

Fly Whither, Finch

by Paul Hawkins



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“And so the three generations of Finch women met, drawn to the funeral from their disparate rough lives, and over conversations and the quest for antique butter churns and milk jugs for their country kitchens, they were gradually drawn into a common bond of understanding of the heart that lives in the shackles of its own design, a slave at once its own slave master, burdened only by the denial of what it can be, in moments of clarity it tries to avoid, the bold liberty of freedom denied out of duty, the heart too proud to be vulnerable, too injured to risk again, too young to be wise and too worldly to remember the untutored wisdom of youth, the desire to be free – a sensucht for a never-was that was nonetheless the only thing that it was made for, to want more than it could achieve, the rough and tumble of love, and to share that dream because only sharing it brought it closer, with the one you loved, opening a portal through which the impossible might be seen but not touched, if but for a moment almost in reach, when the language of denial has melted in the orange and purple hues of a sky that is neither dawn nor twilight but is the quiet place where someday greater things might be, a light of which the sun and moon are only promises, desire and desire and desire like a light that, finally, will never set. Fly whither, Finch, fly, whither? Fly free!”

From the bestselling novel “Fly Whither Finch,” (now available everywhere in paperback)

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Sometimes things about myself strike me as funny that wouldn't have struck me as funny when I was younger. But now I can be an object to my own self. I think about myself as if I was a history, and I try to put things down in writing. I have taken up smoking even though every scientist on the planet agrees it is unhealthy. It is one of the undisputed sins left. I don't know why I've taken it up. Maybe I want to still be able to sin so I'll know that salvation still counts for something. It calms my nerve as I think, anyway, when there's nobody around me to offend.

I think with a clarity I have not had before. This is because I survived what I did not expect to survive.

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In the end it's always about the land. The inner-city Catholic neighborhood I grew up in is now a target of urban renewal via eminent domain. It has gone downhill since I grew up there, and the principal language spoken there is, as it always has been, Spanish. It is a high-crime area, but it also has holdout families, good people, and it has the church and the social services center. But it is now, in this riverside area, that the city wants to develop a business park, along with a sparkling public space called the “Bridge to Tomorrow,” in which a pedestrian bridge spans two riverwalks and joins a corridor of upscale shops to a world-class Convention Center, all in a greenscape environment.

Once it was only a slow green river cutting through dense trees, with collapsing fur trader structures hidden by the overgrowth along the bank. Then the United States wanted the Native Americans' land and relocated them to this plot. But then this plot gained value and was settled by the land run and a tent city sprang up around the tanktown for the railroads. Then it became a city newsprung in a late gilded-age aesthetic, moneyed by oil. And in the 1970's came the demolition of historic downtown for a great plan of urban revival – but that plan eventually devolved into parking lots nobody used and a downtown mall nobody visited. The high hopes had come to nothing, but they had motivated great leaders to risk someone else's livelihood on their design, taken by force of law. In the end it's always about the land.

The old Negro nexus of culture from the 1930's has been annexed and turned into a white professionals' neighborhood, complete with pristine loft apartments and coffee houses and high-end stores. The old warehouse district is now a thriving center for restaurants and pretend biker bars. The location of what was once the grandest hotel in the state was first transformed into a parking lot and then made into a public garden. They let butterflies loose there in spring.

In the end it's always about the land.

And now they want the poor Catholic neighborhood as a place to make the Bridge to Tomorrow. Where do people go when they're displaced? If you destroy the low-income housing, where do the poor live? Where do you ship the homeless to make your urban areas sparkle? To Tulsa?

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A woman I knew fought the urban renewal. There were so many poor and homeless to take care of. Where could you build a home for the outcasts that would not drive down the value of the nearby property?

Maybe the city will pass a penny sales tax for social services.

The woman and I had known each other when we were much younger. I had thought I had loved her but it was with an early love of the heart, when a desire to be loved in return was all the heart knew.

For the longest time, in my mind's eye, she was always in her youth, eighteen forever, no matter how many years had actually passed. This illusion was especially true when I was lonely and my mind was throwing strands at things to see what would catch. But now I am a widower and that ideal has long since died, and each of us loves but does not love each other, and that's the way it should be when people move on.

But that's all to get ahead of myself. In the end it all boiled down to my love of my son, and to explain that, I have to explain how I got to be the father I was. I was not the somber penitent this prosaic bit of an introduction might lead you to think. I am just writing this way because of the way I was taught in school, and maybe the way I was supposed to be serious in the confessional. In truth I was kind of a flake and an asshole.

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I always had a way of making money – a Midas touch in software.

I lived in what had become a bedroom community of a prairie pretropolis, and I lived in a single story brick ranch house in an eclectic neighborhood built in the 1970's, with no two houses alike, and my house had been identified by my neighbors as the "Oil Baron's house" because apparently an oil baron had lived there at one time. I still got checks and stock certificates for the Oil Baron in the mail, but I always wrote "Not at this address: Dead" on the envelopes and put them back in the mailbox.

My house might have been modern at one time – it had alternating flat and peaked roof panels at different levels and a step-down living room and a sunken red bathtub in the master suite that apparently had cupholders. It was the only room that seemed to have been remodeled from the original design, and when we moved in, it was the first room my wife had torn out, even before the avocado kitchen. But slowly we had remodeled the whole house, room by room, and now it looked much more modern inside than out, which was frequently the case with the houses in the neighborhood as the original inhabitants died or moved out and were replaced by young couples or families.

My wife had died and my daughter had gotten married and my son had moved out to go to grad school even though the grad school was just across town, and that left me alone. I had work friends but I didn't have any real friends. My wife had always made us sociable at church, but after she died I gave up church and took to nights sitting alone in my big arm chair sipping scotch, until it got to the point where I realized I was sipping too much scotch and sitting too long, and it was then that I decided I needed something to do and someone to do it with.

My first thought was to look in the Yellow Pages under "Friendship: Platonic," but it was of course not a service offered there, or if it had been it would really have been something else, and I certainly did not care to navigate the minefield of the internet for companionship.

I had a cell phone filled with hundreds of business contacts all across the country but not one person I would call a friend. In fact, I began to wonder if I knew what a friend really was. Was it someone you knew well enough to have over to your house? Well, then what? Watch the 'game' together? Cook? Talk – simply talk? What did I have to talk about except business, and these days I thought I should let go of business.

I remember friendship from my childhood. A friend was someone you got into trouble with.

I never would have dreamed there'd be so few people I wanted to share my life with. My wife had been the person I loved to share my life with, but she had passed away. Now, deep down inside, I guess I felt as though I'd just as soon be left alone.

I remembered that friends are sometimes made by sharing and surviving adversity together. Then, if nothing else, you could be friends by talking about the adversity you'd shared – talking about it from every which direction as if you could never quite exorcise the thought of "What if we hadn't made it – what if we had died?"

At that thought, something inside me suddenly wanted to seek out adversity. I was surprised at the intensity of the thought – I always did have a weird kink in my head. Immediately I wanted to jump into the car and drive down to Mexico – I didn't care who with – you could get into real trouble in Mexico – and then just barely get out of trouble and maybe the guy you went with got put into jail and you had to call the consulate and try to bail him out – there was alcohol and a girl involved – and if you did get him out you'd be friends – or else never talk to each other again.

It was more tempting to seek out adversity when you had plenty of money like a safety net, like that billionaire who builds rocket planes as a hobby. I had plenty of money. I had bolted from a senior management position at an energy software company and launched my own firm and my company boomed and I retired many times a millionaire. I had, in a sense, become the Oil Baron, as if it was the house itself that dictated the destiny of its inhabitants. How had the first Oil Baron died? I wondered if would follow in his fate.

After I'd made my money my children had pleaded with me to move out of 'that musty old home' and into one of the cookie-cutter mansions springing up like mushrooms on the edge of town, but I had resisted, not so much because I had raised my family there, or because I had shared it with my wife – the memory of whom still stabbed me like a wound five years after her absence – but because in my mind it was an extension of myself, a cocoon where I could be myself, not some stranger in a mini-mansion staring out of an upper-floor window onto a new sod-rolled lawn wondering if the lady walking her dog was going to pick up its poo.

I sometimes had foolish ideas. I wondered if I should invite an acquaintance to go skiing with me and form a friendship by having us break our legs together.

