IN THE MIDST OF TEARS AND LOUD VOICES
AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Nancy D. Dean-Franks, B.S.

Denton, Texas

December, 1988
In the Midst of Tears and Loud Voices, and Other Short Stories consists of five short stories. The first story, In the Midst of Tears and Loud Voices, is set in the Missouri Ozarks and told by Becky Bricker about an odd aunt. The second story relates an aged man’s transition experience in Belgrave Leaves New York. The third story, Dorcas and Deborah, is told by Deborah about her unusual relationship with Dorcas Weatherby. The next story is a Southern “local color” piece about a single day, The First of May in Battle Ridge. The fifth story, Good Coffee, Cheap Ketchup, Cold Sheets, details the strange meeting of a man and woman whose lives have other, unknown, connecting threads.
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IN THE MIDST OF TEARS AND LOUD VOICES

Aunt Ora Lee was always my favorite of all the many brothers and sisters Daddy and Momma claimed, and I do not really know why. She was perhaps the least of the evils, for I never took to most of my relatives. I had been singled out as the family oddball long before I knew what was odd about me, and when I did discover my singular difference which was nothing more than the desire to learn, the years of sullen hurt had turned into a vague amazement, later to sad tolerance, for the impoverished ignorance of our clan.

I say our clan to describe the odd mix of relatives passed on to me and my siblings from both our parents, and in fact the two sides were joined by marriage here and there over four generations. But, for whatever reason that a small child has for favoring an aunt or uncle, I did want to be with Ora Lee and enjoyed her prattle. It did not hurt, I am sure, that the odd assortment of creams and powders which littered her ancient mahogany dresser were at my disposal. As I think back now, the true attraction was due to the fact that she had no husband or children which in an ever expanding family as ours was, was peculiar. Also, I must admit, she did let me have a whole quarter's worth of Bazooka bubble gum, at that time two for a penny, and didn't say a thing when I chewed it all in one day.

My mother, the oldest child in her family, was nothing like Aunt Ora Lee. Momma was quiet, Ora Lee was loud; Momma was chubby, Ora Lee was thin; and Momma was tired and tied with a husband and children, Ora Lee was alone and full of life. She was the first woman I ever saw wearing
trousers, but she was not attractive, not even slightly, though no one would have called her ugly. Still, to that little girl I was back then, she was the only extraordinary female of my acquaintance, and the Missouri town of ours, deep in the Ozarks, had in her its only Hepburn or Davis prototype. For me, Becky Pointer, Aunt Ora Lee had the one thing I treasured most—freedom.

When I was eight Daddy died of cancer. He was only twenty-seven and Momma was forced to find work and that meant going to town; town being Bruno, the major community in the area, some twenty miles away. She went to work for the Bruno Mercantile and spent the next ten years bowing to the tyranny of Mabel Harrison, the meanest Christian woman I ever expect to see or hear of. To call Mabel a bitch would have gladdened her heart, for wheresoever sin showed its ugly head, Mabel was prepared to minister. It was the good and gentle that suffered at her hand; she was so proud of her Christian virtues that she had nothing but jealousy for the real things. But give Mabel a drunk or an adulterer and you would see the purest of missionary zeal in all its wonderous glory. Mabel had never missed a single church service—three times a week they met—nor a bible study in her life. So, straining under the holy impunity of “Miz” Harrison, Momma had to relinquish some of her motherly hold over me, Willie, and Mavis. She did this by allowing Aunt Ora Lee to watch us after school and on Saturday until I was fourteen and old enough to watch the other two. I attempted to do what Momma would expect; I sorely wanted to please my mother, which I know I never truly did. Ora Lee never worried about pleasing her sister or anyone else, and in her company I cared a bit less, too.

During those eight years when I regularly saw Ora Lee, I learned very little about her other than what the whole family just seemed to know; she never divulged secrets or shared hidden desires. She did, however, bake
some interesting treats, apparently known only to the Bricker family, because I never heard or saw of them anywhere later. She made one especially odd concoction, but highly favored by all her nieces and nephews, called "soppies" made up of shortbread that was placed in a saucer and covered with strong black coffee and sprinkled with sugar. However, my personal favorite was a candy of sorts we all called "Brickerbrack" that was sorghum reduced over a hot burner until it reached a hard candy stage then drizzled into a shallow pan of cold water to speed the cooling. We would greedily snatch up the lacey pieces from the warm water, gumming up our teeth with the hard toffee-like substance. It is no wonder that we all had cavities riddling our teeth.

She was seldom known to make ordinary pies and cakes, and as a cook she was rather bad. Her biscuits were acceptable, but her gravy was closer to brown milk. All vegetables were boiled until they disintegrated, and meat had to go through several deaths before it could be placed on the table. But, she was good enough for Uncle Bert, her brother, for whom she kept house, and no one else was allowed to cook his, or my, eggs. We knew that no unsightly trace of white or yellow would escape the hot grease of her skillet.

Uncle Bert who owned the house where he and Aunt Ora Lee lived, was a bachelor and lay-preacher. That was about all anyone could have ever said about him. He worked in a shoe store, in the bargain basement, and outside his work with the church he did nothing else. Everybody in the Bricker family waited on him, did the yard work, various repairs, ran his errands, and waited for pearls of wisdom to cascade from his thin lips-- they never did. Momma worshiped this strange little man and saw him as the Bricker's paterfamilias; since she was the oldest and he next oldest, that was accepted by the rest. I never liked Uncle Bert, probably no one did besides
the Brickers -- and, I was a Pointer.

Uncle Bert liked only two of all the nieces and nephews and they were Uncle Mays' girls. Uncle Mays Bricker was Momma's next youngest brother, and he was a trouble-maker so we were told, but how so was never clearly stated. I suspect that he simply spoke the truth when Bricker tradition demanded silence. I really loved Uncle Mays, but he never seemed to know. Aunt Ora Lee loved Uncle Mays too, and he was the only person who could have ever had any hope of getting her out of "that mess" -- as her courtship with disgrace was referred to -- had he not died in a fiery crash of two cars flying around an Ozark hairpin curve. The unofficial news report passed down through the family years later was that Mays' vehicle ran head on into a car full of drunken boys that crossed the center line. Their bodies were burned beyond recognition and, as the story goes, Uncle Mays' brains were found on top of a telephone pole fifteen feet away. He was only thirty-three, and left six little children behind, and his weird wife Polly. To her shame, Polly, who was Aunt Ora's best friend, when she wasn't her worst enemy, was the one who introduced Aunt Ora Lee to the Svenghali of her downfall.

Polly Wallace Bricker was one of eight to ten kids, depending on the bastard count, of an illiterate petty thief who lived so far back in the mountains that electricity and roads had not been put in until the sixties. Polly's mother was half-blind and fully retarded, although, back then everyone just called her a "half-wit." Polly was mentally only a little better off than her mother, thanks to compulsory education finally catching up with them and the fact that she ran away from home at age twelve. She got to Bruno on a milk truck and obtained work as a maid for Cloris Vernor, a preacher's daughter and frustrated missionary. Cloris had been determined to raise Polly out of her white trash background, so she made sure that
Polly went to school, but then had her cleaning the house half the night. Polly made as much progress as her genes would allow. She was gentle and kindhearted, but she was also quite pretty, an unhappy combination. All the local young rogues wanted to get “acquainted” with Polly and, luckily for her, she got to know Mays Bricker early on. Cloris approved of the relationship and Polly became a Bricker on her fifteenth birthday. They had as good a marriage as you can hope for in such circumstances; he did not abuse her, and she cooked and cleaned for their family without complaint. But Polly did have a problem that did not improve with age, and that was her incredible gullibility. She believed everything she read or heard. If she had seen in the National Inquirer that ice cream had been discovered in the Sahara desert, no amount of reasoning would have dissuaded her that someone had not discovered a well of vanilla custard in the scorching sand. Polly was also wonderfully superstitious. Once she wet her pants from fear when Willie chased a coal-black cat straight in front of her. Momma gave him a switching that drew blood—-a drop anyway—-over that. But we kids all loved weird old Polly, even though she was never forgiven by the Brickers for introducing Hughie Radkin to Ora Lee. That was probably never terribly important to her since no one not born a Bricker ever truly was one, and being on the outside of the family was something she was already accustomed to. The only thing she lost in fact was any occasion of approbation without some mention of her failing.

Hughie B. Radkin was one of Polly’s relatives by marriage. He was dark and wild and good looking in a rough way that women often seem drawn to. Polly had not seen him more than three or four times in her life when he stopped by her house one day and wound up staying. Uncle Mays had been dead a year or so or Hughie would not have had such luck. But once in, there was little likelihood that Polly would ever have uprooted him had he chosen
to stay. Without Uncle Mays to protect her, Polly and, most sadly, her children were to suffer because of her slowness of mind and her unsuspicous good nature.

If Hughie Radkin had ever done a day’s work, it was unknown. He spent a lot of time going here and yonder, but he never worked, although he usually had money. Everybody in our family suspected him of any crime that was reported in the Bruno Gazette and uniformly “disliked” him; hate was not formally allowed due to scriptual injunction. He was too slick, too perfumed, and too friendly ever to be trusted by a real Bricker -- or a Pointer for that matter. I was warned by Momma to stay far away from him and her implication was plain in the hardness in her eyes when he was mentioned. She called him filth and we were frightened -- even Willie--by her vehemence. My skin still crawls when I remember, sometime when I was about fourteen, catching him looking at me from top to bottom. I was wearing shorts and a halter top, my girl’s body straining with a woman’s growth, but I was yet insensible to it. However, his gaze made me feel all that I had ignored. I ran home and changed my clothes; his look had made me feel so dirty. It is hard for me to believe that he could ever have been a sweet little baby or a cute little boy; I want to believe that he was always an evil creature who slunk from the womb and grew to manhood untouched by any human goodness.

Much of what occurred after Hughie moved in with Polly is, I admit, recalled as mostly second-hand information, because by this time I had just gone off to Kansas City with a scholarship; that oddity of mine had paid off it seemed. But my occasional visits home were filled with family news and Hughie P. Radkin’s activities.

As best as I can reconstruct, Hughie was no more or less a menace than any other lazy relation until Uncle Bert got sick, and after many weeks of
hospitalization and agony, died of cancer. Aunt Ora Lee was devastated by Uncle Bert’s long black days of pain lying helpless in the grip of death. The doctors had operated twice and experimented with so many chemicals that Bert had no realization of life or death, but Ora Lee did, and she suffered every needle and every dehumanizing procedure for him. She sat day after day at the hospital smoking, fidgetting, and crying. Hughie would offer to drive her to the hospital and then shared her Lucky Strikes and long hours of drinking strong black coffee. He was always by her side listening to her stories about Bert while patting her thin sagging shoulders and promising to help her any way and every way he could.

Mother, Aunt Sarah and Uncle Charles were shocked that she would turn to Hughie when she had decent family to lean on, but Aunt Ora never considered shunning his kindness and made it clear to the Brickers that she was perfectly capable of choosing her own friends and they had no business interfering. No doubt she was also flattered by his attention, although she called him “the boy” and repeatedly said that he was like a son. Momma and the others railed about Hughie among themselves plenty, but generally held their tongues. But they were all suffering, really more than I could have understood.

Uncle Bert died and was buried next to his mother and father and infant sister in a crowded little country cemetary where four generations of Irish-English immigrants and their off-spring had been sent back to the dust. Hughie P. Radkin had sat on the front pew of the old church, right next to Aunt Ora Lee, and patted her shoulder while the other Brickers fumed in silence only to prevent a scene that might sully the memorial service. The unforgivable breech of violating Uncle Bert’s funeral left the Brickers, even Momma who cried profusely at any funeral, dry-eyed and vindictive.

Unfortunately, Aunt Ora Lee was oblivious to the signs of a gathering storm,
so blinded was she now by Hughie’s attention. There did not seem to be anything anyone could do or say to awaken her common sense. I have come to see that ignorance plus loneliness often equals stupidity— but I learned as well that there is also the mathematical reciprocal at work in human affairs.

For several weeks after the funeral, Hughie was in the shadows. Occasionally he ventured over to Ora Lee’s, but for the most part, he kept to Polly’s house— and his mysterious forays into the night. Momma, Aunt Sarah, and Uncle Charles were pre-occupied with settling Uncle Bert’s small estate which everyone concluded would be shared equally if the house were ever sold, but Aunt Ora should have a home there as long as she wanted. Aunt Sarah and Uncle Charles had no real desire for any part of the estate, but they were concered for Momma, and not insensible to Ora Lee’s un-Bricker like tendencies. The three of them spent several weepy nights, drinking strong Folgers’ and drawing forth the ghosts of their parents and and other dead relatives. They were closer at this time that at any other; they were Brickers, blessed and beneficent, struggling and surviving, waiting for Beulah land and their places at God’s right hand if they had not or did not falter.

Sarah, fortunately as she frequently mentioned, had her above- average children and successful husband to worry with, and Uncle Charles had his farm, so they all, Momma too, were quick to try and put aside the funeral incident and attempt to get on with life.

I had come home for Uncle Bert’s funeral and since it was summer stayed hoping to find work in Bruno. Momma seemed so frail now that all the significant men in her life were dead. True, Uncles Charles was there, but Momma had never ceased to think of him as the “baby” of the family, not a reliable male. Aunt Ora Lee was also in the deepest depression of her life.
There was so much sadness, with the tears and the twisted handkerchiefs of mourning which had always been serious and intense for the Bricker women. Still, I saw something tentative, maybe youthful, occasionally turn up the corners of Ora Lee’s mouth when she was in a reverie that was supposedly evoked by some memory of dear Uncle Bert. However, I was inclined to connect this wistfullness, not to the dead, but to someone quite, if not actively, alive.

For much of that summer I visited with Aunt Ora Lee and renewed, in a sense, our early closeness. Curiosity may have had a part in my efforts to learn what was going on in her life and whether the family had legitimate reasons for their anger over her friendship with Hughie. There developed a lull in the battles and, with Hughie not visibly a part of her life at this point, the family seemed to coalesce and act like Brickers again. Maybe it was simply that we all wanted that awful person to disappear, fade away into the shadows, but that did not happen. Of course, she was a middle-aged woman of a respectable God-fearing family, and Hughie was a twenty-year-old young man who was probably, the family hoped, going to pass some time at Polly’s then go on his way or meet some girl, get married and disappear into domesticity. All wishful thinking on the whole. I don’t suppose anyone would have believed that the results of this connection could have turned out so disastrously.

Several weeks passed and Ora Lee settled down alone in the house she had shared for so long with Uncle Bert. She fell into a pleasant routine of rising early, keeping house, and helping with Polly’s children since Polly had taken a job in the local shirt factory. Polly lived just a few blocks away, so the children trooped down about seven, had breakfast, and then went out to play usually somewhere between the two houses. But this summer in particular they came down to Aunt Ora’s in the afternoon, loaded up on her
specialties, just like Willie, Mavis, and I had done, then made their way home in time to rush through their chores before their mother got home from work. Willie and Mavis were high school age and once in a while they would land on her doorstep too, so that one would think, as so often we erroneously do in emotional matters, that Ora Lee could not have possibly been lonely or deprived of love.

I suppose it doesn’t matter how much bread you have, though, if what you really want is cake, and it was not too long before a restlessness began to creep in prompting Ora Lee to dive into a number of projects which, she said, required that the kids stay out of the house. She told Polly that Mavis or Willie could take care of the kids from time to time, which naturally made Polly feel guilty about all the time the kids were spending at Ora Lee’s. She made a list of repairs that needed attention right away and furiously started cleaning out Uncle Bert’s room. Then she started wallpapering and then painting and then other refurbishing activities on the little house. Summer was deep with long blistering days and short baked nights. Hughie took to strolling down the street from Polly’s to enjoy the cooling of dusk and would stop in for a chat with Aunt Ora Lee who regularly sat on the front porch fanning herself and drinking iced tea in the early evening. He was helpful and gave her a hand with putting up a new screen door and hanging light fixtures back up that had been taken down during the repainting and papering.

