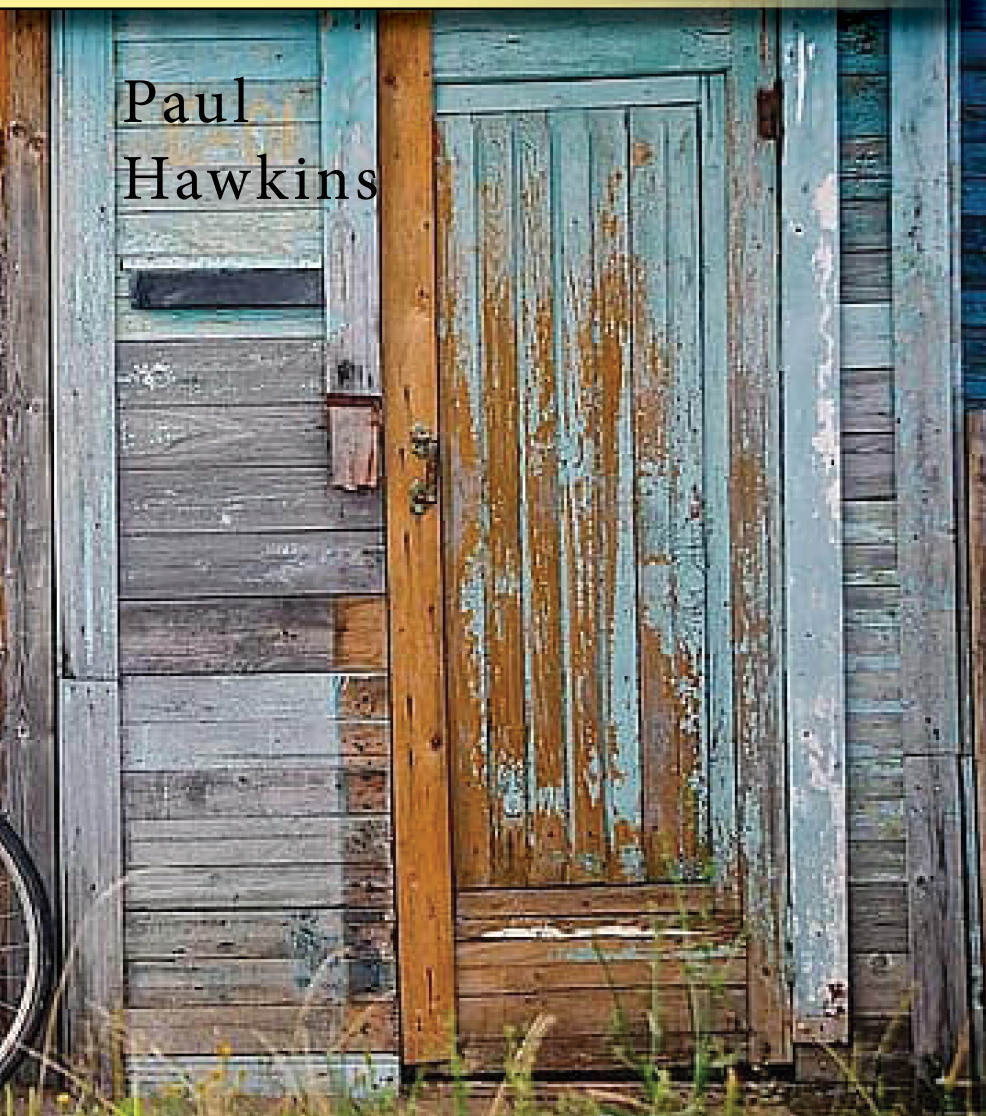


A Quiet Place of One's Own

Paul
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1939:

A man road his horse toward town, skirting the edge of the woods, only taking the road to cross a wide, lazy green river. Then it was back to the woods with him. While on the road he had been passed by a Model A packed full of stiff-clothed church-goers. The men wore black, the women long plain dresses. They clutched their hats to their heads. He hung back until the dust cleared. He remembered it was Sunday, but for the longest time days had meant nothing to him. He lived in a kind of grey cloud of a wife dead and his children now adults and fled, and him alone in the house. He noted the seasons, but not the days. He nursed his crop from shoots to market every year, but this year he had hardly bothered. He would sell his farm to the man who'd always wanted it. He wouldn't even pinch him on the price. He had one chore in town to complete and then he would be gone forever.

The man was named John Parker but was locally appellated "Park."

Park was a tall, lean man of 45, but he looked older. He was tanned. He had short hair curly hair that was once yellow but was sun-blached to a yellow-white. He was not your typical farmer. He wore an old suit vest and a sweat-stained fedora while out in the fields. And his blue eyes were the color of ice. Instead of bright they were most often flat and weathered, though he could force them into a façade of interest if his company required it.

He was riding into the small Oklahoma town of his residence, Titus. There was a new town and an old town. The old town had been located on the banks of the river and now rested in partial decay like a leaf in the mud; the new town sat three miles to the east, along the state road and the railroad. The old town's scant business district sat abandoned among reclaiming vegetation, but some outlying residences here and there along narrow dirt streets remained stubbornly occupied, with their occupants taking their trucks into town once a week for supplies, and in between waiting on the gasoline truck to fuel their generators.

The new town of Titus remained clean three decades after its birth. It benefited from the railroad and the state highway. A grain elevator rose above all other structures, and the depot resided along the town's main street in the shadow of square brick buildings. You could throw a stone from it and hit the department store, the bank, the post office, the county courthouse, and the city hall. Its main trade still came from local farmers, although every so often wildcatters would come through town and convince a farmer to let them sink holes, hoping for the next Wild Mary Sudick. It was everyone's dream to get oil rich. The man he was selling the farm to was convinced it sat atop black gold. Take his money, Park thought, and let him think that.

Park's horse was dappled and walked slowly. It was evening and the man knew that he would spend the night at the house of a friend. He had thought of camping out, but damned if he'd camp out ever again - he had done it on cattle drives in his youth and that was enough. To this day his back did not forgive the memory of stones under his bedroll. A man needs some comforts. His friend would ask about his

business and he would divert him by talking about old times (they had been school friends), and he would make the man nod off with drink. He told himself it was just to have a roof. And if necessary, he would allow himself to be a little eccentric - unlike most of them, he had been to college, and though his friend had gone to college with him, he knew Park to be a bit off.

Park guided his lazy horse to one of the houses in the old town and down the long dirt lane from the fence and the mailbox to the small farmhouse with curtain-billowing windows all opened against the heat.

His friend David met him halfway up the lane and took the horse's bridle and told him, "Walk with me while I take the horse to the barn."

Park was glad to dismount.

"You and me are two odd ducks, Park – the Harvard farmers."

"Hah – well, the A&T farmers, maybe."

"Let a man puff himself up a little – at least we went. Of course, I learned animal husbandry and you stuck your head in books. I came out knowing how to artificially inseminate a cow, but I'm not sure what you came out with other than a head full of dreams. Of course, you transferred out to get a degree in Lit. You're a man of letters underneath a sweat stained hat. You read every book you could get in your hands: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Byron-Shelly-Keats. But you ended up married to a dirt farm."

"Someone needed to look after my old man and my brothers were no good. What could I do? Leave him to die?"

"But you stayed on."

"I was married by then."

"And you were good to her. Look, you're free now. Maybe you have a desire to see the world. After 30 years it might not be a bad time to indulge it."

"Not sure."

"Look, as a friend, let me tell you you've been too lonely. It does things to a man's head. There's nothing keeping you here now. Sell that farm and hop on a train."

"I am planning to, but I have to settle a few things first."

"Of course. Are you feeling well?"

"Why?"

"You look a little peaked. How long since you've eaten?"

He could not remember.

"You need a meal."

"And a drink?"

“Maybe just one.”

They settled the horse in the barn and then walked into the small but tidy house. It felt bigger inside than outside. Dave was a tidy bachelor. He went into the kitchen and returned with a large glass of water and a small shot of whiskey.

“Some of the farmers pay for my assistance in moonshine. I help them with planting windbreaks and boning up on crop rotation. Hell, I should work for the county extension but I’d hate the hours.”

Park took a drink and sat on the couch. His friend soon had their dinner ready, two rare steaks and potatoes, and Park wolfed his down like it was his last meal. After that they moved to the living room and pulled up two chairs beside the radio, David turned it on.

“Damn,” Park said, “An opera station?”

“Straight from New York via Wichita.”

Park finished his drink and then said, “Maybe just another – I can’t relax.”

The man filled his cup then watched him put it to his lips.

“That’s better,” Park said.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what is so important that you can’t just take a few days and relax? You can stay with me. What is so weighty that you have to go riding into town like a horseman of the apocalypse instead of just zipping in and getting it done?”

“I like the rhythm of a horse under me. Another?” he asked, holding out his cup.

His friend took the cork out with a half-second’s hesitation. “Maybe just one more, if it will help you sleep.”

“You’re a prince. Remember when we put those cows into the dorm showers during final’s week?”

His friend laughed. “Did someone put us up to that, or was it all us?”

“It was all you.”

“I never was so mischievous. I question your memory.” But he did not protest hard, and his face was smiling.

“You got me into trouble. I’m lucky I graduated.”

“I had to get you into trouble,” David said. “I was never any good with girls. Here you sit, in the hall of the bachelor farmer. Women still make me nervous, even today. Never figured them out.”

Park looked at him and laughed. “Maybe that’s a blessing.”

“I don’t know. You never had any trouble with them.”

“I never had any trouble talking with them - the trouble comes after, when they think they love you.”

“It gets lonely here. I think there’s worse things than being loved. Maybe if I could meet some widow woman.”

“All the same!” Park said with a grandiose wave of his hand.

His friend looked at him thoughtfully.

“One more?” Park asked.

“You’ll have a hell of a headache.”

“Okay, cut it with water.”

The man went to the kitchen and came back with the cup, and Park took it.

“Let a man who’s about to gamble himself warm inside a little.”

His friend got a glint in his eyes and spoke measuredly, like floating out a pawn in chess. “So what’d you say you’re going to town for?”

Park opened his mouth but then drew his fingers across it. “You almost got me,” he said. “I suppose I should be getting to bed.”

“Don’t do anything crazy. Just drain your bank account and go to Timbuktu and send me postcards.”

“That’d be nice. I will after I’m finished.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“You really think I’m about to do something crazy, don’t you?”

“You need a bath.”

“Tomorrow and tomorrow.”

“Well then, you can have my bed.”

“No, the couch is fine. You’re too kind.”

“Then get some rest. You’ll have a headache tomorrow.”

“I can live with it.”

After some tidying up in the kitchen, his friend turned out the light. Park pulled off his boots and stretched out on the couch. Only then did he realize how tired he was. His whole body ached. He propped a pillow beneath his head and in two minutes was asleep.

*

He took a bath in the morning and pulled out finer clothes from his bag than David had expected. Once dressed he looked not quite ready for a funeral but somewhere close.

“Just drop me off at the depot.”

“You can go any direction from the depot.”

“Yes. Don’t pry.”

“Okay, the depot it is.”

The sun had risen with a haze of a grassfire nearby.

“You don’t need your pack?”

“No. Look, when I’m done I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

His friend swung his old De Soto out onto the dirt lane and then onto the smooth county road. Elms undulated in the breeze along the roadside for a while, and then as they left the aura of the river, nothing but flat and dust.

“Makes me thirsty,” Park said.

“We’ll be there in two shakes.”

In a minute the first low shacks of the town appeared. David steered his car across the train tracks and then the fine houses appeared, a few ranks of them with mailboxes by the road, some with their flags already up, and then rose the squat brick edifices of the middle of town. The man turned right and went between the bank and the hotel, and then one jog past the telephone office and he was at the depot.

“Everybody out,” he said, and gave a kind of laugh.

Park exited and tipped his hat to him.

“Thank you, gov’ner.”

“Showing your schooling.”

“The Dickens you say. Movie house education.”

His friend laughed.

“Wait for my call later this afternoon. And take good care of my horse.”

David agreed to do so. He was always David and never Dave. At school there had been another kid named Dave, and everybody thought of him as low-born. He had brought head lice to school more than once.

Park waited for David’s car to disappear, and then he walked to the diner and ordered ham and eggs. He found out he could not eat but he lingered over his coffee and the waitress tried to chat him up but he demurred, talking about the dry weather and how bad it was for his crops. Once she kenned he was a farmer she did have two words to spare.

*

1929:

There were two sons of a wealthy local horse rancher. The younger one was Phillip (never Phil), an earnest preacher, and the older one was Bryce, a gambler, bootlegger, and lout. He lived off his father’s money and drove into Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri to play the horses and always came back with his

car loaded with booze hidden in secret compartments he'd had built in. Not that it mattered if you paid the cops enough – everybody was on the take. It was good for the state economy. But he didn't even do it for the money – he just did it for the sport. What money he needed came from a horse ranch his father had carved off for him, principally for raising thoroughbreds and lending them out to stud. The man had dark hair and could be considered a dandy – he wore dark suits and had a bright watch on a chain and enjoyed cigars and liked to think he was rakish with the ladies. The hair was thick and coarse on the backs of his knuckles.

Phillip was the progeny of a second, fair-haired wife. The husband and the first wife, a stern brunette of a stocky build, had parted once he got rich and thought he could do better, and she left him because she thought she could do better with a nice chunk of his money in a more sophisticated city far away from his vain, domineering personality.

Phillip was more of a wisp than his older brother. He was a willowy blond man with scant whiskers and large eyes that drank in the world sifted through romantic poetry. He was of a mind to be a preacher of an Emersonian order, with Christianity as a kind of hood ornament to a vehicle driven by a loose but inspiring concept of higher ideas and Universal Love. He became a favorite of socialite ladies and was invited to many teas and had many willowy introspective daughters foisted upon him, but just when it was looking like marriage was too worldly for him to contemplate he chose the most unlikely match – an immigrant woman of dark complexion and wild ideas about past lives and séances and love without concupiscence. They had an ethereal wedding and the absence of concupiscence lasted a while and they could always be seen walking like two diaphanous butterflies tilting on a single breeze, and in memory the light seemed to break through the clouds to light their path, but something must have gone wrong because six months after their marriage they announced she was with child. Everyone agreed she must have just pinned him down one night and taught him about the birds and the bees.

After the baby was born Phillip grew the flimsiest beard a male has ever grown and took to wearing a tall dark felt hat of a decade prior, like a country parson's hat. She would stay at home nursing the baby while he went on an ever-expanding circuit of teas and lectures. It came to be where he would be gone for weeks at a time and would send her back the most effusive postcards vaguely asking about the happy bundle but mostly blathering about the beautiful things to be seen in the big cities – in Chicago, and St Louis, and then, yes New York, and finally, in Europe – oh the rarefied Celestials that alighted there! Someday it would be their home. It was about this time she began wondering if she shouldn't go back to her home country, in Eastern Europe, which she heard had mended itself into a quiet prosperity after the first world war. But it was at the moment that she was considering this thought that she met Park, who was in town to inquire about some small banking transaction, and something decidedly non-Emersonian kindled in the very brief time their eyes brushed. He went home and tossed in bed like he had caught a fever; she felt the drudge of caring for the baby lifted off her for the first time in months. She noticed that it had a sweet face, and she rocked him gently in the shaded room, and sang to him.

Nothing came of that meeting though because Park was married and every shred of his conscience told him to be loyal to his family and he had deeply ingrained in a sub-layer of his mind, from a strict Protestant upbringing, the sense of the forbidden. After weeks of fantasies of her in his arms and knowing her and being loved by her in a way that made him feel alive, he learned to tell himself to put it aside. He took to working double hard in his fields as a kind of atonement for even thinking of straying, and he loved his family, and his wife sensed in this a kind of compensation but she did not show it – she

was just pleased to see a little spark out of her brooding husband – she knew that he missed a life of books and educated conversation. He felt he had left a very particular kind of happiness behind. He loved his children and had a very strong desire to see them grow up healthy and strong – and leave – but there was the spark in him that wanted something more.

He did, though, ask in town about the woman's name, and in every question had the desperate sense that someone would immediately guess why, but no one ever did. The pastor's poor neglected wife was named Olivia. He treasured the name the way a boy might put a keepsake in a box under his bed.

As for Olivia, as her husband's flightiness grew she would insist the he stay home to help raise his child, and in fits and starts he did, once for even three straight months at a time, even working at a holy roller church that his whole mind bridled at, but always he was drawn away again. When the child was two, she took to leaving it with a lady and working tidying rooms at the hotel. It was good to escape. She thought of leaving Phillip – it was obvious whatever he needed to sustain his ego was only to be found as a prophet of the guilded set, not at home. He probably even had a woman somewhere. He earned good money but spent good money on fine things mostly for himself. He moved them to a nicer house but she just had to get out, hence her job – just to be among people. Finally one day she met Park again.

He was in town to settle the purchase of some adjoining acres since, in his extra dedication (when others were in the clutches of the Depression), his farm prospered. The man he was buying from dragged himself to the clerk's office for the transaction like a shell. He was dirty and looked hollow, defeated. Park offered a fair price but knew the man had lost all hope of anything but escape. It tore Park up inside. He could only complete the deal with the thought that he was investing in the well-being of his family.

That night after completing the deal at the bank, he stayed in the hotel. He was not a man who thought he deserved especially nice things, but it was nice to stay in the clean room with turned-down sheets and a smell of lilacs and a drawing table with stationary to the side as if it expected that he might need to sit down and write something important. He took a warm bath and enjoyed just soaking for once and then he went downstairs and ate a better dinner than he could usually afford in the hotel restaurant, and then as evening fell and the air cooled and the sky turned pink at the edges, he decided to take a walk. It was then that he saw the man that he had purchased from, drunk in the street, jeered by those around him as he complained:

“God damn the world! What is there but cruelty that sets men in it just to suffer? Lord, I tried to be a good man and feed hungry mouths. What is there but anguish in the air that snatches every bite like Tantalus before the table? Lord how your promises fade in the empty air! I hate the day I was born.”

Park was shaken. The man's eyes fell hollow and glaring on his. “God damn you for setting yourself better than me. It is no work of your own hand but of fate. I do not begrudge you the land – I say damn the land and am glad to be rid of it – but God damn you sir for being exalted by anything other than fate, that lights its fire upon what altar it pleases, for no rhyme or reason, and hollows some men out inside, as if they have a secret sin.”

Park saw Olivia's eyes at the other side of the crowd.

She was a dark-eyed woman. She wore her hair shoulder-length and to one side. Of late she had stopped wearing the golden earrings and jeweled rings on her fingers, but there was still something

unmistakably exotic about her. She wore streaks of henna in her hair. But her arresting feature was her eyes. They were large and dark brown almost to being black, but not quite, and they had a depth to them that seemed to speak suffering and empathy. If someone believe all that mumbo-jumbo of ancient souls, they would find their proof in those eyes. They echoed a troubled if not violent past.