I had the idea of going skiing in my mind when I went to visit a neighbor to see if he was a candidate for shared adversity and friendship. It was a man down the street who mowed his own lawn and pruned his bushes vigorously and walked a gorgeous Irish setter and seemed like a hale fellow well met, but when I'd invited myself over I found the man's house to be full of animal heads – long horns, short horns, glassy eyes all around. He had an end table that was made out of a bobcat. The man was British and had been a mercenary in what he nostalgically referred to as "Rhodesia" and he had certain strong opinions that came out more as bourbon settled in him and his large bald head turned red, and he had written a hefty book on the Boer Wars that no one would publish. He got so plastered that when I excused myself the mercenary did not notice. I stepped over the recumbent setter and out the door. I had decided that I would not want to share the adversity with that gentleman.

The bobcat end table affected me profoundly. In some way I felt myself to be the bobcat, trying to escape petrification. I was a man who sometimes got strange ideas. I always had been, but the busy-ness of work kept it in check for decades. After my wife had died the world that had been grey routine through my decades of quiet productivity suddenly broke like the rent curtain in the temple, and now it made me feel like a stranger in a funhouse.

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My name is Clayton Westbrooke, though in business circles I had called myself “Clay,” since people were more likely to buy energy-based software from a good-old-boy named “Clay” than from “Clayton.” Clay could wear cowboy hats – “Clayton” could push pencils. Actually, I preferred “Clayton,” but there were many many times when it was Clay who had sealed the deal by giving cowboy hats and boots to prospective customers in the Northeast and leaving them saying, “It takes a man like Clay from Oklahoma to understand the energy business from oil wells to electrons.”

I had made a name for myself as an inventor in gas pipeline optimization software. Gas had to move through pipelines the same way traffic flowed on freeways, but there were only so many pipelines and there were many suppliers and many consumers, and somebody had to coordinate all that throughput and keep track of who had injected what gas into the system, at what quantity and what price, and how loss and congestion effected the system and the price at different “sinks”, and whose gas was whose, and whose got priority, and so forth. Optimization of flow was an incredibly complex science, but just as complex was getting the participants on board. When I had started the industry was all good old boys and pats on the back and sweetheart deals with favorite utilities and whiteboards and phone calls and guesstimation. But government regulation of the energy industry helped force it to become more of a science, and I had been the right man at the right time, given my dual understandings of stochastic analysis and glad-handing, part college degrees and part horse sense.

But one never has a science of one’s self. I had always been a mystery to myself, though work had helped to bury it for decades.

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My adult son blamed me for his mother’s death – he blamed me for not being at her side in her last days at the hospital. “It can’t be that bad,” I’d repeated to myself. “She’ll get better, the world will keep going – I have one more sale to make, one more agreement to negotiate, one more business trip to persuade clients that new regulations meant new software.”

I had loved my wife, but maybe toward the end I took her for granted as a business partner, someone who could hold down the family while I held down my career. At first she put on a good face, but then I could tell she resented my time away from home. In turn I told myself that even my secretary sympathized with me more than she did. I tried to be away from home even more than I had been before. I might have even been tempted for more sympathetic companionship.

She died of cancer. The prognosis had not been bad at first – one small lump removed from her breast. But things turned quickly when it was discovered that the cancer had metastasized into her bones. They tried a series of increasingly aggressive therapies, but they could never get ahead of it. She got weaker and weaker. At some point, finally, it came down to a will to live, so my son had said, and I had taken that away from her, not from her consciously but from a pattern of reducing her significance to me.

“I love you,” I had said, through tears, at her bedside. I had had my secretary pick out some very nice roses.

“Take care of the children,” she’d said.

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My daughter Grace, who had married well and lived hundreds of miles away, came home for the funeral in something of a flourish. Her husband was an investment banker. They dressed in the well-tailored black of mourning. Their boy wore knee-pants and their daughter a small lace-fringed black dress that would have suited at the funeral of a Kennedy.

My adult son, Robert – not Bob – showed up scruffy from graduate school, wearing a black suit he might well have gotten from a thrift store. The too-short sleeves were frayed.

He seemed the most reverent person there. He did not cry; he looked like an eyeless marble effigy that might grace a tomb. He shook his head as if he were concluding some internal conversation. After the funeral he hugged his sister but would not shake my hand. Then the children packed into their vehicles and left, and I was alone.

After three days of mourning I went back into work. Everything was running smoothly.

“Back so soon?” my assistant asked.

“You look tired – take more time off,” my right-hand man advised me.

“All right,” I said. “You call me if anything comes up.”

They never called me, except for me to sign things, or to report newly closed deals. Sales were always rising.

Then one day I called and said to take me out of the day-to-day operations. I offered to sell back my shares, but they said that would be foolish at the rate the company was growing. We agreed to a kind of titular directorship.

“You find yourself something you’d really like to do, Clayton,” my assistant, Tom, had said. “Life’s too short not to take new chances.”

I signed some papers that gave me the directorship. When I left the tall glass and chrome offices, I was a free man. I walked out to my Porsche and drove home.

Six months later I was wondering what to do with myself. My daughter insisted I go on a Mediterranean cruise. I did not like the idea but I loved my daughter and so I did it, though I was unpleasantly surprised that she had also signed up a couple from my wife’s old church to be my companions. It was not a good match – there were our religious differences. I had become more or less an agnostic after my wife’s death while they often insisted I lead them in grace over meal. In order to keep true to my lukewarm beliefs while fulfilling their expectations, I made half-hearted prayers; a typical kind of compromise prayer was,

“Lord, thank you for this food and for food in general since without it we would die.”

The woman spent most of her time making samplers with Bible verses on them while the man kept commenting on “My how beautiful the Lord made [Gibraltar, Greece, Morocco, the French Riviera, the Parthenon (even though he had technically not made the Parthenon)], and how wonderfully he had endowed the Mediterranean peoples with such ingenuity even though the Italians had not shaken off the shackles of pagan Rome. The couple and I drifted apart on cordial terms, and I spent the rest of my time on deck with some light reading – new federal energy regulations – and by the time we arrived back home I was all ready to set up a new corporation call “ElectronCo.” ElectronCo was a company dedicated to measuring the milliwatts consumed by a company’s technological infrastructure and minimizing their power consumption through optimized scheduling of CPU usage. In short, a company could save hundreds of thousands of dollars a year by turning off their computers at night. But it was more complicated than that - at least on paper - and paper, in the form of regulations to be complied with or surmounted, kept companies like ElectronCo in business. The government paid a lot of money to companies that tried to save energy, both in their operations and their products. Almost all electronic devices had a state of “sleep” when they were not in active use. Sleep saved energy – our company invented a more efficient form of sleep, and even now it was being beta-tested in a new line of cellphones for possible industry-wide adoption.

I held ElectronCo near and dear to my heart for three years – it had started out as a whim and a hobby but I threw myself into it once I got started. But after I had gotten it to a productive plateau it began to bore me, and after its IPO I gladly turned operations over to a crew of technowonks and Ivy League biz admin types and kept it in the corner of my mind the way one might keep an African violet on the window sill – something you hoped would grow in spite of neglect.

And after I had neglected it for six month it turned out the dumb asses had released an app. “WattGuard.” What stupid shits. I had gotten my money out of the IPO, but never, ever give something away for pocket change (or worse, for free) when you could get a regulation passed that required it to be hard-wired into every mobile system.

An app?

Good Lord knows how many hard-earned dollars we’d already given away for free, for every Tom, Dick, and Harry to load onto their cellphones. Why buy the cow...?

I wondered what the hell people went to school for to make such bone-headed decisions.

They could have at least called it “Wattzdog.”

Still, after the IPO, I had money of a magnitude I had never dreamed of before. I suppose I told myself that I finally owed myself a higher standard of living – that it was time to set the musty old house aside. For six months I brooded about what I should do with my future. Nothing came to me but to maybe buy an Irish Setter and sip scotch.

It was while persisting in this existence that my son Robert came over, looking as threadbare and angry as ever, his black hair swooped like a raven’s wing over his pale brow.

Since he had turned around 21, something had changed in him. He developed a sudden mania for painting, and he got very good at it. At the same time the everyday world began to be a mystery. Some days it took a great effort of will just to go out to the store. He often did not look people in the eye when he talked. He had had a steady girlfriend since he had been old enough to date, but they broke up suddenly last year.

He waded into me like continuing an argument. "What the hell happened to you, Dad? You didn't always used to be a robot. You used to be a great dad, always taking us on trips or to ball games or the fair and having fun. But it got to the point where you withdrew from us."

"I had to provide for my family."

"You stayed gone more than you had to. You got to like being away from us. You and mom fought more often than not."

"That's nonsense! Now look, I know you've been unhappy lately – you need a change. I've told you time and again that I'll pay your entire way to a university of your choice. You're a genius. You've got a bright future ahead of you in Physics."

