Yes. Sarah and I are new members of the Holburn Garden Club. After a couple of meetings, we both decided that we needed to learn more. And after your class—”

“You recommended me to Miss Pettiford,” Carol said.

“Yes, we’re looking forward to your talk to the club next week.” In the mirror, Jacey caught Dan’s bemused expression. It was all news to him.

“Sarah’s a real worker,” Carol said. “She’s secretary for her husband’s church, an active gardener, and a volunteer at the Shelter several days a week. She does so much good.”

Dan was looking forward to breaking past the last traffic light on the road west. Carol waved her hands and laughed as she spoke—a booming laugh. With her multi-pocketed beige jacket, hand-lens, small binoculars, and tiny round wire glasses attached to a chain around her pudgy neck, she reminded him of Teddy Roosevelt. Dan wouldn’t have been surprised to hear her say, “Bully!”

* * *

After driving Phyllis back to Wando, Ed Lashley returned to Fairall. The conference was outside town in a forested area at the Conference Center, a collection of buildings surrounded by woodlands, pastures, and low brick walls. Once the horse farm for a wealthy shipper, it had been turned into the Foxglove Home and Conference Center by a local church group. The surrounding forest and wetlands area, the Foxglove Reserve, had gradually grown to over 450,000 acres. The last large tract had been acquired from SalvoCorp, a federal contractor. The land was sold as a mitigation site to offset the environmental damage it was doing in the construction of a new federal research facility east of Fairall. Ed had heard from the president of the state science teachers’ association that this was why the conference was at Fairall this year. Dr. Randall had asked a botanist from Holburn University to give the keynote address because of her research on the site. She was compiling a comprehensive environmental inventory of the Reserve to serve as a benchmark for future studies, as the land reverted to a natural condition.

It was Randall’s hope that Fairall would open the Reserve to neighboring school systems so that science students could visit a rare, undisturbed, middle-latitude deciduous community. To date, however, the Northern Regional government in Fairall had shown no inclination to cooperate with outsiders. Randall had encouraged Ed to talk with any local school leaders who showed up for the conference. So far, Ed had not met anyone from the Fairall school system. Only other science

association members had come to the pre-conference meeting for volunteers. With the help of Phyllis and the other volunteers, Ed had set up all the signs, tables, and rooms for panel sessions, exhibitors' reception, workshops, luncheons, and dinners for the next three days. Registration had already begun before Phyllis and he had left.

The Foxglove Home and Conference Center was surrounded by rock walls made of the local slate, greenstone, and river rocks taken from nearby Pawmack Run, which fed a small pond behind one of the residence buildings where conference attendees would stay, the Milford House. The guard at the gatehouse examined Ed's conference pass as carefully as he had when Ed had left an hour earlier. Ed started to tell him he was one of the fedayeen, but he noticed that the guard was armed and probably not in a joking mood.

The winding road up to the main building was lined with tall American boxwood. No driveway to a farmhouse, this road had clearly been designed to show off the estate and inspire awe. All of the buildings were brick, Georgian style, even the stables, barns, and other outbuildings. Flagstone paths, an English boxwood maze, giant beech trees around the reception center, and stone footbridges arching over a small stream descending to a pond at the foot of the hill where the main buildings stood. Some of the buildings were homes for the elderly. Other areas, surrounded by heavy-gauge wire fencing and guarded by armed security staff, served some other function. Ed noticed a small airstrip and helipad within the fenced area. Professor Randall had told Ed that all of this was now owned by a religious group, but it reminded Ed of some of the large horse farms around Wando—properties whose horse stalls had better plumbing than the homes of grooms and groundskeepers. They were owned by business people who aspired to be gentry and wore jodhpurs and tweed coats when they went to the town post office.

The Foxglove Center, however, was on a grander scale than any of the estates around Wando, particularly now that it had also become the reception area and visitor center for the vast Foxglove Reserve. Ed parked under a giant copper beech by the reception building. The sound of his Duster dieseling made the man and two women walking up the path turn around. The two women seemed to be amused, but the thin, gray-haired man frowned.

"It's an old car." Ed held out his hand. "Ed Lashley. You must be presenters."

"Dan Connors. This is my wife, Jacey, and Dr. Carol Chapin."

Carol Chapin was a plump, hearty sort with a wide smile. She pumped Ed's hand. "You are the conference chair Hank Randall told me about."

"Yes, I'm the one that Hank has suckered into this for the last five years."

Dan raised an eyebrow. “Hank does seem to find things for the rest of us to do.”

“But it’s beautiful here!” Jacey squeezed Dan’s arm.

“Yes, just look at this beech,” Carol said.

Carol and Jacey gazed up at the dark-branched giant. Jacey was clearly Dan’s better half, Ed thought. She had merry, dark eyes and a fine, unwrinkled, downy skin that had never folded into the pouts, smirks, or snarls that settled in the faces of other women her age. She seemed to be one of those rarities, a person without guile. Ed had sometimes seen a sixth grader with such an open expression, but by the time they made it to high school, faint lines had already appeared, lines that settled in well before middle age. As Ed met former students around town, he observed little change in the expressions they had had as children. Some would call them lines of character, but Ed saw them as behaviors that character had to overcome, like the deep, vertical lines on Dan’s cheeks and the tracery of scribbles and sagging flesh around Ed’s own eyes. Jacey was certainly well past middle age, but her eyes, like her outlook, as far as Ed could discern, were fresh and unencumbered by deceit or pettiness.

Plastic name tags were spread on the sign-in table in the foyer. Seated behind the table, like a huge Humpty Dumpty on a tiny stool, was a corpulent, red-faced man.

“Arnie Winkler, this is Dr. Chapin, Dan Connors, and his wife, Jacey,” Ed said. “Arnie is our science supervisor in Wando schools. He kindly volunteered to man the registration table.”

Arnie shook his head. “Ed volunteered me. You gotta watch out for Ed—but it looks like you already know that. But I don’t complain. This little job just suits me.”

After Carol signed in and received her packet, she turned and looked around. “Where did Mr. Lashley go?”

Arnie shrugged. “I warned you. There’s no telling about Ed. He probably went back to see whether the caterers have arrived.” He handed Dan a registration packet.

“I wanted to talk to him about the projector for my keynote speech tonight,” Carol said.

“Why don’t you check in the main hall?” Arnie said. “The room should already be ready for you to upload your presentation. Ed told me that he spent yesterday setting up for all the speakers.”

Dan and Jacey watched Carol stride off quickly, wheeling her black tote behind her. Dan said, “According to this packet, we’re staying at Milford House. Where’s that?”

“Up the hill from here. Can’t miss it,” Arnie said.

“Let’s look around in here before we go to our room,” Jacey said.

Dan was glad that Jacey was so taken with the place and the event, even though he already wished it were over. Granted, he didn’t have much to do—introduce Carol for her seminar on “habitat

fragmentation,” whatever that was, and then give his own session on sample design. The rest of the time, Jacey and he could wander around the grounds and enjoy the open air. Since his retirement, they seemed to need distractions, anything to keep their conversation from following their usual course—a dark watershed of grief that sent every stray word and unguarded expression down the same path of guilt and self-accusation.

For Dan, the great satisfaction of his life had been to become part of his father’s old unit in the Air Force, the Defense Atomic Support Agency, and to serve for several years in the same unheralded cold war duty as his father—running quality assurance on the nuclear arsenal scattered around the country. It was a satisfaction that Jacey appreciated but did not understand. And when Danny and Linda came along, Dan never expressed any expectation that they should follow him into the military. He knew, however the feelings of insufficiency and uncertainty of growing up in a household that revolved around military rotations and rehearsals for disaster. It had a way of minimizing other strengths and desires that Dan might have had. At some point, he had made an assessment of what he had to offer—a skill in mathematics, like his father’s—and then, like his father, committed this to the Air Force.

He hadn’t needed to preach. Danny had absorbed his feelings about duty, country, and family tradition. Danny could see how deeply satisfied Dan was with what he did. Such a sense of necessity and urgency was more appealing than more years of college. As Dan replayed it, the conversation always went the same way. Jacey would no longer listen to it. She would say, “What if?” and leave the room. They needed distractions. It was as if they walked along a steep path, leaning into the hillside to avoid slipping down an embankment of loose slate. The distractions kept them going.

Jacey had led him into a paneled library with a long, highly polished, oak conference table, its surface inlaid with lighter woods in a scrolled design. On the mantel were a stuffed fox and pheasant. Paintings of hunting scenes and the heads of various animals hung on the walls. The books were collections of sermons, bound religious journals, and theological treatises.

Dan read aloud from a brass plaque on the wall. “‘Library and conference room of the Foxglove Interdenominational Board of the Northern Region.’ Dr. Randall said that this place was owned by a religious group.”

Jacey stared at the antelope head over the doorway. “Let’s go outside,” she said.

Ed Lashley stood on the loading dock behind the kitchen. The caterer was late. For Ed, the caterers were the big headache of the conference every year. Foxglove Center provided dining room and

kitchen, but had no staff. The town of Fairall had a few restaurants, but no caterers, so Ed had to rely on Bernadette's Catering, a catering service in Wando, operated by Bernard Netti, a cranky florist who had branched into shipping and catering to make the payments on the lease for his flower shop. Mostly, Ed had dealt with Mrs. Netti. During the week, Elaine Netti was a school secretary at Wando High, but her ultimate plan, she told Ed, was to cater full time. Every transaction that Ed had with Elaine seemed like a favor to her. Every transaction he had with her husband seemed to require an apology for pulling Bernie away from the plants in his cold room.

A green panel truck appeared from behind the dumpster. Elaine was driving, pumping the brakes as she argued with a teen-aged passenger. She rolled down the window to hear what Ed was saying.

"Elaine, we need the reception table laid out. What's going on?" Ed jumped back as she threw open the car door.

"We're OK. Tina will set it all up. We're OK. As soon as I've unloaded here, I'll go back to town for the dinner flats." She looked back at her daughter, a red-faced girl with short, black curly hair and a pout. "Put on that hat!" Elaine shouted. "And button your coat!"

Tina pulled off her headset, forced a cylindrical, paper hat down to her ears and struggled to push the cloth buttons into the holes of the white smock that, like the hat, was too small for her.

Ed started to ask whether Tina was to be the only help for the dinner, but Elaine had not stopped to talk. She angrily stalked to the back of the truck, lowered the lift, and rolled out a rack of five trays of box lunches. Pushing them quickly away from the van, she slammed the doors and drove off, leaving Ed, the trays of food, and a pouting Tina standing by the dumpster.

Jacey looked out the window of their room in the Milford House. Black shapes, like nodding sunflower seedlings with the shells still attached, surrounded the distant pond at the foot of the hill behind the hotel. They were grazing Canadian geese, their heads buried in the tall grass around the pond. Dan had returned to the main building to find out where his sessions were to take place, and to pick up their box lunches. He had no interest in the conference, but he didn't want to be late for anything he was required to do.

A white path of crushed shells led away from the Milford House to the pond, Reception Center, and a boxwood maze with a white bench in the center. Jacey traced the maze with her finger on the window pane. She wanted to have lunch on that bench.

When Ed left Tina in the kitchen, she had begun to pull the cling-wrap from the trays of food and set them on carts to roll into the dining room. He stopped to look in one of the mirrors lining the dining room. As they had pushed the racks from the loading dock into the kitchen, Tina let the spring-loaded door slam back, knocking a pitcher of cranberry juice onto Ed. He handed the empty pitcher to Tina and walked to the other end of the room. In the mirror, Ed saw a middle-aged man with dark-framed glasses, a pot belly, a widow's peak, and a shirt that looked like he was bleeding out. Mainly what he noticed was how different he looked without a mustache.

Pinky had asked why he shaved it off. Now he wondered why he'd shaved it off. It certainly hadn't made any difference to Phyllis. She'd spent the whole time they were together staring at the huge monitor that Ed had carried to the car for her from the school newspaper lab. Phyllis said she needed it to make the banners and programs. Of course, that's what Ed had asked her to do. Still, she hadn't said anything about the missing mustache.

Ed studied his reflection. Now that his upper lip had reappeared, he didn't like it. And the cranberry stain made it look like he'd had a nosebleed. Next to him in the mirror, an arm appeared—in a suit-sleeve with a French cuff and cuff-links. As Ed turned right, he heard a familiar voice on his left.

"Hello, Ed." Dr. Leroy Runcible—"Jerry" to his friends—wore one of his many suede coats, a maroon, paisley tie with a Windsor knot, a monogrammed handkerchief in the coat pocket, shiny wingtips, and a name tag identifying him as the Superintendent of the *Fairall Schools of Faith*. His eyelids rose on the same expressionless, calculating eyes that Ed had tried to avoid on so many occasions when Runcible had been principal of Wando High. Ed noticed that Runcible's hair was raven-black—one of many features he'd probably had to make over after finally being booted from Wando County Schools for trying to create a theocratic curriculum.

Runcible stepped toward him. "Ed?"

Ed backed away. "I didn't know you were in Fairall." Ed hoped that the impudent Tina would now crash a beverage cart, to give him an excuse to leave.

"Yes, I finally found my *métier*. Here in the Northern Region, the BFP allows me to model the New Learning."

"BFP?" Ed said.

"The Board of Faith and Practice. My Guided Ministry program was exactly what they had been looking for."

“How nice for you,” Ed said. As soon as Runcible had left Wando High, Ed had dumped out all of the leaflets and manuals about the Fourteen Steps to a Harmonious Interface Between School and Community, or F.S.H.I.B.S.C. Ed called the plan Runcible’s Fishy Biscuits.

Runcible’s hands made a steeple to touch his lips. “In the New Learning, we change the setting for instruction, but we also look back to older forms—even the yeshivas. When our students learn history, science, or other subjects, they must be mentored closely. They must come to depend upon the school as they will later depend upon society.” Runcible paused for questions, and then frowned. “I’ll say more in my session tomorrow afternoon.”

Ed nodded as he looked for Tina. “I’ll try to make it, but managing the conference takes most of my time. You understand.”

Runcible was already walking away. “Come when you can, Ed.”

After finishing lunch on the white bench in the middle of the boxwood maze, Dan and Jacey pushed aside the aromatic branches that lined the narrow paths to see a way out. Jacey paused to inhale deeply through her nose, closing her eyes to enjoy the scent. Dan’s aggravation slipped away as he held her shoulders. He felt her chest rise and fall. He studied the fine down on her neck and the faint freckles on her cheeks. All that he knew about her he loved now even more than he had forty years ago.

“Here it is.” Jacey pulled Dan’s sleeve. “We turned here when we entered.”

Dan said, “You led me in as if you’d done it a hundred times.”

“I had studied it from our window and memorized the turns, but recalling the turns in reverse order was not so easy.” She ran ahead of him, her short, brown hair bouncing behind her as she followed the undulating boxwood shapes.

When Dan emerged, she had disappeared. When he looked back to the path, Jacey tapped him on the shoulder.

“Here I am.”

Dan took her hand as he slowly turned around. “And how did you know I’d make it out?”

“Oh, you’ve been in worse fixes than that.” She pulled his jacket to bring his face down to hers. “Like this,” she said, kissing him on the chin.

“This isn’t so bad.” He nuzzled her hair.

“You don’t know what I’m going to ask you to do.”

“Uh-oh. Not more digging and planting.” They held hands and followed the path past the duck pond.

“No, but close. I want to help the Garden Club with the Craft Show benefit for the Regional Shelter. And I’ve volunteered you.”

“It’s fine.” Dan squeezed her hand.

“I like the Club. And the Shelter is a good cause. You don’t mind?” Jacey searched his face.

“It’s fine, Jace. We can do what we want. It’s just the two of us now.” Dan immediately regretted what he had said. It diminished everything. They stared down as they walked. Their efforts always came back to this. Dan sometimes thought of it as a marble whirling around in a cup. As long as it was kept racing, it climbed the sides, but if you stopped moving the cup, the marble slid to the bottom. This was the system’s stable end-state. Such stability, the evenness of dissolution and finality, was unbearable. It was a stable place precisely because nothing could live there. He put his arm around Jacey’s shoulders.

She pulled closer to him and gathered her sweater around her neck. “It’s getting cold,” she said.

“Guess we should turn back. I have to host Dr. Chapin’s first session in an hour.” Dan looked up at the tall, chain-link gate at the end of their path. Behind the gate was a compound of white, block buildings. Concertina wire was strung along the top of the fence. An armed guard in a black uniform appeared from the small gate house. To Dan, it looked like a restricted military facility. Above the roofs, the tips of towers were visible. An antenna field probably occupied the distant tract beyond the block buildings. Inside the gate, apparently just delivered, was a pallet of wooden boxes, marked **Rocochet, POMZ-2B, BLU-92B, M16A1.**

Carrying his assault rifle at port arms, the guard approached them.

“Sir, this is a restricted area.”

Dan looked back at the sign. “Is this a military facility?” He noticed a line of men being marched around the corner of one of the white buildings.

“No, sir. This belongs to the Northern Regional Security Corps.” The guard stood perfectly still.

Dan backed away. “Let’s go, Jace.”

Jacey’s eyes widened. She pulled on Dan’s elbow. As they walked away, Dan remembered what he had recognized about the labels on the wooden boxes. The labels referred to landmines.

When Elaine Netti returned with the food for the banquet, Ed was relieved to see three more servers get out of the van with her. During the afternoon, Ed had done most of the fetching and busing for the reception while Nina Netti talked on the phone and glared every time he entered the kitchen.

With registration and the vendor exhibition also underway, Ed could finally slip into the opening session with Dr. Chapin, a small meeting in the Foxglove library for those specially interested in her field—habitat fragmentation. No spaces were left around the large conference table, so Ed sat with other late-comers in the arm chairs surrounding those seated at the table. Dan Connors was finishing the introduction when Ed came in.

Carol Chapin had changed into a tight, Kelly-green pants suit and made an unsuccessful effort to comb her springy red hair. Her glasses and hand lens hung from her neck and bounced from breast to breast. She seemed very uncomfortable in the pants suit, continually pulling on the sleeves and the waistband as she told about her growing catalog of all the plant species in the Foxglove Reserve and the great advantage to the community and schools to be near such a large undeveloped tract of mid-Atlantic forest that would be allowed to return to its climax condition.

Her listeners were not rapt in attention. Most of those at the table were bearded men wearing jeans—typical botanists, Ed thought. They stared at their laps or occasionally glanced at each other as if there were some more important business ahead. This made Carol more uncomfortable. She put her hand to her hair and pointed the laser at the pheasant on the mantel instead of the screen. This session was intended as a pre-conference seminar for university instructors engaged in similar research, so Ed was not surprised that he saw no one he knew, except for another Holburn botany professor, named Barker. Ed had attended his session on plant alkaloids at another conference. As indifferent as they were to Carol's presentation, many hands went up when she asked for questions.

A sallow-faced man with a sticky looking crewcut spoke first. "So you're the Chapin who's cozied up to the land developers and pharmaceutical companies to get finder's fees. Well, I came here to tell you to stop sending me your sleazy offers to be cut in on this reprehensible deal." His chair screeched as he pushed it back, stood up, and walked out.

Suddenly, the room was alive with grunts of approval and foot shuffling.

Carol was pale. In her green suit, she looked like a prickly pear with a wilted flower.

Dan's ears turned red. "Order!" he barked.

The foot shuffling stopped.

A young man with a dirty, blond beard shouted from the end of the table. "What you're doing is a disgrace to the profession."

Dan took a book from the shelf behind him and slammed it on the table. “Quiet!”

Carol dropped her laser pointer on the floor and left it there. Staring down at the table, she said, “It doesn’t seem to matter that I’ve known most of you for years. I don’t know how you could believe that I would make any deals with drug manufacturers to exploit the resources of the Reserve for personal gain when Gene and I actually donated some of our own land. When Gene, whom some of you knew, was alive, we decided that if this area were ever set aside we wanted it to include our adjoining property as a buffer. Our only compensation was the satisfaction of knowing that this extensive habitat would not be fragmented as has occurred elsewhere. Certainly, I know about the potential value of many of the botanicals that could be derived from this tract. That’s obviously one of the reasons for having Reserves.”

Carol paused to take a sip of water.

Ed noticed that Blondbeard had lost the glaring contest to Dan Connors.

Carol cleared her throat, took another sip, and spoke loud enough to reach the back of a freshman lecture hall. “What I can say categorically is that I have nothing to do with the malicious e-mails that have been circulating in my name. I am not the sender. I have no financial interest. I—”

She broke off suddenly, as if she’d seen a harpie fly past. Ed followed her gaze to the hallway, where Dr. Leroy G. Runcible paused in the doorway, caught her eye, and slipped back into the lobby.

CHAPTER NINE

Harry woke suddenly, the image of a woman with a spot on her forehead fading with a dream. Scrunch snored and gasped, his hind feet twitching as he slept at the foot of the bed. Harry looked at his watch—four in the morning, the Sunday after Ash Wednesday. Harry hoped that Aunt Clarisse had a ride to church with Doris Stihl. He didn't want to go anywhere today, particularly not to church, where Lester Stihl would want to talk shop after the service.

Harry had heard enough about “data-driven policing.” The emphasis seemed to be on “driven.” Ever since Lester had installed the expensive, bug-ridden system, the computer set the priorities. Wireless transmission of incident reports bypassed the area captains and went directly into a database managed by Officer Berry. Although he'd only been on the force for a year, Tim Berry had immediately understood the new system—not only because he'd grown up on video games, but also because the tracking system was similar to the one he had used as a city tour guide. As a rookie webmaster, he was now routing all of the information in the system. The area captains complained, but Lester liked the real-time map of incidents he could bring up on his flat screen. He insisted that Harry promote the system in his press releases to show that the Holburn Sheriff's Office was staying up to date to keep the city secure.

Of course, the system hadn't prevented Reading from bludgeoning White in front of the Quik Mart on the west side of town. Every incident became a blinking light on Lester's monitor. Knowing about this probably wouldn't stop a restless kebab chef in the Pakistani fast-food enclave from following the *fatwa* of his favorite *imam*, but it did give the police department some panache. As Harry appeared on television in front of Lester's flat screen, he looked like the weatherman in front of the tornado warning system. Viewers could be confident that Holburn's police were in the front lines against hasheesh-crazed *fedayeen* bent on destroying the Easter Egg Tree illegally erected in front of City Hall. To everyday bullies, like Darryl Reading or Bernard Benton, however, the blinking lights outlined a satisfying pattern of resistance and submission.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed. The swelling in his feet had gone down. He still hadn't gotten his weight under two hundred pounds, despite doctor's warnings, many dog-walks, and far too many salads. What he really wanted was brandy. His red nose and cheeks still showed his past affections, but now, for Bea's sake, he was a teetotaler. He leaned forward, his face in his hands. He had fallen asleep in his shorts at seven o'clock in the evening.

It had been easy to fall into another routine, even the bizarre routine of a police information officer, or PIO. After the bombing of the Pentagon, everything had changed. His grant-sponsored job had been changed to a full-time position. Within a few weeks, Harry acquired a staff—that is, Officer Tim Berry, who needed no guidance. Nonetheless, as a manager, Harry was now required to attend all staff and city council meetings and to carry a pager. This was in addition to the vague reference in his job description about “interacting with the public”—a euphemism for dealing with people like Gracie Williams and Reverend Benton.

Harry had decided that there wasn't much to do about his situation. Nina had another semester after her return from Guatemala, and Bea required full-time nursing care. Fortunately, there was no mortgage to pay off, but he did feel obliged to pay rent—over her protests—to his Aunt Clarisse. Since coming back to Holburn as a campaign manager for a local councilman, Harry had reluctantly admitted that retirement was over.

Scrunch pushed his wet nose against Harry's leg. It was Harry's own fault. He woke Scrunch and now they had to walk. The streetlights were reflected in the puddle standing in the gutter outside his dormer window. Scrunch wiggled his rump. As Harry crossed the landing to the bathroom, he reflected that standing up after a deep sleep must have the same effect on dogs. The upstairs bathroom was tucked under a narrow gable over the back porch. A giant, free-standing bathtub occupied the floor. After repeatedly bumping his head on the low, sloping ceiling, Harry now knew to turn on the light before

entering the room. A handful of stars were visible through the bathroom window. The unfilled territory between them was like the space between routines and aspirations. He wondered how much matter was in that unfilled space. Even with only a few particles per cubic mile, the distances would multiply even those negligible bits into a load of oppressive proportions. The weight of the negligible—the unnoticed and routine bits of a life—accumulates slowly, like snow on an ice pack. A hairline here, a wrinkle there, a finger strangely trembling by itself, and the avalanche begins. He washed his face in the tiny sink, stood up, and bumped his head.

Outside, it was cool and foggy. Scrunch raced into the front yard as Harry shut the door behind them. Relief. A dog's relief was easy to arrange. Instead of walking down St. Giles Lane, they turned up Beech Street, going away from town toward the green roof of St. Mark's School, which Harry had attended more than half a century earlier. Sold by the diocese to the City of Holburn, it was now a community center. As they approached it, Harry remembered coming to school like this, before daylight. He had often walked up the wrought-iron stairs to the right of the main entrance. Two doors down, on the right hallway, was Father Berman's room. Harry reckoned that he was now the age of Father Berman when he knew him. Harry liked to come early and read in the back of the room by a window until dawn lit the red-gold leaves of a giant maple outside. He knew now that Father Berman knew that Harry had been checking out the same books he had seen him reading. The tree was gone, the window bricked over.

A few headlights were visible several blocks south from the traffic going into the city on Vern Highway, which passed Gracie's Quick Mart on Washington Street in West Holburn before turning northwest to the river. It was still quiet except for the plink of Scrunch's tags. He tugged Harry from the corner. After Harry's angioplasty, Bea had given him Scrunch to force him to walk. She told him it was a new "daily office." With his clerical markings, the Boston terrier was to be Harry's curate. Every day thereafter, Bea and Harry had walked Scrunch around the market place in Roanoke, up the hill to the hotel, and back home again. All of that walking did not prevent Bea's stroke, Harry reflected, and he hadn't lost enough weight. Only Scrunch seemed better for it. Scrunch had even gotten on the good side of Aunt Clarisse, who worried that the "poor little fellow" wasn't getting enough to eat and gave him bacon as a consolation.

Harry's pager vibrated. Five fifteen on a Sunday morning. Lester Stihl never let up. Sooner or later, Harry thought, Lester's data-driven policing was going to drive both of them into the hospital. Dog and man turned home.

The week was not starting well. He would probably go in today to prepare a press release about whatever had happened. Then, when Aunt Clarisse returned from church, she would put June and him back to work on the upcoming Holburn Garden Society meeting. Harry picked up the newspaper and unlocked the door. Upstairs, he looked at the number on the pager. It was not Lester. The speaker had a Spanish accent.

“Fireside Nursing Home.”

“This is Harry Pettiford.”

“Yes. Is Flora, Mr. Harry. Is Miss Bea. She having some trouble breathing. You can come soon?”

CHAPTER TEN

As far as Ronnie was concerned, “Stefany” had too many syllables. Ronnie had clipped her own name in half as easily as she broke the heat-bound spine of John Winston’s budget to make another of his damned revisions. “Stefany” wasn’t even spelled right. What use was a spelling check when “Stefany” and Winston invented their own spellings and expected others to go along with it? Winston was always making up words to explain what he did in that office –words that didn’t exist—like “flowthrough.” Ronnie wanted to flow through her job as the “Superintendent’s secretary” into the position of Executive Assistant, like Elaine Netti, her predecessor. That was the job she actually performed, but Winston had never gotten around to redefining her position—and now he was leaving, damn him. She wondered why she had stayed with him for ten years.

She plucked the pages from the broken binding. Whatever Winston and Stefany were doing in his office every morning was no concern of hers. Stefany was always drawing attention to herself, always lingering after a conversation had ended, primping and gushing about how much she wanted to learn from Ronnie. Stefany wasn’t worth thinking about. She wouldn’t be around long enough to leave anything to remember. She dared to move in, innocently asking questions and pretending to want to learn from Ronnie, and all the while she was preening and posing as if she were on a fashion plate. Whatever they were doing in his office—it wouldn’t last long. And one earring. Ronnie wondered why

you would wear only one earring. Winston's door opened and Stefany came out and sat down beside Ronnie's desk.

"Do you want to go to lunch first today, Hun?"

Ronnie stared without speaking. She wanted to say, "Don't call me 'Hun'," but restrained herself, not wanting to give Stefany the satisfaction of seeing her bothered. Stefany seemed not to notice and continued talking.

"I thought that might make up for your covering my calls." She tossed her head and gave Ronnie her suffering spaniel look.

"There were no calls for you," Ronnie shot back like a harpoon. "Why should you have to make up anything? You seem to be getting along just fine." Ronnie stood up, snapping her purse shut. "But yes, I will go out to lunch now. Thank you very much." She didn't look back.

Street and sidewalk were wet from the morning rain but the sky had cleared. It was a short walk from the Wando School Board Office to the clinic where Ronnie's son, Clayton, had been all morning. The cheerful, red-haired receptionist looked up from her paperback.

"Hello, Mrs. Johns. Back to pick up Clay?" It seemed to Ronnie that the girl had been a patient the last time she had been to the clinic. That's how it was here. The patients were the staff. Clay waited for her in his wheelchair in the lobby. He hadn't bothered to shave, and now it was beginning to show, but the clinic was like home. It was too much like home. His thin, bare ankles protruded over the collapsed heels of his Reeboks. His face was thin and his lips dry and flaking. One eye was bandaged.

"Didn't you bring your water?" asked Ronnie.

He held up an empty plastic bottle. She took it to the water fountain and tried to fill it, but the uncertain arc of water skipped around the mouth of the bottle. She handed it back and he struggled to raise it to his lips. He swayed backwards as he tried to sit up in the chair. The wheelchair rolled back, bumping into the chair rail on the wall. Ronnie noticed the chair rail for the first time. Why protect the walls in such a place? Why protect anything? It was just a place to wait while your son became a stranger and then not even that—some kind of object, a grotesque imitation of a human being, the shirt and trousers flapping on his skeletal limbs.

She knew that Clay could not recall much about being well. The social worker at the clinic had finally dropped her jaunty manner and didn't try to engage them in polite conversation as Ronnie wheeled him to the exit..

"Let me go back to Holburn, Ma," he said as she slowed to turn out of the waiting line at McDonald's. He coughed slightly and tried to pick up a soft drink.

Ronnie glanced at him. A thread of pink foam hung from his lower lip. She daubed it with her handkerchief. She didn't want to think about taking him to the Shelter in Holburn, where Hospice would take over his care. He took a deep breath and put his hands in his lap, saving energy for the trip from the car to his bed. She backed into their driveway so that he would be close to the front door, rolled his wheelchair out of the carport, and opened the door. He stood up in front of the chair. For a moment, looking at his back, she thought of the tall basketball player with medals on his jacket. Then he sank into the chair, his head tipping forward like a brown poppy head on a stalk. In only ten months, he had become a musty old man.

She returned to the School Board office without ever eating lunch. She'd left the bag and drinks on Clay's bedside table. Stefany and Winston were both gone, as usual. They'd set the calls to roll over to the main switchboard. She sat at Stefany's desk. Stefany had not been around long enough to accumulate mugs and calendars and pencils bearing the names of exotic conference sites—all the places Winston had visited just so he could bring the office staff his five dollar souvenirs. Only two months had been enough for Stefany to steal Ronnie's job, a job she needed more than ever. Ronnie opened the top drawer, which contained a pad of postits, a few pencils and a lipstick in a silver case, a case embossed with an "S" for "Suckup." Ronnie would give her something to suck up. She took the handkerchief from her bag and unfolded the bloody froth she had saved so carefully, just as she had done every day for two weeks.

And all the better if it "flowed through" to Winston.

* * *

Stefany Benton had waited too long for Ronnie to come around. She realized it now, as she walked back to the office after having lunch at her apartment over the Wando Pharmacy on Main Street. Maybe Clay had been right after all. He'd told her how angry Ronnie always was, especially after her last boyfriend had left them ten months ago. But Stefany could tell that Clay was glad that she had come to help. He worried so much about upsetting Ronnie that he had even planned his own funeral without telling her. Ronnie wouldn't talk about his disease. She would start shouting and Clay would have to give in. Stefany thought that she could help Clay by helping Ronnie, but Clay had insisted that she should not tell Ronnie about them. Maybe he had been right after all. Stefany climbed the steps to the School Board office. She had thought that Ronnie might accept her as a temp in the office, and then, as a colleague and friend, she could gradually reveal her relationship with Clay. But first Ronnie would have to recognize her existence.

Dr. Winston had been so good about letting her take the job and using his side door to leave the office so that she could visit with Clay while he was at the clinic. Dr. Winston was also trying to help Ronnie, even though he was retiring. He'd brought Stefany on to help with the transition to a new superintendent because Ronnie was so preoccupied with her own crisis. He wanted to raise her pay grade to Executive Assistant before he left and was trying to bring Stefany up to speed on the office routines so that he could give Ronnie the additional responsibility. He had kept Stefany's secret about her and Clay. They were all trying to help Ronnie, but Ronnie's rage about Clay kept everyone away. It was becoming more and more difficult to walk through the door and face her every day. And Clay wanted to return to Holburn. He couldn't go to college any more, but he wanted space between them and his mother. Space and peace.

As Stefany entered the building, she thought of how Ronnie would glare at her and make cutting remarks whenever she spoke. Mostly, they worked in silence, a tense, angry silence like the silence Stefany knew from growing up in the Benton household. She reluctantly opened the door and walked to her desk.

Ronnie was in the file room. Stefany could hear her pulling and slamming drawers as she looked through previous annual budget books. Stefany sat down. Clay wanted to go the shelter in Holburn. He wanted some peace before he had to go. He'd just told Stefany to stop coming to see him and to leave off trying to comfort his mother, but she knew that he didn't mean it. She knew that he wanted her to win over Ronnie so that he wouldn't have to worry about his mother being completely alone when he passed. Stefany could not do much for Clay, but she could do this. Dr. Chapin had even offered to help them.

Ronnie came out of the file room.

"Well, Stef-a-ny," she said, snapping each syllable. "Now that you're finally back, how about you doing the search for last year's budget projection? That way, I can finish my own little job." Ronnie turned back into the file room without giving Stefany a chance to answer. Stefany stalled for a moment to buy time and allow Ronnie to cool down. She took her lipstick from the drawer and touched up.

"Well, are you coming?" Ronnie asked, watching Stefany drop the lipstick back into the drawer and hurriedly stand up. Ronnie was smiling. Stefany was sure that she could make Ronnie like her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dan Connors hoped that he would not see Dr. Hank Randall any time soon. The pleasant getaway Randall had promised at the Foxglove Reserve had ended for Dan and Jacey before the opening banquet. After the grilling she had received in the pre-Conference session, Dr. Chapin asked Dan to drive her back to Holburn. By that time, Dan was happy to oblige. He spent half an hour hunting down the harried conference leader, Ed Lashley, whose red-stained shirt looked like it had been run over. Ed's afternoon had been spent replacing the fan belt on the caterer's truck so that she could return to Wando to pick up the desserts she had forgotten for the banquet. When Dan told him that Dr. Chapin would not give the keynote speech, Ed sat down on a tall kitchen stool and stared at the stainless steel sink. Dan quietly returned to the lobby and went back to the car, where Jacey and Dr. Chapin were waiting.

Jacey was disappointed. She had looked forward to roaming the grounds while Dan was presenting his session. Since seeing the armed Security Corps, however, Dan was uncomfortable about her walking around alone. On the drive back, while Carol was in the car, Dan and Jacey did not talk

about what had happened. Carol was pale and quiet. It was dark by the time they reached the campus. Carol hardly spoke before pulling her bags onto the sidewalk and walking a short way.

But then she returned to the car. “Thanks for what you did, Dan,” she said. “I am not so much upset as I am ashamed of my colleagues. Jacey, I enjoyed our talk.”

They bought take-out from a Thai restaurant on the way home. After dinner, they fell into their routines and didn’t talk about the conference until Monday evening, just after returning from depositing Dan’s paycheck from Holburn University at the Credit Union in Crystal City. Coming into the living room, both of them noticed how a finger of sunlight pointed at their pictures of Danny and Linda posing with their stuffed animals in front of cliff dwellings in Chaco Canyon. Jacey gave him a penny.

“OK, Jace,” he said. “I’m not sure how it’s all going to come out, but here it goes. First off, I’m going to stop teaching. We don’t need the money and I don’t need the aggravation. This weekend caps it. Such pettiness and animosity among supposedly highly educated people turns me off. That crowd was no better than a lynch mob. It was like they had a right to beat up on Carol. But for what reason? Apparently, a phony email. That was the only evidence that academic mob required to vent their aggression.”

Dan’s ears reddened. A vein bulged in his forehead. Jacey squeezed his arm to slow him down.

“It’s just professional envy,” he said. “I’m guessing that a large-scale project like the Foxglove Reserve doesn’t come along every day to the average botanist. Another thing— one of her colleagues from Holburn, a sullen looking guy named Barker, was there. He never once spoke up for her. No wonder she was shaken. She said she had seen some of the messages but didn’t realize the extent of damage they had caused. Such impulsive action is inexcusable from people who . . .”

Dan shook his head. Jacey pulled his arm, leading him to the swing on the side porch. They knew he wasn’t simply angry at a crowd of bearded botanists.

“People who don’t understand their duty?” Jacey massaged his temples. “Is that what you want to say, Dan? It’s about everything that’s happened—your retiring, seeing that plane hit the Pentagon. And it’s about Danny. Losing Danny.” Her hands dropped to her lap.

“We need some coffee,” she said, leaving him in the swing.

“That plane, yes—” Dan closed his eyes. Since retiring in Northern Virginia, they had taken morning walks around the area—sometimes in Holburn, sometimes Alexandria or—like that morning—on Ridge Road in Arlington. They had parked on Prospect Hill and paused to look out on the city before beginning their walk down to the Army-Navy country Club and back. Below them was Shirley Highway, and across the highway, the cream-colored Wherry housing on Fort Myer. Washington

Cathedral, purple on the northern horizon, the Monument and Capitol to the East, and, in the foreground, between Route 27 and the highway, the Pentagon, like a massive bronze badge. Some of its new green blast-proof windows reflected the headlights of the traffic streaming around it. As they turned to walk down the hill, a roaring drone boomed above them. A shadow passed overhead. Dan pulled Jacey to the ground just as the airliner crossed Route 27, snapping off the white poles of a sign over the highway and ramming the west face of the Pentagon with a blow that knocked the back of his skull. Cars in the helipad lit up like torches and then a greasy smoke obscured everything.

After that, they had stopped taking morning walks.

Weeks later, Dan had a chance to look at the ruined section of the Army library, where he had previously been spending several hours a week since retirement on his occasional visits to the Pentagon concourse. The drenched remnants of the collection had been transferred to Crystal City. The pungent stink of char still hung in the air. So much for sending his memo on mission creep to his former commander. He had been studying about a contractor who had offered him a job. Many of his retired colleagues had moved into such jobs after years of doing quality assurance on weapons components, but Dan hadn't decided what he thought about making his inside knowledge available to such an employer. That, after all, was why he had been offered a job. After witnessing the bombing, he almost signed up. Then he read about Muslims being detained and questioned, as in the brief witch-hunt after the Murrah Building bombing. That was another time an unknown Arab was supposedly loose in the countryside. Dan had to admit that some of the rage he felt was against himself for even thinking of such other issues.

His father had once come back from TDY with a poster for him, a picture of General MacArthur and the text of his speech, "*Duty, Honor, Country.*" It hung on various bedroom walls from sixth grade through high school. His father would not have been bothered about mistaken searches. But Danny would.

Danny had written to them from Kuwait about the stench of the burning oil fields. "The dictator knows that we care more about the oil—and maybe even the fish—than we do about the people or the country." It was his last letter. He echoed everything Dan had told him when they argued about the war.

"Sometimes you have to defend a bad idea. Maybe some day you'll get the rank to change the ideas," Dan had said. "But until then, you do your duty."

In their last phone conversation, Danny said, "Dad, when this tour ends, I'm out."

Jacey had tried to patch things up, but the issue was left unsettled. Now it would always be unsettled.

Danny had signed up for the Army in his junior year. Classes at Holburn had not gone well. The Army was something he could do, he said. When Dan frowned, Danny shot back, “Look, I’m finally doing what you wanted. OK?”

Jacey had sat between them then, just as she sat beside him now.

“Take some coffee, Dan,” she said.

“I was thinking about Danny,” he said. “Remember how he said that he was finally doing what I wanted? I didn’t mean that. I just didn’t want him hanging out with that crowd until four in the morning. Teenagers mistake taboos for denying reality. Doing some crazy thing seems more authentic to them than . . . than—“

“Dan, let’s not—”

“Jace, it’s like they deliberately misunderstand what we’re saying. He said his wandering off without telling us was no different than me going off for weeks at a time. But I was on TDY. He knew that.”

“Sure he did, Dan. You know that’s not the point.” Jacey set the tray on his lap. She’d put a piece of cheesecake beside the coffee.

“Yeah. Not the point. The point was me putting my fist through the door and telling him to go away.”

“We can’t change it. You did what you could, when you worked with the widows,” she said. “You tried to help. You tried to call him. You—”

“No. Too late; too little. The very next week Danny enlisted. We can’t change anything now. That mob around the conference table brought it all back. Who can retire from duty? From being a parent? Do we retire from thinking? If a pack of bullies blows up a building—blows all authority to hell—what do we do? Flail about, throw our fists into anything or anyone handy because we’re afraid? What does that solve?”

“I’ll tell you what bothers me the most—that mercenary army in Fairall called a ‘Security Corps’. Mission creep in the Mideast is the least of our problems. What were they doing with landmines, for God’s sake? Next, I guess they’ll declare war on anyone handy. Some of those mines were left over from Yugoslavia and Nam. That’s what progress brings us. War ends but weapons and soldiers are left over.

“Some of us retire our duty—forget all those proud oaths and promises— and go to work for profiteers. Maybe we make *better* weapons—mines, undetectable and remotely detonated. And these

nightmares destroy more civilians or even our own troops, like Danny. And the obsolete mines? They go to crazy mercenaries in poor countries. And apparently, they even go to places like Foxglove Reserve and Fairall. No way do I go along with this or work for anyone that promotes it.”

Jacey spoke slowly, her Tennessee accent drawing out the vowels. “One time a Melungeon man from over to Hancock County came up by our home place in Murphy. I never knew what a Melungeon was before. A glazier, he’d come up to put in some new windows for my uncle, who lived next door.” Jacey pronounced it “dowah.”

Dan remembered hearing her accent for the first time, standing behind a counter in Personnel at Wright-Patterson. As she talked, his breathing calmed and deepened. His pulse slowed. She was drawing off the venom.

“My aunt didn’t let him in the house till Uncle Rick came home for lunch to give himself an insulin shot. He was angry that my aunt hadn’t let the man in, because it meant he’d been paying him for sitting on a wagon under the pecan tree. I heard him tell her, ‘He’s no nigra. He’s Melungeon. The worst he’d do is scalp you.’”

Dan smiled.

“After that,” she said. “I grew up thinking Melungeons, whatever they were, would scalp you.”

They laughed and moved closer together. It was too cold to stay much longer on the side porch, but neither wanted to go inside. They slowly pushed together, gently raising their feet and swinging back and forth.

Rasping and chattering, a flock of robins settled in the trees around the house.

Jacey studied Dan’s face. “You better now?”

“You know I am,” he said.

“There’s something else.” She paused, checking his expression.

“Go on, Jace. I’m OK.”

“The conference center in Fairall is owned by my church—where I grew up, in Murphy.”

“What?” He stopped the swing.

“I saw a sign as we were leaving. It said that it was the official Headquarters of the Northern Regional Council of Temple Independent.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Clarisse Pettiford's supper for the Holburn Garden Club was underway with caterers Harry Pettiford and June Brightman in the kitchen and Scrunch closed away in Harry's room upstairs. The buffet line of elderly ladies weaved around the dining room table, which was shared uneasily by roast beef and sausage rolls, bromeliads and bird-of-paradise flowers, molded jellies of tomato aspic, Gorgonzola dip, stuffed peppers, kiwi salad and a centerpiece of Frosty White gladiolus. Wearing a black suit, white silk blouse and pearl choker, Clarisse was unmistakably in charge and kept her catering crew busy refilling drinks and restocking the buffet. The rivalry between Millie Coleman and Clysta Follette had ended with Clysta's recent death, but Clarisse had nonetheless expected Millie to bring her own centerpiece, as usual, to show up her hostess. Clarisse's huge arrangement of glads and bromeliads dwarfed Millie's mums, but Millie gained ground by distributing flyers she had made about the statue of Colonel Holburn that her husband, Arne, wanted to build in front of the town library. Clarisse cut short the discussion about the flyers by introducing Dr. Chapin to the group.

Harry pushed the kitchen door slightly open and peeked out through the crack.

“It looks like Aunt Clarisse has finally gone into the living room,” he said.

Despite the air conditioning and the exhaust fan over the steaming stove, both he and June were red-faced and sweaty in the tiny kitchen. June pushed her hair from her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Can we open the door yet?”

“Still a few people in line,” he said, letting the door swing shut.

June wiped the back of her neck with a dish towel.

“June, I owe you one for this.”

“Big time!” she smiled.

The kitchen door hit Harry in the back of the head as his tiny, bird-like aunt tried to push into the room. Clarisse was wide-eyed. Harry grabbed a sponge. June handed him the dishpan before Clarisse could catch her breath, shaking her head.

“Nothing’s spilled. At least, not yet! Everything is happening! Now it’s a man at the door. I told him to go to the back.”

They all looked at the kitchen porch, where a shadow had appeared in the doorway.

“He was looking in the window,” said Clarisse, “just when our guest was about to speak! Harry, please get rid of him. I can’t understand what he’s saying.”

She disappeared behind the swinging door and Harry opened the door to the porch, leaving the screen latched. The man had an impudent expression and a bad haircut. Harry wondered if he cut his own hair. His trouser cuffs were two inches above his shoe-tops—he wore no socks—and his narrow lapels and narrow knit tie reminded Harry of a 1950’s FBI costume. Harry stepped onto the porch.

“Can I help you?”

“This the dinner, right?” he asked, waving a scrap of newspaper. “Yes, uh . . .”

“Holburn Garden Club? Dr. Chapin speaker?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, I came,” he said firmly. “Always check the locals,” he said, again waving the scrap of newspaper. Harry took it from him: *Local Club Announcements*.

“I see,” said Harry slowly, turning to whisper to June, who was standing behind the screen door.

Turning back to the man, he said, “Well, see, that’s for the ladies in there. They’re making up the plates for us men back here.”

Harry wondered whether he had read the man properly.

The belligerent stance and impudent expression faded a bit and he accepted a seat on the porch swing. June brought out a tray with two plates of food and two iced teas. When he saw the food, the man set to it without further discussion. Harry noticed that he had leaned his bicycle against the back gate. In his fifties, physically fit and clean, the man was wild-eyed and furtive, tucking some of the bread into his pockets and asking for seconds. When he saw that Harry was not eating much, he stared at the plate until Harry handed it over. Harry was amazed that one man could eat so much so quickly.

Suddenly he stood up and handed back his tray.

“Have to go. Got to go. Now!” he said, looking around him furtively and giving the impression of a wild animal whose feeding had been interrupted by the scent of a predator. He rolled his bicycle through the gate and disappeared around the corner of the house. June came out.

“Why didn’t you just tell him to go away?” she said.

“Well, he seemed to believe that our putting an announcement in the paper gave him a claim on the food, and I didn’t want to argue with him about it. Besides, he took care of our leftovers.”

In the living room, Dr. Carol Chapin was balancing a tray on her knees while talking with Sarah Benton and Jacey Connors, new to the Holburn Garden Club. When she sat down, Jacey had the impression that she had interrupted a serious discussion between the other two women, even though Carol looked up in a jovial and inviting way.

“So your husband is in the military?” Carol asked.

“Yes, he was stationed at Bolling before he retired,” Jacey drawled, pronouncing the word “staheeshunt”. “We came here two years ago from Albuquerque.”

“Quite a difference between the Southwest and the D.C. area,” said Sarah tentatively, as if afraid that she would offend.

“Oh yes, but over the years we’ve done several tours in both areas.”

“I lived in Albuquerque many years ago,” said Carol slowly. “My first husband was a school administrator. I worked downtown at the University of New Mexico. I left there in 1969 and never returned. Not to the town and not to that man.” She stared briefly at Sarah, who looked down uncomfortably.

“We were there in 1969,” said Jacey, noticing the undercurrent to Carol’s statement and Sarah’s glance at Carol. “That was when the Apollo landed on the moon, but I was sick and missed the whole thing.”

“I missed it too,” said Carol. “The only thing I could think about was finishing the semester so I could put as many miles as possible between me and my ex.”

“Why did you come to D.C.?” Sarah asked.

“Our family was originally from Virginia, and at that time, my brother and mother were living together in Vienna. Holburn was midway. A position came up at the university. A year or so later, I met Gene Chapin. Everything that had happened seemed like a preparation for us to meet and live in Holburn for the next thirty years.”

“We call that Providence,” Jacey said.

Carol smiled and, glancing at her watch, hurriedly finished off the last of her stuffed bell pepper, and stood up to begin her talk on “Making Glads Glorious.”

Sarah and Jacey handed out bulbs and pencils, as if the elderly ladies were college students in the lab. Carol showed them how to husk the buds by digging them out of the sides of each bulb with the pencil.

“This puts all the strength into the central spike,” Carol said. “By husking the side buds before planting, spacing the bulbs properly, and knowing how to culture the tiny cormels into new bulbs for planting in the next season, you’ll get a much better display.”

Carol noticed that Millie Coleman had laid her bulb and pencil on the table. Millie seemed to be frowning at the bromeliad on the table across the room. Carol almost called on Millie, as if she were a student who wasn’t listening. But this wasn’t a group of undergraduates. She’d done what she could to prepare this activity. With people, as with plants, preparation was everything, but sometimes, after even the best preparation, one had to discard the results.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

June looked forward to talking with Dr. Chapin after listening for another two hours to Reverend Benton's tendentious commentary. Her first interview with him had been cut short. Benton had left her in the office while he went off to find a copy of his promotional DVD. When the phone rang, she took the call from a Mr. Pinder, who was calling about fundraising. Benton returned, took the call, and told her to come back later. She was so glad to be done with her final interview that she didn't notice the man standing by her car. He wore a knit tie, a tight sport jacket, and trousers too short to cover his white socks. He mumbled something about knowing her, but she studied the pavement and kept walking.

As she turned onto Vern Highway, she looked back at the church and saw Dr. Benton running from the entrance, with its wavy steeple, toward the vagrant, who was quickly cycling toward the college gates. June pulled off her scarf and rolled down the windows to get some fresh air. She circled back to the other side of the campus, parking near the guard house at the entrance. No campus police were in the guard house or anywhere else, as far as she could see. She hoped that the cyclist had business elsewhere.

The Cafritz Science Building was a four-story brownstone, recently stripped of its matted layers of ivy and grape vines, leaving a mottled surface embedded with brown stems. A workman on a scaffold was sandblasting at the corner of the building. Dr. Chapin's office was in a corner of the second floor,

squeezed between bulletin boards that advertised used textbooks and trips to biological stations in Costa Rica and the Bahamas.

From her window, Carol Chapin watched June park and climb the steps. She went to the doorway when she heard the familiar bang of the stairwell door.

“I’m over here, June,” Carol said, surprising her visitor from behind. “No sense circling to the other end of the hall to get back here!”

“I was trying to follow the numbers on the signs in the hall,” said June.

“You would have gone in a circle. Everyone does. It isn’t obvious that the first and last room numbers converge at this end. Don’t ask why!” Carol laughed heartily and led June into her tiny, cluttered office. Her desk and chairs were stacked high with bundles of paper strapped between wooden frames. “Herbarium flats,” Carol said as she emptied a chair for June. “Sorting always runs behind collecting. Add in my students’ plant specimens, and this is the mess you get.”

As June sat down, Carol was surprised to see the face poking from June’s tote bag.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Oh, this is a DVD that was given to me by a minister that I interviewed this morning.”

“That’s not his picture is it?” Carol sat forward in her chair.

“No, he said this was his former professor, who had helped him with the idea for the DVD.” June pulled the DVD from her purse, turning it to deflect the glare from the overhead light. “His name is—”

“Oh, I know that,” Carol said. “It’s Leroy J. Runcible. I ought to know him. I was married to him!”

“I’m sorry,” June said.

“Don’t be sorry, honey.” Carol looked out her office window for a moment and then turned back to face June. “You know what a *Euonymus* is?”

“A yew what?”

Carol laughed. “It’s a flashy little bush. The popular variety has leaves with bright yellow margins. I had one in a rose bed once. It muscled underneath the roses and soon bullied the whole bed. I planned to transplant it, but after yanking at its roots for a whole afternoon, I looked at those yellow leaves and threw it away. What a relief! Why be sorry for something that prides itself on yellow leaves and doesn’t even have a decent flower?”

Dr. Benjamin Barker had also watched June get out of her car and enter the Cafritz building. He recognized her from the picture over her column in *The Holburn Transcript*. Barker's office was next to Carol's. Barker reflected that it didn't take much imagination to see what Chapin was doing. For months, she had been talking to community groups and public hearings. She had organized a seminar on environmental fragmentation. Now she was getting her name into the newspapers—all part of her campaign to become science department chair. At the end of spring term, Dr. Drewyer would finally retire. He'd only taught a couple of astronomy courses for the last five semesters. When he was gone, Chapin intended to be noticed. But no one in the department would choose her now.

Barker stepped out of his office to pin his latest article on the bulletin board between his room and Chapin's. It was another piece on plant alkaloids in *Berberis*, *Circuta* and *Conium*, this time in a wildlife magazine. It was an easy way to fill in the publishing quota for the semester. Hikers and hunters would want to know about the healing properties of barberry, or that a kind of poison hemlock grew in Southwest Virginia. While he waited for word on his grant proposal, he refreshed articles written ten or twenty years earlier. Once his grant came in, the department would have no difficulty choosing between him and Chapin. She couldn't rely on student evaluations this time. Other professors had tried to advance by pandering to students. She had botched the whole grant for the Reserve. The committee would not be fooled.

Barker moved closer to Chapin's office. Chapin and the reporter had their backs to the door. Chapin's office was always cluttered and disorganized. When Barker had mentioned it, she even laughed. Chapin had a tippler's red cheek, the product of two many evenings that began with Martinis and ended with brandy. Barker didn't drink. She came late to meetings—particularly, Barker noticed, after her husband died—laughed, talked about her garden, and then left early. Barker was left to do the work. Even so, Dr. Drewyer expected him to submit his description for a new course in forensic botany to Chapin for her approval.

He knocked on the open door and walked into her office.

“Dr. Chapin, here's the course description we talked about at the department meeting. I'll be doing some field work for the next few days and wanted to give it to you before I left.” Barker stared at June, who had turned off a tape recorder when he came in.

“This is June Brightman from *The Holburn Transcript*,” Carol said. “June, this is Dr. Barker.”

Carol took the document from Barker, who nodded at June and looked around the office. It was twice the size of the cupboard he'd been given. He frowned at the clutter and left.

June glanced over her shoulder. “He’s a sourpuss.”

Carol chuckled. The corners of her mouth turned down. She reached for a tissue.

“I’m sorry. Thinking of Jerry and Barker reminds me of last weekend. What a disaster! I saw Jerry at a conference outside Fairall last week.” Pointing at the DVD with her chin, she said, “He always wears the same, forced, smooth, bland expression. He calls it ‘earnest.’ I call it reptilian.”

She pushed aside a stack of student lab books so that she could stand by the window. She studied June, an eyebrow cocked and her brow drawn up in a little U-shaped knot between her eyes.

June smiled and pointed at the tape recorder. “We’re off the record.”

“I want to tell you something,” said Carol. “I don’t know whether Jerry’s doing it, but it’s the sort of thing he would do. Someone has been sending email messages in my name—horrible messages that could ruin everything that Gene and I had hoped to do with the property we donated to the Foxglove Reserve outside Fairall. The emails claim that I have tried to sell some of the rare plants found in the Reserve to pharmaceutical companies and wealthy collectors. They make it seem that I am harvesting the Reserve. My colleagues received these emails and created an uproar at the conference. I had to leave. Even after all these years, Jerry would do something like this to get back at him for not putting up with him. He was always giving me a reason that things would get better. He wasn’t like his father—or my father—he would say. Jerry was right. He didn’t need liquor to make him mean—and he knew how to hit without leaving marks. What I learned growing up was to protect myself, and not to deny facts. What set him off was being ‘crossed.’ People were always ‘crossing’ him—like his doctoral committee. Later on, some of his followers crossed him.”

“His followers?” June said. Sitting back in her chair to put Carol at ease, she noticed that the recorder was still running. She hadn’t turned off the voice actuation.

“Oh, he always had followers. I was even one for a while,” Carol said. “He talks about how everyone can change, and how reforming education is the center of a new religious movement. What doesn’t change, however, is Jerry. He is as venal as ever. And he needs followers to advance his agenda. When I found out that he also needed them to satisfy his sexual appetite, I left him. He pretended to plead with me not to go, but he really didn’t care, and even left me the apartment in Albuquerque so he could move in with one of his buds. I had crossed him, so I wasn’t worth any trouble. I thought that’s how we had left it—until now.”

Carol pointed to the DVD in June’s bag. “Could I see it?”

June handed it to her.

“Dr. Leroy Runcible and the Journey of Jubilation,” She read,

“A special message to the Northern Regional Council of Temple Independents about the Ingathering. Dr. Runcible describes the Guided Ministry Program he has installed in the Temple’s schools in Fairall, Virginia. This is the first in a series of presentations made at the conference grounds on Foxglove Reserve, a vast, forested area that will buffer our Temple people from outsiders. All members are invited to visit our new site, be renewed by the beautiful surroundings, be inspired by the message, and join our new community.”

Carol shook her head and handed the disk back. “It gets worse and worse,” she said. “Maybe he sees me as a threat.”

June frowned. “Did you know that the Reserve was owned by the Temple people?”

“No. I understood it to be a county-owned property, but maybe there’s now no difference between Fairall and the Temple people.”

Carol’s eyes shone with tears. June offered another tissue.

Shaking her head, Carol sat down, took a deep breath, and shook her head again.

“No, he’s not going to take me back to how I used to be. His kind of person no longer attracts or has any power over me.” She closed her eyes and dropped her voice as she said this. Rolling her shoulders, she took a last deep breath and slowly exhaled.

“Honey,” Carol said. “When you have something caught in your throat, you have to get it out. It’s the same when something is caught in your mind—in your heart. Otherwise, when you’ve once been hurt, you think of yourself in terms of your wounds instead of your possibilities. I stopped repeating my pattern of bad choices when I came here and met Gene Chapin.”

June nodded. “I know something about repeating patterns of bad choices. My ex could count on me to believe him. I disregarded his gambling losses and calls from creditors until I discovered he had maxed out my credit cards. You can convince yourself of some horrendous lies if you think that the alternative is unbearably painful.”

Carol picked up the DVD and pointed at Runcible’s picture.

“And real relief comes from taking action,” she said.

“Maybe you could talk to Harry Pettiford.” June pulled a page from her notebook. “Here’s his phone number. It seems to me that the police could tell you what to do about this kind of slander. And maybe they could find out who’s doing it.”

“Thanks, June. Sarah Benton told me that Harry visited them last week. She’s another one who’s convinced herself to ignore the obvious, but I think she does it for the sake of her daughter, Stefany. But

Stefany's a smart girl—she'll make a terrific field biologist. There aren't so many of us now that molecular biology gets all the attention. Stefany could certainly handle a separation."

"Harry told me something about the Bentons which— " June's remark was interrupted by shouts and talking coming from the hall.

Carol's eyebrows rose. "I have students to advise. Someone should advise me." Her laughter filled the office. "I hope you got enough for your article."

"More than enough," June said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As soon as June had gone, Carol left a message for Harry Pettiford and then called Pinder to tell him she was on her way to the Shelter.

“Regional Shelter—”

“Gabriel?” She said.

Pinder kept talking. “. . . three, for our social worker; four for information about our Plant and Garden fundraiser; five for more on our Share and Save campaign for your church or civic organization—”

“Answering machines!” She turned off the phone, closed the office, and left campus. She was already late to meet Sarah Benton at the Regional Community Shelter. The Shelter was nearby—a three-story, dark brick building on a one-way street off Vern Highway, which separated Holburn from Arlington to the North.

Loops of pink and green poles, bears, rabbits, and ladders were visible above a stockade that fenced in the playground behind the Shelter. The upper floor of the building, added only after six years of personal work and funding by Carol and Gene, contained small private rooms for long-term group home residents and Hospice patients. Carol was proud that it was being used, but couldn’t understand

why it still wasn't finished. Even after they had given the Shelter the money for the project, Carol and Gene had waded through years of conferences with staff, management, governing board, and city agencies. After countless arguments, litigious reviews, and building exceptions, the upper floor had been dedicated only a year before Gene died. He had never complained. He knew what the building meant to her.

Sarah Benton was waiting behind the glass security doors in the outer lobby, a double-locked area where visitors and residents were screened before entry. Carol stared into the monitor over the entrance. On the other side, Sarah started to open the door for her, but Carol shook her head. Today they should stay on the management's good side. When the lock was finally released, a man wearing dreadlocks and army fatigues and two flannel shirts pushed Carol away from the door and pulled his grocery cart over the threshold.

Sarah shouted.

A guard entered the lobby through a side door.

The vagrant pushed the guard, who drew a club and motioned for him to leave. As the guard pushed him out, the man mumbled and jerked his head from side to side, as if noticing something from the corner of his eye—something that moved too quickly for him to see clearly.

Carol slipped inside. Sarah took her arm.

"Let's get inside. Oz is not having a good day," Sarah said.

"No, he nearly knocked me down. He's always been calm in the past."

Carol glanced at the vagrant as he limped away behind his cart.

"They're already here, Carol. We don't need to see Mr. Pinder. He already let Clay check in, thanks to you."

"That's what the Shelter is for. No one should be without a place to go." Carol crossed the day room to the elevator. Seated around the room, several residents suspiciously watched the well-dressed white women. Even though both were long-time volunteers, they were unknown to the transient residents and staff. This was not a place where anyone stayed. It provided temporary shelter for families, caseworkers for domestic disputes, food for the homeless, and a Hospice wing for a few residents like Clayton Johns, whom Sarah and Stefany had just driven from Fairall. The Hospice wing occupied half of the third floor, the other half being reserved for a few long-term residents. The manager, Gabriel Pinder, had balked at blocking out any space for long-term residents, but Carol and Gene insisted—and they were the only donors.

The third floor was newly carpeted and painted—in better condition than the rest of the building. Some of the other benefactors of the Shelter privately called it the “free hotel,” but Carol did not see why a shelter should be furnished with remnants and leftovers.

Clayton was in a small, single room near the elevator. He was asleep, fully clothed, on the small bed by a window overlooking Vern Highway. Stefany was filling a glass of water at the bathroom sink. She wore a loose-fitting dress, but it didn’t hide her pregnancy.

“Oh, Dr. Chapin, thank you so much.” Stefany hugged Carol and then took her mother’s arm. “It makes such a difference. I gave notice yesterday. Dr. Winston was so good about everything.”

“What about Mrs. Johns?” Sarah asked.

Carol noticed for the first time how haggard and pale Sarah looked. And Carol knew why. She noticed that Sarah kept on her long-sleeved sweater, even in the hot, tiny room.

“Ronnie Johns wouldn’t let him go, and now he’s too weak to do anything on his own,” Stefany said. “Hospice doesn’t give him very long now. I wanted to become Ronnie’s friend so that I wouldn’t have to do this on my own—like everything else—but I am his wife now, so I had the right to move him. He’s been telling Ronnie for months that he wanted this. He even planned his own funeral—” Stefany sank into a chair.

Carol poured her a glass of water.

“It will work out, Stefany. His mom will see how good this is for him. And she’ll feel differently about you when she knows everything,” Carol said, hugging Stefany, and then standing up to hug Sarah. “And don’t either of you worry about paying. Mr. Pinder knows that I’m handling it. And you—”

Carol gently shook Sarah’s shoulder and motioned toward the hall. Standing in the doorway, Carol handed Sarah a check.

“I can’t take this, Carol.” Sarah pushed her hands into the stretched pockets of her sweater.

“He’s watching your money, isn’t he?” Carol spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, as if describing the activities of a gall-wasp. “He knows you’re keeping a secret, and he’s merciless to discover it. When you go out, he follows you.”

Sarah bit her lip.

Carol whispered, “You are always afraid. You can never do enough to please him. You know that you should leave him before he finds out about Stefany’s marriage. And Sarah, now I think I know some things about him that even you don’t know. You met him in Rolla, Missouri. Right?”

Sarah’s eyes widened.

“Yes, how did you know?”

“That’s where my ex went to teach after we split up. Let’s just say that I think my Leroy may have taught your Bernard everything he knows.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Once Big Dave had passed out on the recliner, the girl and her younger brother walked to the drug store for their mother's prescriptions. The smell of fresh rain on the sidewalk was a relief from the mixed odors of smoke, gin, and Lysol at home. Davey picked up a twig to rattle the fence.

"Don't do that," Sister said. "You know what could happen."

He dropped the stick, glancing behind them.

But that night it didn't matter. Big Dave had only pretended to sleep.

Their shortcut went through an alley behind Cho Wa Restaurant and Nina's Massage. Sister led. Sometimes men would be sleeping by the dumpsters, but on this night, they were alone in the alley. The blinking red mortar and pestle over the drug store was only twenty feet away. As she passed the last dumpster, Sister heard Davey cry out.

“No, Daddy. I didn’t mean it!”

A familiar ogre. The word that came to her then had stayed with her forever. The creature held Davey like a sack of flour. Davey knew better than to scream or move. A fat man washing dishes stared at them from the kitchen window. Their ogre found it all very amusing. He fed on terror—like any ogre. After dunking Davey headfirst into a slop bucket, he snarled and spoke the familiar magic words, the ogre words—

“Just you go out without you tell me!”

Carol parked between the raised beds of mums on both sides of her garage. Leaving the windows down, she arched back in the seat and closed her eyes.

She had made herself look.

”Always look into their eyes,” she said. “Ogres can’t stand it when you look into their eyes.”

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Harry sat beside Bea in her room at the fireside Nursing Home. Her eyes were closed, perhaps because of the morphine drip that Dr. Phillips had ordered that morning. She wore the new gown with pink roses that he had noticed in a shop window on Washington Street. Her lips were dry. He rubbed them with flakes of ice.

Her jaw clenched. He had long ago stopped seeking reasons for all of her small, jerking movements. Random output.

He stared at the trees along Pawmack Run, outside her window. A green haze seemed to float around them—spring buds. Spring was coming even as the whole region was in the worst drought in seven years. Bea would have enjoyed that green haze—the promise of it.

Her food tube had been removed. For months, Dr. Phillips had been after Harry to have it removed. Now her liver was failing, giving her skin a yellow cast. Her heart was arrhythmic. Dr. Phillips had his way now. Harry had wearily signed another Do Not Resuscitate order while Louise Watkins from Hospice looked on. Fireside's Circle of Care representative, Louise was middle-aged with long, loose gray-brown hair, and always dressed in bright blues and greens, concha belt, dangling turquoise earrings and a huge turquoise squash necklace as if she were going to a Hopi corn dance.

Flora, the nursing aide, appeared in the doorway with a cup of ice.

“You want more ice, Mr. Pettiford?”

“Thanks.” Harry handed her a newspaper. “Here—maybe somebody wants to read this.”

“OK, Mr. Pettiford? Ms. Watkins said to tell you she’s on her way.”

The only sounds were the nursing aides in the hall and Bea’s breathing. Harry put his hand in Bea’s and closed his eyes. He listened to them breathing together and tried to match his breaths to hers. Her breaths were shallow and irregular. More random output.

He stood up.

He didn’t want to return to work. In fact, he was ready to quit. He was certainly no policeman. Nina would soon graduate. And Bea would soon no longer need him. A wave of fatigue rolled over him, ending somewhere behind his eyes—hollowing out places he had never felt and compressing the backs of his eyes. Sour reflux lapped over his tongue and vocal cords, making him cough. He sat down again.

Nina was in some damned village in Guatemala. She hadn’t returned his calls.

He decided to go home. He could take a nap and return after dinner. Louise Watkins would be gone when he returned. He could not be courteous about her attempts to apply to him whatever she had recently learned about the grieving process. He slipped out of the room. Hearing Louise’s voice at the nursing station, he exited down the stairwell to the parking level.

Outside, it was cool, dry and clear—the kind of blue sky that Bea would have made him sit down to see. “We spend too much time looking down,” she would say. In Roanoke, they had often had lunch on a bench on the hill outside the hotel. They watched the clouds come over the mountains, sometimes dropping into the valley like children putting their legs over a stone wall.

Once in the car, Harry remembered that Scrunch hadn’t been out all day.

* * *

He parked on the street. Mr. Malik, his next door neighbor, was crouching over the curb with a trowel. Malik was a retiree who spent his days on yard projects and spying. A short-wave antenna towered over his back yard. While he watched the neighbors from his bay window, he tracked police incidents, storm fronts, air traffic, and marine reports on his radios. Harry called his house the neighborhood listening station. Malik stood up as Harry left the car.

“Sorry to hear about your wife, there, Mr. Pettiford.”

Harry nodded. He would not have been surprised if Malik had known Bea’s room number and doctor.

“Lost my wife now five years ago. But they come back.” Malik smoothed the patch of mortar on the curb.

“What?”

“They come back from where they go. Once saw Edie in a squirrel.” Malik didn’t wait for Harry to reply. “I know most don’t believe it unless they’re in the Temple—the TIBF.”

“The what?” Harry said.

“The Temple of Faith Independent Bible Fellowship. Edie and I were members for forty years. We know that the dead come back sometimes in other forms. Angels, you know. Sometimes you can hear them talking with each other late nights in the short wave static. Mostly just numbers from the spy people that time of day. But other times you can make out a word or two. Anyway, when I saw the squirrel again this week, I knew it was Edie. And I knew it was finally time to go.

Harry stared at Malik’s green, flannel hat with ear-flaps tied at the top. To get the man off the topic of angelic squirrels, he pointed at the curb.

“Glad you fixed that.”

Malik squinted, took a deep breath, and exhaled loudly. “Yeah, well. I need to fix things up before selling the place.”

“You’re leaving?” Harry said.

“Yeah, like I said. It’s the time of the gathering.”

“The gathering? You’re having a family reunion.”

“No it’s TIBF., the family of God.”

“Dr. Benton’s church?” Harry was suddenly too tired to carry on. He leaned against the car.

“No, the Northern Regional Branch in Fairall. Edie and I always traveled back there on Sundays.” Malik picked up his can of mortar and tapped down the metal lid.

“You were from Fairall?”

“Oh, yeah.” Malik pursed his lips and looked down the street. “This area’s changed a lot since we came here.” He pulled out a handkerchief, blew his nose, examined the result, and stuck it back into his pocket. From the same pocket, he produced a wrinkled religious tract. “Here you go, then,” he said. “For your time of need, you know.” He handed it to Harry. “Well, I’ve got to go in for the weather round-up. This drought is a sign, you know.”

Harry’s brow rose.

“Yeah,” Malik continued. “For ‘the people who live in the coastlands.’ You read that.”

He pointed to the tract in Harry’s hand. “It’s all there.”

Harry tried not to touch more than the corner of Malik's tract as he walked up the steps to the house. He expected that Scrunch would be desperately dancing on his hind feet by this time, but when he opened the door, Scrunch was sitting at the foot of the stairs, his eyes on the tile floor.

Then Harry saw the puddle.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

To please his sister, Elrod Cooke had taken a job weekends and three weekdays as custodian at the Regional Community Center and Shelter. Sally didn't want to stay with Mama any more than he did, but she would not let him stay with her without bringing anything in. That was the shitty deal, he mumbled to himself. She now called herself "Ms. Jenkins" and had a baby of her own. Her jobs in housekeeping at the hotel and catering in the evenings did not bring in enough. Elrod had promised to help, but he did not intend to make a profession of scraping chewing gum and buffing floors. He did know that he'd had enough of Wando High School and enough of wondering who Mama would bring home next.

For Saturday morning, he was to pull trash from the rooms on the third floor of the Shelter. His boss, Pinder-ass, was a pharmacist who spent most of the time in his drug store, leaving the Shelter to the custodians, guards, caseworkers, and volunteers, as far as Elrod could tell. Elrod had taken the job because the Shelter was across the street from Sally's apartment. The third floor was where the long term residents stayed—several families, hospice patients, and a few singles, like Clickety-Clack, a middle-aged man who wore tight sports coats, knit ties, and pants too short to cover his socks. His hair looked chewed rather than cut. Elrod guess that was because Clickety-Clack could not stay still in the barber chair. When he wasn't jerking his head from side to side or suddenly sticking out an arm or leg, he was snapping his fingers and mumbling. The only time he seemed at ease was riding his bicycle.

Elrod was half the size of Clickety-Clack, and therefore tried to avoid his room unless the man was gone. Today he had managed to pull out some of the wrappers and Styrofoam boxes that Clickety-Clack had hoarded since the last cleaning. Pinder-ass was always telling Elrod to clear out the weekly hoard and reminding him that the fire marshal could walk through the building at any time.

Elrod was dragging several bags to the service elevator when a tall blonde in a brown pants suit shouted to him from the doorway of one of the hospice rooms.

"You work here? Can you please help us?"

Elrod grabbed a mop from the utility closet. "Help Me" always seemed to mean cleaning up after a drunk had emptied his guts all over the room. When he got to the room, the woman was on her knees beside a man who had fallen out of bed. As she pulled on his arm, he protested and pushed her away.

"Go on, now, Mom. Leave me alone. I can get up. I don't need this," he said.

"Clay, come on. You can't stay here. We're going home. She had no right to bring you here."

Elrod leaned his mop against the doorframe. He'd seen Clay before—on the basket ball court at Wando High. He walked behind Clay, pulling on his other arm and belt to hoist him back onto the bed. Clay fell back on the pillow and began coughing.

Elrod went to the sink, turned on the faucet and put a paper cup under it.

The woman stared at Elrod for a moment and then turned back to Clay. "Let's go now, Clay. He can help us."

"Mom, I'm not going anywhere. This is my last stop. I'm sorry, but this is my choice." Clay corrected himself. "*Our* choice."

"What does she have to do with it? Why couldn't you have talked to me about this?"

"I did." Clay began to cough.

Elrod handed back the cup and headed for the door.

“No, wait!” The woman grabbed Elrod’s sleeve. “Wait, we need your help to leave.”

“No way I’m going, Mom.” Clay said. “I tried to tell you. And Stefany tried to tell you. You won’t listen. I’m at the end. This drug trial isn’t going to work. The crap has shut down my kidneys. Both eyes have CMV. I won’t even be able to see you. I tried to get you to listen. Now we must just get things done. I’ve already planned my funeral. Here, you’ll need this.”

He weakly pointed to a folder on the bedside table.

“Oh, Clay. Let the new medicine work. It’s going to be better.”

He shook his head and locked eyes with Elrod. White matter stuck in the corners of his mouth.

“And, Mom. You’ve got to talk to Stefany.” As he said this, his head rolled loosely to the side.

The woman screamed.

“Cut it out, Mom.” Clay said weakly. “Water—”

Elrod filled the cup again.

“Mom, talk to her. If it weren’t for her and her mom, and Dr. Chapin, I wouldn’t have gotten in here.”

“What did they have to do with it? Why wasn’t I told?” She said.

“Everybody was trying to tell you—even Dr. Winston. Didn’t you read my letter?”

“Oh yeah, Clay. Great letter. I get home and find you gone. As if I wasn’t already out of my mind. What does old Winston have to do with it? And how can they let you in here without my permission?”

Elrod backed toward the door.

“We don’t need your permission, Mom. We’re old enough. Stefany and I are married and she’s going to need help with your grandchild.”

The woman threw her shoulders back like a prize fighter daring his opponent to come on. Then she sank to the floor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Harry and Scrunch were finally taking their late morning walk down St. Giles Lane, around the block to Washington Street and back to St. Giles. They had been delayed when several members of the Garden Club arrived early for a committee meeting. Harry did his best to entertain them while Aunt Clarisse was dressing. He had to let Scrunch out the kitchen into the forbidden garden while he made coffee. Clarisse, wearing white knit gloves, came out when the coffee had perked. In their previous business meeting, the Holburn Garden Club had unanimously selected the Regional Community Shelter to be the site and chief recipient of the proceeds from its annual Craft Show and Supper. The committee was to plan the event. It seemed that every year the club made the same decision, making Harry wonder why they even needed to have a business meeting. For the time being, he and Scrunch were back to their routine, but Harry was uneasy about what Aunt Clarisse would volunteer him to do. He almost hoped that something would come up at the station—maybe a minor assault or bomb-threat—that would force him to miss the Show. Aunt Clarisse had been exacting payback from him ever since her stroke, as if he had somehow caused it. He was vaguely guilty, thinking that, without the upheaval he had brought to her household, Aunt Clarisse would not have become ill.

Being able to live with Aunt Clarisse meant that he could afford to keep Bea at Fireside. He couldn't have found such an arrangement in Roanoke, so he really didn't have any other options, but he felt guilty about it anyway. Over the last thirty-six hours, Bea's condition had improved, once the doctor

had reluctantly reinserted the stomach tube. During Harry's visit at five in the morning, Bea was breathing calmly and the morphine drip had been removed.

The more he thought about returning to the house while the committee was there, the less he wanted to do it. Scrunch was caught off guard and pulled back on his leash when Harry turned right instead of left on Washington Street and headed toward the police station at the end of Ketchum's Alley.

After Bea's latest episode, Harry had considered the bizarre schedule that had become his routine since he became the police spokesman. His days began with the incident sheet. By ten every morning, he'd printed a stack of yellow press releases of murders, burglaries, assaults and miscellaneous infractions of city ordinances from the previous night. Meanwhile, Officer Tim Berry was quietly filling his in-basket for the afternoon media roundtable. He would go to lunch early, walk Scrunch, visit Bea for a second time, usually read the newspaper to her, and then return to the office for a couple hours before supper.

Scrunch leaped the white steps into the station. Harry nodded to Tim as he sank into his cubicle. The in-basket was full. Harry put most of the envelopes aside for Monday. Scrunch sat on his feet. He opened a letter from Dr. Carol Chapin, of Holburn University, scanned it, and showed it to Tim Berry.

* * *

Clarisse Pettiford and Doris Stihl, who always had her hair pinned up to be out of the way when she played the organ, were thrilled to have so many newcomers planning the annual Craft Show. They busied themselves with cake and coffee in the kitchen while the new people talked in the living room. June and Doris carried out trays of finger food while Clarisse brought the coffee in her Lemoges pot with the pale blue flowers. Seated around the coffee table were Carol Chapin, Sarah Benton, and Jacey Connors from Holburn and Phyllis Whaley, a high school journalism teacher from the Wando Garden Club. Clarisse thanked June for coming.

"I asked June to help me and to take notes," She said. "And I told her that you would give her a wonderful story for her newspaper, so don't disappoint me."

After a polite titter of laughter, Clarisse handed out the yellow agendas that Harry had typed for her at work, using the backs of press releases. Phyllis, pushing her frizzy hair out of her eyes, tucked in her chin and raised an eyebrow.

"What's this about a robbery on Vern Avenue?"

Clarisse waved her gloved hands and closed her eyes. “Other side of the page, dear.” Clarisse put her cup on the table. “Now, I want you to notice the donors this year.”

Clarisse and Doris watched the other women studying their lists. Finally, Clarisse nodded for Doris to speak.

“Why, where’s the Northern Branch?” Doris said.

“They pulled out,” Clarisse said.

“But they were the biggest donors!” Doris sat back in her chair. She and Clarisse had passed the ball to the newcomers.

Jacey spoke. “When you say Northern Branch, is that the Temple people?” Heads turned at Jacey’s pronunciation: “puheepuhl.” Jacey blushed. “I guess you can tell I’m from Tennessee. My people in Murphy used to belong to a congregation of the Temple Independent Bible Fellowship before it went to mega-churches. Isn’t the Northern Regional Branch up to Fairall?”

Sarah nodded.

“Jacey and I learned something about the Northern Branch last weekend,” Carol said with a jolly boom of laughter that made Doris drop cake on her lap. “Losing an outfit like that may be a good thing.”

“Well, our church is TIBF too,” Sarah said quietly. “But the Northern Branch has always gone its own way. Lately, Bernard has disagreed with them.”

Carol patted Sarah’s knee. “Yes, we can’t be responsible for what others do.”

June noticed Sarah’s wide-eyed glance at Carol.

Sarah cleared her throat. “Well. We’re all so happy that Dr. Chapin is helping us. Aren’t we?”

The others nodded.

“You can’t join an organization and not participate.” Carol said.

Jacey held out her cup. “You all have made me feel so at home. Over the years, we’ve pulled one tour after another all around the world. Moving so much, Dan and I sometimes felt like a wing-nuts among screws.”

Carol laughed. “It was pretty obvious your Dan was military by the way he handled that crowd of raunchy academics last Saturday.”

“Air Force,” Jacey said. “Thirty years. And thirty years for me to work in base thrift shops and Officers’ Wives groups. I guess that’s my qualification. You can put me to work.”

“That will be fine, dear.” Clarisse beamed, sitting very straight in her chair, her hands in her lap. “Now let’s look at the floral arrangement for our registration table in the lobby.”

She pointed to June, who lifted a heavy album on cue and held it open to show the photos from previous shows.

“It’s our turn this year,” Phyllis said, brushing a hair from her mouth. “Wando hasn’t done the display for the last two shows.”

“That’s so nice of you, Phyllis. You take the album.” Clarisse waved her finger from June to Phyllis. Another ball passed to the newcomers. She smiled at how well things were going. “And Phyllis always brings risers and helpers from Wando. And, of course, we’ve got Harry.”

She glanced at June, who blushed and sat down.

Doris studied the long list on the yellow sheet. “What about the vendors?” She said.

Phyllis set the album on the floor and slipped off her shoes. “Vendors take care of themselves. Just don’t get in their way when they’re setting up booths!” Phyllis said.

“Doris has been their contact in the past.” Clarisse raised her eyebrows.

“I’ll do it,” Jacey said.

Doris and Clarisse nodded.

Clarisse moved to the next item on the list. “We’ll need special help with marketing and advertising this year since we’ve lost the Northern Branch. June, would you be willing to help Phyllis? She usually does both Holburn and Wando, but with Wando doing the lobby display—”

“Sure, Clarisse. We journalists will stick together.” June smiled at Phyllis.

“Doris, let’s clear the dishes,” Clarisse said.

June stood to help, but the two hump-backed veterans carried the trays by themselves, giggling like girls once they were behind the kitchen door.

As their elderly women left the room, Carol and June looked at each other and began to laugh. Carol’s voice boomed across the room. “That’s leadership!” Carol turned to Sarah. “So why do you chair this committee every year, Sarah? Are you stuck with it because you’re a minister’s wife?”

“I guess that it gives me the feeling that I’m using my Masters in Social Work. It’s about as close as I get now case work,” Sarah replied. “But what I’d like to know is why you’re doing this. You have such a busy schedule already. ”

“Not as busy as you might think,” Carol said, taking another cup of coffee from the tray that Clarisse had just brought back into the living room. “After a few more years, I’ll be retiring, and you are the kind of folks I want to hang with.” She made a sulking expression like a teenager and laughed heartily. She looked intently at Sarah. “Besides, it’s a good cause. Any one of us could need a shelter. There’s always a need for safe places where people can go when they can’t quite take care of

themselves, or are temporarily down on their luck—or have to leave a bad situation but not know where to go.” She paused and then, as if to take the attention away from Sarah, she spoke to Jacey Connors, “Where were we before Clarisse and Doris gave the job to us?”