As the men jeered at the farmer she moved to try to lift him up, but he shook her off like a wounded animal.

“And damn you preacher’s wife for the sin of your princely husband. Never did I see the word of God twisted more perverse than to set up another caste of Pharisees.”

Olivia moved back as if from an electric shock and dropped him not out of malice but out of shame. He sprang at her. Park ran up and pulled the man away from her. The man rose, dusted himself off, and resumed his cursing as he walked down the street.

The woman straightened herself and lay a hand on Park’s forearm.

“Thank you.”

“It was nothing.”

In that night they met again as she was tidying the hotel lobby. In truth he had been keeping an eye out for her. It was late. He walked up beside her and she talked as she kept dusting.

“The world is crazy,” she said. “It tore that man’s heart.”

“He had no right to lunge at you.”

He was almost moved to touch her and console her but did not. She continued speaking. “I could stand myself better if what he said wasn’t true. I hate the man I’m married to.”

Park could not keep from smelling the fragrance of her hair, and in one moment his hand was caressing it softly until he saw the front desk man looking at him and he retrieved it. “I saw you,” he said, “two years ago...”

“I saw you as if I had known you in another life,” she said. “There was something in your eyes.”

“Come up and talk to me later,” he said.

That night when he heard the knock at his door he opened it with a trembling hand. He had been tossing and turning.

When he opened the door she fell into him. He felt her body trembling and held it tighter, and instantly everything inside him warmed. He stroked her hair.

“This world is cruel,” she said.

He did not let her say another word. He led her to the bed and he had her there, and in the moment he felt more alive than any day since he was young – he felt authentic. And afterward he did not feel regret but told her, “We have to act as if nothing happened.”

She nodded as she redressed.

He checked out of the hotel the next day and she was in the lobby but they never even met eyes. He left town that day and came back to his family the conquering hero, swarmed with hugs by his children who had missed him sorely for being gone only one night, and then he was held warmly in the eyes of his wife who sensed some unease in his eyes and guessed wrong and said, "There now you did the right thing – he needed the money and we needed the land."

He only saw Olivia in town occasionally after that, and they scarcely acknowledged each other. After that he set himself into the dutiful penance, looking up from his fields only to wish the sun were hotter, to burn him like he deserved. And a few weeks later the woman and her baby left town, and rumor was she went back to her old country, to live with her family and let her neglectful husband disappear to a world of cushions and soft thought. Let her absence sting his conscience, though she told herself it never would – that he had set himself on too high a plane to the care about this or that suffering in particular.

1939:

And ten years after the preacher, Phillip, had left town he had returned, riddled with cancer. His family put him up in a house near the center of town. The rumor was that he had gotten in trouble trying to spiritually enlighten young boys. Upon his return a weight like a stone sank deep into Park's stomach. He could not eat or sleep in his empty house. And after a few days he decided to go into town to make his peace. He rode slowly to his friend's house on his old dappled horse and then had his friend drop him off at the depot.

He walked to Phillip's rented house, which was one of the nicer houses set close to the main part of town. It had a green lawn and a white low fence. A gardener worked out front, and it was so quiet you could hear the snipping of the shears. Park straightened his suit jacket and walked up the path from the sidewalk.

He knocked at the door and a young woman in a white nurse's gown let him in.

"He's been expecting a visitor," she said.

She led him down a darkened hall to the last room on the right and let him go in alone.

Phillip's room had been turned into a hospital room. The man lay in his bed with an oxygen pump beside him. At the man's request the nurse left the room.

"Well," Park said.

The man rose slightly. "How do I look?" And then he lay back down and laughed at himself in a cackling cough. "Come in."

"I hope you get well."

Phillip waved the comment off with his spindly hand.

"We never knew each other well, did we?" the man asked.

"No."

"Then what are you here for?"

“I have something to ask you.”

“Yes?”

“Why did your wife leave, all those years ago?”

The man smiled a thin smile. “You had a thing for her, didn’t you? A lot of men in town did. She was dark and exotic – it was the gypsy in her. I suppose it was the same blood put a wildness in her and made her run off.”

“Do you miss her?”

He only pursed his lips at Park.

Park looked at him and hated the way he looked like a bit of flesh coating a piece of barbed wire.

The withered preacher continued. “I was her ticket into this country, maybe never anything more. We were distant before we sliced the wedding cake. I should have known she was too low born for me. Well, for who I was. I’ve changed. The proximity of death changes a man.”

“I have something I need to tell you.”

“You get as close as I am to seeing death and only then do you realize there’s a hole in your heart you’ve been trying to paper over for years. Only God can fill it. The real God of Abraham, not those fantasies I used to chase.”

“Let me talk. I have to tell you something.”

“I don’t hear confessions.”

“It was years ago.”

“Toss it on the altar yourself. I’m clean. I’ve found God.”

“Your wife and I...”

The man looked at him from his bed and his face clenched just for a second.

“You can’t tell me anything I don’t know. Not that I knew who. She pined for someone. I’m surprised you’re fool enough to say it.”

“It was long ago and I was a different man.”

Phillip laughed. “We’re never different until we lay it at the feet of the Cross.”

“That’s never worked for me. It just keeps itching.”

“I suppose you want me to say I forgive you.”

“I didn’t ask to be forgiven.”

“Then what the hell are you here for?”

“I want you to get mad at me.”

The man looked surprised, but then sank deeper into his sheets. “I found the One True Lord and got clean. That woman, and you, and all the convolutions of the sins of the flesh are behind me. I am not going to get down and wallow with you.”

“Maybe the Lord isn’t real and there’s no healing in this world.”

“You need to put your lust away. The Lord has cloaked me in white and made me a virgin again.”

“Damnit, get mad at me. I deserve it.”

“You are weak in the flesh. I am freed of her and you should be too. I am ready for what lies beyond. I will receive a glorious crown.”

“Not for what you did to little boys.”

“Get thee behind me – you are in your own Hell.”

The man called to his nurse. “Sarah, turn up my oxygen. And see this man out. He’s trying to get between me and salvation!”

Park felt bile rise hot in his throat.

“Our blood puts hooks in our flesh,” the preacher said, “It draws the eyes down to the warmth and the waiting.”

The nurse came in. “Mister,” she said.

“I’m going,” Park said, and pulled his elbow away from her arm.

He found himself outside in the quiet street and the air was cool but he felt hot.

Park needed a road out of this place. He had lived with his own remorse and anger for too long.

A voice in his head spoke as clearly as if Olivia past stood right beside him. “Come away with me. “

“Where is she?” he had wanted to ask, but he hated himself for the thought. He wanted to scream it. But he hated himself for one moment of weakness. He was not religious but thought maybe he had not been wanting forgiveness, only penance. His wife had not been angel, but she had been something more – she had been good. He had taken her away from an innocent life by bending on one knee and convincing her, on a night at the carnival that was more than he could afford back then, back when desire ran through blood and a man will say anything to ease the longing and the loneliness. She had been taken from the world too early.

“Where is she?” he wanted to shout at the preacher he hated, but couldn’t. He had betrayed trust. She had given her heart to him, and that he could have snuffed out the light inside her had sickened him.

Park walked outside the preacher’s house and forgot his hat. He would not go back to get it. The antiseptic stung his nostrils even now that he was out in the open air. It seemed to be the air, the sick smell of confession. He longed to be like the disgraced preacher. He longed to be free of himself.

*

Park had completed the sale of his farm and was living in the hotel now and thrashed in combat with his own desire. He had told himself he would leave on a train to Honduras, or Mexico, or someplace where he could live thriftily on the profits of his sale to the end of his days and be a nobody and not worry about the anything.

His friend David came by the hotel and tried to needle him into leaving for New York with him to see the World's Fair. Park entertained the thought. David had been to New York before, once, on shore leave, and now thought that this qualified him to be an expert tour guide. Park told himself he would be glad to sit back and be responsible for nothing but drinking in the sights and sounds of a new white world while another man sweated the details. He even went so far as to wondering if he should buy a new set of clothes so he didn't look like a hayseed.

He eventually broke down and told David what his errand in town had been. David did not let his face show any surprise and only wore a mask of detached, rational understanding, hardly even undercut by sympathy.

"I see, I see. The thorn in the flesh. Our blood leads us like a lion out hunting when we are young."

Park could only nod. "And when we're not so young."

Park told David he would go on the trip with him but he snuck away from his friend and went into town to question the preacher – to implore him, maybe even to beg, to know where she was, but he got there at the moment the hearse from the coroner's office was loading him up. Even exactly then. Park was aghast. It was like a bridge to the only meaningful thing in his past had crumbled into dust just as he set his foot upon it. He watched them close the door on the long black coach. He took to a night of drinking, and thought of asking the preacher's brother what had become of the woman, but the thought of dealing with the crude man stung his ego, and he reluctantly saw how pathetic he had become.

It took him three days to sober up. When he got up from a cold bath on the third day, with a wet cold cloth held to his forehead to help clear the cobwebs, he told himself to be shed of the town. He went to his friend David, and they were ready to take the trip in a day. They hopped a series of podunk railways until they got to Chicago and then boarded the Twentieth Century Limited. Sixteen hours of luxury to the Big Apple. Once there they were there they walked the wide streets of Futurism in the shadow of the Trylon and the Perisphere, but the gleaming world of tomorrow did not stir Park's pulse like it did for so many others. He felt like they were all trying to sell him something. The future would be all ads and products. He was in a mood. He took to calling David "Dave" until his friend got angry. Park did not know why he did it. Maybe there was something perverse in him.

They got back to town and he could not abide the thought of seeing Bryce, so he left town for three months and traveled around the world before he settled in Honduras. He talked to a man about buying a citrus farm, not that he knew anything about it, but he'd learn. He looked at the little colored fish swimming in crystal streams. He baked beneath the broiling sun and walked beneath palms and for the first time realized he loved the sweet salt tang of the ocean.

In the capital city he took to drinking in the lobby of the Hotel Americas. He met the white-suited man from the US Consulate that he took to calling the Ambassador. They fell into liking each other. The man was a lush but impeccably dressed. He advised Park not to buy any property because there was always a

hint of revolution in the air. He advised Park to carry a gun, but Park had never trusted himself with a pistol.

Park taught himself enough Spanish to get by and liked talking to vendors in the mercada. They did not even wonder what a lonely man was doing here, because there was a small band of expatriates who all seemed to have something to lose, or something to hide, or something to get away from – but they had dollars. Park had the proceeds from selling his farm, plus all the money he'd saved up from years as a frugal bachelor. They tried to fix him up with a girl, but he had no interest. In the end all he had was restlessness. He tried holing himself up in the hotel and reading books, but books were hard to get a hold of. He borrowed some from the Ambassador, but they were modern and he did not like them. In the end he decided he was perfectly miserable. He took a steamer home.

Maybe he would go to Bryce.

Park had decided to leave with David and leave his horrid thoughts behind him, but the desire to know more about Olivia was too much. He snuck away from his friend and went into town.

He went to the hotel that night instead of to David's house, so ashamed he was of his weakening. He locked himself in his room and drank himself delirious from a bottle he had secreted in with him. That night when he was about to sleep he heard a knock at his door – David, he thought. He staggered and had to open only one eye to properly grasp the door knob. But he opened the door to see the preacher's brother standing there in his dark suit and dark, curly hair. He had always been a brutish but prescient man. He had been and was a gambler whose hunches seldom failed. He never got bluffed at cards. He looked at Park.

"Pathetic," he said. Park noticed he looked bleary eyed.

"What's it to you?"

He looked Park up and down. "Before he died, my brother told me about your errand."

Park went scarlet.

"I can tell you where she is, but it'll cost you."

"What makes you think I want to see her?"

The man smiled a lopsided smile. "I can tell when a man is desperate. You're so desperate and ashamed of your own desire you've crawled into the bottle."

"I don't have much money," Park lied.

"I can check at the courthouse good as the next man. I know exactly how much you got for the sale."

Park steadied himself against the door frame. "Get out."

"I don't need your money," he said. Park noticed he slurred his speech a little, and his eyes were a bit wide. "I have a little job – I'd like you to kill a man for me. He strangled his wife, and she was a friend of mine."

"You're crazy!"

"Do it and I'll tell you everything you want to know. You and your friend are smart – you can make it look like a break in."

"I'd never do it, but I can tell the police."

"You have three days to decide. And the police work for me."

"Get out!"

Covington tipped his hat and left. "Call me when you're sober."

It took Park days to sober up. When he got up one day, he told himself to be shed of the town. There was too much fog in his mind and he needed to make himself clean. He had enough pride to see when he had made himself pathetic. He left everything he had and went to the mission fields for three years, doing nothing but digging wells, finding water so other men could baptize. It turned out he had a knack for dowsing.

*

After three years Park returned and ended up taking a residence at a "farm" which was nothing more than a shack with a yard for chickens. He had felt a cleanness inside of his from his years of hard work, but one night of weakness and he had found a taste for liquor again.

One day a stranger in a fancy car drove up to his place. It was a man named Thurmond Allen. He wore a seersucker suit and white shoes that, for whatever reason, collected not one speck of dust from their dry surroundings.

"Mister Parker," I have a proposition for you," he said. "Bryce Covington got to bragging the other day that he is holding you over a barrel – that he has some information you need to know. I am not privy to the information, but I'm here to help you."

"What business is it of yours?"

"You tutored my daughter in English years ago and she went on to go to college. I'll never forget how you got her over that hump. I am a man who pays his debts. But I tell you, I'll only help you on one condition: get off the sauce."

Park considered the man. "I appreciate the offer, but I've spent three years putting everything that Bryce represents behind me. But I agree, I need to get off the sauce for good."

"Okay, but I've beaten Bryce at cards before," Thurmond added. "Not many men can say that."

Park squinted at the man, who had his back to the setting sun. "Let me think about it when I'm sober."

"Suit yourself. I judge you to be an honorable man and simply came to assist."

Park thanked the man and left the conversation begrudgingly appreciating that anyone still cared about him after his long absence.

He went over to his friend David's that night to ask for help getting off alcohol. David was reticent at first, and interposed himself between Park and his door. Park had been pretty much a shit to him in New

York. But Park pleaded, and even got on his knees, and David could see the sincerity in him. So David agreed. He noticed that about 9:00 Park began to get the shakes and he said, "Let's do it."

"Do what?"

"Take the bottle out of your pack."

Park professed ignorance at first – he had told himself he would wean himself off slowly, but then David got up and began rummaging through his pack for him. At first Park wanted to strike at him like a snake, but the image of himself in his own mind made him recoil. David removed the bottle in a kind of triumph and held it high.

"Let's do this," he said.

"Go ahead," Park said. "Pour it out."

"Oh no, this deserves a more dramatic farewell."

He went out in the moonlight and David set the bottle on a top of a fencepost. Then he went back in and took a shotgun down off its hooks above the door. They walked back outside again.

The bottle glinted on the fence about twenty yards out.

"You do it," David said.

"I've never been a very good shot."

"It's a shotgun," David said. "Just aim it anywhere close."

Park's hands shook. "I don't know if I can."

"Then I don't know if I can help you. Do it, Park: kill it."

Park took the shotgun from David's hands and raised it to shoulder-height. He felt a great wave of remorse: "I can get another bottle," he thought. "I don't have to do this."

But then a great tide of violence rose in him. He did not like the thought of himself abject. He squeezed the trigger – and missed the mark.

"Again," David said.

This time Park took more careful aim. He closed one eye and squinted the other. Then he pulled the trigger, and a blast of flame licked the night sky. A great sound of shattering rent the air. When Park looked up, the bottle had been shattered.

David took the gun from him. "Now we can begin. Now we have to fill you up with something useful. Purging yourself is never enough," he said. "One day at a time. For as long as it takes I will flood your insides with enough tea to make you piss a river."

The two walked back toward the house.

Park took a long bath, colder than he'd like but on purpose, to make his body aware of itself. It was better to have his nerves pushing from the outside in than the inside out. After that he ate a hot plate of beans and cornbread then let his full stomach put him to sleep.

The next day David opened the curtains and let the bright light in way too early. Park blinked. He had the shakes and a hell of a headache.

"Coffee and work. I will fill you with coffee until you piss a river."

"I thought you said tea."

"Coffee in the mornings, tea in the afternoons. Piss the poison out."

The two men saddled up early and went out into a wide grazing pasture, and they worked hard for many days following. Park began to get less shaky. The horse became more responsive under his command. It helped Park to feel an animal's respect and, finally, its affection. His body ached the first week, but soon he had the satisfaction of his muscles growing strong beneath him. And although he was not free of the urge for a drink (he might never be free), he felt the slow withdrawal of a certain jangling nervous energy. After about a month, David declared him a better man. He made Park read Shakespeare to him, and Park began remembering memorized soliloquies. He started with all the rants of King Lear but then found him tongue more inclined to A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest.

But release me from my bands

With the help of your good hands.

Gentle breath of yours my sails

Must fill, or else my project fails,

Which was to please. Now I want

Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,

And my ending is despair,

Unless I be relieved by prayer,

Which pierces so that it assaults

Mercy itself and frees all faults.

As you from crimes would pardoned be,

Let your indulgence set me free.

One day David said, "I'm making you go to a dance with me tonight. I've decided to confront my loneliness. Putting you through something has made me want to confront something too. Lord Park, I need a better half. Do you think any woman would have a lonely old bachelor?"

The last thing Park wanted was to go into town much less a dance.

"I suppose I owe you something, don't I?"

"You do."

And so Park girded himself to help him. He went to the dance that night and felt surprised that women still noticed him, but he didn't want a woman right now. He did fix David up with a matronly widow, though – he sensed that David needed a motherly kind of woman. And seeing them together put the faintest bit of warmth in his heart. He decided to fan that little flame. He went to the warehouse by the tracks where he had stored his old belonging and found they were still in storage only because nobody remembered them, and he got out all of his old books and took them back to his shack. He told David he was moving out, and David said he thought he was ready. Park also took back an old desk and a chair and set these up in one of his two rooms. He decided not to retrieve the family photos. He realized he could be who he had not been before, so he had to be something new.

*

Park decided to fix up the shack he had ensconced himself in. He went into town and brought home a load of lumber and some paint. He scraped the old paint off the house and then painted it a clean white on the outside. Then with the lumber he set about building an addition off the back, away from the setting sun, to be a kind of study. Once it was finished he moved the old desk and chair and his books inside. Since he had a yard only fitted for chickens he got some chickens.