"Philosophy."

Since when is it Philosophy?"

He shrugged.

"When do you expect to graduate, switching majors all the time?"

"Maybe I'll never graduate. Maybe studying is my life the same as software is yours. I'll quit when you quit software. I'll make a deal with you: before you go back to living your life as a software mogul, try living my life for just one week."

"And what'll that prove?"

"That you're my father."

"It sounds ridiculous."

"Then be ridiculous. You're the one who tried to break a leg while skiing."

I considered his proposal. For that matter, I wondered when I'd told him about that. Maybe I was a just a messed up asshole.

"See who I am," Robert continued. "See what I do. Hell, ride my cruddy bicycle. You used to be interested in me, and then something happened to you."

"Work happened. I had the chance to make my pile. I did it for all of you."

"Look, if for nothing else, take up my proposal because Mom would have wanted it."

“You don’t know what she would have wanted.”

“Can I ask you a question: Did you ever really love her?”

“Of course I loved her.”

“So take me up on my offer. You’re her husband, I’m your son.”

“If you take me up on mine. Let me send you to a first rate school. And graduate – no more drifting through majors.”

My son looked at the floor, but then he held out his hand for me to shake it. I shook his hand firmly.

“When do we start?”

“How about Monday?”

“Okay – make room for me at your place. Tell your roommate to take a bath.”

So we agreed and that night I practiced riding a bicycle for the first time in ages because I didn’t want him to be better than me at anything.

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But one thing he said had gotten to me. I had loved his mother, but why did I feel like I had to prove it to myself? I thought of the secretary I had been tempted by and laughed. I neither knew nor cared where she was now. Life sometimes makes little things seem great in times of duress. She had been such a fiction.

But then I reached into the back of my desk and took out the only picture I still had of a girl I had met when I was young, in my old neighborhood when my heart was new and all it wanted was to be loved in return. I turned on a burner of the stove and walked toward it with the photo in my hand.

My life had been a crooked road until my marriage. I had been a bright man but not always a sensible man. I think my heart got arrested in things.

When she’d left, something had broken inside of me and eventually healed. But life never puts itself back together along straight lines – the seams are always slightly off when fused, like a bone not set by an expert. Who could the expert possibly be? A therapist? Hah. In life we are all amateurs. Anyone who says they are an expert is a liar.

Then for one moment, as I approached the fire, something that had persisted in my heart for years rose up and wanted to break along the old lines again, to feel the wound fresh, to peer back into the mystery when I was young and the heart knew what it was made for before it even had a name for it. But it is a trick of the heart to locate love in the most unreachable of places. There is nothing more unreachable than a past that never really was.

I held the photo above the flames until it blazed at the edges, and then I threw it into the metal trash can and watched it burn until all that was left of it was ash.

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I had grown up Catholic in a poor neighborhood that was across the river from downtown. It was odd to be a Catholic in predominantly Baptist Oklahoma. While we had sacraments other people had experiences and encounters. I was never jealous of them. Having the sacraments and the dogma gave me a certainty about things. It was like standing on stones. If the stones weren't real then, well, then nothing was real.

My old man died of what they said was lung cancer but I always thought – and still think – it was mesothelioma. He was in the demolition business in the 1970's when lots of historic downtown buildings were being destroyed. It had been hard for him getting a job after returning from Vietnam. From what I understand he had never risen in the ranks and had barely managed an honorable discharge. I think he had the same reckless spirit I did, though without my fortune of a finding a channel for it.

My boyish dreams of a silver and black space-race future died watching his face crumple against a sweat-soaked pillow day after day, without the breath in him to even sit up. I was about 12 when he became bedridden, a condition he endured for years. Mother broke her own health caring for him, and over the next few years, without supervision, I became increasingly difficult to handle. I began to hang with a crowd of boys who were thieves. Mother had no control over me, and her only solace was in my sister Alice, who had grown up quickly to be her helper.

When Dad died my mother had to take two jobs to provide for us – she worked in a dime store and cleaned offices at night. She alternately went into fugues and religious mania, all while trying to get us through the difficult time. When I finally got put in jail for busting out some store windows she said maybe that'd finally put some sense in me but it did not.

Then she got a job in the last upscale department store downtown, and she only needed that one job from then on, and she began to look well and fill out and get her color back (she always was a looker), and it was there that she met husband #2, a doctor who was a widower. After they were married he was able to give us the kind of life we never dreamed. We moved out of that poor neighborhood and into a neighborhood full of large houses on rolling lawns, with nice cars and country clubs. My mother never quite took to it. All the rest of her life she had bouts of depression and intensely pious calls to the Lord. I think my father's death always rattled her with some disbelief in God she tried to paper over with double enthusiasm. My stepfather Don suggested electro-shock, which was prescribed quite casually at the time, and that made me want to punch him square in the face.

My sister took to the new life right away, but it struck up a note of anger in me. I hated the new clothes and I hated the boys at school. I got in many fights, but I seldom lost one. My problems began when I invited the gang of rough boys from my old neighborhood to come up and we began stealing again. I stole a car and got caught, and it was only my stepfather's good name that got me out on bail, and it was his money (I think) that convinced the other man to not press charges.

Still, I had one year left in high school and my mother had to decide what to do with me, and finally it was decided that I would go out to Fresno for the summer to live with my Uncle Peter, my father's brother, and pack fruit. It was supposed to be punishment but I leapt at the chance to get out of there.

It turns out my Uncle Peter lived in little more than a shack out in the country and he had a big ham radio tower in back of his house and an old pick-up truck that he always parked slant-ways in the grass out front and he was a bachelor who showed absolutely no sign of changing his state in life at this late date. He was a tall raw-boned man and he had a medical discharge from the war and got a government check each month and he had a keen mind but all he wanted to do was read and, for want of a little spending money, pack fruit. What he usually wanted money for was gadgets he saw in the back of Popular Science and Popular Electronics. He still had the faith that technology could make a better future. He experimented with what was then a technology limited only to hobbyists - communication via fiber optics. And he fixed cars. He always needed parts for cars, and the men and women packing fruit alongside him always needed their cars fixed or their TVs and radios repaired, and he did this for them on the cheap. Often below cost, I think.

When he picked me up at the bus stop he looked me up and down and said I looked like my father and there'd be no hell-raising on his watch because he owed it to my sweet mother, who'd been through more tribulation on this earth than she deserved. And so we left to pack fruit at five each morning and out amongst the orchards it got to be scorching hot by 10:00 but we worked on, grabbing the fruit as it rolled down the conveyor belt and putting the good peaches and plums in a box and dropping the bad ones into a trough beside our workstations, and we got a thirty minute break for lunch. It was hard work, and the sheer tedium was mentally exhausting. I was always glad to get home and do nothing but read at the end of the day, and my uncle seemed impressed that I read anything he had on his shelves, which was mostly books on or by the pioneers of science or electronic theory or telecommunications.

I scarcely talked to him. When he'd ask me what I was up to I'd just grunt. He'd go out to fix a car or hunker down at his workbench with a broken TV and an oscilloscope.

He had the ham radio hut out back. I took to hanging out in that. I talked to a man in Australia who thought the world was going to hell and that the path was through the jungles of South East Asia. I talked to a man in Iowa who thought the space race and advances in agriculture were going to lift the world to a new era of peace and prosperity. And I talked to a man in Canada who didn't believe in much of anything. You could hear him pause between every sentence to drag on a cigarette. He said he was dying of lung cancer but he didn't care. The world was a mess and you could never make sense of it. He'd take a drag on his cigarette and he'd cough as he exhaled. Why waste your time, kid? It was all pointless. Just get the most out of it for yourself while you could.

I got sick of listening to him. Let him rot in his own hell. So one evening I just switched off the radio and went outside. Though I didn't act interested I walked across the yard to see what my uncle was doing. He had his head under the hood of a car.

"Hand me a 9/16 socket," he said. I did.

“What the hell do you want to sit in that shack all evening?” he said. “Every night it’s the same thing: light and salvation, hell and damnation. That’s why I gave it up. I’d rather tighten a bolt.”

“Damn depressing life,” I said, “helping out these Mexicans. Why the hell do you do it?”

“It makes me happy. I suppose you’d rather be down in the city among the bright lights chasing girls.”

“Hell yes,” I said.

He wiped grease off his hands and looked at me for a long time. “A kid’s got to learn from his own mistakes. Help me fix this car up and it’s yours. That way you won’t have to steal one.”

I handed him another tool when he asked for it.

“Why would you do that for me?” I asked.

“Because you’re my brother’s son.”