They shared a few meals and talked about Polly and her children, the heat, the town, and Hughie told her about his sad childhood and loveless home. Sometimes he would cry: Ora Lee had never seen a grown man cry before. It was not long before Hughie was a regular for supper.

One night toward the end of summer that year Hughie brought a girl named Sandy to Aunt Ora Lee’s house introducing her as his girlfriend. She
was an uninteresting piece by Bricker standards; nothing to even make comment about. She was infatuated with Hughie and clung to his arm until he would shake her off to move. Ora Lee seemed to accept the girl, but as it would become clear, she never truly did. It was shortly after Hughie brought Sandy into the picture that an incident of dramatic proportions began to shape a new life for Aunt Ora Lee.

Whether Polly ever had a part in the next big brouhaha is irrelevant, but she was most assuredly placed in a very unpleasant position by the accusations made by her neighbor, Mrs. Rudsell, that Hughie had made improper advances toward her daughter Marion. Polly had in turn accused Hughie, repeating Mrs. Rudsell's words which had shamed Polly to the bone. Hughie claimed that he was being chased by Marion, but Polly, believing positively all that her friend had said, told Hughie that he was not fit to live in her house and ordered him to get the devil out.

Hughie flew into a rage and slapped Polly so hard she fell down. Then somehow between the first blow and dawn, he was put in jail. I was told that Polly called Uncle Charles who sent the police. When they got there, Polly was sitting on the porch with a swollen, bloody lip and Hughie was inside breaking up the kitchen table. It took two hefty policemen to put him into the patrol car and then again to get him out and into the jailhouse.

The next day he was out on bail and ensconced in Uncle Bert's old bedroom.

When Momma and the rest of the family heard that Aunt Ora Lee had posted Hughie Radkin's bond there was no containing their outrage. She could have attempted murder with greater assurance of forgiveness than this act of familial treason gave hope for. A family meeting was held and the Brickers met at Uncle Charles' to debate the proper course of action. Momma cried a lot and Aunt Sarah wanted to have Ora Lee committed. Poor
old Charles rolled his eyes and sighed repeatedly. He said that he sure as hell was not going to put his own sister in a looney bin, and as far as he could tell, nobody was going to make Ora Lee do anything she did not want to do. You could not, he reminded them, treat a woman of her advanced age like a delinquent teenager.

So, amidst much more wailing, moaning, and gnashing of teeth, the Brickers decided to do nothing. However, doing nothing where family was concerned meant that individually they went to talk sense into Ora Lee, and tried to get her to listen to reason, because she and everybody else in the family, Momma most especially pointed out, knew that Bert Bricker would not have approved of the way she was behaving. And such was the repetition of the unoriginal clan that Ora Lee knew precisely when to quit listening, which was somewhere between the "How are you doing?" and the kitchen where ninety percent of all family business was conducted.

Ora Lee would smile and nod and appear to agree with everything said to her, then she would ask whether anyone figured that Bert cared if she had someone to care about her. Inevitably, a quarrel began about whom she might turn to—-all Brickers were supposed to rely on Brickers and Bricker approved substitutes—all in the midst of tears and loud voices. By the end of an hour, Ora was crying and shaking her index finger at the person and yelling about her need to have friends and be friends with anybody she was so suited to. She defended Hughie Radkin to the bitter end.

Ora Lee had absolute trust in Hughie and believed his story that the girl Marion had been chasing after him. She said that Marion was just trying to getting revenge because he had rejected her. That the girl in question was merely thirteen, and shy, did not shake Ora's confidence. But the quality of blind faith had been made real for Momma and the rest. That was all that explained this illogical bent in a Bricker.
Some weeks went by and no day passed of that time that the Bricker clan was not talking about what might be done to waken Ora Lee to her senses. Momma seemed the most concerned because she most feared for Aunt Ora's immortal soul, and, secondarily, her immediate safety. More information was beginning to surface about Hughie Radkin and it was known that he was violent and had had several brushes with the law. Polly was called to account for allowing him around Uncle Mays' children knowing him to be white trash as she did. Of course, Polly did not know all that Hughie had done; besides, in her family, he was as good as the rest.

But no evidence could shatter Ora Lee's defense of Hughie. He was innocent; he was a victim and always had been. She had felt his tears drop cold and wet on her hands as he told her the horrors of his childhood: the beatings, the deprivations, and the humiliations. All he had to do was shed a tear and Ora Lee would pitifully relent to any request.

Soon he was driving her car and using her money as his own. He was arrested a dozen times for drunken driving, but she would bail him out each time with his assurance that he would never again allow himself to hurt her by his hateful actions. The Brickers were heartsick -- Ora Lee had become a stranger to her own brother and sisters. But, she was still family and they prayed for her and loved her, although by this time only Momma would go to her house.

The greatest mystery for the Brickers was that Hughie Radkin had such phenomenal luck. No matter what evil or illegal act he committed, he managed to get off scot free. Uncle Charles said the crooked cops were some of his best buddies, and everybody knew that Judge McElroy was a drug dealer on the side. The others agreed -- how else could you explain the failure of justice to deliver Ora Lee from Hughie's grasp.

I had returned to school and heard from Momma all the stories that
came out about Hughie. These reputed activities grew and expanded so much that I could hardly keep myself from asking about Hughie the first thing when I called or came home. He supposedly trafficked in drugs and had Aunt Ora Lee “on” something; another possible reason for her crazy behavior. Of course, it was true that he smoked dope and took pills of unknown composition, but I doubted most of what I heard. Not for the first time had I seen friends and neighbors suddenly bursting with knowledge of the worst kind, and in a hurry to spread it all around, after the first crumb was dropped. Why should he? I reasoned about his drug dealing. He had someone providing him with everything he needed. He had plenty of money and a car a his disposal, so why would he risk a prison term? I believed more simply that Radkin was too lazy to do anything so industrious.

The drama continued. One day I got a call from home, and I could tell by the weak way Momma spoke, that something awful was wrong. Naturally, I was first struck with the thought that someone had died, maybe Willie or Mavis, but it was less fearful. Momma said that Aunt Ora was in the hospital with a broken leg and that all the family knew that Hughie had done it. There had been some evidence, she said, when Uncle Charles had gone to the house after hearing from the hospital that she had been taken there by the ambulance. During several minutes of tearful and convoluted information, I learned that Ora Lee had called the hospital herself and an ambulance had been dispatched to take her to Bruno County Hospital. Uncle Charles had been called by an emergency room nurse and reassured that she was in good hands, then he had made straight for her house. He had found no sign of Hughie, but the house was a shambles. A solid oak coffee table had been found half-imbedded in the living room wall, and the china cabinet was turned over in the dining room with broken dishes strewn all about. Uncle Charles proceeded to call the police and told them what he thought had
happened, begging them to put out a warrant for Hughie's arrest. They told him that they would first have to question Ora Lee and went to the hospital to do so.

It was about ten thirty that evening when Momma finally got to see her. Momma said the doctor, who had known the family a long time, told her that something massive had to have hit Ora's thigh to break her femur. When she asked Aunt Ora Lee about it, she was shocked at the reply. Ora Lee claimed that she had knocked the china cabinet over onto herself and that was how she broke her leg. She was rattled and barely coherent, but she maintained that Hughie had had nothing to do with her accident. Confronted with the ambulance driver's account that he had found her in the living room on the floor, did not shake her. Uncle Charles, police in tow, flat out called her a liar. He told her and the police that any fool could see that Hughie had gone through the house in a mad fit, and there was absolutely no doubt about him being the cause of her broken leg.

No amount of furor or reasoning or pleading, however, would get her to admit that Hughie had hurt her. I could tell Momma was near collapse. She said the doctor and the police tried to get Ora Lee to admit Hughie's involvement, but she would not. Without her formal complaint, and no witnesses, there was nothing anyone could do. Momma was afraid Uncle Charles might go after Hughie and get hurt himself, but it was two weeks before anyone even saw him. By that time he was back in the house and playing nursemaid to Ora Lee.

The following weekend I went home. When I saw Ora Lee, she had gotten much thinner and had developed a tenseness that was, as I now know, a result of pure fear. I wish I could say that things got better, but they did not. Ora Lee began to stay home more and more and even quit calling Momma. Mysterious bruises and blackeyes developed, but none she would
credit to Hughie. Momma was frantic and dropped in as often as she could to see that Ora Lee was all right. Neighbors reported yelling and screaming, and even called the police a few times, but by the time they arrived Hughie would be gone and Ora Lee would attribute the noise to the television.

Ora Lee told me that she loved Hughie like a son. She did not understand, she had complained, why everybody would not leave her and Hughie alone. When I had suggested that Momma was worried about her welfare, she replied that if she was not worried there was no reason why Momma or the others be.

My general advice to Momma was to let Ora Lee do what she wanted to. She was, I reminded Momma, a grown woman and had the right to make even bad decisions without interference. It was not that I did not care about my aunt, but I recognized her right to live her own life in her own way. But that was not the Bricker way.

Uncle Charles and Aunt Sarah now totally disowned Ora Lee as a relation. But not Momma, she was scared and certain that Hughie would kill Aunt Ora Lee. Momma would find some excuse to go by her house at least every other day. Not, of course, that she was welcomed. Whenever Hughie was not there, Momma was working on Ora, trying to get her to recognize her damnable state. If Hughie was there he would be as sweet as sorghum, complementing Momma on her cooking, for she often brought something, and her thoughtfulness in visiting her sister. Momma would be so worked up with disgust and loathing when she got home that she would invariably be ill. By this time my concern was more for my mother's health than my aunt's, but it was out of my hands.

There was no pleasure in my visits home after a while. Hughie P. Radkin had taken the little joy that was in the Brickers and destroyed it. The Brickers were frustrated to the point, the first time in the known
family history, of rejecting one of their own, and that could not have happened without some disastrous result. God had to be at work.

When the fateful day came, Momma knew something dreadful was wrong just by the fact that Ora Lee had called. Aunt Ora Lee did not elaborate on the telephone, but asked that Momma come as quickly as she could. Ora Lee, Momma later related, was remarkably calm and Momma feared for the very worst. When she got there, she was too afraid to open the door for what seemed, she said, like several minutes. But, finally she mustered the courage to push open the kitchen door through which she was accustomed to entering. When she stepped into the room, her glance fell upon the coffee pot, half-empty on the warmer. She told me that she knew the house was too quiet and for a moment feared to venture on into the living room.

The sound of Aunt Ora Lee's voice calling to her propelled her finally toward the unknown, but certain, wrong. She said that the room was dark, the only light was that from the kitchen which just lifted the blackness, but left the awful shadows. Momma called out to Ora Lee, but heard only a groan. She said she could smell the blood before she could see it. She groped about for the light switch, and when the light at last filled the room it made her eyes hurt and she turned away, but in that next moment she saw Aunt Ora Lee lying on the floor, blood in a splattered line from the telephone in the hall to the spot where she lay. She lifted her head and smiled at Momma.

Momma called the ambulance and they took Ora Lee to the hospital, with no time to spare, and the doctor rushed her into emergency surgery. She had been stabbed several times in the chest and neck with a large kitchen knife which was later found in the house by the police. She had lost so much blood that it was really questionable whether she would survive, especially in the generally poor health she was in. But, after several hours of surgery to repair extensive internal damage the medical team managed to pull her
What the police found at Ora Lee's house did not explain what had happened that night. Back in Uncle Bert's bedroom they found Hughie, still holding the knife that had been used to stab Aunt Ora, lying across the bed naked, his body covered in blood. A deep gash ran from around the right side of his throat to the back of his neck. If the girl Sandy had not been brought in for questioning, the whole incident would have remained a monstrous mystery, because the police and the medical experts were quite sure that neither the wounds on Ora Lee's body, nor those on Hughie's body, were self-inflicted, yet the same knife had been used on both of them.

Sandy was frightened and still in shock. She told the police that Hughie had brought her to the house and they had had coffee with Ora Lee. Hughie had then told Ora Lee to go to bed and he and Sandy had watched the television for another hour or so. Eventually, they had gone back to the bedroom. Then all that she could remember was looking up as the light came on to see Ora Lee coming quickly toward the bed with the butcher knife in her hand. Ora Lee said: "Anything but this." Sandy then felt the warm trickle of Hughie's blood on her breast and next heard his scream of rage as he leaped up and grabbed the knife from Ora Lee's hand and started to stab at her.

The girl had grabbed her dress and ran from the house with no idea of what was happening, driven only to escape the killing. She seemed unbothered by Hughie's death, and even relieved that Ora Lee Bricker had survived. Afterwards, she was cleared of any involvement and released. Nobody ever heard or saw her any more.

Charges were filed against Aunt Ora Lee, but she was eventually cleared. The coroner said that Radkin would have probably survived had he gotten help instead of reacting with a fit of rage. He bled to death trying to
kill Aunt Ora Lee. The whole affair would have passed through the legal system with hardly any notice, if the local newspaper had not made quite a splash with its only scoop of the century.

Aunt Ora Lee, though, never would talk to anybody about Hughie; not even the police had been able to get her to say anything. All the conclusions were derived from the evidence at the scene of the stabbing and Sandy’s statement.

I did not see much of Ora Lee in the years that followed. But the last time I visited her, we sat in the too warm kitchen and she talked a lot about the things that she was planning to cook for Uncle Bert. She asked me if I would like some of her special treats and looked surprised when I questioned whether or not I would be around long enough to enjoy them. She made a pot of strong coffee, and as she was going about the business of measuring coffee and filling the percolator with water she hummed the old hymn, *Sweet By and By*, for a moment totally oblivious of my presence. When I had pointed out to Momma that Aunt Ora Lee did not seem to be in the here-and-now, she shrugged it off and said that she, Aunt Sarah, and Uncle Charles thought Ora Lee got along just fine and there was no need to intervene since some of the family would always be around to keep an eye on her.

Aunt Ora Lee did do just fine. She lived into her late seventies, falling more and more back upon her youthful religion, clinging to that supernatural strength which had held the Brickers together for so many generations. She also resurrected several more relatives to keep her company, but Momma and the rest of the clan didn’t seem to mind.

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Belgrave sat on the cold stone bench his arms clasped tightly to his rib cage trying to ward off the cold and not succeeding. He looked around at the other benchwarmers and the dreary late December sadness of Central Park. No happy chatting of the holiday shoppers, no silver bells and sweet smells, just cold wet Atlantic wind, and the ordinary New York seen through the untinted bifocals of an old man. His walk up the west side of the park was a daily ritual as it always had been, but now, as he made his way, it was to the YMCA for a swim which his doctor said was good for arthritis. Belgrave found the trip more depressing each day. The weather was either cold or wet or both, and the sight of so many homeless and vagrant people his own age was further depressing. The richest and poorest, best and worst, the happiest and saddest were separated by only a few feet--and well-secured or manned doorways.

It seemed to Belgrave that his New York was gone. The New York of mostly struggling lower middle-class immigrants. Those who had happily sacrificed everything they held dearest for life in this country. Those who could smile at the simple pleasures they found in this Utopia of freedom and justice. Those who wanted only a little so that their children could have a lot. He thought now, as he sat shivering in this familiar place, that the city had been taken over by real-estate tycoons and streetpeople, not a congenial combination.