He settled into the small house. In mornings he would feed the chickens and check for eggs. In afternoons he would read. In between he would tend the acres. He went into town to buy seed. He did so driving an ancient truck that David had found for him, sold by a young man going off to war. The young man had been drafted. The young man's mother was heartbroken, but the father spoke of continuing a proud military tradition, this time against the Axis in World War II. The war was still in its give and take stages, uncertain as to outcome, in Africa and in Sicily, and people went for months at a time without hearing from their loved ones. Park had two sons, lieutenants both, in the 2nd Artillery Division, out of Fort Hood, Texas, and the Army Air Corps. Both were deployed. He seldom heard from them – in fact, it was his job not to know.

His daughter lived with her husband in Pikesville, Kentucky. She did not bring the grandchildren to see him. She kept him at the same distance one would keep a relative that was tetchd or tainted, and maybe he was. He had had a bad temper even when he wasn't drinking, a fact that haunted him now as he tried to keep himself in a state of subdued control. She had been glad to fly the nest and out from under some dross or malaise, she being filled with the drive of life to spread her wings beneath the sun.

The nights were pleasant at first. He enjoyed nothing more than a simple supper then listening to the rising sound of the insects. Sometimes he would go out and look at the stars, until he became conscious that he was a man going out to look at the stars, an image of himself to himself, in a sentimental way, and it took some of the pleasure out of it for him, and he decided he needed a woman to keep him from going mad. He was already mad. But he considered his thoughts and decided he was not ready for a woman just yet.

He told himself that with his money he could be a student of the world. He bought a telescope and an astrolabe and soon was looking at the heavens. In the wide black prairie sky he could see the Milky Way stretched out from horizon to horizon, and he could track the courses of the planets.

He could wear what hat he wanted to wear. He chose a porkpie and took to riding a bicycle into town. He loved the air in his face and the strain of his muscles and then the confidence that they had grown stronger.

These seem like odd things, and small things, but in his mind they were expansive. He began to feel free.

Did the people look at him? Probably. But after a while it simply became "Well there goes Park."

Still, he felt the victim of too much leisure, and so he took a job at the lumber yard. The man made sure Park was off the sauce but when he was convinced he said he could find some work for him, half time. Business was not what it had been.

That left Park with half days for self-edification. He was no damn good at chess but one day he decided he needed someone to play him chess. He knew they played a lot of board games at the VFW, so he went down there and volunteered and they decided he was useful at small repairs, and in between the times when he was needed for something (such as standing on an improbably tall ladder changing light bulbs which always blew out because of bad wiring) he played board games with the vets, and soon he found an old man who wanted to play chess. The old man longed to have someone to listen to his stories and he said he had served under Pershing in the Mexican Wars and had stood atop the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon in Teotihuacan when he was young and unmarried and that they had stirred him but he had nothing to do about it except tell his wife endlessly and try drawing them in charcoals. And now he could tell Park. Park took forever puzzling over whether to take a pawn and holding his finger on his piece (they did not use a timer) and trying to see the consequences of his move from every angle while the old man laughed like a sick crow even though his heart was mostly good and the only weakness he had was for tobacco. Park took to running into town and getting him tobacco.

They found out that Park was book learned and so they made him give lectures to their wives on Shakespeare so as to justify their indolence, and the women always dressed up for these meetings held in the church hall, though unlike in church they let their fashions live a little and one woman wore a beret and so soon they all took to wearing berets, most of them knit, and Park had to bone up on Shakespeare in order to teach them because he would feel guilty just winging it, and so he read Coleridge's essays on Shakespeare (which he ordered from a bookseller in New York although he had the ladies order their Shakespeares from the travelling Modern Library book salesman), but he covered the biggies like Hamlet and Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet and he thought maybe some of the ladies had a crush on him because they said "Oh let's put on 'Romeo and Juliet' and said Park should play Romeo. Park demurred that he only knew how to read plays, not put them on, but an older lady said she had helped in stagecraft when she attended the Normal College and had worked at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and she would do the settings if someone else did makeup, and she said the makeup had to be broad so they could see it from the furthest row, and at the thought of his rogued and eye-lined face Park had to more forcefully suggest that he really was not fitted for the stage, but word of the production got around to the husbands and they leaned on Park to do it, and so Park acquiesced and so they put on 'Romeo and Juliet' and most of the men's part were played by ladies in but they did it well with half of them remembering their lines and a high school boy prompting them from the wings when they not being able. But due to partial deafness, some of them could not hear his prompts anyway and so they winged it and fell back on "Hark, who goes there?" When the production had run for a week they considered it a success and made Park get on the stage to receive his accolades and made him bow and one old man threw roses just to make everyone else laugh so Park picked one

up and held it in his teeth and from then on the old men at the VFW decided that Park was really okay and they were grateful and the ladies made him plan their summer production and settled on 'The Tempest' and Park figured he had several months to figure out how to get out of it.

*

Also, through his interactions with the women of the VFW, Park began tutoring. He had done so years ago, much to the patient consternation of his wife. He was as docile with other children as he was hot-tempered at home. He had helped children get over whatever academic hurdles they were struggling with. His wife understood – Park had to have some outlet from the tedium of farm life, so she abided it. Park mostly tutored in literature and writing – kids actually read classics in those days, and he helped many a youth struggling with the five paragraph theme or an interpretation of "The Raven," or "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd".

Now he started again, and some folks greatly appreciated it, but for some it started the first small rumblings against Park in the town that an eccentric was filling their youths' heads with stirrings that would make them never satisfied with life in a small town or on a farm. "Teach common sense." They supposed the five-paragraph theme was okay, as long as the themes were patriotism or the ten commandments.

And about this time, Park again began to feel he needed a woman to come home to at nights. The nights could be lonely and long, no matter how many good books he surrounded himself with. The next time David asked him to go to a dance, he would come. He could not bring himself to go to church just to meet women – he had never placed ``stock in religion. Actually, in a way, it riled him. Maybe that was also part of the reason for the grumbling about him – he was too secular, putting more stock in Pliny and Herodotus than in the KJV. Had he ever laid it all down at the foot of the cross?

How do you tell a woman "I like you – how would you like sharing your life with me to keep me off of the sauce?"

*

Jim Parker was born in 1889 to a family of farmers and was the third of five children. He helped his father on the farm after his older brothers and sister left. His younger sister died of meningitis when she was ten, and his mother never left him swim in the slow green river after that, though all his friends did, so when he had the chance he disappeared into books, and when he was old enough it was his turn to leave the house, for college, and stick his younger brother with the farm work, but then his brother got married and Park had to return to the farm.

Park's father had been angry man. He had so chastised his children that it was no wonder they fled the nest as soon as they could, leaving Park to tend for him. He had been a lean man the color of the earth and as wiry as a yard bird. Park had taken care of him although he had not been the youngest child, because he had a drop of his mother's abiding patience in him, Bible-based in her, and once he got bigger than his dad he could see in his father's situation a kind of sad comedy, divine comedy, the comedy of human folly. Dust though art – he could help alleviate suffering – the old man had consumption. Park did not see it as penance, or did he, but something timeless and filial, a straight line to be plowed in a field. So Park stayed with the old man, and when the old man died he took over the

farm, and thought about teaching school (but didn't), and then out of the blue he was married and his life coalesced around him.

He was 25 when the United States entered WWI and he didn't have to serve, although he helped on the farms of families who had lent their strong young sons to the war.

His mother herself was sickly after having her last child, Henry, and his sister's death had a profound effect on him. It made him fear death when he should have been jumping into life with the vigor of youth, when the last thing a person thinks about is their last days. He thought too much about the Judgment.

The father drank more after the mother turned sickly.

Park's mother was educated, having studied to be a teacher at Bacone College, and she had been in music and drama, but Park's father was not educated past tenth grade, but it was love at first sight that drove them together and made her stay in the valley. The father had been charming back then like a displaced Southern gentleman, and back then his father owned several farms around and they were prosperous, although his father (Park's grandfather) invested unwisely and saw his dominion shrink back to one small wheat farm, which was also a truck farm.

Park had a rich interior life from being forced to read books while other boys leisured. Mostly he read mythology and the Iliad and the Odyssey and fables and some of the Arabian Nights, all of which were to be interests far into his adult years. And when he got older he delved into every book he could find of the European folklore of the "little people," the fallen, unsaved souls, descendants of the pre-Eve Adam the djinn, or else fallen angels, and since he was fascinated by the pre-Eve Adam he came to want more from the Bible than it offered, and he read the Aprocopha of the neo-Platonists. He wanted something more than salvation.

After one nip at college he decided that he, like his father, had a weakness for the bottle, because whiskey was too good even though it tasted awful, even though his mother had made him promise not to let a drop cross his lips, but in college it had seemed to unlock so much fun in his companions, but when he drank it it did not unlock so much fun as introspection, and occasionally a mean streak that made him want to put his peers down and get a joy from it.

*

The old man died and Park was a bachelor farmer and his mother lived in town in the care of one of his aunts and so he was alone and he could wipe the sweat off his brow out in the fields and he still used a mule back then although other men were welding appliances onto Model T to till their fields (few could afford the actual equipment). And he had a few friends he could meet in town he could talk to on the weekends and one day he decided to go to the fair and he looked at livestock and then saw the shiny "Around the World" building and had a faint hunger to see the world of tomorrow and anyway he wanted out of the hot August sun and so he went in, and in the middle of the aluminum and brushed steel visions of a leisurely future he saw her selling jam (who sold jam in the Round the World building?) and he thought she was beautiful but no one was stopping to talk to her and suddenly he thought maybe he needed some jam and so he made sure he had some money in his pocket and decided he

could forego lunch and spend the money on a chance to talk to her instead, and she seemed like a girl who didn't know how beautiful she was and he felt a catch in his throat but he cleared it and asked the price of the jam and then bought some (blackberry, he remember years later) and he asked her how business was and she smiled soon sweetly it pierced his heart and he was loathe to leave her when he could find nothing else to say, and so he hung around the fair that night and went to see her again but she had gone, and he knew he had to wait until the next weekend to go back, or thought he did, but instead he went there during the week, skipping much-needed work in his field, and he dressed one notch nicer than a farm boy needed to and he went back to the booth but a gruff looking old man was there, and so he left for an hour and came back but the old man was still there and so he decided to walk up anyway and ask where the girl was. Tall and strawberry blonde in gingham, with a pale red-head's face. The man, old enough to be her father, and who eventually turned out to be in fact her father, looked him over and then made surer the boy knew he was only working the booth because his wife was sick and the man asked what he did was he sure he wasn't a salesman and Park said no, he grew wheat and so the man asked him how far he'd gotten in school and Park confessed to having gone to college and then the man drew himself and looked at him anew and said, yes, he respected a good education and told him he could meet his daughter at the booth that evening. And so Park went back after 7:00 and there she was, and she smiled to see him again and asked "More jam?" and Park said well okay but she laughed and he was glad not to have to spend the money and it turned out she lived one town over and had been going to Normal College until her mother got sick and Park asked her out to go see a movie about a cowboy singer on a cattle drive and some rustlers foiled hooray and she said yes but he had to keep his hands to himself and he blushed and said he just wanted company and so they went out then, and many times afterward, she letting him hold her hand after a while and he spending many hot nights afterward dreaming about her and he got all worked up and wanted to marry her then and there, and whenever he went to pick her up it seemed her father was sizing him up for something, and once he said he hoped his daughter didn't settle for no dirt farmer but then he said what the hell, there were worse things than living off the land and that hard worked ennobled a man, and so one winter evening when he could see her breath and she sat bundled next to him in the car and asked him if he ever wanted to see the world he said only with her, and he pulled over and drew her to a fallen log beside a frozen river and the winter glistened in the air and in the ice-coated trees like an angelic carnival around them, and he asked her if she would marry him and she said yes. And they were married three months later when it was spring and the redbuds were blooming and they pretended to the preacher that they intended to live devout, earnest lives but even her old man doubted this but the stricter mother believed what she wanted to believe because Park cleaned up well, and they went off with tin cans tied to the car and they drove to Hot Springs and started the first of many happy years together, years that saw babies into the world. But the last baby died in her womb six months in and she became withdrawn after that, and said she wished they had gone to see the world when they had had the chance, when she was young and still in bloom and that sometimes she wished she had been something other than a dirt farmer's wife, that her youth was gone, and he felt like he had stolen something from her. She did not belittle him but she did something worse, she grew distant and wistful, and he grew resentful because he could not get mad, but he came to resent a life of duty to a wife he was suddenly not good enough for, and he longed to be special in someone's eyes again, and he worked all the harder in the fields and set aside good money but enjoyed none of it, barely looking up from the ground to see how far he'd plowed, and finally wishing for the day (he didn't pray) when something like a drop of his youth like the last drop in a bottle might be set in his path, and he had a nip from a bottle

now and then (you always knew someone who knew someone). And that was about the time he saw Olivia in town.

*

As a young man he had had a connection for rare books in the college library. She was a petite brunette with a crisp starched look who wore her hair long and wore glasses and she was always glad to chat with him because he had bright eyes and was always asking for books they did not have, but she wanted a richer portfolio than they had in any case and she was pals with the lady who worked in acquisitions (she had swerved more bohemian once she got tenure) and she purchased the books when no one was watching the ledger and gave him the contacts to purchase them when someone was.

He had read every volume of Bulfinch and through many long-winded tomes (very nearly annotated catalog) of all the Greek, Roman, and Norse gods and heroes written by scholarly or royal(ish) scholars in England. His young mind was full of young striding heroes and valiant women more like Athena than Hera, and more like Artemis and Andromeda.

No one knew why he had imprisoned himself on the farm after walking the wide, wide adventurous world in his head, except for love of his mother and a sense of duty drilled into him by who knows who – his father at an early age?

He flirted with the librarian and went out with her once or twice but it turned out they made far better friends than romantic lovers, probably because they teased each other too much and had already gotten too much inside the circle of filial familiarity. It became so they liked making fun of each other's romantic forays more than probing each other's amorous defenses.

Why did he approach her in the first place? He wanted to get to know her. His blood raced hot and he sweated with nerves. Even now the mental picture of her made his heart pump in a young way, in spite of himself: if if if. If only he had; if only things had gone differently. If who he was now could be with who she was then, and he himself young, but not to be older; if if if – he wanted things that could not be. What would she be like now?

He wrestled with the impossible in his heart. It was not nostalgia. It was some fundamental argument about the influence of love. Hot when you're young, glazed when you're old but still hot underneath; cheated? Wanting the thrill but not the foolish part of it.

*

He decided to become an eccentric, something his life of duty had never allowed. He took piano lessons from an older lady in their theatre troupe, and she tried to foist a daughter off on him – they all seemed to have eligible daughters.

*

He had had a friend from the liberal arts college, afterwards a pen pal, who had foisted onto him a near-incomprehensible novel called "No Charge for Pain!" in which was catalogued the one thing capitalists gave society for free – crushing class-struggle misery and woe. It was initially set in New York (he had never been to New York) then followed its protagonist to the farmland and chronicled an artist/activist's crucifixion by a plantation owner for trying to unionize the sharecroppers. The crucifixion took place on

the side of a tobacco barn (they grew no tobacco in the setting, but what are details?). But most of all it was full of injustice and woe – woe woe woe. The people needed to rise up and change the system. Someday it would happen, all at once, and then the world would transform overnight into a promised land.

Park had promised to read it but was over 300 pages so he secretly only skimmed it and then he wrote back "Good local color!" And "Too Red? Or red meat for the masses?" And "bone up on dialects." He never heard back from the man.

*

The trouble was, Park was not attracted to women his own age. His mind shot back to Olivia. In his mind she had not aged. She had been ten years younger than he was. He tried telling himself that now she would be nothing like his memory, but the argument took no hold. He felt smitten all over again by her dark eyes and her fragrant hair and her exotic air. He teased himself that she might not be remarried, or even if she was..? At least his mind had the resolve to close off that thought. Too many years of penance for a rash action. If she were not available, he told himself, that was that (his mind still resisted the conclusion). But if she was he countered as if he were playing chess with himself.

The thought of her took the charm off of all the ladies he met around town, and some were very beautiful women, many of whom felt sympathetic toward him. He could not believe he was still smitten, like a dagger through the heart. Many of the women understood the desire to see the wider world, the suffering of a rarefied soul to fit into a small town. But he abjured their picture of him. Or did he? Maybe he half embraced it, because everyone has to have an idea of themselves. He wanted to be something more than that, even as part of him recognized it as a useful form to fit himself into, as a hermit crab seeks cover in its shell. He needed to be something.

*

In the interim of being a caricature and being more of a self, he took up tutoring again. Again, it was the VFW ladies who foisted him upon people, townfolks with children who needed to straighten up their marks. Stick to the grammar, they wanted to tell the eccentric, but Park always got to propounding the doors that learning opened up. Many of his pupils were preparing for college, and he could not help but fill their minds with thoughts of a life really fulfilled, never settled for.

*

One afternoon he unpacked a small statue of a monkey holding a bowl and he called it his god in the image of a god because when he was young images of God had been forbidden. He even had to be eccentric about his gods. He named it Ozymandias.

*

Park decided to immerse himself deeper into his studies. He ordered several books on higher mathematics so he would be able to tutor in it. He immersed himself in the world of imaginary numbers for the first time and was a little embarrassed when his mystical curiosity with the concept failed with the actual delivery of a rather mundane reality. But worse, he was for the first time frustrated with his ability to absorb the new subject matter in general. Math bounced off his head and rebounded into the ether. It was a kind of harsh realization to him that he might he might be limited in his mental activity by

a lack of natural propensity. It crushed the idea that he might be a limitless thought in a sea of thoughts one only had to acquaint oneself with to acquire. It forced the idea of a finite mind upon him, chained to a finite body. It enforced a kind of hereditary determinism that he had heretofore be unwilling to acknowledge: he was who his family was, and who his past was. And he was getting old.

In short it threw against himself the idea as he might really stand: a fifty-year-old man in a small town doing small things alone.

He considered himself: perhaps he did need a woman. But even that he considered as an intellectual thing – the need for a companionable set of thoughts, complementary.

*

In time the old truck David had found for him died in a paroxysm of smoke and grinding noises, so Park took to bicycling again. Park liked the feeling of being grounded it gave him. He rode to a house in a willow-drooped lane near the edge of the town proper, in a nicer area where lawns were wide and streets were lazy. The porch of the house rose supported by four white doric columns and honeysuckle climbed a lattice on one side while on the other was a semi-circle of rose bushes containing a bird bath. It was evening and hummingbirds visited the honeysuckle like little shards of light broken off from the pink and purple sunset. He leaned his bicycle against the white fence and opened the gate. In the dusky street neighborhood boys were racing their bicycles up and down, chasing each other and making army noises. Park took books out of the bicycle's saddle bags and walked up to the house and rang the bell.