I helped him repair that car the rest of the night though we scarcely said two words to each other.

I think Uncle Pete put in a good word for me at the fruit packing plant, so before the summer was over they had me doing office work, helping out with the accounting. I took to it instantly. I could see where they’d been making all kinds of mistakes, and I straightened them out. But there was this girl I had been packing fruit with before I had been transferred and now that I’d been promoted I could see her walk past my office window every night. She was blonde with hair like flax and she was too thin and raw-boned and there was something about her that looked out of place but she said she had to work the same as everyone else and I took to hurrying outside to walk with her. She played coy at first, but not too much. She said her name was Marcia and we talked about work a little and how we hated it and she said she had just graduated from a school called St. Michael’s but that the Baptists had been working her neighborhood hard for converts among the Mexicans but others were invited too and she was going to a revival camp and did I want to come. I said why not and I told my uncle I was going camping with some friends and I had the car by then and so I met her at the First Baptist parking lot with a big group of other young people and we piled into buses and before I knew it we were segregated boys from girls and lodged in cabins like barracks deep in the heart of some woods.

For three days they made us sing praise songs every morning, every afternoon (after leathercraft or archery), and every night around a big roaring fire. And I was beginning to feel gyped because I never saw her but at the revival one night I finally I saw her but she looked moon-eyed because the revival was getting to her. The smooth-faced young youth leaders had been strumming their acoustic guitars wildly through hymns but now they made way for a gruff old preacher who said not all Catholics were going to hell because some accepted Jesus but Catholics who believed in Catholicism were going to hell because they were idolaters who worshipped Mary, but here was a way out if you felt the call and brothers and sisters it was okay if you didn’t feel the call tonight but woe be unto he who hears the call and ignores it because that was the sin against the Holy Ghost that could never be forgiven so listen closely to your heart tonight because tonight may be the most important night of your life and then the youth ministers

started strumming wildly on their acoustic guitars again but this time instead of modern hymns they were singing standards like "Old Rugged Cross" and "Shall We Gather at the River" and one by one the girls began falling into hysterics and I watched the girl's friends stand up then she stood up and then here and there earnest pale-faced boys were rising but I refused to rise, and soon a whole bunch of people began rising and they marched en masse down under the light of the full moon to the river and I watched her get dunked and a whole lot of them get dunked and I almost wanted to get dunked myself but I did not, but I did watch closely when she came out of the water with her blouse dripping wet and she stared daggers at me but I wouldn't budge much less go near the river bank. I went to bed feeling frustrated that night and I snuck out to smoke a cigarette and found myself sitting on a log out in the woods next to a girl who had snuck out for the same reason and we found our hands suddenly together and we snuck off between two canoes and that was my first time, and the first thing the next day she got herself dunked to erase it, and I never saw her again.

After that night my heart was just not into my work anymore. Marcia would not talk to me and I realized I had never liked her much anyway. I began making mistakes and my uncle said "Like hell you went camping" but he did not seem that angry and when the summer was over he gave me \$50 on top of everything I'd earned and he told me that maybe now I'd believe him when he said to stay away from women, and he scolded me to never give my mother grief and to make something of myself before the world made me into a nothing, and I took his words to heart and I have been trying to make something of myself ever since.

*

When I got home mother seemed even worse. She looked at me and smiled and commented on how tall and strong I had grown over the summer, but she seemed depressed and almost immediately after seeing me she insisted I go down to the church in the old neighborhood to light a candle to the Virgin "for all the little children in the world." My sister confided that mother and her new husband had wanted to have a baby of their own together but that mother had had a miscarriage and took a long time recovering. My stepfather Don got distant at that time and took to working odd hours at the hospital, although in time he returned to his regular self, and on the whole I'd have to say he's always been nicer to me than I deserved.

So I drove across a gray old bridge that looked like it would sway in the wind, across the Canadian River to the old neighborhood and followed the winding roads of stucco houses down toward the smaller boxier blocks near the river and on past the grocery store and the empty theater and the abandoned dime store to the tall white stucco church, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which had seemed small even when I was a kid, but now seemed smaller. I went in through the creaking tall brown wood doors and in past the vestibule to light Mother's votive candle. It was afternoon and inside the dim church with the Stations of the Cross on the stained glass windows some old ladies were quietly cleaning the sacristy. I went over to the rows of candles on one side and slid some coins into a box and then lit a candle with a taper. I went to the closest pew to kneel by it for a minute to say my mother's rather broad prayer and then a genuine prayer for the health of my mother, and I saw one other figure kneeling and I figured it was one of the old ladies of the parish but when she got up I could see she was much younger and so I

hastily concluded my prayer in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost and followed her outside into the bright afternoon and recognized her as a girl I had gone to school with as a child in the parish, but her folks had moved away. Now she was back and she was beautiful. Her eyes were black and long-lashed, her cheekbones were high, her eyebrows were arched, and her lips were a ruby. When she smiled I knew she remembered me and I remembered her name: Amelia.

We stood side by side on the asphalt in the pale afternoon heat.

“Where have you been gone for such a long time?” I said.

“We had to go live near my aunt when she was sick – my mother was the only family she had. And then my dad couldn’t get a job back here for a long while. What have you been up to?”

“Well my mother remarried and we moved up to the ritzy north end of the city, but I don’t fit in up there. I got sent to live with my uncle in Fresno for stealing a car.”

Her eyes widened.

“Stealing the car wasn’t my idea,” I added hastily. “I fell in with a bad crowd.”

“You always seemed nice. I can’t picture you as a hardened criminal.”

Something about her eyes looking down and then looking back up at me made my heart melt and put a lump in my throat.

We said our goodbyes but I asked her if I could call her and she said yes.

I knew then and there that I was going to spend my senior year at the southside Catholic high school with her instead of at that country club high school in our school district. I went home and insisted on it. My mother wept that I’d found religion but Don was savvy enough to know better but he let us keep it as a secret. He could have paid for everything himself but he arranged it with the principal there to give me a chance to earn my way on work scholarship. He believed it’d be more important to me that way and leave me less time to get in trouble. It turned out Amelia was on work-study too, and we spent afternoons after school sweeping halls and dusting erasers and emptying trash pails. I was assigned my half of the school and she was assigned hers but we always ended up working together. That first week of school she had to let down easy a nice boy who’d thought he was her steady and then after that I knew that she and I were something. I was wild about her. I took her to every dance. At nights she let me hold her hand, and then she began letting me kiss her as I was dropping her off, but she never let me get further than that. But I could give her long kisses on the lips and she didn’t seem to mind.

“I have got to get out of here someday,” she said one evening as sunset painted the sky pink and orange when we left the school after completing our chores. “I’m not going to grow old here. This neighborhood is becoming a dump.”

“What do you say we get out of here together?”

She squeezed my hand and laughed. There was a tear in her eye. "What would we do for money?"

"Damn money!"

She laughed and we walked hand in hand in silence toward my car. "Everybody needs damn money."

The next day she seemed to have decided something inside of herself because when I went to hold her hand she stood off for a second and said that we each had to complete school if we were ever going to be serious about having a future together. People who got married too early got trapped and never escaped. I agreed and we both studied hard the rest of the year but she got accepted to the University of Texas in Austin and I got accepted to the University in Oklahoma and so we had to agree to wait for each other four years. I studied my hardest and chose petroleum engineering for my major because I wanted to make good money for her, and we wrote every week but after a while her letters talked more and more about social justice and I had a feeling something was changing inside her and that someone was bending her ear. Finally it sounded like she was ready to conquer the world for economic justice but with another boy, and so I drove all the way down there in one night and took hold of her hand, but she pulled back and told me she had a higher calling now, and I said she didn't really mean that and she said that sometimes deciding what you really wanted to do meant growing up differently than you'd expected, and she had a boy who shared her feelings and they were going to Guatemala together, and I saw her consciously harden herself against our old emotions and I almost cried but then I left. I could feel her eyes follow me but when I turned around she was staring at the floor and only said "Good luck." And so I left heartbroken, and threw myself into my work, and I guess I decided to grow up, too. I got hired three years into my degree and never finished it but I went to work for one of the largest petroleum exploration companies in the world, all headquartered in a dusty nothing of a town in southwestern Oklahoma.

I learned the industry from the ground up, but while everyone else was talking mechanics and new drilling tools, I began talking software.