An old man wrapped in several garments rolled over on a piece of cardboard that had been placed strategically in a walled corner under a low spreading bush to avoid the cruel wind. Belgrave shook his head with the mixed emotions of anger and frustration and left the bench to continue on his way.
Belgrave made the turn up West Sixty-Fourth Street toward the "Y" and was nearly trampled by an old friend and neighbor, Ivan Erlich; still a big burly man although he was approaching eighty.

"Where the hell you goin' in such a hurry, Bel?" Belgrave flipped up his lower plate and clicked it back in place automatically before replying, mustering up something of disdain for his answer.

"Do you see me walk to this place for my swim every damned day or not? What kind of damn fool question is that? Humph?" Ivan ignored the blustering.

"Say, Belgrave, you going to Harper's funeral Saturday?"

"Harper's?... Not Lee Harper?" Belgrave was did not know what to say. It was less than a week since he was having coffee with Harper and now to hear that another old friend was gone frightened him. "Oh, don't tell me that. Ah...shit!" Belgrave drug his hand down the side of his face. "How's Lucille?" A heaviness in his chest made him hunch his shoulders to accept this painful news.

"I heard she was not taking things so well," Ivan shook his head and talked on. "You know Bel, we're about alls that's left of the old crowd." Ivan gave Belgrave a solid pat of commiseration on the back and walked off leaving Belgrave standing at the foot of the steps leading up to the YMCA. Suddenly, Belgrave turned around and shouted to the back of Ivan disappearing down the block.

"What happened?"

Ivan shouted back just before he turned the corner, "He had a heart attack swimming... there," he nodded at the building housing the Y, "last Saturday." Belgrave looked back toward the building then tossed his kitbag in the trashcan by the alley and walked back home.

He was watching television when his daughter Monica came home from
work, and he did not look up, but said, "Lee Harper's funeral is day after
tomorrow." Monica dropped her satchel full of papers, an evening's work of
grading, on the floor by the clothes tree then went over to her father who
was yet to look up from the t.v. set.

"God, I'm sorry to hear it, Pop. What happened... his heart?" She saw her
father's nod of assent, and noted his tightened mouth. "I always loved old
Mr. and Mrs. Harper," for old they had always seemed to her. Monica felt so
sorry for her father. He had lost so many friends, many he had known from
childhood, and he was clearly not coping well with this last shock. "They
managed to find some treat for me whenever we visited. Remember that
trick he loved to pull on kids -- putting cinnamon disks in the goldwrappers
of the butterscotch ones?" She smiled at the way she could still taste the
shock to her senses. "He always fooled me."

Monica was glad that her father could manage to turn up a corner of his
age-lined mouth. "It was the funniest sensation to expect that sweet,
buttery, sloshy taste, and instead get the zap of cinnamon. Mr. Harper got
such a kick out of the fact that we always would take the candy out of our
mouths for examination. Once he made his niece Luci cry with that gag, but
then she must have only been about three, come to think about it. Anyway, I
liked him."

"Yeah... he was a real character, old Harper. We had a lot of good times."
Belgrave looked off into the past as many happy recollections flitted
through his mind of his old friend, then of others and their families growing
and working together in the years before and after the second world war.

"How old was Mr. Harper, Pop?" His daughter interrupted Belgrave's
thoughts for a minute.

"He was seventy. Just one year older than me." Belgrave shook his head
in disbelief. His turn was coming he knew, and Belgrave got angry at the
thought that he could be gone at any given moment, without having time to consider his doom. "I'm not ready to die," he said out loud without realizing it.

"Of course not, Pop." Monica soothed. "You have lots more time. Don't brood on this. I know it's hard for you, but you have good health and there's no reason to think you'll die soon."

"Hell yes, there's a reason," he boomed not so much at her as at the simple fact. "I'm an old man. A man can expect to die when all of the friends that he wrestled on the play-ground have died. They're nearly all gone. And it's...damn it...it's not right. Just when you begin to know how to live...you die." The closest thing to a tear that dared to be welled in Belgrave's eye, and he quickly rubbed it away. "Damn it all to hell. It's just not right."

Monica judiciously left the room to shed a few tears of her own, not so much for Mr. Harper, but for her father who was more dear to her now than ever before. She decided to try, once again, to get him to move to Florida; maybe the change would lessen the increasing gloom that hung over him, she thought. He had never exactly been a jolly person, but he had never been an absolute pessimist before either. She had to get him to consider the move, but it was going to take more than a simple conversation to gain her objective.

A week after Mr. Harper's funeral, Monica came home with two tickets for Miami. She stood at the door to the apartment not certain about the reaction she might be going to receive. Rationality did not seem to fit the issue, so she entered the living room, her chin set with determination, and gathered energy for the next phase of her plan.

Belgrave was sitting, as he did all too often now, in front of the television appearing to watch a program that Monica knew he normally
would never have considered worthwhile. He was still an attractive man in most respects. His hair was white, a beautiful cloud, unsullied by even one strand of the original reddish brown, but these days often disheveled. And his eyes, though narrowing, were a clear and lively brown that made people trust him, even when they did not like him; and plenty of people did not like him -- but that was nothing new.

Belgrave was an unusual man in a number of ways, one being that he spoke what he thought when asked a question, never an endearing trait. But the people who took the time to learn his ways found a friend who took the concept of friendship to heart. Belgrave firmly believed that good friends were as important as family, sometimes more so. Another Belgrave quirk was his cat phobia, which brought out in other people reactions of total sympathy or total loathing. "No baloney" was his motto, he often said, but one he only believed in in regard to serious matters, because he gave plenty of it to the unsuspecting family members and friends.

Belgrave could tell the most outrageous joke with a straight face. Or, as Monica remembered with some chagrin, he would interrogate her dates with wild questions, his face deadpan, like -- as he had one particular fifteen-year-old shy boy who never asked her out again! What do you do for a living? Can you provide for my daughter? When she would yell at him to quit humiliating her, he would simply reply that a guy with no sense of humor was not worth dating, and, in time, Monica found this to be quite true. What really worried Monica the most, in fact, was that her father had lost his sense of humor.

Monica was his only child and only family now; his wife Beatrice had died a few years before and he still mourned her passing. And as more of his friends and family died, it seemed that he also died a bit. For Monica there had always been two Belgraves; one, her father, who could be stern and still
loving, who took her to the park and played innumerable games, and the other, who was a serious, sometimes grouchy shoe salesman who went off to work each day ready for the worst.

Belgrave had worked since he was in his twenties for the same men's store on Madison Avenue selling "the very best shoes" that could be found in the world. Numbered among his clients were several congressmen, many of the world's richest and most powerful men, and even one president. He believed that he could tell whether a man was wealthy simply by how much time he spent selecting his shoes. Belgrave said a man with "real" money never spent more than ten minutes choosing footwear and half of that was spent checking the fit.

He had often been summoned by valets and maidservants to many of New York City's most elegant homes. He had a large case that held several pairs of shoes which he would fill determining from a card file what any previous customer had bought and, if it was a regular customer, what all his individual peculiarities about shoes might be; for instance, one Wall Street whizkid would never wear black shoes.

If any one disparaged, even mildly, his occupation, Belgrave, his shoulders shifted up a bit and his chin set, would always comment: "If you don't have a good stockbroker, you lose some money, but if you don't have a good shoe salesman... you lose your poise."

Monica felt desperate to do something to stop Belgrave's spiral into self-pity and remorse. There was nothing to do but get him to move to Florida where he could make new friends and brood a little less about the passing of his New York.

Three days had passed since she had first presented her tickets to Belgrave. He had looked at them and her and told her to go to hell, which she tolerantly ignored and kissed his forehead. She had brought up the subject
at every possible juncture, and had met with the same happy refrain. Monica, however, was a Belgrave by birth and she kept up the barrage.

"Pop?" she asked across the table at breakfast the next morning. "Pop, are you listening to me?" He did not reply, but folded the paper neatly into a fourth. "Pop, I know you aren't deaf—stubborn you may be, but not deaf. I want you go with me to Florida. Tampa is lovely. You'll meet lots of nice people, and it'll be warm." She continued with all she could say that was positive and suggestive of comfort. Finally, however, she hit the wall of exasperation and shouted:

"Godamit Pop, I don't want you to shrivel up and die here!" She started crying which was entirely unusual for her, and to Belgrave she looked like her mother so much that he wished she was. He was surprised to see this side of his daughter and immediately felt remorse for his recalcitrant behavior of late.

"I have the two weeks of Christmas break," she said collecting herself, "and I want us to go down there and see about a place for you." She blew her nose on her paper napkin and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Pop, please no more games... just come with me and maybe everything will work out. Okay?"

"All right," he said and feigned irritation when she jumped up and ran around the little table to hug him. He rationalized that it would not do any harm to go down to Florida for a little vacation; he didn't have to stay down there if he didn't want.

"Dad, are you sure you have everything you need?" Monica Belgrave held the phone four inches from her ear in readiness for the response.

"I gotta can opener, spoon, and toilet paper... all that's necessary," bellowed Belgrave. "I'll call you if I run out of anything, and you can jump on a jet from JFK and bring it down here; Florida's only a 'short trip by
"Aw Dad, you know that you'll be much happier down there than in New York. You never stopped complaining about the crowds and the weather and the cost of everything up here."

"So? A man's allowed a few opinions without being moved out of house and home to some retirement village in Florida where he don't know a soul and everybody's old."

"You know good and well that nobody forced you--I'd like to see it happen--to do anything...and quit yelling into the phone. They have improved these things since 1920 you know. "Monica's voice softened: "I love you Dad. Take care of yourself and I'll see you in a couple months."

Belgrave said goodbye to his only child and wondered briefly when the tables had turned. Now it was he being coddled by a thirty year old school teacher who, just a few deep sighs ago, had been on his lap begging for peppermints. He walked into the three-by-four kitchenette and got a beer before sitting down to watch the evening news. He considered that he might be able to adjust to these new--too new--surroundings and that Monica had done a good job when she found the Sunrise Retirement Village. He had just moved in yesterday, and Monica had flown home early this morning; calling him, as a dutiful child should, when she got home. He looked around at the so-called "efficiency model" with its tiny, but functional kitchenette, a nice dining-living area, and, off to the back, a bedroom and bath. If he wanted, he had the option of having some of his meals in a cafeteria, but he was not up to that yet. He thought he would just look the place over more thoroughly and see what kind of characters occupied the other houses -- patio homes, they called them here -- in the immediate area.

He decided to go for a stroll and went automatically to the closet for his sweater despite the high 80's outdoors. Outside he stopped on his patio
and noted the reddening Florida sunset and realized that he was already sweating. "Damn humidity," he muttered and pulled off the sweater tossing it over one of the new patio chairs he and his daughter had purchased only the day before. One way or another, he thought recalling the freezing temperatures in Manhattan, the weather was sure as hell going to kill him.

Belgrave had no more than taken a step away from his patio when a rather attractive woman stepped out of her house which was separated from Belgrave's by only a narrow strip of St. Augustine lawn. He frowned but noticed the still slim hips and ankles, and the only slightly wrinkled face of a woman he guessed to be about sixty. He started to walk on without speaking, but the woman called out in a soft Southern voice: "Hello there. I don't believe we've met. I'm Lenore Martin, but everyone calls me Lennie."

Trapped by this puppy-dog Southern friendliness, Belgrave gave what amounted to his name, rank, and serial number. He was on the verge of being friendly when he noticed that what he had assumed was fur trimming on her lounging pajamas was actually a massive, white Persian cat. He jumped back instinctively and took off in the opposite direction. Lennie looked at Belgrave's quick exit and wondered what had prompted his strange behavior. Stroking the Persian, she commented: "That is a very peculiar man, Tinklebelle, you better watch your step around him."

Lenore Martin could have said nothing more apropos had she actually known that Belgrave would have walked over hot coals to avoid meeting a cat face-to-face. And for Belgrave's part, he was already planning to see the management the following morning to arrange a move.

Belgrave rarely ever responded to any questions about his cat-phobia, ailurophobia it was diagnosed. It was just something beyond his control, so he thought, and it was, he considered, his right as an American citizen to hate cats either real, paper, or plaster. He just knew that his earliest
memories were of a sickening lump in the pit of his stomach whenever a cat was even mentioned. Cats were evil, vile creatures that slinked around and rubbed up against cat-haters before they would cat lovers, which proved his assertion that they were malevolent in some indescribable way.

Belgrave had gained something of a reputation for his phobia. A well known New York psychologist had once interviewed him for a study after Monica had called around to various doctors looking for help for her dad. Belgrave readily consented to the interview, but he refused to have counselling based on the fact that he enjoyed hating cats and should not have to give it up. Monica eventually gave up her quest to cure her father, but while in New York he had continued to get calls for further interviews, which he had occasionally given. One persistent doctor of psychiatry was determined to affect a cure and Belgrave, exasperated, finally asked if the good doctor would also cure him of his loathing for liver, English peas, and sweet wines at the same time. The good doctor sensibly recognized defeat.

The night was too long for Belgrave, knowing that cat was just a few feet away, and by eight o'clock the following morning he was standing at the main office door of the Sunrise Retirement Village waiting for someone to arrive. Although the sign clearly stated that the office opened at nine, he chose to wait. He paced for a while, then he walked out around the patio. Patios were still strange to Belgrave; he could not understand the logic in cementing the wide, lushly green spaces and planting aluminum furniture. Nonetheless, Florida was warm, maybe too warm he thought, considering here it was 80 degrees in the dead of winter. However, the place was not half-bad to look at even with patios.

He surveyed the bougainvillea, spattered with pink-red blossoms, climbing the lattice-work which bordered the walkway to the office. Everywhere, he noted, flowers were already in bloom scented the air
sweetly; such flowers would only be in artificial arrangements in New York at this time of year. No, not half bad, he decided, maybe he could finally try growing some plants.

But--first he had to get away from that damn cat. The familiar lump was forming and Belgrave wondered what he would have to do if there were no other arrangements to be made. Another retirement home was out of the question right now; he had a sizeable deposit involved at this place. So, looking at the palms and the blue ocean in the distance, Belgrave dreaded the day, the upcoming encounter, and longed for the familiarity, if not the security, of his old New York apartment.

A few minutes later, a new Cadillac Fleetwood pulled up onto the gravel drive and a woman who looked to be in her forties got out and teetered on four-inch heels to the office door and proceeded to unlock it. Belgrave wondered what pre-dawn hour she got up to put on all the makeup she wore. He eyed what he characteristically called "real estate couture"--a recent identification after all the hours that he and Monica had spent looking at properties. The woman had on a tight dress of a blue shimmery material that seemed to Belgrave more suitable for the ballroom than the business world, and heavy gold jewelry on her ears, neck, and wrists; her hair was bleached blond and fell in a curly mass around her shoulders. Forever the stereotyping cynic, Belgrave seriously doubted her ability to speak polysyllabically much less handle the management of a large development like Sunrise Village, so he sighed deeply--resigned to ineffectual argument--and made his way toward the office.

The Sunrise Retirement Village office was predictably, and undeniably, professionally decorated; mauve carpets, gray wallpaper, pink twigs in expensive vases, and a large walnut desk--centered appropriately so that no one could miss the point of authority. Belgrave, his chin tucked in closely
and with lips tightly compressed, strode up to the desk and moved only his eyes up to make contact with the office manager. Belgrave tried to remember why it was that he did not know this person, but she made the information available saying: “Ah, Mr. Belgrave, I’m sorry we didn’t meet when you and your daughter made your lease agreement with the property manager, but that happens often around here. It takes a lot of bodies to keep this place functioning, you know, and I’m often called out to help with the resident’s problems and needs.”