“Oh, uh, Clarisse was saying something about working with Wando Garden Club.” Jacey said, brushing hair from her forehead.

“Yes.” Phyllis spoke up. “We always join forces with you for this event since the Regional Shelter serves the area between Wando and Holburn. It’s a tradition.”

Jacey was determined to be a part of something for a change. “You all will have to tell me what to do,” she said.

“It was nice of you to take on the vendors,” Sarah said. “We’re nothing special to them. They go from show to show all year and can be very abrupt and demanding with us amateurs. I worked with Doris last year. They didn’t like it that the Armory was next door to the Shelter. One of the men who sold jewelry insisted that a vagrant from the Shelter had stolen something.

Carol frowned.

“That was Oz,” Sarah said. “Carol and I were at the Shelter yesterday.” She paused. “Jacey, are you—I mean, do you still attend the TIBF.?”

“No, no. Stopped that when I left Murphy. Too much for me. Of course, it was different when I was growing up. Our TIBF. was just a storefront on Main Street. We split with the big church when they wanted to restrict prophecy to a few specially trained people. In our church, anyone could prophesy. We would set up folding chairs for the service. The smell of fried chicken and greens coming from the kitchen in back kept the sermons short. It was just us. We held each other together. Once, the men raised a house after a tornado. We kids ran through the wall frames before the sheetrock went in. We had a picnic and sang a hymn when the roof was finished. That was enough church for me. It was too good to spoil with a second helping.”

“That’s how it should be,” Sarah said. “I just wanted to be sure I hadn’t missed you. Our congregation is so large—“

“Your husband must work hard,” Jacey said.

“Yes, ever since we came here from Rolla.”

“Rolla, Missouri?” Carol said, touching the hand-lens on the lanyard around her neck.

“Yes, that’s where Bernard was ordained and I received my Master’s.”

“So you’re a team,” Jacey said.

Sarah stiffened.

Sitting beside her, Carol noticed that when Sarah extended her neck, a bruise briefly showed from below the collar. Carol put her empty cup on the table. “So that’s where Bernard met Dr. Runcible,” she said.

“Yes. Bernard took some education courses from him.” Sarah looked down at the yellow agenda on her lap.

Phyllis exhaled with a loud whoosh. “I guess I held it in too long,” she said, sticking out her red-stockings feet and stretching her arms above her head. “I’ve got to get up and move around. June, can you show me where the bathroom is?”

Carol watched June and Phyllis go upstairs and then turned back to Sarah, touching the bruise on her neck. “Does Bernard know about Stefany?”

“He knows something’s going on. If he weren’t so busy working on his letter to the National TIBF. about the *Welcome Bible*, he wouldn’t have let me out of the house. Even now—” Sarah took a deep breath.

“Let me get you some water, Honey,” Jacey said, getting up.

Carol spoke quietly and deliberately. “I’m coming home with you today. If I can’t get you to walk out on him, at least I can let him know what I know about him and Leroy and what I know about him and *you*.”

Sarah shook her head. “No, you can’t.”

“Sarah, I must. These guys are all the same. They have to be put on notice. They have to know others are watching.”

Jacey returned with a glass of water. Clarisse and Doris followed.

“Thanks,” Sarah said.

Clarisse had taken off her gloves to wash dishes. She frowned at her hands and laid an agenda on her lap. June and Phyllis, laughing loudly as they came downstairs, stopped suddenly as they saw the sober expressions of the others.

“Who died?” Phyllis said, plopping on the sofa and putting her shoes back on.

“The last item today is no joke, ladies,” Clarisse said.

Everyone looked at the agenda.

Doris spoke. “Clarisse means that the departure of the Northern Branch has undermined our whole fundraising plan for this year. The Regional Shelter and the TIBF. had a matching-plan to increase the value of individual donations. We certainly promoted it at Sixth Presbyterian.”

Clarisse nodded.

“A plan?” Carol said.

“Yes.” Doris said. “It’s called *Share and Save*. Our churches and clubs in Holburn and other towns in the region have always paid for the Community Shelter; but lately, as more immigrant families, victims of AIDS, discharged mental patients and others have needed services, the cost has gone too high. Even with large, anonymous donations, like the one several years ago to build the new wing, the Shelter is crowded and understaffed. Some of us—”

Doris pointed to Clarisse.

“Some of us have sat through the meetings of the Holburn Town Council Community Development committee for years; so we know how they work. The pull-out by the Northern Branch may have undermined the Shelter, but Council will not step in to take its place. The committee studied what other towns had done to eliminate shortfalls every year. It was Mr. Pinder, the pharmacist, who discovered the *Share and Save* plan. Such a nice man! Really, he manages the Shelter as almost an unpaid volunteer. And Marty Pinder, his wife, has been so helpful in making contacts for us—”

Carol frowned. “Share and save?”

Clarisse tapped the agenda. “We’ll take questions after Doris’s presentation.” Doris took some index cards from her purse, turned several of them face down, found her place, and then looked up.

“This year we were going to launch the Share and Save plan at the Craft Show. It’s a way to set up a reliable . . .”

She looked at the next card. “. . . cash flow for the Shelter.”

June raised her hand. Clarisse glared.

June dropped her hand.

Doris gave up trying to remember and simply read from the remaining cards.

“For every donation by a church or other civic organization, an equivalent amount comes back to the donor as a contribution to an escrow savings account upon which it can begin to draw within a year. It’s underwritten by a large nonprofit organization backed by thousands of subscribers, like a group insurance company. Even though the TIBF. has withdrawn its support, we think that a large turnout for this year’s Craft Show will make up for it.”

“Thank you, Doris. Now, June, dear, will you bring the leaflets from the kitchen? They’re in the large box that Harry brought from the printer yesterday. I’m so glad you all have taken on this project!”

* * *

Scrunch tugged on his leash as Harry turned back down St. Giles Lane. After talking with Officer Tim Berry about Carol Chapin's letter, Harry had left the office to catch her before the Garden Club meeting ended. The front door was open. Scrunch raced between red legs to the kitchen. June Brightman stood in the foyer talking to the stylishly dressed woman with the red stockings and what Bea used to call "big hair." Harry glanced into the empty living room.

"Safe to enter," June said. "It's all over."

"You're Harry Pettiford," the big-hair woman said. "I'm Phyllis Whaley, Ed Lashley's friend."

"Oh, yes. Glad to meet you." Harry tried to close the door behind him.

"You and Ed have some work to do for the Craft Show next week."

June and Phyllis laughed at Harry's expression. June kissed him on the forehead.

"Don't worry, Harry," she said. "Clarisse has it all planned."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Seated at his laptop, the Reverend Bernard Benton felt a calmness and peace around him like the hug of the Holy Ghost. He deleted a phrase and typed “the hug of the Holy Ghost.” It was peaceful because everyone was gone. Sarah was at another of her meetings. The cleaning woman had finally made enough noise whacking her mop around the tiled entrance-way, and running her vacuum around his desk while he worked, wearing earphones to block her out. And, of course, Stefany was gone, but that matter would wait.

He had decided to break away. His sermon title, in eight-inch white letters on the black sign board on Vern highway, read “BE YE SEPARATE FROM THEM.” The National could take their *Welcome Bible* straight to hell. If the Northern Branch could pull out and call it an “in-gathering of our people,” then the Holburn Temple could do the same. Technically, the church building belonged to National, but Holburn’s huge congregation wouldn’t allow National to take it away. And the Share and Save plan would make up for some of the revenue lost from National. He might even have enough, he thought, to start a church school program. He could put in a *Guided Ministry* curriculum, like the one in Fairall. He didn’t yet have as many resources as Fairall, but breaking with National TIBF might even increase membership, since many members in Fairall were already driving from as far away as Wando and Largo.

He looked at Sarah’s spreadsheet. They couldn’t tap the Share and Save account for a year, but the elders could delay the building improvement plan. He looked in his desk for Sarah’s B.I.P. notebook. She’d hidden it again.

The mail-slot rattled, shattering the blessed silence.

“Shit!” Benton said, taking off his earphones and bumping his knee as he got up. He scooped the envelopes from the floor. Sarah usually did this.

He looked at his watch. “All junk mail—same begging crap.”

One envelope was not junk mail. He opened it.

Dear Reverend Benton,

We've been coming in from Wando for years, so it's hard to tell you we won't be coming back. Helen and I have decided to go with the TIBF in Fairall because it's closer to us. We're thinking we might move over there so we could put Heywood in their church school. Dr. Runcible, who runs it, used to be right here in Wando, and we like him alright. In these end-times it's better for us to gather together where we won't need the things of this world. Guess you know about their use of prayer pellets instead of godless currency. And there's more security, etc. Anyway, we're sorry to leave Holburn TIBF, of course, and I hope you & Sarah can find someone else to handle the youth program.

God bless,

Horace Fenstermaker

The large dimple in Benton's chin disappeared as his jaw tightened.

"What an idiot!" He said. "He can't even spell."

As he stared at the letter, the front door opened.

Sarah entered, followed by the fat woman who kept bringing students onto his property. She had an eyepiece of some kind hanging on a lanyard around her neck.

"Bernard, you remember Dr. Chapin from the college. She's Stefany's teacher." Sarah did not take off her coat. She showed Carol to the sofa and excused herself. "I'll be right back," she said.

As she went into the bedroom, Bernard shouted, "Where did you put the B.I.P. this time?"

"Second drawer," she answered.

Benton sat down, opened the drawer, and stared at the bright red notebook.

"Dr. Benton?"

Benton twirled around in his chair to face the fat woman on the sofa behind him. He had hoped not to talk to her.

"Yes?"

"I came back with Sarah to talk with you."

Benton raised his eyebrows. He pulled out the red notebook and shut the drawer.

Carol's cheeks were flushed. She sat forward on the edge of the sofa, her hands in her lap and her eyes fixed on Benton.

“You know I was Stefany’s teacher. She’s an excellent science student and I think the world of her.”

Benton’s mouth moved, but it was not a smile.

“I think the world of her—and of her mother,” Carol said. Her cheeks rose and seemed to squeeze the white out of her eyes.

Piggy-eyes, Benton thought. To Benton, she looked like an earnest pig.

Carol raised her voice slightly. “I want to talk to you about them.”

“Now, wait a minute.” Benton started to stand. The notebook slid from his lap.

Carol continued. “But before I talk about them, let me tell you about Dr. Leroy Runcible. You were one of his boys in Rolla, weren’t you?”

Benton sat back down.

“Yes, Reverend Benton, I know about Jerry’s boys. We’ll call them admirers, shall we? Bad as it was to learn about them when we lived in Albuquerque, that wasn’t why I left him. It was because he browbeat me and diminished me. And then, when he finally hit me, I realized that I had a choice. Sarah and Stefany also have a choice, Dr. Benton. Stefany has made her choice. She’s married the man she loves, going to have his child, and to care for him until death parts them. You know the words. I’m helping her all I can. But it’s Sarah who has the big decision: the decision to leave a losing situation, where she is used and diminished.”

Benton stood.

“Look here, lady. You don’t come into my home—”

Carol slowly stood, keeping her eyes on Benton. “No, you look. Look at Sarah’s neck. We make bad choices. We take comfort in reliving abuse. But sometimes we make a good choice and leave. Let’s go, Sarah.” Carol looked over Benton’s shoulder.

Benton turned around.

Sarah stood in the doorway with a suitcase. She looked away from him and started out the door. Then she turned and came back in.

“Sarah, you need to go on,” Carol said.

“I know. Just this, Bernard.” She pointed at the red notebook. “If you read that, you’ll see that this property is in a trust. As long as we’re affiliated with National, it’s ours. Separate, and they take it back. But you do what you want. You always do.”

Benton watched the two women go out, leave the door open, get into their cars, and drive off.

* * *

Ed Lashley slept in on Saturday morning. After the conference, and winging it through his classes the following week, he was content to lie on his back staring at the pattern of hydrangea flowers somehow arising from squash vines on the wallpaper his mother had selected for his room. He'd lain back down while talking to Phyllis. She was on her way back home from a meeting in Holburn. She wanted to meet him for lunch. Relaxed, and listening to her voice with his eyes closed, Ed easily pictured her long legs and ringlets of hair. When he put the phone down, he was aroused so much that no stimulation was required.

After a hot shower, he dressed and went to the kitchen. He re-heated a few halves of buttered biscuits on a cookie sheet. The coffee pot was empty. Pinky had gone "down home" to Cooke-town with Thelma Parks. Ed gazed at the lilac bush outside the kitchen window. Last fall, he had divided the giant lilac because it was lifting the shingles at the eaves. It took a week to dig it up, clipping the roots that dived and wrapped around other roots and chunks of greenstone in the yard. The roots extended twenty feet from the bush. He'd even taken one transplant to Phyllis's condo. It would be years before any of the transplants flowered. Even his hands had ached. Then Pinky mentioned that his largest transplant would grow to block the trap to the septic tank, a small circle of concrete with a metal ring in the center. He'd dug it up again and moved it two feet away. By then, the moon was out and he had a headache.

The cookie sheet was empty.

Phyllis wanted to meet at Martin's Drug Store, a throw-back soda fountain with yuppie cuisine. Ed arrived early and sat in the window, in the space created when the stage was removed. He remembered the alembic of red liquid, petrified lemon, dental probes and retorts that had occupied the window-stage when he was growing up. It reminded customers, however sick they were, to be grateful. He had a clear view of Main Street, where he watched Phyllis drive by twice before finding a parking place. She pulled off her sweater, tied the sleeves around her waist, and revealed a blue Lycra blouse that clung to her breasts like Saran wrap. As she walked, Ed let his thoughts wander.

Phyllis dumped her purse on the table.

"Hi. Sixty-six slowed to a crawl at Manassas. Have you ordered?"

"No," he said. "I was thinking of a Reuben." He stood up to pull out a chair, but she sat in the window seat across from him and moved her purse to the chair, fishing through it for a pen and notebook. Phyllis was always writing and telling Ed to "journal," but his brief experience with journaling had dredged up so much real and imagined unpleasantness that he and his inner self had

agreed to leave each other alone. He confined his imagination to thoughts about rubbing Phyllis here and there.

Phyllis seemed too hungry to talk, which was fine with Ed. The Reubens were too thick and gooey to eat easily, the strands of sauerkraut wiggling at the corners of their mouths. When she was finished, Phyllis drank an herbal tea, pulled a plastic claw from her purse, pulled her hair back, and clamped the claw around as much of it as would stay.

“You know, you owe me for last weekend, Ed.”

“Will you take credit?” He touched her hand.

“Only manpower will do.” She walked her fingers up his forearm. “Let’s go home to talk about it.” She stood. “Are you parked nearby?”

When Phyllis had suddenly stood up, Ed was having an erection. He remain seated, but she had come to his side of the table, pulling her purse over one arm so that it stretched the blouse across a tall, blue nipple. She looked down at his lap.

“And we’ll take care of that, too.” She said.

Later, as Ed looked at himself in the mirror of Phyllis’s bathroom, he decided that losing the mustache had helped. He sat on the toilet to tie his shoes. It was Pinky who had told him to shave it off. “On most men it don’t work,” she said. “Unless you Cab Calloway.” He hadn’t said anything to Pinky about Phyllis, but Pinky didn’t have to be told.

Wearing a terrycloth blue robe, Phyllis was sitting on the C-shaped leather sofa where they had spent the last two hours.

“Now we have to talk, Ed.”

“Talk away,” he said, sliding his hand under her robe.

“Now, here’s the thing,” she said. “The show is next week and we need you and your pal, Harry, to help us.”

Ed had closed his eyes again to let his thoughts wander. “Hmm?”

“To help us with the risers.”

“The what?”

“You need to get the risers.”

Ed touched her lips. “Risers are no problem.”

* * *

When Ed returned home after ten, he was surprised to find Pinky sitting fully dressed in the living room. By this time of day, she was usually wearing an old duster and reclining in the lazy boy with her feet up. She had a closed crossword book in her lap—evidence that she had worked through all the puzzles in the newspaper. She pursed her mouth and stared at Ed for a long time before speaking.

“You been to see Phyllis. That’s good.”

Ed noticed that she still wore the ancient button-up shoes she hated but felt obliged to wear when she “dressed decent” to go out.

He sat down.

“I finally found out what been goin’ on with Elrod,” she said. “Thelma and me leaned on that mother of his. I knew they had to be something she not telling.” Pinky tossed her crossword book in the wooden bowl beside her chair where she kept her Gameboy, pencils, crochet needles, balls of yarn, and scrabble pieces. “Elrod was a tiny baby. Born in the winter. Not good. He always be small. You know how he was about being smaller than his little brother.”

Ed remembered Elrod and Henry running around the house—Henry, huge and flat-footed like some giant savanna ungulate, and Elrod darting around him like a small egret. A year ago, Elrod and Henry had rowed out on Lake Klawir, between Wando and Fairall. Henry had stood up in the boat. It capsized. Henry flapped in the water on the other side of the boat and sank before Elrod could reach him. Swimming, like every other subject Henry had ever tried to learn, had escaped him.

“Thelma and I got Fancine to tell us what happened,” Pinky said. “they be picking on him at school. Him being small, they always done that. But this time, one of the big boys say Elrod took his iPod and start pulling stuff from his locker. When he don’t find it, he knocks Elrod down and kicks him in the face. But there’s more, uh huh.” Pinky shook her head and jutted her lower jaw forward so that her false teeth slipped back a little.

Ed remembered the expression she was now trying to create with her elongated, elderly jaw. It was a determined mouth, set to show the gumption to resist Satan and all his ways. It’s how she looked when Ed came home from school with his shirt torn and told her about Randy Bos, his fourth grade nemesis.

“But his name is Bos,” Ed had said helplessly. Then Pinky had set her determined mouth and said, “Just cause he named boss don’t mean he is.” The next day in school, Ed had punched Randy in the nose. He bled wonderfully. Pinky must have said something to Ed’s mother, because she didn’t have much to say when Miss Green brought the two boys and their mothers together. Ed noticed that the

hulking Randy had bled even onto his socks. As they drove home, his mother had said, “Good for you, Ed.”

Pinky chose her words carefully, as if setting one letter at a time onto the Scrabble board. “It be another of Fancine’s friends,” she said. “Men friends. He was there when Fancine was at work, or wherever she goes. This man says to Elrod, ‘Little fart like you gotta expect it. Just suck it up.’ Fancine found out when she came home. She didn’t know where he was until Sally called from Holburn. She had taken him to the ER for stitches.

“Is the man still with Fancine?” Ed asked.

“No, he be gone the same day. Fancine had that much sense.” Pinky folded her hands.

Ed knew that Pinky was sitting fully dressed in the living room on Saturday night because she wanted him to do something.

“Edwin, you’re going to Holburn next week?”

“And you want me to look up Elrod?” He said.

“Won’t have to. He’ll be at the Craft and Garden Show. Sally taking him along to help with her side-business. You talk to him. See if you can get him to come back to his peoples.”

Ed nodded. “So you know about the show.”

“Yes, the Women’s Circle always makes the New Antioch mini-quilts for the Shelter show. They going to need more donations this year with the Northern Region pulling out. See this?” She held up a handkerchief-sized quilt crocheted with tiny crosses. “We always do more of the cross botonee,” she said. “They sell big.”

“What did you say about the Northern Region? Isn’t that the Fairall crowd that owns the Foxglove retreat grounds?”

Pinky picked up her purse and walked to the steps. “The temple. Huh! They people give a whole new meaning to the ‘church militant.’ I could have told you.”

“What do you mean?”

“That conference last weekend. I knew about old Runcible being over there,” she said, turning on the hall light and putting her foot on the first step.

Ed followed. “How did you know he was there?”

“Our church already small. Ever since these Temple going door to door, we’re even smaller. They selling they planned community, they special school, they security. Even have they own money—something called prayer pellets. When old Runcible was run out of Wando, he fit right into Fairall’s

schools. Good place for him, I reckon. Once you be gathered over there for the end-times, you stay gathered till your time is up. Even Horace Fenstermaker has left.”

“Horace?” Ed’s former student now had a family of his own. The children were always bringing religious tracts to school about the Journey of Jubilation.

“Yeah. Horace called to say they were leaving today to join the in-gathering.” Pinky turned to begin her slow climb—one foot to the next step, then the other foot, then stand and wheeze, her eyes half-closed. She would not take a room downstairs. Ed had stopped asking.

Midway up, she looked back over her shoulder. “Don’t you forget Elrod.”

“I won’t,” he said.

She began climbing again.

Ed stepped back inside the doorway to the living room.

Pinky spoke again.

Ed looked back around the door frame. “What?”

Standing on the landing, Pinky gazed down at him. “I know you won’t. And don’t forget yourself. You should stick with that Phyllis.”

She turned off the light and went into her room.

* * *

June missed the Friday deadline for the article on the craft show. She wanted a story, not simply a public announcement, and hoped to get it from the garden club meeting on Saturday morning and the interview she’d scheduled for the afternoon. She was sorry that Harry had left. Lately, he seemed moody and distant, like he was trying to avoid her. Of course, she reminded herself, he was married and had no reason to seek her out. And even if Bea were not in the picture, Harry would not be interested.

A quarter-hour from the well-kept Georgian single-family houses in Clarisse Pettiford’s neighborhood was the public housing of West Holburn, a crowded area of “affordable” apartments made more affordable by crowding extra tenants into them. Some of the buildings were sprayed—a scat of scrawled paint, marking territory for human tomcats. As June got out of her car, she noticed a tiny young black man struggling to pull a dolly loaded with white trash bags to the dumpster behind the Shelter. A vagrant, swaying in the doorway, watched and waited until the custodian had gone back inside; then he rolled his shopping cart up to the dumpster. He wore several layers of flannel shirts and

military fatigues. His smell preceded him. Dirty dreadlocks hung below his shoulders and covered his face. He looked up as June hurried past.

Once inside, June came face to face with the wild-eyed man who had begged food at the garden club party. Actually, he hadn't begged. He had demanded. He wore a tweed suit and vest, the trousers reaching only the tops of white socks and the shirt too tight to button. His loosely tied, knit tie looked more like a scarf.

"I know you," he said.

"How are you?" June said. She glanced around the empty room.

"I know you."

"Yes. You're looking well." June smiled. "Is Mr. Pinder around?"

"Costed out a debit. You had stuffed peppers and kiwis. A big spread-sheet." He rubbed his head and frowned. "I watch everything. Got to go now." He swiveled like a marionette and left through the door to the stairwell.

The entrance door opened behind her. June smelled the sweet, foul dumpster air clinging to the man in dreadlocks trying to push his cart into the lobby. June quickly turned down the nearest corridor and entered the first open office.

A bald, pudgy man in a short-sleeved white smock over a silk Hawaiian shirt, looked up from his computer. His face was wide and tanned, his eyes merry with little wrinkles. "Welcome, Miss Brightman! I see you've met Burt and Oz."

He pointed to the monitor on his desk. A guard in the lobby was talking to the man in dreadlocks.

"Burt lives upstairs and sees himself as our guardian. He once was an accountant, I believe. Oz is determined to bring his cart into the building."

He stood to shake June's hand. "Gabe Pinder." He touched his white coat. "I came over from work. Saturday mornings are always busy for druggists, but I usually can do a little work here on Saturday afternoons when no one else is around."

"You're not full time?" June sat down, took out her notebook and turned on the recorder in her bag.

"No, most of us except for the case managers, head custodian, security and my administrative assistant, are part-timers or volunteers. It seems to work." He winked. Turning back to the computer, he tapped a key to print a document from the printer under the desk.

"This says it all," he said, handing her the print-out.

June scanned the press release about the craft and garden show. Listed at the bottom of the second page were the members of staff, Board of Directors, and Advisory Board. One name caught her eye.

“So you’re also listed for the capital campaign?”

“Yes. Of course, we earn more from our steady donors and events like the show. It might be different if businesses compelled their employees to contribute, but our sliver of the take from the capital campaign won’t even pay the heating bill. And we’re planning to add another three thousand square feet in the next year. We don’t just serve Holburn, you know.”

“What is the region you serve?”

He leaned back in his chair. “Well we were originally set up to serve areas not covered by the larger cities and counties, so the Region looks like a gerrymander from Holburn west to Wando.”

“Now that Fairall’s dropped out?” June said.

Pinder frowned and sat up straight. “Yes, the Northern Region has finally gone its own way. They never liked the state and federal government contributions that we receive. And they always wanted things their own way.”

“So they didn’t want the Share and Save plan?”

If Pinder was surprised that June knew about this, he didn’t show it. “No, they have plans of their own. I guess they had to reshuffle their resources.” He pulled on his trouser-crease and crossed his legs. “You know, we thought they’d stick with us since so many of us who are involved with the Shelter are members of the same church. But, of course, they are a different branch.”

“I see that Dr. Benton is one of the advisors,” June said.

“Yes. Bernie has been willing to designate a fixed benevolence from our church for Share and Save. And, of course, everyone benefits.”

Instead of driving home from the Shelter, June went back to the newsroom to file her story for the Monday edition. She had asked Pinder for another interview after the show, telling him it would be a personal profile—“local pharmacist manages Shelter.” But before she talked to him again, she wanted to find out more about Share and Save at the Foundation Library in D.C.

CHAPTER TWENTY

On Saturday at five in the morning, Harry searched his closet for clothes he could ruin. He was to meet Ed Lashley in the Armory parking lot in thirty minutes to unload risers for the Craft and Garden Show. Scrunch, already walked and fed, was curled over the heat register. Harry had given away most of his clothes before leaving Roanoke. A pair of brown corduroys lay on the floor behind his shoes. An old sweat shirt and pair of sneakers completed the outfit. He sat back on the bed to catch his breath. His arms and legs felt heavy. He had been trying to sleep since midnight. When Scrunch began to jump against the bed at four o'clock, Harry got up and let him out. Since then, Harry had sat on the side of the bed, tired but unable to sleep.

He remembered tossing the corduroys into the back of the closet. Bea had often playfully threatened to throw them away. But now, throwing them away would be to end the game they'd made of them. His legs felt heavy and tired, as if he had been standing a long time.

He turned out the light and went downstairs. Pausing outside Aunt Clarisse's door as he had every morning since her stroke, he listened for her breathing—a soft, rising “Huh?” as if she were asking someone to repeat what they'd said. In the dark kitchen, he opened the refrigerator to pour a glass of milk. It was sour as clabber. He spat in the sink, turned on the light, and looked at the container. Two

weeks past expiration. Aunt Clarisse didn't bother any more about shelf life. Perhaps it didn't matter when you knew you might not outlive your milk.

The street light above his car flickered and buzzed like the electric snaps of mosquito lanterns catching intruders. All of the houses on Giles Lane were dark except for Malik's. His curtains down and boxes stacked around the living room, Malik stood at the window to watch Harry drive off.

Harry turned right down Beech so that he could pass by St. Mark's. Only the fire-lights were on inside, giving the old building a bony appearance like the ribs and deck of a shipwreck abandoned in the grid of Holburn's tree-named, tree-lined streets, and stared upon by the surrounding eyes of old bay windows, dormer panes, screened porches, and the thermally-correct, wide picture-windows of parvenu mansions with their bright sidings and views over the heads of other houses and even over the bell tower of St. Mark's. Unknown to Father Berman, young Harry had often looked from the bell tower at the farms along Pawmack Run, which flowed east from Fairall, through the dairy country around Wando to the orchards and cornfields around Holburn.

Now West Holburn was an industrial park. Blue and white steel warehouses lined the banks of a wide storm ditch. Blinking red lights atop the chimneys of the power plant were visible from anywhere in town.

Harry turned right on Vern highway, crossed Washington Street, and passed Williams's Quick Mart, where an empty police cruiser was parked to display the "power of the presence," as Sheriff Stihl said. Several men sat on the curb. The power of the presence didn't mean much to them, just as it hadn't to Darryl Reading when he dragged James White through his truck window and clubbed him before onlookers. And the power of the presence had not prevented White from returning with a gun to shoot Reading in the face.

Vern Highway turned northwest, where it formed the boundary between Holburn and Arlington. The steeple of the Sixth Presbyterian Church, on his right, was lit by the single spotlight that had been the subject of a contentious debate for several weeks by the church's Session. At the instigation of Clarisse and the Presbyterian Women's Circle, Harry had recommended the spotlight and become the mediator between two factions.

By a narrow margin, the Session decided that the light was not, after all, an unseemly display. The church was less than a mile from where Darryl Reading had fallen on his face in the street while men sitting on the curb passed around a bottle in a paper bag. Harry reflected that miles were the wrong units to measure the difference between the two places. He was simply too tired to bother with such

differences any more. Somehow, he had become a spokesman for the community against the unseemly and unlawful element. It seemed laughable. Bea would have enjoyed the spectacle of him arbitrating between church elders and then keeping the peace between bullies and derelicts. With Bea, he could almost have enjoyed it. He would wait for Bea to pass, but soon Lester Stihl would have to get by without him.

Bright lights lit up the parking lots of Holburn TIBF. church, the Armory, and Community Shelter. Trucks, campers, and trailers already filled the back lot of the Armory. Some of the vendors had even strung lanterns around their RVs. Harry parked at the far end of the lot, away from the din of engines, radios, and generators, in the white glare of the church's billboard—flood-lit from all angles, Harry surmised, so there could be “no shadow of turning” away from its message: *The End of Your Search for the True Church*.

Harry trudged down the hill to the Armory.

At the entrance, a sleepy looking reservist sitting in front of the lobby's trophy case waved him into the gym, where a noisy forklift beeped as it backed up to lower a massive highboy at one of the antique stalls. Exhibitors kneeled on the floor to duct-tape their power cords, while the Fire Marshall, a prissy fellow with a crisp ball cap and clipboard, busily made notes that Harry hoped he would not have to read. The gym was transformed into a village of booths and posters, representing not only the migrant vendors who did this for a living, but also every Holburn civic or interest group hoping to raise money and recruit members. The bright booths of wine-tasters, horse-enthusiasts, microbrewers, ferret-breeders, cat-fanciers, wild seed growers, Civil war buffs, and needlepoint clubs alternated with the more travel-weary displays of costume jewelry, leather belts, stained glass cats, and ceramic bunnies of the vendors.

Directly in front of the entrance on a long table was a nine-foot, plaster statue of Colonel Charles Holburn, in wig, blue waistcoat, yellow breeches and white stockings. He held a red rose in one hand and a sign in the other, welcoming visitors to the ANUAL CRAFT AND GARDEN SHOW OF THE HOLBURN SOCIETY AND GARDEN CLUB.

Harry had tried not to know too much about the plans of Clarisse's club, but he knew that this display was not one of them. An elderly woman with a dyed-brown pageboy hairdo was shouting at someone kneeling behind the statue.

“Arne, you must tape the cover down!”

A wave of fatigue swept over Harry as he recognized the voice of Millie Coleman and saw the lanky Arne Coleman, retired dentist and aspiring sculptor, rising from behind the yellow breeches of

Colonel Holburn. The Colemans must have arrived at four in the morning to set up such a display. And Harry knew why.

Millie had come early to upstage the club's planned exhibit. When Dr. Chapin arrived later with her gladiolus display to put on the risers, she would be forced to set up far from the entrance. Harry wished he were not wearing old clothes. For Millie, he needed a uniform and nightstick.

When she saw Harry, Millie squealed and raced to greet him. She squeezed his arm, pulling him to her exhibit.

"Isn't it wonderful? Arne has done such a wonderful job. And he did it so quickly! It's just half-size, mind you, but it will show everyone how the statue will look in front of the library. And I've brought nandina and rhododendrons to put around it, just as it would be at the library. When the art-grant committee sees this, they're sure to change their minds. Don't you think?"

Harry stared at his sneakers. "Uh, Millie. This exhibit space is already booked."

"Yes, for the club. That's why I'm here." Her eyes shone.

"No. The club wants Dr. Chapin to do the display. I'm here to help set up the risers for it. It's a large exhibit meant for the entrance."

Harry waited.

Millie rolled her eyes. Arne, tall and stooped from forty years of staring into mouths, folded his arms.

"I told you we couldn't put it here," he said.

Millie puckered her mouth. Glaring first at Harry, then at Arne, she started to walk off, but then one of the exhibitors, who had been taping cords, stood up to stretch his legs and looked at the sign.

Speaking to Millie, he pointed at the poster and said, "The word 'annual' is spelled wrong."

Millie glared at his pointing finger. Then she looked at the sign. Her neck tightened.

Harry thought she was going to bite the man's finger, but she exhaled sharply, dropped her shoulders, wheeled around, and stalked off.

"She'll get over it," Arne said. "I didn't want to bring this here anyway. It's just a mock-up." He lifted the statue to set it on the floor.

An arm fell off.

Arne laughed, "See what I mean?"

Harry walked back to the parking lot to find Ed, who was to have brought the risers in a rental truck from Wando. Several hundred vendors and their families occupied the lot and adjoining ball field

between the Shelter and the Armory. Semi's had made foot-deep tracks between third base and home plate. Harry knew the tight-assed commandant of the National Guard unit. When he saw those ruts, someone would be chewed out. A bearded man with tattooed arms, a black, floppy hat, and pony-tail, dropped a suitcase from the back of his van, scattering turquoise jewelry on the pavement at Harry's feet.

Harry helped him pick it up.

"Hey, thanks, Bud," the man said. He shot a glance toward someone standing in the shadow of the overhang beside the entrance. "I can get the rest of this. Just watch out for that guy over there."

Harry looked at the man in the shadow. His beard flowed half-way down his chest and his dirty dreadlocks covered most of his face. He was a regular around the Shelter whom Harry had seen before.

"He's harmless as far as I know," Harry said.

As the bearded vendor rolled his jewelry inside, Ed Lashley drove up to the entrance in an orange rental truck.

Harry was surprised to see Ed without his mustache. It had looked like a dirty pipe cleaner, but without it, Ed's face was dominated by his goggle-like glasses. Ed leaned across the seat to roll down the window.

"I thought we'd be the only ones here at this hour. It looks like a carnival."

"It *is* a carnival." Harry said. "We can unload here. Our stall is in just inside the entrance."

The risers were actually portable bleachers. Phyllis borrowed them from the Wando Youth Soccer League. They opened like an accordion, snapped upright, and were strong enough to support soccer parents or the Wando Choral Society. Each unit was made of three oak steps fastened with well-greased brass hardware. As they carried the last unit through the entrance, Harry saw a police cruiser pull up behind Ed's truck. Officer Davis followed them inside.

Arne Coleman had dragged the one-armed statue and table under one of the practice basket ball hoops on the side of the gym. The sign was torn. Millie and Arne were gone.

"Checking up on us, Officer Davis?" Harry said.

"The Sheriff said to be here to direct traffic a half-hour before the opening at eight o'clock. The Guard is volunteering parking attendants. It looks like they'll be parking in the ball field."

"This is Ed from Wando," Harry said. "Both of us were trapped by the ladies in the garden club."

Harry saw Carol Chapin coming through the entrance with a seven-foot gladiolus in a huge pot. “Here’s one now,” he said, going to help her.

Following her with flats of smaller flowers were Sarah Benton and Jacey Connors, who was struggling to get around the dreadlocked vagrant in the doorway. Officer Davis suddenly moved quickly behind her. The vagrant shouted at Jacey and pushed his cart back under the overhang.

Carol dispatched Harry and Ed to bring the rest of the display from her pick-up while she unfurled a twenty foot banner behind the exhibit.

GLORIOUS GLADS!

THE HOLBURN GARDEN CLUB AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY WELCOMES YOU TO THE 21ST GARDEN AND CRAFT SHOW TO BENEFIT THE REGIONAL COMMUNITY SHELTER.

BE SURE TO VISIT ALL THE EXHIBITS AND BOOTHS AND TO JOIN OUR *SHARE AND SAVE* GIVING PLAN TO BENEFIT BOTH OUR SHELTER AND YOUR CHURCH OR GROUP.

Jacey and Sarah mounted the sign between volley ball poles behind the risers; then they piled programs and name-tags onto the registration table in front of the exhibit. A line of vendors formed immediately.

Meanwhile, Harry and Ed pulled in a fifteen-foot Norfolk pine to stand on the right of the table and, on the left, a ten-foot pencil bush, looking like an amputee, a poor tree, apparently stripped of leaves and left with hundreds of green, nubs of fingers, spread in all directions. When Harry stood up from pushing the pot into place, Millie Coleman was glaring at him from under her dyed brown bangs.

“Well, Mr. Pettiford, I hope you’re happy. We had to put our exhibit by the back door.”

Harry glanced across the gym. Near the fire-exit and locker room, Arne stood by his one-armed statue. He was talking to the fire marshal with the clip-board. Harry started to tell Millie that the fire marshal would not let them set up near an exit, but decided she would find out soon enough.

Millie glared at Carol, who was carefully arranging her display to balance around the pots of tall gladiolus on the central riser. Sarah and Jacey were busily registering vendors, collecting fees, and handing out programs and exhibit tags. Millie inhaled deeply through her nose, her mouth tightly shut.

She stared after Harry as he went back outside with Ed, took another deep breath, and marched off again. Harry watched to see what would happen when she returned to her exhibit.

Arne lifted the statue from its pedestal. She stopped him, threw her hands in the air, and glared back at the entrance.

At ten in the morning, Harry and Ed strolled back into the exhibit hall with cups of coffee for Phyllis and June from the convenience store across the street. Harry was glad he had found old clothes. Grease from the risers had left the same L-shaped stains on his shirt and corduroys as on Ed's jeans. Prickly needles from the Norfolk pine were in their hair and under their shirts. They weren't looking forward to moving out in twelve hours. Jacey and Carol were at the registration table, so Ed and Harry continued their stroll.

Most of the merchandise on display was Chinese, even when it was marked as "Blue Ridge Scenes" or "colonial crafts." Among the usual rings, necklaces, pendants, beads, bobble-heads, decorative shot-glasses, spoons, decoupage, macramé, rugs, incense sticks from Lahore, brass Indian serving-trays, fiber-optic-cypress-tree lamps, hand-painted Chinese flower-pots, Navajo squash-necklaces and kachinas, there were also exhibits of "craft-enactors" who glued, ground, whittled, spun, painted and knitted for anyone who wanted to watch. Harry wanted to go to bed.

In the gardening area, the Wildflower Society conducted a seed exchange for anyone with leftovers from the previous spring. On the same aisle, the Wando Coop sold onion sets, trowels, bulbs, and rakes. The space between the wildflowers and Coop was occupied by Holburn University's Horticulture and Natural Resource Program. A bearded man with a pinched expression sat reading at a small card table. A few leaflets and business cards, apparently dumped on the table when he arrived, were left as they fell. A small name tent identified him as "Professor Barker, Holburn Science & the *Cratylus Society*." Harry thought of what he would have said to Bea about this sour-faced Barker not being much of a "barker" for his cause. He noticed the puzzled stare Ed gave the man.

"I've seen him before," Ed said. He walked a little farther and stopped. "I know. He was at the conference in Fairall."

"How did that go?" Harry said. They turned into the aisle of charitable organizations.

Ed rolled his eyes. "It was the last conference I'm setting up. Teaching is enough. Trying to understand children is hard enough. You know, there is a family in Wando named Wiggins who even speak their own dialect—but deciphering the mumbles of the Wiggins boys is nothing compared to herding ornery botanists."

Harry smiled. “What about garden shows?”

“Oh. Well, this is different—and there’s Phyllis.”

“So,” Harry said. “You and Phyllis?”

“Maybe.” Ed blushed. His eyes widened.

He made an about-face and began walking the way they had come.

Harry looked around the room to see what had bothered him. “What is it?”

“That man. I don’t want to see him. He keeps turning up.”

“Who?” Harry glanced back down the aisle.

“Runcible—the guy with the fluffy pocket handkerchief, expensive suit, and lapel button that reads: ‘*We Care*’.”

“How could you see all that so far away?”

“Don’t have to see it. The colors change, but the suit, handkerchief, and button don’t. It was the same when he was principal and school superintendent. His school reform plan lies between a yeshiva and a labor camp where inmates receive chits for guessing what’s on his mind. He couldn’t sell it to Wando, but he’s apparently just what Fairall Schools were looking for.”

Ed shook his head. “They don’t even speak of ‘schools’ now. It’s called ‘*Fairall Guided Ministries*.’”

Harry held Ed’s arm to slow him down. “Hang on, Ed. I’m not up to sprinting. You seem to know a lot about Mr. Runcible.”

“It’s *Doctor* Runcible, as he will remind you. I attended part of his session at the science conference. I couldn’t believe he would have anything to say about science. He didn’t. It was all a promo to recruit teachers and students for Fairall. They’re having a campaign of some kind. Is it ‘in-growth?’”

“My next-door neighbor calls it an ‘in-gathering.’” Harry said.

“Well, whatever it is,” Ed said. “Science and education seem to be side attractions for a religious tent-meeting. If I’d known his spiel, I would have scheduled his session in one of the horse stalls.”

Harry sank onto one of the gym bleachers. “Let’s sit down. I’m used to walking someone with short legs.” He shut his eyes for a moment. His heart was flipping in his chest like a hooked fish.

“You OK, Harry?”

Ed looked ready to do vital signs.

“I’m fine. I just don’t walk that fast any more.”

At the other end of the long bleacher under the score board were a few vendors eating Chinese take-out from paper boxes. In front of them, a florist stabbed cut stems into green Oasis foam, twisted static and baby's breath around it, and set the display into a vase. June and Phyllis turned away from the booth as they saw Harry and Ed approaching them from the bleachers.

"I don't know how hot this coffee is." Ed said, handing a cup to Phyllis. "We couldn't find you."

"We were having a good chat." Phyllis patted June on the hand and pushed back her hair.

June raised an eyebrow and smiled.

Ed blushed.

Harry felt light-headed. June took the cup from him, touching his arm.

"Aunt Clarisse has certainly taken charge," she said, sitting next to him.

"I didn't see her come in," he said.

"She just chased away that man. You know—the one who came to the garden club, begging for food? 'Burt,' I think, Mr. Pinder called him. He was bothering Dr. Chapin. Carol didn't mind, but Clarisse wouldn't have him around the exhibit.

Phyllis walked toward the side entrance. "Let's step outside," she said.

On Memorial Days, the Guard used the wide entrance to move tanks and aircraft into the gym. Metal doors were rolled up so that visitors could visit food stalls and craft exhibitions in the parking lot. Armored personnel carriers and jeeps were fenced behind the small black-top beyond the vendors' carts. Just outside the entrance, a tiny Asian woman heaved a huge wok from a propane camp-stove to the counter of her stall. Stacks of paper boxes teetered around her. Steam from the wok mingled with the greasy smoke coming from the oil drum barbecue cooker of her neighbor. A small dark man pulled meat from the cooker while a tall, yellow-brown woman in a white apron handed out samples on tooth-picks. Their aprons advertised "*Ms. Jenkins's Grill and Catering*"

Ed and Phyllis stopped to talk to the man behind the smoky cooker.

"Hello, Elrod."

"Hello, Miss Whaley." His voice was deep and strong.

Harry looked at him again. He was a small, very dark young man of high school age, but only as tall as a fifth-grader. Ed and Phyllis took samples of barbecue and lingered to talk and make an order while Harry and June walked on.

“Ed seems much more animated than I remember,” June said. “And I think I know why.” She smiled.

They glanced back. Ed had his hand on Elrod’s shoulder and seemed to be getting an argument from what he had to say.

Harry said, “Well, Ed was upset by someone he saw here—some former principal who must have given him a hard time. ‘Runcible,’ I think.”

“Leroy Runcible!” June stopped. “Wait a minute.” She fished in her purse. “Here it is!” She held up a DVD with Runcible’s picture on it.

Harry read aloud. “‘Dr. Runcible explains the Guided Ministry program for children on the Journey of Jubilation.’” He frowned. “Where did you get this?”

“Reverend Benton. He’s also on the disk. When I interviewed Dr. Chapin on the same day, she saw this picture and told me Runcible was her ex.” June’s broad smile made Harry forget his aching calves and lower back.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “What did you mean when you said you knew why Ed was upset?”

Her smile settled into her eyes. “I was just being silly,” she said.

Harry frowned. The pain in his legs had returned. He sat on a folding chair by a *pupusa*-stand. “I think I pulled something moving that damned pencil tree,” he said.

“Pencil bush, Mr. Pettiford. Properly, *Euphorbia*.”

Harry and June both looked up.

Carol Chapin laughed merrily at their surprise. “I sneaked up on you!” She looked at the DVD in Harry’s hand. “I hope you didn’t buy that.”

“It’s the one Rev. Benton gave me.” June said.

Carol finished her *pupusa* and wiped her hands. “I wouldn’t pay anything for him, either.” She laughed again, spraying food and choking, with tears in her eyes. She put a napkin to her mouth. “Shouldn’t laugh with food in my mouth.” Then she laughed again—a deep, hearty, wide-open laugh that turned heads and made others smile.

Carol sat on the edge of her chair, as if ready to leave.

“Sometimes I am just so thankful and relieved to have parts of my life behind me and to be able to help others to overcome the same problems I faced.” She said. “I have to laugh!”

“You mean Sarah?” June said.

“She’s one, yes. She’s staying with me for a while. It takes a while to stand on your own. I set the message machine to take all calls, so the phone only rings once. But even so, Benton has called

twenty times. He's the one who will really have trouble standing on his own. I'm just glad to help her—just like the families who must come to the Shelter. It's like teaching and saving habitat. It makes me happy. Gene always said to do what makes you happy. I wish he were still here to laugh with me."

Harry leaned forward. "Uh, Dr. Chapin. Now isn't the time, but about your letter—"

"Oh, thanks for reminding me," she said. "I'd pushed it out of mind. Maybe next week we can talk about it at your office." She patted June's hand. "Thank you for telling me to see Harry."

June nodded. "It's some kind of internet prank, but—"

"*Here* you are." Sarah stood in front of Carol, clasping and unclasping her hands. She wore one of the stretched sweaters she used for gardening. Her hair was flat and loose. "Bernie's here. Can you drive me and Stefany back?"

Carol stood. "Let's go." She turned to Harry. "Oh, Harry. I was supposed to tell you to see your aunt." Carol and Sarah quickly walked around the corner of the building to the front parking lot.

Harry started to stand.

"You should eat something first," June said.

Harry gazed at the village of food stalls. "Anything from here would only clog my plumbing. I'd better go. You have something." When he passed the barbecue stand, he noticed that Ed was still talking to Elrod.

At the registration table, Aunt Clarisse and Doris Stihl were having tea while Jacey Connors handed out programs to visitors. Clarisse wore a teal blue suit with matching purse and shoes, a white silk blouse with a high, frilly collar and cloth buttons. Doris wore a simple short-sleeved blouse and dark skirt. Her glasses hung from her neck on a bead chain, her hair pulled into a bun. She always seemed ready to sit down at a keyboard.

"Harry, we must get these fees today." Clarisse waved a slip of paper. "If we don't collect these registration fees by tonight, we're not going to see them."

"And you figure my two hundred thirty pounds and six feet four inches will make them more likely to pay up than your ninety-two pounds?"

"Oh, Harry!"

Doris smiled. "Too bad Lester isn't here. The two of you would make good collection agents, Harry."

“We shouldn’t need Lester unless one of the dead-beats murders me.” Harry took the slip of paper and turned back down the aisle.

* * *

The cat fanciers paid promptly, apologizing that they hadn’t had any money earlier in the day. The pock-faced seed farmer was a member of the Holburn Garden Club who had assumed she didn’t have to pay. She didn’t want to be bothered while the seed exchange was going on, even though she was sitting alone in her stall. Harry took her name and walked on.

Professor Barker was still reading. When Harry interrupted him, Barker handed him a flyer about the *Cratylus Society*. His expression changed when Harry asked for payment—the same peevish expression Harry remembered on the face of his old maid geometry teacher in ninth grade, who fastened her bun with hat-pins and was never quite satisfied with any proof. Barker reluctantly opened his wallet and paid up. Harry moved on.

The last name on the list was the Fairall County-Northern Regional Consortium. A half-dozen parents and children stood in line to sign up for summer camp in the Foxglove Reserve. Two men in expensive business suits sat at the table taking down names and distributing pamphlets. Harry picked up one and waited his turn.

The pamphlet described a summer adventure in one of the “largest wilderness areas east of the Appalachians” in a youth camp under the guidance of “trained religious leaders from the Temple Independent Bible Fellowship.” Harry glanced at the two men seated at the table. Both wore bright ties and matching pocket handkerchiefs. Harry would have pegged them for salesmen or economic-development types on the make, had he not seen their name-tent:

<p style="text-align:center">CHAIRMAN GREAVES THE FAIRALL BOARD OF SUPERVISORS AND TIBF BOARD OF FAITH DR. LEROY G. RUNCIBLE DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE GUIDED MINISTRIES PROGRAM</p>

Greaves was older than Runcible. Although he had a shock of thick black hair, his face was tanned and deeply creased and his hands were puffy and calloused. Harry guessed that Mr. Greaves

spent most of his time with tractors and cows. Runcible, however, was smooth of skin, manner, and speech. Nothing about him was left to chance. The people ahead of Harry moved on.

Runcible raised his plucked eyebrows and spoke.

“How may we serve you?”

“I’m Harry Pettiford. The garden club wants me to collect your registration fee.”

“Oh, we thought that Horace, our driver, had handled it.” Runcible feigned to reach for his wallet and waited. Finally, the other man got the message.

“Oh, no.” Greaves said. “That’s Council business. Here—”

He pulled a roll of hundred dollar bills from his pocket and handed two of them to Harry.

“That’s too much.” Harry said.

“No, keep it. All for a good cause.” He stuck the wad of bills back into his trouser pocket.

Both men smiled at Harry. On their lapel buttons, was a message like the sign behind them,



Harry nodded and walked off, reading the back of the pamphlet, which pictured a family passing through golden gates into a forest:

Don't be late. It's not too late to join the Ingathering.

There is still a place for you in our community.

The Northern Region of TIBF is still waiting for you.

It was a real estate promotion unlike any Harry had ever seen. It offered not only a gated community, but a gated region extending over many counties in several states, protected by its own Security Corps and “educating our own young people in a guided ministry program extending from childhood through college or trade school to work on one of the many campuses in the Northern Region.”

* * *

When he returned to the registration table, June, Phyllis, Jacey and Ed were waiting for him. June stood up.

“We want to get some supper, Harry. I’ll drive. We’ll bring something back for Carol, Doris, and Clarisse.”

Carol Chapin was back at her seat under the *Euphorbia* plant. She waved for them to go, shouting, “Bring me a salad!”

* * *

Like vinegary mucus, the Greek soup reminded Harry of the curdled milk he'd had for breakfast. Phyllis had insisted that they go to Nick's, a block from the Armory.

"I always come here when I'm in Holburn." She said. Their booth was in a long dark passage lit only by table lamps like nightlights. "Just look at the murals."

Harry and June squeezed into a booth to make room for Jacey, but she was still on the edge of her seat.

"I'm fine, June." Jacey looked at the mural above their table. Among cracked stucco walls and crumbling statuary in a deserted village on the blue-green Aegean, a herd of goats grazed—apparently on rocks.

Harry whispered to June. "That's where our dinner came from."

"You want?" A bony, red-headed waitress stared at Harry. She had apparently taken the other orders.

"I'll stick with the soup," he said. He was tired and hungry, and didn't like the smells and darkness of the place. Soup seemed a safe choice.

"You need some rest." June said.

"I think we all do," Phyllis said. Her dangling bracelets slipped down her arm as she lifted a glass of iced tea. "This is the biggest show we've ever done. Ed didn't have any help with the risers last year." She stroked Ed's arm. "But he did it somehow."

"I had a handcart," Ed said. "The main problem was getting over thresholds."

"Getting past that hairy guy at the entrance seemed to be a problem this year," Phyllis turned to Jacey. "What was he saying to you, Honey?"

Jacey held a cup of hot tea with both hands and slowly inhaled the aroma. She frowned. "He said he knew me. Then he said, 'I do not feed upon the poor. My eyes are on the stars.' I thought he was going to grab me."

"I saw him at the Shelter," June said. "Mr. Pinder said his name was Oz."

"Really?" Jacey stared ahead, her eyes sweeping up as if she were trying to recall something.

"Well, if he grabs me, he's going to see stars!" Phyllis patted her purse. "There's more than one reason for carrying around this saddlebag."

"June has a picture in her bag that Ed might like to see," Harry said.

June pulled out the DVD.

“Jerry Runcible.” Phyllis said. “The Great Reformer. Ed knew him well. He flashed on and off the screen in Wando schools. Now you’d never know he tried to reform us. Wonder what he’d doing these days.”

“He’s here.” Ed said. “Didn’t you see him?”

“We’ve been on the front line. The only thing I’ve seen is about a thousand visitors coming through the front door, headed for our table.”

Phyllis and Jacey laughed.

June started to speak, but was interrupted by the return of the red-haired waitress, carrying a huge tray on her left shoulder. To his surprise, after unloading all the other entrees, she gave Harry another bowl of soup—a yellow-green, glutinous liquid with bits of rice, chicken, and some brown, loose material like corrugated cardboard, floating in it.

“What I don’t get.” June unwrapped a sub. “Why did the Northern Region people come to this craft show after pulling their support from the Shelter? They didn’t want to participate in the Share and Save program. So why come to an event that promotes it?”

“Higher purpose.” Harry said. “See this pamphlet? They’re recruiting people for their planned community. Even Malik’s going.”

“Your next-door neighbor?” June’s eyebrows rose.

“He says it’s time for the ‘in-gathering’.”

Ed put down his ham sandwich. “Yeah, some people are leaving Wando for it.” He looked at Phyllis.

“Like Horace Fenstermaker.”

Ed paused as if deciding whether to say what he was thinking. He pushed his huge glasses back from the tip of his nose. “To me, it’s not an in-gathering. It’s in-breeding.”

“Oh, Ed.” Phyllis chuckled.

“No. Runcible is in his element. He’s finally found people who take him seriously. And there’s not much difference between the Temple and the County of Fairall.”

“I noticed.” Harry said. “The chairman of the Board of Supervisors is also the chairman of the church board—a guy named Greaves.” Harry pushed away his bowl of soup.

* * *

On the return trip in the back of June’s tiny car, Harry wondered whether the soup would stay down. Grateful to get out of the car without mishap, he stayed in the parking lot, taking deep breaths. It was twilight. The lights in the lot were faintly coming on. Officer Davis directed the last of the traffic

coming from Vern highway. Most of the food vendors had left from the side lot. The man with the barbecue business had a kind of rope sling around the oil drum to hoist it onto a little trailer rigged to a car. His arms were probably too short to go around the drum, Harry thought. At the far end of the ball field, Harry saw a man pushing a bicycle into the Shelter's parking lot. About fifty feet behind him, the enigmatic Oz was standing in the field beside his cart, looking up at the sky.

Harry felt better and went back into the Armory. Some of the gladiolus plants were already gone. At the registration table, Doris Stihl nibbled on her salad from Nick's.

"Lester took your aunt home," she said. "She was too tired for any more. "Dr. Chapin has begun to pack up. She wanted you and Ed to help with the big plants again."

Harry saw Ed standing by the *Euphorbia* with all its dangling, knobby branches. Not only was it heavy, but you had to protect the floppy, leafless branches even while they were sticking in your eyes.

"You lead this time," he said to Ed.

Carol's truck was already backed up to the loading ramp. The tall gladiolus was tucked in front of the wheel well. Ed climbed up while Harry held the floppy plant on the tailgate. As Ed dragged it to the front, Harry walked down the side of the truck to push from behind.

The driver's door was open. A head was caught between the door and the jamb. He opened the door. The head of Carol Chapin flopped out, hanging upside down from the seat, where she was held in by her seat-belt. Her face was purple.

Harry lost his soup.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sally want him to scrape the grill, load the damn truck onto her piddly-ass trailer, and truck it all the way back to Leroy's. What he get out of it was the cot he was lying on next to the washing machine. Leroy had not even been home when he finally pulled the cooker upstairs using the rope. He be surprised when he find that can in front of his door. Let Leroy figure it out. He so big and fine. He turned over and stared at the bright sign in front of the church across the street. Only two more hours and he had to go back to work. Old man Pinder didn't pay shit. He wasn't ever going to get loose. Just getting out of Wando wasn't enough, but if he'd stayed there, Elrod knew he would have shot somebody—maybe himself. He wouldn't stay with Sally any longer than he had to: Don't owe nobody no favors.

The money would help. He held the eyepiece to his thumb. Black grains stuck in the loops of his fingertip and in the wide, bloody crack where he'd scratched himself on the hitch to Sally's crappy car. He liked looking at things close-up—like looking through a frame into another world. The little bits of dirt looked like boulders. They came from the sticky black crap he'd scraped off the grill—still on his hands after washing them over and over. Looking at the cut was like looking down into the jagged ditch

behind Cooke-town, where he had to dump the grass clippings, dead potato plants and other shit. People were always telling him to carry their shit away and dump it somewhere. Without the eyepiece, the little cut was just a short, straight scratch. He couldn't even feel it.

Things would change. No way he was going to spend another month with Sally or working for Pinder. You want change you gotta change how people see you—magnify yourself. That's it.

Somebody turned on the kitchen light. Sally was talking to two men by the kitchen door. Police.

* * *

Harry had thrown away the stinking corduroy trousers and sweatshirt, killed the lights, and dropped onto the bed. He stared at the ceiling. He didn't know how Ed had managed the risers after he left. He didn't care. He didn't know whether he could sleep, but he did not intend to get up.

The phone rang. He held it over his head to check the number. It was Lester again.

“Harry. We picked up that kid you saw in the lot. He had personal items of the vic. You take Monday off. We have your statement. Unwind.”

“Yeah, right. Unwind . . .”

Harry turned off the phone, lifted the plastic tab on back, removed the battery, and returned to staring at the ceiling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After driving Harry home, June waited in her car for Officer Davis, who had driven behind them in Harry's car. She took out her laptop to write the story for the *Transcript*. To what had begun as a piece for Monday's *Style* section, she had added a crime report. She looked at the house. Harry's light on the second floor went out.

Phyllis and she had picked up some of Carol's plants to help Ed and Harry. They met Ed coming in, his eyes wide and a green stub of pencil bush in his hair.

"Paper towels," he said. He searched the lobby, rousing the sleepy reservist dozing beside the trophy case. "Take Harry some paper towels!" he shouted.

June and Phyllis had found Harry sitting on the curb behind Carol's truck, his head on his knees. He looked up, wiping his mouth.

"Don't go near the truck. Wait for police. Dr. Chapin's dead. Murdered. June stood in front of the hood and stared at the red head peeping upside down from under the open door.

When Officer Davis and Ed appeared, June took Harry to sit in her car. He put his head back and fell asleep. Sheriff Stihl arrived a half-hour later. Harry was groggy, but Lester seemed to get the information he needed.

Someone tapped on her window. June looked up.

Officer Davis held out Harry's keys. She noticed he needed a shave.

"Thanks, Officer."

"Harry OK?"

"He just needs to rest. So do you." She took the key and waved.

June finished her email to the *Transcript* and slid back behind the wheel. Instead of going home, she called Sarah Benton and asked directions to Carol's house, between Nebraska Avenue and Rock Creek Park. June took Connecticut Avenue North from Dupont Circle, turning East off Military Road to a small bungalow surrounded by shrubbery. The door opened when she stepped onto the porch.

Sarah wore the same stretched sweater—only her fingertips showing from the sleeves. She crossed her arms, pulling the sleeves around her hands. Behind her was the young woman whom June had seen talking to Sarah at the show. Except for her coppery blond hair, she looked like a younger, more relaxed version of Sarah, with a slight bulge at the midriff.

"My daughter, Stefany." Sarah said. "Where's Carol?"

When June didn't answer, she said, "What's Bernard done?" Her eyes rolled back. Stefany caught her.

They eased her to the floor.

"Get some water." June said.

After a few minutes, Sarah stood up. They went into the living room and sat down.

"Carol has been murdered." June said. "She was strangled with the lanyard she wore around her neck. Harry and Ed found her when they started to re-load the truck."

"Bernard saw Carol driving us away. I looked back and saw him standing at the entrance." Sarah looked up at her daughter. "I'm sorry, Steffy. We should have left long before this. But Carol said you couldn't break away without help—that it was like escaping from your own shadow. You needed someone else to help, she said. 'Someone to shine a bright light.' But who did Carol have to help her?" Sarah lay back on the sofa.

Stefany knelt beside her. "Just close your eyes, Mom."

“But if it was your father, then I caused this.”

June said, “No way. The only one at fault is the murderer. Let the police figure it out. Blaming ourselves or anyone else is just not productive.”

June recalled hearing the same words from Harry when she had finally decided to break up with Jim Brightman and leave him and his credit debts in Roanoke. Some of the debt followed her to Holburn, but she had finally paid it off. As she watched Sarah sobbing and Stefany stroking her mother’s hair, June wondered how many others were indebted to Carol Chapin.

Sarah closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed and became deeper.

Stefany turned off the lamp. “Let’s go into the kitchen.”

Stefany pulled a paper towel to wipe her nose. “It’s like it’s too much for me to cry,” she said. “With Clay so sick and Dad—Dad like the way he is. And now, poor Dr. Chapin.” Picking up one of the cactus pots on the window-ledge over the sink, she stared out the dark window into a backyard that seemed to merge with the woods. “She helped so many people. She wasn’t just my teacher. She knew when people were hurting and always tried to do something about it.”

June nodded.

Stefany held the cactus up to examine it more closely. “No trichomes here. At least, I don’t think so.”

“Trichomes?” June said.

“Plant hairs. Carol was an expert on them. She even got me an assistantship to work with her at the Smithsonian. Once, Clay . . .”

She put the cactus down.

“Once Clay is dead.”

“I’m sorry.” June said. “Is Clay a good friend?”

“Clay is my husband.” She touched her belly. “You may have noticed.”

June smiled. She glanced at Stefany’s hand.

“And I don’t wear a ring because of Daddy. We didn’t want him to know. But Carol told him everything.”

“When was that?” June said.

“When Carol moved Mom out of the house. We came here last week. But—”

“The day of the garden club meeting?” June said.

“Yes, but Daddy isn’t the only one. Mom doesn’t understand. Carol helped Clay and me to get away from Wando—from his mother, Ronnie. Ronnie didn’t want to believe that Clay was dying.

She wouldn't let him do what he had to do. She was furious when she found out about us. Since Ronnie has been coming to Holburn, it's been hard even to visit Clay. She knows about us now, and gets wild whenever I'm around. When I mentioned the baby, she screamed that I was the one who made Clay sick. She knew it wasn't true, but it didn't matter."

"You think Ronnie could have hurt Carol?"

"I don't know. But I saw her today at the Shelter. She knew how Carol helped us move and get a private Hospice room in the Shelter, just as Clay wanted. So it isn't just Daddy that could have hurt Carol. And if it weren't for me and Clay—"

"Now, don't you start." June said.

"I know: 'Blaming is not productive.'" Stefany smiled.

"No." Sarah said, stretching and inhaling deeply. "Blaming is not productive."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Harry lay awake in his underwear with Scrunch nuzzling his armpit. He wondered what his smell was telling Scrunch about the day. Lester had told him to take Monday off. Hell, he was going to take the job off. Time to pack it in. His lower back ached from being a moving-man. His undershirt was sour and damp with vomit. He didn't want to move or open his eyes; yet he couldn't sleep.

A car door thumped shut outside. The doorbell rang.

And rang again.

Harry sat up. The bell would wake Clarisse. He grabbed his robe, went downstairs, and opened the door.

Standing in the porch light with a torn shirt and glasses cracked diagonally across one lens was Ed Lashley.

“Sorry to bother you, Harry.”

Harry buttoned his robe and backed into the house.

“No, that’s all right,” Ed said. “I needed to see you before I head back.” He turned his head slightly.

Harry looked at the orange truck, double-parked by his car.

“I went over to the police station when I heard that they had Elrod. Sure enough, there he was.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose.

“The police have picked up Pinky’s little nephew, Elrod Cooke, for the murder. He couldn’t have done it, Harry. I know him. And, well—I can’t tell Pinky that I was here and did nothing about it.”

After a long pause, Harry finally spoke. “He’s probably a person of interest.”

“Is that a suspect?”

“Not exactly. Just someone with explaining to do.”

Ed waited for Harry to say more.

He didn’t.

“What I wanted to ask, Harry, was this.” Ed spoke slowly, looking down at the iron porch rail. “When you go in on Monday, could you check on him for me and let me know how it’s going?”

“Sure, Ed. Will do.”

“Thanks. Say—you should get some sleep.”

Harry watched Ed go down the steps to the street. He noticed that one of Ed’s back trouser pockets was torn. Next year, the garden club would have to hire professional movers.

He shut the door, walked up three steps, and realized he was going in on Monday after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The next day, Millie Coleman left Arne asleep and went to church by herself. The choir rehearsed at nine in the morning, before worship. As she hung her coat in the hallway outside the choir room, she heard Doris Stihl telling what had happened at the Craft Show.

“Poor Carol Chapin was strangled right there in the parking lot—just as if this were the West side of town. But Lester picked up a boy right away. He had money and some of her personal belongings—some kind of magnifying glass.”

Millie put her coat back on and left the building. As she drove back home, she smiled at Sheriff Stihl’s efficiency. He had cleared things up promptly. Now she could begin planning the centerpiece for the next club meeting. She would let Clarisse know—after a day or so. No contenders this time. And it was time for Arne to get out of bed. They had to plan another way for the grants committee of

the Art League to see his statue. Displayed in the right venue, his piece would destroy the competition. She always felt better after church.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The headache began over his eyes and radiated back along the sides of his head. Dan slid quietly from under the quilt. Jacey was curled around her pillow. He'd been asleep when she returned from the Craft Show. He searched for his medicine in the bathroom cabinet. The books that Jacey had given him claimed that he would feel better if he understood his feelings and talked about them. But understanding didn't help the headaches any more than the medicine did.

His blood pressure was controlled, but his heart seemed to skip and pause when he allowed the thoughts to come back—the sudden blast and shudder as the plane dropped from the sky, the crunch of his fist in his son's bedroom door, the smell of the smoke from the Pentagon. He was sure it was the same smoke his son had smelled from the burning oil fields. Knowing what made his heart skip and pause did not help. And walking and long conversations did not help.

Without the conversations, however, Jacey would have become depressed by his lack of progress, as she had been disappointed when he decided to quit teaching. It was hard to find ways of

giving her evidence of progress. Volunteering at the Credit Union, he had helped some families of Pentagon bombing victims with their tax returns and found donations from private charities. For one enlisted man's family, he had expedited paperwork so that they could receive survivor benefits and leave the Community Shelter. What he did not do was agree to speak on Holburn Cable News about what he was doing, or about the war, as a retired expert on military materiel. He didn't realize he had hurt Jacey until after he had snarled and slammed down the phone after the call from Cable News had called. After he shouted 'pundit!', he saw from her eyes that Jacey had liked the idea of seeing him on television. He reversed himself at once, telling her he'd think about it. She was unconvinced.

He told her that he was making progress; he had moved on. But Jacey knew better.

Such progress as he made was only from being with her. He had no intention of telling her what the doctor at Andrews had told him after the last stress test. Waiting to pee, he stared at the privet hedge outside the bathroom window. He was glad they had paid cash for the town-house. Jacey was making friends in the community. With Linda in Palm Springs, Jacey was going to need her garden club, officers' wives, and other interests. Dan gripped the sink. The urine finally came—in a sputtering spray onto the seat. He waited for the pounding in his chest to slow down.

The One Idea Crowd—that's what Dan called the pundits. They reminded him of the fads that had swept through the military, like "zero defects" and "six sigma." Suddenly you were expected to toss out what you knew about error and sampling design and start chanting the new mantra. One mistaken idea about terror and terrorists was now the basis for an industry. Too much and too many depended on belief in that one idea. One of Dan's last commercial contracts before joining the Air Force was with a lipstick company. Product-research they called it. But there were no data on melting points, saponification values or toxicities. The data he was to analyze were market penetration statistics. The One Idea Crowd again. Could eleven year-olds be targeted with minimal negative impact? As he had examined the contract, Dan had thought of his father putting on his blue uniform every morning, going to the base and spending twelve or more hours sorting through the data from the nuclear stockpiles around the United States—an aging stockpile, whose reliability and safety required more and more attention as the cold war dragged on. The family didn't know much about what his father did, but, whatever it was, and perhaps because it was secret, it was sacred. Dan decided that there were more important uses for him than pushing eleven year-old girls into premature sexuality in service of market-share.

For a while, especially when working for the Defense Atomic Support Agency in New Mexico, as his father had done, he had felt this was the best choice he had ever made. The longer he worked, however, the more he found that the military had its own One Idea Crowds. For his father, the idea had been duty. Dan understood that. What he didn't understand was when the market-share crowd came to help him with his analysis of the components of weapons systems. He resisted as long as he could, but in the five years before retirement, he transferred from data-systems analysis into mission-development. Even there, however, in what was supposedly a unified services command, the One Idea Crowds from each branch tried to jam through their own programs and contractors. Mission creep was business as usual. He was glad to leave. Somehow, duty and country were not enough to keep everyone on the same team. Understanding what was going on didn't help. He couldn't change anything.

He had allowed the thoughts to come back.

He held his breath.

The stairs creaked as he went down to the living room. The class's Statistics tests were on the dining room table. He'd finished grading them while Jacey was out at her craft and garden show. Now he had nothing else to think about.

Maybe for that single reason, he thought, he should stick with teaching a little longer. It didn't pay much, but it was a distraction. And to Jacey, it looked like progress. Maybe it was. But he didn't want to work with academics. His headache returned as recalled the spectacle at the conference in Fairall of a roomful of credentialed asses, so certain of their moral superiority that they shouted down Dr. Chapin and forced her to leave the room in tears.

Maybe the place itself brought out the worst from them. For a religious retreat center, the Foxglove Farms operation was certainly well armed. Dan had googled the Temple Independent Bible Fellowship after Jacey noticed the sign when they were leaving. Mostly it only seemed to be another small, Protestant sect. The earliest group had formed in the late 1830's, like so many other denominations and utopian groups—Salubria, Icaria, Hopewell, and Phalanx, or later ones, like Twin Oaks. The Northern Regional branch of TIBF, however, was a different phenomenon. It claimed a "homeland" area, had a theocratic government, kept an armed Security Corps, and

recruited from other TIBF churches to “build its vision of a faith community.” A very insular vision, Dan thought.

Wealthy members had bought enough land in Fairall County and the surrounding region over the years to be able to promise new residents “a refuge from terrorism and the godless, media-driven world, and an opportunity to join the in-gathering of the people of faith before the end times.” In its online newsletter, *LAST TIMES*, Dan came across an article by someone named Runcible. He advocated a “reformed, yeshiva-type” schooling where children would received “guided ministry” from teachers in “sound doctrine and practical skills that promote and support the community in these last times.” A caption, under a photo of adolescents circling a device that resembled a sausage grinder, read:

Students in the technology program learn how prayer pellets are made.

Apparently, prayer pellets were a kind of optically-scanned tokens, like key-ring cards, on which students were paid for keeping up with their studies. The pellets were accepted as legal tender throughout the Northern Region. So—they had their own currency, their own army, their own state.

The stairs creaked.

Dan tossed the test papers into his attaché case. As he snapped it shut, Jacey’s arms slipped around his waist.

“I woke you. Sorry.” He said.

Jacey squeezed harder and laid her head on his right shoulder. She sniffed, pulled away, and blew her nose.

“What’s wrong?” He turned around.

She was pale. “Carol Chapin’s dead. Murdered.”

Dan took both her hands and walked backwards a few steps to move her in front of a chair. “You need to sit,” he said. “I’ll make coffee.”

Jacey laid her head on his attaché case while Dan started the coffee-maker and looked for pastry to warm. She kept talking.

“I wondered why she was taking so long at the end of the craft show. She had taken a few plants back to her truck. I was with Doris Stihl. We didn’t notice how long Carol had been gone until Phyllis and the others came back from dinner to help clean up. Harry and Ed found her when they took a plant to her truck.”

“Why do they say it was murder?” Dan said.

“She was strangled. You know that lanyard she wore.”

Dan nodded, handing her a mug.

“We all had to stay for questioning—everyone who was still in the Armory when she was found. The police blocked the exits. I didn’t leave until two this morning.” She ran her fingers through her hair.

Dan poured the coffee and set muffins on the table.

“Carol was so good to everyone and so jolly. Why would anyone want to do that to her?”

Dan sat down and pushed the mug toward her. “Just rest a minute,” he said. He closed his eyes. Something was always going wrong. Just when he thought he’d finally gotten things right for her. Just when she seemed to be getting by on her own. Something was always going wrong. Some plane from nowhere was dropping on them. Now this.

The coffee brought color to her cheeks. She leaned on her elbows, closed her eyes, and held the cup in both hands under her nose.

Finally putting the mug down, she took a bite of the muffin and looked at Dan. “I’m O.K., you know. Just tired.”

“Maybe you should go back to bed.”

“Yeah. Maybe in a little while. Dan?”

“What?”

“You remember Ossie Ricks?”

“Lieutenant Ricks from Albuquerque?”

“I saw him yesterday.” She pointed to a scratch on her left hand. “I didn’t know at first—even after he pushed me.”

“He what?” Dan’s nostrils flared.

She shook her head. “No, it wasn’t like that. It’s all right, Dan. It’s all right.” Jacey examined her hands. She searched for a way to say it without bothering him. Shaking her head again, she said, “I knew you would want to know about him after working with him, but . . .”

“Was he wounded, or what?”

“I don’t know, but he’s not in his right mind. He’s a homeless person. And he looks awful. June said he’s bipolar.”

“June?”

“June Brightman, a reporter-friend of Mr. Pettiford’s. She had asked Mr. Pinder, the manager of the Shelter, about Ossie after he pushed her. Oz lives at the Shelter, but most of the time, he pushes a shopping cart around town.”

“The guy with dreadlocks?”

“That’s him. June said he was harmless.”

“Except that he hits people?”

“It was a push, Dan. I think he pushes when he can’t get the words out. He knew me. He recognized me.”

“Ricks was such a straight arrow.” Dan said. He had a degree in aeronautical engineering and big plans to become a test pilot and astronaut. He was so focused that—“

“That you understood each other perfectly.” Jacey smiled.

“I can’t imagine how this happened.”

“It’s a disease, Dan. I just hope he didn’t have anything to do with Dr. Chapin’s death.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Harry woke up at noon on Sunday. Clarisse must have let out Scrunch before going to church. A steady, bumping sound came from outside. He looked down from his dormer window. Malik, wearing his dirty ball-cap, stood in the street while three movers in yellow tee-shirts relayed boxes from his front door onto an ancient, open-bed truck with wooden sides. The company name on the truck and the backs of the tee-shirts was *Wiggins Waste Services, NRTIBF*. Harry pulled down the curtain and turned on the shower.

After he showered and dressed, he heard sounds downstairs. Scrunch was missing. He looked out the window again. The truck was gone, but June's car was parked in front of the house. June had let herself in with the key Harry gave her when Aunt Clarisse had her stroke. Since then, June had

sometimes come by on Sundays when Harry was not taking Clarisse to church. Descending the stairs, he smelled pizza.

June sat in the Lazy-Boy with Scrunch. A pizza and soft drinks were on the coffee table.

“If I’d known you hadn’t eaten breakfast, I would have brought an omelet.” June’s hair was tied in a pony-tail. She wore an orange sweat-suit and sandals. “I ran down Giles Lane today.”

Harry sat on the sofa.

“I get tired of always running along the river near my place.” She pointed to the pizza. “It’s veggie. I know you don’t eat sausage any more.”

“Thanks,” he said. “This is a surprise.”

“And you don’t need any more surprises?”

“No, now that you mention it. I wish that could just curl up like Scrunch and be generally out of touch for a while.” He took a piece of pizza. June didn’t know that he also avoided cheese. And she didn’t need to know.

“Well, that Cooke boy was released this morning.” June rubbed Scrunch’s ears.

“How did you find out?”

“You forget that Doris Stihl lives in the town house next door. I saw her leaving for church when I picked up my paper. She said they released him once Officer Davis corroborated his story.”

“Which was?”

June sipped her drink. “Which was that when he was pulling out of the driveway at the Armory he saw something shiny lying on the ground. He got out of the car and picked it up. It was Carol Chapin’s hand-lens. Her coin purse lay beside it. Officer Davis remembered because Cooke had held up traffic.”

Harry shook his head. “I wish I’d known. Ed Lashley came by last night to tell me to keep him informed about the boy.”

“Oh, Ed picked him up this morning. He had also left word at the Sheriff’s office.”

Harry sat back, glad that he didn’t have to make any calls. This also meant that he could stay home tomorrow. “Did Doris tell you that, too?”

“Yes. I won her over by helping with the Craft Show. She really doesn’t care to deal with all the petty complaints of vendors and visitors.

Harry nodded. “She’d rather be in front of her organ console.”

“Exactly.” June said.

Harry finished his second slice and wiped his mouth. “You know, Ed looked terrible when he came by here. What happened to him?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Should I?”

June smiled, shaking her head. “When you saw Carol, you dropped your side of the pencil bush. It fell on Ed, breaking his glasses.”

“I don’t remember much,” Harry said.

“You fainted. I wasn’t sure that you were going to make it inside the house. You hadn’t eaten much all day. You had worked hard, been on your feet all day, and then—”

“Then I threw up.” Harry said. “You drove my car here. How did you get back?”

“Phyllis. She was waiting for Ed and Arne Coleman to load the risers back into the rental truck. She followed Ed back to Wando.”

“The risers.” Harry took a deep breath, stretching his arms above his head. “Sorry I missed that.” He closed his eyes and leaned back.

Rattling the keys didn’t wake him, so Clarisse shook Harry’s shoulder to get him and the dog off the sofa.

“Harry! Wake up!”

He sat up at once. Eye-level with Aunt Clarisse in her black hat, he rubbed his eyes and looked around the room. June was gone. A note lay on the coffee table. Aunt Clarisse shook her head as she went into her bedroom to change. Harry picked up the note:

Dear Harry,

Was it something I said? I never saw anyone drop off so fast. I gave Scrunch another walk so that he wouldn’t wake you. I didn’t have a chance to tell you the big news. Lester has arrested the Reverend Doctor Benton. See you for lunch tomorrow at Bernie’s. Take care. Love you, June

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Early Sunday afternoon, Ed finally pulled into his driveway. Elrod had sulked the whole trip. He was wearing a short green jacket and matching ball cap that made him resemble a jockey. It reminded Ed of a statement made more than thirty years earlier by an elderly outgoing member of Wando's School Board at a tea for her in the high school library. Estelle Jencks, a wealthy matron from one of the Hunt-Country estates, when she learned that Ed was a first-year teacher, had advised him that "the coloreds here only need to go through eighth grade. They make marvelous stable hands." In her mind, Ed supposed, this was helpful advice on curricular emphasis for a novice teacher.

Pinky was sitting in the living room, wearing her Sunday suit, staring at her hands, and rocking slowly. She'd fixed her hair and put on her good glasses, not the ones held together with surgical tape that she used for doing crosswords. Ed and Elrod sat down on the couch in front of her. Ed started to leave to get the baggage, but Pinky shook her head and began to speak—looking only at Ed.

“You know my Christian name is Lydia, Edwin. Of course, I be ‘Pinky’ so long it don’t matter. Who gave me that name was my grandmother. I been working since I was down home, a mile from here.”

She flattened a wrinkle on her dress and raised her eyebrows, still staring at Ed. He couldn’t imagine calling her “Lydia.”

Elrod’s jaw tightened.

“When I was fifteen, Daddy sent me to my cousins in D.C. After I work for our peoples, I got a live-in with the Whewells. Big old brownstone with turrets. Yes, *turrets*. Might as well a’ had a moat. I worked they job seven years, and kept money with the penny-savers to get set. I never went back. I live-out doing steady cleaning in some of the new apartments. I had a good place for more than twenty years, but my cousins died except for Thelma Parks. She wanted me back down home, so I came. But I couldn’t burden her and Earl when he came back from France without a leg. And they live too far out for me to watch the childrens here in Wando.”

She paused to reach down to the walnut bowl beside her rocker, taking a small cloth bag from it, sniffing it, and laying it on her lap.

“Mama give me this freedom bag when I went up on the train to D.C.” She glanced at Elrod, who was frowning at his feet. She turned back to Ed.

“It seems when Earl and Ed Senior, Edwin’s Daddy, was coming back together in 1945, something happened in Roanoke. Something fixed it for Ed Senior. Some miration¹ about where Earl could sit in the train depot.

“So when Earl ask Edwin’s Mama could I do some sewing and piecework for her, it was Ed Senior brought her round. And when he died, Edwin’s Mama said, could I live-in upstairs. When I saw the rooms, I knew it be no live-in like I had on Thomas Circle. No Mistress Whewell breathing down my neck day and night. No uniforms for gray times and black times. She just want some help—another woman here. She left me live my life, go to church, look after the Cooke babies. Maybe, I think, I remind her how Ed Senior was. How he spoke up for me because of Earl.

“I live in; I live free. Didn’t have no fear. And didn’t owe the family nothing.”

She stopped rocking and pointed at the newspaper on the coffee table. “Once I read that president under house-arrest in Burma say she not afraid. She say it isn’t power that corrupts, but fear. Fear keep you back. Fear keep you on the wrong track.”

¹ Dialect for a trouble, altercation, or difficulty. For this and much more, I am indebted to the book on living-in and living-out during the great migration by Ms. Clark-Lewis.

Elrod shifted, bunching his green jacket around his neck.

Pinky still looked only at Ed as she spoke, her voice rising slowly, like the preacher on Gospel Call, her favorite Sunday radio program.

“But we get chastened, because ‘He chasteneth those He love.’”

Elrod’s lips tightened, his jaw set. He stared at her freedom bag.

“Some mortified and others mortify themselves. I’m old enough to remember slaves. My grandmother was a slave. She live a long time. When they came over, they mortified. They had nothing—oh, maybe a small stone. Maybe. But they mortified. Only thing they bring worth keeping was they memory. But some even lost who they was, who they peoples was. All you got is your peoples. You got to study on that.”

She paused. Elrod’s gaze had settled on the andirons by the fireplace.

“But they mortified. Some lost their manhood. Girls were taken away. They mortified, and out of it, the chaff burn away. They refined by fire. Why we black: we refined by fire. Mortified in our minds. We had to reach deep, to hold on. Some fell away—too weak! Some sank in sin—too weak! My grandmother was strong. She went from field hand to clerk because she learned to keep a ledger. She learned to read when she contraband and stole herself from a farmer in Wytheville. She came to Cooke town, where her peoples were. She said *her* grandmother was stripped and packed head to foot in a slave ship. They never heard they own language. The angels hung their harps on the willow trees to give satisfaction till God was pleased with that sacrifice. Why we do that, boy?”

Pinky’s cloudy eyes fixed on Elrod. He had to look up, the corners of his mouth tugged down against his will. His fists unclenched, his eyes half-closed, he tried to take a deep breath.

“Why we do that? So you slip away down the alley? All that time coming, that fuller’s fire and mortification, that aching fear. Why we hold on? Why we reach deep in that basket of troubles and miracles and blow on the embers of our souls? Why we walk that stony road? So you can sink into fear and hate, and settle for blame? So you can leave your peoples?”

“Go deep, Elrod. You sink into that deep place. You settle and get it right. Reach for it. And you be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Reach for it. Don’t be curling up in fear and defeat.”

Elrod rocked slowly, tears streaming down his face.

“Gimme your kitchen, boy.” Pinky opened her arms. He knelt in front of her, embracing her knees, his face in her lap, her hands on the back of his neck. She looked up.