As I said I learned the industry and saw how disorganized it was. I invented software to put all the drillers' knowledge down on paper, to sort it by type, to set it aside for empirical research and to store the results in a database. We organized the database by drilling technique, geological formation, time and effort and productivity and long-range output and contact info. And then we made the database accessible to every crew in the field – first by mail then by fax then by computer workstations hooked up to the company's private network. I went from being a paid tinkerer to being in charge of the whole division. This being over a span of a decade. It was work I felt like I personally owned and I immersed myself in it. I had little time for anything else – perhaps I made sure of that.

I persisted as a busy single man for some time. Maybe I kept myself busy to forget about being single. I was not good with women – at first I thought I did not want anything to do with them anymore, and then when I found out I did, I was so awkward I never knew what to say. Women friends offered to teach me how not to dress like a nerd, and I took them up on that, but it never occurred to me that they might be hitting on me. But one day when I had almost given up looking, a very attractive woman caught my eye. Her name was Aubrey Jones. She was one of the first female engineers in the field. She was petite (I

always liked petite girls) and had auburn hair and clear grey-blue eyes and had a serious look about her and always seemed to hold a clipboard as if she were measuring how and why oilfield engineers managed consistently to be jerks, but somehow I managed to get past her armor, and when I asked her to go with me to a casino night being held by a local church she agreed. I think she liked me at first because I made her laugh. I told her about my wayward youth and packing fruit. She said how gentlemanly of me to get all the bullshit out of my life before I became a professional, and we laughed a little at how prehistoric some of our co-workers were and how she'd used her clipboard to smack someone in the head who'd pinched her butt and how he gave her a wide scared berth after that. She wouldn't tell me who it was so that left me hundreds of guys to guess from. Then I told her about my bachelor uncle who fixed cars and packed fruit and had a shelf full of books you'd only expect a scientist to own, and how I'd learned so much from them I could see I grew in her respect. She told me she came from a family of all boys and how each of the lettered in athletics and she sure wasn't going to be told to be a pretty little housewife and so she studied engineering and earned all of their respect and was the confidant of her father.

We grew very close over the next few months, and were engaged only six months after we'd first met. By the next May we were married, and three months after that we were expecting our first child – my son.

She is the one I still dream about. She is the one I still wake up holding. Decades later – today, I dream I'm holding her and then she disappears, and I can't remember her phone number. There is something dusky and ruby in those dreams, and they end with me in a deep deep well with no ladder to climb out of it, and I realize she is gone.

*

I acquiesced to my son's challenge to live with him as a kind of a penance. Not the feel sorry-for-yourself kind, but the reliving the past to atone for missed opportunities. I wanted to be near him now because I felt he was at the brink of pulling away from me forever. And I wanted my son to be my friend.

I had to arrange for someone to watch my house for a week while I was gone, and so I reluctantly reached out to a man I knew named Art Gibbons from my wife's old church. At first I had to find out if he was still alive, and, finding him alive, if he remembered me. Of course he did. Art offered me his condolences, as if my wife had died just yesterday. I felt the bond of widowers – his wife had been dead for years, and I had the feeling he longed for something to do. I gave him the keys to my house and my phone number. All I asked was the he take in the mail and call me if the house caught fire or got burgled. He seemed as happy as if I had asked him to guard Fort Knox. I was relieved when he did not salute.

That evening my son picked me up in his beat-up compact car. I stood at the curb with two small suitcases. I don't know why I hadn't invited him in – somehow waiting at the curb seemed like the way to start a journey. He took the two bags from me and threw them into the trunk.

I could see from his eyes that he was in one of his moods. He spoke curtly and would not look up at me.

"I didn't think you'd do it," he said.

“Well, I’m here.”

“Good.”

He drove grinding roughly through the gears as we made our way from my neighborhood off to the other side of a main street and then down amongst winding roads then cul-de-sacs of former glory, and finally into the small squares blocks where older houses sat on too-small lots. We arrived at a two-story, paint-peeling grey house just this side of the highway in a district crowded with old houses converted into apartments. His apartment was reached from an outside staircase leading up to a second-level orange door lighted from the outside by a single bare bulb. My son Robert lugged my two bags up the stairs, set them down, and then pushed open the door. I followed in behind him.

The place was well-lighted inside, and the first thing you saw was a poster of Jimi Hendrix over a beaten down orange couch that sank in the middle like a reverse camel. The poster curled at the edges and was held up by thumbtacks.

Robert gestured to it as he carried the bags. “The poster came with the apartment,” he said. “Nobody knows how long it’s been there, but to take it down is bad luck. The wall’s a different color behind it.”

We walked in past Jimi and set my bags outside a door. “That’ll be your room,” he said. “We had a guy skip out on his share of the rent.”

The living room/kitchen was warm and well-lit by yellowed once-white bowls over too-bright bulbs. The furniture was a hodge-podge of garage sale leftovers. Nothing matched, but it all looked comfortable.

His roommate set down some utensils he’d been working with in the kitchen, wiped his hands off on the billowing tails of his open flannel shirt, and extended a hand in greeting.

“Hi, my name’s Edwin Reid – pleased to meet you.”

This was the man I had heard offhandedly referred to as “Uncle Carlos.” Only later did I inquire about the name “Uncle Carlos.” The man was neither Hispanic nor anyone’s uncle. It turned out he got the nickname from playing in a local bar band called “Uncle Carlos,” but no one remembered where that name had come from either, so I suspected it had been a nickname for a strain of weed.

Edwin was a tall man with long brown hair and a brown bushy beard and thick black-framed glasses. He looked to be about 28. Immediately when you were in his presence you felt a gust of liveliness. He had the kind of medium build that would become quite sturdy in middle age. He was quiet and polite and exuded the kind of warmth you might expect from people who cared for stray cats – which Edwin did, setting food and water out on the back porch every night for a neighborhood tabby, petting her when she’d finished her meal and was rubbing against his legs. He had even gotten her fixed with his own money, which was not plentiful.

“Food’s on,” Edwin said, leading us to a blue turquoise table such as might have sat in a diner 20 years ago. We each pulled out our own mismatched chair.

“Smells good,” I said.

My son, still in his pet, said nothing.

“It’s just stew,” Edwin said. “I made it in the crockpot using smoked sausage, peppers, onions, potatoes, and Veg-All. I’ve found that the secret to almost any crockpot recipe is Veg-All. I get it by the case from the church charity pantry.”

I scooted in my chair and let the steam from the bowl rise over my face and then took my first bite. It was very good. Edwin could see I liked it and seemed pleased but also apologized a little.

“It’s not much...”

“Nonsense,” I said. “It’s delicious. You keep hoarding that Veg-All.”

My son sat back not looking at either of us. I waited for him to lash out at me, but he did not. I had a second bowl of the stew and some bread and then I insisted that Edwin let me do the dishes, and he acquiesced, but once I was done I turned to see him greeting me with two cold domestic beers. I took one.

“Thanks,” I said.

I noticed my son sitting in a chair in the corner, sipping his.

We sat there saying nothing for a while, and I was about to break the silence by saying something about the weather when my son kind of laughed and looked nowhere in particular and said, “Tell Dad about your thesis, Ed. Your perpetual dissertation-in-progress.”

“He wouldn’t want to hear...”

But my son sat forward in his chair and for once looked straight at me. “Get this Dad: it’s called “Class, Race, and Gender in Matrices of Identity in ‘The Fox and the Hound’: or, When is a Canine Not a Canine?”

I looked at them both. “You’re bullshitting me.”

“No,” my son said. “Film studies is a big deal.”

“Film has a bigger impact on our culture than almost any medium,” Ed said. “Certainly more than books.”

I conceded that. “But ‘The Fox and the Hound’?”

Ed opened up on the Fox and the Hound as being crowded with thinly-veiled messages of race and class identity. It was a civil rights primer on mixed relationships for children. But more than that: it tried to redefine what race and class were, as social constructs. When the city met the country which was which? Was the fox a hound or the hound a fox?

I sat back and scowled but as Ed went on and on I appreciated how much it made sense within the set of rules he'd been given to play in. Parts of it were brilliant. So just for fun I went hammer and tongs with him a little. That made him puff with gusto and rise to the occasion.

"But really, Edwin, what is pedagogy?"

Oh how that uncorked him. He owned the floor. My son just looked at him and then at me and laughed. He could see I was kind of feeding Ed line like a fish, but Ed and I were both loving it.

Two hours later Ed said, "So do you see now?"

"Yes, I see, but I also see you've got to finish your damned degree, Ed. Take that theory of yours and wrap it with a bow and call it done. You deserve the formal recognition of the work you've done."

"You never finished your degree, Dad," Robert said.

I huffed a little. "Well, that was different. The oil industry was hiring left and right. They offered me a career opportunity right then and there if I'd just come on board."

"See, Dad knows what's best for other people," my son said.