Now Belgrave was puzzled; how did she know him if she had not even met him; again she responded before he could voice his thought. “I know all the residents and I must say you fit the description that Mr. Bledsoe, the property manager—remember?—gave on your personal profile perfectly.” Belgrave was beginning to feel like Big Sister had control of his life now. He made an attempt.

“Miss...ah...,” he looked for some identification.

“I’m Sydney,” she supplied immediately. “Mrs. Sandra Sydney.” She stood and extended her perfectly manicured hand, the red nails two inches long, to Belgrave and smiled so charmingly that Belgrave was about to lose patience.

“Mrs. Syndey,” he started.

“Please call me Sandy,” she said and smiled her most genuine “How to Win Friends” smile.

“Mrs. Sydney,” Belgrave began again with deliberation and noted with malice that her smile faded. “I must have another cottage as soon as possible. A-S-A-P.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand Mr. Belgrave. What is the problem?” Now Mrs. Sandy Sydney was entirely concerned, and Belgrave made ready for another attempt to make himself understood.
"Well, it's like this." Belgrave snorted a bit, his discomfort showing, and cleared his throat. "I hate cats. And... well... that woman that's next door to my place has a great godawful hairy one. I can't live next to it! That's all there is to it." His hands were now deep in his pockets, and he firmed his stance for the volley.

"Oh, Mr. Belgrave," she said and eyed him coyly. "A big strapping fellow like you is afraid of cats. I can't believe it." Belgrave fairly bristled.

"I didn't say I was afraid of the damned things," he growled. "I said I hate them, which is a helluva a different matter. Now, where can I move?"

Mrs. Sydney put on her horned rimmed glasses, and Belgrave was comforted. Now, maybe she would get down to business. He waited quietly while she ruffled through a stack of papers and went to the file cabinet for another sheaf, all without a saying a single word. The situation was taking on a more familiar tone for Belgrave, and he relaxed his jaw a little. Finally, she looked up and spoke.

"Mr. Belgrave I'm very sorry, but small house pets are accepted at Sunrise Village and you signed a contract that made that provision-- made for the residents' benefit-- quite clear. But aside from that, there simply is no vacancy at this time for your particular housing need." Belgrave noted that the set of her jaw had firmed and he prepared to do battle.

"Well, then, what is available?"

"The only thing at present is a luxury, two bedroom cottage on the golf course." She knew he could not afford it, and that made Belgrave even more angry with embarrassment and, consequently, with her.

"How much is it?" he insisted unable to control the rising pitch in his voice. "I'm telling you, I can't live next door to a...a cat."

Mrs. Sandy Sydney smiled and pulled off her glasses to say: "Quadruple your present rate."
She did not wait for his color to lessen. "I'll speak with Lenore Martin, your neighbor, about your...er...difficulty with cats. I'm sure that you two can come to a mature understanding. In the meantime, I'll put your name on a list to change. But surely you understand that another cat-owner might possibly move in. We cannot, I'm sorry to say, always take your particular problem into consideration."

You management, mannequin bitch, he thought. She stood up and smiled her friendliest and once again extended her hand to Belgrave. He considered the red claws before lightly touching her hand. "I'm certainly happy to have met you, Mr. Belgrave, and will do all that I can to help." With that she excused herself and picked up the phone receiver, and started poking at the buttons with the eraser of a pencil expecting him to be gone when she looked up again.

Belgrave walked back out into the warmth of the Florida sun which was just easing behind a towering dark cumulus cloud. He stopped to considered his situation for a moment. Well, he mused, so this is going to be retirement in Florida. He kicked at the grass absentmindedly. Monica had said there would be more than enough for him to do here in Florida. He agreed. There was more than enough. Enough to kill a man, he thought, of sunshine, and clouds, and plants, and rain...and...Lenore Martin...and cats.

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Several weeks later springtime was fulfilling the winter's promise. Monica was out of the classroom for the term, and she arrived late one evening at her father's patio door. She knocked, but no one answered. She tried again, but still no one came to the door. It was dark in the house, and Monica wondered where he would be at this time of night. She walked around to the other door and peered through the glass trying to see some
She was perplexed by his absence, since she had spoken to him early that morning to remind him of her arrival. She decided the next place to look would be the recreation center; he might be playing pinochle. Just as she was preparing to set her bag under the hedge before going, she heard a girlish giggle, then the stentorian tones of her father singing the refrain of an old Perry Como song, the name of which she couldn't remember, only recalling that he had sung it to her when she was a child.

"...my bambino go to sleep." Monica followed the sound of Belgrave's voice, still flat as always, she noted happily. She came around the side of Lenore Martin's house and nearly fainted at the picture framed by the patio light. There, sitting on a patio-swing, was a beautiful older lady dressed in pink satin evening pajamas, her feet curled up under her, as close as she could possibly be to Belgrave. Monica, her mouth open in amazement, walked slowly into the light still unsure of her own eyes. There was her father, dressed strangely in a yellow shirt and plaid pants, smiling contently while he sang the second refrain: "...my bambino go to sleep." But that was not what stunned Monica. It was that Belgrave, ailurophobic Belgrave, was stroking a very large, very furry, very white--cat.

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I met Dorcas on the riverbank the summer my family rented a vacation cabin overlooking the temptuous Hood River. I had spent the first day there, not admiring the beauty and majesty of the river or the lovely view as my mother told me I should, but in the normal squabbling with my parents and brother over who sleeps where and who does what chores -- and attending to my own personal needs like arranging my clothing and secreting my diary where Robert could not possibly locate it. I was thirteen and a half; Robert was ten and I hated him, daily wishing him dead. Our family vacations were a trial and an inconvenience to me generally because I had to be in close quarters with him.

The second day we were there my mother contrarily woke us all at six-thirty for breakfast--we never had breakfast at home nor even got up before seven--and we got up just to keep her from starting a tirade about sleeping our lives away and wasting the vacation money. Dad drank about four cups of coffee with his eyes closed, and I had brought my copy of Tennyson's poems to the table to read, stirring my cereal around aimlessly trying to avoid eating. Robert, the only accommodating member of the family, as I heard frequently enough, ate three eggs and five or six pancakes drowned in raspberry syrup which looked like blood, nearly making me sick.

It was a beautiful morning and once I had escaped the cabin and started wandering down the steep path toward the river, the poorly verbalized notions of natural beauty surfaced in my teen mind and I was determined to remember even the smallest detail of this week to put in my diary so that the experience might be with me always. What I see now in that old brown vinyl-covered journal, its paper pages so yellowed that I can now hardly read the round immature penciled scrawl, are complaints about Robert and
my mother (and praise for my father), but more is written of my encounter
with the girl Dorcas.

Dorcas Weatherby was a local girl who lived in a rather shabby white
clapboard house down near a poorly drained backwater area called,
unofficially, Renter's Swamp. Renter's Swamp had been built to house
laborers who had worked for a large lumber company, and at that time were
rented by the local unskilled laborers who worked in the recreation areas
that had sprung up during the forties and fifties. The houses were small and
the plumbing, added on haphazardly after the fact, rarely worked properly
due to the high watertable and improperly installed septic systems. The
whole place, some fifteen houses on about two acres, stank except in the
winter freezes when the area became the coldest spot in the county.
Naturally those same houses were the ones with the worst heating, usually
foul smelling open flame heaters that were dangerous to small children in
particular. Dorcas had a large brown scarred area on her thigh from a brush
against the heater in her house.

I always say house when I refer to those awful abodes, for there was
nothing to make them homey, even the residents would say "down th' house"
or "down th' place." The subconscious knowledge seemed to be there that
those shacks were too inhospitable to be homes. Most of the occupants of
Renter's Swamp were direct descendants of the laborers who had served the
lumber baron at the turn of the century and who had worked for so little
that hope of escaping their poverty was never realized. The people who
lived in the Swamp now were very little better off, maybe worse off
because they had to pay rent for the run down shanties. They still earned so
little that only one person, so Dorcas told me, ever had left the Swamp to
amount to anything. He had become a manager of a shoe store in Seattle.
But, I had yet to learn of this history as I meandered down the steep rocky
path to the river that morning.

The path I walked down was very steep and shaded by tall thick-trunked pines. There was little undergrowth because of a heavy blanket of pine needles that covered the ground and acidified the soil beyond the strength of most plants. The air was cool and smelled strongly of pine and the river damp; I was unaccustomed to the eerie quiet that was broken only by the aggravated cries of bluejays. I could hear the roaring of the river grow louder as I followed the path down and down as it twisted back and forth frustrating my descent, and as I neared the base of the hill on which our cabin perched, I could feel the roaring power of the mighty Hood; a pulsating demanding presence that was frightening.

Pine cones were scattered everywhere, and I reached down and picked up a large cone and began to pull the segments off. I broke my thumbnail attempting to wrench off a large stubborn piece of the hard, woody cone. Uttering mild four-letter curses learned only recently, unmentionables in a lady's vocabulary, I tossed the pine cone down toward the bank. I never could throw anything straight so it flew off at an odd angle, and the next thing, I heard a stone hit at my feet and a "goddam you" shouted loudly at the same time. I looked hard through the thick stand of trees to see who had thrown the stone, but I saw nothing. Again I heard someone with an uncommonly deep, yet youthful and feminine voice shout: "You goddam pig." Then I saw a tall girl, who appeared to be about my own age, running up the river bank toward the spot where I had left the path. I stopped dead and feared she would hit me square with the next stone which was arcing at that very moment in my direction. My reaction time was lousy and had the stone been intended for me I surely would have been downed, but in the next instant I saw that I was not the pig she was hoping to hit. There was in fact a small whitish pig racing in a wild zig zag up the river and the girl was
flying with long graceful strides fast after it, yelling and swearing at the top of her lungs.

To say I was relieved is only partially correct. I was ashamed that I thought myself to be the pig, ashamed at my usual defensive posture, and ashamed of my cowardice. It reminded me that I was easily bullied by my friends when I was in school, a discovery that need be made by only one person to make the finding commonplace news in days. Had I not met Dorcas, I probably would have gone on being bullied all my life like most of the women of my age. It is the only thing I can thank her for.

The girl stopped short when she spotted me and the pig ran on a few more feet and stopped to root at a decaying log lying along the river bank. She looked at me very directly (I had noted in my diary that "the lower classes" often do); I was too shocked to say anything, but she came on toward me and spoke in that peculiarly deep voice.

"Are you from up there?" she directed her eyes upward toward the cabins that lined the hilltop ridge. She plopped down on a mossy patch and sighed heavily. She was the most startlingly beautiful girl I had ever seen; I have yet to see a female her equal in beauty. She had hair the color of ripe black cherries, and so thick and glossy that I wanted to cry that my own fine brown strands could lack such glory. She was, I had already noted, tall, probably five-eight or nine, but not too tall, just gracefully tall. Most of my girl friends were only an inch or two over five feet so she seemed positively statuesque. I started to hate her when I saw that her skin was smooth and cream colored, unmarred by the horrid teen-blemishes that made my life so unhappy. But her most striking feature by far was her eyes. They could only be described as marble, or maybe slate gray, so oddly luminous that there must have been an unseen light that brought to them that intensity. Even after all these years I have not forgotten those eyes -- my mind can draw
forth her image so plainly that I might reach out to touch her -- and because of them I have been more than normally aware of people's eyes, perhaps hoping to find that color duplicated to keep her from being so special. I stared at her hard, so hard, I guess, hoping to find a flaw, that she soon became uncomfortable and said plainly: "Take a picture, it'll last longer."

"I...uh...I'm sorry." I had little skill with such forthrightness.

"Sit down," she commanded. I sat and primly tucked my legs up under me noting with satisfaction that she sat with her long white legs spread like a lanky boy's and her shorts were very short, something which we "good girls" never wore, nor would have been permitted to wear. I could just hear my mother saying, her mouth drawn up tightly, what sort of girl would look and act like this one was. With more careful note of her clothing, I began to hold my chin a bit higher, because she had on a peasant blouse that was too small, dingy yellow instead of white, and her feet were bare and not very clean and it didn't look like she had on any underpants. Although I didn't have the nerve to express it outwardly, I had decided that I could be haughty with this one, even in the obvious presence of one superior to me in every physical outward manifestation.

Those rough seconds when we decide that we are better than or less than another human being shape our lives immeasurably, but they happen practically without conscious effort for all I was aware of was the need to cloak my envy with smug evaluations.

"Well!" She was impatient for me to find my voice -- I was afraid to.

"Yes," I finally responded, "we have the last one by the path."

"Yeh, I figured as much. I can always spot the cabin people." She looked at me and then back in the direction of the pig.

"I've got to get the pig. I almost had her when a pine cone fell on her and scared the livin' daylights out of her."
"I'm sorry, I didn't know that the pine cone was going to hit anybody."

"It didn't hit any body... it hit a pig. My old man's pig, and if I don't get her back in the pen he'll kill me." With that she bent her long legs back like a $W$ and pushed herself up from the ankles, a motion that made me wince. I got on my knees and then stood up wishing I were double-jointed like she; I imagined she could do the splits too.

"Where do you have to take it?" I asked, thinking of some farm further out from town.

"Just back down to the Swamp." She said this with no hesitation.

"The swamp? Where's that?" She looked back and smiled sardonically. I could tell that the question was some how inappropriate and didn't press further. She went on softly toward the log and the rooting pig and in a quick lunge grabbed the little beast who let out a squeal of rage, but could not escape her tight grip.

"Gotcha, you little scamp," she said pleased with herself.

"Why do you have a pig?" I asked innocently. She raised one eyebrow high and looked at me in amazement.

"To eat."

"To eat!" I looked at the little pig in shock. Sure, I knew were my food came from, but this was a pet it seemed. City people didn't eat pets.

"Where have they had you locked up?" she said sarcastically. Pushing the pig up tightly under her arm she walked back down the river and didn't look back. I figured that that was the last I would see of her which was a relief, but totally unsatisfying because I really did want to see her again--out of curiosity I told myself.

I walked along the path that skirted the river. My thoughts now were occupied by the girl and it made me mad that the spirit of nature had escaped me because of her. She was a them, that was plain to see. But she
was not at the same time. I kept recalling those incredible eyes and the hair and everything about her. But the effort forced me to consider her obvious inferiority. The girls of my circle were taught early, I suppose when we were trained to our panties, the differences between the them, the theys, and the whos. By the time we started first grade we knew who to be friends with and who not to. I can remember that my friend Bess Morris refused to let Miss Pickens put her in the desk behind Malcolm Poge, a dirty little boy from a bad home, and Miss Pickens relented.

But try as I would to go on with my vacation exploration, the girl continued to infiltrate my thoughts as I loitered about the river.

For some reason that I can not pull back from memory now, nor is it revealed in the diary, I did not say anything to my parents about the meeting on the riverbank. I really did not have to think about what my mother’s reaction would be, nor my father’s either. They were entirely predictable and, if at all possible, I sought to avoid lengthy lectures. My life at that point seemed to have been thirteen years of lecturing on everything: table manners, the Golden Rule, proper dress, how to speak to one’s elders, and on and on—a never ending list of behavioral guidelines. Perhaps I made no mention of her because of a developing maturity, I don’t know; teenagers are less clear in their minds than even the adults think or remember from their own teen years. There is a strange amnesia about one’s adolescence that I would have had too if it had not been for the acquaintance of Dorcas Weatherby and the foolish ramblings in my diary.

Later on that evening, sometime after eight, while my mother washed the dinner dishes and Dad listened to a murder mystery on the radio, I left the cabin and headed down the path to the river. I know that I wanted to find the beautiful girl again. I day-dreamed that she was a princess trapped out of her own time, but in my reverie stumbled over a rock and fell face
down. I pushed myself up to sitting and tried to staunch the flow of blood from my bruised nose. Tears streamed down my ugly scrapped face and I heard myself uttering pitiful sounds that I knew Mother and Dad would not hear.