“Ed, you show him where he can stay and tell him what he can do. Put him in that room you keep wanting me to take.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Harry got himself out of the house on Monday morning by skipping breakfast. His incentive was the *Taqueria*, a white, panel-truck across the street from the police station. He went no further south of the border, however, than coffee and a bearclaw. The lock on the trailer door to his office made it difficult to enter without spilling his drink. Officer Tim Berry was studying his computer monitor, listening to talk-radio, and typing at his usual fast speed. He glanced up.

“Sheriff’s looking for you.”

Harry nodded. He hadn’t believed it when Lester gave him the day off. He looked at the pile of yellow press-releases Tim had stacked on his desk—so many “people of interest,” assaults involving “injuries to the upper body,” and “patterns of behavior.” Tim had mastered the opaque lingo with very little help from Harry, and would easily take over once he was gone, Harry thought. It was past time to speak to Lester about quitting. Harry picked up the picture of Bea standing in front of their house in Roanoke. She was surrounded by the huge, pink blossoms of the rhododendron that grew on the south side of their bedroom. It was a sunny day in early spring only a couple of years earlier. The laugh-lines at the corners of her eyes were all merrily tipped up. Her lips formed a “b” or “p.” She was about to speak.

“Mr. Pettiford?” Tim spoke around the divider between their cubicles.

Harry closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“I wasn’t sure whether you were still there. I have a little more on the Chapin e-mails. After what happened to her, I thought it might be important.”

“What you called a ‘Joe-Job’?”

“Yes.” Tim stepped into Harry’s office. “We may have a source—at least, an institutional server. It’s from someone at Holburn University.”

“Thanks, Tim. I’ll pass it on to the Sheriff.” Harry laid the picture face-down. “I’m going over now.”

The Airstream trailer, where Tim and Harry worked, had served Lester, Doris, and their children for a dozen cross-country vacations before its dedication as the department’s Media Services unit. Lester said he got the idea after seeing the astronauts go into an Airstream for quarantine after returning from the moon. In the former kitchen, Harry and Tim shared an office, with a stand-up wall between them. The rest of the trailer was a briefing room for the press. Harry peeked into the briefing room to see how many reporters were waiting. It was packed.

He slipped out the kitchen door.

He carried his coffee across the black-top to the main building. A black Mercedes passed him, turning down Ketchum’s Alley. As Sheriff Lester Stihl opened the door for him, he pointed to the departing car.

“The Reverend Benton and his lawyer. Come on in. You’re looking better than the last time I saw you.”

Lester wore a black suit and black wingtips. By day, he looked like a funeral director. The rest of the time he wore cowboy boots and bolo ties and looked like a lean version of Conway Twitty. He waved toward a wobbly Windsor chair by the coffee pot.

“Let’s talk.”

Harry handed him the press releases and sat down.

They had known each other since elementary school. When the bell rang at the end of the day they went home by way of Woolworth’s, where they read the comics on the revolving stand. Lester liked westerns. He soon moved on to real books—Zane Grey, Louis L’Amour, and Elmore Leonard. When they raced around Holburn on their bikes, Harry was always the Indian being chased by U.S. marshals. Nothing had changed.

Lester studied the press release. “This will do for now. I expect the press to descend on us fairly soon.”

Harry nodded. “Already have—especially with a preacher involved.”

“Or preachers. Benton had a lot to say about someone named Runcible.”

“Leroy Runcible,” Harry said. “He’s not a preacher, though. More of a self-proclaimed educational reformer out in Fairall.”

“Yeah, well. Benton’s none too pleased about the way Runcible’s church is drawing down his congregation, reinterpreting the Bible, and pulling its support for benevolences. And he told me that Runcible was Chapin’s ex.”

Harry sipped his coffee, considering whether to tell Lester that none of this was his concern any more. Instead, he said, “I could be wrong, but it seemed to me that most of the booths at the Craft Show were shut down when we got back from dinner on Saturday night. I would have said that the people from Fairall were among the first to leave, because of the long drive back.”

“There was someone with him?”

“Yeah. A county supervisor named Greaves.”

“Good. We’ll follow up on that.” Lester scanned the other press releases and then handed them back to Harry. “O.K. What about this Joe-Job thing?”

“Tim just told me that he’s traced it to a server on the campus.”

“He should keep on it, but for my money, it’s Reverend Benton. He’s not one to be crossed. Wants things his own way. Here’s a pushy woman who not only interferes with his daughter but also convinces his wife to leave him. He had motive and opportunity. And the police visits to his home over the last year indicate a pattern of behavior.”

“He’s a bully and hot-head.” Harry said.

“But you’re not convinced,” Lester said.

“Well, luckily, I’m not a policeman—even though you had to deputize me to make me legal. I’m just a mouthpiece.”

“That’s all right. I’m not convinced either. There’s nothing cunning about this murder. Sure, Benton could have strangled Chapin and quickly crossed the parking lot to his church. But he strikes me as a coward. In all of the police visits to his home, nothing definitely incriminating was ever discovered. Certainly, his wife never talked. No, he’s the sort who would be more clever about murder—more discreet.”

“Not like Mingo,” said Harry, referring to one of their classmates.

Lester smiled. “Mingo liked the frontal approach, so you surprised him. But he never was convincing as a bully after that, so he took up football. If you think about it, Harry, you probably launched his career as a professional linebacker.”

Mingo had enjoyed twisting fingers and squeezing the wrists of smaller boys. Harry was big, so Mingo didn't bother him. When Father Berman told the boys about Greek fire and how it stuck to the ships of the enemies of the Byzantine Greeks, Harry thought of the bottle of *Bluegrass* on Aunt Clarisse's dresser. He slipped it into his bookbag, took it to school, and waited in the cloak room for Mingo to start his usual morning warm-up of torment for the smaller boys. Mingo no sooner had twisted Lester's arm behind his back than Harry had sprayed him with the perfume. Given Mingo's personal hygiene, the floral scent lingered for days. Even teachers laughed. When the snickering subsided, Mingo didn't want to be noticed. Those Greeks knew what they were doing.

Lester had to take a call, so Harry returned to the Airstream. He stood outside to finish his coffee. It was a clear, cool morning. Two ravens tugged on a piece of *pupusa*, which stretched between them like a push-me-pull-you. He'd read that ravens made such a racket that they alerted other carrion eaters to goodies on the ground. But, despite being noisy profiteers of death, ravens relied on others to do most of the killing—other creatures, with the strength, reflexes, and readiness to kill without provocation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In Bernie's deli, a block from the police station, a long, narrow aisle ran in front of the deli-counter. Harry picked up his usual turkey and mustard on whole wheat, no sides. Bernie, a Cordon Bleu chef who made most of his income from catering, had already wrapped the sandwiches for his usual customers.

"You want Ms. Brightman's sandwich?"

"Sure." Harry said.

Bernie nodded gravely. Harry had noticed that Bernie looked for ways to limit the burden that the deli operation placed on his time. By doing a two-fer, and wrapping sandwiches and pouring drinks in advance, he bought more time to bake elaborate confections. Harry noticed the tiers of a wedding cake laid side by side on the back counter. The door bell jingled as June came in and sat down.

Harry joined her, motioning to the cake behind the counter. "Bernie's got quite a system. One counter's ready for the lunch crowd; the other's for baking."

"Yes. You know, his name isn't really Bernie. It's Ahmed. He's Algerian, trained in Paris." June sat down and pushed her purse under the tiny round table. "How are *you* doing today?"

"A few aches."

"Any progress on the investigation?"

Harry knew that June, as usual, disguised her journalistic inquisition as small-talk, but he went along with it. He didn't plan to be a person of interest to her or anyone else for very much longer. "Well, Benton's gone home. He had motive and opportunity, but there's apparently no physical

evidence to link him. Anyway, why would he have gone out of his way to drop the hand-lens and coin purse in the driveway only to turn to walk in the opposite direction back to his church?”

“For someone who did so much good, Carol seemed to have many enemies. She showed you those vicious emails?”

“The Joe-Job.” Harry said.

“What’s that?”

“According to Officer Berry, a Joe-Job is an internet slander campaign. Apparently, it is not restricted to politics. The poison spreads as the message is passed on to others.”

“Whether or not it’s true.” June unwrapped her sub.

“Harry nodded. “The tar sticks, regardless of innocence.”

“So Carol was accused of profiting from her environmental work. How were the hundreds of acres of the Foxglove Preserve that she had protected from habitat fragmentation supposed to profit her?”

Harry studied the corn beef and cheese in June’s sandwich. “The emails claimed that she had sold out to pharmaceutical interests. Some of the plants in the Reserve are the only natural sources of certain substances. Tim said today that these emails are coming from someone on campus.

June’s eyes widened.

“Still, it seems to me that anyone so afraid of direct confrontation that he or she would engage in this slimy conduct would be unlikely to commit murder.”

June took another bite of her Reuben and wiped a string of sauerkraut from the corner of her mouth. “Yes. Carol confronted Benton. She told him that Stefany and Sarah were leaving. She even threatened him.”

“Threatened him? What did she say?”

“Sarah said that Carol called him one of ‘Runcible’s boys’ in a way that might not sit well with Benton’s congregation.”

“So he knew Runcible?”

“Runcible was one of his profs in Missouri. Runcible was always grazing, according to Carol—always looking for someone to seduce, male or female. When she found out, she left him. He was disappointed because their marriage had provided cover.”

“So now he’s seducing Fairall County.” Harry finished his un-sugared iced tea.

“What?”

“Something Ed Lashley said. I think I now understand his behavior toward Runcible. The man’s piety comes down to getting the biggest piece of pie for himself.”

“You think he’s behind the Joe Job?” June pulled a notepad from her purse.

“Maybe. If he could get onto the university server. Maybe not, though. Carol Chapin was single-minded about her causes. She didn’t wait to see what others thought and she didn’t back down when she knew she was right. If Runcible wanted to do her in, he had to get in line.”

June wrote a note and put the pad back into her purse. “Well, Sarah is convinced it was her husband. She’s terrified that he will get away with it and come after her.”

“Where is she staying?” Harry said, as he pushed away from the table.

“She and Stefany had been at Carol’s, but the police told them this morning to move out.”

“Procedure.” Harry nodded.

“Sarah didn’t want to involve any church members—afraid that it would get back to Benton; so I called around for her. Jacey Connors offered them a room until things settle down.”

* * *

As Harry walked back to the office, he decided to tell Lester he was leaving. Let the police sort through all of Carol Chapin’s enemies. He had no idea what he would do next, but he’d had enough of police work. All Harry really wanted to do was to go to sleep.

He started up the steps to the Sheriff’s office.

“Mr. Pettiford!” Tim Berry shouted from the doorway of the Airstream. “I’ve been watching for you. You need to call Fireside Nursing Home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Later that afternoon, Harry finally lay down on his bed, finished with everything: finished with the hilly drives to and from the nursing home, the slobbery hug from Flora, the lifeless body of Bea, her head gently turned to rest on her shoulder, her small, white hand on her breast, and someone offering him coffee, and a black gurney in the hall. All Harry wanted, if he wanted anything, was sleep.

* * *

June drove to the university after lunch to follow up on a call she had received from Professor Barker that morning. He wanted to meet her in Dr. Chapin's office. She parked in front of the ivy-pocked brownstone and walked up to the second floor. As she circled the floor looking for the room number, she remembered Carol telling her that everyone made this mistake instead of turning left when they came up the main stairs. The long way around took her by the departmental office. Posted on the bulletin board were names of the members of the Search Committee for Department Chair.

Boxes were stacked outside Carol's office and Benjamin Barker was sitting at his new desk, enjoying the view of the quad.

"Dr. Barker?" June stood in the doorway.

"Oh. Come in, Ms. Brightman." He took a box from a chair for her. "Thanks for coming. I have something for you."

He handed her an unlabeled disk.

"As I was cleaning out Dr. Chapin's office, I came across some information on her computer which I downloaded for you to use in the profile piece you are writing about her." His eyes were bright, his brow serenely smooth.

June could think of nothing polite to say. She wanted to know why he was in this office—even *allowed* in this office—only two days after Carol's death. She wanted to know who had authorized him to clean it out and take possession. And why a clean-up included snooping on Carol's computer. Finally, she wanted to know what he would gain by giving her the disk—a gift that, if she took it, made her a partner in whatever he was up to.

"I can't take it." She handed the disk back.

"Why not?" Barker eyebrows rose.

"Well, for one thing, I don't have permission."

"Anything on the university's equipment can be examined," he said.

"By someone authorized, by the police, by the department chair—but not by me." June stood up.

"Oh, if that's all you're worried about, it's O.K. I've been selected for department chair. That's why I needed to finish this move. We're preparing for an accreditation committee. Questions have come up about the future of our research program at Foxglove Preserve. Unfortunately, now that we've lost Professor Chapin, we need to get up to speed on what has been done before the committee arrives next week. The CD will simply give you a little additional information about that research so that your article can include a nice tribute to her work."

He handed back the disk.

June noticed that in his tidying up, Barker had neatly stacked all of the plant presses in a corner instead of putting them in the hall with the boxes. Another authorized acquisition, no doubt. She took the disk, nodded, and left—going out the way that she had come in, so that she could revisit the bulletin board. The posted schedule showed the search committee meeting later in the week. Barker was certainly sure of himself.

* * *

Bea wore the floral print she had bought because it was the same color as the mountain laurel beside their patio in Roanoke. In early spring, Harry and Bea would eat breakfast on the patio, watch the mountains turn green, and the buds swell until the delicate, pink-edged wheels emerged.

The skin of her face was like shellac. No warmth or soft fuzz remained on her cheeks. Rouge only made them hideous. Harry's hand covered her tapered fingers. When they had lain together, Bea would say, "We just fit."

People shuffled past the closed door to the viewings in the other parlors. Harry's forehead ached. He gripped the side of the casket.

"Full stop." He whispered.

His pulse went on, with staggered thuds and blips, and the occasional missed beat that the doctor had noted with little interest, the missing beat that was his own ineffective effort to die. "Why won't the damned thing stop?"

His knees buckled.

He woke up on the couch behind the lilies that Nina had sent because she couldn't make it. Someone had put a wet paper towel on his forehead. The social worker from Fireside was bending over him, her freckled breasts and Navajo squash necklace suspended over his face.

"How are you doing, Harry?"

He took his time. What came to mind was to tell her to— No, he wouldn't say that. Mainly he was angry for waking up at all. "O.K. Dizzy, I guess."

"You just lie still. No one needs to come in here until you're ready and feel better."

"What time is it? Is it time for visitors?"

"Yes. A few people are here."

Harry sat up. "Let them in."

She frowned.

"I'm O.K. Let them in."

She handed him a paper cone of water and went to the door to let in Doris and Lester.

Harry drank the water and slowly stood up. He avoided looking at the casket.

Doris squeezed his shoulders and Lester patted his arm. Harry smiled and left the room. The hallways were dimly lit by flickering candle-bulbs. He didn't see a restroom, but turned down the hall anyway. A huge, red-haired woman lay in the casket next door. He stopped.

Carol Chapin's viewing was next door to Bea's.

Sarah Benton, wearing one of her shapeless sweaters, stood with a tall, balding man at the casket. Harry couldn't place him. Sarah touched the man's sleeve in the same way that Bea sometimes touched Harry when they were out together. It was Bea's signal to him that they were in a social situation beyond his comprehension, and, therefore, he needed to be quiet. Bea was always right about this.

The Men's Room was at the end of the hall.

* * *

When Stefany entered Clay's room at the Shelter, she found that the Hospice nurse had again put up the screen around Clay's bed. It seemed to give him privacy. She heard Ronnie sobbing on the other side of the screen, and Clay's raspy voice trying to calm her.

"Mom, it's O.K. This drug trial is coming to an end. My CD-4 count is twenty-eight now. Normal is eight hundred. So, see, they learned something. We just have to face it."

Ronnie shouted. "I'm not facing anything! That Chapin woman should never have brought you here. It's this place that's making you sick. This damn—"

"Mom, I asked to come. Dr. Chapin did it for Steffy. She fixed everything up the way I asked—"

"She fixed us all right. Oh, Clay."

"I'm dying, Mom. That's it. You just got to—"

Stefany came around the screen.

Clay sipped coke from a straw. Most of his hair was gone. The skin of his face seemed to hang loosely from the facial bones.

"Hi, Hon." Stefany said, leaning over to kiss him.

Ronnie said, "You shouldn't kiss her on the mouth."

"Oh Mom, she'd have to drink a bucket of my saliva even to be at risk of getting this bug. I've told you. Steffy's clean—and so is your grandchild." He coughed again, patting the bed for Stefany to sit down. "How are you, Mrs. Johns?" He said.

"Better now, Mr. Johns," she said.

Clay glanced up at Ronnie, who seemed to be staring at something far away and out of reach.

"Mom is doing her part to keep my blood pressure high." His laugh became a cough.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Several weeks later, Dan Connors was parking in his driveway. He jerked the key from the ignition and started to get out. Jacey grabbed his arm.

“Wait, Dan. I’m sorry. O.K.? I didn’t know that they would stay so long. But Sarah had nowhere to go. I thought staying with us would give her some time. Our guest room was free. I know I should have asked.”

Dan shook his head. “No, it’s just me. Having them around all the time talking on their phones and watching television gets on my nerves. It crowds me. I’m on my guard all the time. It’s just me. They won’t stay much longer—right?”

“I’ll ask Sarah today.” Jacey studied his face. His forehead was damp, his skin pale. “Why don’t you go for a drive?”

She took his hand.

“I’ll talk to her now.”

“Thanks.” He whispered. “God, I’m hot!” He turned on the air conditioning and closed his eyes. Jacey slipped out.

He waved back to her as she went into the house. Sarah and her daughter had not been loud or difficult guests. They had simply been in the house full time for almost a month—a very long month, for Dan. He backed out, put the window down, and drove toward town on Vern Highway. A fine spray fell on his arm from the traffic hissing by on the wet pavement. The early rain had stopped before he’d asked Jacey to come with him to the store. They spent the next hour sitting in the parking lot, talking about Sarah and Stefany. Dan didn’t like taking calls from Bernard Benton or hearing Stefany throwing up in the morning.

At the light in front of the Armory, he noticed the wild hair of a dark-faced figure in fatigues. He pushed a cart across the parking lot to the Community Shelter. Dan turned into the lot and parked. The man entered the building and turned right. Dan followed. A buzzer sounded.

A guard came into the lobby and waved Dan inside. The guard went back to his meal as Dan turned right and went upstairs into the new section of the building. The hallway was half-completed, although several apartments seemed to be in use. Dan saw the man in fatigues entering the stairwell at the far end of the hall. At that end of the building, the ceiling and walls were unfinished.

From the accumulated dust and trash, Dan surmised that it had remained unfinished for some time. Dan came onto the landing and looked down over the rail. The man had disappeared.

Then he heard scuffling behind him. On the other side of the landing was a small access-ladder to the roof. Behind the ladder was the shopping cart. A secret cache.

Suddenly the man came up beside him, waving his arms, muttering, and limping.

“Ricks!” Dan said.

The man stopped.

“It’s Dan Connors. We were stationed together at Kirtland. Remember?”

The straight-backed lieutenant who wanted to become an astronaut had become a sour-smelling vagrant with red eyes and dirty hair. Dan had met such men at the VA hospital—men who had seen too much, men sent into danger by a nation that wanted its own way without being inconvenienced, men like his son.

“Ricks broke his sticks.” The man muttered and looked past Dan as if he were talking to someone else in the room. “Oz took the prize. YOU GO NOW!” He stood in front of the ladder, with arms outstretched. “You go now!” He said again, glancing at his cart.

Dan turned to leave. His heart pounded. He needed more information, but this wasn't the way to get it. All Ricks could think about was protecting his cart. Dan wanted to give him some money. He turned around to reach for his wallet.

Ricks lunged forward, pushing Dan into the railing. It snapped apart. Holding the broken pipe, Dan fell twenty feet onto the concrete floor.

* * *

Jacey was glad to find Sarah alone. Stefany had gone to the Shelter to be with Clay. Sarah was talking on her cell in the kitchen as she looked into the back yard.

"Yes, it's taking some time, but I want to be free of him before we go." She heard Jacey, turned, and smiled. "Must go now." She slipped the phone into her pants pocket.

"How's it going?" Jacey said.

"Well, the divorce papers must be signed." Her eyes narrowed. "You'll be glad to see us go, I know."

Jacey blushed. "Well, Dan—"

"Say no more. It's pretty obvious. But, after all, we invaded his turf. He wants you to himself." She hugged Jacey. "I can't thank you enough for putting up with us this long. We should be gone by the end of the week, even if we have to stay in a motel."

"You can't do that," Jacey said.

"Yes we can. We have the money now." Sarah's eyes brightened. "And we will have to stay in town until Clay passes."

"You're planning to leave?"

"Yes. Carol was right about that."

Jacey raised her chin.

"Well, you know. Carol had a bad childhood; then she married a man who emotionally abused her, as her father had done. Pretty common mistake. Just ask me."

Sarah exhaled slowly. "Whew. Well, Carol told me you've got to make 'verified change.'"

"Verified?"

"Yes. Don't just change for change's sake. Make sure that you don't recreate the same emotional trap from which you have escaped. For Carol, it meant a professional career. For me, it means getting away from Holburn, from the church, and from Bernard Benton."

Jacey was surprised at Sarah's self-confidence. She didn't tug her sweater-sleeves over her fingers or keep her chin against her chest. In the last week, Jacey hadn't seen Sarah even wear her stretched, gray sweater.

The phone rang from Sarah's pocket.

"It's Stefany."

Jacey walked into the dining room to give them privacy.

"Wait!" Sarah shouted after her. "Stefany's calling about Dan."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lester Stihl studied the incident report as he finished lunch in his office. He wondered if it could be as simple as it seemed. A crazy vagrant is so protective of his shopping cart that he kills people who go near it. There were previous reports about him pushing people near the entrance of the Shelter. Now he pushes a man down the steps at the Shelter, killing him. Maybe he did the same thing to the prof from the campus. The wild goose chase to pin the murder on the Reverend, or on a sanctimonious school superintendent, or—as that reporter seemed to think—on an envious colleague

bent on character assassination, was going nowhere. He wanted to ask Harry, but Harry had bailed out after Bea's death.

From what Doris told him, Clarisse could hardly get him to eat. He wasn't seeing anyone, either. And Lester figured that Harry must have disconnected his phone. They hadn't talked since the funeral.

Sometimes, things really were this simple. Maybe the vagrant would even admit what he'd done once he was back on his meds.

As for Harry, well, that wasn't simple.

* * *

To keep away from Aunt Clarisse and her little trays of fruit and iced tea, Harry sat on the back porch swing. When he sat in the house, Clarisse asked how he was, what he wanted, whether he was hungry, and, after he had answered, she asked it all again. He didn't want to shout at her, so he sat on the porch.

Scrunch sniffed around the bushes along the fence, his tags clinking softly as he tracked a squirrel. Harry closed his eyes. He hadn't returned to the office since the funeral. Nothing from his desk was worth keeping. He'd stopped wearing the cell phone and pager. The calls were always from June or Lester. He had dropped the batteries into the trash.

White flowers of the Bradford pear tree next door lay like a snow drift on the fence. Three people stood in Malik's back yard—a young couple and a realtor with a red puff of hair and a non-stop spiel.

"Endings and beginnings." Harry said aloud, closing his eyes again.

A door slammed. The voices disappeared inside.

Losing both parents at the same time, Harry reasoned, would be a shock for Nina, but it would be easier than caring for a disabled parent. Better to remember the family as it was than to manage codger-rot. Sweep the house. Find new tenants. Believing a Flood was coming, Malik had joined his church's In-gathering and moved to higher ground in the Northern Region. As far as Harry was concerned, the flood had already passed over him. Any tragedy is the end of a world. He was light-headed, weak, and without appetite. He offered no resistance: Beginnings and endings: *Let the mighty billows roll.*

The garden gate clinked.

Harry swung forward to see around the corner of the house. Someone leaned a bicycle against the privet hedge. It was Burt from the Shelter—the one June said they called ‘Clickety-Clack’ because he made jerky movements and snapped his fingers. He carefully hung his hat on the handlebars. His soft, whitish hair was both neatly combed and unevenly cut, as if it had been chewed. His head was knobby, larger on the right side. He wore a white shirt, a narrow, knit tie, and a tight charcoal gray suit, with short trousers and white socks. As he walked, his face twitched and he extended his neck backwards.

Harry stood.

“Have to see you,” Burt said, pulling a newspaper page from his pocket. “See you to get it right. Have to get it right for her.” He clenched the porch rail and awkwardly put his toe on the bottom step. With both hands on the left rail, he struggled to pull himself up the steps. His right leg seemed to circle the rest of his body like the leg of a compass. His face contorted as he pulled himself up. Arms and legs seemed to have business elsewhere, even as Burt compelled them to work together. He sat on the end of the swing.

Harry sat on the other end.

Burt handed Harry the feature article from the *Holburn Transcript* that June had written about Carol Chapin.

“I haven’t read this.” Harry said.

“You read it. Got to get it right for her. I know . . .”

“You know what?” Harry said.

Burt stared at the sunlit pear tree, briefly bright in the sunlight as a magnesium torch. His lips puckered and twisted as he worked to speak. “Wuh, Wuh . . . Wuh . . . We were . . .”

He pointed at the paper.

Harry read.

Prominent Botanist and Philanthropist Slain

Dr. Carol Chapin, Professor of Biology at Holburn University was attacked and murdered in the parking lot of the National Guard Armory on Saturday evening. Dr. Chapin was assisting the Holburn Society and Garden Club in its annual Craft and Garden Show to benefit the Regional Community Shelter. Police have apprehended a person of interest in connection with this incident

and another death at the Shelter. Other sources identified the suspect as Oz Ricks, currently a Shelter resident.

Dr Chapin was active in professional and community organizations. With her husband, the late Gene Chapin, she made a large donation to the Community Shelter and gave hundreds of acres to the newly established Foxglove Preserve near Fairall. A life-long advocate for abused women and children, and an ardent environmentalist, determined to restore a fragmented habitat, Dr. Chapin will be keenly missed by her colleagues, students, and friends in Holburn and at the Smithsonian Institution.

Harry looked up.

Burt pushed the swing back with his toe. The movement seemed to calm him.

“Wuh...was my sister.”

“Carol Chapin?”

“Yuh . . . Yes. And Oz never misses macaroni night.” Burt’s face reddened as he puckered and pulled back the corners of his mouth. “Wuh . . . wuh . . . was not—”

“Oz was not?” Harry said.

Burt took a deep breath and blew out through his mouth and nose. “At show!”

“Oz was not at the show when Carol was killed?”

Burt nodded.

“He was eating macaroni?”

“Yes, with me.” Burt nodded.

“At the Shelter. Because it was macaroni night.” Harry said.

“That’s right! That . . . That . . . That . . .”

Harry nodded. “O.K., I understand. Carol was your sister. She took care of you at the Shelter. You know that Oz didn’t kill her. You want me to tell the police.”

“Got it!” Burt shouted. His fierce, blue eyes widened. “I . . . I . . .” He slammed his fist down on the bench.

“It’s O.K.,” Harry said. “I’ve got it.”

They swung silently for a half-hour, watching the pear tree go from incandescent white to dusty cream as gray clouds gathered in the early afternoon. When Scrunch finally came back to the porch, Burt stood and left, saying nothing.

Harry listened to the gate snap shut and the bicycle spokes twack against the woody lower branches of the privet as Burt wobbled from side to side. Harry's arms felt heavy. His tongue was thick and dry. Someone was speaking to him. He opened his eyes.

No. He was speaking to himself, telling himself what to do next:

That, boys, is the sum of philosophy:

He could picture Father Berman standing by the classroom window.

Knowing what to do next.

It was Father Berman's voice he heard now, saying,

Lester should know.

Leaving Scrunch in the back yard, Harry quietly went inside and dressed. Aunt Clarisse was on the phone in her bedroom. He stepped over the creaky top step. Dizzy from not eating, he leaned heavily on the banister at the top of the staircase. Sleep was what he wanted—sleep and no more waking. But this wasn't about what he wanted. Not yet.

Aunt Clarisse had laid the newspapers in front of his door, including the Roanoke paper he had been reading to Bea at Fireside. He picked it up and sat down on the bed.

"Here's another article about the D Day memorial in Bedford, Bea." He studied the picture on his lap. Three GI's were scaling a cliff. One threw his leg over the top. Another hung from a rope in his left hand as he pulled up another man with his right hand. Between them, falling away from the rope as he was struck by machine gun fire, hung a third soldier, his neck arched back, a scream caught in his throat. Harry held the picture closer. The men and the rock cliff were the same material, a weathered, hard surface of cracks and knobby crevices. The toes of their boots slid away from every slight ledge or hollow they could feel. Only the rope and the hands of the men above would get them over the top. Eighteen year-olds were commanded to scale cliffs with wet ropes and fingernails while 60mm rounds chinked around them.

"I hope you didn't have such agony," he said. "I hope you didn't know anything, Bea. You never showed what you felt." He pulled off his robe and put on his socks, stopping, still bent over, too heavy to sit up. He heard the voice again—Father Berman, leading the boys through a geometric proof. *Button your shirt.* Commands, routines, dry lists: these he could follow. Only obey. *Shave and comb your hair.* Forget what you want. Listen to the voice. *Angle side angle.* Harry could not want. He could not make anything from Bea's death—certainly not relief. All those people telling him at the funeral that things were better this way: they could go to hell. He could not become anything

else, anything new—not any more than a paralyzed arm could wave. But he could follow directions. *Side angle side*. Because he had to eat, he would eat. Because Lester deserved to hear from him, he would go to the office. The time for doing what he wanted would come later.

He had a moment's thought about Scunch as he started to go out the front door, but decided that Scunch would be happier hunting squirrels. It wouldn't take long to tell Lester what Burt had told him—and to resign. He opened the door and came face to face with June Brightman.

“Aunt Clarisse called me,” she said. She threw her arms around him.

His arms hung at his sides, heavy as the weights on Aunt Clarisse's grandfather clock with the sunny face and accusatory ticking that marked the seconds, minutes, and hours he had lived since Bea's death.

June's eyes, wide and teary, were bright as ever, he thought. Not wanting to see her winning smile, he looked over her shoulder at his car.

“Let me drive,” she said.

He followed her down the steps and got in.

“Where to?”

“Sheriff's Office,” he said. He regretted speaking so abruptly.

“I've been calling,” she said. “But I guess you know that.”

He nodded.

They turned left on Washington Street. June took the long way, by Vern Highway. The usual crowd stood in the Quik Mart parking lot. The service road to the Sheriff's Office branched South, just East of the Presbyterian church. It lay parallel to Vern Highway until turning south between the Shelter and the Temple. Harry was grateful that June didn't talk.

She parked behind the Airstream. He went in and came out quickly, carrying a shopping bag. He threw it on the back seat, slammed the door, and walked to the white brick building that housed the jail and Sheriff's Office.

After half an hour, June saw Harry and Lester standing together, Harry's wide shoulders filling the doorway. Finally, Harry closed the door, came down the steps, and sat in the car.

“We'll eat now,” she said.

Harry stared out the window.

* * *

In a corner booth of *La Pomme du Pin*, Harry and June ordered omelets.

He drank some water. “You know, it all isn’t for the best. They don’t know.”

June squeezed his wrist.

“Lester said again that it was all for the best. Bea is dead. There’s nothing good about it. Who knows whether, frozen somewhere inside her body all these months, she was listening and understanding everything? That’s why I always told Flora and the others to talk to her as if she understood, never to talk over her as if she were an object. And I talked to her every day. Who knows what is ‘best’ or ‘meant to be,’ as the people at the memorial service kept saying?” Harry put his fist against his mouth.

June nodded.

The omelets arrived.

Harry stared at his lap. He picked up a piece of toast and laid it down again.

“The omelet is great.” June pushed a dish of salsa across the table.

Harry reached for it and stopped. “Don’t eat this any more. Bad for stomach. Not that it matters now.” He sampled the omelet, put the fork down, and drank some coffee, holding the warm cup against his chest. Staring at his lap again, he nodded. The cup tipped slightly.

June took it from his hand. Harry had fallen asleep. She finished her meal and asked for the bill. Gently shaking his shoulders, she got him up to walk back to the car. Dark clouds piled overhead as she drove back home. It had begun to sprinkle as they went inside. June had Harry to lie down on the living room sofa. She sat down with a newspaper in the recliner. The windows grew dark. As Harry dozed, June heard Clarisse muttering in her bedroom about the remote control. A weather man was saying something about afternoon storms.

* * *

Scrunch’s bark woke Harry. June was asleep on the recliner, the newspaper scattered around her. Branches slapped the windows. Lightning crackled. The lights flickered. Scrunch was outside in the downpour. Harry raced to the kitchen. When he opened the door, Scrunch wiggled through the crack and shook the water off on Harry’s trouser-legs. After prancing and snorting about the indignity, he shot into the living room and jumped on June’s lap.

“Ouch!” June sat up, slamming down the foot rest. “Ugh! You smell.” She pushed Scrunch off her lap.

“Sorry June,” Harry said. “I left him out all day.” Scrunch took his wet-dog smell to Harry’s lap, pushing his brindle head under Harry’s hand. “I guess that Dave Burton’s visit made me forget everything.”

“You called him Clickety-Clack—the bicycle rider from the Shelter. You remember him begging a handout from the Garden Club?”

“Oh, that one,” June said. “What did he want?”

“What we all want, I think. Justice—especially for our dead. We can’t do anything *for* them, but we can do something *because* of them. Burt is Carol Chapin’s brother. He wants her murderer found, but he knows it wasn’t Oz Ricks—that other vagrant with the long hair and shopping cart.” Harry set Scrunch on the floor. “When Carol was killed, both Burt and Oz were at the Shelter eating macaroni. Lester called Gabriel Pinder, the Shelter manager, to confirm the story. Pinder hadn’t been at the Shelter that night, but he said that Oz and Burt never missed macaroni night. Pinder also confirmed that Carol had been paying for her brother to stay full time at the Shelter. She set up a trust fund that both pays for his care and makes regular contributions to the Shelter. Carol and her late husband also made a huge donation to the Shelter’s building fund to pay for the new wing. Lester is releasing Ricks today.”

“But didn’t Ricks push Dan Connors down the stairs?” June said.

“Not according to the medical examiner. Connors died from cardiac arrest, *followed* by a fall. Dan was probably dead before he hit the floor. Evidently he had been at risk for some time. It seems that his health turned south after his son died in Desert Storm; then Dan and Jacey had the misfortune to witness the strike on the Pentagon last September. Jacey told the M.E. that Dan hadn’t slept well for months. She had hoped his teaching a class at Holburn U. would calm him, but he continued to get worse—especially when he learned that one of his former officers was a disabled homeless man at the Shelter—”

“Oz Ricks?” June said.

“Yes. Dan went to see him. Whatever they said to each other led to Dan’s heart attack. Dan fell backwards over a sawhorse in front of a loose railing on the landing above an uncompleted stairwell. Pinder still thought that Oz pushed Dan, but Lester doesn’t buy it.”

“Jacey must be devastated,” June said.

The rain drummed the walls and pounded the windows in great, convulsive pulses. A siren wailed past the house.

Aunt Clarisse appeared in the shadowy, arched doorway, like a tiny chorister in a choir-box niche. Harry thought of his brief career as a choir-boy at St. Mark's, singing the *Angelus*. *Hail, Bea. Blessed art thou among women.*

Clarisse shouted at June. "Come stick some of those newspapers in my window!" She frowned at Harry. "I told you this would happen if you didn't caulk!"

Scrunch ran under a cane-bottom chair as Clarisse entered the room.

"Was that animal on the couch?"

Harry ignored Clarisse's question, scooped up the newspaper, and went into her bedroom. The weep-hole in the window-well was jammed by a wad of brown, stringy oak-flowers and flakes of dried caulk. When he scraped it away, the water ran out. He blotted the sill and wall with the newspaper. It was too dark to see much outside. The wind rattled the loose panes of glass.

When he didn't come back, June went into the bedroom and found Harry sitting on Clarisse's bed, bowed over, his head in his hands. She sat beside him and put her arm around his shoulders.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Ed Lashley had given up trying to get Harry on the phone. Sheets of rain swept the highway. Lightning crackled on the horizon. He worried about the bald tires on his old Duster. He was caught in traffic near the Bull Run battlefield behind a tractor trailer. A state trooper with a little waterfall pouring from the brim of his hat stood in front of the steaming trucks and the tiny KIA sedan that had run into it. Like a blue snake swallowing a goat, a tarp billowed and sank over the trailer, where it was lashed, snapping and thumping in the wind. A television station's panel-truck was parked on the shoulder.

Jacey Connors stared blankly at the news story of a traffic tie-up on the Interstate outside D.C. Her hair was uncombed, her face taut, her eyelids red and swollen. She wore only a thick, blue bathrobe. Sarah Benton set a tray on the coffee table, turned down the volume, and handed Jacey a cup of tea.

“Take something, Honey. You’ll feel better,” Sarah said. She wore her shapeless sweater over a pants suit.

“Thanks, Sarah.” Jacey took the tea. “I’m glad you’re here.” She drank a mouthful and coughed. She set the cup down and clasped her knees. Sarah rubbed Jacey’s arm.

The weather man repeated his refrain about the unseasonable storm and scattered tornados throughout Virginia. Jacey fell asleep.

Sarah returned the tray to the kitchen and took the cell phone from her pocket, pressing Re-dial. This time she got an answer. She noticed the headlights from Stefany’s car as it came up the drive.

“I can’t talk very long. I told you that the church will be all right with this. You just have to wait.” She glanced about impatiently. As she listened, Stefany opened the front door. Sarah pushed back hair from her forehead and tugged the sleeve of her sweater. “Look, will you forget about Oz and Burt? We’ll talk later.” When she turned around, she saw Jacey going into the bathroom.

The tractor trailer was finally pushed into the median so that traffic could pass. Ed aimed for the center lane. Within five minutes, he had reached the first Holburn exit from I-395, Vern Highway. He parked in front of the Pettiford house on St. Giles Lane. He wiped the fog from his glasses and looked around the car for an umbrella. He was always giving umbrellas away when he passed walkers caught in the rain. He’d given the last one to Phyllis when he drove her home from the truck rental office early Sunday morning. Wobbly and tired after the garden show, police interrogation, driving to Wando, and then unloading the risers, she had leaned against the car as they stood under the umbrella in drizzling rain. After such a night, tired as they were, neither of them wanted to return to an empty room, but they hesitated. Ed knew that Phyllis was fiercely independent, no matter how bedraggled she looked at that moment. As he saw it, she yearned for affection and shared intimacy, but she feared routines, expectations, and assumptions. When she lingered with him too long, he knew what she wanted. He gave her the umbrella and told her to go to bed.

Now Ed lingered outside Harry’s house. Ed had met Bea Pettiford when Harry had first come to Wando on college business for several weekends to set up a satellite campus. Bea was bright, quick, and witty, a perfect foil to Harry’s lugubrious, dry humor. She was like a tiny, iridescent hummingbird, flitting around some giant, pendulous tropical flower.

The pouring rain divided into rivulets around the wipers. A puddle formed on the floor under the vent on the passenger’s side.

One weekend, Ed had taken Harry and Bea up a little knoll in the southwest part of Wando County to show them the wide, hollow plain left from an inland Triassic sea. The climb was too much for Harry. Ed had run back to his Duster and driven it off-road and half-way up the hill. Bea and he struggled to keep Harry on his feet. In the hours and days afterwards, Ed had become attracted to Bea even as he helped her and assured her that the hospital in Wando was as good as the one in Roanoke. Even though they only talked about helping Harry, he could easily accept her quiet smiles and bright eyes for himself. After angioplasty, Harry recovered. The Pettifords returned to Roanoke and Ed returned to Wando High.

The downpour paused long enough for Ed to run to the porch.

June's cell phone rang just as there was a knock at the front door. Harry stood up too quickly, felt light-headed, and sat down again. June took her phone into the kitchen and Clarisse retreated to her bedroom. Harry slowly slipped on his shoes, stood, looked through the curtains, and saw Ed Lashley standing outside. Scrunch danced out from under the chair and did *ochos* around Ed's legs, his tags tinkling and claws clicking against the tiles in the foyer.

"Out of the way, Scrunch! We can't shut the door." The dog raced upstairs to Harry's room and then raced back down.

Ed had wet hair and wore his usual wrinkled shirt, corduroys, and white socks. His thick new glasses were fogged.

"Sit down. Sit down." Harry said. He put his foot on the piano bench to tie his shoes.

"Harry, you've had a hard time." Ed said.

"She's gone, Ed. I did what I could. All I could do. But Bea is gone. She was on a PEG tube for two years—gastric feeding. She couldn't speak. Barely moved. Didn't seem to sense or know anything. I still kept hoping she would wake up and come back. And now—well. I don't know when she became the condition for my existence, but that's the way it is. She's gone and I don't exist any more."

"I'm so sorry." Ed said. "The service was a wonderful tribute. Phyllis said that it made her wish she had known Bea. I just wanted to check on you. Your phone—"

"I dumped the batteries. Today was the first time I've been out since the funeral."

Ed left his muddy shoes in the foyer and followed Harry into the living room.

June, still holding her cell phone, returned from the kitchen.

“Hello, Ed. Thanks for coming.” She glanced at Harry, who had sunk back onto the couch, his head bowed. “I know that Harry appreciates your coming through the storm to see him. Were you in that bottleneck on the Interstate?”

“Yes, it didn’t amount to much.”

June dropped the cell phone back into her purse. “That was Jacey Connors. She wanted to tell you something, Harry.” June glanced at Ed, who was wiping his glasses. His eyes seemed very small without the thick glasses. “I guess it’s O.K. to tell you in front of Ed,” she said. “You know that Sarah Benton and her daughter have been staying with Jacey since—”

“Since Chapin’s death.” Harry said.

“Yes, and she was very apologetic about even calling. But she said that Sarah and Stefany have been so good to her since Dan died.” June paused. “And she was worried about them—”

Ed pushed his glasses up on his nose. “When was that? You mean Colonel Connors?”

“Yes. It happened at the Community Shelter. I think the investigation is still open.” She looked at Harry.

“No. It’s closed.” Harry said. “The Sheriff told me it was a heart-attack. Even if he had survived the fall, his heart was too damaged to last.”

“He fell?”

“Over a sawhorse and twenty feet down an unfinished stairwell.” June said.

Outside, the wind shook the branches against the screen porch. The lights flickered. June turned back to Harry.

“Oh, I didn’t say why Jacey called. She was worried about Dr. Benton coming after Sarah. She heard them talking on the phone. Until now, Benton didn’t know where Sarah was. Now that he knows, she is afraid that he will come after them. Sarah has told Jacey about his temper.”

“Why didn’t she call the police?” Harry said.

“I guess she thinks of you first—after the way you helped Carol.”

“What did you do?” Ed said.

“Not much.” Harry sat up, rubbing his eyes, and then his ankles. “I just did some inquiries for her after that slander incident—the Joe Job.”

“So that’s why she got such hostility at the conference.” Ed said. “She left her monograph on the podium and walked out. Let’s see, that was . . .” Ed looked down at his shirt pocket. He pulled out a drenched pocket-calendar and peeled back the pages. “That was during the pre-conference. Colonel Connors saw the whole thing. He seemed more upset about it than Carol.”

June glanced at Harry. Chewing his lip, he was staring at the space between him and Ed as if Ed had just laid something in front of him.

“Dr. Chapin had been receiving obnoxious emails from someone in her own department.” June said. “Other messages, claiming that she was using her habitat research in Foxglove Preserve to traffic in rare plants, were sent to her professional colleagues.”

“What did Jacey want to tell me?” Harry said.

“Jacey heard Sarah tell Benton that the church would be all right and that he should forget about Oz and Burt.”

Harry frowned. “Oz and Burt? Why should they matter to him?”

June nodded. “And why would Sarah care about Benton’s problems?” She pushed the recliner back to raise her feet. “I’ve been uneasy ever since the garden show. Carol was killed outside while we were inside joking. Oh, I got a story out of it, but why must I always profit from other people’s disasters—even my friends’?”

“You couldn’t have stopped it,” Harry said. “No one even saw it happen. Writing is what you’re suited for, June. Never knock your calling.”

Ed had been wiping his neck with a handkerchief. “Maybe someone did see it.” He spread the wet handkerchief on his knee. “I wanted to tell you what Elrod told us when I got him home. That’s why I called earlier. He was cleaning up the barbecue drum in the parking lot after the show when a car with a small trailer passed him. The passenger threw something out of the window. Elrod picked it up when he left later. It was Dr. Chapin’s loupe.”

“The hand-lens she wore around her neck.” Harry said.

“Yes,” Ed said. “Elrod didn’t see into the car, but the trailer behind it was unmistakable. It held a tall, teetering white statue with only one arm.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

After her morning run along the river path, June showered and emailed her editor that she would be doing interviews on the Save and Share story, her last piece on local religious news. The regular Religion columnist would return the following week. It was a cool, overcast day, but most of the bad weather had moved East the day before. June didn't tell her editor that she also planned to visit Sarah and her daughter at the Shelter. She had promised Jacey to check on Sarah and, if necessary, to help her find another place to stay.

As she entered the lobby, she passed Oz Ricks, sitting on a low, brick wall by the door. He wore a blue bandana around his hair. "Hello, Ms. Brightman," he said.

She turned and looked at him.

His eyes widened as if he were astonished to see angels ascending and descending the steps. June hurried inside.

In the common-area, a woman with straggly hair and a yellow bruise on her jaw was giving a sticky bun to a baby. Several residents were watching television. June glanced up at Mr. Pinder's

remote videocam and waved. She took the steps two at a time. The tile and potted plants in the space downstairs gave the appearance of a hotel lobby, but upstairs was less gracious. A dingy, brown runner lay in the hallway. The rooms were fitted with cheap, hollow-core doors, many of them unpainted. The smells of pizza and decay hung in the air. The hallway was unfinished. At the far end of the hall, she saw unpainted sheet-rock walls and a sawhorse on the landing.

The room of Sarah's son-in-law was two doors from the stairwell. The door was open. Three women were in the room. June knew Sarah and her daughter, but not the frizzy-haired woman sitting on the bed. She was pushing a small pink sponge into the mouth of the pale young man lying on the bed.

"Take it, Clay! You're so dry." She said.

Sarah, wearing a smart blue pants-suit, came around the bed to hug June. "Thanks for coming, June. This is Clay's mother, Ronnie Johns, from Wando."

Ronnie shook her head without taking eyes from Clay. June looked at him more closely. He struggled to breathe, making a deep rattling sound, like a marble rolling in a wooden box. His face and eyes were yellow, his neck and sunken chest covered by a pink rash.

Stefany had wiped her face so many times that her nose was smeared with eyeliner.

Sarah walked June back to the hall. "He's almost gone."

"I'm sorry." June said.

"It's just the way it is." Sarah said. "I was surprised to get your call."

"I was coming over here anyway to talk to Mr. Pinder about a feature on the Save and Share plan, so I thought I might check on you at the same time."

"Check on me?" Sarah voice raised slightly, attracting Stefany's attention.

"What is it, Mom?" Stefany said.

June smiled. "I got a call from Jacey. She was concerned when she overheard your Mom talking to your Dad on the phone yesterday. She thought that he might come to her house now that he knows where you are."

Sarah frowned. "I see. She needn't have bothered."

"Daddy won't bother us after that scene with Dr. Chapin," Stefany said. "He'll say, 'Come out from them and be separate from them.' He considers me contaminated now." She buried her face on her mother's shoulder.

Sarah stroked Stefany's hair. "Bernard only talks to me now about the church office and bookkeeping. No one replaced me in the office."

Sarah led Stefany back into the room and then came back to the door.

“I didn’t know. This is all very sad. I’m sorry for you.” June said.

Sarah shrugged. “We’ll be all right.” She squeezed June’s hand. “I’ll talk to Jacey.”

* * *

As June returned to the lobby, Gabriel Pinder was entering the building. A big-boned, pudgy man, taller even than Harry, he wore a pharmacist’s smock.

“I’ve seen you running by my condo in the mornings.” He motioned her into his office.

“It’s relaxing to run by the river. Thanks for meeting with me today. You have a busy schedule.”

“No problem. I usually don’t come here until later, but I’m glad that you want to feature Save and Share.”

As they entered his office, June glanced at one of the monitors. Oz Ricks stood outside with Burt.

“I’m doing several interviews around town on Save and Share, and also going to the Foundation Library in D.C. I was hoping that you might direct me to some of the churches and other groups participating.”

“Oh, to be sure. Yes.” Pinder pulled his glasses from the top of his head to his nose. He took a fingernail clipper from his desk and began to trim his nails. “There are many success stories.”

“Starting with this Shelter?” June said.

“Yes. The Shelter. We’ve certainly benefited from Share and Save.”

“And the Chapins’ trust fund?” June noticed that he clipped his nails to the quick.

“Chapin? Oh, well, but that’s not related to Save and Share. You must have heard from the police.”

June nodded.

“See, that was a separate donation that the Chapins made to care for Carol’s brother.”

“And for new construction?”

Pinder began to file his nails. “Yes, that too.”

“So, Save and Share not only raises funds for the Shelter but also for the donors?”

“Yes.” He said. “It’s a win-win for all the donors.” He handed June a flyer. “You’ve seen this?”

“Yes, thank you. Do you have an annual report?”

“Just a minute.” He stood and turned to the file cabinet behind him.

June looked around the office. On the monitors, she saw Oz and Burt, still standing in front of the Shelter. The mother with straggly hair was changing her baby on a lounge chair. The hallway outside Clay's room was empty.

"You must be busy both running a pharmacy and managing the Shelter," she said.

Pinder smiled and picked up the nail clippers as he sat down. "The Shelter is a kind of hobby, I guess." He rolled back to retrieve and staple some pages from the copier by the file cabinet. Then he spun around in his chair to hand June the report. "And I like to think that I'm doing some good. You know: *payback*."

June glanced at the monitors and smiled. "I can see you're making a difference."

Pinder nodded gravely. "That woman—" He pointed to the monitor. "She almost didn't make it. The social worker pulled her from an abusive relationship."

"And you have long-term residents and Hospice patients as well as domestic violence victims?"

"We supply housing, but cannot provide nursing care." Pinder's broad, rugged features and careful grooming reminded June of a TV newscaster. He was smooth. So was her ex-husband—never moreso than when he was going out on a limb. She noticed that Pinder was clipping his nails again after filing them. He had the same believability and air of integrity as her ex did when he was explaining how the latest investment in a computer start-up was going to 'pay off big time.' She leafed through the annual report.

"The Share and Save plan comes to ten percent of your revenues?" She said.

"This year, yes. We will grow it as participation increases."

"It's a 'win-win' for contributors, you say here, because—"

"Because not only do other organizations help our operation, they contribute to an investment fund on which their own groups can draw for benevolences or other needs. They share and save at the same time. Some churches, like Independent Temple, have already begun to draw on their accounts. You should talk to Dr. Benton."

June smiled. "He's next on my list. How is it that the parent organization, the Northern Regional Association of Independent Temples, has not endorsed Share and Save? Didn't they even pull their support from the Shelter?"

Pinder was nonplussed. "That's an internal matter for them, don't you know. Heavy spending on their construction projects in Fairall has soaked up most of their discretionary funds. That's another issue in itself. I guess you know about their so-called 'in-gathering'?"

"Some sort of end-of-the-world event?" June said.

“Exactly. They’re convinced that they need to build a closed society, surrounded by forests, and distant from the East Coast, which the next great flood will supposedly drown. With ideas like that, you can’t be too surprised by their lack of interest in us. Coffee?”

June stood. “No, that’s O.K. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Pinder rose. “Let me know if you need anything else for your article. We want good press.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Harry sat in back of Lester's office with Arne Coleman. Millie Coleman, wearing a knit cap with stray hairs sticking out above her ears, sat in front of Lester. When the deputy had arrived at her house, she was washing her hair. She hadn't put on make-up or done her nails. She gripped her purse as if it were a stake to plunge into someone's heart.

Lester had no intention of indulging her. "Millie, you have withheld information from a criminal investigation. I expect some answers right now. What do you know about the murder of Dr. Carol Chapin?"

Millie relaxed her grip on the purse and crossed her legs. "Oh, that. Well, I found something."

"What?" Lester said. "Tell everything you know."

"When Arne and I finally decided to leave that wretched excuse for a garden show, we had no help from anyone. We had to carry our whole display—which wasn't even used—back to the trailer. And Arne had to move his model statue. All the time we were doing this, garden club members were passing us in the parking lot—like that Chapin woman and some of the new members who don't even come to all the meetings. They pretended not to notice us. Anyway, as I was coming out with the last flower pot, the parking lot had cleared and Arne was waiting in the car. I looked down and

saw a little kind of magnifying glass lying on the ground beside a coin purse. I picked them up. After looking at them, I threw them out the window as we left.”

Lester waited; then he said, “Go on, Millie.”

“What do you mean? That’s all there is.” She shrugged.

“No. You saw more.”

Millie pouted.

“Tell it all now, or you will be sorry later.” Lester folded his arms and waited.

Very slowly, Millie began to swing her foot. “Well, I did see more. It was where I found the magnifying glass. I saw that Chapin woman.”

“Dead?”

As Lester said this, Arne Coleman sat up straight. He obviously hadn’t heard this before.

“Hanging from the seatbelt out her truck door.”

“And you did nothing?” Lester said.

“I didn’t want to be involved. Someone else was bound to find her.”

“Oh, Millie!” Arne howled.

* * *

Jacey searched for Dan’s grades in his attaché case. The University had called. The grades were not in the case. Sometimes, while she slept, he would get up to work in the bedroom across the hall, now occupied by Stefany and her mother. She had found Dan simply sitting in the room and staring at the family pictures on the wall. She opened the door. Stefany’s clothes were on the bed. In the top drawer of the desk by the window, Jacey found a stack of Dan’s papers, including the student roster and grade sheet. Pushed into the back of the drawer was an unfinished letter, a love letter.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

When Millie left, Lester pulled off his tie. “Can you stay for a few minutes, Harry?”

Harry took a seat closer to the desk.

“You keep bringing me information after saying you’re leaving.” Lester said.

“Loose ends, I guess.” Harry said.

“I wonder if we should bring the Cooke boy back in. You know he worked at the Shelter?”

“No. Does it matter?” Harry glanced outside. The sun had set during Millie’s interview. Two lights in the parking lot had come on. If he stayed much longer, he could cancel dinner with June.

“Once Oz Ricks was back on his meds, he remembered that some women walked to the Shelter with him when he was going back from the garden show for macaroni night. Maybe Elrod saw them too.”

Harry pulled a penknife from his pocket, the monogrammed knife Bea had given him for his last birthday with her. “It seems like all those people walking around in the dark would have bumped into each other.”

“Yeah,” said Lester. “I’m still not convinced about Benton.”

“How do you mean? He had an alibi. Right?”

“Oh, sure. But he’s involved somehow. Look: Chapin came between him and his wife. Then there’s this guy Barker that you and Tim turned up.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know any Barker.”

“The Joe-Job, Harry. Barker is the other prof from Holburn U. who created the whisper campaign against Chapin. He doesn’t even know we’ve discovered him. He gave June Brightman a CD that he supposedly downloaded from Chapin’s computer. It seems to confirm the rumors he had created, but Tim Berry says it was doctored.

Harry slumped in the chair. “Better Tim than me. Where computers are concerned, I don’t know Java from Mocha. For a lady with so many good intentions, Carol Chapin made a lot of people mad.”

Lester took a soda from the small refrigerator behind his desk. “She also angered Millie Coleman—and you know how seriously those ladies take their flowers. Then you add Oz Ricks suddenly becoming clear-headed enough to tell us that one of the two ladies he’d seen before, visiting some Hospice patient, came to the Shelter at about the same time as the murder. And—“

“Wasn’t Ricks taking his medicines?”

“Yes, but according to the lab, he was taking a bootleg, half-strength med. No telling where he got it. And then one other thing—“

Lester paused to see how long it would take Harry to look up from staring at the pocket knife he was holding.

“What’s that?” Harry said, not looking up.

“It’s something the lab showed us about how Chapin died. At first, we assumed someone was waiting in the back seat of her truck to grab the lanyard and strangle her from behind. It turns out there were two people.”

Harry looked up.

Lester smiled, showing the gap between his front teeth. He picked up a pencil and held it like the cigarette he wished it was. “Someone was sitting beside her on the passenger’s side, leaning toward her, when the accomplice on Chapin’s left pulled the lanyard tight.”

“How did they figure that out?”

“Like many ladies, Dr. Chapin carried a tote bag instead of a purse. She had put it beside her on the seat. When the passenger got in and leaned toward her, he or she pushed against the bag, leaving an impression, and then got out leaving the door slightly ajar.”

“An impression on a tote-bag and an open door?” Harry said.

“It’s not evidence, but it raises questions.” Lester slowly ran his finger around the top of the soda can. “Not something you would pitch to the press—is it?”

Harry stood up. “This pitcher has given up too much to stay in the game.”

* * *

The lights dimmed in *La Pomme du Pin*, turning the pastel seascapes on the wall from blue to pale green. June was waiting at the same table where they had eaten on Ash Wednesday, weeks earlier. June’s giant tote-bag was in the chair that Harry pulled out.

“Let me get that.” She said.

“I’ll sit here.” He sat beside her. “You carried that around all day?”

“It looks like I’m camping, but I needed it for interviews. It holds my purse, camera, notebooks, and recorder.”

“Who did you interview?” Harry pointed to his selection on the menu as the waiter appeared.

“I made the rounds today: the Regional Shelter, several churches, and the Foundation Library in D.C. I’ll be glad to give the religion beat back to someone else after writing this last column.”

Harry noticed that June was not wearing much make-up. Her eyes were red.

“You look tired.” He said. “Religion must not agree with you.”

“It’s the practitioners of religion that keep me awake.” She said. “People like Gabriel Pinder and Bernard Benton.”

“What did Benton do this time?”

I interviewed him for my feature on Share and Save, but it turns out he doesn’t know much about it. He left it to his office staff.”

Harry reached for a bread stick. Holding it made him seem hungry. “Did he have any other staff than Sarah?”

“No. He gave me one of the same pamphlets as Pinder. Then he talked about his problems with printing church bulletins. He even asked whether I wanted a part-time job.”

“Sarah certainly won’t bail him out.” Harry said.

“No, when I saw her at the Shelter, she had enough to do with Stefany, her husband, and his mother.”

“She wasn’t worried about Benton?” Harry nibbled on the bread stick.

“No. And I called Jacey to let her know. The loss of Sarah means no more to Benton than the breakdown of a copy machine. Jacey, on the other hand . . . You know.” She patted his arm.

“Yes. I know.” He saw the waiter coming with their plates. “Maybe I’ll call her.”

“That’s good, Harry. It would help.”

The waiter flourished a cheese grater and asked more questions than Harry could answer. June waved him off.

“So, what have you been up to?” She said.

“After I called Lester about Elrod’s story, he wanted me to sit in on his interview with Millie Coleman.”

“He brought her in?”

“She wasn’t happy about it, but she finally admitted to picking up the hand-lens at the murder scene.”

“Millie saw the murder?”

“No. She discovered Carol after the fact. She didn’t want to get involved. Pretty cold-blooded.”

“Like the plants in her center-pieces.”

Harry picked at his grilled salmon.

“Lester didn’t suspect her?” June said.

“Lester suspects everyone—Millie, Benton, Elrod, Barker, a woman seen leaving the scene. He favors Benton—even with his alibi.”

“Barker is certainly creepy enough.”

Harry finally ate some salmon. “He was the source of the rumors, you know. That disk he gave you confirmed it.”

“And Barker thought he was confirming that Carol was on the take.” June took a notepad from her purse.

“Tim Berry had already pegged him for the Joe-Job.” Harry touched her notepad. “When he saw the disk and your notes, he compared the grammar and usage on the disk to those in the slanderous emails, he was sure that they came from the same pen. Don’t ask me how he did it.”

June looked through her notes. “That disk had some other files that puzzled me.” June pushed back her plate. “See here.” She showed Harry a table she had made. “Carol kept a record of her contributions to the Regional Shelter. With her husband, she had set up a generous trust fund for David Burton’s care. He is the only resident with a permanent room. She also endowed one and a half million dollars to the Shelter itself.

“And they still need plant shows and bake sales?” Harry said.

“Supposedly, the money is for construction, but from the appearance of the second floor, you wouldn’t know it. That got me thinking.”

Harry smiled.

“As I went around to the members of Share and Save today, I discovered that none of them really knew much about it. Like Rev. Benton, they knew that other churches were involved. They had heard testimonials from a few participants who had dipped into their S & S funds to pay for special programs. But no one really knew how it worked—including Pinder, who only said that the S & S Foundation was well funded.”

Harry poured himself another cup of coffee. “So you went to the Foundation Library.”

“Yes. I looked at the tax records for Share and Save. Pinder is the Chairman and various churches are represented on the Board of Directors.”

“Including Benton?” Harry said.

“Yes—Sarah Benton. She’ll probably resign. An interesting thing, though: the initial value of the investment fund was one and a half million dollars, deposited by the Shelter.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose.

June took the bill. “I’ll get it this time.”

They stood and walked to the entrance.

June pulled the tote-bag over her shoulder. “If I hadn’t seen Carol’s disk, I wouldn’t have noticed the amount. When I called Pinder, he was so concerned that I properly understand S & S that he is bringing more documents to my condo this evening. Guess I pushed a button.”

Harry wished he hadn’t finished the salmon. Reflux made it hard to talk. He wanted to loosen his belt. He shook his head.

“June, you should get some sleep. I’d suggest that you let this go for awhile.”

“You do the same, Harry.” She hugged him, heaved the tote-bag back onto her shoulder, and walked to her car.

* * *

Harry sat on his bed with Scrunch, the newspaper spread on his lap. At this time of day, he had usually read the paper to Bea.

“Bea, it’s me again. I’d like to believe that you can hear me, because that would mean that you go on elsewhere than in my mind. Wherever that is, the news of the day will hold little interest for

you. I'm ready to join you. We've seen each other through the worst. The best is behind. Neither today's nor tomorrow's news will improve on it."

He looked at the obituaries. Dan Connors was pictured in uniform—younger, thinner and happier than Harry remembered him. He had promised to call Jacey, but he really had nothing to offer her. He glanced at the phone.

Someone had left a message. He played it: "Mr. Pettiford, this is Jacey Connors. I need to talk to you as soon as possible."

"So much for letting things go." He said, dialing her number.

"Hello?"

"Harry Pettiford, Mrs. Connors."

"Thank you so much for calling back. I didn't know who to call about this. I thought that since you're with the police—"

"Well, actually—" Harry stopped himself, too tired to explain.

"What?"

"Go on, Jacey. It's all right." He said.

"I found a letter. You know that Sarah Benton's staying with me?"

"Yes. You were very kind. A letter?" He said.

"A love letter. It's from Sarah to someone named Gabe. Now, maybe it seems that I'm a nosy busy-body, but with Carol's death—and then Dan's, I—" Her voice broke.

"Take your time." Harry said.

"When I saw what she wrote about them '*cashing in on S&S once everything has quieted down,*' I wondered what it meant and whether—"

Harry stood up.

"Is Sarah there now?" He said.

"No. She's at the Shelter."

"O.K. Jacey, you were right to call. I'm calling the Sheriff."

"I don't want to get Sarah in trouble after all she's been through—"

"Yes. This may all be quite innocent. On the other hand, I want you to leave your house. Come sit with my Aunt Clarisse for a few hours. You shouldn't be home when Sarah comes back."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

After the memorial service for Dan Connors and Carol Chapin, the group assembled at a long banquet table in *La Pomme du Pin*. Harry asked Ed, who was sitting with Phyllis, about the man who had just gone to the buffet table.

“Who’s the man with the mustache?”

“Hank Randall.” Ed said. “He teaches at Holburn University. I asked him here after the service to introduce him to Elrod. You’re looking better than the last time I saw you, Harry. Phyllis tells me that you’re returning to Roanoke.”

“It was June’s idea. She wants out of the *Transcript* so that she can free-lance. She thought we both needed a change of scenery.” Harry took a forkful of salad.

“She was lucky to have you, from what I heard.”

“Too bad Millie Coleman didn’t have some luck,” Harry put a bowl of soup on the empty salad plate. “You heard about it?”

Ed shook his head.

“Two days ago, she backed into an oncoming dump truck and was killed instantly. It seems that she had a huge flower arrangement on the back seat and couldn’t see around it.”

June set down her plate and pulled out a chair. “Ed, it wasn’t luck. Don’t let Harry distract you. It was quick thinking. Harry called Lester and Officer Davis to come to my house only ten minutes after Pinder arrived. Pinder was already running scared. When they got him back to the station, he broke down completely.”

Harry buttered a roll. “Tell Ed about the pills.”

“He had potassium cyanide pills in his pocket,” she said.

Ed smiled. “Did he think he was a foreign agent?”

Harry noticed that Ed wasn’t wearing his glasses.

“The pills were for June.” Harry said.

June nodded. “Mr. Pinder was not exactly the benevolent pharmacist he appeared to be. He even diluted the meds of Shelter residents to add to his coffers.”

Phyllis set down her plate. “Did you want coffee?”

Ed shook his head. “June was telling us about the affinity scheme that Pinder and Sarah Benton had going. Where did they come up with money to make the first pay-outs?”

Elrod and Hank Randall, who had been standing behind the table holding their plates, sat down with the group. Hank and Harry shook hands.

“So you’re the sleuth who put it all together!” Hank said.

“More of a dupe than a sleuth, I’m afraid. It’s too bad that Dr. Chapin didn’t take all of her concerns to the police.”

“She was a wonderful woman. Sheila and I had them to our home many times,” Hank said. “Her work at Foxglove Preserve set the standard for cooperation between the public and academic communities. And—“

Ed broke in. “Careful now, Hank. We don’t need a lecture. I want to know why Carol was such a threat to Pinder and Sarah—particularly after she went out of her way to help Sarah and her daughter.”

“One and a half million dollars.” June said. “Like a sourdough recipe, every affinity scheme needs a starter. Pinder took the money that Carol had endowed to the Shelter. He used it to fund the Share and Save Foundation. With the endorsement of the Bentons’ church, other churches made contributions of, say, a thousand dollars each; then they waited for a month and received fifteen hundred dollars from their ‘investments’.

“Of course, everyone wanted to participate after those first pay-outs. Carol figured it out before anyone else. No ‘good cause’ could be *that* good. She asked to see Pinder’s books on her endowment. He panicked. Using the Craft Show as a cover, Sarah and he murdered Carol—”

Phyllis wrinkled her nose. “But Carol had driven Sarah home.”

“Pinder drove her back.” Harry said. “She was seen in the Shelter after the murder.”

“She always seemed so mousy. I can’t see her doing that.” Phyllis said.

“Yes.” June said. “But abuse and bullying don’t always create champions like Carol. Most of the time, the victims are too confused about what it takes to survive to reach past fear, anger, and desperation. Carol was special.”

As he studied Ed reading the wine list, Harry realized that Ed was wearing contact lenses. “Ed, you’ve changed your glasses.”

Phyllis clapped her hands. “Finally!”

Ed blushed. “I guess that’s not the only thing we’ve changed.” He held Phyllis’s hand with his. Both wore rings.

“Congratulations to both of you!” Harry and June clapped, catching the attention of those seated at the far end of the table. Aunt Clarisse and Jacey Connors looked up and smiled.

“I’m living at June’s place for now—” Ed said.

“*Our* place.” June said.

“And Elrod is living with his Aunt Pinky while he studies Biology at Holburn University. Right, Hank?” Ed looked pointedly at Professor Randall.

“Right, Ed.” Hank said. “I’m watching out for him. I know I owe you—especially after the last conference—but it’s also a pleasure to work with such a serious young man.”

Elrod smiled sheepishly.

Ed raised a glass. “And I’m keeping a job warm for him until he’s ready to take it. Now: A toast to Dan, to Carol, and—”

He touched Harry’s shoulder.

“And to Bea. To all of those who bring us together and reverberate forever in our hearts!”

THE END OF PART ONE

I'm at the other end of my arm.

by

Henry Randall

I'm still at the other end of my arm

If you watch carefully you will see me
Flickering between impulse and restraint,
Desire and satisfaction, deferral of
Some Great Plan and scraping the sink.
I exist between your whickering in the night
And the music in my teeth. There I was,
Clawing through a pail of oysters,
Steeped in their own liquor. There I was,
Walking with you down Duke of Gloucester
When you finally walked away from home.
Here, I still hold your hand. I'm still
At the other end of my arm. Just look.
Here.
Here. Just look.

Foreword

Being almost immortal means that you can be done with a thing and then become involved with it all over again. Even an old identity. This memoir begins with my letters to Elrod Cooke, a former student, recovered from his wife, Lena, when she was disposing of his things. I tell about my life with Sheila, my professional associations, and my experiences with Avery Crawley and his Ark Park, Fairall's Board of Faith and Practice, the Wiggins incident when Elrod was killed, and how Margaret Crawley took Dr. Irene Brooks hostage to make her write the history of the Northern Region. Maybe you are tired of postdiluvian stories about the defedding.

My regrets.

I don't claim novelty, impartiality or literary skill, but unlike other writers on this subject, I witnessed everything.

Hank Randall (originally)

October 18, 2008

Dear Elrod,

I was surprised to hear from you. Thanks for your sympathy and kind words. Your repeated requests for a copy of my book force me to confess that I have not finished it and, with Sheila gone, I probably never will.

Best wishes to you for a long and satisfying career. I know that's also what Ed Lashley would have wanted for you, in his place at Wando High.

Cordially,

Hank Randall



October 23, 2008

Dear Elrod,

It was good to hear how your classes are going. I stopped teaching at Holburn last semester. Most of the time, I read or write a little on the book, but it doesn't come to anything.

The boy whose family moved to Wando from Fairall would certainly make a case study. You know the kind of action research I used to talk about. You should consider it. Yes, his situation does remind me of our talks in the cafeteria about "nature's studios." Well, I must wrap up and get some dinner.

All the best,

Hank Randall



November 10, 2008

Dear Elrod,

Thanks for calling me. I enjoyed visiting you in Wando. The countryside was a wonderful change of scene from Holburn and all of the levee construction here. After leaving you, I tried to visit the Foxglove Preserve, but that's fenced off now, like the rest of the Northern Region.

Watching Oneal Wiggins in class was like stepping back in time. I hope that his family does not represent what's happening in the Northern Region.

Elrod, since you seem to care more about my unfinished book than I do, I'm going to put it all in a box this week and send it to you—but don't expect much. I kept getting off track. It's more of a meandering fugue than a book, and I don't feel well enough to have any more to do with it. I've added some explanations here and there, but mostly it's the way I left it two years ago—part textbook, part memoir. Now it's a Thanksgiving gift for both of us—for you to have it and for me to have done with it.

All the best,

Hank Randall



All the Other Saints

A meditation on my partners and nature's studios

For Elrod

By

Henry Randall, Ph.D.

*Wisdom cries aloud in the street;
In the markets she raises her voice;
On the top of the walls she cries out;
At the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
And fools hate knowledge?*

—Proverbs 1:20-22

CHAPTER ONE

The thing about wisdom is that she doesn't stay in the market place. She's painfully likely to show up anywhere, as Aeschylus said somewhere. And usually she appears too late.

Before I had to call the police after Sheila drove off in the minivan, I believed that I would finish writing my textbook—even after losing Wendell in the bombing incident at the *Flowing Brain* conference. I mean, I've taught my science methods course for elementary school teachers more than five hundred times in all of the cafeterias, conference rooms, off-campus sites, and supply closets the university could place instructional adjuncts. Now I wanted to write my own book, maybe for some extra income—even with only a few more years to use it—that is, when I used to think about retirement income.

Of course, my hodgepodge would never sell anywhere but the campus bookstore. Such an amalgam of science, philosophy, history and pedagogy would have been rejected even by a subsidy publisher. Adjuncts never retire, anyway, so retirement income was not really in question. But I had started writing before telling Wendell about it—almost two years before Sheila passed away. Now that she's gone, the habit of writing is as good a way as any to await nature's verdict—market place, retirement income, and wisdom all be damned.

The title I gave to Wendell was *Nature's Studios*, but now I've gone back to my original title—*All the Other Saints*. Here's a bit of it:

You do not need a lab or studio to learn about nature. The studios of nature are our daily experiences. You don't need the approval of authorities to enter the studios of nature. A long time ago, Roger Bacon said that the real test of truth is not authorities or logic but experience. Even without training, you are probing to understand.

You may have prayed for your daily bread. Well, here it is! All that you need for your nourishment and work surrounds you. The natural world is always at hand. Native peoples did not require houses, fences, pavements, or the innumerable objects in a Dollar Store. The Earth provided everything they needed. In a way, you are like the tuner on a radio. You are surrounded by signals, but the tuner must be turned on. You must select a channel. In the same way, you must dial up your own perception and cognition to find the work to which you are suited.

Imagine that you receive a message from one of our lunar stations. Images and data fill the screen of your console. The messages of your daily perceptions are like telemetric signals from the moon. Your brain relies on the telemetry of the senses. Without it, the brain is deaf, dumb, and blind inside its lonely, bony house. In the same way that lunar signals can be represented in binary code, sounds, pixels, and patterns, our perception and cognition present experience to us as images, symbols, odors, and pressures.

The saints of human experience receive messages with startling clarity. Set apart because they bring help, understanding, or delight, they become the masters of nature's studios—our teachers and partners in expressing our understanding of experience and therefore, of our love of each other. We call them sages, maestros, and "doctors of all those who know." Unfortunately, however, even for saints, the moments of clarity come at great cost. Sometimes, years of frustrating work are spent on retrieving and explaining the original insight. Other times, the costs are ridicule, obscurity, or worse—like seeing discoveries turned into weapons or wasteful products.

Of course, many discoverers do quite well and even grow rich. But the great joy of all who inquire is to find partners to share in the work. And because nature's studios are always open, even in our dreams, our partners may enter from any doorway—even from the past. As Lincoln said somewhere, "Writing is the great invention of the world . . . great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent and the unborn, at all distances of time and space . . ."

You get the idea. Today is All Saints. My textbook should list all the saints of science and imagination. They live in our dreams—like you, Sheila.

Wendell Brown gladly left the writing of biographies and religious allusions to me. With him out of the project, I can now do what I want—if I want anything but Sheila. As I write this, I'm looking through a spider web sprayed on the window of a bagel shop. My hagiography is like another kind of Halloween leftover. I write in the belief that there is still work for me to do.

Sheila, you are beyond my telemetry, but even when you were within reach, you were mostly beyond me. I had only your downy cheek, your high forehead, the clasp of your fingers, your whispers in my ear. You were beyond me, even when I was flooded with you—even when I knew that you were what my life was about.

Near you, I near a rarity,

Dear disparity.

I want to have you near;

Yet, much as I know you,

It is only near.

--Tom Farley, The Profit of Doom

I have seen you in twilight, morning light, in smoke, and fog, your image—sharp and obscure, bright and fading. The telemetry of my double-faced eyeball is channeled from tens of millions of signals and compressed—before the message even leaves my eyes—into bundles of only millions of signals, sorted by wavelengths and retinal coordinates. All of this processing occurs before my eye ever faces my brain. So much selection occurs before thoughts even flicker. All of that shaping and bundling flies off in multiple copies to all the managers of my cognition, who, like all managers, imagine they are in control.

As in any bureaucracy, the meaning of the reports will be lost. When I try to recall you, I find you filed under a thousand entries, behind a hundred doors—some with mountainous thresholds. What I make of you is not a reconstitution. My image of you is a wish, a fabrication, a dream, and a simulacrum. You are with the saints. I write to remember you rightly, but you escape into the mist of details.

* * *

Of course, the book I proposed to Wendell was different. It was to present scientific lab work as a kind of **studio** that comes naturally to human beings because their nervous systems are like scientists. That is, our nervous systems probe, sample, send telemetric signals, seek patterns, and verify what they find. Selective attention then sharpens our neural connections to notice more instances that fit the patterns.

Wendell liked the idea—or at least, I thought he did. I wanted to include sketches of the lives of artists, scientists, philosophers, mathematicians, engineers, inventors, and other saints of human imagination. Anyone would be included who had created new ways of thinking and living.

Wendell winced when I first said that.

We were in his office in the Physical Sciences building at Holborn University, talking about the book after a panel discussion that evening by his *Cratylus Society*—a group apparently fond of the idea that real communication is impossible and, therefore, the less one communicated, the better. That suited Wendell, but he hadn't gone as far as Cratylus, who, convinced that change was the only reality, finally stopped talking entirely, resorting to pointing and gestures. A man of principle.

* * *

On a Thursday evening, Sheila and I went to McKelvey Hall to our first Cratylus Society meeting. Although not a member, I had been invited to present a paper Symposium the following week. A few townspeople and black-clad students and professors stood by a table inside the entrance. Wendell hadn't mentioned that you had to buy tickets. Sheila wore a white blouse and the reversible *Dine* shirt that she'd bought at a pow-wow several years ago. Her hair was fastened back with a silver clasp in a long pony tail. In the crowd of black jackets, Sheila was like a lavender orchid growing in basalt.

We sat in the middle of the auditorium. Maybe you know how big McKelvey Hall is. The townspeople sat in front and the students and staff scattered around the room. The lights were dimmed except for spotlights on the panel. Wendell sat to the right of three other professors. I only recognized Ben Barker, a bearded guy who always sat in the back during faculty meetings after losing his bid for department chair. According to the program, he was to present a paper on *taxonomical misconceptions*.

Sheila pointed to one of the titles on the program and chuckled. "Did you see this?" she said.

The title of Wendell's paper was *Misconceptual Disasters*.

"He's a fine one to talk about disaster." She squeezed my arm.

I put my finger to my lips as the first presenter stood up.

Wendell was the last in a line of tiresome speakers. After his reading, an audience member asked, “In childhood, do you think that most misconceptions come from pseudoscience or does pseudoscience lead to misconceptions?”

The audience sighed.

Drinks and snacks waited in the foyer.

Wendell frowned. “It’s not a chicken or egg question. Our thinking about anything begins with concepts. As children, our novice concepts are based on limited experiences. Rich and varied experiences falsify such ideas as ‘the abominable cavity contains the heart, lungs, and vowels.’”

The audience laughed for the first time in the evening. Unfortunately, Wendell warmed to his subject.

“Verbal hooks are not the same as understanding. Children not only must recall but make sense of what they recall. The fact that the sense of the fragment doesn’t fit into the sense of the whole may not be noticed—particularly by the naïve thinker. Structure of knowledge is rooted in conceptual packaging of experience. Pseudoscientific knowledge is usually packaged for persuasion rather than comprehension.”

“I hope that’s all he has to say,” Sheila whispered.

No one raised a hand.

But Wendell talked for twenty minutes more about structure of knowledge and expert systems.

When he finally sat down, the moderator immediately dismissed us.

* * *

Looking down from Wendell’s office on Friday morning, a crisp day in November, we could see the remains of the sunken Washington Monument peeking through its scaffolding over the Potomac levees. Without prompting, Wendell talked about our book. Pleased with himself from the night before, he now thought the book should focus on fundamental misconceptions in physics and couldn’t see why I kept bringing saints into it.

So I told him about my dentist.

Dr. Arne Coleman had recently returned to dentistry after a brief stint as a freelance sculptor. One of his pieces was even commissioned for the Holburn waterfront. Sheila and I could see it from our apartment. After his wife died several years earlier, however, he lost not only his greatest promoter, but his interest in sculpture, or so he said. It seemed to me, however, that he had simply come back to the kind of sculpture that suited him.

It was while I sat in the dental chair that I realized we are always surrounded by saints. As I stared into the wide eye of a light with side-handles that looked like a puppy's ears standing up, Dr. Coleman was taking digital pictures of tooth number twenty, the second premolar on the lower left—or of its stumpy remains. He set himself the challenge of making a three-quarter crown. It would have been easier to cut it down and cover the stump, but he wanted to save it. He wore magnifying lenses and used fine-tipped probes and forceps to explore the space left in the tooth by the previous filling.

Using suction and a small blower to keep the cleaned area dry, he took more pictures of the space with his probe-sized digicam. Data from these photos were then used in an object-based program to produce images on a monitor beside his work tray. A form of computer-assisted drawing, the program first offered a proposal for the dimensions of the crown. Restarting the program allowed him to generate different proposals from the same data. The image finally selected could then be rotated and edited to obtain the desired features. As this tooth is not normally visible, his work did not have to be anatomically perfect. He only needed a crown that provided a good bite and was seated securely to prevent decay. Data from the image included sectional heights of the tooth and the depth of fissures to the tenth of a millimeter. Dr. Coleman looked like he was at the controls of a Mars rover. The completed image was a profile for use on a milling machine with two diamond cutting-heads, or index centers, which carved the crown from a ceramic block as the work was sprayed by miniature power-washers to keep it cool and free of fragments.

Sheila and I had watched a similar operation in a wooden shoe factory in Volendam decades ago. I suppose that *sabot*-makers watching such a machine set off the riots that gave us the word “sabotage.” The guides moving over the profile could be calibrated to make shoes of any size—the end of their livelihoods.

The resulting crown was about 1.2cm long and 0.6cm wide, resembling a child's baby tooth. A piece of ceramic the same shade as my other teeth and apparently as fragile as a chip of china, yet it was strong enough to withstand the tremendous forces of chewing. When the crown was seated, it did not quite fit. A slight amount of grinding on the sides with a hand piece permitted it to slip into place. Bands and wedges secured it as the cement was cured with an ultraviolet light. Pictures of the new crown revealed an irregular fine line between the crown and the remains of the original tooth. To my eyes, this tooth looked better than most of the others around it.

Though I see it, however, I understand it no better than I understand what was in the mind of the cave painter who chased a bison ten thousand years ago—or what is in the mind of a physicist tracing a boson today. I simply am not trained to notice what is relevant in order to understand this small work-

area. This small studio is accessible only to those with the tools and concepts that it evoked—a work-area like the niche for a saint.

Halfway through my dental story, Wendell had swiveled around to face his spiral periodic table, but when I returned to my office, I wrote a *Foreword to Nature's Studios*. Turning Wendell off seemed to turn me on.

* * *

This was the paper I presented at the Cratylus Symposium the following week.

Appointments with what is

Nature evokes our best efforts when we take it as a studio. In fact, nature brings these studios into being. We say that studios are “evoked” by nature because only by building studios to meet exacting specifications can we prepare to understand what nature has to teach.

In the studio of the mouth, or the even smaller studio of the work-area around tooth number twenty, we can approach our subject in only limited ways. We can ignore the limitations, of course, but then our approach will be clumsy at best, as demonstrated by the comparison of nineteenth century dentistry to the modern interdisciplinary field that draws upon physics, chemistry, metallurgy, engineering, gem-cutting, and other artisan and medical fields. By using the word “evokes,” I suggest, not that nature is a person, but that natural phenomena interact with us through a kind of mutual probing, such as occurs in studios of artists, engineers, scientists and artisans. Stanislavski said that actors enter their studio by asking “What if?” Poets, according to Hart Crane and Marianne Moore, enter their studio by “imagining what is.” Percy Bridgman, Alfred Whitehead, and some other philosophers of science have insisted on reminding us that objects are not stable and that our world is comprised of relationships and events, not absolute concepts and static objects. When we probe with fingers and ideas and artistry, nature probes back.

To enter the studio of tooth number 20 is to touch with finely tipped forceps, sickle-shaped probes and ball-burnisher—to see, with magnifiers and computer imagery, the chalky discolorations of the tooth, indicating that bacteria have slipped between dentin and enamel and released the acidic byproducts of fermentation. To enter the studio is to listen to computer-generated signals concerning the fitting of crown to tooth, and the milling of a ceramic block, and to watch for the marks left by bite-papers on a tooth that does not quite fit.