Ed could feel the tension and said, "I had more fun explain my ideas to you, Mr. Westbrooke, than I've had explaining them to my professors. Thanks for letting me rant for two hours."

"You can call me Clay."

"Thanks Clay."

"I'm going to bed," my son announced to no one and turned the corner into his bedroom and shut the door. The door shut hard but doorframe was warped and the door didn't latch.

I said I probably would get to bed as well, so Ed showed me my room and where I could put my things and where the bathroom was. So I changed into my pajamas (I never wore pajamas) and lay in bed a long time. I could hear the TV from Ed's room for a while, but then it turned off, and the apartment was quiet and black.

I lay there and could not sleep. Then I got up and tip-toed into my son's room. His raven's hair hung over his pale skin, but on his face was a look of peace. It gave me a catch in my throat. I loved him so much. For a moment, while he slept, he could still be my angel.

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The next day my son said he did not feel like going in to school, so I rode in with Ed.

I got to use my son's back-up bike. It was a chalkboard green one-speed bike with upright handlebars with a bell on them because the screw that held it on was rusted and the screwhead was stripped so no one could remove it. I rode right behind Ed. I did not use the bell.

The bicycle also had blinking front and rear lights which alerted drivers to my presence in the dim light of morning, although the generator used to illuminate them made the pedals harder to pump than as if I were riding through wet cement, and I was already not in great shape as it was. We rode across the overpass with our bike lights on and narrowly avoided being hit by SUV's. The riding got better once we crossed the bridge and the bike lane began.

"Robert really should be coming in with us," Ed said. "He teaches today."

"Really?"

"Yes. He's been missing a lot lately. He's been in a funk since his girlfriend left him."

"Why did she leave him?"

There was a long pause. "It's hard to explain," Ed said.

I let it go for now because he seemed uncomfortable talking about it, like he was betraying a confidence, but I intended to follow up later.

As we got closer to campus, the bike ride became exhilarating because there were young people around. We were soon rolling across the green campus grounds with other bikers zipping to and fro and not a one of them giving me a second glance because it seemed so natural for someone like me to be there, like maybe they thought I was a professor.

I tried to enjoy myself but the mystery of my son was bothering me. Ed and I had breakfast at the Student Union and then he took me to his class on Comparative Religions, but I couldn't get interested. I recognized the professor as a priest from years ago, but he had changed – he sported a neck beard and wore a billowy shirt like it was made out of burlap and wore a yin-yang symbol around his neck. And now he preached the historical Jesus. Jesus as the great teacher but without the miracles. He talked about it like it was something shocking, but it only bored me. He preached it so fervently that I thought he must feel guilty about something, but I wasn't even interested enough to imagine what his sin was.

Then we went to the film class Ed taught. He looked in his element, striding in the front of the classroom, not quite the hippy he looked. He had his class well behaved; some looked at him adoringly. God, how young they all looked, I thought.

One student was presenting his paper, which was titled, "Winnie the Pooh and Tigger: Apollonian and Dionysian Elements in Discourses of Otherhood: A Lacanian Perspective on Self-Construction in the Forest." I could see the apples did not fall from the tree in Ed's class. I remembered the parroting kids did to get good grades. After the young man's presentation there was sage nodding of heads and a smattering of applause.

After Ed's class he and we dropped by the auditorium where Robert should be teaching. A few students still sat there waiting, but it was maybe twenty minutes after the class should have started and Robert wasn't there. Ed excused himself and made a phone call, and then he gave me a slip of paper. "Go and see this

man,” he said. “He’s Robert’s faculty advisor, and he’d like to talk with you. I think he and you should discuss a few things. I promise I’m not sending you into the lion’s den.”

After Ed slipped me the paper, I rode my bike over to the old brick building that housed the Classics and Philosophy departments. It was a shabby building – the kind of building where the low dollar departments were shelved. I suddenly felt as if I’d much rather have walked over there. I needed time to collect my thoughts. A slow walk under the old oaks would have helped me clear my head.

I walked past the bike rack and through the building’s heavy wooden doors and up to the second floor office whose number Ed had written on the note. The name plate read “Professor Kruger.” There was a flyer for a foreign film on the door, but the date of its showing had come and gone. I raised my hand and knocked. I heard a rustling and then heard the knob turn and soon a tall white-haired man was introducing himself. He reminded me of pictures I had seen of Sigmund Freud except his face was warm. His blue eyes drooped gracefully at the edges.

“Mr. Westbrooke – I’m so glad you could come. Ed called and said you were on campus today.”

I entered his small, book-cluttered office. He cleared a stack of papers off of a chair and then offered it to me. I sat down facing his desk.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

He shifted in his chair, stretched out his legs, then drew them back under his chair and looked at me.

“Mr. Westbrooke, I’m worried about your son.”

“Look,” I said, “I understand that he and his girlfriend just broke up, and that has made him really depressed, but he’s a good kid. I know he’s missed a lot of school and that he has teaching obligations, but give me a chance to get him back on track.”

He cleared his throat and paused a long while. “I want to preface this by saying that it’s probably going to be as hard for me to say as it is for you to listen.”

I immediately thought there must be a girl involved. “Just tell me,” I said.

“Your son claims to have overheard voices in the teacher’s lounge conspiring to get him expelled.”

“Well, aren’t you trying to get him expelled? Isn’t that why you’re talking to me?”

“No – he’s one of my favorite students. But he’s not himself. He says we send spies to his classrooms, looking for reasons to take away his teaching assistantship. He made quite an outburst about it at the last faculty meeting.”

“Well, are you?”

“No.”

I sat back and thought. I felt my insides tremble with an energy I couldn't focus. "He's been under a lot of stress..."

"I took the liberty of discussing the symptoms with my own psychiatrist. I did not name names. I think he may be showing early signs of schizophrenia."

"Nonsense! He's just stressed. Why, I remember my own mother..." I paused.

He leaned forward. "I only want the best for him. No one's going to hold what's happening against his progress toward a degree. He's one of the nicest, most determined students I've ever had. But he needs help."

I couldn't accept it. "He's just been under a lot of pressure. He stresses himself. He's been a recluse since his mother died."

"Please let a doctor see him."

"I'll do what I think is best!" I rose to leave.

"Best for him," the doctor said.

I turned to leave, then remembered myself and turned again and shook his hand roughly. "I didn't even know he was studying philosophy," I heard myself say. But then I wished I hadn't said it and I left abruptly.

I didn't wait to meet Ed like I said I would. I had to get back and see my son. Thoughts welled up inside me of my own mother cracking up. I unchained the bicycle from the rack and peddled off beyond the campus and down the road. I had to see him. I'd tell him I loved him. I thought of all the times I could have been there for him but hadn't. "Son," I'd say, "Let's get you help. Then let's get you out of here for a while and help you relax - see the world. Just you and me. The best tour money can buy."

I found myself daydreaming as I rode. I had drifted into the middle of the lane and corrected myself. I realized that when he had invited me over he had wanted something from me. It must have taken a herculean effort for him to do so. I knew he couldn't stand me, but he had reached out for something. It wasn't too late to give it to him.

I had swerved out into the lane again. I felt stupid for not have gotten a taxi. I straightened out and got as close to the curb as I could. I was coming up to the bridge. Would it be so bad, I thought, if I got hit? The beardo in comparative religions had talked about reincarnation. I hadn't believed in that shit but if I did, I thought, I would come back and make things better this time. I wanted to come back and make things better for my son.

This time I swerved in front of an SUV. There was no place for the driver to turn. I felt myself impact the hood and then slam against the asphalt. I tried to sit up but felt a blinding stabbing in my side and I fell back down and fainted. When I woke back up I found my head cradled in the hands of a paramedic and

could hear a voice in the background saying it wasn't his fault. The back of my head felt sticky and I was about to faint again.

"Is my son okay?" I said.

"Buddy, no one was with you. You were alone."

My head felt light and the world shrank down to a small dot of bright light. Then it disappeared.

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I was in the hospital for about a month with three broken ribs and a skull fracture. I felt so bad I did not think I'd live through it. For the longest time all I was aware of was nurses coming in and out of my room at all hours, and the hours rolling together from dark to light to dark again: taking my blood pressure, taking my temperature, measuring my blood oxygen count – a day nurse, a night nurse – names on a whiteboard. Staring at the TV and not knowing what I was seeing.

One day I noticed that my stepfather Don was sitting at my bedside. He was elderly but appeared in good health.

"I was designing software," I said.

"No you weren't – you were riding a bicycle across an overpass, which is one of the stupidest things I've ever heard of."