A servant answered the door. "Well hello, Mr. Parker," he said. "Miss Elizabeth is waiting in the small dining room to see you. I hope you can tutor some sense into that girl. She's angry enough being kept inside as it is, but her father says she needs to pull up her grades. If you can't get through to her I don't know who can. Follow me."

Park entered the high-ceilinged house through a velvet wall-papered and down a long hall with portraits of ancestors in hunting regalia (had they ever existed?) and then into a small dining room off the kitchen. There sat an auburn-haired young girl of maybe 17 in a white blouse and jeans that could pass for a boy's. She rolled a pencil against a book and caught it when it bounced back. Her lips were painted to a cupid's heart and her eyes were green and had a spark of distracted vitality darkened by her furrowed brow.

"You're here," she said.

He nodded and pulled up the chair opposite her.

"Good evening, Miss Elizabeth," he said as he set his books on the table. "I hope you're doing well."

She said nothing.

"Now as you recall from our last session, we were discussing the importance of transition sentences in the five paragraph theme. And as we discussed vis-à-vis subject matter, Pliny the Elder..."

She yawned. "You know this is punishment," she said. "There's a dance tonight."

Park did not like the thought of his services being used as a kind of coercion to get better behavior out of a child. It always made tutelage more difficult.

“Well maybe if you really crack down we can get out a little early. And did you do your reading out of ‘Lives of the Caesars?’”

She frowned and looked down at the pencil. “I got distracted,” she said. “Doctor Nesbit says I have a short attention span due to the fact that the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck for part of the time of my delivery. He says the c-section deprived me of the trans-vaginal experience required to properly cement my personhood at an early age.”

Park blushed, and she noticed, and smiled a kind of triumph.

“I’m not one to question a doctor,” Park said, “but I’m sure you’ve had ample time to recover your personhood by now. So if you’d have done your reading, you’d know that Vespasian...”

“You know what?” she said. “I think better when I’m outside. Could we walk while we go over our lesson tonight? My mind feels all closed off in this stuffy old house. Have you seen the gardens out back? Mother’s made a perfect trail through the primroses and Father says were going to get a swan.”

“It really would be better if you’d done your reading.” He frowned.

“Just this once,” she said. “I know I played hooky on my reading – I promise I’ll double up next time. You can fill me in on what I’m supposed to know while we walk.”

Park scowled at her. “Just this once,” he said.

She leapt up from the table like a jack-in-the-box and raced for the back door. Park scooped up his books and followed her.

She was skipping as Park shoved two books under his right arm and opened a third one and squinted to read it in the fading light. “If you had done your reading, you’d know that...”

“Isn’t it a marvelous night?” the girl said, skipping a circle around him. “I bet those people at that stuffy old dance don’t get to enjoy a lick of it.”

“It is a nice night,” Park admitted. Nights like this made him feel young. He got out in them less often than he should.

“Oh look, fireflies! They say you can make a wish if you catch one.” With that she was off down the terrace, grasping at the air.

Park closed the book and took off after her.

When he caught up with her her face was beaming as she looked up at him. “Caught one! I wish I never had to worry about getting into a stuffy old school.”

“You know how important it is to your father that you achieve something he never could. He’s a big man with the railroad but he never got to finish his education, and the one thing he wants from you is to get that college degree from a school back East. And I can help you do that. Elizabeth, it will get you so far in life. You won’t regret it.”

“I don’t care about school,” she said, “And neither should you. They say you’ve seen the world.”

“Only little slivers of it.”

“What’s it like?”

He felt the urge to wax expansive well in him but he squelched it down, then allowed himself this one concession. “It’s the people in the world that matter. For instance, you have a loving father...”

“Oh poo on him. They want to make me into something, not be something. I wish I could be at the dance.”

“You’ve been to one dance you’ve been to a thousand dances. Now it’s the company you meet there. To make the most of a dance you’ve got to be pleasant company, and right now you’re not being very pleasant company to me. I think we should go back inside. Now as I was saying, Pliny the Elder...”

“They say you’ve seen a lot of beautiful girls. Do you think I’m beautiful?”

“You are a fine young lady who needs to get her head in the books.”

“If you were my age, would you kiss me?”

“We need to go back in the house.” He closed his book and turned away and began walking back up the path.

“I wouldn’t tell anyone if you did,” she said, and ran up to him and tilted up her face.

“Elizabeth!” Park said. “This lesson is over. “Double your reading for next time.”

“There won’t be a next time. I’ll tell Dad you made a pass at me!”

Park felt his stomach knot and he stopped in his tracks. He could see his whole tutoring career crashing down, but then a catcall from behind the bushes stopped them both, and out from the bushes jumped a young man. It was Elizabeth’s younger brother who intruded onto the scene, doubled over with laughter.

“You do that, Liz, and I’ll tell Father how many times you’ve snuck out the window! I saw everything, Mr. Parker, and I’ll vouch for you!”

Elizabeth scowled at him.

“Boys from seven counties,” the boy said. “One’s even been in jail...”

The girl stomped her foot and glared at her brother then turned and ran back toward the house.

“I’m Roger,” the boy said. He looked to be maybe fifteen.

Park had dropped his books and was picking them up. Thank you Roger,” he said.

“You’re not the first one, Mr. Parker,” the boy said. “She almost run off with an encyclopedia salesman. Now I better show you out the roundabout way.”

Park followed the boy along the edge of the garden through primrose and delphinium` to a low white gate at the side of the house. He opened the gate for Park then came up beside him.

“So they say you’ve seen the world, Mr. Parker.”

“I’ve heard that already tonight.”

“Well you have.”

“The tale grows in the telling. Only little slivers of it.”

“And they say you’re a little off.”

Park looked down at the boy but could see he meant no offense by it. “Yes, I suppose I’m a little off.”

“That’s okay,” the boy said. “I suppose this town would be a better place if more people were a little off. But one thing, Mr. Parker...”

“Yes?”

“We have got to get you an automobile. I can fix any car I get my hands on.”

“I have an old truck.”

“You buy the parts and I’ll be at your house every day to fix it up.”

“I’ll think about it,” Park said.

The boy stood next to him as he loaded his books in the satchels.

“And you’re sure your sister won’t spread malice about me?”

“I have blackmailed her before. She won’t peep.”

Park held out his hand. “You’re a good man, Roger,” he said. Then he threw his leg across the bike. “Well I’m off. I’ll let your father know I’m terminating the sessions.”

“You think about my offer,” the boy said.

“I will.”

So Park rode off into the evening already turning to night. As he pumped the pedals he that his whole tutoring career could be jeopardized, and he was annoyed that it had grown to mean much to him.

He worked off the frustration by building another addition to his house, so that it formed a “C” with an enclosure for a garden. He worked out in the hot sun punishing himself for something he didn’t even do.

*

After that Park was more selective about who he was tutoring, avoiding all the discipline cases and dropping the ones he had, abruptly but honestly. It did not always go over well with the parents who want surrogate parenting. He was not in it for the money, anyway, and would just as soon as tutor the ones he worked for in barter because their children seemed more motivated and honest. His winnowing of his student pool put him off a little with the townfolks, who began to rumble about him being snooty or rather, high-toned and stuck up. He had his head in the clouds, they said – he should cultivate practical minds and citizenship – where did he stand on the war?

Park found that his loyal clients were still loyal, and he ignored the rest. The proof of his results was all he valued, not approbation.

Park felt the need to supplement his tutoring with math, but he had already established his limitations with math, so he tried to recruit a partner to supplement this deficiency and he met an older woman who had kept books in town and really had a first rate mind for numerals but she inquired why she never saw Park at church. Park did not know how to answer her directly: that he did not believe in anything except possibly Reason and indifferent Fate? She invited him to Wednesday night church and was injured when he did not accept, and that was that. After that and whatever rumor followed he saw his opportunities for tutelage fall off a little bit more, but he did not need to seek their approval or, rather, would not. He could always retreat to his enclave and his studies and be perfectly happy there. And so his tutoring opportunities dropped off save for a few who saw him as a wise old Greek chopping rhetoric and logic into the heads of the progeny of the Christian Empire. The college boards were non-denominational, maybe scandalously so.

Park did see to it that he got the company of Roger, because he felt a special challenge in the boy. He could tell from first meeting that the boy was smarter than his sister but did not give himself credit for it. He learned that the boy's grades barely hoisted themselves above passing and he did not want to see the boy doomed to less than he could achieve. And so Park accepted the boy's deal to fix up the truck if the boy would agree to tutelage – a barter. The boy agreed, and now Park had to acquiesce to a thought he did not particularly find himself attracted to: What need did he have for a truck? He no longer felt interested in expanding his domain beyond the universe to which his feet could carry him.

Park would order parts through the local garage and Roger would work in the afternoons, often with a smudged face and his arms covered to his elbows in grease. The project took one month, during which time Park filled the boy's head with American History and World History and logic and English Composition. He threw in Science – Park always had a layman's love of the Natural Universe and had made himself into an amateur scientist, and the boy began to be able to pass tests that Park administered through call and response while the boy lay underneath the truck working on this or that.

The boy got the truck running with a series of rumblings and coughs. He told Park the final step was the to drive it into town to get the paint and body work done, and so Park parted with what he saw as an inordinate supply of cash to pay for it. He would have driven the car as a battered grey wreck.

At the garage they smoothed out the engine in addition to their other work, and one bright afternoon Park returned home from his keeping time with the men at the VFW to find the vehicle tarped in his yard. He could see new tires poking from beneath the canvas. Roger was on hand to oversee the unveiling. "Go ahead, Mr. Parker, let's see it."

Park yanked the tarp timidly and the boy went up beside him and flung it off with more of a flourish to reveal a tight-looking polished chariot from the previous decade. One thing trouble Park – it had been painted a fire-engine red.

Park walked all around the vehicle. Its chrome shone; its upholstery was new; all the dials and knobs on this inside gleamed.

The boy had Park drive it into town to show it off and he was more proud of it than Park was. He made Park drive it by the school once and up and down Main Street at least three times and then said, "Let's take it out in the country."

"I'm more of a town-body," Park said.

But Roger insisted and soon they were hurtling past the last stop sign and roaring through the wide open wheat fields.

“Come on, put the pedal down, Mr. Parker,” Roger said, and Parker did, and a thrill rushed through him and put a pulse in his blood. Roger insisted they go to the next town over to show it off but this Park forcefully declined, and so Roger agreed to take it back to Park’s fam and parked it in the yard for chickens.

“A first rate job,” Park said.

Park’s tutelage of the boy curtailed after that, but he did leave the project with the sense that he had instill some first-rate knowledge and reasoning skills into the boy, but Park found himself only using the truck for errands. He was suspicious of the feeling of power it gave him and the urge to be something other than himself.

*

In time Park decided having a truck was not so bad - for errands. to use every now and then. He decided to drive into the county seat to browse a bookstore there. He drove along a road that wound between hills whose trees poured down right to the edge of the roadway. At the bookstore, which was large for a small town because its owner prowled for books in Tulsa, a woman, who turned out to be the owner, asked Park if she could help him find anything. Her name was Mildred Matthews and she had fading brown hair swept in front of her shoulders. Her smile was creased and her blue eyes blinked from behind too-big glasses. There was a smell of cedar coming from her clothes. He expressed his interests in Roman history and mythology and she took him to what scarce offerings they had, although she said she knew where she could get more if he was interested, and Park noticed she was not wearing a ring. He felt his long stale bachelorhood put a nervous tremor in him and he wanted to keep talking to her. He waiting until some other customers were taken care of then he took his books up to the counter. He told her how hard it was to get books and conversation in his small town and asked if they could get together and talk some time. He felt as though he had served up his loneliness on a platter. When she smiled and said she’d like to he was glad. They arranged a time and place at a diner near the bookstore. He was nervous she would cancel but she did not, and they met and both told a little more about each other. She was interested in his having been around the world, well, little slivers of it, and in his wide-ranging history of reading, and he in hers, and she asked to see the small town where he lived and to see his odd little farm, where he raised an odd variety of fowl he claimed were the next big thing but really did not believe himself, but he liked them because they were odd. He was ashamed of his small house but when she arrived she put his fears at ease by saying it was very Bohemian, for in truth he had decorated it with art from many eras and bits of history and Oriental oddities, including his carved statue of a monkey holding a bowl which he said was his monkey god and to which he made offerings of pocket change plus his keys at the end of the day. When he showed it to her she made the requisite offering of a few coins plus a butter mint.

They went out to dinner and some of the townsfolk could not help but rest their eyes on him and his new friend, but he ignored them though he’d hear about it later, and after dinner he asked if she’d like to look at the stars, and she hesitantly said she would, so he took her out into the garden centered between his house and its additions, in the center of the “C”, and so they sat in the garden and moved closer together and then he thought “what the hell” and leaned in to kiss her. She pulled back for a

second but then let him, and finally she returned the kiss with at least a little fire in it. After that though she scooted away and lay her hand on the bench, and he reached out and held it, and he became conscious of himself sitting next to a strange woman whom he did not know. After that romantic attempt they nervously swerved into a discussion of GB Shaw, whom Park did not like but Mildred did, and once Park had played out his limited knowledge of the man Mildred laughed and said she would have to educate him so they could have a better discussion next time. A book of three plays, she said, and she told him the order to read them in. Park reluctantly agreed.

The way she sat next to him as he drove her home was smiling but stiff, although when he dropped her off she did tilt her head for a kiss and Park felt something like a small flame rise up when she held his lips a second longer than he'd expected. He dropped her off at a small brown brick house with a wide porch and a light in the window and a cat in front of the light. She said she'd had a splendid time as if she were saying something formal at the end of a ball – she shook his hand. He said his goodnights and left looking at his own feelings that he wanted to see more of her.

On their next night out she showed him her town, but first her house, with a wall of books in what should have been its dining room and two stuffed teal chairs cantered toward the fireplace. It smelled of a kind of perfume you might buy in bulk from the drug store, sweet and lady-like without the least hint of carnality. After dinner they went back to her place and in the full view of her two cats kissed on the couch and forgot about books until she pulled away and told him she must wait until she was married, and he judged she had been waiting thirty years but he acquiesced and scooted to one side and held her hand and kissed its white skin, and then he excused himself and drove home. He felt unexpectedly hot – he was always a bundle of sensations to himself to be examined by himself.

He drove home feeling hotter inside himself than he'd like to, and he judged she had gotten under his skin. In his dreams she turned nineteen, and he imagined the turn of her slender frame to her hips and his hands resting there and him being gentle the first time and afterwards their being able to talk about books or films or music in the franker and casual way of people who were through trying to impress each other. He found himself overdressing for their next meeting and guessed that meant he was both nervous and serious.

They had many outings after that and Park worried she might expect him to ask to marry her and he worried at his own thought of what the hell, maybe he would do it. He could see her bright eyes tilted up at his and her mischievous smile that let him know she had gotten to know him better than he had let anyone know him in years, and he welcomed his face in the reflection of her eyes, but always, always there was something in him that did not want to go through with it. In the end it was a relief when she told him her mother was sick and that she'd have to be gone at least three weeks to care for her.

*

After an evening of nightmares over his ill-tempered father, and his own much repressed ill-temper flaring up in return, Park woke up at 3:00 AM desperately wanting a drink, and as much as he wanted support he did not want to wake up David, who had his whole life wrapped in his steady matronly girlfriend turned fiancé, so he got himself a handful of hard candy and crunched it and put some coffee on the stove. When the coffee was boiling he poured a cup and went out to his garden and lay on his back on the bench.

“Damn it,” he thought.

He let the shivering from the cold supplant the shakes until he felt a little more himself again, and he sipped the coffee until he body felt less like a humming motor and began to return to the steady pace of his heartbeat rather than his buzzing mind. Then he got up, went inside the house and threw a blanket over his shoulders, retrieved a book and went back outside. He started a fire in the fire pit and poked it with a stick until it found its life. He stroked a dog that had adopted him and read Shakespeare’s sonnets by the firelight, the ebb and glow flickering on the pages.

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame

Is lust in action: and till action, lust

Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,

Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;

Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight;

Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,

Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,

On purpose laid to make the taker mad.

Mad in pursuit and in possession so;

Had, having, and in quest to have extreme;

A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;

Before, a joy proposed; behind a dream.

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well

To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

He poked a stick at the fire and thought. He could not sleep, so he went back inside and pulled on some clothes and took the keys to his truck from the monkey’s bowl with an intention to drive just to feel the cool air on his head, but as he drove there emerged a vague idea of where he was heading.

He was driving to an abandoned shack Roger had told him about. It was up in the hills, and not easy to find, but he had committed Roger’s directions to memory: thirteen miles past the last stop sign, then off on an old logging road up into the hills. Park watched the odometer then drove slowly until he noticed the old dirt road branching off to the left. He put his car in low and began creeping up the steep road, keeping an eye for every sudden turn.

“Damn stupid thing to do,” he thought to himself as he skirted a dropoff, but he did not stop. He watched carefully in the scope of his headlights for every curve and bend.

After nine miles of winding he began to think he must have missed it and was ready to turn back when he saw a dark, tilting rectangle set against the stars. He turned into a small dirt turnout, shut off the car, and retrieved a flashlight from his glovebox.

The boy had said someone was murdered here years ago. All the kids knew it. They sometimes went up here to summon ghosts, or really, just to drink and scare themselves. They said there was still blood on the walls.

Park shut off the ignition and stepped slowly from his vehicle toward the shack. He shone the flashlight on the ground to guide his feet. He went to the wooden porch – the door was open and he let it creak as he walked inside.

The first thing that struck him was how much it was like his own shack.

There were grey dry floorboards inside. A man had strangled his wife, the stories said, and then hid here in his own misery, drinking himself blind, not caring if he was caught – maybe, half wanting to be caught but too cowardly to turn himself in. No one knew who had killed him. They said he had killed his wife, but there were never any charges filed – a story that grew in the telling.

Park laid down the flashlight and traced the brown stain on the wall with his fingers. He felt he was circumscribing a life – a sorrow here, a fortune there; here tears, there laughter, and finally a long dark slide that got steeper and steeper the more one tried to climb out of it. A decline that led here. Finally light could not get in. Park turned from the stain to the mind of the man and then, in his mind, to the outline of the man on the floor, one arm near his head and one outstretched, the palm open and empty as if releasing something.

He turned off the flashlight and slumped in the corner and could see stars peeking through the broken roof. Did the thing he let go escape through there? Up between the cracks and out into the icy blue flecked with fire? Or had he died trapped like an animal, imprisoned forever in the stain, to do no more than trace and retrace the contours of his life from illusory moments of joy only to be stung by their deceit, the trickery of a life already predetermined to a transcendental violent end? A life that would have turned out the same, every time. Park's mind gravitated toward the latter but surprised him in wishing for the former. He was not a sentimental man, but he also had a sense of justice. He rose deciding to call Thurmond Allen's favor but Thurmond Allen was nowhere to be found – off on a gambling junket somewhere. He did not keep anybody's hours.