I got to my feet and started back up the hill. My shirt, once white, was now splattered crimson. I was certain that my nose was broken, and only images of Uncle Bill’s nose, which was grotesque from being broken in Army boxing matches, came through my pain. A slight touch at my elbow made me jump and I fell down on the pine needles padding the edge of the path. It was she trying to help me up, and she spoke more kindly than she had earlier in the morning down at the river even asking what my name was.

“What happened to you... I heard the crying and came to find out what was happening.” She had on the same clothes and still was barefoot, but she had added an old cardigan against the chill of the evening damp that hangs over large bodies of water. She took the sweater from her shoulders and draped it over my own and patted my back.

“I had an accident once,” she said and showed me the oval shaped scar on the backside of her thigh. “I burnt it against a heater.” She was not conversationally gifted, but what she said mattered, so she did not have to say so much it seemed.

“Let me help you to your cabin.” She pulled up under my arms to get me on my feet and guided me back. The swelling was beginning to cause my head to ache miserably and it was difficult to breathe through my nose. She had to push me up the stairs of the cabin, my vision was so blurred by the puffing tissue around my eyes. A sharp kick at the door brought my parents quickly to see what was going on. Mother gasped and pulled wide the door to let us through while Dad was muttering curiously: “What happened to Deborah? Did she get mugged? Where did you find her?”
"I'm Dorcas Weatherby," I heard her say and nearly forgot my pain on hearing the unattractive name this nymph was burdened with. She should have been a Charlotte or a Sheila or a Pamela -- not a Dorcas, although she was quite equal to the Greek heritage of her name. By now her sweater as well as my shirt were quite soaked with blood and my mother was on the verge of fainting. Dad sensibly picked me up and carried me back down the steps and to the station wagon. Dorcas went on: "I heard a sound in the woods and went to find out... and I found her on the path."

"Thank you, dear," my mother said and tried to think of something she could use to catch the blood before it got on the upholstery of the station-wagon. Robert was sent for an old towel and Dorcas was forgotten in the rush to get me off to the local clinic.

Two days later, I was up again none the worse regardless of the scabbing and bandages that covered my face. My nose was broken, but there was nothing anyone could do about that. I had voiced my fear of looking like Uncle Bill to mother who assured me that if it did look that bad I could get a nose job, just like the movie stars. Mother's remarks made me think about Dorcas and that she could easily be a movie star with her looks. The best I could hope for was to look like Imogene Coco instead of Jimmy Durante.

As soon as I got home I decided to venture down the path again, only this time I looked carefully at the trail in front of me instead of daydreaming. True, I hoped to run into Dorcas down at the river, but when I got down to the riverbank I saw only my father fishing with Robert, but no one else was immediately in sight. Dad was determined to demonstrate the proper casting method to Robert whose sole interest in fishing was the product on the plate. I said hi and smirked at Robert who stuck out his tongue. Dad kept asking: "Robert, are you paying attention?"

The sun shone warmly and promised a hot day, what a kid hopes for on
vacation. I squinted against the glare of the noon hour and wished I had some sunglasses. Shading my eyes with my hands, I looked down the river in the direction from which Dorcas had emerged before. I could see nothing because of the bend that cut sharply ahead in the river. The voice of my dad was irritating, so I walked down the river to see what might be around the bend. I had gone several yards beyond the turn when, from the precipitous shoulder of the river, a shape arose and it was Dorcas. She looked toward me and came down the pathway hurriedly.

"Hi," she said looking me over. "I guess you're alright...though you was pretty bloody the other night."

"I'm fine now, thank you," I answered. "My Dad took me to the clinic and the doctor...Doctor Brunson gave me some stitches."

"See," I said holding my chin up so that she could get a better look. She still wore the same dingy blouse and red shorts. I wondered, illogically, if these were the only articles of clothing that she owned.

"Gee, those are awful. I never had stitches in my cuts, they just have to get healed on their own. I never have been to a doctor." She seemed disappointed by this last fact and I tried to act indifferent to the subject. Something came over me that wanted to keep Dorcas with me so I asked if she would like to have a picnic with me and she said she would. So, I arranged to meet her in half an hour on a large rock which protruded to make an ideal table about half way down the path and into the forest of pines a few yards.

I ran home on this return trip, oblivious of the site of my original injury, to the cabin and put together some ham sandwiches, wrapped in waxed paper, and some sliced tomatoes in a basket along with a thermos of lemonade. I tossed in a few of mother's oatmeal cookies and slammed out the back door in a hurry to meet this strange new friend at the table rock.
When I got to the rock she was nowhere to be seen and I called out her name: “Dorcas...where are you?” several times, but there was no answer. I waited, two maybe three hours, but no Dorcas ever showed up. I just sat there meanwhile and eventually ate every morsel of food in the basket. I had eaten and waited; hoped and waited; waited all afternoon for someone I thought I disdained and cried when she did not show up.

Mother was sympathetic when I told her what had happened, that Dorcas had said she wanted to picnic with me, but she had not made an appearance even though I had waited all afternoon. She said I could expect nothing better from such a girl; she had no manners, no upbringing. I tried to believe this was so, but I could not make myself.

The next day my mother learned, from Mrs. Pellum, the real estate agent in town who oversaw the vacation cabins, all about the Swamp. Mother heard everything she needed to to satisfy her mind. Dorcas was, Mrs. Pellum gossiped to Mother, much admired by the local men, young and old, but kept to herself mostly running up and down the river. “She’s a queer one, that Dorcas Weatherby — not likely to amount to anything. far too pretty to amount to much.”

All the rest of that week I walked slowly down the path and along the river bank hoping that Dorcas would come back and talk to me. I never saw her again. Mother would chastize, ”Why do you go brooding after the likes of them?” meaning, of course, any of the Swamp residents. I could not say why I brooded after her, but I did.

When our week of vacation in that small town was over and we went back home to the city, I continued to think about Dorcas Weatherby. I would think about writing to her, but never got further than a couple of ineffectual lines. My dreams were even dominated by her. I would see myself dressed in a gown of blue silk, striding toward Dorcas who was sitting in her dingy
peasant blouse by a fireplace. I would reach out to her to give her my hand, but she would turn into a rat and dash into the ashes. Soon, all my diary entries were filled with comments about her eyes, and her voice, and every fine detail I could imagine. But, as with most summer obsessions, she faded from my thoughts when school began and my real friends and foes took up all my time.

The usual course of years followed for me; first college, then a husband, the children, the clubs. I had rarely thought of Dorcas Weatherby for at least fifteen years, when I encountered her in a most unlikely setting.

A friend had asked me to go with her to a new play and showed me the review in the newspaper. I saw the name and for a moment could not remember where I knew it from when it quite literally lit up in my mind. Oh, I know this person, I told my friend excitedly. She was impressed and asked me how I came to know this "shining new star of the avant-garde," as she read it from the paper. I felt no desire to tell her, instead I said that I would like to go with her to the play and perhaps we would see Dorcas backstage. I felt certain that this had to be the Dorcas Weatherby of the Swamp -- the name was too unusual and she would have gone on to do something like this; hadn't I thought so even back then. The remainder of the week was as slow as a child's summer, and I became a shrew to my children in my anxiousness to see, once more, the fairy-like Dorcas.

My friend was amused by my excitement, which was really angst if she had only known. I had found it difficult to explain how I came to know Dorcas, but told her all I could recall of her incredible beauty and her house on the river. By the time that we were to leave for the theater that Saturday, she was as tense with anticipation as I.

We left a bit early that evening so that we would have time to review the program thoroughly, and in the hope of getting a glimpse of the star. I
was aggravated that my friend was so well-dressed and she with me for being under-dressed. The effort seemed a waste to explain how little notice could be given to anyone if she were around, for it was only in regard to Dorcas that I felt that expensive clothes and jewelry could not make up for my plainness of which she had made me so aware. I had never felt any malice toward her for this. In many ways this sense of myself became my greatest strength, but I had used all the advantages I possessed to make up for this weakness. But this night I was confident that even Armani furs and Cartier diamonds would be of no significance and I went without the more obvious accoutrements of wealth.

We had marvelous seats third row back, center. The program was thick and we quickly set about finding out about the play and especially Dorcas. The information was impressive, yet vague and did not confirm that this was the same girl I had met. No mention was made of the small town and there was no picture, so I had to be content with the dates of the list of accomplishments in an effort to calculate whether the years at least accommodated her as a plausible candidate which they did. I hardly noted anything about the play itself, but craned my neck about trying to see something behind the curtain edge. Occasionally a hand would pull the heavy gold curtain back ever so slightly while the theater was filling. I wondered if Dorcas would know me if she saw me, or even acknowledge it if she did.

The theater became crowded and the faces of several well-known people in the audience made me question the likelihood that I might actually get backstage to see Dorcas. I was so nervous that I had torn off three fingernail tips before I was aware I had done so. Finally, though, the theater began to darken and the music, strange and yet appealing, maybe Phillip Glass I conjectured, filled the lowest level of the theater and swelled upward twisting around the gold chandeliers and falling back down again.
The lights, which had been low and blue, came up slowly to reveal two people in a dim room bare but for a bench and table. I knew the woman must be Dorcas Weatherby, but I could not make out the face in the soft light.

The woman's voice drifted out to the audience, and there was no mistaking that I was hearing the same full voice that had filled my head and heart so many years before. More mature was her voice, but the quality that demanded attention now had been there back that summer.

I stared hard to get a better look at her, but she sat backstage and her head, bent forward, was curtained by her long dark hair. I wanted to leave my seat, walk up onto the stage, and take hold of her face between my hands that I might see her closely. But I could do nothing, except sit and wait.

The dialogue ran on but I heard nothing. I just wanted to see her, and the waiting was agonizing. When I had nearly decided that the couple would remain in their places for the entire performance, the stage went dark again and the scurrying and bumping indicating a change of scenery brought me back to my senses. My friend patted my hand and asked if I was enjoying the play. I nodded, and nodded again when she asked if this was indeed the Dorcas Weatherby that I had known. I seemed to have no ability to speak, but kept flying back in my memory to that rather uneventful summer vacation and to a girl I had not really known at all. Why had I been so overwhelmed by her then, and why was I now?

The lights came up again, and this time the couple were standing nearer the audience. I felt something like stone settling in my stomach as I stared with disbelief at the woman who walked toward me, as it were, and pointed a long finger stating her unheard lines of condemnation. The face was so hideously scarred that I was conscious of my scream, but that was the last thing of which I was aware.

When I floated up from the well of blackness which had overtaken me, I
saw my friend talking with someone near the door. I looked around wondering where I was, when they noticed that I was coming to. The person that I had not identified was Dorcas and she came over to me, kneeled down and patted my cheek. I looked up at the awfulness of her once lovely countenance and felt the hot tears brimming over and started sobbing helplessly. She shushed me and called my friend over:

"Try to get her calmed down and I'll be back after the last act," she looked down at me once more and opened the door to leave. Looking over her shoulder she said, "This should get some sensational coverage."

I regained my composure and looked at my friend who was clearly put out with the embarrassing spectacle which I had presented. She pulled a chair up next to the sofa where I lay and looked around the room which I had decided was somebody's dressing room, but not Dorcas's. Before she could chastise me I spoke to explain.

"I was so shocked... she had been so beautiful, I couldn't believe she could have been so disfigured... It's horrible."

"Where have you been?" My friend looked at me in disbelief. "Didn't you read the program, you ninny?" I must have looked puzzled, because I was terribly confused.

"What are you talking about?"

"She is in costume, you ass," she said with impatient shaking of her head. "She is in make-up to look like she was in a tragic fire."

"You mean she is all right... nothing is wrong with her face?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," said my friend, herself a beauty never quick to compliment anyone. "She is fine, if that's what you want to know... the scarring is plastic and paste, all fake. Feel better?"

I was bemused by this information, but relieved -- at least I think I was -- I am not sure anymore. At any rate, she reappeared later as
promised and said she was sorry that her appearance had frightened me. I hardly had words in my mouth with which to apologize for the disruption of the performance, but she brushed it aside saying that the publicity would do the show good. She chatted on for some minutes about how this sort of calamity seemed to bring out the best in the critics, and how the show could use all the help it could get. When she finally got up to leave, she looked at me and said curiously as she opened the door:

"Come back and see the whole show when you are feeling better. I'll ask my secretary to get your name and address--she'll send you tickets."

And with that she left.

I made no further attempts to see her or have her acknowledge our acquaintance, I was simply too humiliated. She had no idea who I was.

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THE FIRST OF MAY IN BATTLE RIDGE

Many citizens of Battle Ridge awoke on the first day of May to a morning of such glittering beauty that they could not but remember with light-heartedness that the loveliest of months had begun.

But there were some among them whose exhilaration was tempered with sadness. These people were those who remembered poignantly, albeit with nostalgic clarity, that May first had for so many years meant the excitement of the Spring Jubilee and the Troop Carnival. But in the early forties local disagreements between the town council and the principal businesses and churches had eventually led to the demise of the only joyful, community-spirited activity ever allowed in this battle-gray Confederate war memorial.

Brandon Troop, great-grandson of Colonel Elbert Troop, had particular cause to recall the Spring Jubilee as he slowly drove his old truck down the black-topped road and past the Civil War Memorial and Museum of the battle that had been waged on the ridges of the hills and in the valleys here in VanZandt County. The early morning dew was glistening on the dark green grass of the memorial lawn, and the scent of honeysuckle brought a smile to his lips as he recalled the days when Colonel Troop's Carnival had opened its season in Battle Ridge, and he, just a little boy, would wander around the grounds trailing a sprig of honeysuckle vine, pulling the trumpet shaped flowers from the twig to suck out the "honey."

It was he who had eventually been forced to sell the business and settle permanently, which he always knew he would, here in the town where the Colonel had started his small carnival after the horrible Civil War. Brandon, a quiet and gentle man, found it no great sorrow to give up the nomadic wandering from town to town all over the South for the year-round
work in the hardware store that had been left to his wife Millie by her father. He knew tools, the carnival was a never-ending mechanical nightmare, and he loved the old building that had served this town's implement needs for nearly a hundred years. No -- he did not regret the change, but he did miss those sweet spring days when the Troop Carnival had made the music for the Spring Jubilee, and he missed his dad for whom the carnival's opening and closing had been the real beginning and ending of each year.

His decision to sell the carnival had been for the best, of this there was no doubt. The equipment was run down and too expensive to replace, and the good people who had once come from the surrounding area to work the rides and man the booths had retired or passed on. The years following the second world war had brought far too many opportunities for work in the cities and a chance for a better life for the sort of young farmboys who had once gone off happily to work for three generations of Troop "Colonels."

The filthy, illiterate con-artists he saw now at the carnivals were a far cry from the simple, yet proud, people of his youth, and he could never have worked with such as these. The fact that local squabbling had caused the Spring Jubilee to be discontinued had not been a serious factor in his decision, but it was used as an arrow to sling every time the subject came up, which, even after twenty-five years, happened with surprising frequency.

An even better reason to sell the carnival was Millicent Prothro, a tall gracious southern girl with a good head on her shoulders and pretty one at that. He had gone to school with Millie in the one-room school house the students had all called Kaiser's Camp after Miss Helen Kaiser, the teacher, and for the World War I villain that the kids all said she was surely related to.
Millie's father was an immensely popular man in the county who ran a successful hardware business, but he regarded his daughters, Millicent and Rosemary, as his best accomplishments. He spared no expense to see that they were well-dressed and well-travelled; both had been to New York City and Europe when most of VanZandt county citizens had not been to the neighboring county. Needless to say, there were no young men in the town good enough to court his girls, although those same fellows might be highly regarded in every other aspect by Mr. Horace Prothro. Rosemary agreed with her father about the local boys, but she extended her disdain to everyone else in the area and was heartily disliked, even by her sister. On the other hand, Millicent had an egalitarian spirit and loved her hometown and the independent Southerners who peopled it. Fortunately for Brandon, she had already decided when they were in the eighth grade row of Kaiser's Camp that he was going to be her husband.