To enter this studio is also to use an array of conceptual tools equally fine and well-matched to the tooth's tiny topography. The anatomical structure of this studio is summarized in special terms such as mesial, lingual, buccal and distal. These terms are operationally defined in rotations that show the surface, tongue-side, cheek-side and overview of the tooth. Such terms are essential for thinking about the fitting of the crown in three dimensions. Since the times of Galen and Vesalius, the tools and terms have historically evolved to fit more closely to the studio of tooth number twenty.

Indeed, some of the human experience in this studio has been transferred to the computer program and the robotic milling tools, just as the experience of thousands of years of surveying has been transferred to the tiny computer atop a tripod being used by the young man in a baggy hip-hop costume standing outside the dental office when I left. Whatever uses he had for the proofs of Eratosthenes or priestly Egyptian trigonometry were digitally summarized in the device quietly rotating to detect a signal from its mate on the other side of the highway.

Customized dental work previously done elsewhere by appliance technicians is now done by a sophisticated office device that incorporates the knowledge of those technicians and improves on their speed and precision. And just as wooden shoes can be mass-produced, dental crowns could conceivably be mass-produced if dentists were more concerned with speed than with saving the usable remains of damaged teeth. Terms such as learning, practice, study, production, application, artistry, science, and engineering are very useful in generating incomes for millions of people, but they don't really have much to offer in understanding the kind of personal work and partnership with saints that occurs in a studio.

Robert Henri warned aspiring artists that they must first be masters of what they already possessed. So it is with the studios around us, all of them inhabited by saints, like the alcoves around a cathedral or the spaces for the avatars of Vishnu in an Indian temple. Academic distinctions are valuable to those that make them, but the work of studios goes on without them, just as the building of temples, tombs, and churches of the past went up and withstood the elements—all without reference to what went on inside them.

One of the aims of our book is to offer some features that may help us to notice these appointments with what is. Certain features characterize all studios. Studios are not simply places. When actors or musicians talk about studio work, for example, they refer not to a place but to the perfection or modification of performance. Musicians and audio engineers like Teo Macero even say that the music studio is another kind of musical instrument.

Studios are relational arrangements for the purpose of understanding. Certain features, shown in Table 1, are shared by all studios, whether they are the work-spaces of painters, chemists, engravers, musicians, writers, or engineers. Examples throughout this text will show how the masters of studio-work have conducted and talked about their investigations. As you think about the children you teach, we challenge you to transform your classroom into a studio for inquiry.

Table 1

The characteristics of a studio for inquiry

- *A frame of reference which sets the range of scales of observation,*
- *A point of view or orientation to inquiry, together with arrangements that enable it, and partners to share the inquiry,*
- *Appropriate units of measurement and methods of calibration,*
- *Specialized tools, concepts and operational terms,*
- *Quantitative relationships and patterns,*
- *Sampling procedures, including methods of verification and ways of assessing whether samples are representative and methods valid,*
- *Methods for transferring or automating what has been learned, and*
- *An evocative and evolving relationship between subject and object.*

* * *

Although I had been making similar comments to classes for years, I first presented this outline during the Cratylus seminar on “*the future of learning in the arts and sciences.*” After my comments about studios, a postgraduate biochemistry student named Crawley, whom I’d previously taught as an undergraduate, asked about “scaling up” the design of a studio to bring an entire community to change its frame of reference.

Wendell quipped that the Third Reich had had some success with that during the 1930's.

The student sat down.

I thought that the young man deserved a more serious answer. "You're really asking how to improve the education of a whole community. Textbooks aren't the answer. The information in books that Dr. Brown and I have written to improve the public's scientific literacy can only be mediated if the students forced to read them become teachers. Clearly, the commercial media fall short. But there *are* some ancient models of community renewal through education."

What had occurred to me was a *huskanaw* that Sheila and I had witnessed at one of the powwows we attended every year. Not that I was much of a Saponi, but I wanted to claim any part of the genomic heritage to which I was heir. Anyway, in the initiation, the novice is led by some *powah*—a person who has visions—to reset both his perceptions and concepts.

The *Cratylus Society*, however, would not take kindly to praising a vision quest, so I said that, even in science, "We need masters to lead us to re-set our percepts and concepts. Call these adjustments 'frameshifts.' You make a frameshift every time you look at an analog clock. The same clock face measures in seconds, or minutes, or hours. It's so familiar that we don't think about it. What if a community were equally familiar with shifting between, for example, *likelihoods*?

"For example, the likelihood of suicide is almost twice that of homicide, but this is not what you would conclude from news accounts and crime fiction. People trained to shift their attention easily between risks of low and high likelihood would make better decisions. All options are not equivalent for any decision. Trained attention is a precursor to making frameshifts. A community comfortable with frameshifting would resist demagogues, quacks, and marketing.

"For example, what our government is currently calling 'saline incursions' might also be called the 'leading edge of a new interglacial period of decreased land areas.' The former label suggests a low risk; the latter, a high risk. You know that during previous interglacials, our East Coast moved fifty or more miles inland—sometimes even west of the Fall Line here in Virginia. Does that sound like a risk worth considering?

"Frameshifting is common in studio work, where zooming in and out, for example, is used to solve problems; therefore learning in studios could help to make the members of a community more capable of making wise political and personal decisions. In studios, our guides help us to become familiar with customary methods of craft and investigation, of measuring, of using different scales of observation, of sampling, of pattern-seeking, and of verification. In a lab or studio, labels are less important than experiences."

Wendell could hardly sit still. Newton and Dirac were not medicine men, he said. “Nature is the master. Scientists uncover the structure of nature. They don’t go into trances to have visions. They collect data”

Wendell went on in this way for half an hour. The young graduate student stared at his feet.

When Wendell stopped, I took the microphone again—but not to quibble over the meaning of “nature” or catch Wendell in the old Baconian fallacy about concepts magically emerging from data-sets. No, I tried to agree with him.

“Yes,” I said. “Why distinguish human events from other events? The term ‘nature’ is synonymous for ‘*what is.*’ The conditions under which nature becomes a studio for any of us will vary widely, but appointments with nature, as with dentists, are inescapable. We cannot, for example, all be dental experts, but we can, with a little effort, enter the dentist’s studio to understand what she is doing there. And we can enter other natural studios to see what we can understand. We can’t all be experts in all areas. In fact, there are more kinds of phenomena to study than there are humans to study them. But we can stay long enough with some of the masters to grasp their points of view and frames of reference. As we learn, we can begin to notice studios all around us. We will come to expect that there is always an appointment waiting for us in any studios we can learn to notice. And there is always a saint waiting there to guide us—a master who knows how to perceive, how to measure, sample, and understand, even if the master is only present in a book, performance, painting, or mathematical formulation never previously applied to the situation.”

Then I suggested that, under the right conditions, a studio might even be able to include a large group—like a town, for example. The negative exemplars of Nazism, dystopias, and modern marketing campaigns notwithstanding, I argued that a community might even be set up to sustain inquiry and verification. Such a town might even showcase the “best practices” for continually making new insights—or shifts in frame of reference—more readily available to all members of the community.

“What if people routinely welcomed new ideas and viewpoints?” I said. “What if everyone in such a town routinely had ‘appointments with what is?’”

The moderator brought the panel to a close by saying that “only Dr. Randall could weave a utopia from art studios, saints, and dental offices.”

* * *

As I was saying before, this gives you an idea of how the textbook would have run. I liked the optimistic tone. Wendell was not impressed.

Back in the science department, I carried on about my saints for half an hour after the symposium. “The saints are always with us,” I said, trying for a grand finish—something worthy of Sheila.

Wendell’s eyebrows rose.

“Trying even to number them is like trying to list the names of God.” I said. “In fact, it is the same thing. Faraday understood this when he made his first studio his own mind. Alan Hirshfeld wrote in his biography of Michael Faraday that the young bookbinder’s apprentice, like other earnest young people of the time, took Isaac Watts’ *Improvement of the Mind* as his guide to personal reform and to a more careful study of electricity. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses ready to penetrate our ignorance like a swarm of feral bees ready to move the hive if we will prepare a place for them—a place for both the stinging threat and the buzz of imaginative, constructive work. It’s no coincidence that Renaissance engravers would sometimes include a beehive between the library stacks where scholars labored.”

I don’t really recall everything I said, but it went something like that.

Wendell quietly waited for me to finish; then paused and said, “Hank, when you’re on a tear, it’s just better to wait for you to land. Some other time, when you’re ready, we’ll talk about using my misconception index.”

He leaned back in his chair and gazed at the spiral periodic table pinned up over his desk. He was in his late fifties, portly, with a shiny head, and a beard like Lenin’s. He didn’t suffer fools, but he never told them so. There were other ways to pin back our ears.

I had baited my hook by showing interest in Wendell’s misconception index. He was quite ready to let me do the other writing, but he wanted to publish his index. Like Gertrude Stein, Wendell wanted words free of associations, terms as elemental as the purified products of chemical reactions. Like Buckminster Fuller, he was offended even by words like “up” and “down”. Wendell lived in a frame of reference all of his own.

“On a planet, one moves *out* or *in*, not *up* and *down*.” He once said with a grumpy snort.

For Wendell, the real project of our book was to banish words like “sunrise” from the language. He would have replaced it with “sunview.” He never said how he would translate “sunset.” He outlawed all misconceptions, whether from usage or dead metaphors. Squirrels do not bury acorns “for” the winter, and, as far as Wendell was concerned, humans were also much less intentional than they imagined. He was also peeved about mistaken uses of scientific terms, such as saying “evolve” when

you meant “develop.” The misconception index would provide an easy way for teachers to avoid these pitfalls. To put it bluntly, Wendell was a purist. Like Roget, he’d collected lists of misconceptions and pseudoscientific expressions as I had collected lists of saints. For a year or so, we really thought we were working together, but, as I said, Wendell stayed in his own frame of reference. His wife, Diane, certainly knew that.

She’d known it a long time. But I would never have known if Sheila hadn’t seen her at Holburn mall with her yard man, and had a long talk with her over the phone the following night. I did wonder why she was always coming to Wendell for money, as she did when I was talking about a cloud of witnesses. She took off her sunglasses, removed a ten-penny-sized hairpin from the loose bun she had made of her coppery brown hair. Holding the clasp around her hair, she stabbed the bun again and seemed satisfied with it. Wendell pulled out his checkbook when he saw her at the door. Diane stared at my red cowboy shirt with white pearl buttons.

“Sheila has a shirt just like this,” I told her as I straightened my bolo tie with the turquoise thunderbird clasp. “We’re going line-dancing.”

“Hank, you’re a hoot,” Diane said.

“It’s chow-chow night.”

She was puzzled.

“It’s a relish,” I said.

“So.” She paused.

Wendell tore out the check.

“Everyone eats relish?”

“It’s a contest,” I said. “For the chow-chow prize.”

“Which is what?” She said, taking the check and pausing in the doorway to stare at her silver sandals and purple toenails.

“Oh, this year it’ll probably be an old CD of Patsy Cline.”

“Like I said, Hank.” She turned to leave. “You’re a hoot.”

Wendell pulled an apple from his desk and began to peel it with his pocket knife. The skin slipped off in a ribbon. Without watching Diane through the window as she got into the car and drove off, he returned to staring at the spiral periodic table on the bulletin board. I guess that I noticed this because, when one of us had to leave, Sheila and I always watched the other until we disappeared from each other’s sight.

Anyway, I say that Faraday's first studio was his own mind because he took the nonconformist preacher's book to heart. Faraday certainly also knew many of Watts' hymns, like *Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun*, with the lines:

*Blessings abound where e'er he reigns;
The prisoner leaps to lose his chains,
The weary find eternal rest,
And all the sons of want are blest.*

Both Faraday and Watts knew what it meant to be "sons of want," and both looked for the kinds of improvements of mind and circumstance that would bring justice, industry, and comforts to working people *before* they arrived in heaven. They had known too well from their own childhoods what Watts described in his most famous hymn, *O God, our help in ages past*:

*Time like an ever-rolling stream
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.*

Human beings are short-lived, easily annihilated by sickness, poverty and overwork, and always prone to pride, error, and a disturbing tendency to act out everything we imagine in our big brains, as Kurt Vonnegut says, even when it will explode the world. Indeed, even for the religious person of Faraday's time, it was not enough to wait for heaven or for Jupiter's "moons (to) wax and wane no more."

I assume that Watts was referring to Jupiter, both because of the plural and of his textbooks on logic and natural theology. As Watts would say, we must read the messages that God has left for us in the hills that stand "in order," and in other natural patterns. To do this, we must make tools of our minds and see things for ourselves, instead of simply accepting the authoritative statements of experts—even though Liam Hudson's old book, *Frames of Mind*, suggested that those who go into science are likely to be risk-averse and change their opinions when told what authorities think. It reminded me of Wendell.

But like Benjamin Franklin, another electrical pioneer, Faraday was an autodidact and joiner. What he could not learn from books he was determined to learn from public lectures and associations with others of like mind. Like other saints, he wanted partners, like Davy and Thomson, so that he could see around his own corners and also overcome the objections of his better-educated continental colleagues. His greatest partner was Maxwell, who not only accepted Faraday's idea of curved lines of force but had the maths to apply his idea to gravitation—daring to improve on Newton. Faraday didn't stay in one frame of reference. He let the cloud of witnesses come to reside in him, as if he were one of his own accumulators, not of charges but of ideas and hope—hope that, as Burns, Schiller, and others of the time were saying:

*...come it may
As come it will, for a' that,
The pith of sense and pride o' worth
O'er a' the earth,
May bear the gree, and a' that.
For a' that and a' that,
It's coming yet for a' that,
When man to man the wairld o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that.*

* * *

I sang a bit of this to Wendell later in the same month, on St. Andrew's Day.

He endured it admirably.

I was in a tartan for the Scottish Games that Sheila and I were attending in the afternoon.

"It's the *hope* that we're missing from those early scientists and philosophers, their optimism, Wendell."

I sat on the lab stool that he used for physics demonstrations, my sporran hanging between my legs.

"False hope, unwarranted optimism," he said.

Wendell had come in late that morning. He hadn't shaved or changed his shirt from the day before.

I didn't know what was going on, but clearly he needed cheering up.

"Look at it this way," I said. "For me, religion is not about creeds. It is a response to personal transience and certain annihilation. While self-protection is our first impulse, we quickly realize that

others are needed. Trust comes before everything else. We form limited partnerships. Next, we begin to include others in wider partnerships, and then, as trust increases, to enter more dutiful relationships. The basis for community is trust, not self-interest. We feel for others, project ourselves into their points of view, and from this empathy we develop compassion—and, finally, wisdom. For me, this is religion in a nutshell. It's the religion anyone can understand and use.”

I sipped coffee from a parrot mug that Sheila and I had picked up at a Jimmy Buffet concert in Virginia Beach, when there was a Virginia Beach..

Wendell turned to look at his spiral periodic table. He opened his lecture notes and pretended to read. Maybe he wasn't pretending.

I went back to my office. Talking with Wendell always led to more writing for the textbook, particularly when he refused to say anything:

At their best, religions recruit the emotions we need in order to face annihilation and to find the trust and steadiness for study, work, making decisions, and solving problems. This is what compassion does for us. It's very practical. Wisdom is the consequence of deciding to live compassionately and without grasping. A wise person, like the ancient twisted oak in the Taoist parable, becomes useless to the manipulations of others simply in refusing to live by grasping. This is a productive state of mind for imaginative work. It clears so much out of the way that one can get on with the work of understanding—the studio work.

Writing this, I realized what was wrong with trying to extract religion from our thinking, like Wendell and the *Cratylus Society*. Religion was part of the neural machinery. Language and religion arose together. Witness Roy Rappaport's idea that the idea of the sacred was originally a way to sanction liars. The new idea of language was a wonderful way for rascals to turn bonding into deception, Ponzi schemes, and affinity scams. Religion put a brake on excessive opportunism.

One can fault the religious scientists, like Faraday, Watts, Kepler, Newton, Mendel and Michelson, for their versions of natural theology. But do not fault them for linking themselves to the powerful, world-altering, class-shattering, kingdom-building, flywheel of religious energy. Their genius pushed them into their work and their hopes pulled them forward. When racing with annihilation, you need all the pushes and pulls you can find to keep yourself moving. Mainly, I just needed Sheila.

Since the early scientists, other saints, unconcerned with theology, have simply had different objects of devotion, but no less religious energy. They do not need to imagine a master in the studio to enable them to accept the direction and correction they find there.

Faraday, steadily working through mistakes in his laboratory in the bookbinder's shop, probing and being probed by electrical phenomena, was as thrilled by the constant divine attention he was receiving as Brother Lawrence in his kitchen or Gerard Manley Hopkins, writing his poems:

*Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.*

And when Darwin and Skinner, scientists with little interest in natural theology, were working with their pigeons, they were no less attentive than Hopkins to the directions and corrections they received. Darwin saw the innumerable human fingers that had shaped the pouters, tumblers, barbs, and fantails loved by pigeon-fanciers. Skinner, for all his insistence on the irrelevance of the inner workings of bird-brains, was as carefully trained by his pigeons to perform according to their movements, motivations, and capacities as if they had been his drama coaches.

* * *

I had to tell Sheila. This was the angle I wanted for the book. I had no classes, so I went home. She had tied her hair back in a short ponytail as she worked at the kitchen counter, where she was dripping sticky, white puddles onto waxed paper. A plate of pecan clusters sat near the sink.

"Mints and Texas millionaires," she said. "Don't touch 'em. The only thing Scottish about them is the whiskey, but I expect every one of them to make it to the games."

She put down her spoon and put her arms around me. "I thought you were going to work all morning."

As I looked at her wide, brown eyes, I realized that I could no more convey my excitement about an angle on saints and their natural studios to Sheila than I could to Wendell—or to a book publisher. It was an idea going nowhere. Who was going to publish something about the saints of dentistry, the

natural theology of hymns, and the notion that science education could be improved by entering natural studios to be surrounded by a cloud of witnesses? No wonder Wendell was unimpressed.

“Hank?” Sheila frowned. She had a spot of mint candy on her chin.

I licked it off.

“What are you up to?” She held me at arm’s length.

“Well. Why do you think I would come home at this time of day?” I caressed her shoulder.

We didn’t spend any time that morning talking about pigeons.

CHAPTER TWO

The next time I saw Wendell, he was reading one of his old back-issues of *Analog* magazines.

“Those go back a ways,” I said.

“Better than today’s rot.” Wendell wiped donut glaze from his mustache. “Fantasy ruined science fiction. It introduced too many variables.”

I tried to look interested. “Too many variables?”

“Yeah.” Wendell twirled back to the donuts on his computer keyboard. “Ben Bova used to say that the formula for the best science fiction was to make only one supposition and let the story develop from its consequences. Like, suppose that electromagnetic signals were detected from certain viruses? Then the rest of the story would develop from that one idea. You wouldn’t bring in alien, a meteorite strike, or death-rays.”

“Like Adelard of Bath,” I said.

“Who?” Wendell snapped at the remains of the donut slipping from his fingers, showering bits of glaze onto his beard and lap.

“Adelard was a twelfth-century monk. I heard about him in a lecture by Steven Goldman. While Adelard accepted religious doctrines, he refused to call them explanations. Stars were not bright *because* God hung them in the heavens. He insisted that natural events be explained in natural terms.”

Wendell pursed his lips. “Not really the same thing, is it? I mean, the religious beliefs are extraneous to the explanation. I guess that’s what you’re getting at?”

I brushed off some of the donut glaze he had just flicked my way. “Yes. I think of it as accommodating to what is. For example, if you want a chemical reaction to go forward, you have to accommodate to the law of mass action. Skinner had to accommodate to the world view of his pigeons if he was going to shape their behavior.”

Wendell nodded slowly.

I said, “Without accommodating to the contingencies of nature, the worlds of pigeons, rats, and molecules, we do not learn. Imagination helps us to get outside ourselves. When we enter the world-view of an animal, for example—what Tinbergen called the *Merkwelt*—we notice all sorts of things, like the spots on a herring gull’s beak, or the silhouette of a hawk. Temple Grandin, the animal psychologist, actually walks through cattle guides at the cow’s level so that she can notice things like bits of yellow fabric, which throw the cattle into a fit. She shifts to the cattle’s frame of reference. Kekulé had a similar experience as he projected himself into the world of carbon atoms. Or, think of looking at Rembrandt’s self-portrait and not noticing much until you focus on his eye and the whole painting leaps into three dimensions. “

“We never really get outside ourselves,” Wendell said, as he shut the door and lit a cigarette. “You can imagine all you want.” He paused. “Here’s a poem for you:

*‘There is a knocking in the skull,
An endless silent shout
Of something beating on a wall
And crying, Let me out. . .’*”

“It sounds like Percy Bridgman,” I said.

“Ogden Nash.” Wendell twirled back around in his chair to face the spiral periodic table. He took a long drag, snuffed the cigarette on the side of the trash can, and then stripped the paper away, letting

the tobacco fall into the can. He stood up, dropped the donut box into his attaché case, and turned off the light.

I recalled Sergeant Sanchez telling us to field strip our cigarettes—as if the Cong could not smell us—fat, milk-drinking GI’s—just as the Snake tribe who bathed daily in the cold Columbia smelled the stink of the white men in the Lewis-Clark party, all of them overdressed in their woolies and leather coats. Only white men would think they had been mistaken for gods.

The holidays passed, bringing the spring semester in mid-January. Wendell did not say much about our project, although he wrote a few chapters. I don’t think he really liked the word “studio” because it suggested arts and crafts rather than science laboratories. Only research interested him, but Holburn University did not have much laboratory space for research, even for professors like Wendell, whose private grants paid for the equipment. To the surprise of some professors in the department, he had made department chair at the age of thirty-five and had continued to carry a full load of chemistry and physics courses while taking his research off-campus (on something called the “plasmid switch”) to a classified facility run by a federal contractor, *S & U, Inc.*. Wendell enjoyed being mysterious about what he did there. All that I knew about the place where he worked was that it had been so large that Foxglove Reserve, the federally funded mitigation site set up to abate its environmental damage, spread over more than five hundred thousand acres. Some of our biology professors had conducted fieldwork in the Reserve before it was closed to outsiders by the Northern Region.

* * *

January 12, 2009

Dear Elrod,

I'm glad that you're enjoying my book, even though it's not finished. Yes, I did hear about Dr. Crawley's later achievements, but I didn't know about his visits to the Northern Region. As for other sources on Faraday and Watts, as the French say, "je sèche." It beats me—I'm dried up. That old idea for a textbook is as cold as my feet.

I appreciated your explanation of how Ed became involved with the Wiggins clan. I had never heard the whole story. Years ago, Ed told me about Oneal's older brother, and the family's strange dialect, but he didn't tell me about their connection to the Northern Region. I look forward to coming to the environmental camp this spring. Thanks for the invitation. Ed would have been proud of the way you have taken to science teaching at Wando High. Take care of yourself.

Hank R.



CHAPTER THREE

*“All things on earth shall wholly
pass away like narrow smoke
rising from couch grass
char, as a baler ranks
up windrows, curls up
and throws hay in determinant array. . .”.*

-Tom Farley, The Profit of Doom

At Spring Break, Sheila and I attended a concert given by one of the music professors, a lanky young man with long curly hair. Liszt was all he wanted to play. The next day, we drove down to our cove near Urbana. Sheila had wanted to leave earlier, but I felt obliged to go to the faculty concert. Before going to the camp, we spent several hours wandering around the shops on Duke of Gloucester in Williamsburg and the Pottery outside town. Sheila filled the back seat with gifts, party favors, and fudge

for her home projects and parties in the fall. At sunset, we parked next to our seventeen-foot Timberline by the inlet. We didn't fish much. We just liked to tramp around the woods and watch the sun set over the water. Sheila insisted on leaving phones at home. I didn't mind.

The second night, we heard trucks moving into the Assembly Grounds next door, near the boat racks. The following morning, taking down our boat, we noticed a giant tent with a sign in front—**RALLY TONIGHT. ALL WELCOME. SAVE THE EARTH!** We set the canoe in the water and paddled a half-mile downstream to a neighbor's dock.

Charlie Siebert, a Cherokee farmer, and May, his wife, came to the lake after harvest and planting. Sometimes we spent the evenings playing canasta or forty-two while the ospreys settled on their high nests after a day spent flying up and down the river. On those nights, the distant loons mourned unstoppable losses with their three-note call.

A silver eel flashed across our bow as Charlie pulled it from the water.

"Not much today," he said, unhooking the eel and tossing it back. "Good to see you, Sheila! I guess Hank had to come with you?"

Sheila laughed and threw him the line. "Brother Eel tell you anything, Charlie?"

"He asked me was it true what is said about trees—that they're hard in the spring and soft in summer." Charlie twined the fishing line around his hand and pointed to his cabin. "Come on up."

We trudged quietly up the bank, stepping around the poison ivy. Sheila stopped at the steps and frowned.

Charlie grinned. "You're wondering why Brother Eel said that?" He tapped a log. "Well, he can't study spring-wood with a microscope, like Brother Hank. All he has to go by are the green, hard-headed *Wasichus* who lean over the water trying to catch him with a hook."

Sheila shook her head. "I knew you'd think of something, Charlie. What's a wahseeka?"

Charlie let them into the house. “*Lakota* word for white folks. It means ‘they who take all the fat for themselves.’ That comes from Joseph Bruhac, an *Abenaki* writer. Any stuff I know about my people comes from books. Check it out!” He tossed me a book from the mantel, went into the bedroom, and came out again.

“May’s still out picking mushrooms,” he said. “Let’s sit.”

The morning light streamed in through windows and cracks between logs. The cabin’s dirt floor was covered by a bamboo mat. A coffee pot sat on a small pot-belly wood-stove in the corner. On the kitchen shelves were a few jars of preserved beans and peaches from their farm. Besides these items and a small bed and suitcase in the bedroom, no other belongings were visible. The camp was a place for leaving other places behind. It was the same for Sheila and me.

Sitting down on the mat with us, Charlie took off his fishing cap, his pecan-brown face lined from years of farm work. He pointed to the book.

“It’s sad when even the People have to learn about themselves from anthros. But maybe tonight we can be the anthros—as long as Sheila isn’t too busy making pine-cone men.”

Sheila tossed her hair back. “You know I like prickly men, Charles, but I’m not making those again this Christmas. What’s going on tonight?”

“My neighbor’s preaching next door. Actually he may become an in-law. So I feel obliged.”

“Ida’s interested in him?”

“Not Avery—his son, Will. Avery Crawley is one of the big-wigs in Rectortown and Fairall. His shop, or whatever it is, is between our place and Lake Hennessey.”

“I had a student named Crawley,” I said. “He was a biochemist, not a minister.”

“So’s this one.” Charlie said. “Maybe same guy. He doesn’t preach the way you’d expect. Sometimes he even sounds like you, Hank.”

“That bad, huh?” Sheila laughed. A beam of light crossed her face.

For a moment, both Charlie and I were transfixed by the glow of her face, the joy in her.

“What’s going on here—a séance?” May stood in the doorway behind us, an ammo belt hung with small cloth bags around her waist. She was small but large-boned, with high cheek bones, brown eyes and big hands. She reached behind her head to tie back her hair. “Ready for a mushroom omelet?”

We didn’t turn it down.

* * *

That evening, Charlie and I went to the tent meeting. May and Sheila declined, telling us they would read about it when we published our observations of native customs.

As we neared the tent, Charlie suggested that we not enter too soon.

“I like being close to the door-flap,” he said. “Anyway, Crawley doesn’t come on until after the warm-up.”

He stared at me. “You know.” He said. “They do some trance dancing before they’re ready to listen to wisdom. Of course, they got the idea from the First People.”

The trance dance turned out to be a frenzy of shouting, babbling, arm-waving, chanting, and singing. An ensemble of guitars, pump-organ, drums, tambourines, accordion, and saxophone filled in all the missing frequencies. I was glad to stand in the doorway with the greeters.

The first warm-up preacher was a tall, thin, flat-haired fellow whose nasal voice whined through the speakers like an amplified mosquito. The second preacher wore a black suit matching his skin, interrupted only by a clerical collar. From where we were standing, it looked like his head was floating over his body.

“In those days. Say ‘amen;’”

“Amen!” the crowd chanted.

“I say, in those days, before the flood, they were eating and drinking. Amen?”

“Amen!”

“They were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage. Amen?”

“Amen!”

“And they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away. You hear that?”

“We hear it!”

The litany pushed up the fervor of the crowd while the music modulated up, the volume rose, and the drum section tried to sound like a hurricane. A small black man squeezed into the doorway.

“Dr. Randall?” he said.

“Elrod. I didn’t recognize you. This is Charlie Siebert. Elrod Cooke—one of my former students. You’re teaching in Wando now?”

He nodded. “Thanks to you and Mr. Lashley.”

“Are you a member of this group?”

“No. It’s my wife, Lena. She’s always been a member of the Temple Independents—even before they started the In-gathering to Fairall.” He wiped his face with a handkerchief. “It’s too hot in there for me.”

We stepped into the parking lot to be able to hear each other, but still had to shout over the speakers set up on poles around the camp. Hundreds of people sat on lawn chairs outside the tent, many with Bibles in their laps. We walked to the far end of the lot, surrounded by a string of Christmas lights.

“These rallies are exhausting,” Elrod said. “But Lena is expected to be here—”

“And that means you’d better be here too,” Charlie said. He scraped a twig with his pocket knife. “We know about that, don’t we, Hank?”

“The ladies are worth it,” I said. “But I can’t say that I would want to participate in this, uh, worship service.”

Charlie squatted and drew a circle on the ground with his pointed stick. “I can worship in any style, but I prefer the People’s old way—walking under the sky, among the trees, and between the corn

rows in tassel-time, getting dusted with the holy corn pollen. Tribes don't matter—Iroquois, Ojibwas, Nazarene, Baptist, Zulu, Roman, San. All of the traditions lead back to the old way.”

Elrod stared at Charlie. “That’s how my Aunt Pinky used to talk”

Everything about Elrod was in miniature—not that he was a midget. He was about five feet tall, compact, and very dark. With his large glasses, he reminded me of pictures of Billy Strayhorn.

He spoke again, looking around to see if anyone else was listening. “I don’t know whether this group from Fairall is satisfied with worship. The way they’ve been buying up land, taking over the town and surrounding themselves with fences and security guards, they seem to have other things in mind. I have a student, Oneal Wiggins, whose family is heavily involved with the Temple Independents. His father trucks trash to the big recycling center outside Fairall.”

“The Salvage Yard at the Ark Park,” Charlie said.

“Yes, that’s right. I thought that Oneal had a speech impediment until the parents finally came to school. Parents and children all spoke the same pidgin. Professor Randall, you might be interested.” Elrod pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. “I’m thinking that it’s a genetic disorder, like the KE family in Britain. You know—where the FOXP2 gene was discovered. Anyway, the father has four sons. When they finish tenth grade, he pulls them out of school to work full-time on the trucks—says they must prepare for the end-times. Oneal is the last one left in school—a middle-schooler. I’ve been trying to get him some special services, but the father won’t sign off on it.”

“Wait a minute!” Charlie said. “Hear the quiet?” He stood up. “The main event is onstage.”

No one even breathed. The drums were finally silent. The lights had dropped except for a tiny spotlight about the size of a dime from where I watched in the parking lot. The spotlight searched the stage until a single figure stood up. I could hardly see him. The crowd broke into applause and hallelujahs, stamping their feet and standing up. We couldn’t see anything for ten minutes. Finally, everyone sat down and Avery Crawley began to speak. I wouldn’t be able to tell you what he said

without the copy of the sermon I later received from Tom Farley. According to Tom, Avery's speeches were all variations on the same message.

"All things on Earth shall wholly pass away! This is my first vision. But what *is* the Earth? It is the Being that experiences us. It is us and all that's given to us. A great gift!"

A few "Amens" rang out. Others in the crowd said, "Listen, now!"

"We are living in deficit times. Appetites and pride have outstripped resources. Deficit times? Amen! But Correction is coming. We can prepare for it. First, we can make some *inside* repairs; then some *outside* repairs. If you join the In-gathering, you will begin your inner repairs. 'For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.' You're going to need some inner adjustment to align with the divine life. What kind of adjustment?"

Crawley paused and stared at the silent crowd.

We moved closer to the door-flap, but he was still barely visible, his face shaded by a ball cap.

"First thing we will do is to pray." He paused again; then he whirled around to speak to the audience at the other side of the stage.

"But what is prayer? Here's my definition:" He took a book from the lectern. Apparently this was only for effect, since he quoted himself without looking at the book.

"Prayer is sustained attention and creative engagement, personal or collaborative, which leads to a cognitive procession from fate to will, ignorance to understanding, grasping to acceptance, waste to salvage, fear to hope, opportunism to compassion, exclusion to inclusion, and partial work to soul work."

"This is a lot to take in, isn't it? Prayer is a procession—a walking away from the old life into a daily alignment with the divine life. While we live the divine life and march in that procession, we are praying.

“But we are badly out of line. We are living in deficit times! Any doubts—listen to the media. Read the magazines and newspapers. ‘All are part of this procession,’ but not everyone is marching forward. And I’m prophesying now to the few of you who *feel the doom*. I prophesy to the few who are ready to prepare themselves for the end-times so that they can bless and heal the Earth. Look how the trees prepare for winter. Thousands of leaves fly into the sky. Roots take down the rich fluids made in the summer. The trees feel winter coming and prepare themselves. When the spring comes again, they bless and heal us with fruit and shade. But first, they prepare. I’m looking for anyone here who feels the doom and is ready to prepare for it.”

Crawley paused, pushed back his hat, and peered into the audience.

A few in the audience waved their arms over their heads, but no one shouted. An electric tension filled the silence.

He chewed on a straw for a moment, pulled on his cap like a pitcher preparing for the wind-up, and spoke again, his voice barely audible.

“For those few of you who *feel* the doom and understand that the end of all things is at hand, I have a special message. First, it’s not so hard to understand the end times when you realize that every personal disaster is the end of a world. All the beloved ones who die before their times end the world for us.”

His voice began to rise.

“And cities swept by tidal waves, volcanic fires, and disease—every disaster is the end of a world. And twenty thousand years ago, when grinding glaciers pushed humans south of the Alps, they scraped away all traces of those early people. And wherever humans have gone, for over fifty thousand years, the living soil itself and all its wild peoples of plants, nematodes, insects, birds, mammals, and thousands of other species have passed away—passed underfoot, under plow, under pavement. Peaked

soil, peaked climate, peaked habitats. So much has been slashed, burned, developed, slain. So much has passed away. And this is the second vision. *Every personal disaster is the end of the world.*

“Can you take in the next vision?”

The crowd held its breath like a herd of deer watching hunters pass.

Crawley stepped behind the lectern to view his notes. Clearly, he knew the value of suspense.

Whatever he was up to, he needed no crib sheets. Every effect was calculated. It was hard to realize that this was the same student I had taught—and whom Wendell Brown had so easily embarrassed before a crowd. Finally, he looked up, took off his hat, and stared straight ahead.

“Where do we go from here, friends? Where *can* we go? Can we ascend and live in space? Can we delve into the Earth and return to caves? Or maybe we can live in plastic bubbles in a deep sea trench! The way ahead seems so confused and dark. Yet ‘even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as day, for darkness is as light with thee.’ Don’t look for an escape-pod or ark! *The Earth itself is our vessel.* This is the third vision. And the fourth is like unto it:”

The antique language had an effect on the geriatric crowd in the parking lot. Many of them left their lawn chairs to push closer to the door-flap. I could only see the top of Elrod’s head.

“My message is for the few of you who *feel* the doom, but you should know that the facts are available to everyone. Though some of us join the In-gathering to prepare for the end-times, the time is coming when *all* the other saints will be needed. *None survive without all.* And the mystery of how this will occur is the fifth vision.”

Crawley gripped the corners of the lectern and bowed his head, as if exhausted.

“Friends, there are more visions. When the In-gathering is completed, I will tell them all. But tonight is simply a time for you to make a decision. If you feel the doom, if you are ready to prepare for the end times, you need to come forward. Members of our Board of Faith and Practice will pray with

you. They will explain how to enter the community. As another prophet said not so long ago, ‘The time is always right to do the right thing.’ Thank you.”

As the crowd applauded, the ensemble played a slow hymn and a huge singer in a purple sarong belted out the tune—or what was left of the tune after she had pulverized it. The people behind us were surging like a rip-tide. I slipped to the side, but Elrod was swept forward. Someone tapped my shoulder.

Charlie had put on his John Deere cap. “Let’s go now,” he said.

* * *

We didn’t talk until we were back in his cabin. Sheila and May were laughing on the other side of the door. Charlie stopped me from going in.

“Just listen!” he said.

The high, chirping, sweet duet was as gentle as night-jars or whippoorwills.

Charlie dropped the stick he’d been carrying.

When we stepped onto the porch, the laughing stopped.

“Charlie? That you?” May said.

“It’s us,” he said, opening the door. Sheila and May sat on the floor against the wall with a half-finished quilt over their knees and piles of cloth squares beside them. “You two may finish that project some day,” he said.

“We thought you two had been gathered-in,” May said.

Sheila giggled, dabbed her eyes and looked down. Whatever they had been laughing about, the joke was on us. We sat beside them.

Charlie stretched. “So what do you think of my future in-law?”

I didn’t know what I thought of Avery Crawley. It was hard to reconcile my memory of the student with the performer we had just observed. “I guess I’d have to say that I’m repelled by such

theatrics. His message seems to be a muddle of the apocalypse and the Sierra Club. I'm not sure what the bottom line is, but most prophets of doom aim to make a profit out of doom."

"That's pretty good, Hank," Sheila said. "You ought to write it down." She turned to May. "Hank is writing a book."

"Really?" May said. "What's it about?"

"Uh," she said. "It's a little hard to explain. It has to do with science education."

"Oh, well. I'm sure it will be very good," May said, returning to her stitching. "We all have our projects."

Charlie pulled the corner of the quilt over his feet. "Well I'm just an old ex-Ag student, but I'd say that your project will keep us warm, but Hank's will likely addle the minds of more students like Avery Crawley."

The three of them suppressed their laughter by looking down and covering their mouths.

"Go ahead and laugh," I said. "Probably I have it coming if I had anything to do with what we witnessed in that tent."

Charlie guffawed. The girls shrieked with laughter, tears streaming from their eyes.

"We set you up," Charlie said.

Sheila cleared her throat and dabbed her eyes. "May called me earlier this week to be sure that we came in time for the rally. When I heard that your prize student had become a wide-eyed preacher, I couldn't resist!"

Charlie wagged his finger. "You should have seen his expression when Crawley started the act. He looked the way he does when you and May freeze the deck!"

When the tittering laughter died down, I said, "So the joke's on me. OK. But I refuse to believe that the six credit hours I spent with that fellow were responsible for such a transformation."

Sheila raised her chin and looked down her nose at me.

“You’re always saying that good education gives us ‘new windows on the world that shift and transform our frame of reference.’”

“Well that sounds like something I’ve said, but I guess now I’m the one framed.”

We sat quietly for a while, our backs against the wall, our legs covered with the quilt. I held Sheila’s hand. Outside, the katydids were trying to be heard over the crickets and bullfrogs.

Charlie tossed his hat on the quilt. Staring out the window into the darkness, he began to speak.

“Crawley makes some sense—what he says about ‘deficit times,’ for example. The *Dine* say that the Earth can be destroyed if humans do not follow the Beauty Way. It’s happened twice before. The survivors climbed into the new world on a thin reed.

“There’s not much beauty in a strip mine or investment bank that I can see. And the only reason that the People know these things is that, like he said, they destroyed the Earth once before. Every time humans moved into a place—Australia, North America, Europe—they annihilated the game. We People only learn by driving ourselves into a corner. The old ones—the survivors who learned and became wise—passed on the sacred stories, just like the Senecas say about the Old Rock giving the boy a story for every bird he offered. Call them myths if you want, but those stories were warnings about stewardship, as we say in church. Of course, when Pastor talks about stewardship, it means hold your wallet.”

May laughed and pushed his shoulder. “When was the last time *you* came to church?” she said.

Charlie pretended to frown. “Things in Fairall and Rectortown began to change long before Crawley came along. First there was the big forest project around Foxglove Farm—well, it isn’t only a farm any more. Then the Temple Independents came, and it wasn’t long before they outnumbered us original residents, brought their own school—even their own money. Close behind them—so close, I’d say that the two are connected—came that *S & U Corporation*, bringing more outsiders.

“I used to go to the Post Office in town. Got to be so many new people, it closed. A bigger office was built closer to Foxglove. Then Crawley came, opening up that combination dump and laboratory he calls the Ark Park on the bluff over Lake Hennessey. They pay so well that some of our people even left their casinos to work at AP.”

Charlie sipped his coffee and spun the canasta tray.

“Somewhere along the way, after the Economic Development people stopped believing their own fable that the newcomers were a great blessing to the town, the City Council was itself replaced by the what-they-call-it?

“The Board of Faith and Practice.” May said.

“Yeah,” he said. “The old Council had taken so many proffers and made so many off-sets, that *it* was finally offset—onto a side-rail. It’s a strange business—as if our town has migrated to another country. I’m not sure where we live now.”

None of us spoke. We sat for another half-hour. Sheila and May folded up the quilt. We said goodnight and walked back to our trailer. No one wanted canasta.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two weeks later, in the middle of class, I got a cell call from Sheila. She was in a parking lot somewhere south of Alexandria. She could see the Masonic temple, but she couldn't find her way home. I dismissed the students and went to find her.

The car was in the parking lot of a convenience store on Route 1 near the turn-off to Mount Vernon. Sheila was knitting in the back seat, surrounded by shopping bags of yarn.

"I sure didn't want just to sit here and do nothing," she said.

"I hope that sweater's for me," I said.

She put down the knitting needles and frowned. "I don't know what happened. I was coming back from a new re-sale store in Franconia when I realized I didn't know where I was. I looked all

around, saw the tip of the Masonic Temple, and kept on going. But then I didn't know what to do next—how to get from here back to Holburn.”

“It's OK, Honey. Everybody gets lost some time. Why don't we get something to eat?”

“Oh, Hank!

All you can think about is eating.” She wrinkled her nose. “Let's just go home so that I can fix you some real food.”

* * *

Dear Elrod,

I assume that all I should bring for the camp next week is a sleeping bag and personal items. You know that I'm glad to work with the students, but I don't plan to bring many materials for demonstrations like I used to do in class. You mentioned that you hadn't known about Sheila's Alzheimer's until you read my memoir. It wasn't something that we talked about. Of course, it all came to a head at the Flowing Brain Conference, as you know. See you soon,

Hank



CHAPTER FIVE

*“Words have done all wrong
and words put nothing right
yet I am choosing words,
driven in the pursuit
as birds to winter warm.”*

-Tom Farley, The Profit of Doom

Perhaps I should have had second thoughts about attending another conference at the Foxglove Conference Center in the Northern Region—particularly after hearing the preachers in Urbana, and after Ed Lashley’s disastrous experience in 2002—and considering Sheila—but Wendell and I had prepared a presentation about our book to create a little buzz among the cognitive-science types.

Actually, *I* wrote it. He'd brought a paper he'd presented several years before. Wendell only wanted to get away from home. I didn't ask why, but it seemed to be a way to bond with him long enough for us to finish the book. Not that anyone could really bond with Wendell.

As we stopped at the outer gates of the Foxglove Reserve, armed guards came to both sides of the car. Wendell didn't even look up from the notes he had been writing in the back seat since we left Holburn. One of the guards scanned the pass I had received in the conference package. Whatever came up on his screen kept his thumbs busy for the next five minutes. After having each of us step out of the car to be "imaged," he finally let us in.

Between the outer and inner perimeters was a narrow neck of the forest that bulged to the North and South—by that time only a thousand or so square miles, a fraction of its later area. Close to the one-lane gravel road were giant, thick-trunked *Arbor Vitae*, rangy Virginia pines, the mitten-leaves of *Sassafras* and *Mulberries*, mockernuts and oak trees of all kinds, and forest floor covered by ground cedar, mosses, *May-apples* with their poisonous fruits, and, everywhere, bracken ferns. The midsummer canopy screened out most of the light so that dogwoods and redbuds were already in decline. When I had first seen these woods on a tour given by a botanist from Holburn University, she had expressed her hope that one day this area would become like the primeval forest of *Białowieża Puszcza* in Poland, the last remnant of the ancient forests that once spread across Europe, Siberia, and North America after the last glacial retreat. Sheila and I would have rolled down the windows to take in the forest air, but Wendell had already nixed any air that didn't come through AC.

We soon came to another high, stone wall. The guards at the inner gate went through the same routine, including another imaging. We passed through the woods for another half-mile before coming onto the retreat center. More fences had gone up since my last visit, making fewer areas of the compound open to visitors, except for the conference hall, registration building, hotel, and the gardens

between them. Looking at Wendell scribbling in the back seat, I had misgivings about the whole enterprise.

These misgivings strengthened when we encountered some of the other conference attendees at the registration table. A statistician would say that they made a bimodal distribution, but I call them the Two Tribes—the Woolies and the Fluffies. The big-haired, unscrubbed, pigtailed, wild-eyed Woolies were dressed in sandals and beaded denim jackets. They flopped their dirty backpacks next to the shiny Gucci gear of the other tribe, marked by their dark, conservative suits, wingtips, high-heels, facial tucks, and puffy pocket handkerchiefs—the Fluffies. Neither tribe would have claimed Wendell or me. It was as if we were Lewis and Clark arriving in a strange village on the other side of the primeval forest. No one was familiar. From the name-tags, it seemed that the Fluffies came from Fairall and the Woolies from almost anywhere. No one seemed to be from research institutions or schools. Wendell reluctantly pinned on his name-tag and, for the first time, looked around the room.

“Who are these people?” he said.

“You’ve got me. I don’t recognize anyone here.”

Sheila squeezed my arm. “Wasn’t that man, standing over there by the pheasant on the mantel, with you and Wendell on the stage last year?”

Wendell looked him. “Yes, that’s Crumich from the *Cratylus Society*.” Wendell left us immediately to take up with Crumich. Whoever he was, Crumich had relieved us of talking to Wendell. He seemed to have a lot to say to Wendell, who listened without reply. More than the other members of the *Cratylus Society*, Wendell emulated their namesake by connecting as little as possible with anyone about anything. Bonding was out of the question. I was finally ready to admit that his outer shells had been filled from birth.

Sheila and I went to our room, a bright, spacious suite with two queen-sized beds. As she always did, Sheila immediately opened the windows.

“Look at that boxwood!” she said.

We watched some of the Woolies strolling in the maze of ancient, undulating boxwoods behind the hotel. I noticed that the lake, further down the hill, had been fenced off. One groundskeeper held down a Canadian goose while another put a collar around the bird’s neck.

“It looks like a research project is underway on those geese.” I said.

“Why can’t they just leave them alone?” Sheila said, waving her hands in front of her face. “That spoils it!”

She pulled the curtains and sat on the bed.

I sat on the floor by her legs, with my hands on her knees. “It’s all right, Honey. We won’t be here too long—and we can walk in the gardens when I’m free. Do you have a headache again?”

“A little one,” she said. She shook her head as if to knock the pain out of it. “Give me that duffel bag, Hank.”

I pulled the bag onto the bed. “What is this, anyway?” I said.

She pulled out May’s quilt.

“I told May that we would never finish only working on it at the camp,” she said. “Help me spread it out on the bed.” From the bottom of the bag, she drew out a stack of squares with red and blue bonnets. “You go on to your meetings, Hank. This will keep me occupied.”

* * *

In the conference hall, next day, I went online and found out that *my* tribe of cognitive scientists and teachers had boycotted this event. None of my plugged-in students would have bungled matters like this.

I was in the habit of remaining unplugged as much as possible. Consequently, I never saw the emails warning that no self-respecting member of the science tribe was going to mingle with the many

religious Fluffies and literary Woolies who had signed up expecting to join the stream of the “flowing brain” to either spiritual revival or new-age enlightenment.

Lewis and Clark would have needed a whole team of interpreters to make sense of these tribes. Maybe if I had read Dr. Brooks’s history of their explorations, or her poem comparing the exploration of the continent to the exploration of the brain, I would have accurately sized up the situation and immediately driven the three of us back home.

But that would have finished Wendell as far as our book was concerned. With misplaced optimism, I still thought this could be a positive experience.

Anyway, Irene Brooks would not write her history for another century.

* * *

At first, it was easy to pretend to Wendell that everything was on track. We sat behind our name-tents with other presenters near the dais at a long counter with a green tablecloth. He continued writing.

The initial presentations were made by speakers from government and industry, the keynote, *Why the Flowing Brain?*, given by the CEO of the *S & U Corporation*. According to the program, this stood for the recently-merged *Salvolution and Utnapgen Corporation*. “Salvolution” wasn’t explained, but the second name was an acronym for *Ultimate Transformations through Nuclear Print Genomics*. That really didn’t explain much, either. The keynoter talked about ways of suppressing the brain’s “relevance filter.” This presumably released a flow of creative activity. Some of the Woolies clapped. Genetic and animal studies underway in the labs of *S & U* at Foxglove were studying the right temporal-parietal junction. In humans, he said, left temporal strokes sometimes threw the victim under the dominance of the right hemisphere, making you feel like a liquid, according to Dr. Jill Bolte. This same sense of *flow* (as described in the program by someone named Csikszentmihályi) was found in anyone working with such singular attention that he screened out his surroundings.

People like Wendell, who disregarded the speeches.

I looked at what he was writing. Loops twisted around the page. They resembled the false knots you make in a rope by pushing one loop through another. Coming off the loops were attachments of different shapes, like sand burrs. Over each burr, he had written “DIANE.”

He glanced at me. “I know that guy. I’ve seen him at Salvation. Not that he ever comes to my lab.” He pointed to his drawings. “Know what these are?” he said.

“They look like slip-knots,” I said.

“Well, they’re plasmid switches,” he said. “But they’re also slip knots. Like marriage.” His jaw tightened. “Diane’s left me.”

Unfortunately, we were the next presenters.

* * *

Besides Wendell and me, three others sat on the panel—two Woolies and one Fluffy, a pompous fellow named Runcible, I think. Considering what happened, it’s no surprise that I don’t remember much about them. The Woolies were literature professors and Runcible was a school administrator from Fairall. After I read my paper, *The Mental Workshop*, explaining about “studios for inquiry” and citing examples from the history of science, Wendell came to the podium. His unbuttoned shirt and wild expression notwithstanding, he made a strong start.

“Since 1668, when John Wilkins prepared his table of words to eliminate ambiguity from language, there have been no significant advances in the field. The effort stalled for lack of . . . for lack of . . .”

Wendell stared dumbly into the lights. Perhaps he had already noticed something in the crowd, but when he finally gripped the podium and leaned forward again, it put me at ease. He was back in stride.

“For lack of theory,” he said. “Linguistic flux has even led some qualitative researchers to deny the possibility of an exact referential system. Clearly, however, the distribution of the monads of language may be treated like the probability distributions of subatomic particles, their parameters defined, and their ranges of usage delimited using the Shannon-Weaver expression. As I began to study this issue, it became obvious that an index of misconception could be—”

“TRAITOR!”

Someone behind the lights had screamed. I shielded my eyes to see him.

“WHY ARE YOU ON STAGE WITH THOSE RELIGIOUS QUACKS?”

The shouter was running toward the stage. It was Crumich, a thin, bald-headed man wearing a fanny-pack.

As I scanned the crowd, I saw Sheila in the back of the room, holding quilt squares and hurriedly going from seat to seat looking for someone.

Looking for me.

I left the stage.

Wendell blinked as the house lights went up.

Crumich stopped two rows from the stage, pulled out a revolver, and shot Wendell.

Two Woolies wrestled the shooter to the floor.

The crowd stood up, screaming and cramming the exits. I was halfway to Sheila, who stood frozen against the back wall as people streamed out.

I shoved through the crowd, stepping on ankles and elbowing anyone who blocked me. When Sheila was within reach, I held out my hand. She didn't take it. Her face dripping with sweat, she stared past me. I glanced back at the stage, where Wendell lay, surrounded by Fluffies and Woolies.

Finally, I was close enough to grab Sheila's hand, but she still didn't see me. The crowd shoved us, but I held onto her hand over the heads and shoulders bumping around us.

Suddenly, as if struggling in the ocean, Sheila raised her arms, looked at me, and screamed,
“HANK, WHERE ARE YOU?”

Still holding her hand, I shouted, “I’M AT THE OTHER END OF MY ARM!”

CHAPTER SIX

“All things on earth shall wholly pass away.

All that we touch we know and truly love

and swim our hopes upon into the dark.

Still green, we hold what we must cast away.”

-Tom Farley, The Profit of Doom

Once we were home, I put Sheila to bed and called the doctor. A urinary infection had spread to her lungs. She was calm, but wouldn't eat. I couldn't interest her in puzzles or sewing. She went into the hospital for a week of intravenous feeding. I called the assistant department chairman to find another adjunct to cover my classes for the rest of the semester. He told me that Wendell was home from the hospital and not taking calls. He didn't think that Wendell was coming back. Crumich was under observation at the state home.

Sheila became more weak and feverish. Sometimes she seemed to have an invisible Opponent, a wrestler who would pin her to the right—her right cheek mashed against the chair and her left arm and leg flailing. When she sat down to eat, she hung onto the table as the Opponent began pushing. But she

would lose grip, sending a glass of water flying across the booth. Of course, nobody ever sees the Opponent. They only see you, Sheila—with your head squashed against the armrest and your left knee tilting the table. The Opponent is versatile. It doesn't make sense that a wrestler would also be a puppeteer, yet your knees spring up, your head bobs, your elbows flap in and out. And no one sees the strings—least of all the all-knowing doctors. The Opponent is no ventriloquist. At the same time that he stifles you, he makes you try to speak. The words—even the thoughts behind them—are choked off before you can line them up. The Opponent amuses himself by watching your face trying to jam a few syllables together quickly enough to snap into a word. Usually, they scatter like beads from a broken necklace, but once you said, “You make life good for me.”

I will remember that.

The all-knowing doctors sent Sheila home again and told me to contact Hospice. It was our last project together.

The Home Project

Death turns out to be an easy project. You need no kit or special tools. Waiting is the main requirement. Mostly you do not move. You breathe easily until you don't. No special diet is needed because no food is needed. That's because you shut down. The stomach wrinkles up like a walnut and hunger disappears. A wonderful weakness takes over. There is no need to lift your heavy arms and legs. Your feet are so far away that you don't even think about them. You begin to wonder where you are. The angels of death come and go, reminding no one in particular that nothing is really needed to die naturally. They don't stay too long. They prefer endings and beginnings. The middle is left to you. You turn out to be a body of work. All around you, caretakers and mourners ask each other how they're doing. All you have to do is to die on time.

Actually, there is a kit.

Various cocktails have been set aside in the fridge. This is in case you don't shut down in time, because once everyone is sure they don't feel too bad, it's your cue to be on your way. Not being ready on time will mean you need a send-off, like a squirt of Roxenol under the lip.

Now, understand, with you not moving or speaking, the difference between your discomfort and the uselessness of your loved-ones is nominal. If the waiting goes on too long, someone has to do something. It's not so much that there is no kit as that everyone prefers to ignore it, unless necessary. As with any home project, we like it when no special equipment is required. Keep it natural, like Thoreau going walking so that he wouldn't later discover that he had never lived. He was sure that the preservation of the world was in wilderness. Was he surprised. Trotting off into nature to avoid discovering you have never lived is a whooping wild ride into the dark leafy hollows of death. In both cases you fail to be preserved, except in an embalmer's confiture.

You are expected to shut down, but you can take your time about it, as Auden said of Yeats, until even the suburbs are deserted. But you are expected to shut down, because opportunities are at hand. Your death, apparently an ending, is the opening of possibilities. A rush of prospectors wait to start behind your finish-line, beginning with all those who rushed you about on gurneys and left you in various rooms for penetrations to make you limpid as the shallow plastic-bottomed pool you once saw installed beneath a water lily garden, its short-lived, golden fish glittering like your briefly luminescent arteries and nodules that have been slyly perfused for a kind of network newscast of the prospects available. Like Sooners racing for a stake, here come the insurers, swathed in disclaimers, specialists, aides, technicians, night watchmen, parking attendants, snack bar waitresses, their families and lawyers fanning out like remoras behind them. Last of all, I come. Even I, who love you, cannot help but profit from you.

As nephrons feel their capsules close like the pressed clover leaves you carried in the wallet in your purse; as venules and arterioles, clasping each other like fingers of two hands, feel the pulsing tendril of blood being withdrawn; and even as the subcellular stock exchange of your membranes feels itself going all to sales—and none will buy—here am I, breathing your sweet breath, sharing your warmth, remembering you all wrong.

Well, it is called re-mem-bering. No one promised more than a rough likeness at best. So we all come away from you with something. You are a body of works, perhaps even a school or period.

You sink into a deep sleep, asking for nothing, endorphins falling on you in a soothing, warm rain through the dogwoods, redbuds and rhododendrons you loved. You walk in some new place. I stagger around in the empty lobbies of bus stations. Delays and cancellations drove other passengers away. Even the locals were cancelled. Only the drunken sleeper with the stained crotch and greasy hair shares this place with me. No lines leave from this station any more.

No, it's only me. I am the drunken sleeper.

Like other objects left in the moraine as you withdraw and melt into the earth, I adhere to the detritus—your aunt's tea towels, your grandmother's Lemoges gravy boat, the tiny figures in the crèche you stood up shakily between cotton balls under twenty Christmas trees, a flute I cannot play, books with small notes in the careful print you preferred to cursive. Someone can use these things: the drawerful of white blouses with high necks, the wispy-haired doll in dimity, and all of the time I'll have when I no longer feed you, clothe you, and cherish you. Someone wants your long blue robe, the painting of the Schloss in Heidelberg, where we threw snowballs, and all of the space I will have when someone removes your dresses, shoes, and borrowed bed that rises, lifting you like an offering to the blue sky. Someone sees possibilities in these things.

As in any home project, the instructions do not cover the local situation, as when I assembled a lamp and speakers in the corner. Lacking head-room for the lamp, I pulled it apart, only then discovering the wires soldered at both ends making a great necklace of black tubes and bonnets with light bulbs peeking out. Lacking a socket in the only place to install a speaker, I extended the speaker wires and afterwards was compelled to imagine Mendelssohn's violin music sweeping free of the skips and pops made from my meddling with the connection. Lacking instructions beyond the general purpose pamphlets left by the angels of death on one of their visits, I can only wait for you.

No lotus was provided in the kit, no enlightened one, skilled in shifting the weight of our life so that I will not be tipped over by it. How shall I carry it away for you if I can't pick it up? The local case always defies general purposes. We live as outliers. We live in the margins.

The weight of that living is not a ponderous mass of routine and normal existence extracted from the great body of human experiences, like a gooey ball of dough, flattened to be sped off on sheets to the ovens, cooked into representative facts, and sliced with precision. That kind of weight is the weight of significance. But we who are outliers, inhabitants of the margins, individuals: we do not signify.

We burn with intensity, unfold, imagine ourselves into being and take the shapes of our aspirations. Our weight is the tug of structure held together by its inner geometry and the pulsing squeeze of endlessly iterated connections of fibers, tubules, and streams of fluids and electric currents. Even now, the work of your body is structure, structure extending into relationships, adhesions, possibilities and hopes. How can I lift it? Another class of prospectors will come soon enough. They scrape off the general features suited to their scraping tools. They write death notices, send messages worldwide, not about the shape of your lips forming a word dear to me, but about gender, birth-date, marital status, prior existing conditions and consequent revisions of life expectancies given this crisp, new bristle of information. The rest of our life is left behind, imponderable and untabulated.

Unlike you, I never finished a project that really looked the way it did in the picture, even when I myself made the picture, as when I traced the Audobon painting of the fish hawk pulling a trout from a stream. In raised copper, both bird and fish are too muscular, the feathers and stippled scales both resembling sausages taped to a wall. Usually, I lost patience at some step of the operation. I could only stipple so long before feeling urgently called to get on with something else. It was the same when you set me to laying tile or encouraged me to paint a landscape. All those little spacer-crosses were too much to bear. Waiting, even with nothing to do, turns out to be easier than enduring the delays entailed with the placement of countless spacers; or with the never-ending taps on the bevel to make the stipple points in copper all alike, or with the tiny, twitching brushstrokes needed to turn green blobs into leafy undergrowth—or with all the other kinds of painfully approximate endeavors in which the handiwork must move more slowly than growing fingernails. My impatience welled up like reflux. So much delay, necessary to art, made me revolt and hurry the work.

It always showed. My project never looked like the picture. The tiling hardened into a wavy surface. In the painting, I had to install a shed in front of the dark green undergrowth to cover mistakes and give myself fewer leaves to paint. And now, the project that we never finished, each of us hurrying along at the end—you with your breaths and me trying to catch them—our project. Our project turns into something nothing like you.

CHAPTER SEVEN

*Because the snow-line sinks
between sunspots, the jet-streamed storms froth;
all weathers change.*

*—Tom Farley, *The Profit of Doom**

There is nothing to report about my life after Sheila's death. I simply stopped. The university held no more interest. I retired. I sat on my balcony and watched the river rise closer to the statue of Colonel Holburn. I lost weight. How long did it go on? I don't know. Years, maybe.

All of this changed after going to the environmental camp near Wando.

Elrod Cooke had been at the *Flowing Brain* conference—to hear me, he said. But I suspect that Lena took him. He sent me several letters. He had seen everything.

Finally, I replied, and, after a few more letters and visits, I agreed to come. He gave me a ride—probably to keep me from backing out.

The sky was overcast, the river high after a week of steady rain. Elrod picked me up in front of my apartment. Once out of the Metro area, Elrod drove north of Wando, east of Foxglove Reserve, into the Hunt Country, a hilly area of orchard grass, stables, and fields studded with the greenstone outcrops left from ancient seabed. Tucked into a narrow valley, the camp consisted of two dormitories and a converted barn.

The Lashley EcoCamp for Wando Public Schools

Elrod nodded. “Mr. Lashley came back from the Eastern Shore for the dedication two years ago.”

“I suspect that you had something to do with naming the camp after Ed,” I said.

Elrod smiled. As a student, he had seldom smiled. He was no longer tense or withdrawn—or thin. The years had rounded his angles. There was enough flesh under his jaw to crease when he smiled. He looked content.

“You have finally gained some weight,” I said. “Lena is feeding you right.”

“Lena’s expecting,” he said.

“Congratulations! When is she due?”

“Three months.”

He parked between the dormitories.

“The students will arrive in an hour,” he said. “I’ll take your kit to the lab building while you find a room in the dormitory. Your choice of rooms.”

Two hours later, I was doing an Ecological Footprint activity with a group of ninth graders in the barn when I saw a pick-up truck outside. Elrod talked to the driver. A boy pulled a canvas bag from the tailgate and began walking toward the dormitory. Suddenly, the driver got out, almost knocking Elrod down. He grabbed the bag away from the boy. Words were exchanged. Elrod joined them. After a few minutes, the driver gave the bag to Elrod and drove off. The boy walked to the barn. As he came closer, I recognized him as the student Elrod had asked me to observe on a visit to his class at Wando High—Oneal Wiggins.

Oneal was small, thin, and furtive. He and Elrod arrived as my lesson ended. While two other teachers divided the group to do transect studies in the woods, Elrod introduced me to Oneal.

“This is Oneal Wiggins, one of my students. Oneal, this is Dr. Randall.” “Hoowsah,” Oneal said, shaking my hand and staring at his feet. “Yos dedaki fer Mustah Cookie?” His lips barely moved when he spoke.

Elrod translated. “Yes, he’s one of my teachers.”

“Heretofore seesaw.”

“That’s right,” Elrod said. “He visited our class once. Well, go ahead, now. Join one of the teams. Enjoy yourself and learn something today!”

When the students had left, Elrod told me about the incident in the parking lot.

“Old man Wiggins doesn’t want Oneal to stay overnight. Says he can’t spare him. At least, that’s what I think he said.” Elrod shrugged. “I persuaded him to wait until this afternoon to make the decision. I figure that it will be too much trouble for him to come back later on. He’ll just let it go. That’s the kind of parent he is. I’m familiar with the species. For a day or so he’ll have to lord it over his other sons. Maybe being here will give Oneal a chance to think about a different kind of life.”

After the students came back from the woods, we had lunch. Rain drummed the tin roof of the old barn, but it was cozy around the fireplace. Wind joined the rain. The barn creaked and whistled. We

took out the microscopes to look at pond water from the tanks around the lab. This activity seemed to save the day until lightning cracked and the power went out. Ever resourceful, one of the teachers pulled up the blinds and did an interdependence activity. The students formed a circle. Everyone turned to the right and sat down on the lap of the person behind. Sounds of laughter, whirring winds and crackling lightning filled the rest of the day.

Then it rained through the night.

And all the next day. The parking lot became a pond.

At noon, a dark ridge of clouds assembled above us like the teats of a giant sow. The oily sky was the color of dark, stale urine.

Half of the students were in the dormitories. I stared out the barn window while waiting for water to boil in the fireplace. The Wiggins trash truck came through the flooded parking lot like a small launch. Just as the elder Wiggins dismounted, there was a tremendous “SNAP!”

Wiggins fell on his face. Steam poured from a black streak in the roof of one of the dormitories. The boys’ dorm had been hit by lightning.

Wiggins pulled himself out of the mud in time to see Elrod running toward the dorm. I grabbed my raincoat.

The dorm was on fire by the time I got outside. Both Wiggins and Elrod had disappeared. As boys ran out of the dorm, I directed them to the barn. One boy stopped in front of me, rain streaming down his face.

“They’re fighting inside!”

“Who?”

“Mr. Cooke and Oneal’s Dad. I think the lightning struck Oneal.”

“What? Go to the barn,” I said.

The fire was being quickly smothered by rain, but the smoky stench in the dorm forced me out again. I put a wet handkerchief over my mouth and went back in.

Shouts and banging came from upstairs. From the landing, I saw the three of them.

Oneal was lying on the floor with a roof-beam on his thigh. Elrod had apparently levered it up a few inches with a two-by-four before Wiggins arrived, waving his arms and screaming in his strange dialect about how much the hospital was going to cost him and how losing Oneal would put his work behind.

Wiggins screamed. "I gret mine shut your face!"

He shoved Elrod onto his back, sat on his chest, and began whacking his head against the floor.

I ran toward them.

Maybe that's what made the floor collapse.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*From act to act, from scene to scene, we go,
and skim from part to part, till what endures,
residual, derives from what injures.*

—Tom Farley, *The Profit of Doom*

I awoke in a strange bed. A teenage boy was bringing me a breakfast tray.

“Where am I?” I said.

“The Milford,” he said. “Pop says you survived a tornado.”

“The others? There were three others.”

“I dunno. Somebody died I think.”

As he left the room he shouted back. “I’ll tell Pop you’re awake.”

I must have fallen asleep again. Someone gently squeezed my shoulder.

“Professor Randall,” he said.

I sat up.

Unshaved, wearing a ball cap and a yellow rain slicker, Avery Crawley stood by the bed.

“How do you feel?” He said.

“Like a pile of bricks landed on me. What happened?”

“When our Security team spotted the lightning strike, they went to the campground and found a smoldering building with you and three others trapped inside. Two men were dead and a boy had a serious injury—a broken femur. Everyone was evacuated to Wando.”

“Except me.”

Elrod was gone.

“I thought that you might prefer to be our guest during the clean-up.”

“The clean-up?”

“The tornado and rain followed the highway east to Holburn. The flood will take more than a week to recede. According to one of our doctors, you escaped breaking bones—”

“But not contusions,” I said, looking at my bruised arms.

“You fell through a floor onto a bed,” he said. “Go on. Eat. You must be hungry.”

I lifted the cover from the plate of eggs cooked over sautéed asparagus, spinach and potatoes.

“Not the usual hospital fare,” I said.

“This isn’t a hospital, Professor Randall. My wife, Margaret, made your breakfast.”

Crawley took off his raincoat and left the room.

* * *

The ample breakfast put me back to sleep. When I woke up, Crawley was sitting by the bed.

“Feeling better?” He said.

“Much better. I’m sore, but I can certainly be discharged, if you would tell them.”

“This isn’t a hospital. You can go any time you’re ready.”

“But you mentioned doctors—”

“From our tissue engineering lab.” He pointed to the window. “This is the Milford residence for our Foxglove Conference & Research Center.”

“Tissue engineering?” I said. “What’s that? Making organs?”

“In a way. They follow up on the research by Vacanti, Langer, Grikscheit, and others who infused polymer scaffoldings with stem cells to organize and fill out the scaffoldings to become ear, liver, or bowel. We have many projects going on at Foxglove and the Ark Park.”

He leaned forward and studied my face.

“Oh, I remember you, Avery,” I said. “My wits were not knocked out, even though I don’t understand what you just said. And I’ve been keeping up with you.”

“Yes, I saw you at the tent meeting.”

“Well, I didn’t want to ask,” I said. “But I don’t understand. You were in research at NIH after working on the Genome Project; then you came out here to the woods and became a preacher?”

He smiled and rubbed his chin. “I needed a different kind of *studio*.” He laughed. “That surprises you,” he said. “You see, I had a vision.”

“So you really did have a vision?” I pushed away the empty plate.

“As much as any of us can have one. You were the one who read to us from William James—”

“Oh, you mean where he says that visions come before reasons—”

“Exactly. Even the most rigorous verification is driven by concepts and visions. But we have to work hard to avoid becoming what you said that Goethe warned us against—”

“Becoming people ‘whom theories convince,’ you mean?” I shook my head. “You and I are the only ones who remember those old lectures. I know why *I* do, but—”

“But why do *I* recall them?” he said. “Because of imagination. Because they made me start thinking about imagination. What if a community deliberately were to align itself according to imagination? Not to making and consuming products, not to extending power and influence, not to over-satisfying appetites—but to inquiry and imagining, supported by life-fostering concern?”

“Sounds like a university,” I said.

“Not any universities I know,” he said. “Our institutions are all corporate entities with voracious interests of their own. The more they are treated as corporate persons, the more they crush individual aspirations and imagination; the more they impose their own frame of reference—a narrow window defined by immediate gratification, market-share, exaggerated self-worth, blunting of dissent, and violence. Universities, Cardinal Newman to the contrary, are no different than other corporate institutions.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at my blue feet. “So you tell people to escape the end of the world by coming here? I don’t get it, Avery.”

“It’s the power of apocalypse,” he said.

“What?”

“Apocalyptic visions seize our attention. Do you really think that people would come here if I presented empirical proofs or the impeccable logic of truth tables? Visions come first. I saw that years ago. But it wasn’t until I had my own visions that I understood what to do.”

He sat back in the chair, holding his right foot on his knee. Thin and wiry, he was not much bigger than Elrod. When he took off his cap, I saw that his hair was already grayer and sparser than mine.

“So you became a preacher?” I said.

He stood. “Yes, I became a preacher. Actually, since the flood, the Board has decided to call me the ‘Supreme Prophet.’ But enough talk for now. When you’re feeling better, I want to show you around and make you a proposition. You rest. Those bruises must hurt. I told Will to look in on you.”

“Your son?”

“Yes. It helps to keep his mind off other things.” Crawley put his coat. “His sweetheart’s mother was killed in the storm.”

* * *

After sleeping for another day and a half, I got out of bed. My suitcase and teaching kit were on the night stand; my clothes had been cleaned and hung in the closet. I noticed that the shirt had been stitched.

“My Mom did that.” Will Crawley stood behind me with the lunch tray. He was a younger, dumpier version of his father. “You a teacher?”

“I’ve been called that. Mostly, I watch others learn. Are you in school?”

“Sort of. Pop says I would learn more at the Ark Park. I’d rather learn on my own, but I’ll probably work there next year. I want to double my credits before leaving school.”

“Double credits?”

He set the tray on the bed. “Yeah. We get to double what we’ve earned if we finish all the studio seminars. I’ve made about three thousand so far.”

“Three thousand what?” I stopped myself. “Oh, I’m sorry. I always say that whenever a student gives a number without a unit; but you’re not my student.”

“It’s okay. Pop does the same thing. It’s *pellets*.”

It still didn’t register with me.

“Prayer pellets. In the Northern Region we’re paid in pellets. Like this—” He showed me a capsule like a large, bar-coded vitamin pill. “Pop says that one day we won’t need them. He says that, one day, we’ll prove that our work and service credits are in the time bank by scanning in our biomarkers.”

“I see.”

I didn’t see, but Will was in a hurry to leave. “Will, I want to thank you for watching after me. I’m a little sore, but I can be on my own. I was sorry to hear about your girl friend’s Mom.”

The corners of his mouth tugged down. “I haven’t seen Ida since . . .since the accident.”

“Her name is Ida?”

“Ida Siebert.”

“Charlie and May’s daughter?”

His eyes widened. “You know them?”

“Yes. What happened to May?”

“She and Charlie were trying to secure a boat. Something—maybe the wind—knocked her into the water. By the time Charlie found her, and he and Pop got her to shore, she was unconscious. Doctors said it was a coma. When Ida called, she told me her mother’s eyes stayed open. She was like that for three days.”

* * *

I dressed, shaved, and finished lunch. The room opened into a lobby, where the concierge asked me to wait while she made a call. Within a few minutes, Avery Crawley came down the stairs carrying two mugs.

“You’re up!” He said cheerily. “Come into the lounge. We’ll have tea.”

The lounge was a small, paneled room with a mural of a hunting scene across. Crawley shut the doors and motioned for me to sit down.

“This place was a horse farm and estate before Temple Independent converted it into a retreat and conference center. Then S & U added sanitarium and research facilities. They tell me that one of the most popular hunts ran through the property. Of course, the Board closed the property to hunting.”

“Avery, I thank you for taking care of me, but I must return to Holburn.”

“You can’t.”

He sipped his tea.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Holburn is half under water. So is the Eastern Shore. As a matter of fact, so are Bangladesh, Digby, St. John, , and some of the smaller islands of the Indian Ocean and South Pacific. Anyway, it will take several days before the road opens. You could drive as far as Wando, but I hope that you will be our guest here. We could talk—”

“You mean about your proposition?” I said.

“That, and other matters.” He pulled a straw from a vase of pampas grass, broke it, and chewed on the end.

“Look, I’m glad to see you again, but I don’t think we have anything to talk about. I’m retired now, since—”

“Since your wife died.” He set down his mug. “I was sorry to hear about it.”

“Thank you.” I held the warm mug of tea with both hands. “Since Sheila died, I have kept to myself. Now I’ve learned that two friends were killed in the storm.”

“Two?” he said.

“Elrod Cooke and May Siebert.”

He laid his cap on the table. “I didn’t know that you knew May.”

“Charlie and May were our friends for years. It was he who took me to hear you speak. He knew that you had been my student.”

“Sorry I didn’t make the connection. When I saw you both at the tent meeting.” He shook his head. “Of course, I knew about Elrod because Lena is one of our intake processors in Reception.”

I certainly did not want to hear about the In-gathering. I stood up. “So, anyway, this is not the time for me to become involved in anything here.”

Crawley remained seated. “On the other hand, maybe this is precisely the time. You know ‘it is always the right time to do the right thing.’”

“Dr. King, wasn’t it?”

He nodded.

“Something else I used to say in class?”

He nodded again.

I sat down.

“I’d have to say that I didn’t care to hear it in that sermon of yours. Whipping a crowd into frenzy is really repulsive to me, in fact.”

Crawley opened the door to the lobby and looked out; then he shut and locked it.

“Okay, Professor Randall. I admit to not being very proud of tent meetings, but the visions are real.”

“You heard voices?”

“No, I have visions. Different phenomenon. Call them insights, if you like. The first one was at NIH when I was working on the idea of using the genetic toolkit to save disappearing species.”

“The genetic toolkit? Avery, I’ve been out of this for years. What do you mean?”

He picked up his cap and flattened it. “Pretend this is an embryo.” He pointed to the bill. “Here’s the head end. The genetic toolkit works head to tail to sculpt the segments and organs one at a time.

Sean Carroll wrote a beautiful book about it. My idea was to hide the toolkit for one animal in the noncoding part of the genome of another animal. It's the toolkit that directs development. All creatures share the general purpose genetic switches that turn on other genes to assemble structures in the proper sequence. It was my thought that some day, when habitats are restored, the genetic archives of vanished species, could be reactivated or opened, like the Ark."

"So this was your vision?" I said.

"No. The vision came while I was working on the Ark project. I had attached a plasmid switch to a plant viroid to link a few foreign base-pairs to its ring of nucleic acid—a block of genes known to repress the deletion of the end of an appendage. As I carried a batch of this viroid past a radio in the lab, the reception became so clear, it was as if the announcer were standing beside me. Of course, I assumed that my body had become an antenna. After checking further, however, it was clear that the batch of viroid was boosting the signal."

"Wait." I said. "You thought you could save the genes of endangered species by inserting them into the genomes of other species? Even if that could be done without disturbing cell division, why would evolution conserve such material? There would be no advantage to the 'archive' organism; after a generation, the 'archive' would degrade."

Crawley pulled out another piece of straw to chew. "Ordinarily, you would be right, but the plasmid switch made it possible to disguise the archive as a conserved sequence. Now the way this works is—"

I held up my hand. "No, that's all right. Just tell me about the vision."

"The vision came when I tasted it."

"So much for lab safety," I said.

"See, I had the suspicion that the viroid could boost other signals. When I had put it into a bacterial suspension, there was a burst of chemiluminescence. It happened again in other suspensions—"

yeast, murine pancreas tissue, rat cells, and so on. In some cases, the signal was in the infrared frequency. As I thought about the protocols for controlled trials, I became impatient.”

“A dangerous feeling for a researcher.” I wondered how many other cranks there were in the woods and basements of the country—turning tinfoil into altars and rebars into backyard towers.

“Yes, but I tasted it anyway. At first, it was like a slightly rancid pistachio. Then I had an overwhelming reaction, a feeling of warmth and tremendous sadness—not depression or hallucination—just sadness. It was a sense of doom, of some unsustainably heavy weight. Here—” He patted his chest.

As he spoke, his eyes rolled back, his voice deepened, and his arms fell to his sides—as if something within him were now speaking.

“The messengers surround us. Every leaf, every microbe, every feathered, hairy, scaly creature sends us this sad message. They receive it from the Earth and from each other. Earliest emissions went into space twenty thousand years ago. All creation sends this message. All creation groans.”

I backed away toward the door.

Crawley’s voice rose. “Only we humans, increasingly divorced from our own feelings and experience—except for the flickers of understanding in our artists, natural scientists, and other saints—only *we* do not receive the message. *All things on earth must wholly pass away.*”

Although he seemed to be in a trance, I refused to accept the nonsense and talked to him in a normal way. “But there’s nothing strange about this message, Avery. We know that we, the Earth, and the sun will all disappear.”

He suddenly slapped his chest. “But *I felt the doom! Here, in my chest!* I felt it, Randall. Knowing and feeling are worlds apart. Feeling it meant that I had to do something. Change something.”

His voice rose. His eyes grew wide and fierce.

My sore arms and legs began to itch. “Let’s sit down again. I get the idea. It’s very interesting, but I—“

Sitting on the edge of his chair, he began to speak more calmly. “You don’t get the idea. You’re close, however. *Any personal disaster is the end of the world.* After a death, we look at the rest of the life that we must live in the absence of the loved one, and more life seems redundant.

“Yet life has its own inner logic. Give it time and it renews itself. We become different. Our identities change. Our place, as the Psalmist says, “knows us no more.” We go forth, exploring—looking for another place.

“The heaviness we make on the Earth is like that. To feel the doom here—” He pointed to his heart. “To feel it is to be compelled to restore the Earth, to find middle ways—ways that realign us with our natures and bring us back into our own feelings and experience. That’s why I have gone into Apocalogeny.”

I was baffled. “Avery, you’ll have to tell me what that means. Then I have to go.”

“It means creating the sense of an apocalypse. Boost the signal. When the People feel the doom in themselves, they change their wants, their appetites, their occupations, their consumption—everything.”

I nodded. “So that’s why you preach.”

“Yes. And I got it from you.”

I shook my head. “No way!”

He relaxed back into the chair, crossed his legs, and smiled. “Shortly after my vision in the lab, I went to the seminar in Holburn, where you said that a theory is a policy for arranging an investigation. When you spoke, I recalled our discussions in the science history course about studios and saints and—”

“I get the idea. But I never recommended mass indoctrination.” I was irritated. “Look, Avery. That discussion concerned *science education*, not preaching about apocalypse. I was describing how to arrange for classrooms to be more like studios.”

He nodded. “For sure. But what is a studio? It is the ideal, personal, creative and productive engagement that every person seeks—a flow into our own natures. We are most alive when we are exploring. Every human being is suited to do some kind of investigation. They are our callings. When we are exposed to the signal of life-fostering concern, we will align ourselves to our callings—”

“Wait a minute, Avery. You’ve gone through more hypotheticals than I can count. Let’s see what you’ve said so far. Like Timothy Leary, you were in such a hurry to have others swallow your ideas that you swallowed them first. The microbe you ate has made you feel that the end of the world is at hand. You quit a good job. Then you heard me talk about improving learning by making classrooms more like studios, so you put two and two together and came up with apocalogenizing—or whatever you call it. You’re enrolling people into some kind of top-heavy, theocratic cult where they will receive continual broadcasts about how bad things are while they work in specialized jobs that they have been made to believe are their callings. This sounds like dictatorship, ant colonies, or hell to me. I’ve heard enough!”

He held up his hands. “You have the wrong idea, Professor. The In-gathering was going on before I came here. The Temple Independents have religious reasons for their efforts. What I brought to the table was a way to make their new community independent of what they call the ‘outer sympathizers.’ The Board of Faith and Practice was interested.

“So, I introduced them to the major owners of *S & U*, a Northern Virginia contractor named Briggs and a book publisher named Darian. Both men, after surviving personal crises, wanted to leave a legacy of socially and ecologically responsible investment. Since my project at NIH was really supported by Salvation anyway, they were glad to move the operation to Fairall, where it became part of the Temple Independents’ Apocalogeny Division. Because of Congress’s recent completion of corporate-person legislation, the lawyers from S&U were able to give the Board of Faith and Practice full site-protection from federal interference. Foxglove Reserve was already a mitigation site. Now there would be no taxes or problems in obtaining special easements, long term leases, or security clearances.

The religious exemption and the partnership with S&U gave the Board of Faith and Practice what they wanted—isolation from outsiders.

“Of course, it also gave me a population who could receive a continually reinforced, long-term exposure to the apocalyptic signal—a population who could realign itself to live by life-fostering concern rather than appetites.”

Perhaps if my headache had not returned, I would have measured my words more carefully.

“Avery, whatever your intentions are, you are still describing an ant colony. No thanks! I appreciate your help, but this is not for me. And please don’t cite me as your source of inspiration.”

“I still haven’t made the proposition,” he said. “But maybe this isn’t the time. Maybe after you’ve thought about it—”

“I don’t see it happening. My brain may be addled after Sheila’s death and after dropping through a ceiling, but not addled enough to become a part of this.”

“Okay.” He opened the door to the lobby. “Your truck is in front. Remember, if you change your mind; if you find that you have no idea of what to do next, I have a proposition for you.”

“We’ll leave it at that.” I said.

* * *

I packed my bag and returned to the lobby. The concierge was playing solitaire, her hair hanging down over the cards and her mouth puckered in concentration. She looked like Sheila at the age of twenty-five. Like Sheila, she had a high, unlined forehead, bright eyes and long, thin fingers. She felt my stare.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“No, I’m leaving. Thanks. You like card games?”

“Yes. My favorite is canasta.”