The next afternoon Park went to the newspaper morgue and combed through the issues three years prior and at first found a small article that said a man had killed himself over gambling debts. It said he had been survived by his wife and two children. So, if this was the same person, the embellishment of having strangled his wife was untrue. It did not say, however, who he had been indebted to. The man had blown his own head off, or seemed to have. They found a gun next to the body. No doubt an open and shut case about a man nobody cared much about.

But then he found a curious thing – there had been two murders or suicides around the same time. One man, Wayne Jacoby, had strangled his wife, after all. Both men died alone. The second man, William Parsons died after the first. It seemed the rumors had been reversed – the man who died in the shack was not the strangler, though he died in proximity to that man. Park wondered if they were connected.

*

A few days later while he was riding his bicycle home from the VFW, where he learned the wives' guild was planning to pressure him to direct "The Tempest," he noticed a car driving slowly up behind him, low lazy clouds of dust kicking into the air from its tires. He pulled to the side of the road and waited for the dark luxury car to pull up beside him. The car parked next to him and the man inside rolled down the window. It was Bryce Covington. The man was heavier and had much more grey in his hair. He looked like he would get winded if he had to run twenty feet. But he had the same supercilious curl to his face and the same glint in his eyes.

"Hello Park. Looks like you've made a nice little life for yourself."

Park looked back in the man's face. "I suppose I have, in a way."

Bryce smiled at him. "Look, I know something you want to know. But it'll cost you."

"Don't you ever give up?"

"Not when you betrayed my brother."

"Well, I have something you don't have now – indifference."

"Forgot about that girl?"

"Maybe."

"Well she's not forgotten about you. How much is it worth to you to keep her out of your hair? She had a child by you, a son. The boy's 13 now and wants to meet you. The woman wants you to meet him. Wouldn't that just ruin everything with you and your new lady friend?"

"Maybe you're lying. Maybe I wouldn't care."

The man laughed into his moustache. "You have temerity, but you're not a good bluffer. You are one man who should never play poker."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to get out of town and never come back. Tell your sweetie adios."

"I should have just pointed a gun at your head and made you tell me."

"But that's just it, Park. You would never do that. Your life is a suspension between the thought and the deed."

"I suppose I should tell you this: I'm sorry for what I did. Not that I loved her, but that I cheated."

"Remorse? You're not that weak, Park."

"I am a changed man now, and I just want to live my life in peace."

Bryce smoothed his moustache. "I suppose you are about as low as you can go. Danged foolish, a grown man on a bicycle. But know this – you are never to tell anyone about my little proposition back then, or you will disappear and no one will ever find you."

Bryce drove off with a sudden squeal of his tires, leaving Park in a cloud of dust. Park stood on his bicycle and waited for the air to clear. Then he looked at his foot resting on the one raised pedal, and at the red reflector on the pedal's side. He did not want to believe that the man was telling the truth about a son. Bryce was nothing but a lie built upon a lie, a bluff to see how far he could push a man. He had been telling himself now that Olivia has disappeared and not left a trace that Bryce would have had the energy to pursue. But thoughts throbbed inside of him from a fire that he had not been aware. He might as well have been back at square one. He saw things as a young man saw them, even though he had not been young when he met Olivia – he had felt young.

Park rode home flustered. God he wanted a woman – not a mousy woman, a rough and tumble one. He longed to be back in Honduras among the señoritas. He told himself he could leave and be anybody but himself for good. He went home and the walls felt close on all sides. He looked at his wall of books and could not find one thing he wanted to read, so he sat there and stared at the monkey god with its indifferent serene religion of beauty, truth, and fate. The smug conceit seemed to mock him. What did he owe anyone? What kept him from throwing his hands up at fate and mocking it, and mocking all the books and all the patient solitude and all the things that reined a man in? And what kept him from drinking? But there his conscience stung him. He could not ever let himself go again. He would be a rage and a fury and finally he painted a picture with which he could be ashamed of himself, a man lost in his cups slashing a blind path of brief meaningless sensations, masking himself pathetic. He was a man who must live for doing men no harm now. There was no middle road, for other men, maybe, but not for him. Slowly his blood cooled and he felt himself finally rest back in his chair. He had to be himself for himself – he was who he was now, or else he would be a monster.

He rose and made himself some coffee, then he took it out into his garden and sipped it as evening fell. He had a tutoring session tonight, he remembered. The familiar simple duty held his hand like another, cooler hand.

My God, a son he didn't know?

He put it all behind him – it had to be a lie.

But in the back of his head it was another thing that Bryce said that itched at him – never tell anyone about their arrangement. To other men it would have been a threat, but Park realized in it an admission that he himself held at least one card. One man dead after strangling his wife, another man dead from apparent suicide in a shack up in the hills. Park determined to learn more about them.

*

Park planted some boxwoods in front of his house. He bought small ones, intending to nurse them to maturity over the years. Four of them, spaced equidistantly, with the ground around them cleared for a flower garden. He had loaded the plants in the back of his truck from the nursery one Saturday morning that had dawned temperately after a long hot summer. He felt invigorated by the cooler weather. As he leaned on his shovel to dig the first of four holes for the boxwoods, a car rolled up in front of his house. Out of the elaborate, ornate vehicle stepped Thurmond Allen. Thurmond was in his seersucker suit and white shoes. He walked across the dry yard toward Park and Park took off his work gloves and shook his hand.

“How are you doing, Park?” he said. “Off of the sauce?”

Park affirmed. "Have been for some time now. My friend, David Wilson, helped me kick that habit. Still, it's day by day – forever."

"I judged you to be a man of some inner resolve," Thurmond said. "I'm glad to hear it. I understand there's a recovering alcoholics group in Tulsa."

"I can handle it on my own."

Thurmond looked at him with large brown eyes. Thurmond was a tall man and large of frame. His seersucker suit stretched unbuttoned across his broad chest, exposing the gold chain of a pocket watch in his vest.

"Suit yourself. Different things work for different people. If you have support, that's enough."

"Did you come here to help me get my garden started? There's a shovel."

Thurmond looked at the shovel with drooping eyelids. He took out a handkerchief and dusted his hands neatly, as if the mere proximity to an implement of manual labor had soiled them. "I'll watch. I came here to talk about the debt I owe you."

Park looked at him. "I would like you to help me get more information on the deaths of two men that took place near here about three years ago."

Thurmond raised his eyebrows. "I was ready to offer my assistance in locating that lost love of yours. I was going to offer the services of one of my men in finding out where she went after leaving town. Now there would be few leads, but it would begin with assuming that Bryce is bluffing when he says he knows anything about her. My theory is he was simply glad to be rid of her. He never did think she was good enough for his brother. He thought of her as low-born and said as much in card games. He never once boasted of putting a tail on her. Still, there were a few people close enough to her that she might have confided in."

Park put his hands in his pockets and looked at Thurmond. "I have to start off by saying I hardly know you. But anybody who is adversary of Bryce's is a friend of mine."

"So you're not quite as dispassionate as you pretend?"

"He had me over a barrel when I was low and – say – do you give me your absolute word that I can trust you?"

"We can shake on it."

Park shook his hand and Thurmond cleaned his hand afterward.

"What I want to tell you is this: when I wanted to know where the woman was, Bryce offered to give me the information on the condition that I kill a man for him. A man who had strangled his wife. That man later turned up dead, but not by me. I want to know whether Bryce killed him or had him killed, and why, and how I can prove it."

Thurmond took off his hat and mopped his brow. "Park," he said, "as a gambler myself I can say that the motive for the murder was probably gambling debts, and that the murder of the wife was probably from a common point of despair – an argument over money, a hot-tempered man who let his passions undo

him in all things, including silencing a scolding voice that stung his conscience. I never gamble with people who can't feed their mouths or the mouths of their loved ones over the loss of a few dollars. I play against the house."

"Bryce said the woman meant something to him."

"A lie, possibly. Why would Bryce admit a weakness? Had he been drinking?"

"He might have been. His eyes were wet. And then there is the matter of a second murder – or an apparent suicide – a few days later. I think the second was in reaction to the first."

"How so?"

"I think that if Bryce could not get me to murder for him, he found someone who would, and that man in turn killed himself out of remorse, or else was killed himself to erase any trace of Bryce's involvement."

"Those are a lot of conjectures."

"That's where you come in," Park said. "I want some way to prove Bryce's involvement."

"And you would find a District Attorney willing to prosecute your findings? They are all crooked here."

"I just want to know for myself." Park said. "I want to know that the one of the few moral decisions I ever made was against something that was worth standing up to."

"But you made your decision by running away."

"I suppose that's why I want to resolve it now. I've decided to stay here and live with myself. I can't live with myself by not knowing that Bryce is a cold-blooded killer – by not being willing to confront that fact due to the desire simply to live life relatively easy now. For some reason I want the truth to be known. If even only to me."

"To do this even about people you don't know? Park, they were probably not good men."

"Who's to say I'm a good man?"

"The closer you get to Bryce, the more difficult things will become for you. What then? Die a martyr? Look, I can do many good things for you: get you a nice job, get you a few acres, set you up with a nice trip for you and some lady friend who will make your life complete. I'm not sure I can, in good conscience, let you live out a life of vengeance."

"It's not vengeance!"

"It is if you're still letting him have power over you. My only suggestion is that you move on from it, for your own sake. Let it go."

"Then I suppose you can be of no use to me." Park said and turned away.

"Now Park," Thurmond said. "Suppose I do help you. Do you promise that if I can prove Bryce's involvement, that you will simply be happy to live with that knowledge that you are morally superior to

him? Because otherwise you will end up dead. I did not ask you to give up the bottle only to replace it with another life-stealing fixation.”

Park stood and thought. “Morally superior? Yes, I suppose that’s what I want.”

“Then I will try to get you opportunities to interview, in secret, the decedents of the two men. That’s all I can do.”

“That’s good enough.”

“And Park,” Thurmond added. Don’t pin too much on moral superiority. None of us leaves the world with clean hands.”

*

He did not hear from Thurmond Allen for three weeks – and in fact no one knew where Thurmond was – he was in the habit of disappearing and reappearing at whatever schedule and on whatever errand suited his fancy. But after three weeks (during which time Park directed *The Tempest* for the ladies’ VFW auxiliary and played Prospero), he got message to wait for Thurmond’s driver on the certain hour of a certain day. The large black driver pulled up to Park’s house in a long black car, and Park climbed in the back and soon was delivered to a small white house on a patch of dry lawn sitting on a dirt lane 100 miles away.

“Get out here,” the driver said. “We make this one stop.”

Park got out. He had been given to understand that he was to interview Thelma Parsons, the widow of the man who had died in the shack he had visited.

Park walked up to the plain concrete slab of a porch, looked back at the car a moment, then knocked at the weathered green door. The noise seemed to him to echo loudly all around, for the insects were not singing on this hot afternoon. Just as he was about to turn away he heard a clear, high, aged female voice as stern as a teacher’s voice call from behind the door: “Come in.”

Park creaked open the door and walked in to see a small parlor off the hall to the left, and saw two chairs pulled up to a small table. The light was filtered by a drawn shade in the room so that it only pushed through in a brown-green glow, with a bright crack of yellow light streaming in at the curtain’s edges, catching dustmotes. The woman he was to interview sat in a rocker facing away from the table so that all Park saw was a weathered hand resting on one arm of the chair, with lace around the wrist. Behind her against the wall was a cabinet full of curios and photos.

“He’s not in any of them,” the voice said, guessing his thoughts. “Suicide’s the sin against the Holy Ghost, and I have not forgiven him for leaving me.”

Park sat in the empty chair opposite hers and took out a small notepad and pencil.

“So it was suicide?”

“That’s what the inquest said. “There were powder burns on his fingers.”

“I’m sorry to hear about it.”

“Why are you sorry? You don’t know me and he did nothing to you.”

“I’m sorry because I know what it’s like to want to kill yourself.”

“Then you’re weak.”

“Then I’m sorry for your loss.”

“That’s a more acceptable sentiment, but I doubt even that’s sincere. You want something from me. You did not come here just to offer your sympathies. What do you want to know that hasn’t already been in the papers? He died three years ago, alone in that shack outside of Titus, his own hand pulling the trigger. And that after he had betrayed me and everyone who had loved him. He had done nothing I couldn’t forgive, but I can’t forgive that.”

“Let’s talk about what he’d done.”

“Now you’re warming up to it,” she said, and he could hear a richer tone entering the tenor of her voice, as if she were tasting something delicious. “You are a direct young man.”

“I’m not that young.”

“Pardon me if I don’t turn to look at you. I’ll accept you on your word. Inquisitiveness is mostly a young man’s game. I used to be a teacher. I appreciate your temerity to cut to the core of the problem. Let me starts at this: my husband lost an amount of money to Bryce Covington that would probably not be considered large by most men’s estimation, but was large to us. I had inherited it from my mother and we were going to save it for our retirement. But my husband lost it to Bryce playing poker. The poor stupid fool had no luck about him at all. His whole life was bad luck. Did you know he fought in the Great War?”

“Tell me about that.”

“My husband was drafted when he was nineteen – we were married at seventeen, and like a dutiful wife I threw kisses on him when he left and stayed strong while he was away. But he did not come back the same. He would wake up screaming. He told me he had seen men split in two by shrapnel. He had had to kill two Germans no more than boys in the Argonne forest, and he lost a leg below the knee. Now I supposed that many men came home with similar stories and that some told about them and some never did, each modulating their mind to horror as their temperaments allowed. Some boast of their war stories. But my husband was not like that. The war killed something inside of him – or rather, killed it night after night. He could not abide the sound of loud noises after that. I had to walk on eggshells – never rattling a pan. The backfire from a motor sent him into a pale, shivering panic. He was friendless and close to uselessness. Oh, the local farmers tried to befriend him, and he did have their help from time to time, but in everything they soon became paternal, and tried to cheer him up by painting a picture of him at last benignly retired, with the beauty of nature all around him. But he didn’t put much stock in that. It took everything I had to roust him into going into the fields every day, and once he got started he did work hard, but the next morning he would be as listless as ever. He had to provide for us so I made sure he did. I taught school but that in itself was never enough to get by. I did it mostly to get

out of the house. And at nights all he would do is sleep. He withdrew from the world – until we got the money.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well then there were plenty of men who suddenly became his friends, and he was fool enough to be glad of their company. We were living in Titus back then and he was lonely but I think for him it was much more enjoyable to have false friendships than real ones – he needn’t have any emotions tied up in them. But they got him into the habit of drinking, and that unwound his mind enough that, unbeknownst to me, he began gambling a little, here and there, and began to have a little success, and I think it put a genuine joy in his life that he hadn’t had for quite a while. We were childless, and he had nothing to come home to except to me, and I suppose I was rather stern and unsympathetic to his illness – it was my job to drive the man. And so when he could be no-one in the company of his associates and lose himself a little, he found something like happiness.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

“I do.”

“You are here because you do, I suppose. But there are worse things than a joyless life – for example, a life of sorrow. But some men even enjoy their sorrow more than joy. He might have become one of them. He made one friend in a man who was kind enough to drive him home some evenings. I have it from this man that my husband began coming out on the losing end of luck, and then he put more pressure on himself to win it back. I suppose he felt guilty about gambling in the first place and that I would find out about his habit. So he began wagering on higher stakes, hoping to reverse his fortune. But he never did. Bryce Covington saw to it that he was cleaned out of every last cent.”

“How do you know it was Bryce Covington?”

“His one friend, or friendly associate, told me. He tried to get him to quit with what little money he had left, but Bryce, knowing that he sat upon a small but tidy bit of cash, pumped him full of the hopes of finally breaking even, led him to gamble away every penny. He let him win a little, built his confidence up and therefore his hope that fate would eventually deal him a winning hand, then slowly bled him dry. He disappeared for three days, so ashamed was he that he had lost our inheritance. I knew then that something serious had gone wrong, and I checked with the bank and sure enough he had drawn out all the money. And when I confronted him he fell apart in the most abject way that it made me despise him. I have no time for weak men. I told him then and there that I was leaving him to live with my sister. In hindsight I suppose if I had been the least bit sympathetic I could have saved him, but even to this day I don’t feel sympathetic. Maybe I should – you could argue with me that I should, seeing how the war hollowed him out. But don’t try – I won’t. He was not strong and I was a fool to marry him, but now at least I had a reason to be free of him. You see, there is something in the very way that women are knit together that doesn’t like sickness, or so I believe. We give life.”

“So you think it was out of shame that your husband locked himself in that shed and killed himself?”

“Not shame; hopelessness. He let himself see a life with no way out. But as long as your heart’s beating there’s a way out. One can atone.”

“So he could have won you back?”

“No, but he could have won something of his own pride back through hard work. And then, who knows? He could have found someone to share his life with.”

Park paused. He did not say what he wanted to say, that if she had been in his shoes, had seen the cruelties of war...

“I can guess you’re thinking I’m pretty cruel. Maybe that’s true. But I had to live. I saw my future going on where he did not. I was a teacher, I had to satisfaction of seeing an ounce of sense getting into some of my students’ heads. Life has something to make it worth living, if you let it. If for nothing else, just to conquer death one day at a time.”

“I wonder if he didn’t do one thing more – two days before he died, a man who strangled a woman of whom Bryce confessed fondness was found dead in a house not five miles from where your husband took his life. He was found shot in the heart. The murderer was never identified. I wonder if Bryce had offered your husband a way to absolve his debt by killing the man.”

“Now you are spinning things out of whole cloth.”

“I wonder because of this: Bryce offered to alleviate a debt I owed him if I killed that man.”

Now it was the woman’s turn to be silent for a moment. “I do not think he had it in him.”

“Not even to repay the debt, to recover his lost funds, and win you back?”

“How would he explain getting back the money?”

“Did you mean that much to him that he would do it?”

“I probably meant more to him than he meant to me. Maybe. But his most likely motive would have been to atone. To recover the money as a way to paper over his egregious error, in his own conscience. But win me back? I do not think there was enough love for that.”

“Do you know where he was that night?”

“I had already left him.”

“Is there anyone who would know?”

“He was utterly alone. Not even the one man who had halfway befriended him would know that. When he went to check up on my husband after I’d left, he said he could not find him.”

“But why would your husband retreat to a shack to kill himself? Why not do it in your own home?”

“I take it you are implying he was hiding from something?”

“What would he have to hide from?”

“The house that was his home damning him with its own loneliness. He did not want his friend to visit him and possibly tease him out of misery. You did not know the man – I did. He could never have brought himself to do that. It would have been too decisive.”

“For a man who had seen death and had already killed, in war?”

“I do not admit that he was decisive enough to kill a man to pay a debt. All I know and care for is that the man is dead.”

“And you’re not sorry?”