Brandon laughed to himself now, remembering how his knees shook and his voice failed him the first time he picked Millie up for date -- a church picnic. The old man had stared so fiercely at him that Brandon thought he might faint.

But Millie told her father straight out, after she had gone off from home to teachers' college in the city where her father hoped she would find a suitable husband, that she was not interested in any lawyer, doctor, or congressman, just Brandon Troop, and her father had had to resign himself to the loss of one daughter.

Three years later Millie and he had married on the twenty-third of April, a week before May 1, 1942. Millie had gotten a job as one of the five teachers that by this time taught in Battle Ridge. So, for the six months that the carnival made its rounds of town and county fairs, Millie stayed at home instructing the first grade pupils in her charge and helping her father
in the hardware store, and so this pattern continued for seven years. During the months the carnival was not traveling, Brandon spent his time with repair and maintenance for the rides were practically antiques, many dating from the turn of the century. In fact, when the second world war called him to serve and he sold the carnival, the real value had been in the ancient carousel which was dismantled and sent to an antique-restoration company back east.

Still, this morning as he looked at the acreage behind the war memorial where the old generators had puffed life into the magical rides for so many of the VanZandt County children, he felt a twinge of sadness. The ferris wheel immediately came into the picture. How many local boys, he wondered, had tested their bravery by standing in a swing as it crested in its circular pathway? The real skill in this was to be able to remain thus until the swing had begun its descent? He could still hear the frantic screams of girlfriends and mothers and the laughter of the would-be heroes’ companions.

There had been many good friends made along the highways and byways in a time when life was uncomplicated, hard and unpredictable, yes, but still simple. Back then most of the people in this part of the country lived in small towns, and life in the United States was predominantly agricultural -- strong farming stock, his dad used to say. Honest hardworking people were sure at a premium now, he thought, and that thought made him realize that he was growing old; it was just the sort of thing his dad and grand-dad would have said.

Brandon’s grandfather, Colonel Elbert Troop, Jr., and his father Colonel Elbert Troop, III, had been tough men, muscled from the hard labor of erecting and dismantling the carnival two or more times a week from May through October. The schedules were torturous and there was no room for
shirking, but the Troop owners had never asked more of their helpers than they gave themselves. 

One great improvement after the time of the first Colonel Troop had been the transporting of the carnival via the trains which went through the country on a crosshatch of rails. Those days the trains went through every community of respectable size, but the weather, various natural disasters, and plain human failing often made the chore of moving the carnival nothing short of miraculous. Even so, the times that the Troop Carnival failed, in seventy plus years, to open on time could be counted on Brandon's ten fingers.

When the first, and only real army Colonel Elbert Troop had started the carnival in the 1870's, the brightly colored and decorated wagons, now more commonly associated with the circus, moved the carnival through the unspoiled countryside pulled by massive draft horses whose hooves were as big as buckets. Brandon's grandfather would tell him stories of floods, freak early snow storms, and even an occasional Indian village that were a part of the early carnival life. One story that Brandon especially liked to hear, and for which he would do any chore to have the story repeated, was of the time that his great-grandfather had been struck by lightening while trying to get the camp set up during a fierce thunderstorm. It seems that the storm blew up suddenly, as they often do in the South. The horses were being unharnessed from the wagons and a large canvas canopy had quickly been erected for sheltering the beasts. As the Colonel was leading his favorite horse, Old Frank, to the shelter, a jagged bolt of lightening shattered the darkness with a blinding light that sent the men for cover beneath the nearest wagons and the horses fleeing wildly in all directions. The blast of electricity left the colonel lying unconscious and severely burned. The cowering workmen came from their shelter beneath the wagons
and to his aid. They carried him to the lead caravan, which served as home and office for the Colonel, and treated his injuries the best they could for there was no immediate way to get him to a doctor, or a doctor to him. When the storm abated, and the horses were found and brought back to camp, Obediah Childress, the Colonel's righthand man, tied the Colonel over the massive neck of Old Frank, climbed on behind and got him to the nearest doctor some miles away. The carnival continued its slow way onto the next fair and the Colonel rejoined the group by the week's end.

Supposedly, Brandon's great-grandfather was never fearful for himself in thunderstorms thereafter, believing that lightening never struck the same place, nor--with queer logic--the same person twice. However, Brandon was always afraid of storms as a boy and had never entirely lost his fear of being struck by lightening.

Of course, there were many stories of the carnival, and the Troop men were raconteurs to the core--something that had made Brandon very popular with the local boys and girls when he was in school and now with the youngsters of the town. He was a popular speaker for the PTA, the scouts, and Sunday school classes.

He drove on into town, down the north and east sides of the square and then he parked behind the hardware store which was on the eastern corner of the south side of the town square. Brandon got out of his battered old GMC truck, took a long pull of the fresh morning air, and went up the steps to the loading platform. It was a beautiful day and only going to get better, so he thought, for the opportunities to work it provided. As he pushed the old brick in place to hold the door open, Brandon decided he would call over to Rosemary's flower shop and have her send Millie the biggest bunch of flowers he could afford to celebrate May 1; he knew Millie would understand.
At their home on the outskirts of Battle Ridge, Millie Troop was clearing away the remains of breakfast. She poured her second cup of coffee and carried it out on the back porch. She had submitted her resignation to the principal only yesterday, Friday, and was sad thinking that she would not be entering her dear old room to begin another group of eager girls and boys on their way through the joys—though her charges would generally think otherwise—of “reading and writing and ‘rithmetic.” She had done so for thirty-one years with a few years out to get her own two babies, twins, a boy and girl, ready for school; she had taught them in their first year, something that would not be done nowadays, but then there had been only one first-grade teacher. She had intended to wait until they were in the second grade, but the woman who was teaching the first grade became pregnant and the principal asked Millie to come back. But there was no question in those days that she might be less demanding of any student, even her own.

Millie had great respect for children, especially the very young, and this had given her the ability to be what the best teachers always are, firm yet considerate. She had no false modesty and was proud of her teaching record, knowing that she was greatly respected in Battle Ridge. And now she was teaching the grandchildren of some of her first pupils.

But the schools had changed so much in the course of her teaching career: from the one teacher—one room school she had attended in the twenties, to the five teachers in a five room structure of the forties when she first started her career, to the present long, rectangular elementary school built in the late sixties to accommodate thirteen teachers, two for each grade and one for kindergarten, and the principal’s office—not to mention the various rooms for lunch, music, school nurse, and storage. For all that things seemed better in the school, they equally seemed worse.
Millie wondered if perhaps she simply had not grown with the times, though it was something for which she had never been accused. She had read the journals and spent summers traveling to the university for classes as well as going to the state teacher association meetings.

Battle Ridge had grown through the years, but it was still a small town of less than three thousand residents, but the school was really overcrowded with many pupils coming from the surrounding small communities that once had had their own local schools. Millie was not a little unhappy with all the consolidation of schools and what she saw as the devastation of the rural villages that seemed inevitable with the loss of the local school. A school, she believed, held a community together and gave it a common thread of interest and importance; a spirit of mutual understanding that is lost when the children are taken miles away to school. And once the children leave the community to attend school, it was only another step for them to leave the area. It seemed that nowadays they all left for places farther afield. She had former students in practically every state in the union; some as far away as Saudia Arabia and even one who was a foreign correspondent in Russia (she had seen that child's curiosity early on).

She was ready for retirement, at least physically. Keeping up with a classroom full of six-year-old boys and girls was demanding, and she was having more and more difficulty getting up from the floor, the favorite place for many first grade activities, these days. Besides, there were a hundred projects she was ready to tackle that there had never been time for during her teaching years. So between a sort of general disgruntlement with the changes in public schools and her aching joints, Millie had finally tenured her resignation.

She took a sip of her coffee which had grown cold. There were cardinals, jays, and mockingbirds all chromatically compromising the
morning air with their songs. She spied Rolly, her calico cat, crouching under the boxwood hedge eyeing the bluejay on the feeding table. Deliberately shuffling her feet, she caused the jay to fly off and thereby upset the fun Rolly anticipated. Sighing contendedly she looked off in the distance.

From her vantage point on the porch, Millie could see for some distance to the south. She and Brandon had purposefully sought the highest point around Battle Ridge, with an unrestricted view, on which to build their home. She could look out over Battle Ridge, and on south along the ridge on which the Civil War battle had been fought that gave their town its name. There was a blue haze hanging heavily over the lower hills already this morning, and it reminded Millie of the pale blue chiffon over-blouse that her mother had worn at Millie's wedding.

Unlike Millie's father, Agnes Prothro was pleased to see her gentle child married to a man with confidence and an equally good disposition. The Troops were fine people and Agnes had no fear that her Millicent would ever suffer the indignities of a thoughtless or hateful husband. Although Horace Prothro was well liked in the community, he was an insecure man who found countless little ways to degrade and humiliate his wife in the privacy of their home. However, Agnes wanted most for her daughters to be happy with themselves, then they could be happy with someone else. She felt secure in this for Millie, but she reckoned considerably less for Rosemary.

Millie had been her mother's child and Rosemary, the eldest by a year, had been her father's. Agnes could talk to Millie, but Rosemary was contentious and arrogant, and Agnes would, when she was all to easily frustrated by Rosemary's will, leave her to Horace's discipline. Millie appreciated their mother, whereas Rosemary only found her simple and unsophisticated, both of which she never wanted to be. By the time Rosemary was eight years old she had stopped paying any attention to her
mother and would only do what Horace required.

Millie thought it was ironic that Rosemary, who had so disliked these remote hills that pleasantly sculpted the view before her eyes, should have made her home in Battle Ridge after only a couple of years in Memphis -- and a failed marriage to a Harvard educated lawyer. Not that she had settled back in Battle Ridge quietly, not Rosemary.

Millie looked at the spire of the county court house that had been the scene of several Rosemary Prothro battles. Rosemary went to city council meetings and court like some women went to the hairdresser. She had owned the only florist shop in town since it opened in 1939, and as a local business woman, she was determined to be active in every municipal project. If nothing stormy was going on, she would go out and find something.

Millie was at that moment in her reverie reminded that Rosemary had been a principle member of the group whose actions had eventually led to the death of the Spring Jubilee, and in the process sparked her in memory that today was the first day of May.

She rose from her bent-willow chair, tossed out the dregs of coffee onto the strawberry bed at the end of the porch, and went into the house to make a phone call. As she re-entered the kitchen, Millie decided to put on a stewing hen to make Brandon's favorite dish, chicken and dumplings; like those his mother would make for him and his father each year on the day the carnival readied to leave for the season. Mrs. Troop wanted, so she said, for them to keep the taste of home fresh in their minds and on their tongues while they were gone and surviving on camp food. Not that camp food was really all that bad, especially in the old days, considering the necessity for depending on local produce and available meat. The Colonel used to say that he could tell the basic nature of a village by the welcome the camp cook received as he went in advance of the carnival to buy provisions.
Millie smiled at the changes so few years had wrought. Here she was delving the depths of her Montgomery Wards deep freeze for the hen, but not all that many years ago the camp cook had to walk three or four miles into the town, negotiate with the butcher, the grocer, and the baker to get food for the ten or more men, then go to the mill for the animals' rations. Millie did not have to negotiate the price; prices nowadays appeared to be set high enough to cover any exigencies, but in the Colonel's day, his cook might be met with outrageous prices by scalpers of a sort hoping to make a quick buck from the itinerate carnival. But, as the Colonel was quick to point out, that was only in his early days and that town would be bypassed the next year. The Colonel was a scrupulously honest man, and the Troop carnival at the turn of the century little resembled what Millie saw these days.

With the hen stewing nicely in a pot of boiling water, Millie finally got around to the call she had planned to make. Wiping her wet hands on the towel by the sink, she poured a cup of coffee and prepared for what was inevitably going to be a long conversation; they always were with Rosemary. As she picked up the black telephone receiver from its tall cradle she gave the whole instrument a wipe with the damp towel, remembering how proud she had been of this marvelous addition to her home back in the forties.

She had thought a telephone was an extravagance, a luxury they could live without, but Brandon liked having it and Rosemary had encouraged him with her descriptions of ridiculous situations that could arise and go unheeded if Millie were home all day without a telephone. This had all seemed foolish to Millie, considering that Brandon came home every day for lunch, but she had secretly found great pleasure in being able to pick up the receiver and place a call without going into town and using the telephone in the store office.
Shaking off the past that seemed determined to insinuate itself upon her morning, Millie began to dial. Well, she decided, there definitely were advantages to progress, even if they could not be applied to a conversation with her spirited and obtuse older sister.

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Brandon and Millie Troop were not the only people in town this morning who had ventured from the present Battle Ridge back through their memories to other first days of May of many years before. Bert Gresham, the mayor of Battle Ridge from 1940 to 1948, was walking past Rosemary's shop and heard the phone ringing inside. He could see plainly the slender form of his oft-times adversary. He and Rosemary had sparred many times over the years in town council meetings, for they both had served as mayor and council-persons during their long lives in this town.

Bert had longed for Rosemary's attention back in their school days, but she was too uppity, as she was generally considered, to give him the time of day. He often wondered what had prompted her to come back to Battle Ridge when she could have settled easily in a city someplace where the excitement she seemed to crave would have been more easily found.

Instead, Rosemary had opened a flowershop and become embroiled in town politics, something women did not do in those days. She never remarried and the rumors were rife about the young, beautiful divorced Rosemary who pushed her way into men's business. But, after all, the more generous offered, her great great-granddaddy had founded the town, and a long line of her relatives had been prominent in Battle Ridge; so she was tolerated.

She had travelled all over the world and found much to disparage about this little town. It was not long before she was marshalling support for
various projects that took her interest, and much of Rosemary’s crusading had been good for the town. During her administration the town had gotten a public library, the court house renovated, and a new school built, all with tax raises that the majority of councilmen said could not be garnered. Naturally, Rosemary had made a few enemies along the way, and had instituted—or tried to—a few changes that rankled in this highly conservative county. The old jubilee and carnival came to mind as a battle that Rosemary had won that caused everyone else to lose. Too bad, Bert thought unhappily watching her move about her shop, that she had had to be so single-minded and create a chasm that had yet to be bridged.

The argument started simply enough, as they often do, with a minor disagreement. He shook his head at the folly of humans who, when set to get their own way, will forget all else in realizing that aim. He walked on down to the Corner Cafe, which lay directly opposite the VanZandt County Hardware store, as he did each weekday morning. He ordered his coffee and biscuits nodding his “good-morning” to the other cronies down the counter, but his thoughts were still preoccupied with the Spring Jubilee and the year, 1941.

Bert viewed the square from his vantage point near the window in the Corner Cafe and thought that the years had not been too harsh on the old scene. Several large sycamore and sweetgum trees, fresh leaved and richly green, surrounding the court house had been planted during his tenure as mayor, and now filled the gaps where once the ancient elms that had stood so elegantly before they had all succumbed to Dutch Elm disease.

Bert caught a glimpse of Brandon Troop carrying a parcel to a car parked in front of the store and wondered why he did not retire from the business. He could see Brandon’s stooped shoulders and fringe of white hair, yet the picture in Bert’s mind was of a young man struggling with the
vagaries of ancient machinery as he set up the carnival which had been an integral part of the May first Spring Jubilee since the 1890's. No doubt, Bert surmised, the Jubilee had been a real tradition in Van Zandt county; too bad the youngsters now had no sense of that.