I stared at her.

“Sir?”

I turned and didn't look back.

CHAPTER NINE

*This passage is a tunnel
With ancient trails to other rooms
Where by trials and ordeals
We try out our ideals
Such as they are:
A great catch,
A sharing of bread,
A send-off for the dead.*

*Above, the martins throng the Spirit Mound—
Not souls, but birds
Who know where insects can be found.
So are creeds—
The high aerobatic acts
Made of deftly soldered speculations:
The flux of words.*

-Irene Brooks, Finding a Purchase

*. . . a theory of matter is a policy rather than a creed;
its object is to connect or coordinate apparently diverse phenomena
and above all to suggest, stimulate and direct experiment.*

—J.J. Thomson, The Corpuscular Theory of Matter

I found a room in Wando and called Lena Cooke to offer sympathy. She asked me to come out.

Cooketown was a circle of houses around a vegetable garden. Lena Cooke, tiny, pregnant, and as dark as Elrod had been, sat between boxes on one of the porches, her face in her hands. I parked by a line of bean tents. She looked up when I shut the door.

“Thank you for calling, Professor Randall,” she said. “Here are the letters and papers you sent to Elrod, and his notes.” She pushed one of the boxes forward.

“It looks like you’re having a boy,” I said.

She cocked her head to the right. “How do you know that?”

“The way you’re carrying him in front. Maybe it’s an old wives’ tale, but my Sheila always said that a boy was carried in front like a tote bag, but with a girl, the mother’s hips and belly were filled in all around. Maybe because of shared hormones.”

“He’s going to be Elrod Junior,” she said. “After he’s born, we’re going to Fairall.”

“The In-gathering?”

“Yes.” She looked at the box. “Elrod couldn’t make up his mind. He kept looking at your papers. He said that the original idea about studios came from you.”

“So I’ve heard,” I said. “But I don’t really have anything to do with it.”

She smiled. “When you’re chosen, it doesn’t matter what you think.”

“Well, I’m not chosen, but if I can help you—”

“I’m fine. Fancine, Elrod’s mother, lets me stay here while I put his Aunt Pinky’s house up for sale. When it’s sold, I’m leaving with my sister, Clysta, and sister-in-law, Leah, and their children.”

She had come down the steps. She stooped to pick up a beer can. “One of Fancine’s men-friends,” she said. “There *is* one thing you could do.”

* * *

The Wiggins family lived a few miles from Cooketown along a hilly road that dipped repeatedly into standing water from creeks spilling over their beds. Lena had given me a small box that Elrod had made for Oneal. I wished that I hadn’t taken it. My hips and neck ached. Along the road were flooded fields, wind-snapped traffic signs, fallen trees, and ducks paddling over submerged front yards in trailer

parks, some of the trailers tilted into the water where the cinder-block foundations had sunken into the mud.

The yard of the Wiggins place was also submerged. Beside the mailbox was a rusted Volvo chassis on a hay-bale. The small modular house sat on a large lot cluttered with car parts and farm equipment. Several vehicles, including an old school bus, were parked in back. Rusted rebars and stacks of tractor tires rose from the water. Several men in yellow tee-shirts were piling plastic bags from a double-garage onto a dilapidated truck with *Wiggins Waste Services* painted on the door. Beside it was the pick-up truck I had seen at the camp. The smallest man was Oneal. He limped to my truck.

“How are you, Oneal?”

“The with I had be gone.” He glanced from side to side as if listening to someone else. His knuckles were bruised.

I showed him the bruises on my arms. “We were lucky,” I said.

“Nah Pap an Mustah Cookie.”

“No, I’m sorry about your dad. Here’s something Mr. Cooke wanted you to have.” I opened the cigar box. Elrod had tagged each of the items: A small cloth bag, marked “Pinky’s freedom bag,” a pocket knife, a small magnifying glass (Elrod’s tag was “a special window”), a small dictionary (“another kind of window”), a few other objects, and an index card, on which Elrod had carefully printed, “IT IS ALWAYS THE RIGHT TIME TO DO THE RIGHT THING.”

* * *

I found another collapsed ceiling when I finally returned to our apartment in Holburn. Yellow tufts of insulation stuck to the walls. The bed was wet and musty. The rooms smelled like damp rot.

I sat down in the kitchen and checked for messages. The condominium manager had called several times before letting workmen in to repair the ceiling. Charlie Siebert had called.

I looked out the balcony window. The statue of Colonel Holburn had fallen over. Atop one of the domino-like knees sticking up from the water was a cormorant. In the past, I had only seen cormorants on pilings two hundred yards from shore—usually a pair or trio of them, preening after a dive or stretching their long black necks in the sunlight.

I boxed up what I wanted to keep, put it on the truck, and covered it with a tarp.

* * *

Chatter is the reason for books. We can't restrain our chattering and scribbling; books give us a reason for it. Portraying silence in a book—well, it doesn't make much sense. One can't portray silence properly in a book.

A composer, like John Cage, or like my friend, George Smeltzer, could install half an hour of rests into a composition. The closest a writer gets to it is the space at the end of a paragraph, chapter, or stanza.

But this doesn't guarantee that the silence will be observed.

Chatter intrudes.

Pausing, reflecting, praying—and other ways of summoning the inarticulate—all require silence. Properly observed, the silence spreads out, surrounds the rattles, shouts, and angular screeches of sheet-metal work next door, the steady hum at sixty hertz through the night, the drone of distant clothes-driers, and the clumps of landing gear as jets drop to tarmac.

Properly observed, silence spreads between them and under them until the sounds are drawn out to a cloudy consistency, a floating, muffled cloudscape over the quiet mounds below. In that hilly terrain, the attenuated sounds above are at last sufficiently removed to put free space between ourselves and our chatter about ourselves.

As you can tell by now, I know very little about writing. I certainly don't know how to portray silence, but silence is what is called for at this point in the story.

Days and weeks of silence.

How can a frame of reference to silence be created from the squiggles, lines, and loops of written language? I don't know, but I do know that more than a pause, more than a breath, is needed. Perhaps stage directions would do the trick. Something like this.

Gather up your heartbeat, the drumming in your ears, the gurgles in your gut, the hiss of breath. Gather up the traffic on the bypass, the distant whistle of the train leaving town, the scrape of branches on the broken railing, the whine of discontent and urgency in your mind. Bundle it all into a small, woolen freedom-bag. Drive out into the country as far as you can go. Take it into the woods. Gather up the memories of every walk with your beloved under these trees. See only the nuthatch, angling and probing in the bark as you angle and probe in the dark. Pierce eyes. Do not see what lives no longer. Gather it up. Throw the bag into the water.

Do not listen to it sink.

But such “directions” are only a kind of stuttering speech that creates a monotonous simulation of silence—the literary equivalent of a noise-canceling head-set. Not silence, but leveling of noise. As in all sorts of other weak writing, it is easier to write about a thing than to embody it. So I come back to making blank spaces.

Like this.

* * *

After emptying the truck into the camper, I walked to Charlie's cabin. A note was on the door.

I'm at the mound.

Charlie and May had shown us the stone mound on a mushroom hunt. To me, it was just a stony outcrop on a hill overlooking the lake. Charlie was pleased that it didn't seem to be anything special. May and Charlie had been bringing baskets of soil to pile on the mound ever since they discovered it. Only the upper rocks were still visible. Charlie said that the original stone mound was probably twelve feet in diameter and contained only a few burials. Only dignitaries would have received such a burial—maybe Manahoac tribe, but probably an earlier people.

Poison ivy was everywhere, so I wasn't looking very far ahead as I hiked along the shelf at the forest-edge, the lake twenty feet below me on the right. All of the docks around the lake were under water.

A head poked from the trees—a wide, frightened eye, a white tail. A doe zigzagged past me on the narrow ledge, bumping shoulders. I grabbed a branch and turned.

She disappeared. I stopped. The woods were as quiet as before, but after this warning to be vigilant, I noticed what I had missed before. No human sounds. No outboard motors, no music, no shouting.

* * *

Charlie nodded as I sat down with him on a flat rock by the mound.

* * *

At dusk, a loon called from the other shore. The shaggy white oak made a gentle, deep cracking sound. We stood, poured a basket of soil on the mound, and walked back to the cabin.

From under the coals in the fireplace, Charlie pulled several ears of corn. We divided a beer. He spoke after eating.

“You saw the doe?”

I nodded.

“They came back to say goodbye.”

We stared at the canasta tray in the middle of the table.

“You take that,” he said. “The dominoes too. Forty-two is no good without partners.”

“What will you do now?” I said.

“I’ve got a farm to run,” he said. “Good thing, too. You’ve got to have something going. We can’t do anything *for* them any more, but there’s plenty to do *because* of them.”

I took the cards and dominoes back to the camper and went to bed. When I woke up, I knew what I had to do. There was no farm to run, but there *was* unfinished business—catching an idea of mine that had leaped the fence.

CHAPTER TEN

**All of these interactions,
intricately folded in multiple dimensions,
form a continuous but folding
fluid surface of events.
From moment to moment,
this surface is perceived as tendencies
and choices.**

—Tom Farley, The Profit of Doom

The guard at the gate of Foxglove Reserve passed me through after the first image check. The guard at the second gate personally escorted me back to Milford House. The same concierge was reading at the desk. She looked up and smiled.

“Good afternoon, Professor Randall. Dr. Crawley said you would be staying with us again in Room 104. Will that be satisfactory?”

“Yes, it was fine.” I picked up my bag and set it down again. “Oh, and I have something for you.”

I untied a string bag from my back-pack.

“Really?” She turned her head to the side, raising her chin, like a spooked horse.

“Don’t worry.” I said. “It’s only this.”

She took the bag and laid it on the counter.

“You may open it,” I said.

“What is it?” she said.

“It’s a canasta tray. And two decks—and a set of dominoes for Forty-two.”

Her smile, with one corner of her mouth higher than the other, was like Sheila’s. She relaxed and gave the tray a spin.

“Thank you, Professor Randall.”

“Call me Hank,” I said.

“My name is Vicky Brooks.”

I pointed to her book. “Are you a student?”

“Yes, I’m still an apprentice,” she said. “In my last semester of library science. My husband can’t wait for me to finish.”

I picked up my bags. “Enjoy the cards,” I said.

She called after me as I walked away. “Oh, Professor—Dr. Crawley said that he would send a driver to take you to the Ark Park for lunch.”

* * *

The driver who knocked on my door at noon was a tall, African-American man in his twenties, wearing a greasy, blue coverall.

“Cicero Brown,” He said. “Prophet says you need a ride.”

Once in the truck, he pulled a pipe from the plaid shirt under his coverall and put on a misshapen, brown Fedora without a band. He drove with his left elbow out the window. “You know the country around here?” He said.

“Just visiting,” I said. “I’m not here for the In-gathering.”

“Didn’t think you were,” he said. “I can tell.”

“How’s that?”

“Two kinds of people around here—the guardians and the onlies.”

We hit a bump on the unpaved road as we climbed around a hillside thick with white oaks and hickories. Cicero tamped his pipe with his finger.

He glanced at me and laughed. “You wonder what I’m talking about!” He lit the pipe and took a long draw.

“I guess you’re referring to all the security guards—”

“Nah. Those aren’t the real guardians. They just a little army for the Board. The real guardians are up to the Ark Park. The Board of Faith—they the onlies. Only do this, only believe that—you know.”

I nodded. “So which are you?”

“Me?” He laughed. “Neither one, sir! Neither one.”

A wide farm valley spread out below us as we came over the top of the hill. Beyond the farms was a wide lake. Above it, on a chalky bluff, rose a huge building like the hull of a boat.

“No sir,” he said. “I keep to myself working in the shop. Me and my wife have a little place—or at least I try to stay with her sometimes, but not so the tax man knows it. We do what we have to do, you know, to have enough. But some time, I’m gonna buy us a little motel in Fairall and fix it up. Don’t matter whether you a guardian or an only, you gonna need a motel sometimes. That’s how I see it.”

Even with both windows down, the cab filled with apple-scented smoke as we descended the hill. He was quiet for a quarter-hour. He laughed again.

“What I am is a *local*,” he said. “And there aren’t many of us!”

“How do you mean?” I said.

“Most of the people have *come* here; they not *from* here. I recall when there was no Board, no Ark Park, and when Foxglove was just a horse farm where my daddy was a stable-hand. Everything fancier now.” He pointed at the hull on the bluff. “That Ark used to be a chicken-house. And the Temple Independent people used to be a store-front church on Main Street in Fairall. Came a time when us locals became—what they call it?—an endangered species.”

We drove behind a dump truck going up the one-lane, dirt road to the Ark Park. At the crest of the ridge, it turned right.

“He’s going to the dump.”

“The Ark Park is a dump?” I said.

He laughed—a deep, mellow laugh, calm as a meadow in the morning light. “The Ark Park is built on a dump. Guess that’s one reason old Prophet Crawley put it up here. People been dumping their city trash here for a hundred years. He says we’re gonna mine it.” Shaking his head, he blew through his pipe, tapped it on the rear-view mirror and dropped it in his pocket. “I just work on what they bring to the shop.”

“You’re not a guardian, then?” I said.

“No. Your guardians be more like Brother Crawley. Seem like they always afraid they gonna lose something. They even save—I’m not joking!—the old gaskets and washers from the engines we breaking down. Everything has to be sorted and labeled. You wouldn’t believe it. Don’t bother me none. We paid good.”

He let me out at the Ark, a huge, green boat of a building, at least ten stories tall, the prow facing the valley and the stern open, like a ferry-boat, but fitted with wide, stone steps instead of a ramp for cars. I walked up the steps.

The Ark Park building had no offices. Small groups of people stood or sat on rugs around the first floor talking, looking at diagrams on flat screens, or eating at one of the long tables in the far right

corner of the room. Small white posts, each about three feet tall, were installed irregularly around the room.

When I crossed the threshold, a blue light flashed from the post in front of me; then the post spoke.

“Mr. Randall. Welcome. The Supreme Prophet is on the upper deck. Follow the blue lights.”

Several posts lit up, making a line to the elevator. I followed them and got in. There were no buttons to push. The elevator simply delivered me to the upper deck, another open space, with tall windows all around. The blue lights led me to Crawley, who was sitting with others at a long table in the far right corner of the room.

“Gentlemen—and ladies—this is Professor Randall. He joins us for lunch.” Crawley pushed out a chair. “We’re having spinach salad and lamb shanks today,” he said.

“That’s fine,” I said. As I looked down the table, I saw Wendell Brown at the other end.

“I believe you know some of us, Hank,” Crawley said. “This is Deborah Detwiler, my office manager. You know Will and Wendell. The curly-haired fellow is one of our music conservators, George Smeltzer. Mr. Ricks is here from Engineering. And we’re honored to have Mr. Lyman Jencks from the Board of Faith and Practice.”

I recognized Jencks as one of the preachers at the tent meeting—the one with the whining voice who did what Charlie had called the “warm-up.” From his expression, he seldom warmed up to anything.

“We’re finishing up here, but you can serve yourself.” Crawley passed me a salad bowl.

Turning back to the group, he said, “I take your point, Lyman. Outsiders have to be carefully monitored, but in some of our operations—even your fiber reclamation at the Hartley Mill—we simply need their expertise. George and other conservators had to use outsiders to set up our servers in

Support Services. Even the organic inks you use at the newspaper office still come from outside. Now, when we reach carrying capacity in within the next year, we will have all our own people in place.”

Jencks stood up and closed his attaché case. “Very well. The Board will be watching you very closely, gentlemen. When the In-gathering has ended, separation must be complete. Good day.”

After Jencks left, everyone talked at once. Several newcomers joined the group, saying that they had been waiting for Jencks to leave. As the talking died down, Crawley spoke again.

“Deborah, I guess that you’re pleased that the Board is only watching the men.”

“This is the only place the Board doesn’t watch,” she said. “If they did, Mr. Jencks would know that he just had lunch with outsiders.”

“Ah, but Ms. Detwiler,” Crawley said. “Remember Herr Goethe. *‘Nichts ist drinnen—’*”

“English, Avery!” One of the newcomers shouted.

“Things are neither inside nor outside, but the inside determines the outside. I take it to mean that insides and outsides matter less than how you fold the package. We’re setting the initial conditions here for our installation by making the first folds, just as the genetic toolkit sets the first conditions for the segmentation of an embryo, just as *el Niño* sets initial conditions for a storm system, just as—”

“Stop preaching, Avery!” Wendell growled from the end of the table. “This isn’t one of your revivals.”

“Sorry, Wendell.” Avery took the straw from his mouth and sat his chair back on four legs.

“Okay. Glad to have you folks from the T-project to join us. We’ll be talking later with Dr. Randall. For now, let’s have that pie.”

A large apple pie was quickly divided. Everyone except Crawley and the newcomers took their pieces with them back to work. Wendell left first, not saying anything to me. Just as well. I didn’t know what to say to him.

The two newcomers were young people, a man and woman wearing blue-green scrubs. While Crawley talked, they bent over a large pad-viewer, apparently playing a videogame.

“Thanks for coming, Hank.” Crawley stood. “Let me show you something.”

We walked along the tall windows around the perimeter of the room.

“What we’re trying to install here is a different way of thinking about resources. Look out there.”

He pointed to the fields below and the sides of the valley, where orchards climbed the slopes like ranks of tiny spiders. “Farmland is the foundation, along with a good aquifer and Lake Hennessey. Then there is our mining operation—”

Below us, spread over hundreds of acres adjoining the Ark building, was a huge refuse heap, divided into blocks and streets where dozens of workers in yellow suits were shifting piles of trash into rolling bins. From our height, it looked like an animation of some biological process, like the removal of toxins in the liver.

“In those low buildings, hidden from the road, we have clean labs for our microbial nano-electronics factory, a low impact industry that will ultimately supply all of the products we require. Of course, it’s the ‘requiring’ part that needs the most work.”

“How’s that?” I said.

“It’s what I meant by thinking differently about resources. Thinking differently begins with *learning to want less*. The less we want, the less we require. The less we require, the more easily we can meet our needs. To balance a life of reduced wants and appetites, increased reverence, stewardship, and moderation, we must also strengthen socialization and opportunities for creative engagement. I call it the Incubator Project.”

“An ant colony?” I said. “And I suppose that everyone here has swallowed the viroid?”

“No, no. That’s not necessary. Only those who want to. The influence of a few transmitters suffices. Emotional contagion takes over. And there are other ways to boost the signal. The Incubator

sets up the initial conditions, but once underway, our life here will no more require viroids than the old space shuttle required its gantry after lift-off. Plotting the trajectory and setting the initial conditions—that's the hard part.”

“Indeed.”

I didn't know what else to say. We were looking over the bow of the Ark. Chinks of light reflected from distant windows in the town of Fairall, a small grid of houses, stores and buildings around a water tower and domed courthouse, surrounded by the forest of Foxglove Reserve.

It seemed like megalomania. Somehow I was involved in it. I didn't like it, but I didn't see how to change it.

“What you have done here is beyond my understanding,” I said. “But however much I might agree with your *ends*, your *means* seem more than questionable. Maybe even diabolical.”

“Are they?” He said. “In a society increasingly unable to do the simple right things, hamstrung by economic, military and environmental entanglements, we are propelled into choices that are obviously against the interest of our species. The well-known list of hazards, mistakes, and imperial delusions is very long—a school child could write it. What is missing is *resolve*. Most of us simply don't *feel* the doom we are knitting for ourselves. Here, in the Incubator—some of us for religious reasons and others for reasons of their own—we *do* feel the doom. Here we have the resolve.

“You say it's diabolical. Perhaps it is.” He stared over the entrance-way and the winding ridge-road, far below us, where Cicero had driven me. With his blue cap, he looked like the captain of some giant ship—maybe an aircraft carrier—watching over his floating city from the quarter-deck.

He faced me.

“Let's do this,” he said. “Before you make up your mind, why don't you visit around the plant today? Talk with some of the people working here. See for yourself whether they behave like ants.”

We walked back to the couple in scrubs, who had finished off the pie and gone back to their videogame.

“You may go back to work.” Crawley said. “Just freeze the simulation for now. We’ll come around to see you later.”

They closed up the videogame—or whatever it was—and walked to the elevator.

Crawley lifted the domed cover of one of the posts, used the keypad, and turned back to me. “Just follow the blue lights for a tour of our plant. We’ll have dinner when you return.”

* * *

The first stop on the tour was the Conservancy, several decks below ground level. The blue lights led me to a long aisle of grey computer servers. The readout on the last pole was:

<p>GEORGE SAKALAS SMELTZER MODULE 702.5559</p>
--

Wearing headphones, George sat at the console of a kind of organ fitted into a towering, half-cylinder of at least twenty screens, where sine waves of all sizes and colors scurried from left to right. When a blue light appeared in the central panel, he turned around. Like a cherub with round spectacles, merry eyes, and curly hair, he seemed to be returning to Earth from some beatific vision. He removed the headset and hopped off the bench. It was only then that I realized we were about the same age. In fact, I had met him before.

“Avery said you were coming,” he said. “I told him we’d both taught at Holburn.”

“So we did. But our paths only crossed in the *Caf*.”

“Publish or perish—I had enough of Academentia, I can tell you. But, speaking of the *Caf*, let’s have something to eat while I show you around. Didn’t you come to one of my concerts?”

“The Liszt,” I said.

“Yes, the Saint Francis piece. That’s when I was trying to be definitive. Here’s the thing about definitive works. At the time you hear them, you can’t imagine that the work could ever be performed again. It’s how I felt once about a performance of the Verdi *Requiem*, with a chorus of two hundred, outstanding soloists, and a top orchestra. The physical power of the sound, at least from where I was sitting in the front of the hall, pushed against my face and chest. The beauty of it—thrilling and unbearable! Yet, several years later, I heard the same work performed by a small ensemble and was equally moved, but more intimately. Both times were definitive.”

“With respect to the circumstances.”

“Yes.” He handed me a sack of cracked pecans. “Or take ornamentation. Students sometimes skip it because they think of it as extra. Frankly, in some music, it *is* extra. But in the *Goldberg Variations* it is integral. To realize ornamentation in a definitive way, however, is another matter. Interpretations vary widely, but what becomes obvious is that only some of these interpretations will work. You start out by counting in three, maybe, and find that the thirty-second notes are difficult to imagine. So you go to counting six eighth beats per measure and, taking it very slowly, discover a new structure for the piece.”

“Yes,” I said. “What you call definitive performances we speak of in the arts and sciences as finished products and proven theories. But often they are simply clearings in the forest where explorers have stopped to regroup. They give us a plan or policy for what to do next.”

He handed me a bag of pecans.

“Help yourself. Toucan?”

“What?” I said.

“What’s a toucan? It’s a bird that can do it better than one.”

He laughed at his own joke and swept his arm over the console and aisle of servers. “Ever since musicians put two hands to one keyboard, they’ve been increasing their power by twos—two hands, two

feet, two keyboards, two voices, duples, quadruples. I lost track of the power of this instrument when it went beyond two to the thousand. Today I'm using it to collaborate with a colleague in Helsinki on a sample set from a recent volcanic eruption in Iceland. We've found a nonlinear pattern in the data that can be set for violaphone and stringed shears. It's a kind of cross between Lou Harrison and Alan Hovhaness, if you know what I mean. As a matter of fact, I can bring up the relevant passage from Hovhaness for comparison—"

"Wait a minute, George," I said. "You lost me at the pecans. You're turning a volcanic eruption into music?"

He slapped me on the shoulder. "That's pretty good! Let's leave this and sit by the window."

"There's a window down here?"

He led past another aisle of gray servers, where the whole wall opened into a meadow. Two deer lapped water from a spring bubbling in a rocky patch of ground, the water spreading out and gathering into a puddle that flowed down the hillside.

"It's the headwaters of Pawmack Creek," he said. "We decided to change the image today."

"It's a simulation?"

"Oh no. That's Pawmack Creek today, as seen through a projection from our optical cables. You want to watch dragonfly nymphs in the water?" He touched a panel in the wall and the image changed to a life-and-death struggle between a foot-long nymph and a tadpole. The tadpole lost.

"That's pretty impressive, George."

"Every office needs a window," he said. "Even one four floors under ground. Every wall down here has one. Some of our conservators—like those in hydrology or geographic information systems—use them more than the rest of us. Most of us are less interested in real-time data than in beauties revealed—like with the volcano."

The meadow returned. We sat down at a long dining table like the ones I had seen on other decks. He poured cups of water and ate a pecan.

“So, you take the noise of the volcano for your music?”

“We take the whole volcano! We make it a wave-form and reassign its coordinates to musical parameters. What it becomes then is up to the artist. It’s a new instrument for one of the apprentices.”

“Apprentices?”

“That’s what we call the kids who come here for their studio sessions.”

“To earn pellets,” I said. “Crawley’s son told me about it. So this is a school?”

“We call it a conservatory. My section is a data-base of music. Half of my day goes to selecting and making entries. All of the conservators follow the same guidelines. Choice and verification are handled differently in the arts than in engineering, but the idea is the same. The apprentices learn to use the holdings.”

“It seems like an impossibly huge project,” I said. “I can’t imagine how you would go about saving even a small portion of the scientific information, for example.”

“I don’t know much about the sciences.” He flicked some shells into a small chute projecting from the floor behind the table. “I think I heard one of the mycologists say that she had linked up with a data-base in Utrecht to compare our collection of fungi with theirs. As I understand it, there are seed banks and depositories all over the world that we cross-reference to validate our own living collections, just as I am checking my catalog against the one in Reykjavik. As far as scientific data goes, I’m sure that the Curator’s Guidelines apply there as well as they do here.”

Staring out the window and drumming his fingers, he seemed suddenly tired of explaining and ready to return to work. “I suppose I should tell you about the Guidelines,” he said—more to himself than to me.

He poured himself another cup of water.

“There are four guidelines,” he said. “Two things to avoid; two things to do. First, we’re supposed to avoid *indulgence*. It’s easy to spot in the arts; I don’t know about the sciences. For example, say a writer produces a novel of great beauty or stunning accomplishment; then, for the next twenty years, he turns out a series of similar novels—all best-sellers, all as satisfying as bon-bons to his fans. We save only the first book.”

George leaned against a tree on the window-wall.” Ricks, one of the aviation engineers who ate lunch with us today, told me a few weeks ago that in science, indulgence shows up as a decline in significance. It seems that scientists also write best-sellers to stay employed. They call them discoveries. Discoveries attract attention, even if they are later shown to be incorrect or exaggerated. But replications do not attract attention and, therefore, are seldom done or published. Ricks said that his conservator disregards what she calls ‘band-wagon research.’”

“It seems to me that some important insights could be overlooked by doing that,” I said. “Replication is the gold standard for verification in the hard sciences, but in sociology, paleontology, nutrition—frankly, in almost any field—a skilled observer can notice a regular association between variables that is likely but not yet replicable.”

“Like in case studies,” George said. He tossed my pecan shells into the chute. “We also do those in musicology. But your concern is covered by the fourth guideline.”

He stood up and pushed in his chair. “Let’s go back to my studio.”

“Have a seat,” he said as he leaned against the console. “Okay, the second guideline is to avoid *ideology*. In practice, I don’t think that this guideline works very well. I mean, do I disregard *Wozzeck* because of Büchner’s views, or exclude *Dixieland* because Adorno preferred atonal music? If a work seems to have no merit other than its ideology, then I don’t select it; but matters are seldom so clear-cut. I’m not happy about including Wagner’s literary works, for example, but how I could I exclude them?”

Sitting at the keyboard, he pushed two bars. The meadow reappeared on the screens around the console. A loon-like melody seemed to rise from the stream.

“Something I’m working on,” he said. “Okay. The other two guidelines are to look for life-fostering concern and imagination. Those skillful observations you mentioned would get in under the wire of imagination. Sometimes the Curator uses the word *intention* for ‘life-fostering concern,’ as when he reminds us that *four eyes* are needed for his visions. One of his many quirks—”

“So the Curator is Avery Crawley?”

“Yes. To us, he’s the Curator; to the Board of Faith and Practice, he’s the Supreme Prophet—although Lyman Jencks doesn’t like it.”

“Jencks is on the Board?”

“Their youngest member. Most of the Board members, like Chairman Greaves, have been around since the early Temple days. They like what Avery and the *S & U* Corporation have done for the Northern Region.

“What do you think of that?” he said suddenly.

“What do you mean?” I said.

His brow wrinkled. “Guess I haven’t gotten it right yet,” he said. He reached back to the console and pulled the two bars he had previously pushed in. “I wanted to see whether you noticed the effect of sampling a loon call through an obo-cello—a hybrid instrument. It’s a peripheral sound I’m using in the fifth of my opera series.”

“Sorry. Guess I wasn’t listening.” I said. “You’re also a composer?”

“Most of the time. It’s why I’m here. All of the conservators work on their own research or productions. Avery insists on it. He even gives us quirky assignments. Like my opera series. The five operas reinterpret old stories, the Samaritan, the persecutions of Daniel and the Tories, the tragedy of Electra, and the Great Flood. They were my idea, but Avery insists that I complete them. He even

demands progress reports. These stories aren't the properties of any religion or group, he says. He wanted me to set other stories to music, like Red Hand, the Seneca story of the medicine man who was healed by animals, and some of the Abenaki and Iroquois stories about the Deer People who allow themselves to be killed. provided the hunter is respectful. These stories, he says, come from the bitter experience of exploiting the world. “

George shook his head. “I told him that I had to do it my own way.” George aped the way Crawley leaned back with a pencil in his mouth. “ He said, ‘They are sources of creative imagination that help us summon the energy to commit to life-fostering concerns, but you must find your own way to write this work. Just complete it.’ You know how Crawley talks.”

I nodded. “So he assigned you to write these operas?”

“In a way. He knew that I was already concerned about saving these stories—these myths—in the form of operas. ‘Why should the Devil get the best tunes?’ —as Luther said. How many people even know the biblical stories any more—much less the myths of Greeks and Senecas? At first, I sought funding from religious foundations, but all of them had their own conditions and prescriptions. So did the academics at Holburn. But not Crawley. He didn't ask whether my interpretation would be acceptable to the Board. It was the intention of the project that mattered to him—the use of myth to promote life-fostering concern and creative engagement rather than indulgence.”

“His ‘four eyes’ again,” I said.

George's notion of salvaging religion by reinterpreting it through musical plays seemed about as likely to succeed as Esperanto, Prohibition, or Melvil Dewey's spelling reforms.

“Exactly—inner eyes and outer eyes.”

The blue light flashed on the central panel.

“I see that Wendell is ready for you in Nano-biotics. Better not keep him waiting.” He stood.

“Come back soon.”

When I glanced back, he was already wearing the headset.

* * *

I followed the blue lights back upstairs to the Nano-biotics Studio. Wendell sat on a three-legged stool by the elevator. He still had the beard, but now had a buzz-haircut. Walking quickly with a slight limp, he glanced at me, brushed—rather than shook—my hand, and strode down the hall, leaving me to catch up to him. Same old Wendell.

“How have you been doing?” I said.

“You mean since that Conference?” He blew his nose. “I left everything after that—the science department, Holburn, that crazy Cratylus crowd, smoking cigarettes, Diane, and . . .”

I was probably what he omitted from the list. “So you’re feeling better?” I said.

“Huh?” Over his desk, a large screen filled with equations had caught his attention. He highlighted one of the expressions. “Finally doing what I want full-time,” he said.

“Your plasmid switch, I guess.”

“Oh, that’s worked out. They use it here all the time. It saves those biochemists all their trouble with restriction enzymes, I can tell you.” He blew his nose again. “No, I’m working on the power plant. The next step after the PS—applying microbial nanoelectronics to energy generation through photosynthetic photovoltaics.”

“How’s it going?” I said.

“Look around, Randall!” He waved both arms. “It’s what runs this place. We’re totally off-grid. Even the windows are impregnated with receptors. And it’s all light enough to disassemble in a week.”

Wendell then led me through the equations on his screen. I didn’t understand it then, and I can’t repeat it now. He wasn’t interested in small talk, so I followed the blue lights to the next stop.

* *

I came to a deck without windows. The blue lights stopped at a door made of shiny, chased steel.

CLEAN LAB FOR THE T-PROJECT
WEAR SCRUBS

A drawer opened from the wall. I took out the scrub suit, put it over my clothes, and slipped booties over my shoes. The door opened. Crawley and the two videogame players were waiting inside.

“Welcome to the T-project!” Crawley said. “I’ll show you around here before we go to dinner. Ana and Byron will bring up the images for us. Just have a seat.

The lights dimmed and the huge image of a bristly, plated creature appeared on the window-wall. The ocular micrometer in the field of vision showed it to be less than a thousand microns long.

“Ever seen one of these, Hank?”

“With the eight legs, it looks like some kind of mite. What is it, about half a micron long?”

“That’s close. It’s a tardigrade. There are at least 40 species in North American waters, beaches, and low-lying areas, most of them living in mosses and lichens.”

“‘T’ for ‘tardigrade’.” I said.

“And for *time* and *teabags*,” he said. “I’ll explain in a minute. Ana, show the life cycle.”

Another tardigrade appeared, its outer cuticle buckling as the organism slid from its skin. The old cuticle bulged with activity. An egg popped out, a tiny stylet projecting through the shell. Within a short time, the tiny tardigrade emerged. Meanwhile, other eggs had hatched inside the cuticle. Twenty tardigrades were soon crawling about.

“They keep the same number of cells and therefore only grow by increasing cell size,” Crawley said.

The window opened on a mossy bog. As the camera zoomed into the frame of reference of the tardigrades’ world, the sheltering leaves became warm ponds teeming with wheel-headed rotifers, pollen

and fungal grains, flickering protozoa and more tardigrades lumbering about, occasionally snagging another animal or bit of plant with a proboscis. The picture changed suddenly.

The watery scene began to shrivel. The leafy basins collapsed. Activity ceased. The window zoomed out, the bog now brownish yellow in the midsummer sun. Time advanced. Rain fell. The window zoomed down. Once again, the tardigrades' world teemed with life.

“The biography of a tardigrade,” said Crawley.

The lights came up as the window faded.

“They must be a fascinating study,” I said.

“What’s fascinating is their longevity,” Crawley said. “When they go into their dry form, their metabolism is almost turned off, so that they can withstand both extreme heat and cold—even less than 200 Celsius. More importantly, desiccated specimens millions of years old have come alive again when carefully rehydrated. We have been using PS technology to understand the genetics of their metabolism.”

“‘PS’ is ‘plasmid switch,’” I said. “Wendell tried to explain it to me. What I get is that your whole operation in this building is based on PS—even the power plant that supplies electricity—”

“Yes—through photosynthetic electronics.” Crawley said.

“But it still isn’t clear to me why this technology has so many applications.”

Crawley leaned back in his chair, chewing on a straw. “The story goes back to the time before the merger between Utnapgen and Salvolution. Both corporations were studying the preservation of potentially useful species through genetic control of cellular development. At that time, we were using traditional methods, such as characterization of the proteins that guide embryonic changes. I had a grant from Salvolution to sequester the genome of one microbe inside the noncoding DNA of another microbe.

Wendell, working in the biophysics section, had developed a new method for manipulating sections of genetic switches with great speed and precision. Think of it as a kind of subatomic forceps.”

Crawley moved his thumb and index finger like tweezers. I noticed that Ana and Byron had gone back to their videogame.

“Shortly after I began to use PS, I discovered the viroid. You know that story.”

I nodded.

“Well, the people over at Utnapgen got wind of our work and pushed for a merger. When we linked efforts, we discovered dozens of other applications for PS—a whole realm of microbial nano-electronics that took advantage of the machinery of cellular organelles for large-scale power generation, detoxification, and materials production. For the second time, a large-scale biological industry to supply power and materials was feasible. It had low environmental impact and massive productive capacity.”

“The second time?” I said.

“The first time was the Neolithic Revolution—farming. Since then, I hope that we’ve learned how to avoid some pitfalls. When we saw where the research could go, I made my pitch to move the plant to the Northern Region. As you know, I—”

Byron looked up from his pad.

“Uh, Doctor Crawley. Do you still need us to . . .”

“Oh, certainly. Let’s not keep Ana and Byron. Show us the next clip.”

The window reappeared. Two rhesus monkeys were pulling on their mother’s arms. As time advanced, they grew larger. Both were males, one with a black tuft on his forehead. A rather long sequence followed, showing them wandering about their cage, playing with balls and ropes. As time advanced, the black-haired rhesus seemed to grow heavier and to move more slowly while the other one slept or played. As his black cap became gray and then white, the old male rocked slowly on his haunches and stared at his litter-mate, who was climbing the chain-link fence to pull down a banana.

The window showed red and blue curves, graphing the lifetimes of the two monkeys, showing time on the X axis and ‘Population’ on the Y-axis. The red curve was an upside-down U; the blue rose steadily and leveled off.

When the lights came on, Crawley held a tea-bag.

“The experiment you saw has been done by Byron and Ana on over a hundred sets of rhesus twins. The results are always the same. One twin has a normal lifespan. The other—the one who drinks this tea—continues to thrive. In fact, as you can see by the blue curve, that whole population of monkeys is still alive.”

“What’s in that tea?” I said.

“We call it tea because it’s made from tardigrades,” Ana said, her voice sharp and grating. A plain-looking young Asian woman with her black hair pulled tightly back to reveal a bony forehead, when she spoke, I found myself watching a pulsing vein just below the hairline.

“It’s not just an extract,” she said. “We’ve isolated the relevant components of the *Echiniscus* metabolic sequence with PS, captured it in supernate, and freeze-dried it to adhere to *Cho-Wa* herbal tea.”

I hesitated to ask for another explanation. “So, the monkeys who drank some of this tea made from tardigrades seem to live longer?”

“They *do* live longer!” She frowned. “It has to do with the master equation. Quarter power scaling puts our metabolic rate at a three-quarter exponent of our mass. The echinisoid tea pushes down the rate by five percent—maybe more. Look at this.”

She turned her pad around so that I could see the swirl of equations.

Byron muttered to her.

“Oh, you need the graphic,” she said. She aimed her pad at the wall. The window opened onto an animated, desert landscape. A red ball rolled down from the upper left corner over gentle dunes, then up a steep grade, over long, flat areas, and finally dropped from a cliff at the lower right corner.

‘**RESET**’ appeared onscreen. This time, the ball was blue. Once again, it had enough momentum coming from the upper left corner to make it over the steep grade. For the blue ball, however, the topography of the landscape after the steep hill had more ridges, slowing the ball down. In fact, it never made it to the cliff, instead moving busily with little progress over the innumerable bumps in the terrain.

“So, what you see here,” Ana said, “Is the effect on the developmental plane of less than a five percent change in the metabolic power function. A fractal graphic will show the topological mixing—”

“Thank you, Ana.” Crawley held up his hand. “We won’t keep you. Let’s go for a walk, Hank.”

We took the elevator back to the top deck and sat again at the table. A cleaning crew was working at the other side of the deck, carefully vacuuming the contents of each of the chutes along the wall into different receptacles on their carts. Crawley poured me an orange drink.

“Carrot juice,” he said. “It has a little apple in it. You’ll like it.”

We watched the last pink streams of light from the setting sun. Wendell would have said that we watched the sun until we’d turned away from it.

“Wendell seems to be in his element here,” I said.

“Yes. And the others? George—”

“No question,” I said. “No one comes close to an ant. Not even Ana. But then, maybe it’s because none of you are ‘onlies.’”

Crawley smiled. “You’ve been talking to Cicero.”

He turned up his glass to get the last drop of juice, leaving an orange spot on his nose. “He’s right, in a way. The folks in Fairall don’t know what we’re doing here. It’s not that we’re hiding much. They simply don’t see it. We’re like that temple in ancient Alexandria where Hero’s machines made the

gods fly and dispensed holy water from a vending machine. The Board's frame of reference is narrow. But their children who apprentice here will see things differently. They are already shifting frames."

"Okay. I agree that everyone seems to be here voluntarily. And, as you said, they're 'creatively engaged.' Both Wendell and George were impatient to return to work."

"Because they're suited to what they do. We don't have many indulgences here. The work is absorbing. None of us can comprehend the whole effort. Therefore, at meals, we always meet with workers from different sections to share frames of reference. We all feel the doom, but we are joyful in our sharing and in our work. Perhaps it appears strange."

"Everything here is strange. Even Wendell is different."

"Yes, even Wendell is responding to a loss. I find that this is the characteristic shared by all of us 'guardians' on the Ark. We are painfully aware of loss."

He patted my arm. "Like you, Hank."

I finished my drink.

"But it's more than just feeling the loss," he said. "Guardians refuse to indulge in the feeling. Instead, they are determined to make something. They see bits of all of us in each of us. Because of this, they *must* respond." He tapped his chest. "But knowing how to respond depends on discovering what suits you. That's where my proposition comes in."

"So what's your proposition?" I said.

"Remember that blue ball?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*She finds us artichokes
By poking sticks in trails of meadow-mice.
Is it in fact her gift, or something she would never eat,
Some joke to see us eat it out of season?
Yet only by looking through her eyes can we see.*

—Irene Brooks, *Finding a Purchase*

You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

—Mark Twain

Twenty years after beginning the T-treatment, I returned to Fairall for my second Decade Report. That was in 75 RRT*, according to the revised system. Defederalization was already a reality, although not publicly acknowledged, even after the Disconnection Period, when many areas in the country, like the Northern Region, became autonomous.

* Regional Realignment Time

After examinations by physicians and tissue engineers, I was sent to the serious, dark-eyed Ana, who now had the T-studio to herself. After an hour of scraping and probing, she moved on to the questionnaire.

“How’s your sleep?” she said.

“It’s turning out the way you thought. I seem to be adding about another minute per month.”

“You’re sticking with greens and only a little meat?”

“Yes, I’m always carrying around bags of beets, kale and carrots. When I travel, I always seek out the farmers’ markets.”

“No processed food—no monosodium glutamate, no peppers and strawberries with pesticides, no sugar, no soy, no—”

“None of that.”

“All right,” she said. Ana now wore thin wire trifocals and a top-knot bun. A few black and gray hairs had sprung loose. “Just remember,” she said. “That stuff is slow poison for anyone; but for you, it would have immediate effects. All right. Your skin, muscle tone, and appearance have not appreciably changed since your last exam. Effective aging since that exam I would put at about twenty days.”

She pursed her mouth in disgust. “Now for the subjective questions. Do you notice any changes in perception? For example, is any slowing or acceleration of events apparent to you? What has been your experience?”

“I know you don’t want any long stories,” I said. “So I’ll be brief. As I traveled between sampling sites in the first years, I didn’t notice any problem. My energy was good, my sleep sound, my mental alertness—well—as good as it ever was.”

Ana’s eyebrows rose as her fingers raced to enter my comments. She didn’t like to use audio recorders.

“In January of the thirteenth year, I was consulting with a few professors and tribal council members at St. John’s University in Santa Fe. The temperature outside was four degrees. Whether it was the temperature or the altitude, I don’t know. But I simply fell asleep while we were talking. Everyone else was amused, of course.”

“Any other time this has happened?”

“Not like that. I’ve learned to notice when it’s about to happen. If I haven’t slept fully or the temperature is too low, I’m guaranteed to pass out for at least half an hour. If I feel it when I’m driving, I pull over. Of course, driving is now so limited in many places, between the fuel problems and the blockades, that—”

Ana looked up from the keyboard. “What do you mean?”

“I guess you don’t get out enough to know about the blockades and migration check-points. Maybe half the states and cities have them now. You don’t go into some areas without the right papers or paying the toll. The tolls vary depending upon the state-lines crossed and the officials you meet.”

“What about the Interstate highways?”

“Oh, those were seized by the states several years ago. The ones left in good repair have been made into toll roads. And the Feds are too busy with floods and military involvements in central Asia, Africa, and Central America to tend to highways.”

“So people really are so afraid of each other.” She shook her head. “The Curator said it would happen. Just as he warned about the first storm.”

“Yes. I remember *that* storm. That’s when I was at the camp with—”

“Now, what about time perception?” Ana was back at the keys.

“Time perception.” I wasn’t sure that I could express what I had experienced with sufficient brevity for Ana the Focused.

“Let me put it this way,” I said. “My memory is good, but it seems like my mental gardener died—the one who had been cutting topiaries in my brain.”

Ana frowned and looked up. “What’s that? Topi areas?”

“You’ve seen how bushes around wealthy estates are sometimes pruned to resemble spheres, pyramids, or animals. That’s what I mean. The shapes I had for so many ideas have given way to a kind of undulating, natural shape—like giant, old boxwoods. I still remember what I thought once, but the former shape seems inadequate. I can’t explain it, but I feel quite calm about it.”

Ana had stopped typing and taken off her glasses. As she leaned forward, I noticed the pulsing vein in her forehead.

“Mr. Randall, you are having a frameshift.”

* * *

The Assembly for my Decade Report met on the upper deck. We sat in a circle of almost fifty people on the large rug. Wendell was missing. Before speaking, Avery took off his cap, revealing a pink spot at the crown under the few hairs left. He’d lost weight.

“Dr. Randall has already submitted his written report from the sampling sites. Ask questions.”

A dark-faced man with straight black hair and a beaded vest spoke first. “You say that my people in South Dakota have taken over the silos.”

“Well, it’s more lucrative for them than the casinos had become. The same has happened in New Mexico and a few other places. Local tribes were given the contracts to guard the bombs so that the remaining military people could be thrown into the fire in Samarkand in Central Asia. Generations of bomb-guardians have passed since the weapons were first produced, but when tribal councils asserted their ancient precedence as stewards of the land and demonstrated the effect of AP’s micronized reactors to draw energy from the sites, the Pentagon was easily satisfied. Ever since their immigration-control-drone accidentally destroyed a Lakota town, they have been trying to save face.”

A middle-aged woman with a high, unlined forehead, thin features and long dark hair, like Sheila's, raised her hand.

"Dr. Randall, you may not remember me—Vicky Brooks, from Data Systems."

"Seems like we played a few games of canasta," I said. "And you liked to freeze the deck."

She smiled. "When you were in the Bay Area, were you able to discover anything new about the failure of the internet?"

"Failure was built into it, of course, from the beginning. Marketing squeezed out all other traffic and hacktivists succeeded in disabling what was left of the system during the Big Shrug."

"The Big Shrug?" she said.

"That's what I've lately been calling the political shut-down of any agencies not related to flood control, the military, or fundraising."

A ripple of laughter went around the circle.

"When I was in the Bay Area," I said. "The local Incubator group was converting its archives to the AP's Metajava format. The literature and music libraries were finally added to the collection, even though it doesn't yet show up on our secure server system."

George Smeltzer had a beard, completing the circle of silver curls around his face. "Did they use our compression algorithm for the music? I hope that we're not going to have to restore sound again from old mp3's."

"I don't know, George. Somehow, I can't get too excited about frequencies I can't even hear—"

"Oh, but we *do* hear them. I can give you examples—"

"Save it, George," Crawley said. "Hank, tell us about Holburn. You've been back several times?"

"Well, there's not much left of Holburn since the impoundment to protect the Capital. New Holburn, as it's called, is little more than a neighborhood surrounding the new site of the university.

Both Alexandria and Arlington residents complain about the pumps, but they keep the Monument above water. As for the people I knew in Holburn or other submerged areas, like the Eastern Shore, the survivors have scattered to inland towns. Some of them would have come here if there had been any openings—or if the perimeter were more friendly.”

Crawley rubbed the stubble on his chin. “That’s the Board’s doing. They seem to think they need live land-mines out there. We’re considering the issue. Of course, we *are* at carrying capacity, but we would not have been so strict. The Board already had the mines, so we could not prevent their deployment.”

An argument broke out between some of the engineers about micronized shields versus viroid telemetry to disrupt the mines. Crawley called for a break.

* * *

He took me to the galley and poured cups of carrot juice.

“I guess you noticed that Wendell is not with us,” he said. “He passed away in his sleep a few months ago. We’ve lost several people since your last report. You look the same as ever, but so does everyone who got the T treatment.”

“I’m sorry to hear about Wendell. But at least he was happy here. That’s the first time I’ve heard of any others on the T-treatment. How many of us are there?”

“Ten in all. You were the first. We now receive a Decade Report from one of you every year. And you’re the first to go critical, if Ana is right.” He pointed to a window wall, showing the huge copper beech-tree in front of Milford House.

“Critical! That doesn’t sound good. I’m in critical condition or I’m going to blow up—or what?”

“No problems.” As he took the straw out of his pocket, his hand trembled. He saw me looking at it. “No problems for *you*, anyway,” he said. “Look at this tree. Think about a child at the age of six. Even years after birth, her brain is developing. As a matter of fact, it’s still developing in her twenties.

“But consider the six year old. The tree is there, but it has no leaves. By age six, it is structurally in place in the child’s brain. The scaffolds have been removed. It stands on its own. All of the slots for categories, all the connections between distant branches, trunk, and roots—all are in place. The unused circuits, whether they were emotional connections damped by unresponsive parents or alternative ways to frame and sample the world around them that were never explored—all have been pruned away. And the rest of life? Well, it’s just a matter of adding leaves.”

He took out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

“Sorry. I have many regrets. You were never a parent.”

“No,” I said. “I always thought of students as my children, but it’s not the same.”

“You see,” he said. “Will’s family moved to another town in the Region. I don’t get to see my grandchildren, Willy and Margie, much since I . . .”

He wiped his eyes again. The back of his hand was paper-thin.

“Since I gave them and some other children the viroid,” he said.

“But why? Didn’t you once tell me that it wasn’t necessary for everyone to have it? And that taking it should be voluntary?”

His jaw tightened.

“But it *is* necessary for leaders to have it,” he said. “Despite what it does to them. See, I have a tumor. So does everyone that took it. The price we paid. It’s like the price paid by descendants of those Ashkenazim whose fine brains evolved under the selective pressure for numeracy by medieval banking. The side effect, however, is a heightened risk of sphingomyelin tumors.

“We pay the prices necessary. You once said I was diabolical, tampering with people’s lives. But maybe the path of evolution is a switchback road with devils at every turn—beginning with that early battle of matter and antimatter that left the few bits of stuff from which everything flowed. Maybe to live is to tamper. I did what I was suited to do. I simply followed that other Preacher who said,

‘Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.’ Going, maybe, to join the other devils. You can judge for yourself. My son certainly thinks so.”

“So, when do I go ‘critical’?” I said.

He shook his head. “The T-treatment doesn’t have that kind of risk.”

“I notice that you don’t call it risk-free.”

“You know better than that, Hank.” He smiled. “No, what I meant about you was that you’re undergoing a frameshift. Think of it this way. That tree that’s been with you since you were six has received a graft. Now the graft has begun to replace it.”

* * *

The break ended and the circle formed again. A clay pipe was passed around. The engineers had settled their differences. Crawley spoke.

“Hank, please give us your general impressions as you have traveled between sampling sites.”

“For the most part, the country appears to have changed very little,” I said. “One still finds big box stores surrounded by aging housing developments, where many of the extravagant homes of the past have been divided into apartments. Most of the population is overweight from multiple trips to various outlets serving nutrient-laced corn and soy fillers made to resemble bread, apples, meat, and other foods. These fillers are heaped into plastic bags or, in fine restaurants, arranged decoratively on plates. Disease, resulting from consumption of sugar and other additives, is the foundation of the medical industry, which now employs almost two-thirds of the population. Given the cost of personal travel, most of my long-distance rides now come from cross-country truckers in the nutrient-filler and sickness industries.”

I took a puff from the pipe and passed it on. The fragrance was like the corn pollen Charlie used at our annual mound ceremony, until a farm accident left him bed-ridden..

“When people aren’t working, they worship by the thousands in the Eternal Bowl Chapels, with their gridiron naves. The popularity of these events has closed down many churches. Of course, a sizeable group continues to use electronic stimulants wired to the remnant of the GPS network cobbled together to replace the internet. Others are collectors, filling homes with antique Chinese gee-gaws or books. And many others seek the repeated sensations provided by various stimulants or best-sellers from the sequel-mills.

“As with other aspects of marketing, we continue to produce and want, produce and want. Intentional realignment, as you call it—the internal turn of heart and reflection that shifts one’s frame of reference to new ways of seeing and restorative, life-enhancing concern—is discernible in a few communities near the Salvage sample sites. But bad habits are like any other habits. They are life-works that do not easily give way.”

I noticed Avery nodding off.

“Summing up, I’d say that continual stimulations from alcohol, sugar, slogans, tobacco, filler-additives, gambling and market speculation, political promotions, and marketing messages—and from the neurotransmitters that all of these release—have sadly kept a large portion of our population in thrall to debt, sicknesses and reactive behaviors and policies. When I heard our Curator speak for the first time, many years ago, his text was the one about the people of Noah’s time who went on eating and drinking when they could have worked together to solve some of their problems. I often think of that as I travel between sample sites. Since that sermon, Dr. Crawley has often explained to me that, during the Incubation Period, our alignment to the divine path requires *internal* incubation and development—inner eyes, he calls it.

“I’m beginning to see that it begins with a kind of mental gardening—a bit of pruning to get back to a stock of personal essentials. As you can see, he’s said it so many times that the topic now puts him to sleep.”

Deborah Detwiler touched Avery's shoulder. He opened his eyes to smiles and gentle laughter all around.

* * *

After dinner on the upper deck, Crawley laid data-files for travel passes and identities on the table and showed me a picture of Vicky's daughter.

"Irene is at New Holburn University," he said.

"She looks like Vicky," I said. "Vicky always reminded me of Sheila."

"One of our poetry conservators, Tom Farley, says there are 'bits of all of us in each of us. These easily suffice another world to splice.' It's another version of my vision."

Staring into the forest below, Crawley leaned forward on the railing around the bridge.

"I don't know whether to be optimistic about a transformation requiring my own disassembly," I said.

"Hank, you've already begun your own disassembly—probably the first of many. It seems to suit you. I'm glad that you took the tea. Ever since you spoke about meeting the saints of sciences and arts through studio work, I have wanted to do something for you. You opened a window for me. Ana thought you were too old for her project. She was certainly right about Wendell. I so much wanted to hold onto him. Ana said he would never watch what he ate.

"But you're different. Even Ana sees that the main requirement for the treatment is not age but curiosity and the open windows of imagination. I knew that you would keep learning."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Wendell drank the tea? He chose to do it?"

"Of course he chose it!" Avery snapped. His whole right arm trembled. "We needed him and he was determined to keep working—like any of your saints, Hank."

He took a deep breath.

“The Ark will need more saints as it sails from the Incubation phase into the Installation—particularly when the next flood comes. ‘All are part of the procession,’ but some of the saints need to be alive to guide the People in difficult periods. I call you the ‘ten elders.’ Your decade reports have been remarkably similar. While the greater population continues to produce more than it requires and to consume more than attention can encompass, our founder populations have become established at all the sample sites. Through these founder groups, we will offer an option to the surrounding communities when they finally collapse. Whether our way will have sufficient force to sweep through the greater population as clothing, speech, or farming once swept through human populations, I don’t know. In the long run, we all come to nothing. But for us—call us guardians, saints, or even con-men—as long as there are odds to beat, we play the game.”

Crawley inhaled deeply, closing his eyes and shaking his head as if there were something in his ear. He sat down at the table.

“What’s this about another flood?” I said.

“Our climatology section has confirmed it with storm centers at our sample sites in the Galapagos, India, Labrador, and Norman, Oklahoma. I’ve been preaching about it in Fairall for the last year, but Lyman Jencks has them so alarmed about outsiders’ influences that some of his followers wonder aloud whether I am ‘out of faith’ with the Board or just out of my mind. Many of them don’t remember the last big storm. Meanwhile, Lyman got wind of the viroid and turned the Apocalogeny Division into his own research lab to investigate its structure and determine what we’re doing up here.”

“Of course, Jencks Enterprises has traded with outsiders for years, making a fortune—and not just in prayer pellets. Ever since they erected the dam to enlarge the Club’s lake at the Foxglove Center, I have stayed away. Researchers moved here. Foxglove is a now country club combined with a kind of research and rehabilitation center—although its customers never seem to recover. It has been a handy way for Lyman to handle dissent. Everything has changed.”

I nodded. “My image wasn’t accepted at the guard-house this time. I waited almost three hours before Cicero picked me up. He told me on the way up that AP guests no longer stayed at the Milford.”

“That’s why you need new identities. You’ve always needed a back-up identity in case others became curious about your not aging. This time, with the coming storm and end of the Incubation phase, however, you may receive closer scrutiny both inside and outside the Northern Region. Your assignment will keep you closer to Fairall than usual.”

After the previous Decade Report, I had simply received an update on the same alternative identity that Human Resources had given me when I went on my first sampling cycle. In twenty years, I’d never needed another identity, but I was still expected to train with an acting coach. Taking on two additional identities would mean several months of training. The coach was not easily satisfied—maybe because she no longer worked for the Old Vic.

I noticed that one of the assignments involved handling a skipjack.

“Does anyone even sail a skipjack any more?” I said. “I’m hopeless around ropes and boats.”

“*Lines*, not ropes, Hank. But that’s all right. You’ll get what you need when the time comes. It will have an outboard motor, so sailing skill is minimal. Dame Vera looks forward to your training.”

“Probably more than I’m looking forward to Dame Vera,” I said.

He picked up the picture of Vicky’s daughter.

“Later on, Tom Farley will fill you in on the boat pick-up. For me, *this* is the main assignment,” he said. “I want you to watch out for her. You must understand. She received the viroid, but then she left Fairall before finishing her apprenticeship. Vicky wanted her to get away from everything here—Fairall, the Board of Faith and Practice, and”

“And *you*?”

He nodded.

“Understandable isn’t it? She found out about the viroid. You went too far.”

Crawley took out his straw. “It was Will who told her. He may even have told Jencks. And you’re right about Vicky not taking it well, even though she knows me. She sent Irene off before Jencks had completed his security cordon around the Region. The Disconnection stranded Irene from her mother and from the follow-ups to the viroid treatment.”

“You mean there’s more than just swallowing the stuff?” I said.

“We boost the signal. My grandchildren and others in the treatment group are within range of the arc-receiver and transmitters, but not Irene. We’re concerned about her safety, of course; but also, Irene has some interests and abilities that will be needed during the Installation and Correction phases. We were hoping that she would join AP after apprenticeship ended.”

He handed me another data file, *Irene Brooks, Historian and Librarian*.

“You don’t seem very contrite, Avery,” I said. “You’ve been right about so much, however, that I’ll let it pass. Maybe there isn’t any cause for concern. She will probably come back after college.”

“Not likely. Vicky says we tried to steal Irene’s independence. She’s fed up with both us and the Board.”

“So what can I do about it?” I said.

“Just stay near. Let the other elders visit the sample sites. Take a job in the area. Keep up with her. Oh, and do the little pick-up job for us before the next tornado.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

*When Tom passed away Nature didn't weep.
He was a scrawny, red-haired parts-man, poet
and banjo player. Rocking on my porch,
he never sang much about shepherds, sheep
or sacred groves, or demigods who scorch
their paper wings flying into reason.*

(From H. Randall's introduction to the revised version of *The Profit of Doom*.)

*Each has his or her place in the procession.
All are part of the procession.*

—Walt Whitman, *I sing the Body Electric*

As I prepared to leave the Ark Park after three months with Dame Vera, I had a visit from George Smeltzer and Tom Farley, a red-haired young man wearing a blue coverall.

“Tom is on break from the Parts Shop,” George said. “Cicero told us you’re leaving this afternoon.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t have a chance to talk. Dame Vera insists on immersion.”

“She’s given us all workouts during cross-training—even Tom.”

George sat on one of the rockers in my small guest room in the crew area below ground level. The window wall viewed the blue lines in a moth-wing at a magnification of four hundred times.

“What are you looking at, Hank?” He said. “Looks like pipelines somewhere.”

“Or fields of violets seen from thirty thousand feet,” Tom said. “Or ridges of lapis lazuli beveled on a medallion, or—”

“Did I mention that Tom is a poetry conservator?” George said. “He’ll turn those blue lines into a song if we let him.”

“You work in the Parts Shop?” I said.

“It’s better than writing at a desk,” Tom said. He paced around the room. When he spoke, he seemed to look at someone behind you. “And it’s certainly better than producing jingles for a living—no matter how lucrative they are. Even ‘snap, crackle, and pop,’ if you remember that ad campaign, made a fortune for a guy in Chicago. No more will I put words to work making people more dependent on unnecessary lingerie, or cosmetics, or soft drinks that soften their brain cells, or—”

“Tom worked for Jencks’s newspaper in Fairall until last year,” George said.

“Endless copy about farm markets, the latest devotional guide, couplets about prayer pellets. Everything had to rhyme. And everything I wrote was returned for me to scrub out evidence of imagination. And—” Tom took a deep breath.

“So you came to AP?” I said.

I realized that one did not converse with Tom. One simply interrupted his flow from time to time. As Tom flowed on, with George and me occasionally interrupting for clarification, George finally explained their visit.

“A year ago, the Curator gave Tom one of his little jobs—”

“Yeah—only eighteen million base pairs,” Tom said. He ran his fingers through his mop of red hair.

“I’ll tell it, Tom,” George said. “You can embellish it later.” As he rocked, George folded his hands in his lap.

“The job was to take the structure of the signal-viroid and code it into verse. The Board of Faith—”

“Jencks!” Tom shouted to the wall. “He needs a double dose of the stuff. Not like Blake, or Muir, or even young Wordsworth. People like that have always understood. But Jencks—”

“Mainly it *is* Jencks.” George frowned. “But also the people in Apocalogeny. They’re very interested in deciphering the viroid. Given his health and the coming storm, Avery wanted to protect the code, keeping it offline but also making it available to other incubation sites if the AP has to shut down.”

“Shut down? Why?”

“The Board’s Security Corps, at Jencks’s instigation, has encircled our plant. Supposedly, this was a safety measure, but no one doubts the Board’s intention to move in here. Most of the current broadcasts and sermons about “outsiders” are really about the Ark Park.

“In the past, Avery was able to convince the Board that AP was their ‘support service,’ but as Jencks’s faction increased and Avery’s health declined, suspicion and fear have prevailed. Since the sixtieth year after the Regional Realignment, when Jencks’s faction took over, the size of the Security Corps has doubled. Shrill rhetoric about regional unity and avoiding contact with outsiders is common. Avery’s predictions of disasters are publicly dismissed by Jencks and his club.

“But privately—when they meet at Foxglove—they speculate on the windfalls they could make in the aftermath of another storm. Most of them are in the insurance, building, banking, and realty trades. You get the picture.”

“Well, no. I don’t.” I said. “Do you mean that with all of the engineers, scientists—experts of all kinds—who work here, and the window-walls viewing everything in the region, no one saw this coming? And now you protect yourselves by writing a poem?”

George stopped rocking.

“What do I know about it?” George said. “Music is what I do. I didn’t say that AP was defenseless. Just that Avery wants a fall-back—a little extra security in case something unforeseen happens during the storm. What do I know? But Tom’s work is more than a poem. It’s not entertainment. Don’t read it for a buzz; read it for an anointing. A healing story does not provide erotic stimulation. But it incubates in you. You become rivers, black bears, and granite hills. Somehow, even given the constraint of writing verse to a chemical code, Tom has succeeded in—”

“*Because of the constraint!*” Tom said. “The *one story*. There are many stories, but all the same story—a trapline for the dead. Capture the sweethearts, fathers, friends to whom we were obliged, the great benefactors, and even the great bullies wearing funny hats and clothed in tinsel delusions that they also made others wear. And it is a work of grief.

”We want all of them back for questioning, for some explanation, for another chance—or only to touch their faces. We want them all back, even the first travelers who came out of Africa through the Gate of Grief. To know them, we tell their stories because we need them all, all the saints—because *none survives without all.*”

Tom lowered his voice

.”While all the other stories were going on—the mysteries, intrigues, wars, love spats, and acts of courage—there was this other story, this message from the life of the Earth. A simple message. A signal simple enough to understand if it is not swamped by our distractions. ‘Have we not seen? Have we not heard? Their voice has gone out to the ends of the earth.’”

* * *

“Okay, Tom.” George said. “As you can see, Tom’s story goes beyond what Avery imagined. It even makes its own predictions. I’m using the book for the libretto of the last opera in my *Marginal Notes* series. It fits perfectly. You may recall that I’ve been working on an interpretation of the key

myths of our species, the only species whose marginal existence depends on the stories it tells itself, the only species which—”

“Now who’s elaborating?” Tom said. He’d finally stopped walking around the room. “Just remember what happened to Calvin’s marginal notes. King James was so provoked by them that he banned Calvin’s Bible and commissioned his own.”

“Only because Calvin didn’t set it to music,” George said.

I zipped my backpack.

“Gentlemen, I’ve finished packing. This discussion really doesn’t interest me. You tell me that the Security Corps will soon attack. You also say a great storm is coming. Yet you are talking about poetry, operas, and John Calvin. Perhaps this is what Avery means when he says that ‘none survive without all,’ but to me it seems ludicrous to mix esthetics and religion with urgent security matters.”

Tom’s face reddened, turning his freckles dark brown.

“Unless leaving security to the armed men is even more ludicrous. Unless the first man knapping a stone was told to be more serious. Unless the play of imagination must snap shut in fear. Unless dissembling and bending backwards are better than poems that let us ‘more fully inhabit our lives,’ as Christian Wiman once said about the stories that make us less likely to destroy our world. Unless Socrates was wrong to bet his life on inquiry. Unless everything about us were not marginal. Unless everywhere we walk is not a ledge giving way—

*‘Fractures creep by me, craters crumble in
As might a crust one snips along a tin.
Seated at my table
Amid stars, I slice a sinewy syllable.
Discovering this skin a vast disguise,
I peek out through a thousand scanning eyes.
I look across the room
At past stars tunneling to doom.*

*I line and guide the knap that splits
And join the images a scratch commits.
One needs the stunning skill*

*To flake off hours and piece in messages;
One needs the nerve, the passion, and the will
To fraction breath, to extract images.’”*

After the outburst, no one spoke.

* * *

The window now viewed Main Street in Fairall. A trio of black-vested Security Corps soldiers was eating lunch outside a restaurant. It looked like any small town.

George stood up slowly as I opened the door.

“I know that what we say may not seem serious to you, Hank. All of us here feel the doom, but we feel it in different ways and about different matters. For Tom, it’s the threat to poetry; for me, it’s the way we’re losing the ancient stories and music. We all feel loss in different ways. I know that Avery never gave you the viroid. He insisted that none of the elders receive it. He used to say, ‘We only give a nudge. The genome is too intricate for anything more.’ Then he would say that the first sign of the founder effect would be frameshifts in the elders. It would be a natural effect of healthy longevity, he said, because learning is a natural pleasure.”

“He got that from Aristotle,” Tom said. “And don’t talk about the Prophet in the past tense, George!”

“Sorry,” George said. “I know he’s not gone yet.”

I put my bags by the door.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I can’t say that it makes much sense, but I’ve learned my parts from Dame Vera. When I get the word from Cicero, I will pick up the document and take the first truck to Santa Fe.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“A world with a God in it, to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that, where he is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things.”

William James, *Pragmatism*

*“Let even earth expire
in unremitting fire—
distress our senses,
shed our ‘essences—’
ashes divisible
to jots invisible:
these easily suffice
another world to splice.”*

-Tom Farley, *The Profit of Doom*

Avery’s predictions were as reliable as ever. Hurricane Enkidu, in 78 R.R.T, ended the Incubation phase and began the Installation. I could no longer be Hank Randall. Of course, I hadn’t been Hank Randall since Sheila died. Our arms around each other had defined our coordinates and identities. I was already someone else.

Once I had hitched a ride, I looked at the note Avery had attached to the manuscript I was carrying to Santa Fe.

“Be on the alert for someone who can tell our story. Tom’s way is too obscure, too full of himself and proud of me.. And he was working within the constraints of the code. At first, I thought it would be Wayne Neely, but now I’m sure it will be Irene Brooks. Watch after her.”

Now that Irene had gone on to graduate work, I required an identity that would be of more use to her; so I come to the end of this book. Tom gives the rest of the story of the Ark Park in his poem, *The Profit of Doom*, except for what I discovered when I returned for the next Decade Report.

* * *

After a few problems getting through the checkpoint, I had to make my own way to the Ark Park. Cicero was missing. In fact, when I arrived at the bluff, the whole Ark Park was gone. Rows of firs and pines grew in its place. When Arthur, George Smeltzer’s son, finally caught up with me, he took me to the new site. The plan all along had been to move the operation regularly, like an Iroquois longhouse.

* * *

The book I have finally written is not the book I intended to write. That was to have been a science textbook describing our way in the world as the life of a studio artist, craftsman, or laboratory researcher, a life devoted not to appetites, but to life-fostering concerns such as imagination, compassion, inquiry, and canny, creative achievement—a life of prayer, which, for me, is an intentional alignment to how things are. More than a hundred thousand years ago, the first saints began their procession along this divine path. All are included in the procession, but some of us require several

lifetimes to understand what we are suited to do. Others can receive new coordinates and newness of life simply by attending to their existence.

Not me. I had to drink a tea made from crushed bugs.

Here is not an ending but a frameshift

Primary Sources

The Restoration (and Dissolution) of the Northern Region

by

Henry Randall

*All things on earth shall wholly pass away,
as grazing aphids from the milkweed green,
or obsidian beetles in the dark,
ten-legged lines from ever-fingering touch,
or icon from belief, or firefly swim
of stars through leaves from awe, or hope, or love.*

—Tom Farley, *The Profit of Doom*

“The area formerly called the Northern Region extended from Wando, Virginia west to the Blue Ridge, south as far as Roanoke and north to the vicinity of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The Regional Center, Fairall, below the valley of the Pawmack, reached a maximum population of 163,542 before the tornadoes of Hurricane Enkidu in 78 RRT and subsequent collapse of the Klawir dam.”

—Irene Brooks, *A History of the Second Secession*

Prologue

The Supreme Prophet watched the crowds in the Immersion Grounds from the high deck of the Ark Park long-house. A rambling complex of carnival rides, museums, libraries, research labs and small manufacturing plants, the Ark Park was also the salvage yard for the Northern Region. From its recycled materials came the fabrics, appliances, compost, seed stocks, and refabricated metals and plastics that were used throughout the region. It was the region's largest employer. The power for these industries came from restored water-driven mills and a photo cyclic process developed by the previous Supreme Prophet. In addition, the crowds walking around the park and other public areas in the region were passing over a motion-sensitive apron that supplied a steady, low charge to the nanobattery stations in the power plant. As the steward of this self-sustaining operation and community, the Supreme

Prophet was apprehensive about the coming restoration. The time was at hand, the time that had been predicted, the time for which everything had been prepared, the time when, despite her wishes or physical condition, once again, all things would pass away.

NICKY

When the twisted old tree in front of the duplex was finally flung to the ground in a storm, the roots poked up like fingers of a hand swearing to the truth. Irene Brooks knew whose truth it was. Nicky Risdon was finally dead. She stopped at the duplex on her way home, their second place on the far side of the Avenue from this first place, this narrow duplex where she and her mother, coming from the bus stop, always had to squeeze onto the stoop past the mothers in housecoats and the dirty children in droopy diapers, this daily passage where they endured the sullen homemakers' stares at the working woman and her bony daughter, and where, once, when Irene was carrying her report card, Mrs. Risdon had turned and shouted up to her mother, who was hunting for her key after finally making it to the threshold, "Did she pass?"

“Of course she did!” her mother snapped back. That Friday her dad took an extra twenty dollars to the bank for their house-fund. Her parents were counting the days until they could leave, but Irene was happy to walk to school, play with Sarah Jane, and watch the street from the tree between the duplex and the Risdons. That tree was still standing, full of red leaves –unlike the one her dad had planted in front of the house. He’d planted it about the same time he tried to persuade Mr. Risdon to share cost on a driveway. Mr. Risdon was not called “Mule” for nothing. Her dad ended up pouring cement for half a driveway, but that didn’t bother him as much as what Nicky Risdon did to his tree.

Now Irene was returning home to the place her parents had finally bought with their house-fund, slowly and painfully accumulated like the Magic Boxes they collected for the building of a new church, where the congregation moved the same year that they finally moved into their new house. All of this now re-appeared before her as if she were still watching Henry Street from her tree, the street that went from their duplex on and on, across the Avenue, past school, past the former Holy Rollers’ church, before it went to Temple Independent, and their own first church, now an antique store, past their new house and up the hill into the woods, where everything disconnected.

A distant whistle reminded Irene of lying awake in the room she had shared with her parents and of listening to the steady triple-beat of boxcars going onto the siding a half-mile beyond the hedge along their back fence, before the tracks were taken up.

Startled when a face appeared at the window and the front door of the duplex opened, she quickly drove on.

Summer was over. She would soon return to the university in New Holburn and her quiet library, surrounded by friends, the leather-bound folios and monographs about ancient expeditions. Nicky had never brought any books home from school. He always followed Irene home and pulled on her hair or book bag until the day when she swung around and struck him in the temple with her lunch box. He shook his head and sat down on the curb and fell backwards. She felt suddenly nauseated and scared.

Her mother would have to visit Lou Risdon to explain how Irene had killed her son. Mother was timid and proper. Lou wore pink curlers and always pinched a cigarette between her yellow fingers. Her mother spoke from a refined distance, but whether you were across the street or sitting beside her, Lou shouted and swore. After lying on his back for several minutes, however, Nicky stood up, theatrically shook his buzzed-bald head, and walked widely around her. No explanations would be needed.

The FOR SALE sign was stuck in the front flower bed where over the years her dad had planted hundreds of daffodils. Irene wondered how many of them had still bloomed that April around the dilapidated wooden steps. Irene had suggested asking for a best offer, but the cheery realtor, Mrs. Mauck, was certain that they could do better. Even an empty corner lot was a prize, Mrs. Mauck told her repeatedly, always politely avoiding mention of the house's condition. She would set it all up. Potential buyers would have to walk to the sign and pull off a flyer in order to learn the asking-price, Mrs. Mauck explained. Planting the sign near the porch would force people to come up to the house. There weren't many houses left on the street after the last disassembly. Irene was sure, however, that none of the three recently sold "comparable properties" listed in the flyer was aching in every joint and beam like her mother's dusty, book-filled house, where every accomplishment, every one of Irene's twenty-eight monographs on Lewis and Clark, her one published book of verse, and every letter her mother had ever received from her had been classified, filed, and cross-referenced.

Now all of that was gone. More than half of it to the Salvage, but the walls and floors still bore the impressions, like bruises, of leaning shelves and sagging file cabinets. Her footsteps echoed in the dark living room. Upstairs in her tiny bedroom, she looked through dormer windows down the street to their old duplex. She remembered her first night in the room, when she had stared out the dormer window at the only thing she could see clearly, the red maple tree between the duplex and the Risdons. She never saw anything from the new dormer like what she had seen from that old tree.

She turned to finish her appraisal. The house had been emptied and broom-swept. The Board would render a decision on where the house would next be installed. Time to go. Past twilight, the crickets and a few fireflies were signaling for mates, and Irene listened for the first erratic, ratcheting clicks of katydids and cicadas before leaving. She drove through the woods to the regional passage and was soon in her apartment. Lying in the dark, she remembered how Nicky not only stopped teasing her after she hit him with her lunch box but afterwards even stood up for her. Once, when a boy had returned with a trophy from a hunting trip with his uncle, all the boys at recess were taking peeks into his paper bag whenever they thought the teacher wasn't watching. Irene asked one of them, Wayne Neely, a freckled, sandy-haired boy who also lived on Henry Street, what it was. "You wouldn't like it," he warned her. When one of the other boys heard this, grabbed the bag and headed for Irene, Nicky tackled him. "Leave her alone!" he shouted belatedly, since the squirrel's head had already tumbled out of the bag at her feet. Determined not to give them any satisfaction, however, Irene examined the object as if it were an artifact, and then stoically walked on.

After that, the boys didn't seem to mind when Irene joined in their games. She and Wayne had always played together because he had toy cowboys and Indians, and horses with tiny bridles and saddles that could be cinched. The riders were all bow-legged to fit the horses. Her mother would never have understood her "Little Irene" playing cowboys or racing across the blacktop ahead of all the boys. Gasping hard after one memorable race, Wayne shouted, "You beat us all, Irene!" Later on, when the boys grew taller, her long legs were no longer a sufficient advantage, but by that time she wasn't interested in foot-races with boys. She had already begun to read about pioneers and the westward expansion and to make her own kind of race towards a different destination.

The next morning was overcast. She could stay in her apartment all day; the fall semester would not begin for another two weeks. Mrs. Mauck had said there were already two or three calls about the house and she would tell Irene "all about it" when Irene returned after the open house. Irene would have

preferred a written summary, but realized that this would cheat Mrs. Mauck of her one pleasure from an onerous and risky profession spent disentangling her clients' self-delusions from uncompromising facts—as Irene also spent her professional life separating historical claims from entangled reputations, meager evidence, primary sources and witnesses reluctant to speak about their experiences. She would hear Mrs. Mauck out. Perhaps if Irene had simply heard Sarah Jane out, things would have been different between them.

Sarah Jane was two years younger than Irene. She lived with her grandmother in the duplex next door. Her mother came by from time to time, but Sarah Jane never talked about her. Her grandmother said she always liked for Sarah Jane to play with her because Irene used her imagination. Irene set a good example for Sarah Jane, she told Irene's mother. The other children in the neighborhood didn't read or do puzzles or paint the way Irene did. Irene tried to watch out for Sarah Jane and live up to the grandmother's expectations, but mostly she and Sarah Jane made up stories about their toys or swung on the rope-swing in the back yard or raced through the grape arbor behind Sarah Jane's house, deliberately risking being stung by the honeybees and wasps that swarmed there. Once, on a mission Sunday, Irene took Sarah Jane to her youth group at church. After the service, Mrs. York, the youth-minister, gave Sarah-Jane a Magic Box and an application form to fill out for camp, and then everyone went to the refreshment table. Irene didn't notice when Sarah Jane disappeared.

Another girl came up to Mrs. York and told her that someone had locked herself in the girls' bathroom. Mrs. York investigated and came back for Irene. Sarah Jane was asking for her. Irene knocked, the door opened enough for her to slip in, and then was quickly shut and locked again. Sarah Jane was sobbing, sprawled under the sink. Irene sat next to her quietly for a long time. Finally, Sarah Jane held up the application form. "I don't have any parents," she said. She was convinced that without parents, she couldn't belong to the youth group or to anything else, and Irene could not change her mind. She didn't want the others to see her crying, so Irene cleared away the curious girls from the other side

of the door so that she and Sarah Jane could slip out through the stairwell exit. Sarah Jane didn't come over very much to play after that.

When Irene told her Grandma Reeny about it that evening, she learned that Sarah Jane's father, Jack Collins, was a soldier off with the Security Corps, but Reeny didn't want to say much about Sarah Jane's mother. Irene had learned that Reeny's silences were usually more informative than her comments. She had different kinds of silences. Sometimes, when her mother and aunt were cross with each other, Reeny would just say, "*Girls*" in a way that showed her wounds from their hurtful remarks to each other, and then go back to the bedroom she shared with Irene's Aunt Agnes. Sometimes, her father, tired after struggling all day with giant wrenches and rollers at the paper plant in Hartley, came home to find Reeny making one of her little kitchen shelves out of scrap wood. He would shake his head, and Reeny would sigh and quietly return to her work, as if seeking a hidden and higher calling.

Her silence about Sarah Jane's mother, however, was different. As she hurried Irene off to bed, Reeny acted as if the silence itself had already revealed too much. It was only later that Irene began to understand that silence, however, one summer evening when there was still enough light for her to sit in her tree while dinner was waiting on her father. She had often heard Lou Risdon shouting at Mule or Nicky, but on that night Mule was shouting back. Irene didn't hear much except for the phrase that Lou repeatedly screamed, "you and that Collins woman." It was only a few weeks afterwards that Sarah Jane's mother took her away, and Sarah's grandmother didn't tell anyone where they went.

Irene had been staring out her window at the campus of Holburn University across the street. Students and their parents tugged hand carts loaded with baggage and appliances to their new dormitories. Although she had been watching them for half an hour, she had been seeing Sarah Jane. Her final return to Henry Street, or what was left of it, the previous day after so many years had released many memories, as though the trees and houses had been keeping these memories until she returned. Her memories of Sarah Jane, Henry Street, Fairall and the Northern Region were all packed away when

she left for college in the same year as the disconnection. Unable to return, she had tried to remember her family by little “commemorations,” as she called them. From her father, a mechanic and inventor who always studied the things he was fixing to “let them have their say,” as he told her, she took patience. “Nature is a studio,” he said. “I heard this once, and it’s true. Let things have their say and they will teach you how to understand them.”

From her mother, a librarian and record-keeper at work and home, Irene took her interest in library science. From her grandmother, however, Irene took her most professionally useful skill, the ability to listen. Because patience, library science and listening were skills she used every day in her interviews, research, and teaching, she felt that she was always commemorating her family, a family she had never seen again.

Learning to listen to her grandmother’s silences had helped to make Irene a skillful interviewer. Instead of staying in her apartment near the university, she had scheduled an interview that afternoon with a contact, a friend of her mother’s who lived in the Valley. She intended to make the most of the temporary permit she had been given to visit in the Northern Region while selling her mother’s house. After a bagel and cup of tea, she left for the checkpoint at the regional passage, once again driving through the woods where everything was disconnected, but going this time not to her old neighborhood in Fairall but to a distant part of the Region in the Pawmack Valley west of town. She encountered no checkpoints going west. The place she was going, called *White Posts*, turned out to be little more than its name suggested. Standing by the four white posts in the middle of a country road, she took out her map. The witness, a Mrs. Lorena Mellideo, lived “on the White Posts Road,” but neither the map nor the sign on the post gave any indication of which of four lanes to follow. Irene suspected that all lanes ended in the same place, given that they all seemed to go down the same hill, so she drove down the widest of the four.

Irene taught her students to think of those they interviewed, or whose documents they read, as “witnesses” and of their interviews as “depositions,” even though they were engaged in historical research, not legal work. This advice seemed to make the students more attentive to getting exactly what witnesses said and did not say about their experiences. She had found that students were careless about the details when they thought of themselves as “getting a general idea” of the events under investigation. “Imagine that you must meet legal standards for evidence in a court of law,” she would say. “Historical evidence is actually held to a higher standard because it is not to be collected with adversarial intent, but it should be at least as carefully collected as legal evidence. Ultimately, you *will* have adversaries, and your defense will depend upon the quality of your evidence.” Of course, the analogy broke down when one began to consider that history—indeed, any effort of *understanding*, rather than simply propping up a point of view—began with a thorough critique of one’s ability to bear witness to one’s own personal experiences. Witnessing to one’s own experiences was quite different from witnessing to observed crimes. Students had to learn to hold their own witness suspect until the usual biases and other patterns of instant interpretation had been eliminated.

The analogy also broke down in those special situations when the witness of one’s personal experience was always being suborned by others who wanted to control the outcomes of inquiry. Any investigation concerning the Northern Region, for example, like Irene’s interview of Mrs. Mellideo in White Post, was subject to supervision by the Fairall Board of Faith and Practice, which had governed the region since she left Fairall thirty years earlier. She only had a temporary permit to travel in the Northern Region because she had given her mother’s clothing to one of the nurses at the Foxglove Home and Conference Center in Fairall, where Vicky Brooks had spent her last year. The nurse was married to a member of the Security Corps and had previously traded favors with outsiders. Irene was permitted to visit Lorena because she had been a friend of her mother’s, but Irene hoped to learn about her mother’s work. Both her mother and Lorena had worked for the Board of Faith and Practice for over

40 years, even before the defederalization that followed the flooding of the Eastern seaboard, but her mother had never talked much about what she did.