“I can’t think of anything else I can say that will help you. The only man who may have known a different side of him that I did was the man from the card games who had befriended him. You can pursue your fantasies with him.”

“Can you tell me who he is and where to find him?”

“His name is Tom Stout. He is a barber in Titus.”

Park knew Tom Stout. He rose. The woman did not turn around.

“Thank you for your troubles,” he said.

“And so you’re off to look for one more nail on which to hook your own fantasy of revenge. You must make the man guilty enough for you to act. You are as weak as he was.”

“I suppose you could say I want justice.”

“Justice? Who are you to be the arm of God? You want to hate.”

“I want peace of mind.”

“Well then, go out and try to find it. Seize your temerity while you can. I’ll give you that you have more gumption than he did, even if the same level of foolishness. Now I have nothing else to say. Good day.”

Park turned to leave. “And if I find out anything, will you want to know?”

“No,” she said. “I have turned and sealed my past to my satisfaction. I can gain nothing by reopening it.”

Park walked out the front door into the blinding white afternoon light. He walked back to the car and the chauffeur let him into the back seat.

“Find out what you wanted?” the man called over his shoulder as he pulled the car away from the house and down the dirt lane.

“Maybe – can you make one more stop?”

“The boss didn’t say anything about one more stop so I can’t.”

“Well then, just drive through town on the way back. Can you do that?”

The man agreed and made a detour to his route to go Titus’ town’s main street. As they passed the cluster of storefronts in the center of town, Park saw the barbershop and looked in its window to see a man roughly his own age standing and looking out. Park resolved to drive into town on his own the next day to talk to the man.

*

The trouble was getting a chance to talk to Stout alone. He was a busy man – his shop was busy, and after hours he often did charitable work by cutting the hair of people confined to their homes, and if not doing that he was doing something with or for the church. Stout had married late and had three teen-aged children living under his roof. So Park went in for a haircut and there were many men in his shop waiting or just jawing amongst themselves on a lazy afternoon. When it finally came time for Park to get his hair cut he stepped into the chair and casually mentioned to Stout that he would like to see him to discuss a private matter; he caught the man short.

“I’m an awfully busy man, Mr. Parker. Let’s just talk about it here.”

Park listened to the hum of conversation going on around him, amongst the men in the chairs. It seemed distracted enough, though he imagined it could dry up at the faintest opportunity to overhear a bit of gossip. And he did not want to let Covington know he was asking around, so he let the matter drop and simply talked about the weather and his ridiculous habit of riding a bicycle almost everywhere and an exaggerated near-religious belief in the body-and-soul rejuvenating virtues of fresh air and exercise that would put the man off guard with a caricature of his eccentricity.

“I will drop by your house tonight,” Park said.

“Say, you aren’t trying to sell me something?”

Parked played along. “Sell? No, I am giving you an opportunity.”

“I don’t reckon I need any opportunities.”

“You’ll change your mind. Get in on the ground floor.”

“All right, Park. You’ll get five minutes. Bring a pamphlet.”

Park agreed he would and he waited until the evening and then rode his bicycle over to Stout’s house on a quiet side street a mile removed from the center of town. A large elm drooped over his front lawn and he could see the shadows of Stout’s children moving about in the kitchen. Park stood his bike up on its stand and rang the doorbell.

Stout’s wife answered and dried her hands off on her apron. “Hello Mr. Parker,” she said. “John said you were coming over here to sell him on a genuine opportunity. I hope it doesn’t involve money because with three adolescents we haven’t got much to spare.”

“No money,” Park said.

“And not religion?”

“Everything we do is a religion!”

She stared at him like he was as mad as a March hare and went inside and in a minute Stout was at the door.

“Let’s talk outside,” Park said. “It’s such a nice night.”

Stout agreed and closed the door behind him. The noise of the happy voices inside faded a little.

They walked to the shadow of the elm.

“Now Park, you’re not trying to sell me on some religion, are you? I reckon you’ve got some pretty far-flung ideas. Now us, we’re Methodists and we’re happy to be so.”

Park went ahead and played his hand. “Pete, what do you know about William Parsons?”

Stout started and then gave him a stony stare. “That was a while ago, Park. You were gone, but I suppose you’ve learned he took his life. But honestly, let the past be in the past.”

“Listen Tom, I’m not going to say another word unless I know I can trust you. Whatever I say, you’re to keep it between us, understand?”

“If that’s the case I’d just as soon not hear it.”

“You knew William to be a lonely man, didn’t you?”

“If you’re saying I didn’t do enough to save him I’ll take umbrage to that...”

“No, what I want to know is this: when did you last see him?”

“The day before he took his life. Now what is it to you? It’s all been through the inquest and the courts.”

“I want to know what his frame of mind was: was he depressed, was he bitter? Was he angry?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Did he talk about having to do something he didn’t want to do? Was something heavy on his mind?”

“What are you going to do: put the dead on trial?”

“I just want to know.”

“Look, Park, he was a troubled man. He could go from sad to bitter to angry all in a flash.”

“Did he ever talk about Bryce offering him a way out?”

Stout looked down and then looked back up. “All that’s behind me, Park. I don’t gamble no more, nor drink. But have you ever known Bryce to offer anyone a way out?”

“As a matter of fact, I do – once.”

“Well there’s only one man you can talk to, then.”

“I suppose there always has been only one.”

“Now Park, you can count on me to keep this under my hat, but don’t do anything foolish. Bryce has a lot of power and few scruples. Oh, he’s nice enough when you’re on his side, but hell when you’re not.”

“I know. I suppose I’ll go talk to him, but I hoped to do so with more cards in my hand.”

“Unless you’re keen on disappearing, you’ll just let it lie.”

“I can’t let it lie. Just my nature, I guess. I can always disappear on my own, later. The world’s a big place.”

Tom turned to go but then he turned around. "Say Park, there is one funny thing Jim mentioned when I saw him last. He asked me if I had heard about a man who strangled his wife. Out of the pit of his own despair he distracted himself with gossip about something like that. I told him I hoped he wasn't getting ideas. I don't know how he even heard about it."

"Did you know they didn't try to arrest the man for three days after the body was found?" Park said. "The newspapers said as much. He got loose on habeas corpus because it looked like a break-in and he had an alibi and they had no proof. He was found murdered before they could take him in, and from what I read I don't think they looked hard for someone to press charges on. He was found murdered before William took his own life."

"I don't think he could have been involved in anything like that."

"How badly did he want his wife back?"

"Not too badly, I guess. They didn't seem to get along. She was always scornful when I brought him home."

"Maybe he loved her more than you thought."

"That's an awful lot of guesswork. I take it you never heard about the suicide note."

"No."

"Well rumor has it there was a suicide note. Of course, only the sheriff would have that, I guess, if it ever existed."

"I've got to read it."

"Good luck getting it. There is one man who is supposed to have read it before the sheriff got hold of it – like I said, if it ever existed."

"Who was that?"

"It was William's brother. He's the one who found the body. He knew where he and his brother used to stay when they were out hunting. But the brother is deployed in the seabees."

"Then it's him that I've got to get hold of. Who would know how to get him a letter?"

"Well his wife. She lives in Pikesville. Look, I can keep a secret but if you go sniffing around..."

"I know."

*

But he had not been able much to settle on how to get at the dead man's brother when from his past came back into his life – the Panamanian "Ambassador." He appeared on his porch one day in a sweat-stained dark suit with a steamer chest at his feet. Park saw the wagon that had delivered him hurrying away in a cloud of dust, as if glad to have deposited him. He was looking, he communicated to Park in no uncertain terms, for a place to lay low. Park invited him in, though to do so meant the Ambassador had to sit in the one good chair by the desk while Park sat on the foot of the bed. He got the Ambassador a

glass of water, and the Ambassador mopped his broad oily forehead with a handkerchief and then drank the water off at one draught then told his story.

“Something frightful has happened. Nothing that couldn’t be resolved reasonably between two gentlemen, but I am dealing with no gentleman. It seems two men can’t share the love of one woman. Oh, this is most indelicate. She never loved him the way she loved me, or so she said, but when the chips were down she went back to him, which is to say for reasons of his short, vengeful Latin temper, I currently find myself on the lam.”

“He chased you all the way up here?”

“I fled to here because I remember you telling about it in your stories. It seemed the perfect place to hide. This man is vengeful and relentless. I think he is a Nazi sympathizer, but in any case he is a big man in a small pond where he comes from, and his pride is aggrieved.”

Park cooked him supper and let him sleep in the addition for the night, but in truth Park valued his solitude and did not care much for the unwelcome intruder who had no definite plans for how long he would stay. The next day he talked David into helping find the man lodging and gainful employment. They finally got him on as a hand at a farm out in the country, but soon that farmer was irritated beyond their ability to verbally repair:

“He plays cards all day; he does not know a cow from a bull, which I find a remarkable thing. The draft mules will not obey him. He is scared of chickens. He is too fat for my horses. He can’t tell the weeds from the crops. He becomes highly odorous when he sweats, and he sweats all the time. He is constantly trying to borrow money and has been teaching my other hired man “Liar’s Dice” in the hope of parting him from his cash. I will not have him another instant.”

The Ambassador was deposited back at Park’s farm, and as the wagon pulled away and the Ambassador was left once more in the dust with his steamer trunk, Park decided to lodge him one more night and then tell him to get a job or get out. The man ate voraciously and dabbed at the corners of his mouth daintily between belches. “Fine beans, my boy, fine.”

“You need to get a job.”

“But what employment is here for the erudite?”

“Teachers and preachers.”

“You don’t suppose this town needs a *temperance* preacher?” His face glinted a little.

“There is always business for them.”

“Nothing is so compelling as a conversion story,” the man said as if to himself, “And I have that in spades. Oh how my life was laid low by drink – the señoritas I bedded, the enemies I made – but now I am dry! Say, do they have a mission in town?”

“Not in this town, but in the county seat.”

“Then I shall start my mission as the lowest of the low, and rise in the world as an example to be trotted out as an example of the wayward turned righteous. It will be a start. Do you think you could drop me off there tomorrow?”

“I’d be glad to.”

And so the next day at dawn Park had loaded the Ambassador up in his truck and he drove him to the county seat and dropped him off at the mission. It was in the coming weeks that he began to hear of a remarkable man giving his testimony, of having fallen from great estate to rags in slavery to the demon in a bottle. He had been a sinner – oh the basest among many – but now he was given to the Lord and the one true path of the Roman Road, and brother you could tread that path too if you would give up your sins today, and trade in that bottle for the Living River. He could move many to tears. He had dug one of white suits out of the steamer trunk. He would stand out there in 100 degree heat castigating and soothing while all the while fanning himself with a Panama hat. He had become a circuit preacher’s chiefest exhibit, and they made good money collecting for the poor. Park was glad to hear of it because it meant the Ambassador was now out of his hair, or was until the day he turned up at his doorstep again.

“No one is to know I’m here,” the white-suited Ambassador said, “but I need to impose upon you in this: I need to be trained in the art of the duel.”

Park was shouldering a bag of seed for the chickens and dropped in the dust in front of his house and looked at the man kind of helplessly. “What would I know about a duel?”

“I need nothing but instruction in good aim, and then a second. I have decided to face my pursuer once and for all. If the worst happens, the worst, I am to be carried away in the Living Waters to my eternal reward.”

“You don’t believe that stuff, do you?”

“Oh good man Parker, I think I do. It is good to have a purpose in life after decades of being a scoundrel. I got baptized, you see, and ever since then I have felt a cleanness and a lightness in myself that I haven’t felt since I was a young man full of hope in the world. I sleep better. I sweat less. It helps explain why my life of grasping at the low hanging fruit has always been in vain. If nothing else, it’s the psychological cure. I no longer want what I can’t have.”

“And if you win this duel you will still continue your life as a circuit preacher?”

The Ambassador fiddled with the hat he held in his hand. “All I am saying is I am ready for a life of not running. He has found me here – my pursuer. I saw him check into the hotel in the county seat last night. He had a swarthy look and a steely eye. I saw him glaring at me from the back of the crowd while I was preaching. He had the motion of his hand drawn across his neck. Let me tell you it unnerved me at first, and I felt all the wind of my conversion drain out of me, but only for instant, before it was replaced by steel. It is time to put my old life behind me once and for all.”

And so Park called up David and they interrogated the Ambassador to make sure it was not some secret stash of whiskey talking, and they were sure it was not, and David said that sometimes a man just comes to a point where he has to face up with the long road of ruin in his life, and either he was a new man after all or he was not, so they took the Ambassador out back and showed him the basics of firing a pistol. At first he held the gun off at arm’s length like a man might hold a flapping chicken by its feet, but by and by he gained more confidence and could shoot a can off the fencepost with one eye squinted

maybe one time out of ten. They then decided that Park would go as the Ambassador's emissary to the hotel and propose the duel to the man.

Park played upon the man's pride. It was your honor that was wounded, was it not? A man cannot reclaim his honor in a cowardly act. If love is valuable at all, it is in that we rise to it in the way animals cannot. If it matters to us, it is as a noble calling. You cannot debase yourself for it and expect to return to it by the way you came. You are a big man in your own country. Why live so lowly?

"The whole world's changing – none of us can return the way we came."

"But you do have something to return to – do you want to be chasing this man forever? It is your life he is taking away from you. Be done with it. Return to the love of the woman he stole from you. Return to the woman and your rightful place in the land of bananas."

And so in the wee hours of the morning, as the man took to drink and considered Park's proposition, squinting at him with an eye that became more watery, but more gimlet, he agreed he would do it.

They met in the lane behind the lumberyard before dawn the next day, and somehow word of it had gotten around so that there were more than fifty onlookers gathered, crowded back into the grass field that gave way to a stand trees that retreated toward the gentle murmur of a creek. The two men stood twenty paces apart. The Latin man had no second and said he didn't need one. Park stood by the side of the increasingly agitated Ambassador.

"I don't know if I can go through with this," the Ambassador said, almost crying. "I want to live."

"Well, you got yourself into trouble now. You either shoot or be shot. I think that man has death in his eyes. Look, how about I try to talk it into fifty paces so you both miss?"

"Would you?"

"I'll try."

So Park tried but the man refused and said for Park to leave the man's side so they could get on with it, so Park started to move away, leaving the Ambassador standing all alone.

"Oh please!" the Ambassador shouted. "Let's just talk this out. I don't want to die! I thought I'd found religion but I haven't – and where there's doubt, there's no assurance of the pearly gates! Just let me slink off – I'll never darken this town again."

This set the crowd to murmuring and his recent converts hissed and muttered but he did not care.

The Latin man raised his pistol and took the Ambassador in his sights, but just then the sheriff strode around the corner and blasted his shotgun into the air.

"There'll be no dueling today! You all git home."

The Latin man puffed his chest. In slurred speech he told the sheriff that he had no authority over him because he was an official of the Panamanian government and this man had offended Panamanian law and what would the US do if it offended the home of the mighty canal and that in any case if he were arrested he would see to it that his government freed him, and this man had insulted his honor and the sheriff said dueling was a stupid thing and that dead men had no honor and the Latin man got tired of

arguing and took a potshot at the Ambassador and missed and the Ambassador closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger and hit the Latin right between the eyes so that he fell backwards onto the dust, boots up, with fifty witnesses will to testify it was self-defense.

The Ambassador dropped his gun and looked at the dead man in wide wonder with his mouth a little noiseless O and the sheriff walked up and grabbed the Ambassador and jerked him away through the crowd, which was moving forward to inspect the dead body and as the Ambassador was led away he shouted "Praise Jesus, I'm free!" but he had already declared his apostasy and no one clapped for him. He was dragged roughly around the corner toward the jail, and then three deputies came up and told the crowd to disperse and so the crowd began to move away but Park and David did not get far because they were informed the sheriff would probably want to talk to them, and in the coming days he did talk to them and said he could have charged them with 100 things, but seeing that he had fifty witnesses to self-defense and having come to understand the circumstances of the matter (the Ambassador being a hunted man), he declined to press charges but if they ever arranged something like that again he would press full charges, so they promised never to arrange a duel again and the matter was settled. The Ambassador left town as a figure of awe and shame, his career as a temperance preacher ruined but a life as an anonymous seller of encyclopedias spread out before him.

Before he left town the Ambassador stopped by Park's farm and took Park's hand in his own fleshy one and pumped it and said that he owed him his life, and Park said he owed him absolutely nothing except the chance to return to his own solitude, and so the Ambassador left and Park returned to his solitary life, which for a time ran peacefully undisturbed.

*

Park found William's brother's wife easily enough but it was another matter convincing her to give him an address at which to reach him. In the end Park lied and told her it was to settle a matter of his brother's estate. She uneasily gave him the address and he thanked her a little too much out of nervousness and was glad to climb in his truck and get away. The truck did prove useful from time to time.

Once at home Park wrote out the letter to Brian Parsons three times, and each time crumpled it up. Finally he settled on the following:

"Dear Mr. Parsons,

I am writing to you in confidence about a matter of your late brother. I am trying to open a case against a man I believe helped push over the edge in his time of misfortune. It involves the man he was gambling with and whether there is sufficient evidence to prosecute him as an accessory. I have heard that your brother left a letter and that you read it. If the letter mentioned anything about Bryce Covington, please advise. This is a matter of some urgency.

Best regards,

Jim Parker"

He addressed in care of the address Mrs. Parsons had given him and rode his bicycle into town to the post office and mailed it air mail. While in town he decided to write a second letter so he stopped by the dime store and bought some stationery and a pencil and went to the diner and wrote out the following:

“Dear Mildred,

I am sorry I have not contacted you in so long. I have been thinking about how unreliable a man I am. I am glad to have had your company but am, in the end, too used to the company of myself in the solitude of my own thoughts. I am incapable of falling in love again, and it would be an injustice to lead you to believe otherwise.

Best regards,

Jim Parker”

This he also mailed, and when he was done he got a sudden desire to go by the hotel, just to sit in the lobby and read the paper. He rode over there, but even as he was doing so he began to get a high, tight feeling in his chest that was both frightening and delicious. He was thinking of Olivia. What a fool he was to be stuck in the past. And yet the thought of her resonated as surely as if a bell had been struck. He sank into one of the comfortable chairs and unfolded the newspaper before him but all he could see was a ghost of himself talking to her, coming up behind her and stroking her hair, feeling the empathy only a shared misery could unlock, imagining what it would be like if she yielded and rested her head on his shoulder, and him nervous with fright and desire. She had yielded to him, he remembered, and at once he felt more alive than he had in his whole life. There had been something kindred between them. Park saw their ghosts separate at a glance from the front desk man but with the promise to meet later. That moment had been more intimate to him than their meeting later because it had been a promise, not a fulfillment, but the golden thing of an agreement and a shared secret. He remembered how he had waited for her in his room, waiting for her knock, not unconfident that she would show, but rather nervous if the meeting would not live up to the promise, in some way longing to keep the notion of suspended desire alive in an eternal waiting, the golden thought of something wonderful never to be lost. The moment had not disappointed and had only reinforced a bond of mutual suffering and hope, but also the fact that it could be over and possibly never attained again. They had separated with a secret and no promise of reunion. And there had been no reunion. Park was left with a strong affection of the moment of what-could-be, because he was there again, always there, in a stuck hope that there could be a time when he could see her again, and that they would somehow be as they had been in the past except forever now.