"I was helping Robert..." I said. Then I thought, "What happened to Robert?"

"Robert's receiving treatment at the best mental health clinic in the city. He fought every one of us. I still don't think he believes he's really sick, but I convinced him he was hurting himself. His friend Ed helped me get him to a doctor. There are effective treatments for schizophrenia. They're still confirming the diagnosis, by the way, but I'm convinced. There are medicines to control the delusions and psychotic episodes. You never heard what he did to his girlfriend did you? He went about throwing things and accused her of poisoning him."

"It's my fault. I should have been there for him."

"There are two problems with that: first, the condition is likely genetic, and second, you are talking in the past tense. He is going to need you for the rest of his life. You are going to have to be his watchdog. It will be easier if you can make him your friend. The key to long-term recovery will be to make sure he sticks to his regimen his whole life - once he starts feeling better, he will become convinced he's healed and will make every effort to go off his pills. It will be your job to make sure he stays on them. It will help if you can find him a psychiatrist he can eventually trust. I'm helping you with that. And one more thing: he is under the delusion that you cheated on his mother. That is a delusion, isn't it, Clayton?"

"Yes."

“It seems he found a photograph of another woman in your desk, and he remembers how much you were away from your family, and how you and his mother fought.”

“We fought, but I never cheated on her.”

“But were you tempted.”

I said nothing.

“He can tell as much. I know all that was years ago, but not in his mind. In his mind, traumas are present and vivid. Time is not linear – it circles around events and relives them. You are going to have to get used to the perspective of what’s in his mind. It is going to take a great deal to make him trust you.”

I got tired after a few minutes. But the next time I woke up, he was there again, perched in the same chair beside my bed. He told me it was the next day.

“I want to see Robert,” I said.

“I’ve asked, but he does not want to see you.”

“When is he going to want to see me again?”

“He blames you for sending him to the doctor for an illness he does not believe he has. He thinks you stayed at his apartment to spy on him.”

“But he invited me.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“It’s going to take forever to bring him around, isn’t it?”

“There’s no telling. He may not ever want to see you again. He may want to see you tomorrow.”

I fell asleep again. I woke up again and again and again, each day a little better. Some days Don was there. Most days no one was there. But Robert was never there. Finally I was well enough to go home.

*

It turns out the old man from church had been watching my house the whole time. I felt absolutely awful that I had forgotten to contact him, but he did not seem to mind. He showed me a garbage bag full of my mail.

“I heard you’d been injured,” he said. “I had the church pray for you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I guess it worked – I got discharged early.”

I offered him two hundred dollars for his services but he refused. He was glad to have helped. He said he understood how it was to need someone. His wife had been dead for twenty years. He had adult

children, all married, scattered all over the country. Some came to visit him from time to time, he said, but never as often as he'd like.

I heard myself say something before I thought. "Would you like to come over for a beer sometime?"

He smiled. "I don't drink."

"Oh yes - how about a Coke then? We can watch a game when football season starts."

"That'd be great. I should warn you I yell at the TV."

"That's fine. I yell at the refs mostly."

"And listen," he said. "Sometimes the men at church get together and do home repairs for needy families. We could always use more help. I remember how you once said you were pretty good with your hands."

All of a sudden I felt the fear of getting sucked into a social circle again. "Let me think about it," I said.

He nodded and left. I would remind him of my invitation when fall rolled around.

*

And one day just like that my son came by. He was with Ed. I looked at the two of them out on the front porch. Robert was blinking as if the light were bright outside, though it was not.

They came into the foyer and I closed the door behind them. Ed stepped into the sunken living room but Robert stood and looked around him.

"Same old house," he grunted.

"Yes. Come on in."

He came in and the two of them sat on my brown leather couch. Robert perched forward though Ed leaned back.

"Same old musty smell," Robert said.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"We can't stay long," Robert said. He brushed his black hair back.

"That's okay. Stay however long you'd like."

"Dad, I'm sorry you got hurt," he said.

"I had it coming," I said. "I hadn't ridden a bike in twenty years."

He nodded, and then we had nothing to say for a while, and then my son abruptly asked, "Do you miss Mom?"

"Every day."

"I do too," he said. "I think she was my lifeline. I've felt lost ever since she's been gone."

"I have too."

He looked at me darkly. "Dad," he said, "did you ever cheat on her?"

"I swear I never did. We had some bitter times, but I never cheated."

He cocked his head as if he were testing a perspective in his mind. "I feel a lot of animosity toward you," Dad, "but maybe someday that will change."

"Thank you. I'm very proud of you, son. "

"Ed says that we should do something together, and my doctor agrees."

"How about a world cruise?"

"How about a ball game?"

"That sounds good."

Ed looked up the date of the next home game on his phone, and I told them I'd get the tickets. Then they were gone again - but with a promise for the three of us to meet up later. I fully expected Robert to change his mind before the date came.

Once they'd left I thought about my wife, his mother. Immediately her face welled up before me. We had a short courtship because from the very first moment we met we knew we were absolutely right for each other. It had been electric. Something had bonded to the very center of my heart the first moment I saw her face - she was the one for me. What we'd had was real joy, real trust, and real camaraderie. I would say it was as if two became one, but that seems to diminish how much each one sacrificed for the other. But the two becoming one flesh is in the Bible someplace, so take it from there instead of me. Love can both tear and bind.

*

We went to a ballgame downtown a week or so after later. It was a game of the city's new professional basketball team - it was the city's pride. The city had passed a sales tax to build a coliseum and practice facility for it. It was part of the city's startlingly successful downtown transformation. There was a riverwalk lined with upscale businesses, restaurants and nightclubs. Couples walked hand in hand through a park under twinkling lights. Most the scary elements of the inner city had been chased away, though nobody quite knew where they had gone.

Across the river was my old neighborhood. The city's next urban renewal plan was to leap the river – to build an office park and a “Great Lawn” and a Central Park with walking and biking trails on the other side, and a new convention center, all linked by a people bridge and light rail joining the new hotels, big businesses, and the State Capitol. Some critics noted that while what the city really needed was better mass transit for the working poor to get to and from their jobs, here was light rail to link the upscale, the rich, and the powerful.

This second phase of urban renewal was to be funded by a recently passed sales tax extension lobbied for under the title “A Bridge to Tomorrow.” The sales tax extension had passed overwhelmingly. The Phase II plans would be approved by the city council, and the next step would be to condemn and acquire the property. The people would be paid the price of their houses as appraised by the county assessor, but the land would be the site of million-dollar development. It was like buying an oil reserve for the price of the shack on top of it.

The church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was to be preserved because it was an “historic building.” Much of its surrounding neighborhood would be made into a fashionable “Mount Carmel Plaza,” to reflect the rich Latino-American heritage that had been historically a part of the area. It was unclear however, how many parishioners would actually be able to afford to live in the new housing development planned to surround it. It was also unclear whether their homeless mission would be allowed to remain. The Salvation Army outreach center was already slated to be moved five miles away.

Outside the stadium we were met by a small pack of demonstrators protesting the condemnation. Some of them had signs: “Fair Compensation,” “Stop the Bridge,” “House the Poor,” and, to my amusement, “Not in My Backyard.” A few bull-necked cops stood back watching them, but they didn't seem too interested. The demonstrators did not get much notice or sympathy from the crowd filing into the stadium. Opposite them were signboards showing artists' renditions of the city's plans for the urban renewal's extension. The posters showed people walking in open air markets surrounded by frozen yogurt stands and coffee shops. Families cruised down bike trails or jogged in the Central Park. Others participated in a regatta on the wide watercourse made, via a dam, from the once-trickle of a river. I swear I am not usually a cynic about such things but I did not see more than a handful of people of color in all of the drawings. Having come from a primarily Hispanic neighborhood, one that was now going to be largely condemned, it rankled me a little.

I walked over to talk with the demonstrators. I told my son and Ed I'd meet them inside.

Once I got closer I could see what an odd group they were. Once was a big, young bearded man, a brown-cassocked monk or friar or something. He was saying a rosary and when people went past he was telling them how many homes would be destroyed and how many families would be displaced by the new construction. Flanking him were two elderly, diminutive Hispanic-looking nuns (Carmelites) in habit with the same message. A strident, lean old man with an Old Testament beard was chanting out a vengeful prayer to St. Michael. A man in a neat business suit was handing out fliers explaining what the real value of the property should be rather than the city's estimates. This was the man for me. But before I could talk to him I was accosted by two women who demanded to know how the city could raise

the sales tax by a penny to make new playgrounds for the rich when there were so many poor and homeless that needed to be taken care of. I turned to them and was about to offer some money to whatever charitable fund they used to feed the poor when I recognized one of the them as the girl I had known years before, when I was a young man and fell in love in the old neighborhood.