At the foot of the hill in a clump of Paw-Paws was a mailbox mounted on flagstones and stenciled with the name “Mellideo.” A gravel path led down to a small fieldstone cottage about fifty meters from the road. A sloped, wide concrete apron surrounded the house; there were no bushes or flowers in sight. Whoever planned it had no intention of ever having to reinforce walls damaged by roots pushing or by water seeping into the foundation. Irene was surprised when a bare-footed elderly lady wearing a straw hat, T-shirt and shorts came around the corner of the house with a garden hose. She had apparently been spraying the concrete; when she saw Irene, she turned off the water.

“Little Irene!” she shouted in a loud, hoarse voice.

“How are you, Mrs. Mellideo?” Irene answered.

“*Lorena*, dear,” she insisted. “You come in. Watch the puddle! Dean was disgusted when he finished all this masonry and discovered that he’d left a depression in front of the door, but he never had the chance to fix it.”

Lorena was puffing on the last inch of a cigarette, which she reluctantly flicked into the puddle before they went up the slate steps into the house, letting the screen door bang behind them.

“Let’s have some iced tea. I am that done in,” she shouted over her shoulder as she went down granite steps into a kitchen with granite counters and granite sinks. Irene noticed a huge alabaster table in the dining room and green serpentine benches in the living room. Lorena shook her head. “Dean was in construction, you know. We got the leftovers from every mall he ever built. I used to tell him it was like living in a quarry, but now he’s gone, y’know, it’s like living in his monument. I don’t mind it n’ more.”

As they sat down, Irene took her steno pad from her purse.

“They still make those?” Lorena asked, taking a cigarette from a small marble box on the bench. “I filled thousands of them when I was working.”

“Oh, there are better ways to do this now, as my students insist on telling me,” Irene said, “but I prefer my notepad.”

“You must keep it confidential, Irene. If the Board—“

“Yes,” Irene interrupted, “I have been warned every time I go through the regional passage. I was surprised that there were no Checkpoints coming out here.”

“Well, I have been ‘out of faith with the Board,’ as they say, for some time,” said Lorena, “so I don’t mind telling you that they don’t need checkpoints out here because the whole area is mined.”

“Mined?” Irene couldn’t believe it. “You mean land-mines?”

“Yes, and if I still had any kin in Ireland, I’d leave my little stone house tomorrow,” Lorena said, throwing her hat on the floor to reveal her thinning red hair.

“Ireland?”

“Oh yes. I was only two years old. And I was *Loreen* before going through Immigration.” She chuckled about this. “I might as well be from the moon. Most of the people around here any more have never even seen a globe unless they’ve been to the Ark Park at the Salvage, where all sorts of odd old things have been collected. The next time you get a permit, that’s probably where you’ll find me, stuffed in one of the prehistoric dioramas.” Irene gazed down, biting her lip. “I’m sorry dear. It hasn’t been very long since Vicky passed, has it?”

“Three years,” said Irene. “That’s how long it took to receive a travel permit. I couldn’t even attend the funeral. There was a security cordon--”

“A cordon goes up every time the Board is threatened by outsiders or sympathizers.” Lorena shrugged. “That’s always what we were told to say when Vicky and I worked there.” Lorena studied Irene’s face. “You look more like Ellison than Vicky. You have the same high forehead—“

“But what did *you* think?” asked Irene, slipping deliberately into her interviewer role.

“Well, when we worked there, Vicky and I always said that the biggest threats *to us* were from our employer. The Board has a say-so about everything, y’know. We didn’t want to work for them, but Fairall doesn’t have much employment to offer except for the Board, the Foxglove Center, and the Ark Park Salvage—all of them under surveillance by the Security Corps. We had families to raise and they were good jobs, your mom’s in records and mine in public affairs. And you have to understand that during the incursions—“

“The flooding from sea-rise...” said Irene.

“Yes, they were officially called ‘saline incursions.’ It was a scary time. Old Mr. Crawley had set up his Ark Park and Salvage Yard years before the incursions or defedding began. He knew what was coming. That’s why the Board called him their ‘supreme prophet,’ even while they were trying to undermine his work. Marge Farley, his granddaughter, runs the operation now that he’s gone.”

“I always thought that he was the founder of the Board of Faith and Practice,” said Irene.

“No, he just went along with it. You’re lucky that your mother could afford to send you to college outside the Northern Region when she did. She was determined that you shouldn’t stay here.” Lorena sipped her tea.

Just as she had been determined that they would not stay in the duplex on Henry Street, Irene thought. Once Irene had left for college, she never saw her mother again. All their letters to each other were stamped “N.R.S.C.” by officials of the Northern Regional Security Corps. “I don’t remember it being like this when I was growing up,” Irene said.

“It was different then, and your mother kept it from you,” Lorena said. “We all hid it from our children, at least, those of us who knew anything about the way things worked. It was the only thing we could do. We certainly were not able to oppose the Board. Your mom and I were not even comfortable talking with each other about our work. We considered working for Crawley, but everyone who works at

the Salvage is watched and questioned by the Security Corps, even though the Salvage is the largest employer in the region and pays better than the Board. We only went there on business. You risk being called an outer sympathizer just because you work there, and once that happens, you might as well pack and go.

“Over the years, Dean worked with several developers who refused to follow the Board’s capitalization guidelines. The Security Corps escorted them out of the region, and their operations were taken over by the Board. Dean stuck to subcontracts with the Board; he never worked for Crawley and he never went into business for himself.” Suddenly Lorena crushed her cigarette on the table and stared at the floor.

After finishing her tea, Lorena said, “If I weren’t so old, I wouldn’t be talking with you even now. We had a fairly good life. We didn’t want for much, and anyway, Dean and I didn’t want much except each other. Nothing else matters now.” She paused and picked up her cigarette butt. Holding it on the tip of her curled middle finger with her thumb, she flicked it across the room into the granite sink. “Got it!” she crowed. “Dean and I would do that while we sat here. I always beat him.”

Irene looked around the room. No electronic devices, no “entertainment centers,” not even lamps, were in sight. She imagined the old couple sitting in their dark stone house at twilight and tossing cigarette butts into the kitchen sink.

”Lorena,” she asked, “do you have electricity out here?”

“Yes, but not much. It’s enough for some heat and light, but not for appliances –except for the radio. We’re supposed to listen to WJKW on the radio, the “voice of faith,” y’know. Anyway, it’s the only channel you can get. It’s been so long since the disconnections, when the Security Corps ringed the region with forests and ended communication with the outside, that only a few old ducks like me can remember things being different. ”

“So no one keeps up with what’s going on outside the Northern Region?”

“No one admits to it,” said Lorena. “I’m sure you could find someone at the Salvage who is listening to outsiders’ broadcasts. Old Marge Farley is just as contrary as her grandfather used to be.”

“How do they get away with it?” asked Irene.

“Well, ever since Lyman Jencks died after Enkidu, the Salvage Yard has had the upper hand. Some of us even hope that—”

She stopped herself, put their glasses on a tray, and then spoke again.

“Let’s just say that those of us who have to live in the Northern Region with the Board of Faith and Practice are always hopeful.”

* * *

Irene ate lunch at the Main Street Cafe in Fairall. Apparently, lamb was the only meat available. It appeared in sandwiches, shepherd’s pie and even in salads served with grits on the side. She chose an omelet. Her half-hearted research on the place where she had grown up seemed to be at an end. Lorena had suddenly claimed to be too tired to talk anymore, but when Irene looked back from the gate, she saw Lorena picking up the garden hose again.

Irene wanted to know more about so many things, like the kind of work her mother had done, why the Northern Region had developed so differently from the rest of the country and whether the story about land-mines was true; but she wouldn’t outstay her welcome, such as it was—a temporary visitor’s pass to settle her mother’s estate. She thought about how, in 1803, Jefferson had told Captain Lewis to assure the natives along the Missouri River of the good will of the explorers, not mentioning that the exchange of gifts would later become the legal basis for taking land. The official government of the Northern Region, however, was interested not in her good will but only in keeping her out. The omelet arrived with grits and minced, overcooked lamb on the side. The food alone was enough to keep her out.

It was all as oppressive as she remembered. How could she have forgotten? Her mother didn't do a particularly good job of hiding what was going on at work, but Irene didn't pay much attention to her because Vicky Brooks was equally anxious about everything. One could not distinguish her worries about Irene's gangly appearance from her worries about stray animals or her worries about the mandate to exclude outsiders from the Northern Region or her continual worries about their house and income. Irene and her father spent their time giving Vicky reassurance and comfort for one vague obsession after another. They didn't know much about her work besides the distress that it caused her. When Irene finally left for college, she felt guilty for her relief at no longer having someone to console.

Of course, Vicky's long letters, with their subtle reminders of her sacrifices for Irene, arrived several times a week through the years of college and postgraduate study and later years of teaching and research. Answering those letters sometimes made her feel that she had never left, but now that she had finally returned to Fairall, Irene knew that when she left this time she would leave for good. She stared out the restaurant window at the traffic. All of the vehicles, except for hers, were relics made by companies that no longer existed. All of them had roofs made of a dull, green material. The region was saving itself from divine reprisal, according to the radio broadcasts by the Board of Faith and Practice that Irene heard on her way back to town. Outsiders would be revisited by storms, floods and fires because they were "out of faith." The people of Fairall, however, would be spared because they drove tiny, spring-loaded cars, wore old clothes and lived on faith and mutton. She was reminded of her grandmother Reeny's saying: "Use it up. Wear it out. Make it last or do without. My grandmamma said it and it's still true." Presumably the landmines were laid to block entry of outsiders rather than to "do without" any faithless insiders, but the Board made no distinction. So much had been used up or worn out in Fairall that any physical evidence of her childhood had probably disappeared, and she was now prepared to accept it. Today was truly the day for an open house, an airing-out and a final good-bye. She decided to have a last look at the neighborhood and then go home.

* * *

A couple stood in the front yard beside the FOR SALE sign with Mrs. Mauck. Irene hoped that Mrs. Mauck was not aiming too high. As far as Irene was concerned, the house could go for whatever the couple could afford. She just wanted to return home. Since walking out of the café, Irene had become increasingly apprehensive. It was not that she felt she was being watched. Nothing was that obvious. Everyone went about their business as usual, even though there was nothing in the Northern Region as unusual as a visitor. She had run out of the strange “prayer pellets” that were used for exchange and had to pay the waitress with cash. At first the waitress paused, but after exchanging glances with the frowning manager, she took the money without comment, and without any effort to make change.

Irene didn't have to wait for the couple to leave. Mrs. Mauck would write her, but all their correspondence would be censored and, as she had learned from the years of corresponding with her mother, some letters would not arrive. The censor attending to the trickle of mail passing in and out of Fairall had plenty of time to rake through every sentence and occasionally indulge in capricious spiteful acts, such as spilling coffee on the very words that bore hope or affection. Occasionally, a letter was even destroyed. What would become of a letter conveying the check from the sale? Would she be paid in prayer pellets? It didn't matter.

Finally, the young couple left; but as Irene started to open the car door, a man came out of the house. He was tall, sandy-haired, and wore wire-framed glasses. He shook his head but stayed to talk with Mrs. Mauck for almost half an hour before walking away in the dusk. Irene was surprised to see Mrs. Mauck kneel down to stick a narrow banner across the sign that read UNDER CONTRACT.

“So soon, Mrs. Mauck?” Irene asked quietly, not wanting to surprise her, but Mrs. Mauck turned around with alarm, almost terrified. Irene realized that she couldn't see her face because she was looking up into the street lamp. “It's me, Irene Brooks, Mrs. Mauck.”

“Oh, yes. Of course,” she whispered, standing up rather stiffly, but recovering quickly. “Well. Well, we already have a couple of offers.”

“That couple one of them?” asked Irene.

“You saw them? Yes, but theirs wasn’t the best.” Mrs. Mauck pulled a page from her clip board. “Another buyer topped our asking price.”

“Mrs. Mauck...” said Irene.

“Karen.”

“Karen,” Irene continued, “I’m not really concerned with that. Maybe the couple needs the place more than the other buyer. If so, it’s fine with me to sell them the house. Handle it either way.”

“That’s very generous. I will certainly give it some thought.” Judging from the way she was nodding towards the door, Karen Mauck clearly had something else on her mind. “Why don’t we go inside?” she asked.

Once they were both inside the empty house, Karen left the lights off and spoke very quietly, apparently to avoid echoes. “I didn’t know that you were an outsider,” she said. “You see, I assumed that because—”

“Because I grew up here I must still live in the Northern Region,” Irene said.

“Yes. Today two N.R.S.C. officers came to the open house to check my credentials.” She paused. “I’ve never had my credentials checked,” she finally said.

“Look,” Irene interrupted, “I don’t want to get you in trouble. If I can—”

“No, no. It should be all right. They didn’t stop the sale. I’ve never done an interregional transfer, but senior realtors in our office who were around when the region was disconnected can help with that. There were many disputes over property claims along the border, as you probably know. Let’s just take the best offer for your mother’s house and close as soon as possible.”

Irene gave no argument. “Closing as soon as possible is fine with me. Is it possible for you to handle the rest?” she asked.

Karen continued, “We’ve completed all the paperwork and I will act as your agent in closing so you need not return. Following sale, closing and the Board’s review, we should be finished. And there’s one other thing. There was a man here looking for you.”

“From N.R.S.C.?” asked Irene.

Karen shook her head. “I don’t think so. He said he knew the people who lived here and knew you. His name was Wayne Neely.” Karen stepped out of her shoes. “I shouldn’t have worn these shoes for an open house. I never . . .” Her eyes widened. “I never had my credentials checked.”

“It’s all right,” said Irene. “I’m leaving tonight. Whatever you do with the house is fine with me. I don’t want to cause you any trouble. I never expected to sell it anyway. All the time that Mom was sick I tried to come back and was repeatedly turned away. To be able to return even for a few days is really all the payment I need.”

“Oh, Professor Brooks, I’m sure that we will close the sale, but it is better for you to leave as soon as possible. I will get back to you by mail.” Karen had stepped back into her shoes, opened the door to go out, and said, “And the key.”

“Yes, you said you’d want all the keys,” said Irene, handing her the key case her mother had given her when she left for college over thirty years earlier.

Karen Mauck nodded and quickly walked down to her car. For any other sale, Karen would have taken the client to dinner to talk about avoiding closing costs and possibly to ask for a referral, but for this sale she was relieved simply to get away. She hoped that the N.R.S.C. had not contacted the realty office.

Irene took a last look at the house as she turned up Henry Street. This was her mother’s house. It had never meant as much to Irene as the duplex, the place her mother only wanted to leave. Her

mother's house had been the place that Irene only wanted to leave. She didn't even have her own room in the duplex because her Aunt Agnes and Grandmother Reeny lived with them. Perhaps it was because they all lived together that she loved to remember that time, while the memories of the years spent in her mother's house were all about being somewhere else, mostly school or the school library, where she had volunteered at the circulation desk. Her strongest memories were of sitting in her little rocker in the kitchen of the duplex while Reeny mashed potatoes and sang hymns, and of sometimes helping Reeny make peppermint candies on waxed paper, and running outside with Sarah Jane until their faces were red and Reeny would call her in, and falling asleep on Reeny's gentle lap until her mother came home from work. Sometimes she had climbed her tree at dusk after a hot day to a branch above the eaves where she could feel the same breeze that the leaves felt.

Once she had seen Wayne Neely dragging something from the street. She started to call out to him, but stopped because of the secretive way he was looking around. She couldn't really see what he was doing, but she remembered what she had seen in the street earlier in the day—a raccoon lying on its side, puffed with decay, with a huge crow perched on its head. She watched Wayne dig a grave in his mother's flower bed and then disappear behind his house. Wayne was always furtively helping in some way. She had heard that he had even tried to stop Nicky both times.

The first time was when Nicky found the small beech tree that Ellison Brooks had planted in front of the duplex. Her father had stretched awkwardly to lift it from the tailgate of the nursery truck without damaging the huge ball of roots. The nursery truck-driver and Mule Risdon talked while they idly watched Ellison stagger with it up the driveway and into the front yard. Later that week, when Nicky was walking by the duplex with Wayne coming back from school, he grabbed one of the branches and hung from it, tipping the whole tree and pulling up the stakes on the guy-wires that Ellison had carefully attached to the branches with canvas so that the bark would not be damaged. Wayne stood the

tree up again, stamping around the base of it and pushing the stakes back. Nicky just laughed and ran into his house.

For several weeks, her father didn't know at first who was damaging the tree; then, one evening, he saw Nicky hanging from a branch and twisting it around the trunk. Before Nicky knew what was happening, he was upside-down above her father's head. Irene never knew what her father had said, but Nicky stopped hanging on the tree. The beech was permanently damaged, but it grew into a giant with a twisted spine that overshadowed the Risdons' house, a fact that her father noted whenever they went by in later years.

The second time Wayne had tried to stop Nicky was during the last of the regional conflicts, years after her family had left the duplex and Irene had gone to college. Her mother wrote that Nicky had been drafted for the Northern Region Security Corps. By that time Nicky had finished with school but was still living at home with Lou, his mother. She still screamed down the street after him. It was as if she were calling pigs, Reeny used to say. He still got into fights and disappeared with his friends from time to time. Wayne must have heard about what Nicky was planning to do, because Irene's mother saw him talking to Nicky as he was getting into his friends' car to go to the physical exams for the draft. Nicky just laughed and pushed Wayne away. A few days later, Nicky's story was printed as a cautionary tale in the newspaper published by the Board of Faith and Practice. Vicky had sent Irene a newspaper clipping.

Nicky and his two friends drank sodas all the way to the N.R.S.C. Input Center in Hartley, a paper-mill town north of Fairall. They stayed overnight and continued drinking sodas. The next morning, they began their physical exams by giving several urine samples. They were finally disqualified because of sugar in the samples. Triumphant, on the way home, they passed around a bottle of gin and ran into a tree outside Fairall. All three were killed. So Nicky died wrapped around a tree. But her father, who had passed away by then, would have drawn no satisfaction from it. He always said that

Nicky never had a chance with parents like Mule and Lou. The tree only reminded him of how the boy might have turned out without the twists he'd been given. Now even the tree was gone. Irene reflected that, without anything remaining of Mule or Lou, or of whatever was between them, or of even the twisted beech tree, Nicky's effect on the world, the evidence of his existence, was gone. Nicky was truly dead. Of course, her own accomplishment in the world of the Northern Region, was not even to twist a tree. It had been simply to leave as soon as possible.

As she drew up to the checkpoint at the regional passage, a tall, sandy-haired man came out of the booth accompanied by an armed security guard.

"Hello, Irene," he said. "You may remember me. I'm Wayne—Wayne Neely from Henry Street. Please pull into the lot behind the guard hut. It looks like you'll be staying with us for a while. You are scheduled for interrogation in regard to several matters including the death of a resident of White Posts, named Lorena Mellideo. She stepped onto a land-mine a few hours ago."

THE GUEST

“According to an account by resident Thomas Farley, formerly employed at the Ark Park Salvage Yard, the Board of Faith and Practice ‘transformed politics into municipal religion.’”

—Irene Brooks, *A History of the Second Secession*

A giant copper beech shaded the entrance to the Registration building of the Foxglove Home and Conference Center, the plaque on its trunk indicating it was two centuries old. As she waited in the Security Corps truck while Wayne talked to the Processing Officer, Irene looked across the low stone wall beside the gravel road they had followed after the massive double-gate opened for them. Irene wondered why they would have such massive gates when the wall was so low. It was even flat on top. Irene imagined herself getting over the wall quickly by lying on top and rolling across. Once out of the place, however, she didn't have a car. Wayne said it would be kept safe for her, but “impounded” was the word used by the soldier who drove it away. The wall zigzagged downhill, crossing a clearing and

then disappearing into the woods. At the foot of the hill was a large pond with a fountain and small island where geese and ducks were sitting in spots of sunlight. She wondered if her mother had been able to look out on the wall and the pond when she arrived at Foxglove.

She was beginning to feel as if she were waiting in the car while Wayne registered them for a motel room, a motel with exits blocked by armed guards.

Finally, he came out with papers and a key which he handed to Irene as he got in. "You're in the Milford House," he said. "Each of the buildings is named." He handed Irene a map and drove uphill to another brick building with window boxes full of red geraniums. "Here it is," he said. As they entered the building and approached the concierge, Wayne explained that the Processing Officer had agreed to let Irene complete the forms in her room and then give them to the concierge.

"But why do I have to complete them at all? Am I a prisoner, a detainee, or what?" she asked.

"Is this a prison? No, you are the guest of the Board of Faith and Practice," Wayne said, nodding to the ruddy-faced concierge, who was busily eating her lunch. He led Irene around the desk through a small library and into a hallway. Stopping at the first door, he said, "First room on the first floor. It can't be more convenient than that!"

"Unless it would be my own room in my own apartment," she muttered, turning the ancient key in the lock. She couldn't believe that they didn't use biosensors for anything. Her grandmother Reeny had used a key like this to lock the little desk that she had inherited from *her* grandmother. Irene had moved the desk from her mother's house to her apartment. It was one of the few items she had been able to take through the checkpoint at the regional passage. This time she had not even brought luggage with her. She had wanted to be certain that her final departure from the Northern Region would not be slowed by another search at the checkpoint.

"Well, Wayne," she said, "you can put my luggage on that stool by the fireplace."

"Yes, Irene," he said. "I get the irony. I wouldn't be a literature teacher if I didn't."

“Irony and this dress is all I have to wear. What am I supposed to do? How long am I going to be here?” she asked, looking around the apartment.

“They told me it was a routine inquiry,” Wayne said vaguely, looking out the window at the geese around the pond. “It will probably only take a few weeks.”

“Weeks! What in hell do they think I know?” Irene shouted. Wayne hurriedly shut the door.

“I don’t know, Irene. They let me help because I admitted knowing you, but I’m not in the Security Corps; I’m only a teacher at The Fairall Worship and Training College. The Policy Officer agreed that I could be useful because I knew you and because we were both teachers.”

“So you are my personal informer! Look, Wayne, I didn’t ask for your help—“

“My being the informer,” Wayne interrupted, “is better than having an assigned case worker.”

Irene was suddenly very tired and sat down on the side of the bed.

“And the advantage is?”

“The caseworker must provide a verified story; my story only has to be plausible,” said Wayne. “If the Board trusts my version of your story, then you can avoid a lengthy case-verification proceeding. You might even get some professional benefit from your stay by catching up on what’s happened since you left. You’ll find many residents here with interesting stories, and there are documents I could—“

“That’s it about you *literati*,” said Irene, “you don’t have to get it *right*; you only have to get it *plausible*. You’re always going on about telling the stories, but in truth, there’s never quite enough information for a complete story. Every deposition is incomplete. And getting other depositions usually raises more questions. You, however, are less interested in answering the questions than in rounding out the stories—whether it is an exaggerated version of Gettysburg or of Roncevalles.” She suddenly stopped, realizing that she had escaped to the safety of her lectures and that this kind of rant was even more useless in her present situation than it was in the classroom. “Mankind owns four things,” she quietly

recited, staring at the foxhunt on the wallpaper, ““that are no good at sea. Anchor, rudder, oars and the fear of going down.””

“Machado wasn’t it? But what brought that on?” asked Wayne, surprised at the vehemence of her reaction. “I only said that you might spend your time getting some of their stories. I mean, that’s what you do. Right?”

“What I try to get is an *understanding*, and that’s a different matter altogether,” Irene snapped. She didn’t know why Wayne was making her so angry. “Look, I’ve spent the last decade correcting the notion that Lewis and Clark went off into an unknown wilderness. Everywhere they went had already been understood. Names, maps, even stories, all that we take for ‘understanding,’ already existed in the minds of those who had inhabited the territory for tens of thousands of years. Understandings already existed; it was not an unknown territory. Not that any of that history matters any more to God’s peculiar people in the Northern Region. Anyway, how am I supposed to do anything here? There’s no access, no connection to any of the information services of the outer world. And I certainly don’t accept the premise that I’m going to be here long enough to do research.”

“I hope so, Irene,” Wayne nodded, “but these inquiries are usually protracted, and there is the matter of Mrs. Mellideo’s death.”

“She was fine when I left her, Wayne. She had even told me about the landmines. How could she accidentally step on one?”

“It must have been an accident, and nothing will come of the inquiry, I’m sure, but here in the Northern Region these inquiries are a fact of life. The Board calls them ‘studies of significance.’ I think you would call it “fact-finding.” For us, the discovery of the *meaning* of events is more important than simply finding facts. We locals endure these inquiries by letting them pass over us like a spell of bad weather. I only thought it might help you to have something to do while you’re waiting.” He lowered his voice. “And I have another reason.”

“I don’t intend to wait for anything,” she interrupted. “The first thing in the morning I will call my lawyer.”

“Irene, we’re disconnected,” he reminded her. “There are no calls to the outer regions. There are no appeals. When you enter the Northern Region, you are under the laws of the Board of Faith and Practice. As far as I know, you are the only outsider, aside from pilgrims, who’s been here in the last five years. That was when the last of the interregional sports events was cancelled.”

“I remember. Fairall demanded that all of the games be played here and that press coverage be prohibited,” she said. “They seemed to want to guarantee that the games would finally be shut down. But surely other visitors have come here since then.” Wayne shook his head. Irene stood up and went to the window. She stared at the zigzag stone wall and the distant gates. “Maybe I will just leave,” she said. “What have I to do with some petty inquiry?”

“Not recommended, Irene. While you’re in Milford House, you’re a guest. Some of the other buildings at Foxglove are not so pleasant. Believe me. No inquiry by the Board of Faith and Practice is petty.” Wayne’s expression was grim. “It’s better to accept the situation for now, even if it goes against your nature. Use the opportunity to observe some of us at first hand. There can’t have been too many monographs written about us ‘peculiar people.’ You’ll find plenty of material in Foxglove, I assure you. From what I’ve read of history,” he concluded, opening the door and stepping into the hallway, “the main tools you need are ears, a pen and a notepad.”

This was word-for-word what she so often said to her over-wired students. After he left, she realized that he had wanted to tell her something else. She should have been listening to him, not interrupting him. It wasn’t the first time she had forgotten she wasn’t in a lecture hall. She sat down in the wingchair by the window and watched the geese walking around the pond until it was too dark to see. Not once did one of them fly. She supposed that they also were guests.

*“We live within our magnitudes,
Tell tales, tend right and left,
Behold no more than is revealed,
And yet we imagine other scales
And other latitudes”*

—Irene Brooks, *Finding a Purchase*

The Last Hand

No one who had known Henson would have recognized him sitting on the bench off the walkway of a deserted beach in late October. Not only had he lost weight and grown a beard that sprouted randomly like dune grass over face and chin, he simply would never have been expected to come to such a place. Seated behind a wide desk in his Washington office, he had unmistakably been a bureaucrat comfortable with spread-sheets and conference calls. In faded canvas hat, tie-dyed tee-shirt and cut-offs, he looked more like a beachcomber than an agency chief.

The walkway stretched from boardwalk to horizon, the Atlantic on one side and the hotels of New Virginia Beach on the other. He stared at the sanderlings daintily spearing mole crabs in frothy pools left by the retreating surf. No question. It was all over. He'd played the last hand with the email

telling Burriss “where all the bodies could be found,” as the editor had begged for weeks. The briefcase he’d carried into the District for the last 30 years still sat on his desk. He’d dropped his phones, message pad and biosensors into the plastic mail pouch on his office door, leaving everything on his desk with the environmental audit.

If Jill had still been alive, he would have stonewalled Burriss and the other press people indefinitely. He knew how to play against their deadlines to keep the story cold, but now the story didn’t matter. The only thing he got out of it was to *be* out of it. No way he was going back. He’d tried to disappear by closing credit and bank accounts. Of course, a modest search would turn him up, but that probably would not happen until he applied to OPM for his pension. By then it wouldn’t matter. After selling the house and car a month after Jill died, he had rented a small furnished apartment on 6th Street near the National Gallery. For weeks he’d left work early to walk through the Gallery before going home. He inspected the sharp face of Charles V, the Daumier caricatures of the French parliament, and the proud expressions of various Flemish burghers, as if to be reminded of the constancy of venality. Last Wednesday, he had left the office as usual but taken a taxi to Union Station, where he removed bags from one of the lockers. By the time the train passed through Richmond, Burriss would have already changed Thursday’s headline.

For the last week, Henson hadn’t looked at newspapers or television; he had simply sat on the bench watching the sea. The day was breezy and cool. A few surfers in wet suits occasionally swam out but seldom found enough action to make it worth their time. The beach belonged to Henson and the seagulls. Even the police had stopped glancing his way as they swept by on electric scooters. Like the seabirds poking about, Henson was only thinking of what to do next.

At midday he walked to a soup and salad bar, one of the only places open during the off-season along Atlantic Avenue. When the waitress saw him again, she knew what he wanted, so he sat down in the pick-up area. The only thing that bothered him about what he had sent Burriss was that there actually

was a body, not that it had been found yet, and not that she was dead. Sooner than he preferred, someone might come looking for him about her, but most people knew about Dr. Brooks already. She was some academic who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, a professor of American Civilization who had nothing to do with biosciences. She probably didn't know about the transponder research. It was unclear whether she had even known about the Salvolution Initiative when she traveled to the Northern Region earlier in the summer. No one had heard anything from her since then, but now her disappearance would undoubtedly be linked to Henson's departing memorandum.

The waitress finally brought his salad. As soon as he turned to leave, the two wet-suited surfers appeared on either side of him.

"Let's go outside, Mr. Henson," one of them said. He was a bulky man with pocked cheeks and wrap-around sunglasses. Henson didn't argue.

Milford House

*“Now I will speak of understandings
And of how things are:
To expose and tell
What knowing is
And what is known.”*

--Irene Brooks, *Finding a Purchase*

After two and a half months, Irene had become accustomed to the routines of Milford House, a kind of residential hotel for those whose inquiries were pending. About eighty residents assembled in the dining room for meal times. They amused themselves during the day by playing cards, visiting the library, watching one of the movies available on a closed-circuit video system, or sleeping. In a system of unvarying routine, residents were awakened at 9:00 a.m. for breakfast; encouraged by the sexless voice on the public address system to “walk the grounds” after breakfast; alerted by a carillon outside to come to prayers in the chapel before lunch, and then treated to an afternoon of public religious broadcasts from WJKW before dinner at 5:00 p.m. Lights began to dim throughout the building at 8:00 p.m. and went out at 9:00 p.m. Without a lamp or flashlight, sleep was the only option.

Irene often felt so drowsy at this time that she wondered whether a sedative was routinely added to the food. After a month of this routine, Irene came around to Wayne's way of thinking. She needed to do something to occupy her time and it might as well be interviewing her fellow residents.

One of the first things she learned was that to be "on pending" was not necessarily a temporary state of being. Some of the residents had been waiting for years to receive their first hearing before the Processing Officer. Residents' families came and went, visiting with the residents as if they were infirm or at best convalescent. As the months passed by, the urgency and worry drained from the faces of their relatives and were replaced by a careless passivity as they began to regard their family members as wards of an institution, like the patients of a tuberculosis ward or members of a leper colony. Recovery was a distant and unlikely prospect; visits became brief and perfunctory. Care was best left in the hands of the trained staff. Indeed, other buildings of the Foxglove Home and Conference Center were for the aged, infirm, addled, and fatally ill. Milford residents were often transferred to them.

Irene's only visitor was Wayne Neely. Without him, she would certainly have done or said something to land her in one of the other buildings. He brought books, writing supplies and clothing.. He knew that writing would help her to endure the place. The tranquil surroundings and rigid routine even led her to write more freely than she had ever done.

Her research project on the Northern Region began in a desultory—even defiant—way. But it grew to a document of several hundred pages, based on talks with Lorena, Wayne, and the residents of Milford House. She also began another project to occupy her mind after the lights went out.

She imagined walking through the university library where she had worked as a student and later as a librarian after graduating with majors in library science and history. The job had paid for her graduate school and given her access after hours to special collections, especially the Lewis and Clark papers. In her imaginary walks through the familiar stacks, she tried to recall the books on the shelves

and what she remembered about them. The exercise grew into another small book, a poem, which explored her understandings of different fields. She called it *Finding A Purchase*.

But she found no purchase on getting a prompt hearing or even a list of the particulars with which she was charged. Every morning she walked by the registration building, often sitting on the bench under the purple-green leaves of the giant copper beech. Over the keystone of the porch was the sign she had first noticed when she arrived at Foxglove:

”To nurse the life in waning age...”

She found the source in the Milford library. From Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*, the full quotation was:

***“The aim of all is but to nurse the life
With honour, wealth, and ease, in waning age....”***

The next lines, about the vexation of wanting everything from life, accumulating wealth and things, and satisfying appetites, but ending with making “something nothing by augmenting it,” made her wonder whether the person who had selected the motto knew the rest of the poem.

Every day, the Processing Officer parked his car and entered the registration building through a side door near the kitchen. A burly, dark-faced man with thick gray hair, he apparently never carried a briefcase or anything else to work. As she sat outside in the shade listening to the robins in the beech and the ducks down the hill around the pond, she wondered what he could be doing every day that kept so many people waiting, unless keeping them waiting *was* his job. Promptly departing every day at 3:00 p.m., he seemed no more burdened with work than when he had arrived. Irene considered confronting him as he walked to his car. She didn’t because Wayne had once told her, “The main thing is not to be *noticed*.”

At the time, she had argued with Wayne that it could take forever to be heard if she made no effort to be noticed; then Wayne had taken her by the shoulders, made her look at him, and said, “Being

noticed is worse than being delayed. You *must* wait to be called.” Later, when she talked to Mrs. Detwiler, she learned what it meant to be *noticed* at Foxglove Farms and Conference Center. Once again, she was glad to have followed Wayne’s advice.

Deborah Detwiler

Irene counted one hundred ninety-six rooms in Milford House as she walked the halls. She was determined to remain in good physical condition, and therefore walked every chance she could get. One cold, rainy morning in her eleventh month of captivity, Irene was taking her daily walk indoors. The building had ten floors with thirty-six staircases. Irene had just counted the steps to the sixth floor and left the stairwell to cross over to another wing when she came face-to-face with a tiny, white haired woman wearing a hideous, green jogging suit. Amused at Irene's shocked expression, the old woman laughed. "I know they're not flattering, dear, but you needn't worry about me." She pulled her walker back so that Irene could step out of the doorway.

"I'm sorry. " Irene felt her cheeks grow warm. "You surprised me."

"I'm Deborah Detwiler."

The old woman turned her drooping head to get a better look.

"You're Vicky's girl, aren't you?"

"Yes. How did you know my mother?" Irene said.

“Oh, I worked for the Board before Avery took me on to do his math. ‘Office manager,’ he called it. I wouldn’t be on pending if I hadn’t.” Deborah pointed to one of the rooms along the corridor. “Come in,” she said.

Irene noticed that as Deborah leaned forward on her walker, her thin, bare legs trembled with every step.

Deborah’s apartment was identical to Irene’s in layout and furnishings, but it was crammed with books and objects of all sorts. On the mantel stood a small astrolabe and an antique brass field-compass like the one Clark had lost in late June of 1805 during a downpour near the Great Falls and later recovered downstream in a ravine. At the window stood a brass telescope on a tripod. Irene supposed that Deborah was one of those elderly collectors who never passed up an antique, no matter how useless.

“Let me get this first,” Deborah sat down in the wing chair and reached for a small metal box underneath. She flipped a switch and put the box back. “It’s a jammer. Would you like a sports drink?”

“No, thanks.” Irene sat on the divan. “A jamming device?”

“Oh, yes. I do what I can to keep my conversations private, even if they are watching.” Deborah pulled a bottle from the bag hanging on her walker. “Sure you don’t want a drink?”

“You mean the rooms are bugged?” Irene recalled some of her arguments with Wayne Neely and wondered who had been listening.

“Oh, yes. The whole building’s like an examination tray. I ought to know. I helped design the system.” Deborah took a swig of her sports drink

“You?” Irene said. She shook her head. “I’m sorry how that sounded.”

“It’s all right.” Deborah put down her drink and picked up calipers from the end table between them. “I used to be a fairly good physicist. I know how I seem now.”

But you said you worked for the Board,” Irene said.

“Yes, but I was in the Apocalogeny Division for several years. It’s on these grounds. Have a look through the telescope.” She waved the calipers at Irene. “It’s already focused. I was observing the compound this morning.”

Irene crouched down to look through the telescope without upsetting Deborah’s adjustments. She saw a brick building similar to Milford House but painted white, and surrounded by a tall, iron-railed fence with a sign:

THE APOCALOGENY DIVISION
of
The Board of Faith and Practice at Foxglove Farms

“What is Apocalogeny?” Irene said.

“The short answer is ‘the creation of crises.’” Deborah paused as Irene walked back to the divan. “But, given your job, you should get the uncorrupted answer.”

“My job?” Irene’s eyes widened.”

“Oh, yes. You’re part of the Vision.” Deborah smiled and sank back into her chair. “But who isn’t?” She closed her eyes for a moment, and then sleepily said, “Wayne could tell you.” She closed her eyes again.

Irene waited for her to tell how she knew about Wayne.

After a few minutes, Deborah began to snore.

Irene quietly left the apartment.

* * *

The next time Irene saw Deborah was in the lobby after lunch several days later. This time, Deborah wore a plaid cape and used a cane instead of a walker. She waved to Irene.

“Irene, let’s walk. If you give me your arm, I won’t need my walker.”

Deborah put on a plaid cap. “Let’s go to the labyrinth. The path is level. These days, I avoid hills. Easily exhausted, as you know.” She chuckled.

“That’s all right.” Irene said, helping Deborah to shuffle over uneven paving stones. It was a cool day in early March. They sat on a bench surrounded by giant, undulating boxwoods. Deborah was breathing heavily.

“I like the labyrinth. It reminds me of a musician friend of mine. He wrote an opera about a labyrinth just before he died. Living in the Northern Region is like finding your way through a labyrinth. I also come in here to get away from surveillance. We live under a microscope. If that Processing Officer spent as much time on our cases as he does peeping, we might be able to leave here. And I told him so.”

“You told him?” Irene’s eyes widened.

“Yes, indeed. I know it didn’t help me. But I don’t have anywhere to go any more. My property reverted to the Board.”

“Reverted?”

“Yes, from time to time, the Board reminds us that all property in the Northern Region is not owned but held in trust for the Board. It all began years ago when they doctored large tracts after the defedding. Of course, they also profit by taxing usage and property sales. When I protested, the Board said my house was ‘distraigned,’ but they knew why I wasn’t paying taxes. They had frozen my accounts. And then—”

Irene waited as Deborah tipped her head to one side, clearing her throat.

After a moment, Deborah began to snore.

* * *

The next time Irene saw Deborah was again in the lobby after lunch. She wore the same plaid outfit but walked with a cane. Again, she waved to Irene.

“Let’s walk. I promise not to nod off.”

They returned to the labyrinth. Papery, brown leaves blew over dead chrysanthemums and the exposed roots of leafless trees.

“As I recall,” Deborah said. “I was going to tell you about Apocalogeny. I started there under the original director, Dr. Crawley. He said that the Apocalogeny Division was ‘commissioned by a vision.’ Of course, it didn’t mean anything to me then. I needed the work. The pay was good and the inland location seemed safer than Rhode Island. Well, we all know what happened to Rhode Island during the third saline incursion.”

Irene recalled the image of a stream of traffic arching into the ocean from a collapsing bridge.

Deborah was breathing heavily again. She spoke with her eyes half closed.

“As I was saying, I started under Avery Crawley in 45 RRT. I’d just had my twentieth birthday and already finished a post-doc from Stanford, having entered the university at sixteen. I was attracted to the work on genetic biomechanics being done at Salvation by Wendell Brown, but I discovered quickly enough why no one worked with him. So I moved to Apocalogeny. Vicky was also there. She and I were the same age—both of us born in May.

“When Salvation came to Fairall, Dr. Crawley had already decided to work with what he found here—a semi-rural, conservative community whose Board of Supervisors was controlled by a few wealthy families, like the Jencks. They were the puppeteers until the Temple people moved in. I recall when one of the older Jencks women who lived in a neighboring county told me ‘the coloreds’ didn’t need more than an eighth grade education to do farm or stable work. I never heard what she thought of us browns, blacks, yellows, and reds with our university degrees as we crowded the intake during the Ingathering. Most of us wanted to work at the Salvage. Locals and Temple Independents found work with the Board of Faith and Practice, or took jobs in town, or came here to Foxglove, or went to the mill at Hartley. The former county Board of Supervisors was swept out by the newcomers, who established the Board of Faith and Practice. Where the lady got her stable hands after that, I don't know.

"The Board took over Apocalogeny, but they didn't understand it. To them it was about recruitment or 'evangelizing,' as they called it. Keeping the numbers up was good for business. Although Avery directed research in Apocalogeny, most of the staff were Temple Independents connected to local businesses who did very well serving and selling to newcomers. When newcomers and pilgrims used our currency, it was good for banking and investment. Weather-scares pleased the insurers, speculators, and contractors. Businesses didn't care for the change to pellet currency but they readily accepted the shift from land ownership to land stewardship. At that time, this was considered a development opportunity, one 'steward' vying with others to mine a mountain or consolidate farms. And, of course, many speculators, like Jencks, kept bank accounts outside the N.R.—even while they preached separatism from outside influences. At the Board's invitation, several corporations, like S&U, set up business here. Even under the Board's restrictions, they found a large, unified population of believers who worked, bought, and sold as directed. A wonderful cushion for profiteers.

"Of course, the more comfortable they became, the more the Board members wanted protection—a Security Corps armed with weapons from the Apocalogeny Division. Now, in the early years, the Apocalogeny Division handled everything—recruitment, intake, settlement of families, staffing, and research. It was all funded by S&U. The Salvage operation provided support services to the

Northern Region. But when the Board demanded weapons research, Avery protested. Instead, he said, the Region would be protected by a change of heart. He was told to stick to weather reports and recycling. Church leaders took over the Division. Avery gave up on his original idea of having a research, conference, and health center at Foxglove Farms. He decided to do it all at the Salvage site, left Foxglove, taking the S&U contract with him, and stayed at the Salvage from then on.

"Most of us left with him, but your mother stayed in the technical library at Foxglove--a good position for a new graduate. I wasn't interested in staying, because the Foxglove people were less into research than market-research. They were selling the Temple Independent brand of religion and tightening the Board's grip on every aspect of personal life. Their signature was persuasion through frightening assertions—like the weather-scares designed to drum up business for insurers, speculators, and contractors. All rather tiresome.

"While Avery wanted to understand why people aligned themselves with life-fostering concerns, Apocalogeny only wanted to boost numbers of believers and contributions. After we moved out, the Salvage became the 'Ark Park'—although we still called it the Salvage. Avery was so concerned about weapons research at Apocalogeny, however, that, before going, we left some lessons for the new staff. 'Before we depart,' he said, 'we will leave them as many distractions and puzzles as possible.'

"One booby-trap that I made was a program for an interlock system limiting access to the cold rooms. Avery told me to take the active samples to the Salvage before encrypting the security codes. I went on to make puzzling protocols that changed passwords daily, required double keys (one of which was always missing), and shut down the system for the first wrong keystroke in a password. One puzzle was particularly difficult to enter and master. The prize it protected was a nursery rhyme.

"Over the years since then, the Apocalogeny Division dwindled—like most other Board enterprises. The few security specialists who remain learned their cryptography lessons very well. Now they spend their time devising ways to hide what they know. Most of what they know they got from us. They're proficient at imposing lock-outs against outsiders, as they did during the Disconnection, when they built their 'secured perimeter' around the whole N.R. Nonetheless, trade with outsiders continued. Still does. And, after a short time, like flocks delayed by a long winter, even the pilgrims returned. Meanwhile, the Security Corps has made do with ordinary guns and bombs, not that they've used them off the firing range."

* * *

When Irene returned to her room, she wrote down Deborah's deposition. By the time that she had written her third book on the native view of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Irene had grown confident about recalling oral statements. Older people in the tribes didn't like to see notebooks and microphones. Anthros were not welcome. Irene learned to link the speaker's story to her gestures and facial expressions. Deborah's story was also easily linked to incidents in Irene's childhood in the Northern Region.

The families of her parents had resided in Fairall for generations. Her father had a small machine shop at home, and her mother followed a degree in library science from Holburn University with graduate work at the Salvage's Information Science Division. After graduation, Vicky worked for the Board at Foxglove Farms. She never showed her office to Irene. But sometimes, after they thought Irene was asleep, her parents talked about her mother's work.

Once, Vicky had a headache worse than usual. She stayed in bed while Irene's father made beans and eggs. Later that night, Vicky said, "No one can say what she thinks. I don't want their kind of life for—"

The door slammed.

With the door shut, Irene couldn't understand the muffled voices.

On a weekend hike in Foxglove Preserve when she was fifteen, Irene and Wayne Neely found a yellowed, human femur lying next to the stripped skeleton of a doe, her fuzzy head still intact. Skeletons were common finds, but that femur was different. Wayne poked in the gravelly heap of soil under the deer. A washout of egg-sized rocks and gravel had settled at the base of the heap. He handed Irene some of the pebbles.

They were beads.

Irene modeled her school paper about their excavation on Thomas Jefferson's excavation of a mound on the Rivanna River, the first carefully excavated burial mound on the continent. Her Cultural Studies teacher was so impressed that he sent her to his Conservator at the Salvage, where Irene had lunch with the staff.. The Conservator nominated Irene for apprenticeship.

Vicky took action. She didn't blame Irene for hiding the paper and visiting to the Salvage. She only said, "It's time."

* * *

When Irene last saw her parents, they were sitting at the kitchen table. The centerpiece—a broken canasta tray—held salt and pepper shakers and a deck of cards. Vicky passed her a new checkbook with Irene's name printed on the cover.

"It's all the real money we have left. We saved it for you. I'm glad that I kept my account in Holburn. You'll stay with Joyce, my college roommate. She works at the University. She will register you. You must leave today."

Her father covered his mouth with his big hand. After the lathe accident, Irene had wrapped his thumb with her handkerchief when he came out of the shop looking for something to stop the bleeding. When it healed, the thumb was half gone and the nail grew in two pieces at right angles to each other. He never stopped looking at Irene, but said nothing.

Vicky didn't explain. As they walked to the checkpoint, she told Irene that she would write later.

Irene lived with Joyce for one semester. Then the first letter came. Sent months earlier, it arrived open, stamped with the seal of the Board of Faith and Practice. Some of the words were struck out. Irene spent several hours studying the front and back of the letter. Finally, she examined it in her document conservancy lab. Under black light, two words emerged from the strikes: "*lockout*" and "*Disconnection.*"

* * *

The night after her interview, in a wobbly advance behind her walker across the dining room at Milford House, Deborah Detwiler fell. Alarms summoned attendants. Deborah disappeared into a white van at the entrance.

When Irene looked for her next day, the apartment was empty, the doorway blocked by a handcart draped with drop-cloths. Inside, two painters stripped wallpaper. Irene ran downstairs to the concierge's office. A square-faced woman with tight yellow curls, she gave Irene a cross look for asking about another resident.

"What did you say?"

"I asked you where Deborah Detwiler was taken," Irene said.

"We don't divulge any information about other residents," she said. She looked back at her monitor and returned to work.

Irene stared at her until she looked up again.

“What is it?” she said.

“ I wanted to see whether you were alive or mechanized,” Irene said.

* * *

After her encounter with the concierge, Irene’s heart was pounding. Her palms were moist, her throat burned. She wanted to throw words like darts into the woman, but her mouth was dry and she could think of nothing to say. The back of her throat tightened and her chest felt as if it would burst. She avoided the easy walk back to her room and went into the stairwell. Taking the steps two at a time, she raced up each staircase and whirled around the ends of the handrails. On the top floor was a meeting room. She ran across the polished parquet floor to the picture windows and doors to the patio on the roof. She coughed. Her throat was raw. She felt a little knot of pain in her abdomen—her grandmother used to call it a stitch in the side when Irene would come into the kitchen red-faced from racing around the arbor with Sarah Jane. She burst through the door and went out onto the roof.

Behind Milford House was Lake Klawir, where the flightless geese lived even when the trees were bare and the lake shores covered with melting snow. The lake backed into the pebbly spillway going down the slope to the ruins of a retaining wall for a dam. Lake Klawir was the main reservoir for Fairall, hundreds of feet below Foxglove Farms. Irene could partially see Main Street, like a doll village, through a wisp of cloud. Beyond Fairall, to her right, stood the forest and a distant white bluff. To her left was the Apocalogeny compound, surrounded by two fences, the area between them patrolled by dogs and black-uniformed soldiers of the Security Corps. In front of this was the Registration building, the purpose of whose little bristle of antennas Irene now understood. Beyond it was the road and low stone wall she had studied on her arrival. She would not be locked down.

To get out of the building, she would wait for a complete snow-melt, to avoid leaving tracks, and go into the forest to avoid the obvious routes. She assumed that they would use dogs to find her, so she planned to douse one of her blouses in the public toilet on the lobby level and leave it conveniently on her bed as she was leaving.

A week later, during a late winter downpour that washed away the snow and cut gullies down the hillside from the lake, Irene packed her steno pads into her backpack, put on several layers of clothing and hid her other clothes in the heating register, except for the dirty blouse on the bed.

At midnight, she went back up to the roof and reached out for the stout branch of a huge, shaggy white oak that stood close to the building. Moonlight lit her descent. She had studied the tree all week and was confident that it had all the branches in the right places for her to climb down almost two

hundred feet to the ground. A younger tree would have lacked upper branches thick enough to bear her weight. Sliding across the branch to the notch at the trunk, she let the bark scrape against her neck and ankles. Any of the branches could give way from dry-rot. She scanned below for other branches to grab. The first step was the most dangerous. Although she could touch the branch without leaving the roof, she would have to make a small leap.

If she jumped with too much force, the branch might give way; too little, and she would be stretched between the roof and tree. The rain backed up and pooled on the gravel roof, soaking her shoes and socks as she reached out. A gob of water blew into her face. She lost her grip on the branch and reached back to the roof.

Sitting with her legs over the edge, she grabbed again for the branch, swung up, and wrapped her legs around it. Hugging the trunk, she pushed away with her feet and caught the back of her pants on a thin strip of corrugated metal along the fascia board. Nothing tore. It was as if a finger had hooked around her waist-band. She let her legs dangle to drop free of it and then pulled herself to the branch.

Hanging by two arms and a leg, she slowly pulled closer to the branch and brought her other leg around. She couldn't see the branch beneath her, but she knew where it was. Pulling closer to the trunk, she righted herself and carefully worked down the tree, not stepping on a weak branch until she was close to the ground. The loud crack would surely have been heard if the house security guards were outside, but she knew from past observation that, after a quick tour of the perimeter, when the guard and his dog came on duty at 11:00 p.m., they stayed inside. The rain would keep him inside..

Chairman Vint

*“Within the jump
We appear to be experiencing time
But I suspect that this experience is transitory
and probably illusory—as memorable as a daydream.”*
--Avery Crawley to Chairman Jencks in Tom Farley’s *Profit of Doom*

The wind filled Wayne’s jacket and boomed from tree to tree as he crossed the quad to the cafeteria. For a moment, it took his mind off the answer he had given to a student in his Victorian literature course. She was troubled by the way that Tess and other characters seemed to be whipped about by random events. Following the *Institutes of Faith and Practice*, Wayne had assured her that, although Hardy might use chance as a literary device, believers knew that chance did not exist.

Wayne wondered how his colleagues who taught statistics would answer similar questions. For the student’s benefit, he had quoted the statement of a previous Board Chairman. “Chance is just a flaw in seeing nature’s perfect law.” The last of the old Jencks family to serve as a leader in Fairall, Lyman Jencks had actually insisted that there was not even any uncertainty about the weather. When Jencks was not buying up unclaimed property or reminding radio listeners to buy his assured shelter plan, he was naming anyone he considered “out of faith with the Board.” He had made the statement shortly before his death in the great tornadoes and flood of Hurricane Enkidu in 78 RRT, when his son also was killed on maneuvers with the Security Corps. The family’s home, business, and club were flattened. Only a few others were killed, like the school superintendent, who was giving a speech on the club terrace. Many years later, Wayne had been given the task of revamping that superintendent’s Guided Ministry program.

Jencks was long gone, but fear of “being out of faith” still troubled many citizens of the Northern Region. Wayne’s student was comforted by his answer; however, Wayne would have preferred to offer her less comfort and more criticism, as he had received during his apprenticeship to the language Conservator at the Ark Park.

At Fairall Worship and Training College, however, *comfort* set the curriculum—comfort for students, comfort for parents, comfort for leaders and alumni. Faculty was warned not to puncture this cushion of comfort by inquiry or critical analysis. College was a time, according to the *Bulletin*, for students “to become firm in faith, sink roots into the Northern Region, and develop useful skills.” Wayne worried about those roots, but he followed the curriculum.

This meant installing a dozen concepts per semester, the concepts selected by a committee working with the Board to harmonize every subject with the faith principles of *compliance*, *acceptance*, and *significance*. Wayne’s booklet on the application of faith principles to literature had received a commendation by the Apocalogeny Division.

The wind jammed the doors shut on one side of the building, so Wayne walked around to the other side, where he saw the Chairman going toward his office. He decided to take his time.

* * *

Chairman Helmut Vint waited in Wayne Neely's cluttered office at Fairall Training School. He frowned at the piles of books on the floor, shelves, and chairs. Literature was dangerous, even for trustees like Wayne Neely. Vint picked up a book—something about anthracite—read half a page, pursed his lips, and put it down in disgust. Poetry. Writers couldn't talk even about coal without misleading you.

Vint was the youngest member of the Board. Because the other three men were in their eighties and had all served as Chair, Helmut was selected. A newcomer, enthusiastic about the work of the Board, unlike the staff or local people, Vint was the sort of Chairman who could restore fear. Despite warnings by pastors, most people worked at the Salvage, decreasing the Board's revenues and forcing it to close facilities like the paper mill at Hartley and make budget cuts at the Training School, Security Corps, Apocalogeny Division, and Support Services at the Salvage. Outlays for any services from the Salvage led to heated arguments at Board meetings. When he became Chairman, Vint had initially refused to send tributes to outsiders. The older men praised his resolve, but quietly reminded him that the Salvage was the Northern Region's only source of food, utilities, and manufactured goods.

Board-trained as a minister, and a recent graduate of the Training School, Vint had avoided apprenticeships at the Salvage while he was a student. As Board Chairman, he avoided unnecessary contacts with the Supreme Prophet at the Salvage. A man of convictions and a sense of mission, a believer in the authenticity of *The Acts and Major Teachings of the Board of Faith and Practice*, and a strict deflectionist in all matters pertaining to criticisms of the *Major Teachings*, Helmut had a firm grasp of the need to heighten public apprehension about outsiders, storms of divine retribution, declining devotion of the young, and any criticisms coming from those who had fallen out of faith.

Previous Chairmen, such as Greaves, Hinklin, and Jencks, had asserted the Board's priority over the Salvage. A Security Corps action against the Salvage, planned by Chairman Jencks, had ended during Hurricane Enkidu. After the flooding of Fairall and Foxglove Farms, the Salvage restored the Northern Region, settling the question of priority for everyone except the Board of Faith and Practice.

For Helmut Vint to defeat outsiders, he needed to be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove. Sometimes one must follow the example of unrighteous mammon, using cunning and secrecy to assure the security of the Faith. Like the foreman who knew he was about to be fired and forgave his employer's debts to create the good will needed to raise capital to start his own business, Chairman Vint planned to take over the Salvage by arranging for its leaders to welcome him. Only one thing was needful. He would have to choose a new Supreme Prophet.

A copy of *The Journey of Jubilation* lay open on the desk. Vint thumbed through it and noticed the signature on the title page.

Wayne entered carrying a stack of books and threw his coat onto a chair.

"Welcome, Chairman. Shall we meet here or go to a conference room?"

"Here is fine, Professor." He held up the book. " You have a signed copy."

"Yes." Wayne studied Vint's eager expression. "Three exist. The Superintendent died in Enkidu before he could sign any more. Would you like to have it? I have another copy."

Vint licked his lips. He didn't want to ask.

"Here, you take it. You should display it at Board meetings." Wayne nodded gravely. "For edification."

"Yes," Vint said. "For edification." He sat in a leather chair by the desk, keeping the large book on his lap.

Wayne sat on his desktop. Turning to reach into a drawer behind him, he withdrew a leather-

bound notebook. "For security, I keep my notes on our project off the system. You've read the Detwiler transcript?"

"Yes, as usual, the subject says very little," Vint said.

Wayne nodded. "Irene is a skillful interviewer. She lets her sources do the talking."

"But you assured us that *she* was the primary source." Vint frowned as he looked through the notebook. "And the outsiders still claim that she was kidnapped by a cult?"

"She's been in the news since her disappearance. Her friends in the movements and colleagues at the university continue their letter campaign. Some of them have marched to our gates." Wayne paused. "But, begging your pardon, Mr. Chairman, she's *one* primary source. There are others at the Salvage."

The Chairman pouted, blew through his teeth and shook his head. "What do they matter?" He pursed his lips. "Detwiler was a primary source. We never got anything from her—and now we never will."

Wayne was careful not to vex the Chairman. Giving instruction to a wise man might make him wiser, but a Final Authority could not be instructed. He could only be reminded of what he already knew. Wayne nodded. "Quite right, Mr. Chairman. Your foresight in this matter will soon overcome these minor issues."

Vint clearly didn't know what Wayne was talking about, but he said, "Yes. And how is that proceeding?"

"Sir? Oh, the surveillance." Wayne was relieved that Vint had stopped pouting. "It goes very well, as you said it would. When Irene interviews other detainees at Milford House, we get some of the best information we have ever collected."

"But does she have what we're looking for? Is she a carrier or not?"

As Vint again began to pout, Wayne picked up a book from his desk. "It's all in her books, Mr. Chairman. As you recall, her later books and monographs established the field of speculative history, but her early writings were critical of the Ark Park and its Salvage operation. You know that, like yourself, she never apprenticed."

Vint nodded gravely. "Yes, but did she receive a viroid injection?"

"It's possible that she did, although we can't be sure of the variant she received. As you know, the first Supreme Prophet gave the injections to his grandchildren and several others before discovering that it was carcinogenic. The attenuated variant was given in food to many of the conservators at the Ark Park and selected others. Injections stopped when they found that the variant was not as harmless as believed."

"And since that time?" Vint was pouting again. He crossed his legs and swung the upper foot as if keeping time to a polka.

"Since then, the Salvage developed a new technology, and we--"

"We don't know what it is, even though you told me we had two 'primary sources.'"

"As you say, Mr. Chairman."

"Professor, you know that for our plan to succeed, the leaders at the Salvage must believe that Dr. Irene Brooks 'feels the doom,' as they say. They must believe that she continues the lineage of prophecy from the first Supreme Prophet."

Wayne took a pamphlet from the stack of books he'd carried in. "They'll accept her all right. Look at the list of some of the movements she's founded."

He read aloud:

"THE UNITED FRONT FOR HABITAT CORRIDORS,
THE SUSTAINABLE HOMES INITIATIVE,
THE TRIBAL GEOTHERMAL ALTERNATIVE,
THE CROP DIVERSITY COALITION,
THE SOCIETY FOR FLYWAYS AND BYWAYS
THE FOUNDATION FOR NATIVE LANDS AND WATERS,
THE PEOPLE'S COALITION FOR NUCLEAR STEWARDSHIP."

It reads like a course directory for the conservancy programs at the Ark Park."

Vint frowned. "Indeed. I wouldn't know about that, Mr. Neely."

Neely tried to avoid mentioning his own training as an apprentice and his degree from an outsider institution.

"And it is right that you do not know, Mr. Chairman. But Irene's background will impress the conservators at the Park."

"The paper I like is her *Critique of Means*," Vint said. "She attacks the assumption that the Park's genetic manipulations were justified because a crisis was imminent. She says, 'When is a crisis not imminent for any human being?'. It's just right. As Scripture says, 'Now is the time' and 'You fool, today your soul is required of you.'"

Wayne nodded, although he didn't know what Vint found "just right." To attract Vint's attention,

he'd laid Irene's little essay atop the last stack of her books he'd given him. Vint's usual reading was confined to pamphlets and thin books, preferably on religion. He readily identified with Irene's indignation on learning about Avery Crawley's brief program of viroid injection trials. Although he totally lacked the critical apparatus to understand Irene's argument, Vint knew that she opposed the Ark Park, as he did. And that was sufficient. Irene had also criticized the Board of Faith and Practice, but Wayne had corrected enough blue books from Helmut Vint as a student to know that the new Chairman hadn't read any of the thick books under the pamphlet.

Decoys

Irene stopped at the foot of the white oak and opened her backpack to pull scraps of cloth, scented like the blouse left on her bed. Northeast was the way to the entrance, but she planned to go west through the forest, to avoid buildings and Security patrols.

Instead of running immediately into the woods, however, she first went north, leaving footprints, and casting about some of the cloths. When she came to the gravel path, she crossed it, went toward the gate, dropped another cloth, then stepped backwards in her tracks to the path and returned to the tree. Dragging cloths on the ground, she then went east about fifty yards and stuffed the remaining cloths into a hollow tree trunk.

She returned to the white oak, put on her backpack, and walked to a small metal garden shed near the boxwood labyrinth, lay down inside, and went to sleep.

Clanging and slamming woke her at about six in the morning. Five or six armed men in black uniforms were dismounting from military vehicles. As she expected, they had dogs. One soldier started toward her shed, but he was called back to the tree by the others. The whole group followed the dogs off to the northeast.

When they were out of sight, Irene ran behind the labyrinth and into the woods.

The Jump

*“This must change on the other side of the jump—
Or had it changed? No—it would be different on that side.”*

—Avery Crawley, in *The Profit of Doom*, by Tom Farley

Wayne was the first to know that Irene had finally escaped. Perhaps his telling her to wait for the Processing Officer had sped her decision. By eight o'clock that morning, he had told Chairman Vint that their plan was underway. Wayne assured Vint that he would track Irene's movements and keep him informed of all developments.

What Wayne really intended was to pack and leave. Now that the initial conditions for the Correction were in place, Wayne was finished in Fairall. He had no idea where Irene was, but he had already written fictional reports about her escape for the Chairman to receive over the next few days.

After that, Helmut Vint could develop his own plans.

Agents Smythe and Alvarez

*More life is redundant. The certain narrows
Through which plenties pass, and all's submerged—
Or else a glut releases all submerged
Beneath our usual decencies and shows—
sculling as a water-strider goes,
our paired oars test a surface of events;
we ride a bouncing skin of incidents
we never dip beneath, or should we go,
we find another surface without depth
to meet upon, replay our birth and death,
converge and come apart, conceal and show.
From act to act, from scene to scene, we go,
and skim from part to part till what endures,
residual, derives from what injures.*

—Tom Farley, from his libretto to *The Profit of Doom*
with music by George and Arthur Smeltzer.

Scene: A ten by twelve interrogation room at the end of a beige corridor under the National Mall. Still unshaven and wearing beach clothes, Henson faces two bald interrogators, Agents Smythe and Alvarez, across a stainless steel table, with documents, newspapers, a valise, and a white paper bag between them.

Alvarez: "You don't want lunch?"

Henson: "I don't want what's in that bag. Any celery?"

Alvarez: "Sure. We'll get you celery. You want salad?"

Henson: "Celery's fine."

Smythe: "Okay. So tell us about this article."

Henson: "I sent the story. They got it right--unusual for newspapers."

Smythe: "You admit leaking classified information?"

Henson: "Yes."

Smythe: "Were you paid?"

Henson: "No."

Smythe: "So you didn't get anything out of this?"

Henson: "No."

Alvarez: "Here's your celery."

Henson: "Thank you so much."

Smythe: "So, Osvaldo, here's an Agency Chief who blows the whistle on a contract he himself has administered for thirty years, leaves all the evidence in a valise on his desk, and goes to the beach to wait for us to pick him up. Do you *sabe*?"

Alvarez: "No sabo. Why did you do that, Mr. Henson?"

Henson: "I enjoy the beach."

Smythe: "Vacation's over, Henson. How about being straight with us?"

Henson: "Anything you want to know."

Smythe: "The story reports that S&U never even did weapons research."

Henson: "That's right."

Smythe: "How long did you know?"

Henson: "From the beginning. I set it up."

Smythe: "So what happened to the thirty billion in grants and twice that amount in tax breaks?"

Henson: "It paid for research."

Smythe: "You said there was no research."

Henson: "None on weapons. The research was on changing hearts."

Alvarez: "Changing arts?"

Henson: "Hearts. But arts are part of it. Any more celery?"

Smythe: "Wait on that. You mean that S&U misrepresented the kind of research it was doing? What about the IG audits?"

Henson: "The auditors were well paid. I wouldn't say that S&U misrepresented their research. They did develop a micronized transponder, based on the early plasmid switch work on viroids. The MT does well at close range. It's just not permitted for it to be a weapon."

Smythe: "Why is that?"

Henson: "Because it's immoral."

Smythe: "I see. So you didn't want to see that happen."

Henson: "What I thought didn't matter. The MT was never intended as a weapon."

Smythe: "But you decided to leak this information so that it wouldn't be used. You wanted to make up for your part in this project."

Henson: "I'd phrase it differently, but that will do. I was happy with my work."

Smythe: "I have to take a call."

Henson: "Very well."

Alvarez: "Mr. Henson, I was sorry to see that your wife recently passed away."

Henson: "Thank you. We were very happy. Jill loved to socialize, garden, and give dinner parties."

Alvarez: "We saw the photos in your valise. You know, we couldn't find out what you were doing before coming to the agency."

Henson: "No? It wasn't very exciting. Some consulting in western states."

Alvarez: "Places like Santa Fe? The reason I ask is because of the photos."

Henson: "From Santa Fe?"

Alvarez: "Downloads from one of those—what were they called, cellulites?"

Henson: "Cell phones."

Alvarez: "Yes. From the cell phones people used before frontal messaging. See this picture? It looks like you without a beard."

Henson: "Good likeness."

Alvarez: "He looks like your twin. See? Here you are at home with your wife and another lady."

Henson: "Dr. Irene Brooks."

Alvarez: "The same woman who was kidnapped by the North Region cult. You know anything about that?"

Henson: "Quite a bit, actually. And not what's in the newspapers."

Smythe: "How about telling us what you know?"

Henson: "I see that you finished your call, Agent Smythe. Can't say that I ever wanted voices wired to my head, but I'm sure you don't mind."

Smythe: "What about the pictures and the Brooks woman?"

Henson: "What would you like to know?"

Smythe: "Who is the guy without the beard?"

Henson: "Me, of course."

Alvarez: "*Dios!* That picture is eighty years old. That would make him over a hundred and fifty."

Henson: "About right. I try not to mention it."

Smythe: "We're going to lunch, Henson. You'd better think up another story before we return."

Henson: "Glad to! Don't forget the celery."

Lewis, Clark, and Brooks

"The first rule of tinkering is to keep all the pieces."

--Aldo Leopold

After leaving the grounds of Foxglove, Irene passed into a dark forest criss-crossed by footpaths. Small brush piles were stacked in teepees at regular intervals near white posts like those she had seen near Lorena's house. The pine scent from the sticky trunks of the giant trees, the cool morning air, the rustling of sparrows, mews of catbirds and raucous complaints of jays reminded her of many treks over the trails of Lewis and Clark. Ground cedar floated like a green lace over a thick bed of brown pine needles, interrupted here and there by occasional sickly-white fingers of dodder. The sky trimmed the leaves of pawpaw, sassafras, dogwoods, oaks, hickories, and ashes in a blue mosaic. The ground was damp but firm with no trace of snow. She passed several fairy rings before deciding to gather mushrooms. All she'd packed to eat was apples and rolls saved from the dining hall in Milford House.

Tramping the woods around Fairall with Wayne Neely, she had learned to identify edible mushrooms. Then she had learned about the plants used by colonial people, both native plants and escapes from European gardens, like the scraggly mulleins, with their yellow spikes, which were ground

to powder for makeup, or like dandelion roots, sassafras, and comfrey, which were made into infusions and teas. In Holburn, she had spent many evenings talking with Miles and Jill about restoring native plants, like Old Man's Beard and Osage, to forests now as swamped by invaders as the native peoples had been swamped by Europeans. Miles knew a great deal about the habitats around Fairall, once known as the Foxglove Preserve. It had been open to the public and to botanical research, until the same research led to the area being closed. Apparently, the properties of a small virus-like organism living in the plant hairs of a species found only in the Preserve became a matter of national security. A large, federally-sponsored corporation moved in and transformed the Northern Region. Miles told her how the founder of the Ark Park had used uninformed human subjects to test his ideas and then increased his treatment sample size by joining forces with a millennialist religious sect who were recruiting believers to turn the region into a theocratic state.

Irene finally understood what her mother had done for her.

As a child, she was not taken to evening classes at First Temple, or forced, like other children, to memorize the *Synopsis of the Teachings*, or allowed to go to Board of Faith Camp at Foxglove Farms—even when she protested that Wayne and other friends were going. During rallies for revival, her family played canasta. And, when the grasp of the Ark Park and Board of Faith became inescapable, her parents gave her their savings and sent her away.

Irene had lost her parents because of the Board and Ark Park. Determined as she was to expose it, she found the Park and Board immovable and Federal authorities intransigent. Most officials whom she interviewed were too distracted by the war in Asia or the riots over coastal containment to challenge a well-established partnership between business and government. Only Miles would talk to her. In fact, he was the only source for her first essays about the Northern Region.

In time, she found other sources. Her first monograph on the Northern Region was written shortly after *Reimagining the Land*, her award-winning book that speculated on what Lewis and Clark would have learned about the "mental topography" of the continent had their encounters with native peoples been investigative interviews rather than the leading edge of conquest. Although the monograph included no primary sources from the Northern Region, Irene was able to piece together a story from her mother's letters and from the accounts of inhabitants of nearby communities, such as Wando. Certainly, it was not enough. She had remained determined to return to the N.R. one day, for her parents' sake.

Still, as much as she had written about it, "N.R." might as well have stood for "not real." It was a more imaginary place for her than even the long-dissolved shapes of native thoughts conforming to an ancient topography without the highways, sprouting poles and antennas, power lines, swaying buildings, and human swarms of modern life. The Northern Region of her childhood was a safe, dreamy place created by her parents, where play and tree-climbing, games, reading, long walks in the woods, and bedtime stories nourished her imagination. She never knew about the other Northern Region, and the work her mother never talked about.

A clearing was ahead. She stopped and listened. From the canopy of a line of sycamores across the clearing came a high birdsong--*chili chili chili chili*--like brown towhees she'd once heard in New Mexico. She studied the sycamores. A line of them could mean water.

She stepped out of the woods.

In the middle of the clearing was another short, white pole. Coming closer, Irene saw a wide circle of trampled earth around the pole. Hundreds of footprints circled the pole in separate bands with grassy ridges of undisturbed soil between them. Like a fluid flow-pattern representing the swirl of brandy in a glass, the deeper paths were cut in the outermost bands. The central band of tracks might have been made by only one person—a leader perhaps. In India, during her junior year in college, Irene had once witnessed a religious festival involving four to five hundred fervent participants in a pit, whirling, shouting, and pressing against each other to be closer to their leader in the middle. Suddenly, like the click of a light-switch, the ecstatic cries became screams. Older people were lifted from the ground as the crowd packed toward the center. Many fell and were crushed underfoot.

Later, her guide, who had explicitly warned her to watch from a distance, casually explained that there were always fatalities at the festival. The deaths were not only expected, but considered evidence of great faith. In the magazine article she later wrote about it, Irene compared the crush of so many people wanting the same thing to the inadvertent destruction of habitat and water resources by the more civilized world, who would have considered the festival barbaric. She entitled her article "*The Crush of Wanting*" and, as was characteristic of her writing, compared the devastation wrought by civilized peoples wanting and wasting vast quantities of things and energy to the minimal losses that the worshippers had inflicted on itself. One of her critics described the paper as "tedious and tendentious."

Irene had interviewed several elderly residents of Wando who witnessed Avery Crawley's tent

revivals when they were children. The mother of one man, named Eric Fenstermaker, had been the only one in her family not to stay in Fairall after the Ingathering ended. He remembered huge, unruly crowds, ecstatic shouts and dancing. But even as a child, he was surprised at the source of all this energy.

Crawley sat on a stool onstage, his ball-cap pushed back on his head as he calmly chewed a straw. Eric recalled no fights or injuries at any of the many revivals his parents attended. Crawley seemed, he said, in an odd way, to "combine alarm with analysis." At the altar call, the participants seeking revival would form a procession circling the stage while Crawley recited his visions for the community.

Such a procession would make tracks like the ones in the clearing.

To Irene, the concentric pattern seemed too orderly to represent hysteria and a "crush of wanting." It was more directed, more choreographed or stylized. In research for the article, Irene had found some old studies of crowds in different situations. Attendance at religious, sports, and musical events increased the risk of being crushed by a mob, while suffering real disasters such as fires or earthquakes, like the one in San Francisco, witnessed by William James in 1906, seemed to evoke sympathy, compassion, cooperation, and heroic acts. In such crises, devastating as they were, one had enough time to think about others. Seeing through their eyes, James noted, one acted not only in self-interest but in compassion. In the *Book of Visions* that Crawley composed for the Board's *Major Teachings*, he wrote that "all of us are in each of us." It seemed like an admirable sentiment until one heard the testimonies of people like Fenstermaker.

From the few other writings by Crawley that Irene had found, she concluded that the apocalyptic content of his message was intended to persuade believers to work in his Salvage, where they would receive "prayer pellets," instead of money, for their labor. Once they had entered the N.R. compound, they were surrounded by a "secured perimeter," a Security Corps, and a Board of Faith and Practice to disconnect and protect them from outsiders. Meanwhile, the S & U Corporation continued its weapons research at the Ark Park and received massive appropriations from the Federal government, and the Northern Region pursued its theocratic separatism. Eric Fenstermaker said that after they had escaped through the window of a guard house, his mother never spoke of the Northern Region again.

Irene froze. A shadow had moved in the trees. Lost in her thoughts while she studied the tracks, she had been visible to anyone watching from the forest.

The Berkeley Hotel

*Lord, please do not disclose your will.
Do not disclose your will.
To range, like protists radial
In timeless water,
let sluggish natures reel
reel, reel, and be swirled.
Disclose no plan of yours,
but show how you explore the world.*

--Tom Farley, Waltz from *The Profit of Doom*

A guard was posted outside the room. Jumping from the window of the Berkeley Hotel obviously seemed as improbable to his keepers as it did to Henson. Four floors below, a three hundred pound man was eating a moon pie in front of the old tobacco warehouse on Carey Street. Henson wondered why Agent Smythe had brought him to Richmond. Before leaving, General Van Steeveninck, his old boss, had stopped by to give him a memorable two-word sendoff.

Two visitors entered without knocking, Smythe and a stooped, elderly man who shuffled behind a walker.

"Take a look, Dr. Singer. We've given him a shave."

Squinting at the bright window behind Henson, the old man said, "Say something."

"Hello, Larry." Hank said.

Hank remembered Larry, a freshman seventy years ago in Science for Liberal Arts. Larry always sat in front, giving a full view of the port-wine birthmarks on his cheek and neck. The birthmark was all he remembered about Larry.

"He looks the same." Singer said. "Is this a trick? I am not well and if this is a trick--"

"It is a kind of trick, Larry, but I *am* Hank Randall. As least, I'm as much Randall as I am Henson. Identity tends to be less interesting after a few lifetimes. Good to see you again. You became a teacher?"

Alvarez opened the door behind Singer.

"Literature. Forty years. But how--"

"Have a seat, Larry."

Hank offered him a chair, but Agent Smythe stepped between them.

"That's fine, Dr. Singer. Agent Alvarez will drive you back to Shadybrook. You've been very helpful."

Dr. Singer teetered backwards, waving the walker. Hank took his arm and their eyes met.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Singer said.

"Yes, it is me."

Singer shook his head. "No, it *was* you who gave me the idea to make my classroom a studio." Singer's cloudy blue eyes focused on some other place and time. "I did, you know."

Alvarez guided him to the door.

Singer looked back at Hank as the door closed. "I did make it a studio. It was a joy."

* * *

Agent Smythe sat on the bed, wiped his bald head with a handkerchief, and laid the valise on his knees.

"Please sit down, Dr. Randall. How about this: You tell me what you've been doing for the last fifty years so that I don't have to ask."

"Glad to, Agent Smythe. You could say that I've been guiding an idea. Mostly, one doesn't get

the opportunity. We all make ideas about the way things are, and how people are, and so forth. We live on our ideas for a long time—maybe a lifetime. They become more real for us than anything we feel about the world. In a way, it's a kind of general human deficiency in maintaining attention to life. We are so unsteady. The flashes of insight, poems, riffs, and burning bushes that come our way all dissipate like the taste of breakfast. Even disasters that strip us of every dear association finally dissipate. We return to our old ideas—more real than the quivering heart of a sparrow in our hands, the delicate whistling of breath through our sinuses, or the soft squelch of marsh mud under our feet. Alive in our ideas—so alive that we even become characters in our own stories—we fasten onto thoughts as if they were pietons on which our lives are suspended.

"But after a second or third lifetime, one's attention shifts. You awaken. You learn the use of your senses. You attend. You consider the propositions your body makes concerning the way things are. Most are ill-informed. Only some of them require action. I must tell you: we are not on a climb. We are suspended like swirling protists 'in timeless water,' as a friend of mine wrote. Pope called our condition a 'middling state.' Whatever it is, it's not a climb. It's an exploration, a wide-ranging exploration. How does one attend to it—the ins and outs of it, the zooms, the magnitudes of it? Always, always there is a next. And one must always deal with one next thing, then another. But also, there are always saints—partners. I call them the *Fellowship of the Attentive*.

"So, this idea of mine got loose, but I had the chance to get in front of it for awhile so that I seemed to be leading. What usually happens when an idea escapes is—you lose it. The first human to use a word for 'grabbing' or 'seizing'—probably something like 'TAG'—never knew how his word would later branch and flow into 'TOUCH' and 'TAX' and 'TANGO.' But what happened to me was different.

"Because I have aged slowly, I have had a long time to track my ideas and to watch my judgment. It flails about. We think ourselves so sure, so well linked to how things are. But in time, every idea loses its moorings. It must. Human experience goes on without us. Corrections are made. Humans are in perpetual rehearsals. Glorious isn't it?"

Smythe was silent, so Hank continued.

"Experience is all we have. The mysteries we encounter are only our ignorance—and challenges. We are made to explore and rehearse and inquire—not to want and conflict and acquire."

Smythe wiped his head again. "Doctor, I'm not a philosopher. Can you break it down? Tell me why you sabotaged your own agency. Explain why you left the papers and photos in the valise."

Hank stood up. "Yes, you must be the Interrogator now. I understand. We are a swirling exchange of roles, identities, and parts—all of us in each of us. We are our ideas about ourselves. As Tom's song goes, 'We move from part to part. And what endures, derives, residual, from what injures.' However complex the adaptation—a jaw more gracile, permitting speech; a shape more segmented, permitting separable movements; an expression more elegant, permitting new geometries—each is a stage for what comes next. Like brokered deals, our roles are the settlements reached after thousands of unseen transactions. You must be the Interrogator.

"So interrogate! Do what you are suited for. Probe your heights and depths. Join your sainted partners, the fellowship of sleuths who attentively perform mystery plays in drawing rooms, crime scenes, and village socials. None of you believes that mystery is anything but ignorance. Presumptions, fallacies, and unobserved trifles bring you joy. You invite us to witness the evidence of 'what we have seen, and heard, and touched with our hands concerning the word of life.' And, for at least an episode, you right the imbalances between the seen and unseen worlds."

Hank slumped forward on the couch. Smythe shouted for Alvarez.

After two hours, Hank sat up in bed. Smythe and Alvarez stood nearby.

"Usually I have better control," Hank said. "Since I became a chimera, I sleep more and more. My old Cherokee friend would have said to stop resisting. 'Enter the dreamtime with all the Earth's other peoples—the deer, green lacewings, sedges, hills, and lost beloveds.' But I resist.

"The sluggish tardigrade in me gives health and life in exchange for diminishing wakefulness. It's a good deal. I usually know when I'm about to drop off, but sometimes I become excited and forget."

Hank took the salad from the bed stand.

"Dandelion greens and chives! Your idea, Agent Alvarez?"

Alvarez smiled and nodded.

"Okay. Just the facts now. Right, Agent Smythe? Here's the evidence for your report: 'The subject was a sleeper agent—a mole, if you like—for an extremist organization occupying a vast compound in rural Virginia. Apparently a millennialist cult with an apocalyptic message, it colluded with the S&U corporation for federal appropriations to finance its activities. The subject managed the federal contracts and gave the Northern Region funding to establish autonomy from regulatory control and taxation. He also assisted in seeding other states and countries with extremist cells, such as the

Southwest Salvage Region, centered in Santa Fe."

Hank sipped his water. "How am I doing, gentlemen?"

Smythe frowned. "S&U fronts for the Temple Independents?"

"Oh, no." Hank sat on the edge of the bed and pulled up his socks. "The Salvage holds all the cards—the research park, the shares of S&U, and even the Board of Faith and Practice—although they are slow to realize it. But all the Salvage did was to hold some variables constant long enough to install their ideas. They froze the deck. Now the Salvage has already made its next move—and its last. Things are going quite well. Avery would have been pleased."

"You mean Avery Crawley—the cult's founder?" Smythe took out a notebook, even though the recorder was running.

"Yes. As Avery explained it, I was restoring the funds to their original purpose of providing security. Do the great Defenders create security by attacking nomads on the oil fields of Samarkand, or sending an aircraft carrier to India to protect a corn monopoly? Is this providing for the common defense? Were we more secure after reserve units put down the mobs on the East Coast, angered by the loss of their towns during the last ten years of neglect? Defenders call this security, but it feels like a distraction and an imbalance. And what of the other kinds of securities held by the investors in oil and corn monopolies, the disaster-speculators, and the other corporations deemed more important than attention to our own people, our own coastlands, our own future? What secures them? Shiny metal in a vault? Did any of the Defenders' costly arms, military occupations, or preemptive wars correct imbalances and create long term security for all the People in the vessel of the Earth?"

Smythe and Alvarez nodded and walked toward the window.

"There's nothing new about creative reallocation of appropriations," Hank said. "Defenders have done it for years. They have a long history of frightening self-justifications. I remember many of them, such as Tin Balloon, missile gaps, remembering the Maine, the Yellow Peril, various domino theories, destroying weapons of mass destruction, manifest destiny, the red menace, mutually assured destruction,

the war to end wars, and the war on terror. Now it's 'the yellow wave.' All shams and distractions. Committed as they were to protection, preservation, and defense, the Defenders repeatedly left us in undefendable situations without protection and fewer values to preserve.

"After all the great distractions, waste, and indecision of our Defenders, a correction was needed. *Herr Schumpeter* might have called it a 'creative destruction.' But how does one link human imagination and innovation to life-promoting change instead of weapons research and distribution? My reallocations to the Salvage were actually spent on life-promoting security—not on slogans like 'war is peace,' 'business is freedom,' 'weapons are protection,' and 'corporations are persons.'"

Hank took a shirt from his backpack and put his arm into the sleeve. "Proof of this will come when Operation Breakaway breaks down as soon as troops enter the Northern Region. You should mention this to General Van Steeveninck, by the way."

"How do you know about Operation Breakaway?" Smythe said, gazing at the flowering tree outside the hotel window.

"I read *Fragmentary Order 14803A*." Hank buttoned his shirt, tucked it in, and slipped on a pair of jeans. He left the beach togs hanging in the closet and put his backpack by the door. "That's when I decided to retire from the Agency. All this bother is superfluous, you know. The Salvage will soon shut down. I went to the newspapers to undermine Van Steeveninck's pretext for the operation. *Breakaway* has nothing to do with rescuing Dr. Brooks from a cult. It's only about capturing MT technology to use as a weapon. What a surprise for the Defenders! Anyone capturing the viral crown will be captured by it."