He got up having read none of the paper. He folded it and set it on the low table in front of the chair. He got up and went back out into the fresh air, glad to be out of the smoky air and fragrance of the lobby. He went out and got on his bicycle and remembered he had a tutoring session tonight – grammar. As he rode a man waved to him and called him Prospero, because this latest production of Shakespeare had drawn a crowd beyond the small circle of the VFW – word had gotten around town that there was something special to see, and prominent citizens had pushed to have their progeny cast in some role – any role – just to be part of the production. In the end it had been performed in the civic center, not the

VFW hall, and although there had been many missed lines, it had gone over as a big success and already they were asking about next season's production. It was unusual for Park to feel appreciated. It made him uneasy about himself. He was happier being anonymous and more than half of him wanted to unknit all of his community involvement and be a solitary man with a garden and his books and his thoughts. It would be easy enough to do. But there was something in the sense of community approbation that made him feel better than he wanted to. He was more comfortable being scorned.

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Over the weeks he was aware of having grown distant from his friend David, now that he had his motherly girlfriend, the widow Gladys Johanssen. He saw less and less of him, and what conversations he had with him were politer and detached, though this was solely due to a growing reticence on the part of Park. He was probably a bit stung that his friend was being drawn away. Even discussing the weather had grown somewhat halting. Still, it came as no surprise to him to get a wedding invitation in the mail: "David L. Wilson and Gladys Marie Johnson invite you to attend their wedding on the day of" and etc. He turned the gilt card over in his hands, inspected it, inspected the formal looking RSVP envelope, just to get a sense of it actually being real.

He showed the fancy envelope to a man named Jessup, a local itinerant, who had helped to fix part of the lean to. "Sure fancy," Jessup said, his fingers running over the gold embossment. "With the money they spent on that, it better be for keeps."

Park nodded.

His immediate impulse was to call up David, though not to congratulate him; rather, to figure a polite way to ask "What are you thinking?" He could think of no way to ask this, so he simply called up and said he could think of nothing he'd rather do than attend the happy occasion of his best friend.

He was chosen to be best man, attended in his company by Gladys' brother Carl, a beefy jovial man whose sandy hair and freckles had persisted to late middle age.

As he contemplated his friend's marriage he felt alone. What did this place hold for him now? Maybe he would move away. To New York City? No, the place would eat him alive. Where to? With the whole world at war, his choices were limited. A commune? No, he'd hate to be around other eccentrics. He thought of Wyoming, in the shadow of the Tetons, and was pleased by the thought. He could find a small town there, buy a few acres, and read in the summers and enjoy the stark fresh winters, chopping firewood and studying close to the hearth. It painted a pleasant picture in his mind, one he felt he could step into. What did this town hold for him? Maybe he would do it.

He attended the wedding without an escort and got his one good suit out for the occasion and it still fit – Park had been a lean man for thirty years. He stood at the altar next to David and watched the bride's father escort the bride down the aisle to give her away. Mr. Johanssen was in his late eighties and was a jittery old man with a wide grin that spoke of a man now almost completely detached from reality, and happy in whatever world his mind now inhabited. Perhaps he was expecting fireworks.

The bride herself, Gladys, was a jolly strong woman – just what David needed. She tittered and blushed like a schoolgirl, and her bridesmaids in their peach chiffon dresses dabbed their eyes. When he reached

the altar David walked in from the side to stand next to her, and then the ceremony began, and Park's eyes lidded in a preemptive somnambulance.

A Bible passage was read: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." This was followed by a passage instructing wives to be submissive to their husbands which he felt sure brawny Gladys immediately chucked out the window.

When they asked if anyone objected a big Swedish man in the back began blubbing, but no one paid him any mind.

The one thing that irked Park was that David had had to get baptized for the ceremony to take place. This was an occasion Park had decided not to attend. Before the wedding Park had run into David in town and could not bite his tongue: "Baptized? Surely you don't believe all that mumbo-jumbo."

"I suppose a man's got to believe something," David had replied. "You can see how love fits right into all of it." He paused. "You should find yourself a woman and settle down, Park."

"So we can have couples' nights?"

"So you can be happy. What happened to that girl you were seeing?"

"It didn't click," Park said. "She was nice, and smart, but I guess I needed something more."

"Park, you'll still end up married, only to a ghost or a philosophy."

"I am just going to live a simple life and follow it wherever it leads."

"Okay, so long as you're content."

"I am mostly content."

After the wedding, Park decided to skip the reception. He drove his red truck home (he did not feel like bicycling over in a suit). He got home and walked into his small house and everything seemed a bit alien – worn out and ironic. It was quiet – Jessup was not there. So this is your life? He got dressed in casual clothes and started a pot of coffee. He went to the sofa and took out a volume of *The Saying of Confucius* and tried to read it, but his mind kept bouncing off the pages. He set it back down. Maybe he would just leave, as he had admitted to himself. His choice of places to escape to was limited. "Escape"? His mind corrected itself. He had not meant escape, had he? Suddenly he wondered if he felt stifled. Perhaps he did. Maybe he did need to unfold his mind into a larger space.

But didn't he have unfinished business? He thought about how his hate had died down. What did small town intrigue matter to him? But his mind turned to Bryce's lie about knowing Olivia's whereabouts and a little flame rekindled. He would see this one matter through. He felt a keen hatred for Bryce he could not tamp down.

He turned his mind to the other side of the coin of the mystery he had been considering: that of the man who had strangled his wife – the man Bryce had wanted him to kill. What had they been like? What had driven the man to kill the woman Bryce was fond of, and what had Bryce done in return? He decided he

had to know Bryce's history with the woman. He wanted to expiate his conscience. If possible, he finally realized, he wanted to confront Bryce with his sins. Then he would leave town.

He had no sympathy with the husband – Brian Jacoby – did he? He had a few more interviews to conduct, but without Thurmond to arrange them, he knew it might put him in Bryce's field of vision. So be it.

The family of Jacoby lived one town over. The paper had listed the next of kin. He would start there. He would need to use his truck again. In his mind he grudgingly thanked Roger for getting it running. He was beginning to have a love-hate relationship with the truck. Just when he wanted to disdain it, he needed it. In any case, he wished it hadn't been painted fire engine red.

*

The next day Park drove over to Tishimingo to interview the next of kin listed in the newspaper article. He stopped at a small brick house with white painted trim. The garden was neatly kept. He had called in advance of his interview and had fully expected to be asked "What business is it of yours?" but was not. He explained his desire to know the truth and the man was hesitant, but then he said he had a hunch a man named Bryce Covington had been involved and that opened the door. He met with a man who seemed passively detached – analytical - desiring that his brother's side of the story be known, not to absolve him, the brother made clear – there could be no absolution – but to convey the passions and people that had preyed upon the man's heart.

Paul Jacoby met Park on the front porch. He was a tall thin man with small round spectacles who looked every bit like the accountant he was.

"Come in," the man said. We can sit in the living room – we'll not disturb anyone. I'm not married."

Park followed him into the house into a tidy living room and sat into a plush, seafoam colored chair.

"Something to drink?"

"No thank you. Look, I want to know about your brother. I am interested in his murder."

"Not many people have been interested. It was never solved, and I don't think anyone tried very hard to solve it. Where should I start?"

"Start from the beginning."

"Okay. I'll put on some tea for myself in any case. Just a moment."

Park heard the man moving in the kitchen – the sound of a kettle being set on the stove, the clink of china. Then the man returned and sat in the chair opposite him.

"The beginning? Let's see – how does a man get to where he ends up – where he committed his last act? I'll start with this: We came from a good family. My father was a foreman with the AT&S railroad. He saw to it that we went as far in our education as we could. Unfortunately, my brother never took to education. He was the older of us two brothers, and he and my father locked horns more often than not. He left home as soon as he could and kind of went on the bum, holding a variety of jobs up and down the East Coast. He was in the merchant marine for a while."

“And were you close to him?”

“Not particularly. He breezed in out of our lives. Oh, he would come home sometimes flush with pay he had been saving, and he would buy me dinner and joke about how tame and rabbit-like I was. ‘You ought to see the world’ he’d say. Oh, he’d drink a little something he’d brought with him. Sometimes he’d drink too much, and I had to lead him home weaving and singing, and put him to bed on the couch. When he slept he slept like a baby, but then he’d wake up and be his old rough-and-tumble self. He never could keep his cash – he bought everyone back home a little something. He liked to dote on the ladies, and always we thought he’d found some honey, but just like that he’d be off again, throwing himself out into the world.”

“But eventually he settled down here.”

“Yes. He came home having lost an eye in a fight. He never talked about it, but you could tell from his disposition that something had perhaps, finally, led him to realize his mortality. He was a quieter man. Back East, amongst his many jobs, he had acquired some experience in the restaurant business, so my father got him set up to run a diner/restaurant just outside of town. The place started out without much repute, and my brother did nothing to further it.”

“So he had become something of a scoundrel in the time he was away?”

“Like I said, he had led a rough life. Sometimes the clean corners of morality get shaved away. For a while he tried running a clean establishment, but there was just no business. Still, he had the will to persist. He had met a little girl by this time and didn’t want to be uprooted. So he turned a little extra business as a speakeasy. He told me, to assuage my misgivings, that they were common and innocent enough back East, and in the larger towns. It was about this time he met Bryce Covington – he was his supplier.”

“I thought Covington bootlegged only for the sport.”

He leaned forward. “I looked into that, you see. Three years ago he got into financial troubles – he inherited his father’s estate with plenty of debt, and it was all he could do to make things even with the bank every month. Apparently he had to make his hobby into a business.”

“Is that still the way it is now?”

“Look, in my position I can get hold of plenty of bank records if I want. When he first began consorting with Covington I bent a few scruples and looked into the matter of the settlement of the estate. Covington is no longer a rich man, and with the loss of wealth comes a loss of connections. But I’ll get to that.”

Park’s mind began probing the idea that Bryce might no longer be than man he had imagined him to be.

“But back to my brother – excuse me, the water’s ready.”

Park excused the man while he fixed his tea, and then he returned.

“The trouble began when Covington got my brother to drinking again. It behooved Covington to cloud his judgment so that he could casually extend his control over the operation. He added gambling. Just friendly games of cards is how he pitched it, and my brother acquiesced – he began to make some

money now. Before long my brother had taken a kind of passive determination to all of it – let it run under his auspices but leave the management to Covington. Mind you, it had to court the sheriff's protection, but that was not difficult to achieve with a sufficient cut of the profits."

"Covington began to take took a shine to my brother's wife, who was a beauty, a kind of a pearl before swine. Not that her heart was any purer than his. In fact, she was swayed by money. She liked wearing new dresses into town, and she made them buy a new car. When Covington sent my brother off bootlegging he put in time with her. I don't know if they ever had an affair, but he bought her jewelry. Her sister told me this, ostensibly out of concern for her marriage, but mostly out of gossip."

"My brother put up with this for a while, led on by Covington's enduring promise of cutting him on a bigger share of the profits once the establishment "turned the corner." It was always just about to turn the corner. My brother put up with this until he returned from bootlegging early due to a car breakdown, and he found out that Covington and his wife were off somewhere together. His mind raced with thoughts of what they were up to, and he confront Covington when they returned and told him that maybe he didn't need him in the operation anymore. This angered my brother's wife, who had obviously followed her heart into taking sides. Bryce had polish, and in this contrast she saw my brother as a dead end. This was when she announced to my brother that she was leaving him."

"He tried to make her into a kept woman and she belittled him. He told this to me in a blind rage of drinking one evening. He was not even asking me what to do – I had a feeling he had decided what to do. One day she announced that she was leaving with Bryce and he better not do a damn thing to stop it. And that's the end of what I know. Her murder looked like a break in – she had made no secret of the jewelry. My brother was protected by the sheriff, with whom he had colluded to cut Covington out of the picture, and so after a perfunctory questioning was released on habeas corpus. Then, three days later, he was shot in the alley behind his establishment. You might say it was a fitting end. No one was ever apprehended for the crime, though I suspect Covington did it out of retribution."

"So no one saw exactly what happened?"

"No one."

"Who was there that night?"

"No one who would admit it."

"Were there any regulars who might have been there?"

The man thought. "I could give you a list of names. They are tough sorts – none of them would talk to you. Well, there is one who might – he has found God in a holy roller way and is now living a quiet life."

"I'd like his name, please."

Jackoby gave him the name – Floyd Martin. The man lived with his wife and small child, Jackoby said, in a house just outside of town. Park decided to drive by there uninvited. Park thanked Paul Jackoby for his time.

"Anything else you want to tell me?" Park asked as the man was seeing him off on the porch.

The man paused. "Just this: is it odd to want to say my brother was not a bad man?"

“No, it’s not odd.”

“We are all of us torn up in the heart – he just got it worse than most of us. He fell, not completely of his own doing, into calamity. I cannot even say in the end if he was sorry. But I am sorry for him. I ask myself if, as a brother, I could have done more. So many little dominoes fell to make him end up where he was.”

“I’m sure you did everything you could.”

“I do not have your certainty.”

“Thank you for your time.”

Park got in his truck and slowly back away from the man’s house and made his way to a last stop before driving home. The man he sought was not home however, and Park resolved to return at a later date.

*

Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners: so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness, or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions: but we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion.

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One afternoon in the mail came a letter from his son, deployed overseas. It was postmarked from the Philippines but that meant nothing – it could have originated from anywhere in the Pacific. The envelope looked battered. He unfolded the trifold stationary scribbled in a firm hand of blue ink:

Dear Dad,

I hope you are well. I cannot tell you where I am stationed but I can tell you I am well and that the Navy is going to build an archipelago of fortresses all the way to Tokyo if need be. I am doing my small part working shoulder to shoulder with many men from all over the USA.

I have been thinking lately that my children deserve to know their grandfather. I want to be with you when you are around the children. I hope you are keeping up with your regimen and are not drinking. Mother would have wanted you to be well and so do I.

Keep all of us soldiers in your prayers.

Best wishes,

Jason

It had a paternal tone. He could feel his son's firm hand underneath the hint of benevolence and he did not know like feeling like the child in the relationship. He did not want to be under anyone's thumb. He read the letter three times and looked at the envelope again. He imagined a boiling hot sun over a limitless sea, with waves lapping grey massive ships in port, and perhaps an island in the steaming tropics, its tall trees filled with screaming colorful birds. It all seemed so far away. He never even heard from his other son, who had trained at Fort Hood.

He folded the letter and set it on a small grey shelf and then looked about his room. He stretched his legs and then rose to go out into the hot day to pull weeds in his scant vegetable garden.

*

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Park drove over to the house of Floyd Martin, the man who had been at the gambling establishment who might talk. He had to take several gravel lanes and then a dirt road to get there. The place was a white clapboard house set in a green lawn back by a stand of trees fronting a steep slope to a creek. When he got out of his truck the countryside was still save for the occasional call of hidden birds and insects. Byron was out from playing catch football with his son. They both looked up to see him.

Park looked at the two of them and then held his hands out for the ball. Byron paused and then threw it to him. He was a sunny-faced man with short blonde hair and a stocky build. Park caught the ball and walked toward the man and boy, waving hello. He tossed the ball back when he was maybe ten feet away.

"What can I do for you, neighbor?" Skinner asked. "Lost?"

"It's easy to get lost out here," Park said. "And in a place as pretty as this, one might just as soon like to stay lost."

Skinner agreed. "We were blessed to find this place."

Park closed proximity with the man. "You seem blessed. I have no easy way to put this – did you ever used to frequent a place called the Boar's Head?"

The man's face folded in on itself. He looked Park up and down and sent his son inside. "Now why'd you have to throw a cloud in front of the sun like that?"

"Couldn't ruin a sunny day like this, surely," Park said. I wish I could enjoy more from it myself."

"Then let the Lord into your heart. It's the blessings I count now. What you raise seems like a long time ago."

"Three years."

"You from the law?"

Park allowed that he was not.

“Then let me tell you that my life has been released from ruin and sin. It was a woman that set me straight, and God through the woman. You got a woman?”

Park said that he did not, and the man consoled him:

“There’s somebody out there for everyone. God meant for men to be with women, to repair their violence.”

“I suppose those days are either behind me or ahead of me,” Park said. “I married and had my kids. They’re grown and my wife is dead.”

“Sorry to hear that. Then maybe it’s a study of the Good Book that you’re called to now.”

“Maybe, if the good book’s Shakespeare.”

“I can’t say much to that except I’ve heard good things about him,” Skinner said. “Look, what do you want?”

“One night about three years ago a man was shot and killed in an alley behind the Boar’s Head. I understand that you were there.”

“There were about five of us there. Look, some temperance folks organized after that and burned the place to the ground. As far as I’m concerned, it’s gone and that part of me is gone. Why would you want to bring it up?”

“I am trying to prove to myself, and for some acquaintances that I have made recently, that a certain man was responsible. Did you see who did it?”

“No one saw – all we heard was the shot.”

“Surely someone rushed out to help him.”

The man paused. “The police never found any witnesses.”

“And it wasn’t done by one of you?”

The man’s face clouded. “Look – you throwing accusations? It was none of us. We were inside at the time, not one man unaccounted for. Lord, how I repent of those ‘good times.’ Now listen, I have a family, a good life, and religion now. I’m a changed man – changed from the inside. Healed.”

“I’m not, not yet.”

“Did anyone of us aggrieve you?”

“No, but I think the man who shot your proprietor might have. Are you sure you didn’t see him?”

Skinner looked away but then looked back and swallowed. “Mister, I’m the only one of those men who didn’t dive under a table and hide once the shots rang out. Yes, I went out back to help him.”

“And what did you see?”

"I saw a man standing over him to make sure he was dead. It was dark and I couldn't make him out other than to say he walked away with a limp. He must have been wearing black. He disappeared into the night."

"And you didn't tell the police about it?"

"I told the police everything I'm telling you. They couldn't or wouldn't make anything of it. Now look, mister, does that sound like the man you want to set things right with?"

"Maybe," Park said. He thought of the war veteran, amputated at the knee, fitted with a prosthetic limb. It could all settle in so clearly in his mind, if he would let it. He could picture the man thrown violent in misery and despair, making the final outrageous act in a life he felt had abandoned him anyway.