Rosemary had been newly elected to the city council in 1941 and the fire for which she was so well known burned, spitting and crackling, at its hottest. She had money in the bank from the income of the hardware store, part of the settlement of her father's estate, and more as a result of her divorce from Troy Stephenson, a well-to-do Memphis lawyer. Bert had heard rumors that Rosemary's husband was a philanderer, but just as likely, he figured, she was the one who threw him over. The simple fact of the matter was that no one in Battle Ridge knew what had happened between Rosemary and her husband, and Rosemary never enlightened anyone. Nevertheless, Rosemary enjoyed a kind of freedom rare in this Southern community even today. She created so much controversy that the council meetings, which had for years been poorly attended, suddenly became popular events. Certainly, the jubilee battle was more well-attended than the most notorious criminal trial in the county had been.

Bert spread honey on his biscuit and considered that a little sweetening was what she had needed then -- and yet.

The entire problem had started over whether to move the site of the jubilee from the Battle Ridge Memorial grounds to a larger and more accessible spot on acreage next to the First Baptist Church. An ardent church member, even in the shadow of un-Christian innuendo regarding her behavior and notorious divorce, Rosemary said that the jubilee would create trash and other problems such as trampled lawns that, most certainly, the church would be left to deal with. No amount of reassurance could convince her to agree with the plan, and, unfortunately no other site was available.
In her typical fashion, Rosemary rallied many of her fellow church members to her side. The cause of God, she stated, was greater than the jubilee and no one would argue against that, not back then.

That the jubilee needed to be moved from the memorial grounds was unquestioned. The growth of the town and county had meant a steadily increasing number of people attended the jubilee and carnival each year. Some damage to the old cannons and even to the great statute of the Confederate soldier had occurred, and no one wanted to see any further destruction. So there was an impasse created that eventually led to scrapping the jubilee altogether.

Everyone, Bert himself included, thought that the jubilee would be revived by the next year when there was time to come up with some other location that could be agreed upon -- but that never happened. And Bert was still sad that this had been the state of affairs. It would be nice, he thought casually, if we could revive the Spring Jubilee and bring in a carnival so that the young ones of Battle Ridge could have a sense of their town's past and perhaps have a renewal of the tradition of the first of May festivities. This thought in mind, Bert left the cafe and walked up the street to Rosemary's flowershop.

Rosemary looked up as the bell jingled signalling that the door had been opened into her shop. Through the pathway lined with colorful ceramic pots some filled with ivy, others with mums of white, yellow, and purple came Bert, his warm-weather straw hat in hand. She held the telephone receiver to her ear and made a note on the pad lying on the counter before her, then smiled at Bert to acknowledge his presence. Bert could see that Rosemary was old, like himself, but she still kept the glow of youth somehow he could not explain. Rosemary could have clarified the mystery with the name of an expensive and conscientious plastic surgeon in St. Louis. Women in
Battle Ridge were not of the city sophistication that would see deliberate and totally optional surgery as acceptable. That would be purely vain. Rosemary, therefore, was considered to have a merely youthful appearance, easily explained as the benefit of not having children and a husband to look after. Without this knowledge, though, Bert believed he saw a special beauty that was preserved for special women, especially those who were somehow unattainable. He listened to the soft southern tones of her voice as she spoke into the phone.

"Don't you worry one little bit, Brandon," she chided, "I'll get the biggest, prettiest bunch of spring flowers over to Millie first thing this afternoon. SueNell will be in to make deliveries after lunch. See you latter." She hung up and walked around the counter to give Bert a hug. He marvelled that this was how she had always been even back in Kaiser's Camp... one minute ready to tear your head off, the next hugging you -- but never indifferent.

"What are you up to," she asked stepping back to see him better. Her eyes were undeniably victims of age, but she would not wear her glasses any more than necessity demanded.

"Just thought I'd stop by and see you," he said not being entirely truthful. "You are always taking off on one of your trips and I usually only see Sue around here." Bert allowed her to lead him to the office in back of the counter where they could sit down.

"Guess what?" she waited for his response.

"Well, what?" Bert found these exchanges trying.

"That was Brandon I was talking to when you came in... he was ordering flowers for Millie...and, you know, this is the first of May." Rosemary left the implication for Bert to pick up. She had changed so little since their youth, he realized, and went along the path she was paving.
"Well of course I know. I'm not senile yet. And, *that* is why I'm here as a matter of fact."

"Oh." Rosemary pursed her lips and lifted her chin. She had intended to make a pleasant remark about the old jubilee days, but Bert's statement had an edge that could only be related to the disagreement that had stopped the celebration.

The Spring Jubilee had been one of life's great joys for Rosemary when she was a child. It was the one time of the year when Battle Ridge changed from a stuffy small town with stuffy provincial people into a local attraction. The people all over the county turned out to have a bit of fun. Rosemary had always helped her mother with a games booth set up and sponsored by her father. It was the only advertising for the business in those days. She had helped to set up the old milk cans into which baseballs were thrown, drape bunting around the booth, and give out the prizes -- small items from the hardware store, such as pliers, hammers, and such -- all highly valued to rural folk, making their booth one of the most popular, especially with the local farm boys.

Rosemary had not expected the jubilee to die; she had sought only to preserve the church grounds and had expected someone to offer a solution to the problem. She latter regretted her one-sided view, but after marshalling so many to oppose the plan to relocate the jubilee to Whitman's field next to the church, she could not back down. Like most prideful people, she would not admit to her mistakes and risk the censure of her supporters. Instead, the Spring Jubilee had become a thing of the past that now only the middle-aged and elderly of Battle Ridge remembered. So, when her former adversary in the matter announced his visit was to discuss the matter, she immediately became defensive.

"What," she asked, her jaw rigid with tension, "did you want to talk
about?" Her hands went first to smooth the sides of her blonde coiffure
then to straightening the paraphernalia lying on her desk. This automatic
blaze of spirit amuzed Bert and he thought, as he had many times before,
that Rosemary had given Battle Ridge a kindling of enthusiasm that made
life here interesting, although at times aggravating.

"I was thinking about the Spring Jubilee this morning... wishing the kids
around here could have seen it... seen that the old town could pick up her
skirts and dance." Rosemary thought he looked a little embarrassed by this
admission.

"You know," he continued, "sometimes lately I feel like the town is
dying... or maybe its just growing old like me." Bert twiddled the rainbow
colored band on his straw panama.

"I don't know, maybe its because Ella's gone," referring to his wife who
had passed away last year, "maybe its just the beauty of this May first, but I
really long to have another Spring Jubilee -- out on the memorial grounds
like they used to be." She wondered if he was sincere in the last wish, but
she felt sure it was conciliatory at the very least. Her pride wavered; she
thought, surely by now I am old enough and wise enough to take this link of
friendship and hold on to it.

Rosemary gazed passed the countertop to the treetops visible from her
window. A bluejay was experiencing the wrath of a mockingbird who,
though smaller, was fierce in her intent to frighten the intruder from her
nest high in the branches of a sweetgum tree. The redbuds were in full
bloom and she could just see the flowery pink tops from where she sat. Bert
was right, it was a lovely spring day. They used to be such marvelously
carefree, lovely days... those first of May jubilee days. She pulled her eyes
back to the panama hat on Bert's knee. Of course he was right, there should
be another Spring Jubilee -- maybe many.
"But, Bert, today is the first of May. How can we have a Spring Jubilee."

"Hold on there girl, I didn't mean today or even this year, but would you be willin' help to organize one for next year? I'm sure that Brandon and Millie and all of us who used to be involved with it would help."

"I am not so sure about that," she offered reasonably. "But then, it only takes one to get the ball rolling." She smiled at Bert who understood her meaning all too well.

"Bert, Whitman's field was developed fifteen years ago." She felt a disappointing sinking of her spirits. Here she was offering to repair the rent fabric of their past, but she had no way. The town had grown and changed in spite of losing the Spring Jubilee.

"Like I said, the Spring Jubilee at the memorial grounds is what I would like to see."

Rosemary sighed deeply then said, "I don't understand. I thought we had all decided it would be disastrous to continue the jubilee out there. Besides, the whole place is a lot older and in poorer condition now than it was back then."

"So... we will just have to have some security. No one even considered such a thing back then, but thirty years ago we didn't lock our doors either. There's no good reason why we can't have the Spring Jubilee if we have someone patrol the area around the Memorial proper."

"What about the carnival?" Rosemary looked at Bert doubtful. "There is no more Troop carnival, and I don't know what the carnivals around today would be like. Probably too big."

Bert and Rosemary were musing over this point when the phone rang.

"Flower shop." No competition shows, Bert thought. Rosemary's next few words made it obvious that it was her sister Millie on the other end of the line.
"Millie, you'll never guess what I was just talking to Bert Gresham about," chortled Rosemary. "Why yes, we were talking about it." A pause from this end and the deep creases of frown on her forehead told Bert that the conversation was not going the way Rosemary intended. "You've got no cause, today, to be dredging up the details of the past, besides, I want to tell you what Bert and I hope to organize and propose to the town council." Rosemary had skillfully turned the conversation back to her arena and smiled at Bert as she spoke.

Bert sat quietly listening to Rosemary repeat the heart of their quasi-plan to Millie. It crossed his mind that maybe no one would want to attend the Spring Jubilee even if they got passed the immediate barriers of the council. What if the jubilee had died in the forties along with a lot of other innocent hopes and dreams. He stood and walked around the counter and nearer the window facing the courthouse square. A robin bobbed around over the thick mat of lush grass, his predictable rosy breast and satiny gray plumage a happy reminder to Bert of the return of old and familiar friends. He could see bees working the golden forsythia bushes that made a colorful hedge on this corner of the square. Bert was aware that he saw more nowadays than he used to, not that the eyes hadn't finally required bifocals, but he noticed more, was simply more conscious of life in all its forms, not just the louder, larger ones.

Well, it did not matter, Bert thought sagely. Even if the jubilee is dead and gone, I still have plenty left to live for. Rosemary was hanging up the phone as he wandered back to the counter.

"Well, what did she think?" He could not keep the anticipation out of his voice.

"She thinks it would be splendid and suggested we scrap the notion of a carnival and just have the jubilee without it." Bert nodded. Privately, he
thought the jubilee without the carnival was like a cone without ice cream, but did not want to say so. He was still leery of making Rosemary mad and, at this point, he would not want that to happen.

Determined to keep the momentum rolling, they sat down and made a list of people to call. Working together, and with a little luck they decided, they would have a Spring Jubilee next May 1st.

Brandon had been preoccupied with thoughts of the carnival all day and had found the day rather more tiring than usual. When he finally closed the front door and turned the latch, he was glad the the first of May was about over. Strange, he thought, how little he had dwelt on the old carnival days during these many years working in the hardware store. His son handled the books now so Brandon could still be a part of the business without having all the drudgery of accounting, but it was still a long unexciting day's work even when one appreciated, as he truly did, being able to work.

Brandon's father, he knew, would have been disappointed to know the carnival had not passed on down to a fifth generation of Troop men. But he would have probably been equally disappointed in most of the changes in the world. The old man's Southern country life was almost gone, and his carnival, an oddity of honesty even in its own day, would never have survived the post-war labor problems that even Brandon now faced. Although he was getting old and really ought to retire, finding a hard working younger man that would accept the wages he could pay was nearly impossible. His son, an accountant with a thriving business, would not want the barely profitable old hardware store, and Brandon knew that when he retired the store would be sold.
Millie checked the crisper for salad ingredients. Satisfied that she had adequate material for a small salad to accompany the chicken and dumplings now simmering on the back burner, she went out on the back porch to wait for her husband's pickup to pull in the driveway. Sipping at a glass of iced tea, she pondered the news that Rosemary had surprised her with. Imagine, she mused, to actually have another Spring Jubilee; it would be so nice for the children of Battle Ridge. Not that they were totally deprived; there was a county fair, but it had always been a pitiful, and usually rainy, late fall gathering. Besides, the state fair some forty miles away had drawn most of the people a couple of weeks before the Van Zandt County Fair posted its banners. More importantly, in Millie's estimation, the beginning of spring was far too special to ignore. The jubilee had been like opening the door to the best part of the year, while the fair seemed to be closing the door.

Millie put her ruminations aside as she heard tires crunch on the gravel driveway. She went back into the kitchen which was overborne with the mixed fragrance of stewing chicken, fruit, spices, and the large bouquet on the bar separating the kitchen and dining room. She filled a large glass with sugared tea and ice, and returned to the porch as Brandon came up the back steps. He gave her a peck on the cheek, sat down heavily in the deep chair and accepted the glass of tea she held out toward him. Millie sat down in the chair's mate, placing her tea on the small table between them. She made no comment, but waited for Brandon to relax and "collect himself."

He looked far off past the town to the valley below and the ridge of mountains bordering down along the west to the far southwest. The pale blue heat haze was dimming to dusk in the east, and purple-laced strands of cirrus clouds were beginning to sift across the western rim. Millie heard
the deep sigh of contentment that accompanied these rests on the porch.

"It was sure a nice day, wasn't it?" he asked abstractly.

"Yes, dear, it was...especially nice."

"I smell dinner." She brushed aside the inference; the meal was least in her thoughts this moment.

"Thank you for the beautiful bouquet. How could you know that I was thinking about the first of May?"

"Chicken and dumplings?"

"Rosemary said Bert Gresham and she are going to try and get the council to revive the jubilee."

"Did you talk long?"

"You know Rosemary." Millie looked far into the valley and recalled the conversation.

"Remember that old lightening story?" Brandon said as he reached over and patted her hand in the way of couples who have been married so long that complete narratives are rarely called for.

"Do you think that we might really have a Spring Jubilee next year?" she asked.

"I could sponsor a games booth...like the old days."

"Come on in for your supper." Millie sighed and pulled herself up with some effort, bent over and kissed her husband's balding head. "You better enjoy it. I may not make chicken and dumplings again for a whole year." He caught hold of her hand and kissed her fingers.

"You know," Millie said, wondering at the idiocy of it all, "it took only minutes for Bert and Rosemary to settle the dispute that cost two or three generations of folk 'round here untold pleasure." Brandon rose and held the screen door back for Millie to enter.

"It may be too late for the carnival, even if lots of us oldtimers want
"it," he said sagely, "and I seriously doubt that those two old cusses can keep from fighting long enough to arrange a Jubilee."

"Hmhm...," she nodded thoughtfully, "you may be right. Still," she said lifting the lid of a rabbit shaped tureen, "it's such a shame about all that was said and done."

"Well, honey," Brandon soothed, "you can't be worrying about what's already been said and done. That's just The Way The Cookie Crumbles, as they say. What's important right now is chicken 'n dumpings."

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Later that evening Millie and Brandon sat on the porch going back over some of the best and worst of their years together. The first of May had been, in perspective, a combination of the best and the worst. But, as they both agreed, they were glad that they had been able to have had such an interesting life.

"I wonder what the next ten or twenty years will bring?" Millie wondered as she looked up at the stars.

"Hell," Brandon looked at his wife as if shocked by her words, "I'll probably be dead and buried."

"Oh, Brandon!"

"Well, it's the truth." He smiled in the semi-darkness of the porch lit only by the inside light shining through the screen. "Besides... it's just luck. Nobody gets to choose when and where he's born, or when and where he dies."

"My, aren't you a bright one." Millie got up from her chair, brushing the air with her hand to shoo away the insects from the screen door. She looked over to her husband and wished he were not so wise. "Come on to bed."