Agent Alvarez took a manuscript from the valise and read aloud:

*"Unsevered leaves, still sunned in golden fall
above Foxglove's separating wall;
unsevered leaves, no more tip-edge of reach,
still held and sunned; like some archaic speech—"*

"Yes," Hank said. "That's the crown. The Apocalogeny Division couldn't figure it out more than seventy years ago. They knew that it coded the viroid nucleotide sequence used in the micronized

transponder. Of course, they didn't understand that it is a kind of supplement to correct the widespread human deficiency in maintaining attention to life. Like Van Steeveninck, they only wanted control. Did your cryptographers have any luck with it?"

The agents were silent, both of them quietly reading the poem.

Hank put on his coat and went to the door. "Didn't think so. It was written by Tom Farley, who recently passed away. It's a good lesson for your cryptographers, but the Salvage doesn't need it any more. The Installation is finished. And the Correction is underway.

"And, you know, even *I* have visions now. Avery used to say he 'felt the doom,' but for me, it's the feeling of being one of thousands of motes dancing in a viscous suspension—slowly sinking, perhaps, but too occupied with the patterns of the dance to notice anything but the honey-sweetness of life, the flickering lights between the dancers disappearing and reappearing—with seconds or centuries between them—and all of the intricate steps of entrances, ensembles, loops, and closings which can only be understood by being in the dance, in the *Fellowship of the Attentive*. It's my idea of the communion of saints. Perhaps you join it now. The viroid was only our preceptor, our *Dadouchos* to the divine path. We only understand when we join the dance, as you may be doing now. Understanding no longer comes through boosted signals from viroids, but rather, through contact with those of us who carry the signal. In fact—"

Hank opened the door, picked up his backpack, and looked at the two agents, as they smiled at the treetops outside the window. "I think that you gentlemen understand what I mean."

Eddy

From the thick, piebald branch of one of the giant sycamores lining a low, marshy area, Irene watched three figures emerge from the woods--a man, a woman, and a little girl about eight or nine years old. They wore backpacks and carried bundles of brush. After carefully putting their bundles together in a little teepee, like stacked arms, beside the white post in the middle of the clearing, they sat on the ground and opened their packs. The woman took jars from her pack while the man and child laid a blanket on the ground.

Irene lowered herself to the ground and walked towards the group.

"Welcome!" the man said. He was a dark, wiry man with big, rough hands. "We've met many pilgrims going to the memorial procession. Enjoy our food."

The girl had bright red hair, like her mother's. She studied Irene with interest. "My name is Megan. We are from Hamel. Where are you from?"

"I was born in Fairall, Megan. My name is Irene."

The mother's eyes widened. "You're from the First Salvage? We are honored. I am Audrey and this is my husband, Michael Spencer. Will you walk with us to the procession?" She handed Irene a boiled egg from one of the jars.

"Yes, thank you." Irene answered without reflection. She trusted these people without reservation.

"Our Salvage in Hamel is only beginning, but many have joined us from St. Louis and Chicago. A couple from Iowa is running our farm while we are on pilgrimage. We traveled on the windway in a rixwing across the Middle Corridor to the Appalachian Trail. We walked from there. Two days ago, we entered the Northern Region."

"You hiked the Byways?" Irene said.

"Never saw a town," Michael said. "We stayed at hostels along the windway."

Megan sat up on her knees. "We walked with deer and saw a thousand robins and—"

"Eat your lunch, Megan," Audrey said. "We won't stay here long."

"Some day, Megan," Irene said, "you will be able to follow the game corridors and migration flyways from one reserve to another across the whole country. It's up to people to stitch the habitats back together."

Audrey stared pensively at Irene. "It's so good to sit with you. The elder told us we would find the greatest blessing in meetings."

Irene added her apples and rolls to the chicken and greens on the blanket. They ate quietly, listening to the breeze and birdcalls in the treetops. When finished, Michael placed his hand on top of the white post. A space appeared above the post, as if a scroll had opened in the air. A map showed their position. Michael touched the post again and the map disappeared.

"Only a couple of days from here," he said. He picked up his pack and then set it down again, looking at something behind Irene.

She turned around. Two SF soldiers in black uniforms walked toward them. She couldn't run from them, so she simply waited.

Michael reached into his pack as they came up. "You want our passes?"

Both men were very young, one with a tiny mustache and the other a gangly boy with a guilty look. Irene noticed that they had no weapons. The one with the mustache spoke first.

"We're not looking at any more passes. We're going to the procession."

"Yeah, we'll let the old guys fight it out," the tall one said. "Emilio and I have taken off on our own. We don't want any more grief from Sergeant Miklos or any of the others--right on up to that screaming Chairman Vint. We've had it!"

"What do you mean?" Irene said.

Audrey gave them both cups of cider. Emilio drank a little and said, "If we have to choose sides, we will go with the Salvage. They have jobs--and, anyway, I like them better than the Board. But nobody knows where they are now. And Vint has gone crazy about it. He came into the station

screaming that we had to arrest everybody who had anything to do with it—starting with some teacher at the Training School."

"What do you mean, the Salvage is gone?" Michael said.

"It closed down and all the buildings are gone," Emilio said. "One of our patrols discovered it last night."

The gangly boy slapped the back of one hand to the palm of the other. "Vint hears about it, calls an alert, screams in my face because I can't find that Neely guy and some woman named Brooks."

"Wayne Neely?" Irene said.

"That's the one," said Emilio. "Hector and I went to his house. Nobody there. The door was standing wide open. Same thing in his office at the school."

"We come back to the station," Hector said. "Here's Vint screaming that Neely set him up. We're not the only ones who left after that. I know a lot of guys in the Force who want to go to Salvage. Who wants to be chasing Vint's bad dreams? The people at Salvage know how to live—like you pilgrims. That's what I want. Vint can pull his own security watches if it matters so much."

After Hector's outburst, Emilio seemed reluctant to speak. Finally, he took a deep breath, folded his hands, and asked the question so shyly and quietly that he could barely be heard. "We've been looking for a pilgrim group to walk with, because we don't know what to do. Could we walk with you?"

* * *

Irene learned that a pilgrimage to the Salvage made many stops. Brush along the way was cleared and stacked, along with trash, near the poles. Anytime they crossed water, they said a special blessing. Other blessings were offered whenever they encountered deer, bears, or large flocks of birds. They picked mushrooms, poke weed shoots, and fresh puff balls. Irene stopped to write down the blessing Michael had offered for a tree growing through barbed wire.

"For all that is asunder may we feel sufficient wonder that, for deficits observed, we have all the tools reserved."

She asked what it meant.

"It's just a short way of saying that everything we've taken apart we need to put back together. Among the People, every tool can be found; therefore everything we've taken apart *can* be put back together, however difficult it may be. On our place near Hamel, the first settlers mined the soil until crops wouldn't grow. They moved on. Then another generation farmed the land, adding just enough to the soil to make *some* crops grow, even though they weren't as nutritious as they appeared. By the time our generation began farming, the soil that remained was unsuitable even for fertilization. No one before

us had *attended* to the soil. But we did.

"It took ten years to add two inches of topsoil to the bottom land and four years to add an inch to rocky hills and slopes. We did it using animal wastes, low-tillage practices, applications of composts and cultures of earthworms, nematodes, and microbes of many kinds. And we are cautious about putting in crops, controlling pests, rotations, and always leaving half the land uncultivated. All of the generations of farmers on that land possessed the tools to nurse the land along. But they didn't use the tools. They mined the land. Some of the land should never even have been cultivated. But they thought first about making a living rather than supporting the living. What was a mystery to them is a toolbox to us. We understand how to keep the soil from going asunder."

On the evening of the second day, a group of about fifty other pilgrims joined them. A tall, distinguished-looking black man in his seventies welcomed the group to the Northern Region.

"I am Eddy Cooke, your guide, or *Dadouchos*, for the last hundred thousand steps of pilgrimage. I have worked for many years in the machine shop at the Salvage and also kept a small hostel in Fairall for pilgrims. You are welcome to stay with me after the procession." He looked at the soldiers in the group. "Some of you come from other Salvage sites; some of you are members of the local Security Corps; others are reservists in the federal armed forces. You are here because you have met the People and received from them the signal of understanding and proper alignment."

He paused and smiled. Taking off his dilapidated brown fedora, he held it out to them with both hands.

"Those are the words I'm supposed to say. But they not how I talk. You see this old hat. I wear it to remind me of the man who brought me to the Salvage—name of Cicero Brown. Things like this hat help us remember, see. I got the signal through him. But it came in different ways to others—like my friend at the shop, Oneal, who returned this bag to me."

He held up a small cloth bag.

"It's the freedom bag passed down in my family for generations. My buddy got it from an uncle I never met. That was the signal for him. He knew it be time to leave. What we say at the Salvage is, 'it's time for a frameshift.' No matter how we get that signal, we know it means it's time to change. We have

looked through a window and seen the kind of life we want and we gotta walk toward it. The First Elder will tell you better than I can. You be seeing him at the Two Trees. What I say is, 'Welcome.' You may be puzzled how you came to feel this way so fast."

He looked at the soldiers. "You may wonder what made you lay down your weapons and walk away from them."

"Don't matter." He smiled. "It's the signal touching you. Not everybody can be touched by it—at least, not at first. But that don't matter because all of us in the shift, whether or not we know it right away."

"Okay. Here's what's coming." He put on his hat and pointed to the path in the woods. "We keep following the posts to the Two Trees, where we spend the night. By the time we get there, we will be about five hundred people. Same thing at about eighty other places in the N.R., but we will have the First Elder at our procession. He will handle the wheeling and revealing. I'm not cut out for that, but if any of you are mechanics looking for how to fit into the work of Salvage, you see me after the procession."

* * *

Irene stayed behind the group, thinking about the panicked crowd she had witnessed at the religious festival in India. An old woman, wearing a cape and leaning on a cane, also walked in the rear. Irene estimated that she was in her eighties. Her face was deeply lined, her finger joints swollen. She carried no baggage.

"I see that you have no bags," Irene said. "Do you live in the Northern Region?"

"Yes, dear. I've lived here all my life." Her smile was more like a wince.

"Is the walking painful for you?"

"A bit. But most of my pains are elsewhere. Hah!" She spat. "Pardon me, but I get such an awful taste from it."

Irene offered her a drink, but the old woman took a jar of her own from her cape.

She drank it all.

"Thanks, dear. It's much better. Such a rotten taste."

"I guess that you can get bad food on pilgrimages like this."

"I have a brain tumor, dear. The bitter taste comes from that. This will be my last pilgrimage." The old woman's eyes were like moons behind opal clouds. "You get to my age, there are a lot of lasts. It's to be expected."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I've known for years that this would happen. After my husband died, I even looked forward to it. He'll be remembered in this procession, you know. That's why I decided to walk. Well--that and another reason."

They had fallen too far behind to see the others in the dusk.

"I hope we don't lose our way," Irene said.

"Just follow the lights." She pointed to small, flat stones that lit up as they approached and darkened as they passed.

After walking for another half-hour, Irene broke the silence. "You said that you knew beforehand about your sickness. How did you know? Couldn't something have been done earlier?"

"No, dear. Both my brother and my grandfather had the same kind of tumor. So does Eddy Cooke, our guide. We were injected with the messenger as children."

"The messenger?"

"The viroid who boosts the signal from all who live. I call it the Messenger. He's not the first angel to cause trouble, you know. Jacob was fortunate to get away with a bad hip after wrestling with his Messenger."

"You were injected when you were children?"

The old woman nodded and smiled. "My Daddy threw a fit, took us out of Fairall to Hartley. I was a silly girl, too involved with a man to care about anything else. His name was Jeff—Jeff Jencks. What I saw in him escapes me. It all went so fast during the Enkidu storm—my leaving home to be with Jeff, his accident on a troop truck, and my brother dying in a wreck, my running away from Jeff, and then, when the worst seemed to be over, the flood took away everything that was left. Everything but the baby I carried."

"You were victims of Avery Crawley's early trials?"

"Yes, our trials led the way to the micronized transponders that are used now. Everyone will share them tomorrow when the pipe is passed around the circle, as we do every year. We weren't victims. What we received was worth much more than what we lost—except for my brother Willy. The accident took him before he could even reach old age to greet the tumor that escorts us from this world."

Irene stopped. Her voice quavered as she spoke. "How could children understand or give

permission for such a procedure? It was unconscionable. Nothing could repay you for what you lost. From what I have learned, that so-called Supreme Prophet was developing a way to control the residents of this God-forsaken place so that they would work mindlessly at his Salvage yard while the Board of Faith and Practice filled their heads with numbing nonsense—like this pilgrimage of the duped or intoxicated, or whatever it really is. How can you even trust your judgment after so many years of living under the influence of your 'messenger'?"

"One reason, Dr. Brooks," the old woman said. "The messenger doesn't lie."

The old woman pulled her cape around her. Like the scroll over the post where Michael had checked their route, she rolled up into the air and disappeared.

North from Richmond

As the rixwing settled into the windway along the Blue Ridge, Hank Randall watched the venturi turbines glittering in two dotted lines among the trees on either side of the cab. No one would have been more surprised by the application of an idea than Ricks himself, the aerodynamic engineer at the Salvage who first had the idea of streamlining wind turbines to generate power for the guided gliding system of his vehicles. The gentle hum of the cab had already put the other five passengers to sleep. Hank entered a remark into his speech about the rixwing—another example of the hundred or so *co-designs* introduced over the last century by the Salvage. Hank invented the word “co-design” for the title of his Decade Address to the Council of Elders.

As First Elder and founder of the Salvage in Santa Fe, Hank usually spoke first. This was less in deference to him than because they knew he would fall asleep if his presentation were delayed. Once called “human factor” research, co-designing was the fundamental engineering principle at the Salvage. Production was not about creating and increasing demand. Instead, wants were minimized by the

population through proper alignment to life-fostering concerns. Engineers could then provide excellent solutions to problems because the criteria were constrained only by needs. A windway, for example, would have worked no better than any previous transportation system if it had depended upon ever-increasing demand. Instead, it was designed for the small number of Salvage members who needed to travel between sites, usually only apprentices, traders, and pilgrims. Because every band met the needs of its members and because members of any band were networked to all the members of any other band, there was little need for long-distance travel, except for some truck routes made from the remaining segments of the interstate system.

The keys to Salvage had always been to reduce wants and satisfy needs—the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and water, and the spiritual needs of creative engagement, mutual compassion, and inquiry. The windways were originally deployed only along the wildlife corridors between national and state wilderness areas, but outsiders also came to want them. Anyone who wanted to build windway systems was extended credit by the Salvage Time Bank, provided that construction followed the Salvage’s *System Guidelines*. Repayment by co-generation, energy taps, and in-kind services began when the venturi turbines for a new system came online in the network. By meeting Salvage’s guidelines and using STB for banking, outsiders were effectively installing infrastructure for the Salvage.

The outsiders’ installation would never be enough for the purists among the elders, however. Purists always had a point, but usually needed to be restrained from doing anything about it.

Hank struggled to stay awake to finish his speech. But, whether because of the drone of the rixwing, or the blur of greens and browns at the window, or the incredibly dull speech itself, he finally gave in.

* * *

Foxglove was the next stop. He had been thinking about purists when he dozed off. The existence of purists after only a century and a half of the project confirmed Avery’s original decision to build a Correction into his model. Never claiming more than to give evolution a nudge, he was content to allow the disappearance of the Ark Park and everything he had accomplished. What remained would be the change of heart.

Avery hoped it would be enough. Perhaps, like early Buddhism or Christianity during the Axis times, the Salvage’s new way of life would seem possible and even desirable to the larger population. The vast changes needed on all the continents could only be accomplished through decentralized

diffusion of ideas and practices—like the spread of writing or agriculture—not through the codifications of belief in a purists' *Credo* or the creation of a *Salvages Standards Committee*, as proposed by other elders. Hank planned to use whatever status he had in the group to remind the others that they were only counselors, notwithstanding the opinions they formed from their long view of events. Perhaps he could convince them simply to make a position statement.

The cab hovered over the gatehouse as Hank hoisted his backpack and stepped down to the platform. The gate was open. He walked down the ramp and past the security barrier without triggering the alarms. No Security Corps carts or jeeps waited along the tree-lined driveway to the conference buildings. Hank joined Deborah Detwiler and another elder who were sitting under the giant copper beech by the Registration building.

“Good morning, Dr. Detwiler. Are we alone here?”

“Good morning, Dr. Randall,” Deborah said. “You’re looking too well, as usual. Everyone is here except the Security Corps and the Apocalogeny staff. It seemed that they had nothing left to do.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve recovered from your fall,” Hank said.

“It all comes from getting the tea treatment too late in life, as Lorena can tell you.”

The other elder, a tiny red-haired woman, flicked her cigarette butt onto the grass. “Yes, there’s that. And y’know, smoking doesn’t help you either. But I do stick to Ana’s menu.”

“How is the Correction going?” Hank said.

Deborah pointed to the gatehouse. “By the time the federal troops arrived, the Security Corps had disappeared, leaving the gates open. The fiction about the mine-field was quickly discovered, but the troops didn’t reckon with the MT. Before disassembly, the arc receiver at the Park was set to gather a wide-range, multi-species set of signals. They were compressed into a last burst of transmission to all the MT’s in the region. When the boosted signal was received by transponders in their vicinity, most of the soldiers simply walked away, but a few of them became pilgrims. Margaret and Eddy have some of them in the band going to the Two Trees. You’ll see them at the procession tomorrow morning.”

“Is Irene with them?”

“Why do you think I fell?” Deborah shook her head. “That girl needed a push to stop waiting and make an escape.”

“What about the Board?” Hank said.

“In the dark, as usual—what there is left of it. The Chairman issued proclamations after the

Salvage took up its longhouses and its members dispersed into the bands around the N.R.," Lorena said. She sat on the bench and took off her shoes to rub her feet. "I listened to him on WJKW until the broadcasts stopped. Probably I was the only listener."

"That Irene is a listener! She doesn't miss anything," Deborah said.

Lorena nodded as she lit another cigarette.

"She's just what Marge needs now," Deborah said.

"The sooner the better," Lorena said. "The tumor part of Avery's Correction is also working—if you can call it that. *Brutal* is what I call it."

"How many have passed?" Hank said.

"Well you know about Tom Farley. Since him, about half of the Conservators," Deborah said. "It *is* brutal. You know how Avery insisted that leaders had to booby-trap themselves to avoid the inevitable drag created by the vested interest of their generation."

"The 'price of leadership.' I know," Hank said. "But it was an avoidable extreme. And it was unethical. Not all of those who received the original injections knew about the side-effect."

"Even though the tumor doesn't arrive until your eighties, you're never ready for it," Lorena said. "Dean wasn't ready. And neither was I." She flicked a butt under the bench.

A breeze blew some leaves down from the beech.

Deborah stretched her legs. "If I don't take a walk now, I will go to sleep. Having to pretend that I hobbled behind a walker gave me a little tendonitis. I'll see you both at Council."

The Procession

Like the other eighty bands in the Northern Region, the five hundred people gathered at the mound of the Two Trees had slept overnight on the ground and been awakened before dawn by music. Some of the musicians in the band performed with the birdsongs and music coming from the posts near the Two Trees. Birds in the surrounding woods added their rustling, chittering, and chirping to the mix.

Eddy Cooke went round to each group, tapping sleepers on the shoulder and calling them to the procession. In wide circles around the Two Trees, a few pilgrims were already walking slowly to the music. Hank Randall stood between the trees. He noticed Irene sitting with her back against a stone outcrop as she watched the group from a distance. When everyone had joined the procession, he began the litany of the ritual.

Leader: “Everything perished.
Now the world is gone.”

The People: “Why do I still live?”

Leader: “Shall I embrace it—
Earth, the Ark?”

The People: “None, without All, lives.”

Leader: “Skin quilting Earth, we,
Bits of all in each,”

The People: “We suffice, refill”

Leader: “Emptiness, grieving,
Needs, with worship songs,”

The People: “And Objects ours, not creeds’.”

Leader: “Ignorance lost us
All the world we knew.”

The People: “Wisdom restores us,
Each to each, anew.”

* * *

After the litany was repeated twice, the group continued circling the mound to the processional music until dawn; then the pair of quaking aspens that Hank had brought to this spot from Santa Fe caught the light. As the mound turned fully toward the sun, the joined crowns of the trees blazed white, the wind rippling through their flickering green-silver leaves with a soft brushing sound.

Hank recited the closing words of the procession.

Leader: “As this crown of leaves is made from two,
So are we each made from many.”

The People: “And none survives without all.”

Leader: “As the many leaves all face the sun,
So may we face our lives.”

The People: “And turn from wanting what we do not need.”

Together: “And live by loving, not by creed,
And love by inquiry and skill
And fearless wonder, not blind will.”

Leader: “Now let us remember the partners who have passed,
Especially Tom Farley, who gave these words,
And all protectors and conservators
Of the First Salvage, whose work is done.

Together: “Now our new partnership’s begun.
What is you in us we remember.
What is you in us we unite,”

Leader: “So may we, like this double-crown, grow bright,
Listening to winds, leaves, birds and even stone
Tell us their stories, as needful as our own.”

Together: “AMEN.”

* * *

People went in all directions after the procession. The night before, the farmers in the band had set up tables in a circle around the mound. Children ran to the tables, where huge pots of oatmeal, bowls of fruit, and boiled eggs were uncovered by the band’s cooks. Several musicians continued playing as families spread their blankets on the damp ground. A few of the engineers began to disassemble the projection pole to service the solar chlorocells. Several of the mural painters, carrying muffins in one hand and a mural section in the other, began to connect their panels for the mid-day showing. Older members of the band sat down together at the tables and talked over fresh pots of coffee. Some of the young men in federal or Security Corps uniforms were given newcomer packets and seated with teachers, who passed around the pipe. Hank saw that Irene still sat against the outcrop.

“Hello, Irene,” he said.

“Hello, Miles—or are you Miles?”

“Miles Henson is finished. I’m back to being Hank Randall. I’ll tell you the story some time, or maybe write it down. What do you think of the Salvage now?”

Irene stretched and stood. “I can’t decide what to think. Sometimes these people look like deluded true-believers. Other times, well. They seem to have found a simple, enlightened way of life that disturbs the habitat as little as necessary.”

“A way of life you wrote about when you said that Lewis and Clark missed the opportunity to discover how the mind of a people could conform to the land. How did you put it? ‘If they had been less interested in acquisition—”

“‘Than in exploration,” she said. “listened to the First People, and honored their understanding, our subsequent history might have been less violent, destructive, and domineering, both here and abroad.”

“Yes,” Hank said. “And I know that you and Vicky were appalled at Avery Crawley’s manipulations, but I’d like for you to consider something. Just as Lewis and Clark were on the cusp of a choice and went the wrong way, so was Avery. But the choice *he* made, whatever you think about it, led to these people.” Hank pointed to the group, now spread over the mound on hundreds of blankets, eating breakfast and engaged in lively discussions.

Irene slowly nodded.

“And you are a part of it,” he said. “That’s why the Supreme Prophet brought you back to Fairall.”

“Why, I came back on my own!” Irene said. “And up to now, I’ve been escaping on my own.”

“Perhaps,” Hank said. “But you had many helpers, like me, Wayne, Lorena, and Deborah. You’ll see all of them later today.”

“But I thought—”

Hank nodded. “You thought some of them were dead. You’ll have many surprises. But unfortunately, you won’t be able to see the Supreme Prophet again. Margaret Crawley Farley passed away shortly after talking with you.”

“I never talked with such a person!”

Hank smiled. “She was the old woman who walked with you—“

“And disappeared,” Irene said.

“She couldn’t make the walk, so she came by projection. She had to see you to know that you

were the one to receive this.” He handed her a small, metal cylinder.

Irene frowned and started to give it back.

“No, dear. It’s yours. It’s the entire primary source for the history you will write—“

“The history?”

“The history of the Salvage. Who else could better write it? We die and become fiction. Better to have a critical historian write our story than one of us.” He swept his arm over the crowd. “You always watch from a distance. You always listen. You record everything. Whatever fictions you make of us will at least be honest. You will give our story the Correction it needs.”

Hank took off the white robe he had worn for the ceremony and smiled as the musicians played one of George Smeltzer’s tunes, a setting of a hymn for oboes and mockingbird. Irene’s perplexed expression reminded him of Vicky—and of Sheila.

“Bits of all of us in each of us,” he said, touching her shoulder and turning to walk back to the mound.

“Where are you going?” Irene said.

“To take a nap.”

THE END

Editor's Note

As Avery Crawley used to say, the problem with any kind of authority is that after it has served its purpose you still believe in it, like other fictions of history. Shortly after I completed this compilation, Dr. Randall sent me a position statement. Even though it is the kind of authoritative document that might be used to justify some wayward doctrine, I include it here. As a footnote to fiction, it cannot do much harm, and if I don't add it, he will probably add it himself to any future edition of this book he is asked to revise.

—I.B., 155 RRT

Statement of the Ten Elders

The Restoration will be complete when there exists a People who are convinced that the kingdom is now; who have an apocalyptic vision for themselves and their progeny; who are focused on creative engagement with life-fostering concerns; who are curious, joyful, productive, and as fully aware of their transience and the transience of the Earth as are other living things.

The Creation, as once even E.O. Wilson called it, has been signaling us for generations. In fact, the Creation has groaned about us for millennia. The People will finally feel the doom.

Those who feel the doom are not frozen with fear at the prospect of annihilation but are determined to follow their divine paths of exploration and inquiry as creatures who pray without ceasing, that is, who live out their lives doing what they are suited to do, aligning themselves with reality, accepting the Given with joy, and reminding themselves of these intentions through generous forms of worship, continually resetting their Object of devotion as their understanding and ignorance grow.

Every moment, every creature walks a tightrope over the jaws of oblivion. Soon enough, we all slip. Keeping living beings on this rope requires all sorts of evolved solutions, such as the regulatory genes for making eyes, appendages—and thoughts about being human. Such solutions were singular achievements from which all diversity subsequently arose, but they did not arise indiscriminately.

They were set apart—holy, powerful, not to be squandered but conserved. Their values conserved them—their abilities to keep living beings on that tightrope. Like every creature, every song, every star, and every story, these solutions also will end. All of it will come to nothing. But perhaps a People who remain vitally aware of the vision that all things will wholly pass away will be vigilant and aligned to life-fostering concerns rather than to their appetites. Perhaps they will, in the old words, avoid deadly sins—especially the sins of reprisal, exaggeration, violence, and indulgence.

This People may even transform nothing into something. It has been done before. Energy is possibility. Perhaps the People will avoid the old errors not out of fear but out of intense awareness of the importance of their unique flesh and unbounded compassion for others—all the others, human and nonhuman, whose frames of reference they have entered in their explorations. All the saints, none of them truly dead, meet us as partners in our studios, where they live in different forms, such as ideas, words, inventions, works of imagination, and memories of devoted love.

Perhaps we in Fairall gave the human genome a nudge. Perhaps the genetic material of this People is now ready to sweep through the Earth. Perhaps there is time for humans to turn toward the light. All we know is that such vital awareness can no longer be left only to the painters, poets, musicians, visionaries, natural scientists, and all the other makers. Everyone must now enter new frames of reference with renewed understandings and empathy. All are part of the procession. The time has come to realize that all people are artists. All must have studios in which to find their way, because their way is our way. Our well being is entangled with the well being of all others.

Here in Fairall, for a short time, a mere century, we have told and sung the story, performed it, painted it, invented it. This story is of a divine path open to all, necessary to all, because none survives without all.

Prepared by H.R., 154 RRT

Two depositions

The full texts of Farley's poem, *The Profit of Doom* and of Brooks's poem, *Finding a Purchase*, follow. See marginalnotesinwordsandmusic.org, for ancillary materials, including musical works..

—I.B., ., 155 RRT

THE PROFIT OF DOOM

By

Tom Farley

In memoriam William Stanley

Fellow student, runner, and friend from Revere, PA.

The *Profit of Doom* was begun by Richard L. Rose in 1967 and privately printed in 1990 at the print shop of the *Fauquier Democrat* in Warrenton, VA, by Alan Poe.. An earlier version, *Poems and Passages*, was copyrighted on 7/21/81 as TXU 74-256.. This version does not include the Randall Notes.

“All things that are on earth shall wholly pass away...”

—William Cullen Bryant

“The Love of God”

(from the Provençal of Bernard Rascas)

PROLOGUE

If cities sank beneath the sea
And we retreated inland,
Exchanging nation for our regions,
States for towns, we'd come to Fairall.

Like Jerusalem or Eden,
Fairall's a condition—
A pivot-place to dig in heels
When facing a surprised dragon.

When old men have been called to save
They've come from such a place.
From such a center, Arks are launched
Like buoys or satellites or doves.

Before they know what they are saving
From or For (or ask),
Old men signal where they are,
Foreseeing an uncertain journey.

While youth makes good its escape,
Age blazes its return.
So it was with Avery Crawley,
Called from snipping chromosomes.

Once, at his bench in Bethesda
He saw things differently.
From centers that surround—from cells—
A beacon signaled him, he says.

“In a simple cell division
Captured by a vision:
On one page my life completed
Embracing dragons I defeated.”

All that he was he left behind.
(Logic too, it would seem—
For the logic of a dream.)
A vision swallowed up his life.

But he left a path to follow,
The pattern of the whole
Eternal circle of return—

Probing past speech to find speech.

Unlike cloud busters, healers, quacks,

Spoon benders, fortune tellers,

Crawley neither sought true belief

Nor sold orgone, ankhs or angst.

He seemed amused by those who did.

Sometimes he'd lift his ball cap,

Look up at you with cloudy eyes

And tell his vision like a wisecrack.

“All things on earth shall pass away,” he'd say.

“Of course, many should!

Your wastes are curdling in the sea;

They seep from aquifers and drains.

“They tangle fur and beaks and brains,

Yet you feel none of this

Your middens fill with goods unsold,

Your streets with sleepers in the cold.

“All things on earth shall pass away

And none of you will notice—
Feelings and dreamings die together
While you eat seed corn in warm weather.”

From all reports, he left the city
Years before the floods,
Taking his family back to Fairall,
And became a trash collector.

* * *

But there was more: Some followed him.
Saving and preservation
Of all kinds became their mission.
The Salvage operation grew.

Rectortown, the county seat,
Annexed Fairall, grew rich
And made Crawley Supreme Prophet
Of its Board of Faith and Practice.

Amused by the superstition
That transformed politics
Into municipal religion,

He used his title to advantage.

Warning of future floods far worse

Than those they had escaped,

He built a Center for the homeless,

Funded through his weather curse.

“When I once wrote the rationales

For research grant proposals,

A storm—or even cloud—for ally

Would have outweighed facts and logic.

“Angels,” he quipped, “can do the trick.”

Recently he spoke

At Foxglove Center by the Lake.

He makes you think of a carnie.

Wearing a cap, chewing a straw,

He leaned on a stick

As if leaning on the brake

Of a steam-driven carousel.

Only he could see it turning

And hear the tune change:

So it was when he spoke you wondered

How thoughts were getting on and off.

“Will has left me—he’ll return

When he learns for himself

That accidents should be embraced,

Held like an angel till they bless.

“Three points give you a fixed sighting:

A fourth a new dimension:

Willy, Jim, Eddy I hold to—

And Margie will come soon—or has she?”

His notion that an accident

Involving his grandson

Would set off the Final Flood

Drove his son Will from Fairall.

I couldn’t get Will when I called.

Ida, his wife, answered

But her father took the phone—

Charles Siebert, Avery’s fishing buddy.

He rambled on about his illness,
How he'd lost his arm,
Where muskies used to be—
Saying nothing, as intended.

Crawley's picture of events
Is given in a memoir
Written by his clerk at Salvage
Who fails, I think, in prose and verse.

But Crawley said to read it through
As you would watch Walendas
Fly from hand to hand, catch breath
And hold—till they fling up their arms.

I have my doubts. The stops and starts,
The jarring change of tunes,
Many voices but all the same:
It is Crawley through and through.

Read it as you read Isaiah

Or old love letters

Or as you listen to a fugue

Whose figure centers and surrounds.

But not if your page is beeping—

Then let these pages be!

Such as it is, this is the plot.

A trend may change, shares change hands,

A deal fall through—If you must read

See Christie for a plot,

Dickens' people, Bellow's thought;

For linking prose and verse, read Faust,

Joyce or Williams—read an Edda

How giants tricked great Thor

Who failed to test a dream of weakness

Too real to be unbelieved.

Characters

The Crawley Family

Avery and Margaret

Will, their son, married to **Ida** Siebert

Their children: **Willy** and **Margie**

The Siebert Family

Charlie and **Barbara**, his second wife

Jimmy, Barbara's son from a previous marriage

Ida, Charlie's daughter from his marriage to May Strawbridge

Others

Giles, Willy's friend

Emma Strawbridge, Margaret's sister

Eddy Cooke, Jimmy's friend

Leah Cooke Washington, Eddy's aunt

Tom Farley and **Cicero** Brown, Avery's employees at the Salvage

Sally Brown, Cicero's wife

Patton Long, oysterman

Armand Hinklin, Chairman of the Board of Faith and Practice

Lyman Jencks, another Board member

Jeff Jencks, his son (married secretly and briefly to Margie C.)

Two soldiers

Chairman Greaves, former Board Chairman

Poets

like so many leaves
are all of them
crackling with desire
to be consumed—
but by a cupped ear
in perfect stillness.

Siebert Farm

Eddy woke with a start, a bitter taste in his mouth.

He lay under covers without moving

Listening to the farm house creak

As the winds tried to shove it down the hill;

Dreaming of the silo fire

When he'd stopped them going on top with a hose—

A black kid they tried to shove aside—

The fire roaring in the silo

Like the winds roaring around the house.

After that he was good enough

To sleep in Jimmy's room

And Barbara let them be.

The bitter taste was stronger.

He heard Jimmy turning in his sleep.

She left them tinkering in the wash-house.

She left them alone.

When he came home from pumping gas at the Co-op

He'd leave his check with Leah,

Who kept old Charlie in town,

And walk back to the farm

With a loping stride, thin as a cipher

No one cared to read—
But he saved the farm from fire.
The damper clinked inside the stove
As wind whirled down the chimney.
Sparks spat out as he opened up the door.
He looked out the bathroom window.
A mountainous bulb of collapsing cloud
Towered over the silos
As it swept to the horizon.
The striped clouds made him think of disking;
They moved toward dawn
And some preparation—
Alternating dark and light.

Charlie Siebert

All things on earth shall wholly
pass away like narrow smoke
rising from couch grass
char, as a baler ranks
up windrows, curls up
and throws hay in determinant array,

parceling a field's array
of red-top, musk—tied wholly
back as twine flies up—
and chicories. Blue smoke
over the straight ranks
wavered, marking where hay was made from grass.

“Auger won't feed the grass,”
he said, seeing its array
of uncertain ranks
behind him; then, wholly
on his own, in smoke
besides, got down, got under and looked up.

He felt the roller, reached up
and saw it stuck on caught grass,
saw a little smoke,
and heard the gear array
swing down and wholly
take his arm.

These lines make uneven ranks—
not, as spectral lines one ranks,
or moth-wing measured close up:
precise; not wholly,
as mallard-sheen or grass,
a regular array,
like on like—but figures seen in smoke.

None retrieves the waves of smoke:
hurried, like waves of armed ranks
in serried array;
set, as leaves beveled up
on frieze of swaying grass;
complete, as ants, able-bodied, wholly
certain of their ranks, wholly
intent to pivot, filing through the grass;

drifting, like variable words in time.

All disappears in disarray—

yet: even smoke recurves when curling up.

Tom and his Censor

Were my plump Censor leaner
And my memory more ample
I would not beg the miser past
For a morsel of example.

On my want my Censor feeds
To make it keener;
Snaps the petal, sucks the bast
And demands greener.

Fleet memory tries to browse
Behind the moment's lead,
But lives in a perpetual fast—
As winters summers need.

Two sniffs about my range
Two roving appetites arouse—
Each hoping for the smell to last:
Such dwelling love—not time—allows.

Trailer Park

Margie was free to look out the car window

At the rolling banks of clouds—

Her brown curly hair blew in all directions—

Jeff never looked at her—

Driving so fast he nearly smashed head-on

into a collision—What had happened?-

Was she remembering or seeing?-

Maybe Jeff couldn't see it—She wanted out—

Was that her mother on the road?-

Why were they all standing by the car?-

Jeff wouldn't stop for anything—

She was free to look out the window

At the churning clouds—

The taste in her mouth bitter, like aspirin.

Jeff pulled his fatigue cap over his eyes.

If he saw Willy lying on the road he didn't show it,

His black eyes like a rat's eyes.

He drove around it.

Margie pulled at the covers to make him stop.

He wanted her to get out—

Go to the trailer—

He had to go back to camp—

Maneuvers, he said.

He didn't move toward her

He waited in the dark

Black eyes, a long chin and nose—

How had she ever let him touch her?

Now she was free to stay —

Stay in the trailer till the baby was born—

Free—Free of him.

She pulled the covers closer.

She pulled at the seat to get him to stop—

Twisting the sheets—

She awoke in the trailer,

Her chest too tight to breathe.

She leaned against the sink.

Black eyes without whites—

A rat's eyes—it didn't matter—

Willy on the road—it didn't matter—

She sank back to the bed.

She was free.

The Place in Town

“A two room place with furnishings,”

The ready husband said.

Up to a small efficiency

The aged Lessor led.

“The others left their things behind.

Distrained them for the rent—

They left no hold, no payment—

No word where they went.”

Thiraloo, thiralay

Three gone thiralay.

“Here’s your two bedrooms. There’s the bath.

The kitchen’s rather small

But you have everything you need—

A dishwasher, disposal,

“Air conditioner for the heat

And on every floor

There’s a washroom and a chute

To the incinerator.

“About these things—will you keep them?

Whatever you want to do.

I think I’ve waited long enough

For them to come through.”

Thirali, thiraloo

Come three, come throo

Gables rising end to end

And chimneys stack to stack

A pantiled chain of vertices

Making a spiny back

Were all the young wife could see

Leaning on her balcony,

Twisting a tiny braid she’d found.

She turned and came in sadly.

Come three, come three

Come thiralee.

“See this, a child’s fine hair I found—

Woven in a braid—

Here, without fingerprints

Or place a child has played.”

Her husband laughed, “Our absent hosts—
They left their things behind.
A bright blue eye or finger bone
Is next what you will find.”

 Come three, thiraili

 Lully, thirali.

And Margie gazed across the road
And heard the distant storm
And felt her baby quickening
And the hairs rise on her arm.

 Come two, come thiraloo

 Lully, thira too.

She ran into the streaming rain.
The rat-faced man behind
Called, “Margie, Come back! We can talk!”
She paid him never mind.

She raced blind to the subway—
Trailer and high rise,

Past and future hopes, behind,

And rat's kiss and rat's eyes.

 Come one, but two, come thiraloo

 Lully, thiraloo.

Piecing messages

Going from bedroom to kitchen

One only guesses where the ledge has given.

Fractures creep by me, craters crumble in

As might a crust one snips along a tin.

Seated at my table

Amid stars, I slice a sinewy syllable.

Discovering this skin a vast disguise,

I peek out through a thousand fanning eyes.

I look across the room

At past stars tunneling to doom.

I line and guide the knap that splits

And join the images a scratch commits.

One needs the stunning skill

To flake off hours and piece in messages;

One needs the nerve, the passion and the will

To fraction breath, to extract images.

Quickening

All things on earth shall wholly pass away—
as grazing aphids from the milkweed green,
or obsidian beetles in the dark,
ten-legged lines from ever-fingering touch,
or icon from belief, or firefly swim
of stars through leaves from awe, or hope, or love.

Men in their shallow grids, worn tracks of love,
slick chutes and passages for get-away,
insulary housings, marked lanes to swim,
marked meadows to enjoy, and lawns for green,
reach out and feel the cool degrading touch;
look in, through a chink, at the seething dark.

Suddenly I woke. The trailer was dark,
the windows silver.

“Again test this love—
again feel her move. Another soft touch.
Movement—sweet movement!—makes me turn away.
Move, baby! For this the world’s green.
Its breath swims clouds: like dark humped whales they swim.”

Charlie once mentioned how he'd like to swim
again in the north bay. "It's not yet dark,"
he said; then, with "All spring wood isn't green,"
started the story on himself in love
again—not Barbara—but it got away.
I laughed. With time between us, both could touch.

"Pick any fruits. These only, do not touch."
Transparent as Euphrates where we swim,
perfect as a lens, never hid away,
like a gibbous moon on one side of dark
that quivers in dreams—was Eden for love?
That crystal fruit more food than all the green?

Alike the garden, choked with strangling green,
the trailer park, the slow disuse of touch,
crass love of gain, ungainly games of love,
the rippling messages sent out to swim
into our care-full day and sheltered dark:
"All things on earth shall wholly pass away."

*All that we touch we know and truly love
and swim our hopes upon into the dark.*

Still green, we hold what we must cast away.

Jimmy

He was in class when he heard about Willy—

Prophetic Products: Marketing and Distribution:

How to make faith-seals that are binding,

Love-locks that give maximum return,

Prayer pellets for Faith Industries.

His head was pounding. He stumbled

To the Exit, hit the bar

And ran down the hill

The alarm buzzing behind him.

He was the only one still in school—

Eddy dropped out, Willy graduated,

Margie was going with Jeff Jencks.

His chest burned. He slowed down,

Trotting toward the woods

Behind Jencks' house.

They had always been together

But the four of them hadn't even been fishing

Since the old man's accident.

Somehow they were still together—

Somehow —but what about Willy?

He couldn't remember.

Why couldn't he remember?

He leaned against an old gray beech
And closed his eyes.

The five of them were out on the lake,
He and Eddy astern with the old motor,
Willy hanging over the bow dragging a dip-net.
Willy was tiny and wiry as a spider,
Older than him but smaller than Margie,
With flat hair, a flat forehead
And a flat-footed way of running cross-country
Mile after mile, never tiring—hardly breathing.
Margie and Charlie rowed together,
Their heads together.
The others couldn't hear what they were saying.
Mist obscured the shoreline.

He opened his eyes and looked up
Through the twisting, knobby branches
At clouds racing and tumbling over each other.
The trees rustled and he spread a thousand fingertips outward
Touching and touched—
He pushed away from the tree and ran toward the house:
Lyman Jencks' brown fieldstone

With Barbara's car in front.

Where they were, whether even still rowing

In the right direction

He and Eddy couldn't tell.

Eddy had drawn his blue stocking cap over his ears

And pulled up his collar,

His black face and wide eyes blending with the mist.

When he started the car the radio came on.

It was the dry, nasal chanting of Lyman Jencks

From the daily rally downtown

Rising and falling over Barbara's organ playing.

Again tonight she would bring Jencks home for dinner:

Jencks and his snout-faced son.

He and Lyman Jencks would stare at the floor

While Jeff talked about himself and Margie—

Mostly himself—in his father's keening voice.

"Faith," Lyman was softly urging, whispering,

"Increases wisdom. Faith

Increases knowledge of these last days.

Don't believe the broadcasts from the outer regions.

They tell you there's a chance of cold, a chance of rain—

That disasters occur by chance!

But chance DOES NOT EXIST! There is no chance

In the PLAN for these days.

'Chance' is a flaw in faith.

They do not live by Visions-

Floodings do not sweep over us by chance.

They are out of faith”

Jimmy thought of a whining chain-saw caught on a stump.

“When you increase your faith offerings

To the Board of Faith and Practice

You increase our benevolences to those in need.

You support our study of these last days.

You seal yourself and your loved ones against judgment.

Resist the outer sympathizers.

They deny prophecy and disobey Board rulings.

Who can doubt the visions of Chairman Hinklin

Or Supreme Prophet Crawley?

The old coastlands were faithless

While we were steadfast at the center of the storm.

But we must grow in faith—Only this week

Our seekers in the Apocalogeny Division of Foxglove Center
Have received approval from the Board
To renew their grant to uncover angelic messages
Hidden in these storms around us—messages to the faithful.
Messages from the watchers and holy ones—”

Jimmy stopped the car at the Co-op.
They were surrounded by fog—almost suspended
Charlie was talking to Margie.
Willy was still looking over the bow.

Eddy was pumping gas and loading fencing on a pick-up.
His long arms stuck out several inches beyond the sleeves
Of one of Jimmy’s old checked shirts.

“Eddy, you get off work and come with me to Fairall?”

“Past Checkpoint? Why you go there?”

“Got to see Avery Crawley.”

“Prophet? Margie’s grandpa?”

“Yeah. Look—I don’t feel right. Something’s happening.

I heard Willy—”

“I know they won’t let me. Semi to unload. Hey!”

Jimmy turned and ran back to the car

Spun it into reverse and raced out of the lot.

“Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain—”

There was no way to turn it off—

No other channels for years.

“Our young men shall see visions

Our old men dream dreams—”

The old man knew something about the four of them.

He’d looked astern at Eddy and him.

“You will be all right as long as you stay together,” he said.

“Avery meant only to protect you and the rest of us.

Now I’m sure. It brought you four together

And it keeps you together. You will never really be lost.”

Suddenly Willy looked up from the bow.

“We’re not lost, Charlie.

The bank is just ahead. I see it in the water.”

He looked up. The bow of a huge ship

Loomed above them—they would be swamped!

Then he saw the fire on the shore

And the ship sitting on a high bluff,

The Ark of Crawley’s Salvage Yard.

Barbara and Ida kneeled by the fire.

Will paced the dock till Eddy reached out for the chain.

Somehow he had driven off the road

South of town near Checkpoint.

They weren't together any more;

Margie was even going with that snout-face Jencks.

Somehow they were together.

There would be questions but the car had Barbara's pass.

"Registration and license."

Jimmy looked up.

"You going to Checkpoint?" The Security cop looked at the pass.

"Yessir"

"You see that you stay on the highway.

Security cordon against outer sympathizers on the side roads. Live in faith."

He walked back to his cruiser.

Embrace All Accidents

Shall all things coiled on the shaft of the world
hurled listing toward rarer spaces
racing despair and dispersion
run out like a yanked top-string—
dangling—shall living pass away?
Weigh the ancient matters:
Manners of form, fit and inclusion.
None now chooses rightly: No, not one.

Egg, sphere and ellipse were forms of motions.

Such notions of our path, center, bounds,
life-bonds and play come to enclose,
as rose widens, from within:
then in rosette to orbit us.

Compose thus: Mark events
and intents. Be full of all movements
and arguments. Embrace all accidents.

Willy Crawley

1

Ida Crawley was looking out into her rain-soaked garden

Off the East-West highway in Hartley.

Will studied a training manual before going to work.

This is the rain this is

This rain rain rains

Today when it rains

Whenever it rains

Whenever

I want to keep the garden .up

it always rains.

I say wherever I was-

I mean, it didn't matter where I was

I could always learn

if I started right off

at the beginning—

If I could—

The wet cartons and wrappers

people throw into the garden from the highway

—Willy, don't run on the highway.

—Will, we're too close to the highway for Willy.

—Ida, it's all right. Willy can use his head.

I learned physics from a book.

I knew how to understand it.

What it takes is—

Wanting to know, Willy.

Wanting to know—see, Willy?

Why? You're always, Willy—

Where are you going?

—Margie, come with me.

I'm going into the woods

for orchids and morels.

Only look only—

Just look—

They cry, they cry

when they are pulled away—

wrenched, rooted out, Margie.

—Wait, Willy! Wait!

“Wake up, Margie. It's eight o'clock.”

“What time is it, Ma?”

“Eight o’clock, Willy.”

Morning is it time

Why did he say two weeks?

Some time I want to go

I know I could take it on

If it wouldn’t rain—

if he would give me time.

Whenever I want to

I mean, I could always learn

clean up in the garden

if I had time

whenever it rains

and could start from the beginning

“A freight train jumped its track at four this morning

Outside Bakerfield, injuring seven

According to site examiners from Foxglove.

An examination team has been studying

The significance of the damage and injuries

Since seven o’clock this morning.”

—Bakerfield is in the outer regions, Mama.

Too far away; Hartley’s here—

—They give their workers shares

Like at the Salvage

Your father Avery would sooner walk

To Bakerfield than work for Jencks.

— Avery has no right!

We went to Rectortown to get away.

No right at all!

Not after what he did to our children.

Maybe I have a real chance in Hartley.

If I decide to go, I'll just go—

That's all.

“Margie. Margie!”

“All right. All right! (All right, Jeff, I'll come.

But they will figure it out

If we always come together.

But I'll come this time—

No, we can't stay!

I'll just go with you,

That's all.)

“Margie, why are you always on the phone?”

“I am not! You're on it more than me.”

“Margie, that's no way to talk.”

“It sure isn't!”

“Shame on you, talking to your mother that way!”

They're bickering.
Why do they always bicker
when I'm trying to think
what I can do.
What I can do,
I guess,
is start from the beginning.
I can pick it up.
Didn't I rewire the whole house
for a hundred amps on my own?
I did it, Willy.
Willy, it's doing it
that will make you learn.

"Ida?"

"She's on the phone, Pop."

"Willy, you remember Timmy Baker?"

Worked a while at the Bakerfield mill—

Had a red mustache?"

"He was in your band, wasn't he, Pop?"

"Yes, Willy. Yes. That's right."

If he would stop talking to Willy,

If Willy would stop listening to him,

I could ask him—first—
She always wants me to explain.
She never lets me explain. If Willy
If Willy would just stop
Just stop!

“Will, Greta’s in the hospital. They took her yesterday.”

“What happened?”

“She just collapsed.

She stopped breathing and just collapsed.

I told her she was pale.

So did Mildred. She should have known.”

“Ida, you can’t look out for everybody.”

I told her. Didn’t I say.

Didn’t I say?

I felt her forehead.

It was cool and wet.

—Go home at noon today, Greta.

—Oh, Ida. I will be all right.

Didn’t I say.

“Pop, could—I would like to go to Morry’s tonight.”

“In Rectortown again?”

How will you get there, Margie?"

"Jeff Jencks will pick me up."

"Oh. Well tell your mother."

"Doesn't he play football, Margie?"

"Yes, he plays football, Willy.

Yes, he does play football."

What does he know? Oh why bother!

Damn. Where is that damn brush?

Why bother.

"When is the meet, Willy?"

"It's at three, Pop.

But I'll be leaving at eight thirty.

There are some places I want to go."

"Oh Willy. Can't you stay for lunch?

I bought a chicken yesterday.

Can't you stay for lunch?"

"Ma, I told Giles I was coming.

He said we'd have something there."

"Oh Willy, you're always leaving."

"I'll be back after the meet, Ma. You know."

"Let him go, Ida.

We can have the chicken tonight.”

I have to go now, Ma.

I’ll be back tonight. Goodbye, now.”

“Bye bye, Willy. You’re a good boy.

I don’t want no better.”

“Will you take the truck, son?

Get some oil, will you?”

“O.K., Pop. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Willy.”

“Goodbye, Margie.”

“Goodbye.”

“Look, it’s stopped raining.”

2

The clouds lift from the sun

Like tapered valves

From a blister pearl.

I like it when the ground is warm.

Willy was running across the field.

When the ground is warm—

These—

Willy’s wild flowers,

He keeps here
From the fire in the woods—
What—
What was it? I can't think.
I am so tired.
If Willy hadn't left so soon.

 Willy was looking at the garden—
Standing a long time, looking
Tying strings around these beans.

 Along the road
 Trees sway
 As if in a deliberate dance

Yesterday I meant to pick these up
I was so tired of
reaching down
into the bin
all yesterday.

 All of these woods
 as in spider's dream
 (slung asleep in threads)

weave, sway, turn—
twice times twice twice—
turn, touch in time
the tissue sky.

I meant Willy to tell—
Would he be leaving soon.

Trees sprinkling themselves—
trees graceful, slow
in a nodding, nudging game,
falling away with a slow dance.
Dance away, dance away—Dancing away.

“Giles.”

“Willy. You ready for the meet?”

“I guess. It’s just a warm-up anyway.”

“Does Doyle still talk about that All-Regions marathon?”

“He says he knows I can do it

After another season—but I don’t know.”

“You’re bound to be on top this year.

There’s no one in Regions can beat you.”

“Shunk has good times.”

“Cramer beat him in the mile last year.”

“Well, we’ll see. What did you find?”

“These.”

“*Ambystoma.*”

Soft inside must be
these slime nets dangling brown
from smooth green stones—
pushed and crushed between
pestle pebbles—
floated off
as gluey basket
of loose wool—
these floating
pin-eyed eggs,
pinched off, slight-sealed
and cubicled in foam,
gel-bound in bubble-skinned fly-foam.

“I found them under the covered bridge.”

3

QUALITY CONTROL IN PAPER PROCESSING

*Quality control is assuring
control over the overall quality
of our product from the thermo-mechanical raw processing
at the mill through production
of all grains
and grades of paper.*

This manual is designed

To provide

Essential information

To our managers and trainees

Concerning the measurement

And analysis This manual

Is designed to provide assuring

Control over the overall quality

Of our manager trainees

Assuring

Control over our product

This manual

Is designed to assure control.

“Giles, I’m stopping for oil.”

“O.K. , Willy.”

Greta never ties her stitches off.

Sometimes I don’t want to.

Sometimes I am so tired.

The skylights are so high.

I like to sew by a window, though.

It is so dark inside sometimes.

I get so tired.

Timmy said I had a good ear.

Only nineteen.

They let me in the band.

We could have done something

If he hadn’t lost his job.

—The Hartley mill will take me, Ida.

It’s night work.

Two more pellets an hour.

—Oh good, Will.

Willy and I will be right here,
And Margie likes Rectortown.
Dad will let us stay in the apartment
—No, Ida.
No longer than we have to.
We'll all go to Hartley.

Willy will be going back another year.
He could have stayed for lunch.
It's dark again.
It's raining.

If I start at the beginning
I can always—
Willy, you can always take up
where I leave off.
After the scholarship,
I can pay the rest.
I could pay it if—
Willy was running up front
Of all the rest. Willy was—
Control of moisture content is assured—
Assuring—

“Will, it’s raining.”

“Were you in the garden?”

“Yes. I finished cleaning it up.

Oh Will, Willy shouldn’t be driving.

It’s so dark.”

“The truck can hold the road.

Willy’s a good driver.”

“Where’s Margie?”

“She went to Rectortown.

Didn’t she tell you?”

“She never said anything.

Will, I’m worried about Margie.

All these parties—

If that’s what they are.

She’s always out so late.

Willy never stayed out.

And all this talk she’s getting.

She stays in Rectortown more than here.”

“Willy, if it keeps raining like this
the meet will be cancelled.”

“We’d better show up anyway.

You know how Doyle is.

Frank told me Doyle suspended Clark.”

“Clark had it coming.

He was a jack-off.”

“Maybe. He just seemed quiet.

Doyle doesn’t like that.

Only thing he gets from conventions

Is the trophy—

Just so North wins regionals

and he can receive another blessing-voucher from the Board—

He’d suspend me if I wasn’t running cross-country.”

“Look out, Willy! Stop!”

4

“Would you like scrapple, Will? We could have sausage.”

“Scrapple’s fine, Ida. Fine.”

“Is that the book for your new job?”

“Yeah. Dolan gave it me.

They give managers a test.”

“It’s so good your being a manager now, Will.

I’m so proud.”

“Well, I can pick it up.

And then I want you to leave the pants mill.”

“Oh Will, you know

it just gives me something to do

while you and Willy are gone.

I don't mind it.

It helps Willy.”

“I can afford it while he has a scholarship. You know—”

“I'll get it. Willy? Will!”

”“What is it?”

“Willy's had an accident—“

“Now Ma, I'm all right.

The truck was hit at the intersection.

Giles is with me and he's fine too.

We're going to the hospital.”

“Oh Willy, are you all right?”

“We're all fine, Ma.

We're just fine.

We're just going over to the hospital.”

“Oh Willy, don't die!”

“I'm not going to die, Ma.

I'm not going to die.

We're all right.”

“Willy, where will you be?”

“We'll be at the hospital, Pop.

We can make it back all right.”

“No, you stay there.

We’ll be right over.

You stay there, Willy.

Willy?”

“Mr. Crawley? This is Giles.

Willy just fell down, Mr. Crawley.

He’s bleeding from his ear.

I can’t talk now.”

5

“Emma’s coming up from Fairall. She called.”

“I have off till Friday, Dolan said.”

“Your mother will be by at six.”

“Ida, you should lie down.”

“It doesn’t matter, Will.”

“You need to sleep. You—”

“No. Don’t worry about me. No, Will.”

—No, Emma. I don’t want to be

A nurse no more.

I am too old to start now anyway

But you've made a good one.

You kept at it.

—I guess I'd know.

What does it look like?

Yeah, they're in the bench.

They'll fit, I think.

—Oh Margie, you wouldn't want to

You wouldn't want to be a nurse.

They have to go to school so long—

—Wilson? Wilson. Dolan said

You take the press for me

Till Friday—He's up front. My—

My boy Willy was in an accident.

He's dead.

—Mrs. Crawley, you don't have to wait

We have room. You can stay here.

—Oh Ida, we're so sorry.

—We have room.

Room.

*The normal resistance to heat
is dependent upon the coarseness of
fiber. Under normal circumstances
Normally Willy
Would have only your boy
Willy would have only
Suffered a concussion, Mr. Crawley.*

“Where is Margie, Will?”

“She was out in the garden when I got back.”

Didn't I say the highway was too wet

Willy shouldn't—

—Willy, don't go now. Willy, don't

Willy

—Fall practice begins next week.

The team will stay in Hinklin Hall.

—Willy, you could stay here

And take the truck to school.

Your Dad says he's going to buy another

When he gets his new job.

—Ma, it's too far to go.

It would be too hard.

—We just want to see you Willy—sometime.

—I can come weekends, Ma—

When we don't have meets.

This is the last year.

—I guess I could, Willy.

You see if Willy could come down

If Willy could come down

I would always

“Oh Will, Willy will never graduate!”

Where was Willy running?

What was running Willy ran.

—Oh Willy's out running again

—If your weren't running all the time

You wouldn't have any shin splints,

You little twerp.

Oh Willy, I—

—Margie, would you get me a glass of milk?

Where was he running? Oh, Willy's out

Running again.

—Go on, Margie. A puffball’s good.

—I don’t want it, Willy.

Where did you find it, anyway?

Take it away!

What is that running—

Who is that—It’s Willy!

That’s my brother!

He’s up front. He’s

Willy he’s

my brother

What was—Oh Willy

What was running when Willy ran?

Marigolds

Marigolds powdery with dew
I take from time and give to you.
Each delves with sweet offering
before the frost sinks down to sting.

Peril in the shifting wind
makes hatchlings hurry to begin—
as seeds once burst their spindle heads
to race the heat and mildew threads.

Our grim seed-bed is overdue.
Only the sedges wedging through—
and moss and crow-foot and self-heal
register their upstart appeal.

With marigolds powdery and new
I set your grave and wait for you—
As flower for seed, as seed for flower.
Hatch—husk—me; memory scour!

Words

Words have done all wrong
and words put nothing right
yet I am choosing words,
driven in the pursuit
as birds to winter warm.

Words have done us harm
and ill our sickness suit
yet I am using words,
angry at the night
as darkness on a lung.

The words heap up like dung
or sudden snow in height.
Yet I am using words,
picking at the cold root
of their late, sad charm.

Words failed even to alarm
when doubts swarmed in to loot.
Yet to abuse words
a listless ear weighed light
I will not go along.

Gray Coals

Turn all occasions

like gray coals in a fire,

with a steady patience

measuring degrees

as a rod is milled to wire,

or as ball one buries

loosely for the crawlers' stir

and rooting's ease,

dwindles till secure.

Fairall

Until he saw the Ark

Jimmy was not sure he had taken the right exit.

He pulled up to the Parts Shop inside the gate.

A red-haired clerk inside didn't notice him—

He was writing in a small notebook.

“Avery Crawley here?” he shouted.

The red-haired clerk stumbled to his feet

Pushed his glasses onto his nose.

“Not today—”

Jimmy didn't wait for more.

He ran back to the car

But instead of leaving the Salvage

Drove uphill toward the Ark,

Towering over roofs, cranes, and piles

Of rubble, bricks, plastic and metal.

A truck pulled in front of him—Barbara!

She glared at him.

“Get in the truck, boy! School called. Told what you done!”

You leave the car here. We're goin' home.

You should be bush-hogging.

You will finish it before supper, too.

And Eddy's not goin' help you.

You think you wan' drop your studies

And devotions and faith

And face away from holy prophecies—

Well then you will just get to try some plain dirt-farming.

And I mean right after school

For the rest of the month.

Don't you give me no look neither!"

Jimmy slumped down in the seat.

He couldn't think of how to say anything.

What had he been doing?

Running from school.

Dreaming he was fishing with the others.

Dreaming he was a tree.

And what about Willy—

She was right, but it didn't matter.

Crawley could tell him.

She'd get her bush-hogging.

But then he'd drive back to Fairall.

A question of waiting

What should I expect to catch

or resurrect

if I sit out this unwatched game

with time to touch and miss my aim?

Should I throw out the line

or wait until the bobbing sign

can dive deeper than I see—

are my chances one in three?

Avery Crawley

Avery was an absent-minded Supreme Prophet.

He stood on the deck of the Ark at sunrise,

His crinkled face and few gray hairs exposed to the wind.

Still, he reasoned, it was a gift, perhaps

To rummage over ninety years

And still find things happening the first time.

Guided by the turning signs around him,

Guided by his Vision—not “significance”.

To live by a Vision called for forgetfulness

Of a kind—for finding events as if for the first time;

Not letting their significance obscure how one had felt.

The sun rose over a pink column of cloud.

To grasp this railing and to watch this cloud

Was to recover and save those feelings—

Standing at this railing with Margaret years ago.

In some way, railing and cloud could be trusted;

They kept his memories, as did Ark and Salvage Yard.

These and his museums and Foxglove Center

Were his vessels for such memories, he smiled.

He’d made preservation the business of the North Region.

The Board had tried to change that

Through their Faith Industries
And subversion of his research at Foxglove.
Their changes came too late. They missed the turn.

As sundials made a tool of shadows
He had made vessels of the darkest and most stubborn
Human behaviors;
As escapements made timing independent of the sun
So he had released his memories
To the care of the messengers around him.
He could come to them
For signs to recall those feelings and memories.
But now his duty was changing.
The tools he'd handled, the animals he'd held
The children he had lifted up—

All these messengers reappeared before him
In their fresh and accidental fullness and insignificance.
Nothing was lost.
He'd cultivated a temporal confusion
That kept his memories untouched.

The Board would have had his pronouncements broadcast
If he had ever made any.

They wanted the significance of events

The true meanings, the reading of the signs.

Crawley refused and Jencks had him watched.

He'd once asked Jencks in the museum at Foxglove

About the DeVick clocks in their collection.

Why that escapement for 300 years?

Copied on all scales, but little modified—

Had it an unapproachable elegance?

Complete, economical, entirely suited to its task,

It had been raised to an ignoble significance.

Like an orrery or armillary sphere

The ceremony of its movements replayed its significance

Until admiration became reverence.

A weight-driven crown gear trivially turning

Against a verge escapement

Prescribed time measurement for three centuries;

So with semiconductors in their time—

Before the plasmid switch;

Such inventions, no less than the paintings

They had saved during the defedding

Or the intricate scribblings

Of the poets Crawley had sponsored

Or the rare species in their vivaria

Were inspirations:

They faithfully extended touch into mechanisms.

Fingers felt the verge and crown catch on an idea.

That was what salvage meant:

Catching such fresh extensions

Of feeling and understanding.

No one who had worked in the Salvage would miss it,

And so stubborn were human beings

That, having once felt and understood about salvage,

They would seek to repeat the experience

Over and over again.

Regardless of their failed significance

(Crawley emphasized the words

But Jencks was not listening)

These inventions deserved preservation and remembering.

Jencks walked away

Leaving Avery looking at the clocks and sundials.

We save them for a different kind of ceremony:

The procession of our explorations.

How did it feel to stretch under imbricate scales

Or to wait expectantly along the kiva's mud-walls

Or to splice wires on a telegraph pole in the rain?

Without such feelings

All the old pernicious divisions would reappear.

Walls had once even divided cities!

Feelings were neither significant nor insignificant.

A museum or a garden was a procession of feelings.

He watched the hovering column of cloud rise

With the pink sunlight behind it.

This vision had a bitter taste—

Like the two before it, like a hickory nut gone bad.

Bitterness is more easily detected —

One part in twenty thousand:

A low threshold prepares one for the worst, perhaps.

And Willy? Willy would be all right.

A bitter substance in his bloodstream

And detected as bitterness was only one messenger-

One of many.

Anyone would understand who knew the ambience of signs

The ambience of messengers.

They are copiously inhaled—angels and menaces alike.

One inhales clouds of such messengers.

It does not do to assign undue significance

To any particular message.

Here—and where didn't he? —He differed with the Board.

They held their breaths.

They would not embrace a menace.

No wrestling with angels or barrow-dragons for them.

They denied accidents

Refused the sometimes corrective corrosion

Of repeated assaults, risked nothing

And, surrounded by a sea of signs,

Thought that signs had to be revealed and hunted down!

They looked for visions

As if for the lost lids to contain despair.

No—he knew that immanence (an admitted analog)

Meant the embrace of accidents and menaces,

The grasping and working-out of feelings.

All roughness and temporal confusion

Were the objects

And faith the incredible invention

With which to work on them.

Without the accidents and messengers

There was no access for faith. No hold.

There remained only the sterile groping for significance.

He leaned over the railing

To watch the Salvage Yard's solar collectors

Slowly begin to track the sun—

Even as he and four others were just now beginning

To track a different sort of energy:

A different message.

He took a small stone blade from his pocket.

Older than he by millennia,

It had once been flaked from a quartz outcrop,

Faithfully selected and shaped

For a use that had perished with its owner.

How significance shifted!

Once significant for its strength and sharpness

Such material was later significant

For the sparks that flashed inside it.

Significance was too inconstant for faith.

He also had roughed out time,

Trying to be faithful to a vision.

His work of preservation

Resulted in a Board of Faith and Practice—

A significant achievement, perhaps.

Margaret told him it would happen.

She always had a better memory.

She did not claim to “cultivate temporal confusion”

As he did—and wouldn’t let him talk about it.

“Avery, you go ON AND ON without let-up,” she said.

Neither would she get out of bed

And drive all the way out to the Salvage

Just because he had awakened before sunrise

With a bitter taste in his mouth.

“People don’t want to hear it,” she said,

Warning him, years ago, not to leave his laboratory work

To go preaching,

Spreading stories of signs and visions,

Floods and preservation.

“That they might believe you
Will go worse for us
Than if you would leave their troubles unexplained.”
She was right, of course.

His apparent success was a Board of Faith and Practice,
The Faith Industries, the Security Corps—
But there was also the Salvage.
As they had stood at the bow-railing years ago
Margaret had made one concession:
“This Salvage may come to something.”
Crawley smiled at the thought
Of what it was coming to
And that of anyone he was best prepared
For what was actually happening now:
His own failure and rise to insignificance.

Anomalies

All things on earth may slowly pass away
from disregard, before the snowline sinks,
the rasps devour, sun bloats or powers decay.

Sun waves, sea lights—all weathers, streams and lakes,
the torrents of May, the year's swerving lights
behind both doors From and To; though one makes

from Monday to Sunday a living, sits
behind a desk all day and even breaks
maybe—odds aren't—the Pattern, wants and gets

the way out under from, even as one speaks,
may not amber sunlight on tablecloth
alter it all?

Because the snow-line sinks
between sunspots, the jet-streamed storms froth;
all weathers change.

From floes to particles,
suns the seventh May or seventeenth
may melt the ice. Being deep, it buckles,
sunders, calves at the margins, casts away

from shores and from all,
southward, trickles away.

Warnings

Some events we elect to ignore—
such as growling under the floor—
but the curious scratch
that scrapes at the latch
may signify something in store.

The time required to amend
elapses before we intend,
and the clattering scratch,
the rasps at the latch—
these surely—these impend?

Presuming to intervene,
one might inquire of a machine;
if escape wears the latch,
if ratchet wheel catch,
one imposes a thought in, between.

Loose coils that winding deserved
a thought has often preserved.
For a pawl is of tin
and old fittings wear thin
but thoughts last if ever they've served.

Fictions

A fiction is best left to grow—
To burst its own impervious seed.
Nor stratify, nor gently sow—
Just scatter the imperial weed.
What it becomes is like a touch
Both feel, yet each unequally—
The giver who would gain too much;
The taker who gives sparingly.

After Bush-hogging

Eddy went over to where the tractor had overturned.

Laid back in red ruts, the ground, now bristling with ice,
showed a swerve's path and end.

He found Jimmy's coat in the ditch, where the tractor lay.

It had just tumbled over and over, landing on its side
the cab drenched with diesel fuel.

Only the floodlight in the front yard was on.

The cars and rescue squad were gone.

They hadn't found Jimmy anywhere.

He buttoned the coat and dropped it in a sack,

turned the light off and looked down the road

to the fat, copper moon, low in the sky

and its tiny companion, a distant star.

No—he'd read it was a planet

tumbling around in space

like those wrigglers they'd found once

in a bucket of rainwater.

He'd poured them into a jar and taken it inside.

One morning they all changed to mosquitoes and flew away.

Barbara never said he'd have to go

but he had gathered up his things before walking into town.

He was walking up Ferry Street
behind the Siebert apartments.
Aunt Leah would be standing at the drain board
when he brought in wood.

“What you be doin’, Eddy,” she said,
“Now Jimmy gone? What we do?
Wish your Mama was here to tell us.
But Eugena lookin’ on, she lookin’ on.
You take that on in to the old man.
He poor but like you to talk to.
His peoples gone now, and now his boy.
But he don’t know.
Feel bad—you know how he be talking.”

The old man called out,
“Come out of the doorway, boy.
It’s raining, ain’t it? I hear a lot.
Sundays I can even hear the service from First Church, across the parking lot.
Sometimes I wonder why I still got my hearing.
Will and Ida never quite believed it—
that it would be allowed with so little else left.”

Eddy pulled back the screen from the fireplace
and began to spread out the coals.

Charlie went on talking.

“And they would go ahead and say what they felt.

But they’re gone. New people up there now.

Say now, boy—

Have you ever known a chicken to steal her nest?

I bet you don’t know what that means.”

Eddy hadn’t known when the old man had first told him.

He was about nine then and couldn’t understand

how or why a chicken would steal her own nest,

but he had heard the story many times since then.

“We’d start finding eggs around the place

but wouldn’t know at first whose they were.

Putting them back in the henhouse wouldn’t break her of it.

You had to coop her up.

I know some who didn’t bother to coop them

even before killing them

but we always cooped them a week before Sunday dinner.

Chicken was more of a delicacy then.

It was my cousins and me had to tie strings to the feet
and hold them while Grandma chopped.

We had to pull those strings and hold them
so the meat wouldn't be bruised.

A chicken cooped like that and kept from jumping around
made good eating, I'll tell you."

* * *

The apartments were far behind him when it began to rain again.

He stopped in an underpass, waiting for the downpour to slacken.

The old man's skin had been loose and scaly on his neck.

He'd said, "Sometimes when I went out into the field,

I could have flushed one of those chickens like a quail.

But if we were far enough out I just left her be.

Course, if she came back, she went into the coop."

Over his legs was a kind of hoop

which lifted the sheets from his feet.

Aunt Leah had come in with his dinner.

A cold wind swept the rain back and forth across the streets.

A flatbed truck, with CRAWLEYS SALVAGE on the door
pulled up beside him.

“Come on, get in,” said the driver. “Where you going?”

“South,” Eddy answered.

“So am I. How far?”

“Don’t know.”

“I see. Well, name’s Cicero Brown.

I’m going back to Fairall.

You going that far?

Here, son—what is it?”

Eddy had begun to shake all over.

He couldn’t stop himself.

He had nowhere to go and it didn’t matter where he went.

No place knew him any more.

Jimmy must be dead.

He pulled at the latch.

Cicero pushed him back hard against the seat.

“You can’t jump out of a truck, boy!

And look at this storm.

Where you want to go?”

Eddy couldn’t answer.

The corners of his mouth drew down.

“Fairall,” he whispered.

Fairall Motor Court

The face of Cicero Brown, like a scrubbed potato
circled by yellow pennants
stared back from the window.

He stared into the wet car lot and its fluttering flags
then he turned around and looked at Eddy,
asleep on the bed, all elbows and knees.

Cicero stayed in the end unit near the ice machine.

Tom Farley owned the motel and charged nothing.

They both worked the day shift at the Salvage.

Old Potato Head the boys called him,
he had a light brown, high-domed forehead and tiny eyes.

Eddy turned over.

He'd curled in one corner of the bed.

Chocolate brown with small features

he looked fifteen, but his hands were large and rough.

He had tried to jump out of the truck again

when Cicero had pulled over.

When Cicero held him, he had looked away.

The rain was pounding on the window.

“Don't you want to go home, boy?”

“Jimmy gone and Aunt Leah can’t keep me.

Nowhere to go,” he said, beginning to cry.

They sat there a while then Cicero pulled back out
onto the highway for Fairall.

Eddy just stared into the rain.

Cicero watched him till he stopped turning.

He turned out the light and went into the next room.

Eddy woke to a drumming sound and fluttering lights
a hollow ache in his stomach—and sudden fear.

Where was he? Where nothing was—where no one knew. Bacon. He smelled
bacon.

There was a crack of light from under the door across the room.

He was in a motel room,

A gray morning light came through the window.

Little flags were fluttering in the rain outside.

The rain was drumming on the roof.

He remembered coming into this room—

falling onto the bed.

He pulled on his jeans and walked to the door across the room.

He could hear a light scraping sound from the other side.

He quietly turned the knob and looked in.

Cicero was taking a pan from a small hotplate;

he had laid down his pipe, still smoking
beside a small single barrel carburetor.

He looked up at Eddy.

“Morning, Eddy. Bacon and coffee?”

“Sure. Thanks, Mr. Brown.”

“Cicero, “ he said, picking up his pipe again.

He blew a little spray of sparks over his shirt,
which was already sprinkled with small holes.

Eddy thought of a potato with a pipe.

As he ate the bacon, Eddy picked up the carburetor.

It was wiped clean, as if on display.

Eddy noticed an old air cleaner bracket
and a torn gasket lying on the table.

The carburetor’s air horn was worn and scratched.

It had been overhauled—

just as he and Jimmy had done

with the carburetor off Barbara’s old truck.

That one had four barrels.

He ran his finger around the dashpot and choke cover
then turned it over and pushed down on the throttle valve.

They’d joked about putting a supercharger on some old truck.

Suddenly Eddy looked up.

Cicero was watching him—

two bright eyes through a haze of smoking bacon grease.

He seemed to be smiling and nodding.

“You know anything about that, Eddy?” he asked.

“Jimmy and me rebuilt one last month, “ Eddy whispered.

Cicero seemed to be listening, waiting,

expecting him to say more.

He looked back at the carburetor.

“I guess I don’t know too much about it,” he began.

Cicero still seemed to be waiting.

Eddy pointed to the air horn.

“After the air gets in here, it’s squeezed like

and that pulls the gas out of the float chamber—”

He remembered Jimmy showing him with a flashlight

how the neck inside got narrow

and where the gas was vaporized.

“The needle valve inside the float chamber opens up

to let in more fuel while the mixture goes to manifold.”

He felt ashamed suddenly,

and laid the carburetor back on the table.

The old man was making fun of him.

His ears burned, he started to get up.

Cicero caught his eye.

He held his pipe against his chest and leaned forward slightly.

“What then?” he said,

and as he said it, he leaned back again

and tapped the pipe bowl into a dish.

Eddy sat back down.

He looked back at Cicero.

The man was waiting for him to go on—he knew it now.

He started to point to the dashpot.

“This keeps the engine from stalling

when you step off the accelerator too fast—

but you got to know that if you overhauled this carburetor!”

“Sure, son. I know it,” he said quietly.

Eddy held his coffee mug in both hands.

He felt the warmth rise into his arms. He shivered.

“I gots to go now, “ he said.

Cicero said nothing.

Eddy looked out the window at the highway.

A truck of chicken crates had stopped at the intersection.

Fifty, maybe a hundred chickens cooped up in crates.

Going—nowhere.

He’d heard something.

Cicero had just said something.

“The Salvage, boy. The Salvage Yard.

We got a whole roomful of them.

We’ll give you the kits and you can rebuild them.”

“Rebuild them?” Eddy suddenly understood.

“And you can stay here till you find your own place,”

Cicero was saying, packing a fresh bowl

and spraying sparks all around.

He was smiling as if Eddy had done what he wanted

as if things were settled and understood between them

as if Eddy had proved something.

As Eddy looked at him, he began to believe that he had.

Family matters

Upon our privacies

depend all legacies.

Through intimate release

our grudges wear to peace.

A candle lights our room

to rankle Demon Gloom.

By minute degrees

we shape the world—with ease.

You and I convey
whatever stars may say.
Whatever snowfall seems,
whatever a seed dreams
we in our family confirm: we, privately.

The dark too has a place—
and shame, and brief disgrace.
For heirs to earth and heaven
all is given and forgiven.
To touch: this we are given;
to stroke, or hurt, or listen.
Let us then be kind
and bring the past to mind:

How patient mule was given
to hear the desperate Chicken;
how clouds in regal striding
could see the Cricket hiding.
This fact imbeds in fable:
all's given; all's unstable.
The frog becomes a lord,

the knotty branch a sword.
To touch—this we are given,
to stroke, or hurt, or listen.
Let us then be kind:
in all occasions find
forgiveness, and hold
to our long story ere it's told.

The Home Place

Margie walked out of the Fairall bus station into the rain.
Her brown hair hung over her eyes in stringy ringlets.
Only two blocks. Her hair was already wet.
Too early in the morning for a cab.
The strap of her sandal tore as she stepped off the curb.
She broke the fall with her suitcase, which snapped open
dumping clothes and photographs into the gutter.
It didn't matter.
She gathered up her clothes.
Several photographs floated down to the storm sewer.
“Why bother?” she muttered.
She walked on, stopped, took off her shoes,
Looked for the big crepe myrtle bush under the street light.
As she came closer, she saw the blossoms on the ground.

She always looked for this bush.

Her grandfather had told her “You can’t get lost.

Just look for the purple flowers.”

Two cars were in the driveway.

She stopped to wash her feet with the garden hose.

Finally she stood at her grandmother’s back door.

She couldn’t go in.

She saw Margaret Crawley inside, moving around her kitchen.

A suitcase was on the bed.

The door screen still had a cotton wad stuck in it.

Someone else was in the kitchen.

A white uniform—Aunt Emma!

Why was she here?

Both sisters had the same high cheek bones and gray-blue eyes

Like Margie’s, but Margaret was taller and white-haired.

Emma was small and compact, like Margie;

almost twenty years younger than Margaret,

she was nearing retirement as nurse at Foxglove Home.

They were drying dishes when Margie finally knocked.

“Emma, its Margie!”

Hugging her rain-soaked grand-daughter

Margaret Crawley was happier than she had been in weeks.

Emma put her arms around them both
and soon had Margie in front of the kitchen stove
with a cup of warm lemon juice in her hands.

“Drink it now,” she chided gently.

“Dear, you don’t have any dry clothes in your bag
so I’m going to lay out something of mine.”

While Emma was out, Margaret touched the ring Margie wore.

“Jeff’s left me and I’ve left him,” she said quickly.

“He’s gone off to join the Security Corps.

What he always wanted, he said.”

“Have you told Ida?”

“I can’t. Not after Willy—

She wanted us all to go out into the highway and die.

I had to leave there. I had to.”

Emma returned with a blanket.

“You and Emma told me not to run off with him

That it was grief for Willy

That I should wait-

I guess I’m no good at waiting for anything

Not even babies.”

She pulled her knees up under the blanket

and put her head down.

“Margaret, Will and Ida should know.”

“Yes, but not right away. First she must see—”

“Please. please don’t tell them!” Margie shrieked.

Emma felt her forehead.

“And I’m not sick, either.

It’s better if they think I’m still in Rectortown.”

“Your last letter was so happy,” said Margaret.

“That was before I told him about the baby.

‘You didn’t wait very long, did you?’ he said.

I didn’t wait!

He moved *me* out of the apartment into a trailer at the motor park!”

“Newlyweds always argue—” her grandmother interrupted.

“A hug, a touch: that’s all they need.”

“He doesn’t want me, Grandma!

He just turned me out—

like he was waiting for the chance.

All I wanted was the Jencks money, he said.

The Jencks name for my baby—my baby!

I had to leave.”

“You can stay here.” Margaret sat up proudly,

reaching out to squeeze Margie’s arms.

Her look at Emma was almost defiant, Margie thought.

She always felt safe in her grandmother's strength.

Emma was different—

more like herself, but never married;

her hair a reddish brown like Margie's

and her speech sharp, like Margie's.

“Margaret, the girl should know!”

“Yes, yes. But first she must rest. She must eat.

Rest, food—and prayer.”

As she stood, a dish towel fell from her lap.

Margie drowsily looked up at her.

The warmth and firm resolution of that face

was the shelter she wanted.

Now she—and her baby—could sleep.

Rooms

The aged sisters in the living room,

their colored bottles—

time narrowed and pressed against the will

travel will not change it.

You are not your own.

The willows and the white row-houses,

winding little street and tiny houses

seen from dormer room—

from the bus I came here on my own.

Here I get their bottles—

they hope I liked it;

if not, “give them away” if I will—

What you’re made to is never what you will.

Passing school houses—

closed empty places—churches—or was it

they who passed by my room—

which are the bottles?

By a cool window I hold my own.

I wait here. Time is given me to own.

Generous. Pain will

also be generous—these bottles

too. One of the houses

opens—has it room

for living? A man goes out. Was it

rage—then indifference? What is it

if I simply own

they are the same? A jewel box, a tiny room,

a cricket cage, my will—
each of them houses
rage, indifference. Jeni-bottles!

Their magnified frog-eyes stare from bottles.

Contained in me, it
daily lengthens—it lodges, houses.

It grows into its own.

Its will from my will-
attached and tentative as its room.

Over us and it a white roof houses
around us, a wide blue ring (like my own)
closes—bottles us, all three—in one Room.

So love withholds, forgives

As heart by double motion lives,
receives and gives;
as resting birds,
souls of hemlock and bare oak,
in sunward-burst wing-stroke revive
gaining desires roots choke,
so love withholds, forgives,

Let us revive our love,
each give its potion, each drawing breath,
as stars draw tender silicate from ocean—
each breath more delicate, more tender.
Come, let us tend this fire
that borrows us to be our lender.

Mixed Messages

Margie liked to doze before getting up in the mornings.

* * *

*She dreamed she was in her Grandmother's bedroom
on the back porch of the house in Fairall.*

*The dresser was cluttered with pipe cleaners,
faded photographs, nails and canning jars of buttons.*

Above it and over the bed were photographs on the wall.

She heard her parents talking in the kitchen.

Willy was outside tramping in the woods.

She was too little to touch the end of the bed with her toes.

A white fringed cover lay over her;

at the foot of the bed was the back door,

a screen with a white cotton ball in it.

She lay down with her head hung over the side

and let her fingertips run over the white bumpy ridges,

the hills and valleys, white crops and white fields.

She blew on the fringe and watched the strands fall back.

Her parents were coming to the kitchen door.

She rolled back and closed her eyes.

"She's asleep," said Ida, coming into the room.

The voices moved across the room to the sofa.

“He will not have forgotten her.”

“I haven’t forgotten either,” Will said bitterly.

“Never again. He could have killed them.