"You may have just helped me," Park said.

"Well then, brother, let me help put it behind you. Vengeance is ever only the Lord's and his alone. Get yourself a woman."

"I know – I can tell a woman's good for you. I'm not here to tear down your future for the past."

"Well you've meant no harm though I will say it'll take a while to knit my mood back together."

"You go in and rest – surround yourself with your family. Say your blessing over dinner."

"The Lord set me free."

"Yes, the Lord. I thank you for your time."

"No bother," the man said. He hesitated. "Look, the temperance folks got themselves a new prosecutor elected in town, and I haven't told anyone this, but before it was burned to the ground, I recovered a certain book from the building – a ledger. I can't make anything of it other than rows and rows of numbers. But if a man were looking for motive, he might find it in there. If a man were really looking for justice, and not vengeance, it might help out. I hesitate to give it to you. It would dredge too much of the past back up. But maybe you could use it to get someone to tell you the truth, or maybe the truth's written in it someplace."

Park took the large black book and flipped through it. Page after page of numbers, all in the same hand. Was it Bryce's hand? Paul Jackoby might help him make sense of it. Or Paul Jackoby might not have told him everything he knew. He tucked the book under his arm and thanked the man.

Park walked away and climbed back into his truck. He waved the man goodbye and then wound his way back along the lattice of dirt and gravel roads that had led him there. In one part of his mind he felt satisfied, but at the same time he was not satisfied with his satisfaction. If the man had done it, hadn't it still been Bryce Covington who drove him to it? A sense of justice eluded him, and he came to feel as white hot as before. He came to feel he didn't want knowledge – he wanted confession. He could see no way around it but to confront Covington himself, and it itched him in his mind that he needed someone to test his sanity against. He resolved that he would have to talk to David. He needed a plan. What could compel Bryce to tell the truth other than the proximity of death – Bryce's – or his own? A boast in triumph? He thought it over and over.

As he drove he noticed a black car come roaring up behind him. He noticed the cloud of dust first. Soon it pulled up beside and him and began sliding into him, edging him off the road. It was a steep drop-off here, the road hugging a river. Park tried steering into the car, but to no avail. Soon his vehicle pitched over the side, and all he saw next was a crash of trees. The last thing he remembered was them breaking the windshield. Then his head pitched forward and then he was swallowed in black.

*

“We’ll get you a new truck,” were the first words he remembered. It was then that he decided his prognosis might not be as dire as he had feared in his fevered dreams. The boy who had helped him fix up his truck was at his side.

In his dreams he had thought of Olivia. The remembered smell of her hair fought against the antiseptic that stung his nostrils. In his dreams she might have well still been with him. In a sense he had betrayed her in his mad dash for a truth that, ultimately, did not matter. But a selfish thought rose up in him: in the end, what did she matter? The past was the past. Still, in his heart a desire to love, or at least to be loved, had been substituted with a petty vengeance, and his spirit clung stubbornly to it in spite of his higher faculties. He would see it through, he told himself, and then he’d see.

When he woke up again Thurmond Allen was at his bedside.

“Nasty concussion,” he said. Had enough of your deadly obsession yet?”

“Not yet. I found out the man who killed the owner of the gambling den was the same man who committed suicide in the shack.”

“How do you know that?”

“He had had a leg amputated after the war, and he had motive, and a witness said the killer walked with a limp.”

“Why Park, that same week Bryce was thrown from his horse.”

Park’s face dropped.

“He was pretty banged up and could easily have been limping. So you see, it could still have been Bryce.”

Park felt a buzzing cloud well up in his thoughts, like a swarm of flies. He fought against the cloud of disturbed energy.

“I have to know. I have a plan...”

“You’ll have no help from me. You should know enough to let it rest. Of course it was Bryce, directly or indirectly through an associate or an association or a circumstance. Do what I suggest: settle down or move out into the wilder world. Feed your curiosity with dearer things or wider ones. Look, I am leaving for Europe tomorrow to assist an organization that tends to displaced persons. Come over with me.”

“After this one thing.”

“So what is your plan?”

Suddenly Park distrusted the man. He feared being stung by rebuke. He suddenly wanted to confide in David instead of Thurmond.

"I'll keep it to myself."

"Then I'll see you later," Thurmond said and left the room.

Park recuperated over long days. Once his eyes refocused, he busied himself reading a book on Jainism brought over from his library by Jessup. David came to see him once or twice, but Park did not feel the strength to confide in him then. And the boy came by to say he had located for him a new (old) truck. Park told him to buy it and wrote out a check for him to do so.

After a week, Park was released. The first thing he did was reserve the town hall for two evenings the week out and then go to the printers and order the following playbill:

Special Performance: Two Nights Only

John Parker to recite the great

Soliloquies of Shakespeare!

The Bard of Avon

Passions stirred – hearts bared!

Gear up for next season's

Performance of a great play by the Bard.

Auditions considered.

Town Hall, night of [...]

He then called David. Instead of being invited over to David's house, he was instructed to meet him at the diner. They sat across from each other in a booth near the back. After the waitress had served their coffee and gone away, Parker shrugged his shoulders at David and held out his hands.

"Why couldn't I come over to your home?"

David stirred the sugar into his coffee. "Gladys doesn't like you. Says the death force hangs about you."

Park sipped his coffee and was prepared to object but did not find the fire in him. "I suppose she's right. But I am about to get past all that."

"Past your obsession?"

"I am ready to move on – but I have to do something first. And that's what I need you for. To back me up. If necessary, to eavesdrop."

"On what?"

“On Bryce Covington’s conversation with me.”

“What makes you think he will talk to you?”

Park slid a playbill across the table to him.

“I don’t get it,” David said.

“He’ll talk – I’ll shame him into talking. He can’t very well turn down an invitation issued in front of a hundred people.”

“He doesn’t owe you anything. He’ll come over and talk about the weather.”

“We’ll see. I have some leverage that might loosen his tongue.”

“Like what?”

“You’ll see. Just promise you can be there when I need you.”

“I suppose I will see, then. But this is it – count me out after this. You’re just moving from fixation to fixation. I can’t be there for you until you want to really change.”

*

The town hall was filled thirty minutes before the show began. It was dim and stuffy and people rustled in their seats. Men loosened their collars – women smoothed their dresses. Casual conversation lilted on the air. Several young people had been forced there by their parents, pressed into the prospect of auditioning for Park’s next production. “Enunciate – enunciate – like we practiced at home. They have to be able to hear you all the way to the back row.”

Park appeared on stage soon in his suit and the spotlight fell upon him. The audience applauded then hushed. He waited for the applause to die down and then cleared his throat and looked out into the darkened hall.

"Tonight's readings will be from the tragedies – tomorrow's will be from the comedies and will be dedicated to Bryce Covington, who has generously offered to help fund our theater guild. In recognition I will present him with a special book that he has no doubt wanted for a long time, writ in the timeless language about the fortunes of man."

He then announced that after the reading he would indeed hold auditions for the next production, which was to be Macbeth. Parents elbowed their children, but many adults nursed their own fantasies, seeing themselves on stage.

For each soliloquy he set the stage and afterward gave the modern English translation.

"In honor of our next production, I give you a soliloquy from Macbeth:

"[...] Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been

So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other."

He then recited from Othello, King Lear, Corlianus, Romeo and Juliet, and others. He spoke boldly and with forceful gesticulations. Each soliloquy seemed to come from the depths of his heart to stir the passions. Finally he ended with Titus Andronicus:

"Ay, that I had not done a thousand more.
Even now I curse the day—and yet, I think,
Few come within the compass of my curse,—
Wherein I did not some notorious ill,
As kill a man, or else devise his death,
Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it,
Accuse some innocent and forswear myself,
Set deadly enmity between two friends,
Make poor men's cattle break their necks;
Set fire on barns and hay-stacks in the night,
And bid the owners quench them with their tears.
Oft have I digg'd up dead men from their graves,
And set them upright at their dear friends' doors,
Even when their sorrows almost were forgot;
And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
Have with my knife carved in Roman letters,
'Let not your sorrow die, though I am dead.'
Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things

As willingly as one would kill a fly,
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
But that I cannot do ten thousand more."

At the end of his presentation he bowed, and the audience, having understood half of it but feeling edified, applauded enthusiastically.

By the end, he looked out and saw Bryce Covington in the hall, standing at the back in a dark suit, but he did not address the man. Instead, he announced the auditions and met the aspirants on stage. The next day, however, he woke up early to a knocking at his door, and he opened it to see Bryce Covington.

"Hello, Park. May I come in?"

Park allowed that he could, and the two men walked into his small, book-walled living room.

"Make an offering to the monkey-god?" Park asked as they passed the small statue.

Covington looked at. "I'd rather not."

"Then sit down while I make the coffee."

Bryce took a seat on the small sofa. Park busied himself in the kitchen then came back out. "It'll be a few minutes." He then seated himself at his desk chair opposite Bryce.

Bryce took off his hat and held it in his hands. He stared at Park as if trying to take the measure of the man. Park felt as if Bryce was holding something under his hat.

"Look, Park, what is your game?"

"I have a book that you might be interested."

"What book?"

"It is a very important book to you. In fact, I imagine the contents could send you to jail."

"You don't say?"

"Yes, I do. All I want is the truth."

"Again, what book are we talking about?"

"The ledger from the Boar's Head."

"But it burned when the temperance folks burned that place down."

"No, this book made it out."

Bryce squinted at him, weighing his temerity, his truthfulness. Park just stared back.

"I doubt you even have the ledger."

Park turned back to his bookshelves and produced a large black book. Bryce's hands shook, but only for a second. Park opened a few pages, showed the rows and rows of expenses and accounts to Bryce.

"What is it you want?" Bryce asked.

"I want to know this: That time you asked me to kill someone – did you mean it? And since I refused to kill the man, did you have someone else do it?"

Covington laughed. "That was all a bluff, Park, to torture you – you could never pull a trigger and instead would have to live with the doubt about your own inaction."

"I know one William Jackoby who would think different – if he were still alive."

Covington fixed his smile and stared at him. "You don't know as much as you think you know. That man killed an unfaithful woman. Many men had reason to kill him in revenge."

"Maybe – and maybe only one."

"The police investigated and found nothing. Look, you're spinning a vengeful fantasy from stray fragments."

"The police didn't have your ledger. Illegal dealings across state lines, I'd wager. You could be prosecuted beyond this county's jurisdiction, where a rival association of bootleggers has power."

"Why not just hand it over, Park? The past is so long ago, and all I did was run a little bootlegging business – not too rare in these parts."

"Not until I know who killed Jackoby. Answer me, or at the reading tonight I'll tell everything I know."

"But you know nothing. Without my confession, all you have are rumors – prosecutable slander."

"Who killed Jackoby?" Park held the book out toward Bryce, but not within his reach.

"Why don't we just settle this by talking about that girl you had a thing for. My brother's wife. You always only ever cared about her. Why Park, she never moved 100 miles from here. She will be coming through with a carnival next week, reading palms. Why don't you let this all drop and go be happy with her?"

Park's brain buzzed. Bryce could see that his face fell. Hadn't all he ever wanted was to be happy with her? It was such an easy choice.

"You can be a happy man again. Disentangle yourself from all this amateur detective work. Just hand over the ledger. I promise you we'll be anything but enemies. It's time to heal the past between us. As you may have heard, I'm a man of less estate and health than I once was, but I have a woman now – a good woman. I'm ready to set the past aside, and I've made a good faith gesture by telling you what you really want to know."

Park licked his lips. "I turn over the ledger and you'll kill me."

"But you came here wanting to barter it for something. The truth, as you put it. Well I've told you the only truth you've ever really wanted to know. Let it lie and finally rest that troubled brain of yours."

"I can't do that."

"Then perhaps I can't ever let you leave here alive." He reached under his hat. You might have an accident after drinking. You're the nervous sort, always one false step away from falling off the wagon."

The tea kettle whistled in the other room.

"I'm betting you won't do that, or the book ends up with an honest DA. Suppose I take the tea kettle off the stove?"

"Yes – it will hide the fact that you left abruptly."

"Very well."

Park walked back to the kitchen and the man with the gun followed. Park turned off the fire.

"Now look: we're taking your truck out for a little drive. Up to a shack I know. And you're going to drink a lot of whiskey. And then you're going to shoot yourself in the head."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because if you don't, that long-lost lady friend of yours dies under mysterious circumstances." Bryce looked at Park with a gleam in his eyes.

"Get your coat," Bryce said.

"Let me get the wire recorder instead." Park then called out into the other room. "Got all the evidence we need?"

David walked out of the bedroom, holding a shotgun at Bryce.

"I think we do."

Covington looked at them both, from one face to another. His mouth fell in a little O.

David walked past Covington to the bookshelf and removed the ledger, tucking it under his arm. "The recording will get you if the book doesn't. Now drop your gun."

Covington looked quickly at both men. "I suppose I couldn't call this off by offering you a fortune?"

"There's not enough money in the world," Park said. Then he asked a curious question that surprised even himself: "What on earth would I do with money?"

"Very well," Bryce said. He leaned down to drop the gun then jerked up at the last second and fired it at David. The bullet hit David in the arm and Park jumped him quickly, knocking then gun from his hand.

"We can talk," Covington said, "All men have a price." but David brought the butt of his shotgun down on his head, and Bryce slumped to the floor.

"Get me a doctor," David said. "The things I won't do for you."

Park tore the sleeve from a shirt and bound David's arm tight. Then he called the police and reported an attempted murder. The law arrived and took Covington away, and took the book from Park. Park then put David in his old truck and drove him to the hospital.

"I have to perform the comedies tonight," Park said thoughtfully.

"Just recite your life history," David told him. "That's comedy enough."

*

Park kept his appointment that night and recited from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labor Lost*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and more. He ended with the following:

"I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviors to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love."

Afterwards, though the crowd was hoping for some words from him on the tragedy and scandal of the day, he said nothing. He shuffled his papers, thanked the audience, and moved on. A voice inside him told him that it was time for him to move on. He reckoned he had one more thing to do, then he could move on forever.

*

Her tent was at the end of a lane devoted to booths of games. Here you threw a ball to knock over cups; there you threw darts at balloons; on down you tossed rings. People tested their fortunes at these, with children screaming down the lane holding their worthless prizes or begging for more money to try again.

Her tent was at the end and was former blue sun blanched to streaky grey. A sign in front bore a hand holding two cards – one an ace of hearts and the other an ace of spades. A sign said "Fortunes read."

Park saw that few in the crowd made it back this far, and children were steered away from it by their parents. Ladies passed with nose-tipping disdain. But it had its customers – tittering girls wondering who they would marry, men wondering how the crop would come in and would they get rich; people desiring a foretold end to ailments, wondering if their children would make it back from war. Some people wondering if there was a curse upon them to account for their misfortunes.

Park lingered outside and watched the few people process in. He could hear their murmured hopes and complaints as if he were outside a confessional. Some left happy, even giddy, some left with long drawn faces. Finally, when the customers had thinned, he went inside.

"They told me I could find you here," he said.

She squinted at him and then she knew him, and he looked at her. There was some hint of her past in her present – her eyes shone, but not with the depth they used to. Her face was lined; she wore her hair under a scarf but what peeped out was still ebony. There were care lines around her eyes. At first she made to scoop the cards from the table, but then she slowly spread them out again and spoke without looking up.

"Are you wondering about this state I've fallen to?"

"We all have to make a living."

"It's neither good nor bad – I had no luck since fleeing that man. I went through two marriages – both to men who wanted something pretty on their arms, for a while, but men left when they needed more social approbation – this was young love, or young enough. One beat me, the other catted around. I was in St. Louis when my palmistry shop was raided, and so I joined this carnival, which was in town. You think it's a pity – well I never gave up in my ideas of past lives, of present lives controlled by the past, or by the influence of stars – something bigger than ourselves. This is the lowest station of a high calling. I don't mind it – I am married to the carnival barker, and in a way this troupe is like a big family, even the most scurrilous of them. It is a wandering life, but one I have a place in."

"It must be nice to have a place."

"The people we entertain mostly scorn us, and that is probably why we're so close. Oh, we have plenty of transient workers, but the core of us, we stick together."

"That's good."

"I thought I might see you when we were here. Your friend pumped my hand and said you would be so glad to meet me – he seemed happy for you. I take it you've been unhappy. Well, it is good to meet without the hooks in our blood. You look healthy and strong."

"I get by. But listen, all those years ago..."

"Yes, the illusion of love..."

"Let me finish: all those years ago, I was in love, or the closest thing to it I'm ever going to be. I was glad to be free of my drudgery for one night. I came here to make my peace, to apologize if I used you."

She had been spreading the cards out absent-mindedly and did not look at him. "Did anyone tell you we had a child? I found a husband who did not mind – he was a circuit preacher who wanted to save me, first from myself but then for his own hot desires. He fell in love with me, and he was a nice enough man, at first. He used me for a while as his greatest proof of salvation. He was more in love than a puppy, knew he could reform me, but mostly desired to see his earnest young love doubled and redoubled. I could have loved him then, but mostly I wanted security, and I had it for a while. He was the one who started hitting me. Our son rebounded from his foster-father's rigid spirituality into a wilder one from my own increasing indifference to the rule of law – I told stories of the wider world back then. But now he lives in a post-Quaker community of peace and love without God. I hear he is happy."

"What's his name?"

"I don't remember."

"You have to remember something as simple as that."

"Here, sit at the table."

He sat and she turned card over and stacked some on top of the others. All the while she did not look up.

"You must remember – I want to see him."

“He does not need to see you. He does not know he’s not the preacher’s son. Why intrude on him when he is happy? His name is Nathaniel. He is a strong, bright young boy who will be about your height and build, but with my complexion. He believes in happiness without God, and in that commune it’s easy enough to believe in. But look, I was going to tell your fortune.”

“I don’t believe in that stuff.”

“So what’s the harm in listening? Look, you have no fortune. You can’t go forward and you can’t go back.”

He took up his hat and wished her luck and then went back out into the sun. He caught up blowing notes of the night’s entertainment – a circus, a concert, a dance.

*

After that he withdrew from life, from his tutoring, from his friendship with David. He made himself alone. It got to be where he scarcely wanted the company of another human being. He sent a boy into town to do his shopping for him. At first his visitors tried to call but then they did not call, and he settled deeper inside himself.

He felt like doing nothing so much as watching and waiting.

One day he got up and went out to go fishing.

Park walked slowly to the edge of the pond and looked in and did not look like he thought he did – he looked older. He slipped the rope of the boat off of a tree stump and rowed it to the middle of the pond and dropped his line. It was a communal boat and a communal pond. The sun beat down but he did not mind. He spitted a worm on the hook and watched it writhe. He desired nothing more than to catch a fish and pull it up from the disc of the sun reflected in the water.