Brandon Troop got up from his seat with effort and followed his wife inside.
He looked out toward the town lights of Battle Ridge once more before shutting the door, then said as if quite sure: "I'm glad that tomorrow's May second."

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I was the only customer seated at the counter of an all-night pancake house. I was literally falling asleep over my coffee, my chin regularly dropping to my chest at which point I would jump with a start. The cook was taking a nap in the corner of his little rectangular prison, and the only waitress in the place sat in a booth smoking Parliaments and leafing through one of those glossy magazines that are mostly ads of beautiful young models and luxury items too expensive for most of the women who bought the magazine. She looked up and saw my glance and with some effort heaved her two-hundred pounds out of the booth.

"More coffee," she insisted more than asked, and refilled my empty cup without waiting for my reply. "Where you headed so late? --if you don't mind my asking." I did mind, but recognizing her effort to be friendly, plus being too tired for acerbity, I answered.

"I'm trying to make Springfield by tomorrow." I sipped the coffee grateful that it was hot and fresh and not the vile dregs I had expected.

"Well, be careful. You don't wanna fall asleep at the wheel. That's a long, lonely stretch of road." She moved off down the counter and industriously began to fill Heinz ketchup bottles from a generic gallon jug of obviously cheap ketchup. Somehow the activity was engrossing and I watched all the while, the thick red sauce pouring into the funnel and emerging slowly at the end layering into the bottom of the bottles. Occasionally she tapped the bottles on the counter to speed up the filling and melding. Very methodical she was: pouring, waiting, rapping, tapping.

She came back a little too soon and topped off my cup with fresh coffee asking if there was anything else she could do for me, and at my request pointed the way to the ladies' room. Still groggy with several hours of
driving, I gathered my handbag and jacket, then after a half-thought, put the jacket back on the bar stool deciding I need not worry about taking everything into the toilet; however, I found myself looking back to see that the jacket was still there as I made my way to the very back of the L-shaped diner. With a continuing sense of unnecessary apprehension, I approached the bathroom door, noting its smudged half-moon of tarnished brass backing the door handle and felt my normal reluctance to touch such areas anywhere, but especially the handle.

The bathroom, more than the rest of the place, was clearly a vestige of the fifties. Turquoise and white pebble-stone tile, obviously original, covered the walls, and turquoise colored toilets were on the chipped and faded black and white vinyl-tiled floors that no doubt had made the builder light up with pride when they were first installed. To my tremendous relief, the place was reasonably clean; at least I did not feel like cringing even when I touched the faucets with bits of toweling, and I managed to get the water flowing.

Several splashes of cold water with the accompanying gasps helped stir my blood some and I felt a bit more alert, but I wished desperately that I could curl up somewhere and go to sleep. I needed days of sleep and further days of rest in a quiet cool room, preferably close by some little river—a gently tumbling stream that would soothe and calm without asking anything in return. But, there was no hope of that, so I went back to the place at the counter where I had left my jacket. It was still there I saw, feeling foolish for the concern—and coffee.

I passed the waitress, who was back at her magazine and cigarettes, wishing I could forget good sense for tonight and smoke, but my fear of getting hooked again after all these years pushed the idea away. I noticed that a rather too well-dressed man had taken a place at the counter only a
couple of seats from mine while I was gone. He looked up as I sat down.

"That must be your red sports job out there," he commented. I nodded and devoted my attention to the coffee, now all but cold. He made another effort: "Where are you headed?"

"Springfield," was all I said. I was uncomfortable about his desire to talk at three in the morning but responded--I could never ignore an attractive man's attention--in kind nonetheless. "Where are you going?"

"Mount Vernon...I promised my mother that I'd try to get home before the kids left for camp." He smiled at the mention of his kids and I relaxed; this was a nice family man, probably a single father--he had not mentioned a wife. I said that was nice and that he was considerate of his children. He lowered his head modestly and was quiet for a few minutes.

In a little while he looked at me again and asked if I had a family. I thought for a second before answering then told him that I had a little girl who was visiting my mother in Springfield. He shook his head as if to acknowledge his understanding of the situation. He then turned back to the cup in front of him and appeared to be deep in thought and past any small talk now. I decided it was time to go and got up gathering my handbag and jacket. I put some money on the counter and looked at the man once more from the corner of my eye.

He was attractive in a middle-class way: shortish brown-gray hair, blue pin-striped suit, metal rimmed glasses, and a blue satin-stiched monogram on his shirt sleeve. He did not say another thing, but as I opened the heavy plate glass door to leave, I could see reflected in the glass that he was getting up too. I had a moment of regret for talking so freely to a stranger as I moved a bit more quickly toward my car, but my most immediate concern was the time and I knew that it was after three in the morning; it looked like I would be late getting to Springfield.
I had started to unlock the car door when I felt a cold splash down the back of my neck, and then another, and within seconds a heavy rain shower had soaked me to the skin. I jumped into the seat and sat miserably wet considering whether I should try to drive on drenched as I was, or go back into the cafe to wait for the storm to subside, and change clothes.

After considering the inconvenience, but shivering and stimulated by the caffeine, I started the car and pulled out onto the service road and then the freeway. The rain was soon hitting the windshield with such force that the wipers made no difference. I was already wishing that I had stayed at the pancake house and dried out, but edging on, the traffic all but crawling, I doggedly made my way closer to Springfield.

About half an hour later I spied a Holiday Inn at an exit and decided to give up the battle. Fatigue and the drumming of the rain onto the taunt cloth top of the car were bringing me right back to the brink of sleep. I kept forcing my eyelids wide apart in an effort to keep awake, but was barely succeeding; the best choice was to get a room and call Mother first thing in the morning to explain the delay. Relieved as I was by the decision to accept that I was too sleepy to drive, I was still awake enough to note that there was a car exiting close behind me. I whipped around to the street entrance to the motel, and quickly under the entrance canopy hoping to evade what, I didn't know.

A rather dim light shone softly from the lobby and a pudgy young man was standing behind the registration counter with a newspaper spread out before him. He looked up as I pushed open the door and stood shaking water about on the carpet.

"Do you have a single?" I asked squelching toward him. He looked behind him and said that he only had three rooms left, all of them on the second level in the back, and handed me a slip of paper to fill out. I had just
been given a key and had started back toward the door when a black Seville pulled under the canopy behind my car. I knew even before I could actually see him, that it was the same man who had sat next to me at the pancake house; he clearly had followed me the thirty or so miles down the freeway. He smiled and shared an expression of sympathy commenting that he was glad to see that there were other sensible drivers on the road. I nodded amicably enough considering my soaked and wretchedly tired state at that moment, but mainly tried to hurry on and get into my car.

Once more I sat in a puddle as I got in the car to drive around to the back of the motel. The rain was still coming in torrents, and I could see that I would be a hell of a lot wetter before I got some shelter. It was at least some luck that I located a parking space directly in front of the stairwell that led to the second level.

Grabbing my small overnight case, I prepared to make the dash over the ten foot to the pathway through the deluge to shelter. But with a second thought, I decided to look once again at the atlas to see if there might be a shorter route on to my mother's than the one I generally took; I would have to make up some time in the morning. I was still in the car when a figure passed by that I recognized as the man from the pancake house and, just now, the lobby. The sodden hair on my head seemed to gather together into a tight knot when I noticed that he was standing, holding the door open, obviously waiting for me to come in out of the rain. Against my better judgement, I got out of my safe haven, and ran through the five inches of rainwatered gutters toward the threshold and the man.

"They put me in 219," he said matter-of-factly. "How about you?"

Without any control over my own stupid mouth, I replied, knowing as the words left my lips that I should have remained silent: "220."

Goddammit, I thought, why can't I rid myself of these idiotic and
dangerous notions of civility. I'm going to get myself killed and have invited the murder to do the job. My mind thus occupied with chastisement, I walked hurriedly on down the hall to Room 221, and quickly inserted the key into the lock, albeit with cold, clumsy fingers. The man was right behind me; he had no bag -- only a briefcase.

"Well, goodnight," he said. To my surprise he just walked on past me and I could hear him fidgetting with his own doorlock as I was inside putting the nightchain on securely. I finally took a deep breath and exhaled with tremendous relief eyeing the kingsized bed all the while; what a relief it would be to curl up in between clean, dry sheets.

I immediately began to strip off my wet and ruined silk dress and tossed it over the luggage rack. I had turned the shower on to let the water temperature adjust and was about to take off my underclothes when there came a light tap at the door.

I knew who it was immediately and what he wanted; I had sensed something wrong about the man from the beginning. Stepping back into the closet recess, I cowered back in the corner and prayed for some salvation. Maybe he would just go away if I refused to answer. But what if he did not? Would the guy at the desk be up to an emergency if I called? Would I have time to call? All motel systems were different... what was this one... could I get anything from my nightcase -- a pair of cuticle scissors... a knee to the groin... Shit! I was going to die in a lonely motel room out at the edge of some town whose name I didn't even know in the hands of some lunatic who had followed me after I had a cup of coffee at a pancake house frequented by truckers -- all just because I had not planned carefully.

Quiet. It was quiet. I do not know how long it was before I realized that it was quiet. I waked, as it were, in a cloud of steam to the fact that the man had gone away. I ran into the bathroom and locked the door. I could
barely see anything because of the steam, and finally reached down and turned the shower off. Then I turned it back on. The sound of the shower was better than listening for further sounds from the hall.

Finally, after a couple of minutes, my reason seeped back and I decided to go ahead and shower. After all, the door was secure. It would take a lot more than a single man to break it down, and that would surely raise enough racket to wake somebody.

Visions of Hitchcock's *Psycho* intruded, and I took a two-minute shower. By this time I was wide awake, but so tired that my legs felt like rubber. I slipped on my nightgown, wrapped a towel around my wet hair and climbed into the cold bed. Caffeine and fear kept me awake for probably an hour, but somewhere near daybreak, I finally drifted off to sleep, the thunderstorm still raging on outside.

In the dark the sound of laughter broke through my peaceful nothingness and a pair of hands were coming toward me. A scream rose in my throat, but would not come forth; my whole body was rigid with terror and the realization of absolute helplessness swelled my head like a gas till near exploding. Now is the time... for years I had anticipated this moment of death... the vertebrae in my neck compressed at the onslaught. I wanted to scream so desperately, but I had no voice, it had already been taken from me. Then just as quickly the hands fell away and the presence was moving back; some element of my consciousness had been cued, and I realized that I had been in the throes of a nightmare.

I lifted my stiff and sluggish body up and looked to see what time it was; a sliver of light came between the curtains, so I knew that it was now daylight. The clock read ten-thirty and that brought me abruptly to complete wakefulness, and I jumped out of the bed. I knew that I had to call Mother as soon as possible; she would be sick with worry.
I hurried and dialed and, as I had expected, found her in such a state that she would not let me get a word in to explain for five minutes. A severe, yet obligatory scolding about driving late at night in the first place, had to be tolerated first, but, finally convinced of my good judgement—-at least in staying in the motel—-she was pacified. I promised to be at her house by mid-afternoon and—-only just—-in time for an appointment that had prompted the rush in the first place.

I hoped sincerely that when I came back this way with my daughter the trip would be totally uneventful.

A quick shower, a carafe of coffee via room-service, and thirty minutes to dress; then, with no wasted motions, I gathered my handbag and overnight case and put them in the car. I noticed the man's car still in the parking lot, but in broad daylight, all my fears were gone and I just wanted to hurry and get the bill paid so I could leave.

As I left the frontage road and entered the entrance ramp to the freeway, I began to breathe more easily and had time to take stock of the area in which I spent the night. The sun was brightly approaching its zenith and the sky was clear blue like an aquamarine. But, evidence of the fierce storm lay everywhere about in the form of broken tree limbs, debris washed down the edges of the road, and the run off that was still dribbling down into the lower areas. Although the air seemed washed clean and the green of the foliage was bright, there was so much destruction that my usual elation after a heavy rain storm was not there, instead, I had the odd sense that beyond the hills to where the town was, there had been much more destruction. I wondered for a moment if perhaps a small tornado had touched down around this town. I still did not know the name of the town and I looked around for signs that might give a clue, but I did not see anything. Anyway soon I was passed any of the town's freeway links, and my
thoughts were once again on the need to get to Mother's and I allowed my little car to climb in speed while I hoped that the highway patrol would be otherwise occupied.

The remainder of the trip was as boring as most hurried trips are. I managed to exceed the speed limit most of the next three-hundred miles without getting a speeding ticket, and I saw no more of the man in the black Seville. However, I often found myself looking into the rear-view mirror for some sign of him, but there was none.

I arrived at Springfield in late afternoon as I had expected to, and feeling half-starved since I had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours. Regardless, there was no time to eat if I was going to make the appointment with the attorney that had led me to drive at night in the first place. So with just enough time to give my little girl a kiss and change my clothes, I was once again rushing in order to get to there on time.

When I arrived at the attorney’s office, the secretary bade me sit with hardly more that a word, and then she disappeared into the recesses of the mahogany panelled and burgundy leather upholstered, supposedly understated luxury, of this obviously successful law firm. I waited for twenty minutes, thumbing through the latest issues of National Geographic and Atlantic Monthly. My stomach was growling embarrassingly loudly, and I was losing my temper at the disrespect of being made to wait. Finally, I got up and wandered around the secretary's desk to see if I might make myself seen and quietly get some attention without having to say something foolish and loud like: "Ahem... is there anyone there?"

I could hear voices in the same back office, but there was no sign of any person to whom I might complain. I walked back a few feet toward the voices, then changed my mind and returned to the chair and picked up another magazine. I was becoming increasingly more irritated at what I
have always considered a gross mistreatment of clients, when the young woman returned, apologizing as she entered. She told me that my appointment had been cancelled, and just as I was about to protest and explain that I could not just come in at a whim, she said quietly that the attorney who was in charge of my problem had not arrived and no one else could handle the file at this moment. Someone, she promised, would get in touch with me and rectify the problem. There seemed nothing that I could say or do, so I had no choice but to go home.

The rest of the evening I was mad, and even the special dinner that Mother had prepared, and the pleasure of seeing my daughter again after a two week absence, did not assuage my frustration at being ignored by that attorney. I had driven over four-hundred miles, and suffered the vagaries of a terrible storm, and the worry of arriving on time for this extremely urgent appointment, and he had not bothered to show up or call or give any excuse for not being there.

When I finally got to sleep that night, the fear and frustration of the preceding twenty-four hours cursed my unrest with nightmares. I awoke the next morning feeling as if I had spent the night on a cold stone bed. My mother had already been downstairs and coffee was waiting when I got to the kitchen. I told her that I might have to stay for another day and, typically a mother, she told me not to worry and enjoy my breakfast.

I poured a cup of coffee and started to sit down when I saw the morning Sentinel lying on the table. What had caught my eye was a small picture in the lower right-hand section of the front page -- a picture of the man who had been at the pancake house and the Holiday Inn.

I read the article and was stunned at what it contained. The man had been found dead late the previous night in the Holiday Inn in Brainard -- so that was the name -- from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He had been
right next door. Why had I not heard any shot? Of course--the storm. But why had he come to my room? Maybe he had not. Why did he kill himself?

There were so many thoughts scrambling to the front of my mind that I was another moment turning to page A-7 for the rest of the article. I could hardly believe the strange coincidence when I had read on and discovered that he was not only the man that had frightened me so at the motel, but he was also the attorney with whom I was supposed to have met the day before. I felt nauseated. The whole situation seemed too fantastic.

While I had been waiting angrily in his reception area, he was already dead, or dying, alone in that motel room. While I had been speeding along the interstate to my appointment with him, he was growing cold--his business done. I didn't want to think about it anymore, it was all too horrible, and ran crying upstairs to my room.

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