He couldn’t tell us why, but even Margie—

he had to give it to all four—even Margie.

Do you remember?

‘Margie will make the structure complete,’ he said.

‘With the fourth corner, the fourth side appears:

the structure of a minimal integrant,

the seed of a crystal,

our margin on survival.’

Madness, not sickness—delusions, not visions.

We couldn’t stay with him then

and she shouldn’t see him now. Never again.

Let him go his own way.”

“He’s over eighty, Will. Your mother—“

“—says we should. ‘To help him remember.’

Better he doesn’t,

better for all of us.

He can’t be trusted even now.

Only his ‘vision’ matters to him.

In his whole life he has had only that one idea. I can’t live like that.”

“Oh Will, he never meant—”

There was a long pause.

Margie peeked across the room through her eyelashes.

Suddenly a head poked up from under the bed.

She screamed and jumped back.

It was Will.

“You shouldn’t pretend to be sleeping, Margie,” her mother said.

She came and sat on the bed.

“Your father can tell.”

* * *

When she looked up, her mother was gone.

Charlie was sitting on the bed, telling her about May.

May, whom he loved before he married Barbara.

In Charlie’s apartment, she told him about Jeff,

And what her parents would think. Charlie laughed.

“Avery didn’t think much of my marrying Barbara, either.

Neither did Ida.” He opened his tackle box.

“But May was gone. She had been gone too long.

Even an old tree has spring wood;

I’d too much left from May to let it go—

Even if it meant marrying Barbara.

But Avery thought it might upset his Big Plan,” he winked.

“And Ida thought I couldn’t see what Barbara was up to.”

* * *

Then Ida returned and shook her, “Why Margie? Why?”

“How could you keep it from us?

Why couldn’t you wait? We can just go out—

We can just go out, can’t we Will?

Just go out into the highway

when the big trucks pass.

Both Jeff and you saw Willy and didn’t stop!

It don’t matter. And Dad’s so sick now he doesn’t know me.

Willy’s gone. It don’t matter, does it Will?

We’ll just go out into the highway, Will—

Don’t you think?”

* * *

Margie had to rinse her mouth—the bitterness.

But she couldn’t get out of the bed.

Something held her down.

Grandfather Avery said there would be a signal.

Charlie had told her to look for it. Had she missed it?

Charlie had said the messenger would bring everything together.

He found the lure he was looking for in the tackle box.

“Angel messages are complete—

finished off like well-tied lures—

no distracting colors, no unnecessary movements.

That was how May hooked me,” Charlie said.

“She was complete—everything.

All I needed from the first.”

* * *

Will was talking while her mother smoothed Margie’s hair.

“Ida, we will have to go—to see him. Won’t we?”

“Yes, Will.”

Her father went to the screen door

As if looking for Willy in the woods.

Her mother hugged Margie’s shoulders.

“We’re going to see your grandfather,” she said.

“He hasn’t been well for some time—“

“Grandma told me,” said Margie.

“What did she tell you?”

“That he was sick. That this was before—”

* * *

She pointed to one of the photographs.

Her mother took it from the wall.

At first it seemed a news photo of a wreck—

of car parts, refrigerator doors, piles of old lawn chairs.

*Looking down on all of this,
barely visible from a kind of deck,
was a little man with dark eyes.
Her mother laid down the photo and went out.
Margie looked at the man.
Only his head could be seen.
He was standing on something like a great ship,
his hair askew, his jaw jutting proudly.
She thought that he was smiling.*

* * *

“Margaret, she’s awake,” Emma called into the kitchen.
Lunch was steamed rice and chicken with gravy.
She could hardly smell it but she knew.
She was under the white cover of the bed on the back porch.
The shades had been drawn.
A vase of flowers, probably from Emma’s garden,
stood on the old desk, along with books and tiny wrenches,
fish hooks and pipe cleaners of Grandfather Avery’s.
Margaret’s colored bottles of all shapes
made a mosaic of the window at the other end of the porch.
A gray jumper and yellow blouse lay over the desk chair.

Her aunt had sewn her shoe back together.

“Tea or coffee, Margie?” Emma asked from the kitchen.

“Coffee, please.” She knew that Emma wanted her up.

As she was dressing, Emma brought her an envelope,

And hurried back to the kitchen.

It was blank except for the return letterhead:

Foxglove Home, Retreat, and Research Center.

The letter inside was addressed to her grandmother:

Dear Margaret,

Emma will tell you the news.

I remind you that when Margie comes

you and Emma should bring her to see me.

You know by now what the Board is doing.

They question me daily.

Please come soon. Disregard the radio news.

The rains increase hourly.

The Vision will soon be fulfilled.

We two are one, nor shall we cease;

As at the time of the defedding,

As during my last ‘sickness,’ so it will be now.

Don’t delay. With all my love,

Avery

Margie banged the swinging door against the wall
rushing into the kitchen with the letter.

The sisters were at table,
the amber sunlight of early afternoon
shining through the window over the sink.

“What does this mean?” she shouted,
Then wished she hadn’t shouted.

“Let’s eat while we talk,” Emma said..
“Your Grandfather’s back at the Home,”
said Margaret, passing the rice.

“You remember visiting him there.”
“He’s not ‘out of faith’ with the Board?”

Margie asked, unafraid.
Then sorry she’d used the phrase.

“No, no. It’s because his Vision arouses suspicion.
He doesn’t feel well. He went on his own.
He said going there was part of the Vision.”

“But what’s this about me? How did he know?”
Margaret looked at Emma.

“We don’t know, but he’s sure that both of you—
you and Willy—are part of the Vision.

“But Willy is dead!”

“Jimmy Siebert is also part of the Vision—

and you know—“

Seeing Margie blanch and shrink into her chair, Emma rose

and quickly went around the table to her.

“No, Emma. I’ll be all right. What about Jimmy?”

She’d hoped to see Jimmy, to explain about Jeff.

“—a farming accident, like his Dad’s,” Margaret was saying.

“No, Margaret—it was a traffic accident.

A truck at a bridge or intersection, a cattle truck—”

“But surely—” Margaret was confused.

“Poor Charlie—after what just happened to Willy,” Margie said.

Emma nodded, about to speak

but Margaret spoke first:

“But Jimmy’s accident was before.

That’s why I thought you knew.”

Emma shook her head.

“No, Margaret, but it doesn’t matter. Child—”

Margie looked up. “There’s more—

the ‘news’ your grandfather mentioned.

It’s Charlie—“

“Charlie too?” Margie stared at the steaming rice,

the plump fried chicken legs

the dishcloth on Margaret's lap.

"What do you mean, Emma?" Margaret asked.

"In his sleep, last night—another stroke they think."

"Poor Barbara—"

"Margaret, the woman hasn't seen him for weeks.

She and Lyman Jencks have just been waiting—"

"Jencks?" Margie interrupted.

"Jeff's father."

The three women sat silently around the dark kitchen table.

Margaret rose to turn on the lights.

"It doesn't seem to work," she said.

It had begun to rain more heavily.

The kitchen window was dark.

Webs

Make me a leaf that's held exact
in growth, gesture and proud act,
strict and ribbed, spread-and-headed
within its millimeter's spread
contact to bole and root and air—
wax—to divide me—walls: Impair
this wooden mood. Let me waver
in fealty from stem to flower.
Let me move about my base
and speak of you—myself displace.

Drop me to grainy residues
grubs dormer in, soon beetle thews,
grapplings deep in yellow plunder,
powdery scutes that blossoms were,
jaws that sunder bract and barb,
then: mica-wings—in sudden garb
of preened plumage—shattering,
then: through great horned ears, listening.
Taut device, this webbing draws
claw to hand, and wit to pause.

Here I am: as wooden still,
as empty, though myself I fill.
Apart from you I cannot tell—
though wandering as a leaf-green cell
that floats among the rotifers—
what we are to any others—
though but what others tell, we are.

*Yet in device, or travel far,
division to the smallest piece,
we two are one, nor shall we cease.*

A Visit Revisited

Eddy couldn't sleep.

He saw the light from Cicero's room and got up.

Some nights he fell asleep in his work clothes

but usually he could only sleep after talking.

Sometimes they wouldn't stop talking till morning.

Even when he was tired he couldn't sleep.

It was Jimmy. He had seen Jimmy.

Of course, it couldn't have been Jimmy.

Nothing was left in that crushed tractor.

He didn't get a good look at him, that's all.

They were closing shop when he noticed someone
coming to the parts counter at the far end of the building.

Tom Farley talked with him

then the man ran out—tall, blond, loping: Jimmy!

He drove away before Eddy even made the door.

“What's the matter?” Tom called.

Tom had a wisp of red hair on a freckled scalp,

glasses that notched his nose and ears

and a croaking speech

that masked his pleasure in picking words.

“What did he say?”

“Wanted Avery. In a hurry. Didn’t say—”

“Do you know him? Ever seen him? Where—”

“Sorry, Eddy.” Tom came from behind the counter.

“He looked familiar, though.”

Maybe he was seeing what he wanted to see.

He ran into the yard and up to the gate.

A truck like Barbara’s had just pulled out.

A Black DeSoto

“A voice says, ‘Cry’ and I said, ‘What shall I cry?’”

Lyman Jencks’ voice was carried from the rally

to all the special receivers in the North Region.

One of these was in an ancient black car

creeping along the hot gravel road

between Lake Hennessey and unplanted farm land.

Scrub cedars wearing yellow flags,

double-trunk oaks, struggling back from clearings,

and shagbark hickories faced button bushes,

cattails and reeds across the roadbed.

Here and there, heaps of spindly, uprooted

pinus had been knocked down by bulldozers

and piled for burning: “Hennessey Estates”

it was called, with streets to be named

“Chinquapin Knoll” (where there were oaks),

“Mallow Drive” (where weeds had been killed back),

and “Buena Vista” (in a low swampy pocket).

Avery Crawley was slowly studying this development.

When all the land from here to the Salvage

had been thoroughly disturbed by Jencks Realty,

planted with flexi tubing, concrete, asphalt,

water mains, gas lines and power poles,
then homeowners would look for a covering
of trees, rye grass and hiding places
among any flowers or shrubs that would grow quickly.

“All flesh is grass and all its beauty
is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers and the flower fades.”

The broadcast was interrupted by the whir of tape.

A surprise: If Jencks had recorded this rally
he must be using it to cover his activities.

Avery was driving to Signal Point,
between the lake and the Bay,
across the lake from the Salvage.

His days of privilege as Supreme Prophet were ended.

Two things were left to do:

First, give Patton Long the papers Tom had written for him;

Then go across the lake to Somerville

To remind Cicero and the others of what to do.

He looked through the double-paned windshield
across the lake to the village of Somerville.

Something was moving in the trees like a convoy
but he couldn't be sure. What was Jencks up to?
Whatever it was, he was too late.

The clouds had arrived, the towering clouds.
He'd been yanked forward against the bow-rail—
sparks in his eyes and buzzing in his ears.
All the same as before.

Willy was his only grandson. He was not dead.
He wished he could tell Will and Ida,
wished Will would listen.

Oh, it wouldn't be the kind of end Lyman preached
but the preaching had served its purpose
in creating admirable contingencies,
keeping the whole Region in such a fervor—
a fever that Lyman attributed to his preaching—
that the Salvage had prospered.

Only when people believed the end was near
would they come together.

And now the first sign of a divergence: Willy's accident.

Avery had not imagined he would live to see the end.
It was like theft or sacrilege to live on when others die—

but not Margaret, thank God.

Now Jencks would close in to have the Salvage
and to learn the secrets—as if there were a secret!

As if special revelations were needed.

The end was on them all and Jencks wanted the secret.

He glanced at his white-ringed eyes in the rear-view:

arcus senilis —the end comes.

The thready pulse and leaky bellows in his chest
could finally rest. He watched his fluttering hands:
they always trembled now; he'd given up stopping them.

Again he glanced into the mirror. No one on the road.

No one! What was Jencks up to? Never mind.

He'd been yanked forward as if by a catch
in the celestial machine—just as before.

Too many times.

His doctor had once insisted the bitter taste was a clue.

He even found a tiny tumor worming through his brain
like a wasp larva around a cherry pit.

He'd never bothered

Twenty-two years ago, that was.

Crawley knew the cause.

(What sort of cause—formal, material?

No matter. Analysis was a different guide,
a guide he now followed less and less.)

Visions demanded faith.

The sparks had changed to fluttering flags.

Then he was looking at the cloud again.

Clouds were special messengers,
from hand-sized to hand-made.

Every shift of shape was a change in values.

Every drift of fronts, wandering of intention
or new parceling of possibilities
was a new arrangement of contingencies.

One who makes such arrangements
must know the domains of the variables involved.

“One must know,” he had told Jencks,

“whether one commands or is a factor.”

The value of land parcels was such a cloud-shape.

One doesn't stop up wells:

yet every species of organism was a reservoir,
a deep artesian spring;

every messenger was a knot of purposes.

One could unravel it into contingencies

or draw it tighter by force.

To Jencks, value derived from intervention.

He called it development.

It was no surprise that Jencks preached divine intervention
at every turn.

Crawley had seen enough clouds:

simple shapes, complex in origin;

clouds that reeked of flesh;

terrifying yellow clouds that generations coughed up;

towering clouds, bent like reptile heads,

their occipital condyles prominent in predatory interest.

Better development of intentions

than development by interventions.

Something like a sea-breeze—

though too cool and early in the morning—

refreshed him.

Too many of the explorations of the past

had been interventions;

Crawley was pleased with the alternative

he had discovered.

The black DeSoto pulled up to the dock at Signal Point.

The Bay shone on the eastern side.

Patton Long came out of the boat house.

Crawley tapped the package on the seat beside him.

The end was about to be discovered.

Willy could not be dead.

Signal Point

After work, Farley left the Parts Store for Signal Point.

At the same time, Charlie Siebert woke in the darkness

and couldn't feel the buzzer,

which had slipped somehow onto the right side of the bed.

Leah's in the kitchen.

She won't hear. Where's the urinal?

“All things on earth--”

Hell! Why'd it fall on the right.

Maybe I can fling my left arm over.

In the cash box!

Crawley's always finding ways

to leave a message in your path.

When could he have put a note in the cash box?

He never comes round or calls.

Just leaves these notes.

“parceling a field's array--”

He's got the lines he wanted.

—People are speech, Avery.

—Well, signals, perhaps.

Waveforms, maybe.

—Speech, Avery!

To catch their speech

is to imagine the reality they feel.

I need more latitude—

Lines as breath-units—

—Forty syllables, Tom.

Map your meaning on that.

Breathe into it!

Then Crawley had walked up to the Ark,

nodding to himself.

Still, it's better than jingles about prayer pellets.

When the manager at WJKW sent you a message

It was heard over the intercom

by the whole assembly plant.

Barbara can't be here, of course.

She has bush-hogging.

Maybe if I throw both arm and leg over

at the same time and catch the rail—

“He felt the roller, reached up--”

Nothing original here.

*Always accidents—later called inventions,
then finding things:*

first trobar then trouver.

They complement each other.

Always we compose on another’s invention:

Bryant’s, Rascas’s, Scripture’s, Crawley’s;

then assemble meanings.

The assembly work is chewing words.

Though words put nothing right,

Even as I talk to myself—and Avery,

who hides messages in Accounts Payable,

to keep me working at both jobs:

tallying accounts and syllables.

Now I’m on the floor, buzzer under me—

what’s left of me: armless, speechless;

can’t move off the thing.

Dizzy—kind of weak:

like diving off the Point.

“and heard the gear array swing down--”

Like spinning around with May,

her hair flying. Then we'd sink down.

But Barbara—with Barbara

it's always been the farm,

her farm, not mine,

not the Board's, not Jencks'—

he doesn't know her yet. But not May—

May with her green gown.

With Barbara I *wanted* myself in love.

With May I *was*.

At least she'll keep the farm.

Will and Ida would never take it on.

He's made his own way

since Avery interfered.

Avery helped me get May back on shore.

—Avery, does she know me?

Years together;

then drowned in the floods.

A last day, with ribbons in her hair—

staring upwards.

*He wants puzzles—
the orderliness of quilts and wallpaper—
backgrounds and figures,
like those hickories shining against chalk bluffs.
Yet, in all that gold and red there is no fire.*

—Ida, can't you bring Margie and Willy?

Will won't come, I know.

He's never forgiven Avery

for injecting the four children,

for making them a part of his idea—

and thinks I went along. Maybe I did.

You don't remember as much.

How it was with the defedding,

when towns and regions took over

from state and federal government.

You never even knew your mother, Ida.

And Barbara could—

—I don't need her. I had you!

She took you from me.

She wants everything for that farm.

Oh Dad, she'll never be my mother.

She just brought you here to die.

When you had the stroke

after the haying accident

she began talking with Jencks

even about this property.

We've lost everything, Dad.

* * *

Maybe. Will lost Avery. Ida, Willy.

Maybe so. May slipped away from me.

So weak I can't even call out.

“All disappears in disarray--”

As Farley's truck drew up to the boathouse

he could barely see Avery and Patton Long,

staring over boats into the mist.

Here I am on a wet rug.

Leah won't come for another hour.

She may not find much.

—Does she know me, Avery?

May was perfect as a lacewing,
tiny as a bee, bright as a spot
flashing its tail, sinking out of sight:
An angel, Margie—an angel.
Nothing's lost.

* * *

Farley picked up his manuscripts, left headlights on
and walked to the dock, looked at the ebbing
slate-black waters, wave layered upon wave.

Two kinds of surfaces meet here between terrains:

There's a frameshift! "Bet we enter rains."

Crawley's message in four words, or two.

I always think of these things too late.

Both Long and Crawley watched Tom Farley come up,
muttering to himself, scribbling on the bill of his cap.

Long cleared his throat loudly and began again,

"When jimmies begin droppin' from the bar

I leave the skipjack and hire on a drudger."

"Patton, " said Avery, "now that Tom's come, we'll go—"

"Avery, you know you can stay as long—"

“And you know my Vision—”

“Of doom for all,” Tom quipped,

the red hair poking from his cap.

He could see them clearly in the headlight beam

but to them he was a scrawny shadow with red hair.

Tom studied Crawley’s thin face, his wispy hair askew.

Was it to be prison for a vision?

Or was the Vision itself prison enough?

Crawley: professor of invention,

‘eclectician’ he called himself—

like the crank next door

who builds a rocket in the driveway

or tower in the back yard

or tin-foil altar in the garage.

“And all together saved!” Crawley shouted.

“To go back now,” said Tom “to the Board of Faith—“

“Is faith,” Crawley said.

“Since good sense requires a reason. And—“

Long broke into their argument, pulling his cap down,

“Foxglove wants their lab sooks and water samples.

So I’ll push off. You two are back at it.

No sense nor nonsense can I make of it.

Tong nor pot can I sink to catch it.

*Whether it holds still or doesn't—
or backs away—I can't fetch it.
A shoal or orster bar at three fathoms or four
is deep enough for me. That kind of floor
I've walked with drags. Your floor
of pontoon visions with sinking steps—
who knows how to cross it?"*

“There,” said Tom. “Now you hear good sense—“
But Long, casting off in his skipjack, wasn't finished.
“Nor any poem, hangin' from 'considers' & 'supposes.'”
He pointed to the manuscript by the outboard motor.
“Can make no grab a messenger ever closes.”

He grinned and waved as he disappeared onto the Lake.
Crawley watched him disappear and then turned around.
To be sure that the Security surveillance would catch it,
Farley flourished the other copy of the manuscript—
the one without the key to the code.

Crawley took it back to the car and drove off.

When Leah turned on the light
she found Charlie lying on the floor,
his leg tangled with the buzzer cord,
a tackle box knocked off the table.
He held a bright green lure.

A Crown of Leaves

Unsevered leaves, still sunned in golden fall
above Foxglove's separating wall;
unsevered leaves, no more tip-edge of reach,
still held and sunned; like some archaic speech
they seem to sleep in postures of belief,
raised facets on unpolished stone; each leaf,
intended target of one baffled ray,
since yellow cannot make the light delay.

When I am a memorial behind
this separating wall, like these aligned
beneath the golden trees, my sunny love
with her inventive light may please to move
and pause among my leaves before they fall,
read summer's fading speech, and green recall.

Read summer's fading speech, and green recall:
You still hold on, though she is gone—and all.
But in the gold and red there is no fire.
The form only, relinquishing desire,
remains. The lacing stringy veins persist;
the miners' branching drifts and stopes resist
a hollow burden: hopes that she would read

and be revived, warmth that she would need.

Streams pirated, or islands dwindling

in dreams my faltering leaves, my handling

makes these lines she does not read or hear

and will not ever touch, or even near.

She does not cast or gather any light.

The curling leaves will rattle in the night.

The curling leaves will rattle in the night,

but day return and you, seeing with my sight,

will bring me Margie. Then, though doomed we lose

our property, we'll gain the life we choose.

Our doom is room for Eden: without cost

of minds; room for vision of all lost

to empty power; politics and profit—

daily retrieved from want and war by wit;

room for memory of the tools and of the users,

of sands that run to glass, of coals to embers

or to steel, of handle that remembers

hands, or of feel of flax. We—losers?

Shall I lose, if you can say of me,

“He said he loved me. I know that he will see.”

“He said he loved me. I know that he will see

if he just leaves this thing and patiently
listens: She must come back. She is so young.
The baby's hers—and ours—but not among
those people—and what should Margie have to prove
by once more going back? She should not move
until the baby's born and she decides
between them! She's been north—and now the sides
divide us, helpless in their hate and strife—
grandmother—daughter—mother—husband—wife.
Too late, he'll see this trial is testing them
for what he should have seen—proving them
who need no proof but touch: their touch—theirs
not North's or South's or Vision's, or my care's.”

Not North's or South's or Vision's or my care's
the direction that my own heart fares.

I face behind, where love is, heart is, time is
and forward row, where North or care (or rhyme) is,
where Vision bids me go. Oar on gunwale creaks.

The enemy is near and sends among us—
tugging—close to hand—among us—friends—
grapnels—hooks to hold—and tows us fare
that funnel back on lines. And lands us. Where?

Where they grieve us of our cares, hearts, visions,
our north's or south's allegiance, hard decisions—
and leave us bare: I've known such barren place
since first I left you and your shining face.

Since first I left you and your shining face
among the daffodils in cloudless space,
time has seized on stellar gears and separate,
holy time, all disappeared, and disparate,
outward signals flown apart, and storms
drawn up the issue of the heart—that warms
and generates loves, hates and fears—and, fed
on vapor-heat from seas of care, the blinded
eye-wall wound, with banded tentacles
trailing its sunken center in whirring spirals
of feeding arms—from which no charms or gage
can save, because they cannot limit rage
that fetches all into the towering cloud
none see beyond: the Flower of the Proud.

None see beyond the flower of the proud,
the wealth, the glow of color, space allowed
to play their proper parts: the posted fields,

stables, private lake, and current yields—
and nothing of it Given: all by Merit
claimed—rights to give and to inherit,
powers inherent in achieved position—
the customary, provident fruition.

But yellow, waxy—as such I see the fruit.

The comfortable earning? In its root
a Trespass, turning flowers with gray snout
from below. Its crown, that branches out?
A watershed of grievances—still all
unsevered: Leaves still sunned in golden fall.

On a Farm Road

Tom recited dreary poems as he drove them to Somerville.

Eddy was between Tom and Cicero, who didn't mind it.

Cicero smoked and gazed at the rainy countryside

while the wind blew his sparks around the cab.

"Somerville's where I started out," Cicero was saying.

"Tried the mercantile, then selling corn oil, then sold out!

That was after the defedding."

All that Eddy knew about the defedding was the Board

had become Center of the North Region.

Tom was reciting again. Eddy looked at Cicero.

He gazed out the open window without change of expression,

smiling as if Tom's songs and the wind blowing on his face

had the same effect.

The smoke burned Eddy's eyes. He turned away.

They were passing the turn-off to Rectortown.

Why were they going to Somerville? Tom said fishing

but it had been raining for weeks

and neither of them brought a rod or tackle box.

Eddy, unable to sleep, had gotten up before dawn

and found Tom, Cicero and Mr. Crawley in the kitchen.

"Charlie Siebert" he heard them saying as he came in.

Old Charlie in Rectortown? Crawley left soon after.

Tom said they should go to Somerville this weekend.

The farm road to Somerville twisted north from Fairall
toward Rectortown, passing the Salvage Yard
and following the white bluffs along the south lake shore,
around to where Stanley's Run and Pawmack Creek join
east of the dam and then empty into the Bay.

It forked back along the north shore of the Lake,
going to the Foxglove Research and Retreat Center;
banks of honeysuckle and sumac rose sharply
on both sides of the ticking truck. Tom droned on.

"Still green, we hold what we must cast away."

Cicero glanced sharply at Tom.

Eddy realized suddenly that Cicero had been listening.

Tom pulled his stocking cap over his ears

and stared quietly at the road ahead.

"Up to Stanley's Run," Cicero said,

"that feeds into Lake Hennessey, there was a park with a boat
called 'Fletcher's Ark'.

When the bypass was built, it closed down,

although Fletcher'd owned it outright

and had it made a park, with tables, trees,

Free Admission for kids under twelve—

a live boa constrictor and chickens,

a black bear and a two-headed calf.

Selling curios and pumping gas, he did real good

until the bypass was finished.

Before we cleaned it up, cleared back weeds,

came back next day and saw the hull,

we'd thought it was a henhouse

Fletcher'd tucked up to look like a boat—

Four hundred fifty feet long, maybe seventy wide.

Driving out weekends,

we took almost three months to clean it.

Fletcher'd brought in chickens when business failed.

When they took a virus, he sold out to Avery.”

“The Ark at the Salvage Yard?” Eddy asked.

“Avery bought it for speculation

and sold the land when the Board wouldn't rezone—“

“No one understood what Avery was doing then,”

Tom broke in—then stared back at the road.

“He had the remains of that whole boat moved
from Stanley’s Run, above Hartley, to the Salvage.
You know, we had to disassemble it to get it moved
and then up to the chalk bluff over the Salvage—“

Cicero and Eddy were jerked to the right as Tom pulled off.

He raced up a jeep trail, cut off the engine,
and pointed to the road where they had been.

After a minute, a slowly moving jeep came up the road.

Three men, walking backwards in a row behind the jeep
were bending slowly down to the road as they walked.

“Their uniforms—” whispered Eddy.

“Security Corps—Board of Faith,” Cicero nodded.

“We can’t go back on that road,” said Tom. “Mines.”

“We just made it. I saw through the trees.

Jencks is making one of his ‘difficult choices’ for us again—
correcting another ‘imbalance of faith’ no doubt,
such as we hear about on WJKW. It’s as Avery predicted.”

“Listen !” said Cicero. The soldiers were talking.

“Heard news a cattle truck jack-knifed a turn
and overturned with eighty men impacted
in a space for sixty—and three are dead.

A cattle truck holds sixty on a load
but give a man an average weight—
one sixty say, and eighty men will fit.

I’ve seen them swarm up
and jam each other to the cab to find
some easy place among the others—
gone to the range to record-fire.”

Their voices trailed away into the woods.

“So we park and walk, “ Cicero said, opening the door.

The woods were cool and muddy.

Tom led up to a ridge, with Eddy close behind.

Cicero trudged along heavily, his pipe in his shirt pocket.

The trail descended steeply to a stream bed and disappeared.

They waited for Cicero to come over the ridge.

As they started down, Cicero whistled softly.

“This is the Pawmack.

My place is two hundred yards upstream.”

Eddy followed Tom onto the flat rocks overhanging the creek.

Ten feet below, the stream was turbulent and swift.

Gnats hung over the water. Eddy stopped.

If they were running from the security force of the Board

Tom and Cicero must be in trouble.

Suddenly Eddy understood. They'd been talking about Charlie.

Eddy had seen Jimmy at the Salvage.

They'd done something to Jimmy or Charlie—

and he was with them. He nearly ran—

no, better to wait first,

to find out.

Cicero rushed past Eddy and Tom to a little boat landing.

A small, plump woman was waving to him.

“Sally!” he shouted.

“Sally is his wife,” said Tom, smiling.

Threnody

Cab and trailer, eighty crouching men

all rolled over, the side guard cracked apart.

Dressed in jigsaw dapple green and brown,

eighty ordinary men rode on each other

in a rumbling cattletruck under morning fog.

Some were startled out of drowsy sleep,

looked up and saw the trees jump from the road

and sky collapse; their hands found no support;

legless, they fell backwards, hugging men ahead.

Three ordinary men, daubed green and rusty brown:

they could have died prone on a mossy hill

beneath thick bracken fronds, silent

spare and armed, restless among strangler figs

and tapang trees, waiting

till the enemy appears, silent

like them, cushioned on the forest floor

where darkling beetles weave their fragile dwellings

and sunlight sifts in strands through mist

and bayonets like silver fish

dart among dark reeds.

But they died training, crouching, paralyzed

as if a fiend sat on their chests.

Foxglove Home

Crawley sat at the end of a long corridor in the Home

wearing a pale green robe like the others.

He sat by a window with a plastic supper tray on his lap.

Other old men, like Greaves, who had tried to help him

and mad Timmy Baker, his hair like straw stuck in tallow,

sat along the hall in wheel chairs, counting pins

or sorting prayer pellets or finishing dinner.

Avery's eyes were cloudy and watery, he leaned forward.

Something moved along the screen—a bee.

He ran his finger along the window ledge

and remembered the building of this Home—the motto:

“to nurse the life in waning age.”

At that time, he'd seen it as a reservoir of knowledge,

skills, strength—he glanced down the hallway

where his neighbors nodded in their chairs.

“Devils live here,” mad Timmy had told him.

Old Greaves was hanging forward in his restrainer,

Sent here for being “out of faith”. Not this—

Not a dump, a repository. He would change this.

This must change on the other side of the jump—

Or had it changed? No—it would be different on that side.

No longer could he grasp the Vision all at once.
The deep cortex, surface of integrator networks, failed.
Who'd have thought he would live till the divergence?
“Tossed into the living sea of waking dream,”
as John Clare called it—he almost said aloud:
the sleep of sanity in insane places. If only—
If only Margaret would come. No, he would hold on.
The whole Region was asleep, he smiled.
He'd rowed out where they couldn't miss seeing him.
He'd come North on his own. He would hold on.
He should rest before the next hearing—
another chance to tell his version of the truth.
He smiled: “the truth revealed by a Vision,”
as their religious law required—
None had visions more powerfully fulfilled than he did.
He was expert—especially on unknown quantities of water!

He laughed aloud. The others nodded in their chairs.
The Board had to listen to him in those hearings.
Even when he lost his train of thought they had to listen.
Even when he lost hold of the Vision
they listened and recorded and questioned.
All was the same to them.

*Sometimes he'd no more grasp than that bee
who for the life of her
couldn't find her way out of an open window,
even on a trail of jelly down the screen.*

*Earlier, when the sun was mid-high,
the afternoon warmer, the sweet-grass buzzing
she poked and plodded on the wires,
her antennae lazily quivering on a whim—
like a little ritual to remind herself
she was lost in the warm sun.*

*But since she didn't feel the pain of mortal separation
she continued more or less to follow the same course,
hang-stepping from one wire to another,
following along the molding to a right angle at top
and as if the quarter inch it rose above the screen
were an impass
she dutifully would turn right
and continue following alongside.*

*Later, when the sun was eye-level,
the bee flew over the molding, bumping the screen.
Maybe this was her escape. She would find the free edge,
feel her belly buoy up into the air*

and fly off to the sun.

But she only lit on the screen again.

She'd tripped a cobweb's signal cord

but the spider returned quickly

to the darkness of the window latch.

Now she hung from the center of the frame.

Her antennae drooped like two low horns;

she rubbed them with her front legs.

Like velvet piling, they still bristled.

Light came through the window trapezoidal.

The sun was behind a storm cloud

and the bee had flown up to the top of the screen,

rear legs dragging, plated belly pumping,

her wings back along her sides.

She wore a downy, sungold fur

and walking on her middle feet

she rocked from side to side.

“Wake up, old man It's time you go see Chairman Hinklin.”

His surly attendant had returned to wheel him out.

Another hearing—he didn't ask why.

They sought to prevent the Vision—some charm to hinder

some gauge to measure it, to bring it under control.

They needed to find some way around it—or use it.

He would have to repeat his story from the beginning.

And, of course, he smiled, that would take time—

especially for an old man with memory loss.

He sat back in the chair to enjoy the ride.

Aphasia

For the soapy trickle of blood

at the heart's diking flood

over, trespassing age

(Never properly feared),

we thank thee, God.

Well-diagnosed ill: discontent.

That should make us repent—

accusing our practice of excusing

ourselves for our habits:

Practitioners cannot relent.

Alone in our ways
in a tangle of days—
least certain when finding
what always was there—
Guide us, God; yet amaze.

Accommodations

Twin rooms with matching
devils, home-grown and fresh
from Arapesh, Ibo and Ik,
one possessed and one possessing:
Diagonal to hell—
come, stay a week.

The stolen scenes
from Milton's paradise
are put on in the fall.
Reception for sitcom routines
and proball is good
and educational.

Chairman Greaves

The long slow glide
into our expectations
began with a mere moment
set aside for notice—

Dolt indolence
postponed taking either side.
To incipient design
Choice is the fatal option.

In the ferment
of limiting opinions,
we believed their “firm actions”
a “pivot of judgment”—

With “skillful ease”
we wrote, and “sense of the time”
laying difference aside
they “balanced faith”—and I

Not so was I—
laggard to attempt to climb

the upswept prickling eddies
of storm. No stay am I.

Powers fuse seldom.
Stablest objects move. Weak shifts,
varyings, indirections,
vague stirrings—these decide.

Afterthoughts

Better we'd been to've bent
backwards and by dissembling
won them than wake suspicion
wary of words, talking,
process, power divided,
proceedings and assembly.

Then they'd have been tyrants
that stirred our energy
to beat them, or to test
till we'd got a clearance
tight to turn in set,
tamped and trim, for instance.

Bright as bream scuttling
by shadows flashed our pleas.
Dark now dreams are; living
darker, with this disease.

See us speaking, boating,
striding forth or settled
quiet collecting pins,
coins—things that can be held?

Now you notice our geese,
nearing our pond proudly,
staying past summer's lease,
sturdy, unable to fly.

Museum

“The things we have, we leave,”
thinking something’s better,
knowing neither the griefs
nor fouling and rancor
churned into that charming
choice of words: “to nurse
the life,” and that “waning—”
that soft decline: that curse.

Our museum. Writings.
Read DIGNITY with care.
In handling these, notice
involutions—quite rare.
Perfect preparations—
poised just as if alive.
Few scraps of these fragments
from former times survive.

Here history’s given:
how, with wide, brave options,
Foxglove Farms began.

First, we'd common notions;
later, long arguments;
last, a blight: Impatience,
bringing Theory and Balance
by men theories convince.

Again tomorrow

Soft before the day is bright
come the forces of the night—
shapings subtle in their mood
as hidden eyes in somber wood.

Nail and fang clip on the chair
of the sleeper unaware—
and the helpless held by sleep
while madmen prowl the open keep.

Watch small movements in the dark.
Changing shapes is their first mark—
Sleep worms up within the spine
loosed up like bark by flowering bine.

Silent as a ritual
sudden as a feather ruffle,
wishes mirror in her eyes
where power to disembody lies.

Next, shaped cool and physical
as continent of obstacle
is sullen Fact—
depressing and exact.

You should believe, it will advise.

(Its certainty is proof it lies.)

In measurements without relief
it flattens moments of belief.

Next, ready to compute the way
is Fate, that has foretold the day
and in opposing sun and moon
conspired to direct our doom.

Chance, it says, is but a flaw
in seeing nature's perfect law.

Safe is whirlwind: shelter, storm.

Fear no choice that keeps fate firm.

Away, you riddles and dark night!

Dispel your sickly fumes and fright.

Begone, you eyes that peer from woods.

Begone, you powers that gain our moods.

Take us away, you other powers

that sharpen, and do not devour us.

Your mention is a morning song,

your season is forever long.

Rectortown Highway

A tall figure was loping through a field of orchard grass.

Why was he laughing in the darkness?

Soaked to the skin, he didn't know his name.

Why was he there? A message—

A message of some sort he remembered:

“See me, a very crawly, see me”

Crawly, crayly, crawdad maybe.

Was he a very crawly? He laughed aloud,

Somehow he was going toward a brightness, a burning.

Like the sun—perhaps squeezed into existence

by the pressure of sunlight on interstellar dust.

How could he know about interstellar dust

and not even know his own name?

He felt as if he were an ungainly creature

of stubbly baffle-plates, drifting and turning

in warm, red fluid of sunlight,

whirling in a gale of sunlight, the burning,

And darkness around it:

Here he was, an unknown in an unknown darkness

dreaming about waves of sunlight

streams of solar winds. He laughed wildly, loudly

but Margie couldn't hear him.

Revelations (a waltz)

Lord, please do not disclose your will.

To range like protists radial
in timeless water, make sluggish natures
reel, reel, reel and be swirled.

Unfold no plan of yours
but show how you explore the world.

Don't stop the sun on our behalf.
More slowly turn us, make us laugh.
Make welcome, sharp, and singular
the kiss by chance, the meals more regular.
Suffice these signs to show your presence.

Deliver us—we do not ask.
To stay is less a risk
than to suspect oneself absent.
Discourage pride, distraction please prevent,
and lance our wills, where fears and sorrows hide.

The Hearing

In the Silver Fox Room, the ring-necked pheasant on the mantel gazed over the Board of Faith and Practice in plenary session to the paired hunting horns and trophy of fox ears and hunting prints on the green silk walls.

The meeting had adjourned, the room was empty.

A cut-glass pitcher of ice water on a silver tray was set by lectern at the end of the council table.

Crawley was wheeled in from the lobby, the attendant barely getting him through the doorway before Crawley kicked back the foot rests and stood up, making his way around the table to the window.

From there, he could see past the portico of the adjoining Museum of Documents to the earthen dam at the north end of Foxglove Pond, the members' private lake.

Members—the Board had made this their club.

What he'd intended was a conference center—
a place for retreat, inquiry and meditation:
all of it undermined—like the Museum, Home and labs.

Soon the formless waters would undo it all:

“It is Thou, O River, who judgest man's judgment.”

“Avery,” the speaker had entered quietly—
too quietly for Crawley—from the lobby: Armand Hinklin,
full-faced, ruddy, with carefully maintained features.

For twenty years he’d worn crisply pressed suits
with bright ties and fluffy handkerchiefs in the coat pocket.

“Avery—” he smiled appropriately, extending his hand,

“I hope you’re feeling better.”

Avery noticed the biblical cufflinks as they shook hands.

“Thank you for your concern, Armand. Who joins us today?”

“Board member Lyman Jencks, Treasurer of First Church.”

“Of Jencks-Hartley Paper Mill, Links Information Services,
WJKW, L-J Realty, Jennies Shopping Center,
New Eden Motor Park, the Zoning Board and Security Corps,
I believe?”

“Lyman has, of course—“

“‘More joy in his heart than when grain and wine abound’?”

Avery finished icily, leaning on the lectern.

A tall man had just brushed into the room

under the nose of the pronghorn antelope

over the side door to the museum breezeway.

For a moment, Avery saw a different trophy over the door:

Lyman Jencks, with his long nose,

always looking through half-glasses

somewhere over Avery's head,

his sticky, straight hair never flattened enough to suit him,

wearing the camouflage uniform

(with polished buckle, Avery observed) of the Security Corps.

Avery liked to think of the antelope returning to some crag,

its replacement arrived.

Jencks spoke only to Hinklin, as if Crawley were not present.

“Let's begin now. I may be called out.

Our forces will soon secure the perimeter of Hennessey.”

“Whose are the other forces?” asked Avery.

Both men stared at him.

Armand replied, “Why, the Outer Regions—“

“And if angels are the other forces

and Heaven the other regions?”

Jencks shook his head and stared over Avery's head

but Armand replied again,

“Of course, that is what we shall determine here.”

Yes, Armand would determine, confer, deliberate,
determine again, then finally arrive at—
considerations.

Armand had been arriving at considerations
for the Board for seventeen years—
locusts, sunspots and board meetings
all apparently as cyclical as flywheels
that eternally return to *considerations.*

And seventeen years had passed since falling out with Will and Charlie,
though Charlie came around. When would Margaret come?

“Let’s begin,” Jencks repeated, sitting down.

Armand set his recorder for another session.

His silver hair was never disturbed by exertion.

Crawley’s knees trembled, his ears throbbed:

he gripped the lectern as waves of fatigue swept over him.

“The waking,” he said. “The waking share one cosmos.”

“Pardon me,” said Armand, moving closer.

“I’ll take some water first,” said Crawley.

The Home had its own cemetery, a walled garden

through which his attendant always rolled his chair.

“Can we begin now?” Lyman was saying.

Good! How many times had he had to say it?

“Very well, Member Jencks,” said Crawley

in a professorial tone. “As I said before,

“as I told all the members of the Board in these hearings

and told the public: All things on—“

“Now don’t go through all that again, Crawley!”

Jencks said impatiently, “We’ve got the gist.

“And we’re going to use it.

Imminent doom always sells.

There’s always profit in doom.

People see the need for the prayer pellets and offerings.

We all need reminding that this kind of thing can happen.

We haven’t had a disaster worth selling for some time.

But there’s more to it.

What were you doing in a boat coming from the Bay Regions?

Who was that oysterman?

Why did you leave your car and row out onto the lake?”

“I cast off from Signal Point, Lyman. I was coming here.”

“There’s more to it! What’s this?” Lyman held up the manuscript.

“There’s more to this than just prophecies of doom.

The staff In Apocalogeny say it’s a code.”

“Indeed, Mr. Jencks!

I hope they’ll find it as provably secure

as your perimeter around the lake.

They may even find it more entertaining

than your recent news commentary

on the pleasant weather we’re having.”

“Crawley, you’re falling out of—”

“Members—” Hinklin intervened. “Let us seek—

some consideration—

This new vision, Avery, is—

well, alarming.

Our members have been seeking some assurance of shelter.

Their investments insure them a sheltered percentage

of later dividends, of course, as in previous lotteries

but they also seek some assurance regarding
how the Lord will fulfill this vision.”

“Armand!” Crawley said. “There is no assurance.
There is—nothing! Only doom for all—
regardless of when they bought in.

Before now, they needed to seek another kind of shelter;
now there is no shelter high enough.”

“But surely, Avery.” Hinklin’s voice trailed off.

“Gentlemen,” Avery recovered his professorial tone.

Both Jencks and Hinklin were staring at the old man
in his green bathrobe, leaning on the lectern,
reciting, almost inaudibly,

*“Let even earth expire
in unremitting fire—
distress our senses,
shed our ‘essences’—
ashes divisible to jots invisible:
these easily suffice
another world to splice.”*

Let them have their Isaiah with some Empedocles as emollient.

The thought that essences could be just another garment—
nothing deeper than his own feebly firing Wernicke's area—
might qualify him for being out of faith.

But, in faith, he had been out of their faith for some time—
though he'd never bought or sold it. Yet—he allowed it.

How many more times would he tell this story?

Fortunately, he could speak without thinking about it.

“Gentlemen,” he said again, “there is hope in this vision—
but not of escape, and not of security.”

Jencks stood up.

“Sit down, Lyman. I did not contest your claim
to fire insurance for the old shopping center you burned down.

Neither will I contest your move to doom my Salvage Yard
as undeclared ratable property. You want to make a mall,
an ‘Ark Park’ of it, using capital from your merger
with Barbara Siebert's two dead husbands. Have it all!

I give it to you! But I remind you: Nothing is secure.

Not even Barbara's next husband,

who seeks to be Board Chairman when the way is clear.”

Lyman seemed to cave in. His face was ashen.

He reached awkwardly for the shoulder cords of his uniform.

Hinklin glanced around for something to write on, something to hold.

Crawley spoke again.

“Twenty two years ago I brought the Board the Vision.

It is not a new warning, Armand:

*‘All things on earth may slowly pass away
from disregard, before the snowline sinks,
the rasps devour, sun bloats, or powers decay’*

A time of preparation was needed, of justice
equitable and complete as inundation of the coastal plain.

The flooding reached all of us; many of our people died.

Many more survived in faith—or by cunning.

Indeed, I show no particular disfavor toward cunning.

Much cunning has preserved us, must itself be preserved:

‘None survive without all.’

That was the second revelation.

‘Each has its own place in the procession.’

The Board agreed to fund my studies, made me Director
of the Apocalogeny Division, commissioned a Vision.”

Crawley gazed out the window at the thunderhead to the north.

“It was my responsibility to cultivate angelic contacts,
to plan for consequences of the coastal inundation,
to establish a regional Center”

—All of which would have occurred anyway.

Only in such a time of fear and confusion would a project
such as the “cultivation of angelic contacts” have been valued,
much less massively funded by the faith offerings,
fund-raising drives and charitable appeals
upon which the Board had come to depend, absent taxes.
It was his Salvage and his well known fervor in collecting
that had convinced the populace, then the Board,
of the need to seek and save, repair, preserve, conserve:
all things, beings, and occupations of value—before their loss.

A time of preparation indeed!

No special inspiration was needed for that revelation.

The coastal plain was flooding.

The floods outstripped all measures to contain them.

Dissension and division followed,

With inland regions on all continents becoming isolated,
absolving themselves of obligations, then defedding.

Shifts in air masses following unpredicted jet-stream drifting
caused massive storms and inland flooding as well.

Crawley in his faded dungarees had spoken at church dinners
and auctions to anyone who would listen,

“The seeds of all life should be on the vessel.”

It was not, he insisted, a vision only for his family, but for all.

Commercial success of the Salvage gave hundreds of jobs.

None asked for him to justify his visionary claims

while he brought construction and employment to the Region.

He had more success than the coastal agencies,

who still called the flooding of the seaboard “saline incursions.”

On one of his last trips to the federal agencies

he had his second revelation—the yellow spots,

hundreds of them, along the streets

“No, thousands!” He shouted, almost toppling the lectern.

“An inspiration! But what was it?”

Neither Jencks nor Hinklin cared, but neither stopped him.

“An inspiration requires both fertile ambience
and capacious inhalation.”

Crawley spoke again as the professor.

* * *

The medical staff had assured Jencks and Hinklin that their best course
in dealing with aphasia of this type
was to let him ramble on;
possibly he would drop a clue concerning his tampering with the weather,
the electrical disturbances throughout the Region,
or the possible unlawful use of employees
as genetic research subjects.

The Board assigned Hinklin and one member each evening
to sit through these hearings until it was resolved.

* * *

“But what was there in the old Capital to breathe in?

Nothing!” Avery paused for effect.

“Nothing but everything!”

* * *

Jencks looked across at Hinklin, who smiled vacantly.

Probably asleep. To have been accused by a madman

would do no damage. He and Barbara could wait.

When the Board found that he had razed Siebert's apartment
to give First Church an unbroken property line
for their new parking lot they would applaud.

Then he would unveil his Plan for Comprehensive Regional Security,
with minimal premiums.

He looked up. Crawley stared directly at him.

“What is there ever to breathe in, to select
to connect, to preserve—in feelings? Nothing!”

Jencks sat up. “But everything!” Crawley smiled.

“We are speaking, gentlemen, of the post central cerebrum—
where we meet angels.

Every level is a boundary,
a surface mapped by difference equations.”

Crawley paused. Just enough jargon
to keep them from calling the attendant.

He wasn't finished.

The ride back through the cemetery should be paid for.

Somerville

“More tomatoes, Eddy?” asked Sally, holding out a plate of freshly sliced tomatoes and little green onions.

“No thanks,” Eddy mumbled. They sat by candlelight in Cicero and Sally’s little kitchen,

A power line must be down, somewhere, Sally said.

Sally lived partly by faith-offerings.

To prove her need for them, she and Cicero lived apart.

The law of faith stated there could otherwise be no need.

They remained faithful by living apart, Cicero quipped.

“How are the blue-gill biting?” asked Tom.

“Only you would ask about old blue-gill!”

Sally pushed back gray hairs from her forehead and held her knees, laughing.

Cicero leaned back against the sink, wreathed in smoke.

He hardly ate, for all the enjoyment he received watching Sally laugh and feed the others.

Her face was broad and brown, like his.

Like his, her hands were freckled with age.

He pointed to Tom with his pipe

but continued to gaze at Sally.

“Tom, he’ll try anything —once.

I remember a shack of his up the bank from here.”

Sally began to smile.

“How he really took Brother Crawley to heart.

He very nearly passed away!”

Sally bent over to her knees, which she could barely reach,

and came up with a blue apron over her mouth,

tears streaming from her eyes, sobbing with laughter.

She couldn’t catch her breath.

Cicero brought his chair down, gazing intently at Sally.

“Oh Cis, you shouldn’t mention that with Eddy here.

What he think of us?” She began sobbing again.

“You remember his—his *garden*?”

At that, both she and Cicero turned away.

“What they refer to was simply an experiment—

a trial run,” said Tom, pushing his glasses.

“He tried and he ran!” shouted Sally,

with Cicero whooping behind her.

“Well, since you have gone on about it,” said Tom,

“you’ll have to hear my commemoration of the occasion.”

“Oh Tom—you didn’t write about that!”

Sally wrinkled her nose and wiggled her fingers
at a thick-shouldered black tomcat curled in front of the oven.

“Another poem.” Cicero shook his head.

That was a sufficient introduction for Tom.

*“So I arose and went to Hennessey,
with sticky tar and shingles made
a shanty where the herons wade.
The cutworm and the stinging bee*

*“relieved me of my peace
(which was interminable)
and of salad for my table.
Hail drops like shot brought the decease*

*“of what remained, and my release
from Hennessey to home—warm and sane—
and shelter from the rattling rain.”*

“That wasn’t commissioned,” said Tom.

“And Avery pays you for the others?” Cicero asked,
still pacing in front of the sink.

“Only if it fits together the way he wants it.

I had a sestina hidden in a *terza rima* once—“

“But why?” Cicero said.

“What?” said Tom.

“Why would he pay you to write poems?

It’s not like those books that he’s saved—
or those statues and things.”

“It’s more like they were puzzles to him, I guess.

He doesn’t care about my tenor.

Well, at least he doesn’t want hymns about holy handkerchiefs,
ditties about deliverance modules or prayer pellets,
like the ones I wrote for WJKW.”

“That’s it, “ said Cicero, “he wanted you off the air.”

Tom ignored both the comment and Sally's giggle.

"I think it's because I try to make sense of things—

not the way Crawley does, but as things come.

I'm like a daddy long-legs—not much to look at,

but they say it always points to the cows.

I always need to be pointing somewhere.

Some, like Cicero, can talk without saying anything.

Sally can't say anything for laughing.

Eddy, you need to talk but never do—"

"Because you never stop," said Sally.

"Eddy, Cicero says Leah Washington your aunt."

Eddy nodded.

"I haven't seen her since I moved down here. Not for years.

How she be?"

"She fine," said Eddy, looking around the room.

If Security wanted these people, they wanted him too.

"She still doing for old Mr. Siebert?"

Eddy started to answer but Cicero had stopped pacing,

He squeezed Sally's shoulder and spoke loudly to Tom across the table,

“But why does Crawley want those poems?”

Tom didn't want to interrupt Sally

but she had stopped speaking when Cicero touched her shoulder.

“I just piece fragments together, like I said, Cicero.

Some of us explain; others express.

Crawley says there are pieces of all of us in each of us.

Once he tried to explain to me about frameshifts.”

“What?” said Eddy,

thinking of how much of himself must have been in Jimmy.

So little was left. Even the memory of what had happened.

What had exactly happened.

“Frameshift. Like *‘Come by nations’* for *‘combinations’*—

only that's not a very good one. Here's another:

Begin with dogwoods that change the first

and so none side

with golden mocker nut

or rusty oaks, they vary—from lavender

to red and crimson.

*Or begin—as all begin—with cells,
centers that surround,
that fold in graces
as they spread—
bind spaces they contain and line;*

*Soon, though folding races
to include all hues and variations,
growth ends.*

*The fluid surface bends
upon itself. A spine hides
in curled form or leaf.”*

The cat had curled up in Sally's lap.

Cicero relit his pipe.

“That one has several shifts,” said Tom,

“like ‘the fir stands on one side’ and ‘fold in graces’

And there's another tree hidden in the end.

Crawley told me about such messages

and how anything that grows is like part of a signal

rippling through the generations—

a signal compounded of multiple messages

like these frameshifts,

with each individual a different reading.

The readings occur at all levels—

what he called ‘scale invariance’

and one can pick up the reading at any point,

Which is why I say, ‘Begin anywhere.’”

Eddy spoke softly.

“Maybe Crawley wants the poems to give Tom a reading.”

The others watched Eddy closely.

“Maybe Crawley wants Tom to know his own reading,

his part of the signal.

Maybe for some it doesn’t matter about their parts.

They go on serving at tables or fixing engines

or writing in their books.

But maybe others want to know

where their part is—

what prepared the way for them,

where they are, and who will receive them.”

No one spoke. Eddy hardly remembered what he’d said.

“Old Charlie dead, isn’t he, Cicero?”

“Yes, son,” said Cicero, glancing at Sally.

She got up, waking the cat, who wildly jumped across the table.

Eddy stood. Sally hugged him to her breast.

“Cicero,” Eddy said, holding Sally’s hands,

“I’ve got to go back to Rectortown.

If you all don’t take me, I’ll go on my own.

I got to be there—I don’t know why.”

“We can’t stay here,” Tom nodded.

“In the morning, Tom, you take Eddy back.

I’ll take Sally.” Cicero’s eyes reflected the candlelight.

“Then we’ll all meet at the Point, as Avery told us to do.”

History

A history begins with friends—
those next door who knew the routine,
the boys who found an arrowhead,
stories spilled, and smoothed in telling

to friends, who always seem to have seen
or heard, or once to have thought to have said—
always agreeing to have known—the same thing,
but somehow forget how the story ends.

If any of our history is read,
let it be told you always kept from telling,
even for the pretext “between friends,”
whatever things I should or shouldn’t have said.

Cat's Dream

Where once men lived—at center—
in the dream time they no longer enter,
some still return—to curled
feline image of the world,
just audibly growling for comfort.

Furled about its axis,
lapped in field of *Felis*,
the arching earth is held—
not forced but spelled—
With ever graceful leap
to dance around the spinning year
yet seem asleep.

In a hurry

All things on earth wholly pass away
and this leaves no place or time
or reason to design
a thought or garden row
a self-collected moment
or a song
or image of a circling castle-keep

safe against decay; nor need I keep
spinning sediment away
from speech, delivering song;
nor, given reckless time,
need I be turning under row by row
for frost's curl, mildew's spot, or drouth's design
on greens, bulbs, or any new design.

No. If nothing of this keep
then I will leave my row,
spill seeds, and go away
down to Somerville, where one may spend time,
catch bluegill and get quarters for a song.

There's nothing in this row to keep—
nor need I find this song's design.
Head swallows tail. Time's got away—

*Let even earth expire
in unremitting fire—
distress our senses;
shed our "essences—"
ashes divisible
to jots invisible:
these easily suffice
another world to splice.*

The Dam Breaks

“‘The prepared mind,’ gentlemen?” Crawley tapped his head.

“No, rather it is the prepared environment, the background,
the surface of events that makes way for angels.

What is given becomes what is selected.”

How he had toiled over the modification of that plasmid,
a plant viroid vector for insertion into animal genomes,
his research coded in a crown of sonnets,
three hundred base-pairs in a crown of golden leaves.

Let them find the rules for decoding it!

“And what is received, however accidental in appearance,
is cause for thanksgiving, because it guides all selection,
all divergences”

Now he realized that to have sequestered
all metabolic sequences for other beings in human genomes
would have required all the resources
of the old federal public agencies.

The first revelation was incomplete.

“Thousands of yellow spots along the street!

Do you know what they were, gentlemen?”

He paused so long that Hinklin straightened his sleeve
and began to speak. “Gingko fruits!” he shouted.

Somehow, Hinklin was never quite ready for this part—
even though he had the story repeatedly.

“Nothing! And everything!

Like thousands of novae, each splattering distress signals,
a mobbing call, the rush of interferon from a dying cell,
slime mold amebae rounding up their body
with chemical cries,

the web-thrumming of a mother cobweb spider to warn young,
the sudden appearance of imaginal disc in insect
or optic vesicle in mammal:

It all came together. It all sorted out differently than before.

The angels—you see?”

(No, don’t show enthusiasm.

Madness is needed.)

More quietly, he continued, “I had never properly understood
the first revelation, you see.

‘Their voice had gone out’ but I had not understood.

Their message had come from every species—
shellfish, bacteria, legumes.

But before I took the modified viroid into my own body
I had not felt the doom.”

He had been content to pursue his own research,
return home in the evenings to Will and Margaret,
plan for what they might put on their Hennessey property—
then everything changed.

He'd started saving things he'd never noticed before—
old farm tools, steam engines, auto parts;
keeping animals of all kinds, wild and domestic.

Thus began the Salvage, the public appeals, the search
for a way to save ‘the seeds of all life’ in human vessels.

Then came the floods of the coastal plain.

Only after Will had children of his own
did Avery receive the second revelation.

By then, he'd a way to insert the genome of any organism
into a human host, the genes kept dormant indefinitely,
transmissible to offspring.

Reactivation of the dormant genome required
only the proper disinhibition sequence in tissue culture,
only alteration of the ‘background’.

But the second revelation had revealed a shortcut.

The ring-necked pheasant continued to peer at the fox ears
across the dimly lit council table
while windows rattled in the howling winds.

Avery had not looked at his listeners for the last half-hour.

Jencks stared at the sheets of rain sweeping the pond.

Workmen were laying sand bags at the dams.

Hinklin studied the scrolling of his redemption wrist watch.

“It was through the second revelation,” Crawley intoned,
“that I understood how one might describe boundaries
—boundaries of all kinds—without ascribing ‘within-ness’
to either side of the boundary.”

The damper rattled in the chimney
as the wind and rain battered the windows.

“Cell membranes, though they seemed to keep the world outside
were environment within and without.

At boundaries, the environment was reflexive,
self-expressive folding in all dimensions to behold its own beauty.

How independently of genes the cell membranes
repaired and replaced themselves.

How they extended through generations in multiple foldings
to encounter and accept all contingencies,
appearing even to include the environments
which directed them—however salty, hot or acidic!

Look at the boundary of a flock of flying birds—”

Crawley thought of the attempts of Foxglove researchers
to duplicate his findings after he had left the center—
the cultures of microbes and oysters and sheep,
the flightless geese, the thousands of tissue cultures—
as if angels could be taken by force!

And in Milford House, something had been done to Greaves and the others.

But Crawley had been content to study surfaces.

Since he left, the Apocalogeny Division was supervised by Jencks.

With their full knowledge of “nature’s perfect law,”

given in *The Acts and Major Teachings of the Board of Faith and Practice*,

And they were impatient with mere “superficial” understandings.

Crawley raised his arms, imitating a gliding hawk.

“How the flock shifts, flows around trees and roof-tops,
repels the attack of hawk or owl!
Always maintained, maintaining—
as with ameba or leucocyte.
It was *scale invariance*, gentlemen—
the same maintenance of boundary surfaces
at all levels of observation!”

Crawley looked across the table.

Hinklin hadn't noticed the new detail in his speech.

He was pouring himself the last of the water.

Clearly, they only waited for him to stop talking.

“It all came at once, don't you see?”

The problem was finally stated properly.

The solution was obvious—with countless examples.

Like the sleekness of fusiform dolphins

a consequence of interactions expressed by transform vectors

along dolphin-fluid surfaces over time.

Like the tubular regulation of energy exchanges,

invented by ancestors of sponges—

with our digestive system the consequence.

Like every path of interactions

on surfaces of multiple dimensions, with multiple divergences.

Like the kinetics of enzyme-substrate interactions;

Or the interacting determinants of populations' survival;

Or the strange, weak broadcasts

from thousands of modified plant viroids.

These I measured and felt.”

He pointed to his chest.

“Here, in my own body, as overpowering distress.

All of these interactions, intricately folded in multiple dimensions,

form a continuous but folding fluid surface of events.

From moment to moment,

this surface is perceived as tendencies—

and *choices*.

To make the proper choices, gentlemen,

one must seek a Vision of the whole surface of events,

the whole quilted fabric of events and peoples.”

To have such a Vision was one thing—but to bring it off!

It had cost him his son's friendship and respect

and—at last—Margaret's support.

She hadn't come; it was too late.

At least he'd gotten to Long and Cicero.

The code would now go to other Salvage sites.

Jencks and Hinklin pushed back their chairs and stood up.

Will had never forgiven him for “infecting” Willy and Margie
with the original viroid transponders—

even when he described it as a kind of immunization

and had explained the effects it had had on himself.

That was a mistake!

Will could barely accept Avery's eccentricities

while they did no harm; now it seemed that Avery had given them to his children!

Will never spoke to Crawley again.

Avery could never provide an adequate explanation to Will

because he himself never had more than an intuition

about why Margie and the three others would be needed later,

at the margins of the *fold*.:

Where the surface of events folded over on itself,

events jumped across the infolded space, or discontinuity,

to another region of the surface.

In many systems, like the movement of smoke,

the turbulent boiling of water

or the development of a thunderstorm,
the change from normal conditions
to the unusual conditions of the other region
seemed to appear at once,
“in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,”
although to those inside the jump
it might appear to last for a long time,
however disordered the events appeared to be.

Perhaps, as by Brouwer’s theorem,
Margie and the others were “fixed points”
which one might follow back to an original position
on the other side of the discontinuity.

This was not a simple textbook case, however.

All dimensions were involved—

why did only Willy and Jimmy seem to have been affected?

Perhaps a better analogy would be a thundercloud.

Hinklin had just come back from the door to the lobby.

They thought he had finished speaking.

Crawley cleared his throat,

“It was a clue to some kind of bifurcation set.”

That should give Armand pause.

Hinklin sat down again. Jencks turned from the window.

* * *

“All were of one surface—no inside, no outside,
no within-ness, you see! Only surfaces:

a material world beholding itself

as surfaces of interactions, a system of surfaces.

Twenty two years ago we reached a divergence—

much as a growing salamander, like *Ambystoma*,

imperceptibly changes identity from embryo to larva,

or as Pawmack diverges from Stanley’s Run.

We had been receiving a message within our surface-system.

Part of the message was read as the flooding of the coasts—

not that we’d never received other such messages before.

A simple divergence—a *choice*—was appearing:

a choice between cooperation of all parts

through common sense of crisis

or insulary self-annihilation: ”

Crawley whispered, forcing his listeners to come closer.

“None survive without all.

The vessel to contain the seeds of life

could be no smaller than the planet.

That was when I left this Center.”

He looked at Jencks, “That, Mr. Jencks, as you’ve suspected,
was when the parabolic arc-receiver inside the Ark
began to collect and concentrate these messages—
these signals—for transmission to the whole region.

Your station staff at WJKW unscrambled some of the signals

But too late, Lyman—by twenty two years!

We are already making the jump!

You never noticed how it began.

Only in the beginning could it have been stopped.

Since then, gentlemen, it has been entirely predictable
that there would have been minimal evidence of the change
taking place in the nature of events.

No notice is given until we reach the discontinuity—
until we begin to jump!

As it is written, ‘in those days before the flood
they were eating and drinking, marrying, giving in marriage’

Quite unexpectedly, within the jump

we appear to be experiencing time
but I suspect that this experience is transitory
and probably illusory—as memorable as a daydream.
You sent Barbara to the Salvage to spy for you, Lyman.
I only wish that you had not used the children.
Margie knew nothing about the transmissions—
and Jeff would never have rashly joined Security
and therefore been killed in a training accident.
Because of your efforts to ‘secure this area,’ he died—
And now is all is swept away!”

Crawley pointed to the window.
Jencks looked and staggered back.

The earthen dam of Lake Klawir had finally given way. Sandbag crews were racing back to the Center. Jencks and Hinklin rushed from the room.

The mere existence of chemical signals to induce swarming
or of other distress emissions
should have been a clue to Crawley much earlier.
A fraction of the genomes of many species had been conserved.
Bits of all of us in each of us—each capable of weak emissions.
Emissions enhanced by the viroid.

Crawley had collected them,
transduced, compressed and retransmitted them
in a kind of viral telemetry.

And that was enough tampering with initial conditions
to determine the course of events.

Just as sunlight fell from fold to fold of crumpled cloth
on his kitchen table as he sat with Margaret,
the consequent events of the upper surface of a fold
would appear suddenly—in a moment—
after jumping the discontinuity,
on the surface below.

A new equilibrium would be established.

All things would pass away—everything, yet nothing!

The reflection of the surface on itself
was a perfect repentance.

It was unlikely that the transition would be remembered—
no time wasted on self-congratulations!

A new equilibrium of cooperative interactions would appear.

That was what Salvage brought about—

a guide to the divergence and, afterwards

a disinhibition of the nonadaptive controls on cooperation.

The massed, weak signals from normal genetic telemeters

of hundreds of employees at the Salvage
had been quietly retransmitted throughout the Region

for the past twenty-two years.

Crawley had been surprised at small signs of its effect,
such as regional conventions and sporting events—

He looked up.

He was being wheeled along the museum breezeway,
the attendant's uniform rustling behind him—

but they weren't going toward the cemetery.

Crawley turned around.

“Emma!” he whispered.

Layerings

For me as for the rangy bramble stems,
green and tapering, more life is redundant—
a prolonging of form, a widening hunt,
layerings arching in casual systems
over slush and stones and fallen limbs—
a continual grapple for extent—
spreading jagged in sideways ascent.

Spreading jagged in sideways ascent,
occasions intersect, events divide,
courses alter, watery men decide.

I knew no ships, nor what sea-faring meant,
but sentries found my garden. Then more were sent.
Till dark I hid in bramble with spiny hide;
then into Pawmack Creek, where mud-dogs slide,

I slipped a boat, and down the river went.
Along the banks where we had gone before
I floated downstream, guiding with an oar.
Behind me, soldiers pitched a flapping tent
where brambles spread.

It was when, berries spent,

the old canes wither and with curling tips
over stone or wood or wire the new stem slips.

Green willow slips rode the stream beside me.

Where have they rooted, or stuck in dam, or nest?

We also are rootless, without rest.

The storm that slashed out in a weaving spree

left oozing mains, many a split tree

and car upon its back and lodged corn canes—

set us adrift—dispersed—dissolving grains.

The storm that fattened on our pains,

dividing us from homes, friends and wives—

and dwindled as we emptied—again arrives:

not as char-black coil or driving rains

hungry for shell-houses and propped-up gains,

but as whispers like a low draft creeping

by an old dog, who sniffs and growls while sleeping.

How carelessly love drifts from praise to slight

How little cause needs power's vain display—

How needle drifts, and bearings never stay—

How tender speech has surface cinder-white.

Asleep midstream, I felt the night
take by a field, a tree, a toppled wall,
a road, and every face I could recall.
Just as when I'd corn oil on display
under a sign that flickers as you walk by,
I seemed to be blinking from eye to eye
to make the surface still.

A kind of play
it was—each blink an hour, each scene a day:
Jencks and his soldiers marching through the corn—
what Avery said when Margie was born—
waking Sally in the early morning—
when a bat still fluttered overhead.

Nothing that we said had not been said
when the first storm-worm, lashing its sting,
made cattle moan and stone foundations ring.
Taking her bags in liver-spotted hands,
I helped her board a truck to safer lands.

More life is redundant: the certain narrows

through which plenties pass, and all's submerged—
or else a glut releases all submerged
beneath our usual decencies and shows—
sculling as a water-strider goes,
our paired oars test a surface of events;
we ride a bouncing skin of incidents
we never dip beneath, or should we go,
we find another surface without depth
to meet upon, replay our birth and death,
converge and come apart, conceal and show.

From act to act, from scene to scene we go,
and skim from part to part till what endures,
residual, derives from what injures.

You, Eddy, since you lost your part,
became partner with Avery, to him went
from Rectorstown (which grace from heaven sent—
away).

Returned, you've watched us come apart—
Fairall's end and Foxglove's latest start.
Even Lyman Jencks has had his way
as Tom will tell us when he has a say.

To end, I drew up to that pylon ledge.

A skipjack, waiting, circled with line submerged.

Patton was aboard—how my heart surged!

Yelled out, “Here !“ He dropped the dredge.

Now, round a fire, here, by the water’s edge

we warm ourselves, converged, as does my creek

here, Bay-emerged, with earths and rivers speak.

Rectortown Highway

Willy was sure he had made a wrong turn going north
on the old Rectortown road. What was he doing?

Why was he on this road in such a storm?

Poor, cracked trees were downed all along the road;
shearing gusts of wind shook the little truck.

But if he'd made a wrong turn, wouldn't he know?

Wouldn't he know where he was going?

A sudden downpour seemed to flood over the whole truck.

For a moment, he thought he'd gone into a stream.

He pulled off the road, his headlights shining on a branch
or bundle of some kind, blown against a stone wall.

In the light, the bundle turned around with a face:

it was a human being! He ran for the truck.

Willy reached across the seat and threw open the door.

"Jimmy!" he said, astonished.

"Yes," he paused. "Jimmy, Jimmy."

He laid his head back on the seat and closed his eyes.

Willy pulled back out onto the highway.

There was a bridge ahead over Stanley's Run.

In this storm it would probably be swamped.

He'd just have to turn around. But if it was clear

he could get to the college in Rectortown.

They could stay over night in one of the dorms.

As the truck neared the bridge he thought he saw lights.

Security Corps—perhaps turning traffic away.

No, a soldier beckoned him ahead.

The bridge was still safe, except for the awkward turn
coming up at the intersection on the other side.

A troop truck coming toward him was turning too fast.

It was going to tip.

Willy pulled hard to right, flying off the end of the bridge.

The truck nosed into the embankment

where it steamed a moment and then burst into flames.

Meeting Place

Emma wouldn't have gone along with Avery and Margie if Margaret hadn't insisted—

What purpose could be served by being stranded in the rain on old Rectortown road? At least they could use the bypass.

Crawley was talking out of his head.

Who knows what they'd done to him at Foxglove?

He hadn't stopped since he had gotten into the car and seen Margaret and Margie.

They should all return to Fairall—
anywhere but Rectortown. What now?

“Emma, hurry!” Margie was shouting from the back seat as Emma tried to wipe the fog from her windshield.

“Child, I can barely even see.

Where are we supposed to be going in such a hurry?”

“Yes, that must be it !“ Crawley shouted, squeezed between Margie and Margaret, completely ignoring Emma's complaints.

“Our very certainty that Jimmy and Willy are dead is an indication that they are not!

Refusing to accept the chaotic order of events
which we are experiencing,
our brains have smoothed out experience for us,
making it more believable.

None of us agrees on when the accidents happened—
or even how. Were they together or apart?

On a tractor or a truck?

What had a troop truck to do with it—if anything?

It suggests a current-harmonic pattern of movement
through the discontinuity—like convection waves.

In some way, we have repeatedly experienced
components of their accidents in disordered sequence.

That must be it:

together with a kind of time-dilation

Over the course of the catastrophe,
during which the random firings of neurons—”

“Would one of you PLEASE WIPE THE REAR WINDOW!”

But Granddaddy, I remember seeing Willy.”

“Yes, I’m sure you did—or will—see him.

It’s just the same for Eddy—“

“Who?” asked Margaret, trying to reach the rear window.

“Jimmy’s friend, “ said Margie.

“Yes, and also ‘infected,’ as your father says, Margie.

Charlie helped me with that, despite misgivings.

I’m sure Eddy believes that he remembers too.

The four of you were—or will be—together.

Even now, you are homing together

onto the other side of the discontinuity—

and I, for one, will be glad to arrive.

I only hope that what we believe about Jimmy and Willy is not true.”

“Granddaddy, you just don’t make sense—“

“That’s his trademark, Child,” said Emma,

looking at the lights ahead.

“The first indication to me

that we had reached the discontinuity

was the surge in signals we all felt

at the time of the simultaneous accidents—

they must have been simultaneous—

the bitter taste,

the sudden appearance of thunderheads, and so on.

Of course, there are no ‘same time’ experiences.

There is only developmental time experience.

Each of us constructs his own time transforms;

we all experience conventional same time differently.

Perhaps when, for a moment,
we fully experienced the reality of a time transform
different from our own—a personal disaster, an accident—
a critical point was reached.

A personal disaster always strikes
at the center of a universe—at Eden, Fara or Fairall.
It was then we jumped into the discontinuity—”

“Our daddy always said Avery
could explain the whiskers off his face,” said Emma,
looking back at Margaret.

“What’s that ahead?” Margie screamed.

Emma stopped on a bridge.

At the other end of it,
a huge cattle truck had overturned, blocking the way.
Soldiers were standing all about.

Off to the right, under the end of the bridge,
a truck had caught on fire.

The guard rail was slowly swinging from the bridge
like the sprung metal coil off a sardine can.

Margie pushed her way through the soldiers,
sliding down the muddy embankment
to the smoking truck—her dad’s truck.

A small group of people huddled around another truck,
parked up the hill.

She recognized one of them—Eddy!

He was talking to a red-haired man in a stocking cap.

“Margie!” he said. “It was Willy and Jimmy.

I saw it happen.

That cattle-truck jack-knifed coming around the turn.

Willy swerved off. He fell out when the truck hit.

I pushed him out of the way and then got Jimmy.”

“Where are they?”

“Rescue squad took them to the hospital at Foxglove.”

Eddy was holding Jimmy’s jacket.

“You must have passed them coming down here.”

“The soldiers?”

“Soldiers? What soldiers?”

Margie looked around. There were no soldiers—

only rescue units tending to the wounded.

Jeff Jencks was lying unattended on a litter.

Eddy laid the jacket over his face.

Signals

Some take love's rarity
the famine sign of general despair;
probing to gain common purchase,
they measure, tune, filter,
pass wave-lengths
dish to dish, deep to deep:
As if those who live in currents
feel no sweep outwards,
in all ways they return inwards.

Even oysters, agape at high tides,
uttering wordlessly,
outer themselves— extend;
while milling and grinding,
dining in common, they sift shallows,
grow out, umbos to lips—
spiral in perfect outward acts
of inward grace.

They appraise surfaces;
probe , but rightly—
wanting and owning nothing—

even they reveal in sweep of tentacles,
and arrays of mollusk purposes,
and pearl extracts—
as in every rarity –
our want of skill in feeling without words.

Drifting, reaching past speech, words set—
but larvae lose their eyes,
lie on their sides
and swallow the river.

Fishing at the Point

Cicero and Sally were fishing from the dock at Signal Point.

Avery was nodding to sleep in the warm sunlight,
an open manuscript on his lap.

Tom Farley was watching the three of them,
occasionally glancing at Patton Long,
tonging for oysters out in the Bay.

Tom wondered what to make of what Crawley had told him
as they drove back from the accident weeks before.

He'd written it down on the back of an envelope.

Wearing an old green bathrobe,
Crawley had stepped out of a car driven by a Foxglove nurse.
He was so pleased about some prediction he'd made.
He'd verified that some kind of solar storms or eruptions
had been responding to "distress signals" from earth!
"Jencks and the others failed to notice," he said,
"the subtle changes in a population
maintained on a schedule of prolonged apocalyptic faith—"
whatever that had meant.

"By altering the environmental background
over a long enough period of time,
our natural distress-behavior systems were readjusted—
gradually—given a new reading, Tom!
Cooperative behavior, enhanced in this gradual way
over a sufficient period since the divergence,
led inevitably to the discontinuity."
Tom was mystified.

Crawley had him to drive all of them to Signal Point.
Cicero had been waiting for them at the boat house.
They had Crawley's clothes, things for Margaret and Margie,
and Crawley's own version of Tom's manuscript,

which Patton had kept for him. Why so secretive,
why Mr. Jencks should never see it,
Tom couldn't understand. Perhaps it was a surprise
for Mr. Jencks, coming up in Rectortown's First Church.
Jencks had recently turned over his excess assets
to the City of Rectortown
so that he would have more time for volunteer work.
Crawley's remarks about the weather
were even more difficult to understand:

*“Just as thunderclouds will suddenly balloon
to a tremendous volume
when pierced at one or two points by strong updrafts
of warm moist air,
so a massive discontinuity suddenly appeared
when critical events occurred at two fixed points:
the accidents of Willy and Jimmy.
Tom, you must try to help me remember this
in one of your memorial verses.
You must write it down now,
for I will not remember it later.
All things will have passed away—”*

Tom looked at the scrap of writing.

Perhaps it was, in fact, something conceived

and written while half-asleep—

a scribble that made no sense the following morning.

Margaret came out and stood behind Crawley's chair.

As he looked at Avery Crawley,

whose chin now jutted out from under the ball cap

as he reclined in his lawn chair in the sun,

Tom was sure that he had made it up himself

and then forgotten about it.

Besides, it hadn't rained for weeks.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Coda

As in the dark,
fumbling with a rib,
by trial and omnipotent failure,
create in us a clean heart, O God.

Complete, as the folded day,
or sudden turns of circling birds
in streaming swarms,
a new spirit within us.

As the plumed mimosa closes,
folding equally her fronds,
hold, like leaf-green day,
your presence within us.

THE END

Finding a purchase[†]

Explorations in understanding

By

Irene Brooks

“...no theoretic refinement has been allowed to modify the skeme, if it wud detract from usefulness or ad to cost.”—Melvil Dewey, *Introduction to the Decimal Classification and Relative Index*

“...allay all jealousies as to the object of your journey, satisfy them of it's (sic) innocence.”—Thomas Jefferson, 1803

“I doubt if any winter counts, the Indian calendars recording the most important events of the year, even recorded the arrival of the expedition.”
—Vine Deloria, in *Lewis and Clark through Indian Eyes* (Alvin Josephy, ed.)

[†] *This version is abbreviated and without illustrations. See website for the expanded version.*

Dedicated to
SUSAN IRENE ROSE
The first of May

FINDING A PURCHASE

Push off the Perogues (100)

1

Now I will speak of understandings
And of how things are:
To expose and tell
What knowing is
And what is known.

Of many before
And many to follow
I am but one, no more—
Two eyes, two ears,
And a thicket past the brow.

We live within our magnitudes,
Tell tales, tend right and left,
Behold no more than is revealed
And yet we imagine other scales
And other latitudes,

2

Other worlds –upstream
And down into the grain of things.
Other worlds, our theme
To work and realize,
Are found in our imaginings
But understood by reckonings
That map both thoughts and prize.

Oh that we could gather wisdom up
Not as a yarn,
Covered by retellings,
Or a tale cut from chatterings against silence,
Wild caws, and chittediddles' saws,
But as radiance in a cup.

3

As we two settle in this place
My aims are but to understand experience,
And show such understandings as I may,
And claim that knowers and the known
Suffice.

Save dreaming, there's no more:

No take-off without landing,
No pulse without breath,
No life without death.
Nothing's known –however much we're fond—
Nothing's known of myst'ry, the beyond,
Or understanding beyond understanding.

4

I am but one, no more,
And if I tell how things are
It is for now, no more,
And if I find ways to tell
That stay close to the bone
Without becoming ossified,
It is to depart this skull,
To pull off and look back,

The principle applied
Being that to go outside
Requires free passage
From a thousand tribes,
The agencies of thought,
The native peoples who create what is.

Good Medicine (200)

1

What was, and is, and is to come
Is not beyond understanding
But sitting across the room.
Given any two, it is the constant third,
Special but not spectral:

The *between*
That beckons from another's eyes,
Not thing or being
But relationship,
A domain whose variables
Rise from interactions
And fall when we slip
In betrayals.

*This passage lies
Through others' eyes.*

2

This passage is a tunnel
With ancient trails to other rooms
Where by trials and ordeals
We try out our ideals
Such as they are:
A great catch,
A sharing of bread,
A send-off for the dead.

Above, the martins throng the Spirit Mound—
Not souls, but birds
Who know where insects can be found.
So are creeds—
The high aerobatic acts
Made of deftly soldered speculations,
The flux of words.

3

Worship defines the object of devotion;
Then canon follows revelation.
Given the ritual or rationale,
We choose tradition or reformation.
Either names the nameless.

This is not a person, place or thing,
Only the *between*
Summoning us to action
That ties and re-ties us to the given,
For we are gifts of the survivors
By whom and from whom we rise.

4

You are the gift,
The gift of survivors,
The *gift outright*
Of land and family and culture.
Despite your wishes,
You are the gift.

Attend. Learn what was given.
Give and respond and listen.

You are the gift,
Lifted from the human and animal,
The beautiful and terrible.
Despite their wishes,
You are the gift.

Hear then the holy message:
There is no easier passage.

Ubuntu (300)

All who cross the continent,
Meet every human tribe,
Climb the great divide
To look behind our human history,
And make the thousand portages
Across the wide cerebrum
Learn to see.

Sometimes in a rush,
Sometimes a thready course
Of bottlenecks and self-deceptions,
We make but one river.
One mind, one people,
One living and one cosmos
Made of many,
We learn to see.

The Interpreter (400)

How can we trust her?
She could call a strike on our position
And we would never know.
Captive of one people,
Bought by another—
Like words, stolen on pretext
Of being loaned--
She finds us artichokes
By poking sticks in trails of meadow-mice.
Is it in fact her gift or something *she* would never eat,
Some joke to see *us* eat it out of season?
Yet only by looking through her eyes can we see.

Conceptions (500)

Concepts always betray the facts.

The notions of a bear

From paw prints left in barren tracts

Or stories natives share

Of vengeful giants snapping necks

Like beans; or drawings scaled

To the micron; or muskeg specks

From tundra cores detailed

To prove an ancestral beast

Stopped for halibut;

Or image showing the least—

A follicle of hair, cross-cut—

Miss the black maw

Of oblivion.

Contraptions (600)

With hinges, bridges, booms,
Sockets, needles, ropy sinews,
Rib-vaulted rooms, gliding puzzle-joints
Musky remedies, perfumes, knives, inks
Bloody drinks, fabric of hide,
And necklaces of teeth and claws
Worked out from the slaughtered beast,
We wipe the ochre from our faces,
Speak to the departing spirit;
Rub out faint lines of construction
And other bloody traces
Of how we learn technique.

Counterpoint (700)

Art, always confrontational,
Shows all knowledge is relational.
Crawlers creeping on all fours,
We make our way on metaphors.
Assault both from the rear and frontal
Compels us to be contrapuntal.

There are no town limits here.
We anchor our craft from fear
The churning swells of voices
Will tip out our devices.
Guiding art or how we think
We use images or sink.

Props (800)

Supporting action are the qualities of things,
Five sets in a second changed on a stage
That is the world, whose openings—
All played within, there being no without—
Present reality, arriving all the rage,
Leaving at the side door, bundled with provisions.
As for the red wheelbarrow,
And Experience—wide or narrow—
In matters of this sort
What we know is by report.

2

Self-knowledge, perfect form or beauty,
Like alchemy, eternity, and equity;
The Grail, and checks forever payable,
Though neither real nor achievable
Are worthy in that what we learn
Along the way is a true prize to earn:
That it's better to inquire;
That oxygen feeds fire;
That deeds remembered are immortal
And liberty's a holy portal.
*Accept that what we take
For things is what we make.*

Partners (900)

What's given simply is too vast
For us to take more than we make.
The universe has us outclassed.

A witness wants to be believed,
But in passage to the report
Intention frames what is conceived;

Though truth may always be our aim,
It is embedded in belief.
Someone must work to clear its name,

A partner for the passage through the dark:
A Krishna, Enkidu, Nestor, or Clark.

2

The only partner I have had in this
To wait, to listen, and to see me through,
Unknown, yet inches from this line, is you;
Yet I might know you well enough to kiss--
With each always purchase of the other,
With each a continent to understand,
With each a hidden people, hidden land
Sharing all lines and the quilted cover
Of the Earth, now surveyed;
Waiting to be remade.

THE END