She looked startlingly different now. The fullness of her young face was gone and her cheeks looked hollow and had lost their color. Her hair was hidden by a bandana. Her eyes had heavy lids that hid the once-bright eyes beneath them. Her figure was gone – not skinny, not fat – just shapeless. She saw at once that I recognized her.

“Ah, Clayton!” she said and smiled, and she threw her arms around me in a hug, then she held me off and looked at me. “The years have been kind to you,” she said. “I hear you’re some sort of software mogul now.”

“Hardly a mogul – I just managed to invent a few things.”

My mind sized her up and tried to measure her against the woman my memory knew, the young, happy, vibrant beauty I had shared a hope of a bright future with. In my mind, the youthful memory was more real than the woman before me. Then both seemed unreal.

“What have you been up to?” I asked.

“Two broken marriages,” she said. “I finally realized that who I’m really married to is the people. It’s been a long life. We tried to start collective farms in Guatemala and they gunned the peasants down and put a bounty on the priests. We preached social justice in El Salvador and they gunned down Archbishop Romero. And here – here nobody listens. Look around you – we have a playground for the rich and we can’t even fill one coffee can with donations for the needy.”

I couldn’t tell if she loved the poor or loved being a champion for the poor.

“So are you going to donate?”

I took \$100 out of my wallet and was about to drop it in the bucket.

“I was hoping you were going to write a check.”

“I’ll tell you what – what organization looks after the mentally ill who have become homeless? I’ll give to that.”

She mentioned a state program that was inadequately funded and could only keep a person off the streets for three months at a time, and then they were on their own again.

“It does not sound like there’s much.”

“There’s not enough.”

“That’s why you’ve got to work to change the whole system.”

“When’s the next city council meeting on ‘Bridge to Tomorrow’?”

“What does it matter? None of it’s decided at the council. It’s all decided in backrooms behind closed doors. The big money draws up the plans and the city rubber stamps them.”

“Look, I’ve got to get into the game and meet my son.”

I excused myself. I went and talked to the man arguing for higher property evaluations and asked him what could be done. He said the Urban Renewal Board would finalize the property values, and that two city councilmen from poor districts were asking them to be generous in their offers. That wasn’t much out of a council of eight, but it was a start.

I gave the man my card and went into the game. I joined Robert and Don in our seats and bought them each a beer. I knew that alcohol was against every bit of advice on my son’s medicine bottles, but he loosened up with a beer. So sue me.

It was a fun game. Even though I knew next to nothing about basketball, I found myself warming to it just by being part of the crowd. Robert was starting to have fun too. I tried to shout my support for the home team.

“You don’t you know any of their names, do you?” Robert asked.

I told him I was learning them as I watched.

Don had become a wild man. I half expected him at any moment to rip open his shirt and show his bare chest painted with the team’s colors. This from mild, reserved Don.

Robert watched me watching him and laughed. “Now you’re getting to know the King of Veg-All,” he said.

“Get this Dad,” Robert said. “Don’s latest project is proofreading some literature professor’s novel called ‘Fly Whither, Finch.’” He laughed as he described it to me. It was a tale of lost loves spanning generations of mothers and daughters, each generation carrying a torch for what might have been, yet doggedly loyal to what came to be, their rugged men, all told against the backdrop of a runaway girl who had been murdered - but was it by the lover who had lured her from her home, or by a stranger? The generations of women often discussed the girl in flashbacks while buying antique milk jugs or washboards or other decorations for their country kitchens. Would her lover ever be acquitted? Only flashbacks leading up to the present day might tell, as the mystery unfolded to reveal what might have been overlooked, such as lusty hired hands or drifters or her dark scorned beau (now a prominent businessman). In all instances and imagining she fled into the night, free, beyond all dogmatic authority, finally, the wind in her long hair, running towards what might have been, might be, true love, fly whither?

“It’s like a man writing ‘Fried Green Tomatoes,’” he said.

I told him I’d have to ask Ed to see the proofs. I could stand to read something a little cheesy. “He’s smashing the paradigm,” I said. I had no idea what it meant. I’d heard it in Ed’s class.

I bought them both another beer but that was the limit, I told myself. My son was having a good time. When the crowd spontaneously did that stupid wave he did it – I didn't know anybody still did the wave. He even commented on how pretty the cheerleaders were. I found myself thinking "This is too good – something's going to happen." But nothing happened. At least not that night. Toward the end of the game he did seem tired.

"I need to go home now," he said, as if he were reading his own temperature on a thermometer.

Robert now lived in an apartment in a supervised community – a kind of halfway house – for the mentally ill. Nurses checked on him every day to make sure he took his pills – he had help on call 24/7 if he needed it. It was a blessing that I was able to afford it. Even he was beginning to realize it was best for him – at least for now. Ed told me that he always talked about it as being temporary – that someday he would be out as a normal citizen again.

"Is that possible?" I'd asked.

"I don't know," Ed said. "The doctor said it's likely he could go back to being a student at some point, but he'll always need supervision. Maybe someday that can be you."

We parted ways in the parking lot, and Ed drove Robert home.

*

I ended up going to the City Council meeting designated to formally approve Phase II. At first they weren't even going to let me speak because I was not actually a resident of the city, but a member of the protesting group said they'd hired me as an outside consultant. Yep – hired for a dollar.

"I grew up in that neighborhood," I said. "I realize the crime rates are high – but you are the ones who assign inadequate police resources there. I realize the roads are crumbling – but you are the ones who are spending millions across the river and won't even send over crews to fill the potholes. You have lowered the property values by your neglect, and I think you owe a little more to the families who have stayed behind when everything went rotten, because it simply was their home."

"The Urban Renewal Board will take all that consideration."

"And I noticed there are hardly any minorities in any of the artist's conceptions you had drawn up. For instance, there were only white people at the regatta."

This seemed to get their attention. The council members looked at their design consultant. He shrugged his shoulders. They next time I checked the sketches online, some of the faces had been colored in as with a brown crayon.

"I hope that's not reflective of the demographic you're most concerned about," I said. "The city should be interested in the welfare of all its citizens."

“We assure you that the benefits of having a world-class urban renaissance will trickle down to all levels of society.”

I had turned to leave the podium but then turned around. “And you know, you could stand to pour more money into funding care and facilities for the mentally ill. One third of the homeless are mentally ill, and now the only halfway house you fund for them is jail. Or a bus ride out of the state. My son is mentally ill – I shudder to think of what would become of him if I didn’t have the money for private care.”

They nodded thoughtfully. I could see them counting down the minutes to adjournment.

After me a lot of concerned voices and cranks took their turns at the podium.

“The whole system has to change,” the woman I used to know shouted. “The people would rise up if they could be made to see how unjust this distribution of wealth is. I ask all of you to think of what this money could do if it were distributed equally among your neediest constituents. You have a moral obligation to make a just society.”

They passed the measure two minutes after the last voice was heard. Phase II was formally inaugurated. As I was leaving one of the councilman’s assistance gave me a phone number for the city’s executive committee dedicated to studying the plight of the homeless. When I got home I looked it up online. It had a discouragingly meager budget.

None of the religious activists followed me out – they had spotted a TV camera and were organizing a chant in hopes of making the evening news. I admired their fight, but didn’t think much of a joint venture of Christ and Marx. But this is coming from a man who doesn’t think about religion much. Everything I know is in the sacraments, and I’ve neglected them for so long I’m scared to go back. If I could run into one of those diminutive Carmelite nuns again, maybe I could ask her how to get back, or to walk back with me.

The next day I donated five million dollars to the Salvation Army’s homeless shelter and asked the largest companies lobbying for Phase II to match my donation in the founding of housing and training for the mentally ill. I even wrote an editorial about it. I knew I was getting to be a lonely old man when I started cranking out self-righteous editorials.

Was the donation a lot of money to me? Yes, it was a lot to me. The ElectronCo app had just caused two million cellphones to simultaneously crash. I would be litigating and paying for that for quite a while. I fired the Ivy League biz whizzes I had hired to run the company and resolved the next day to go back and run it myself. I needed something to do.

*

While cleaning house at ElectronCo, I had to hire outside consultants to sort out the mess of the books. One of the women I hired seemed to read my mind, and finish my sentences for me. She knew what needed to be done before I could think to give the order. She was kind to me, and empathetic. I could

make her laugh while still being diplomatic. I began to think that maybe I would like to get to know her after the work was finished. I hoped she liked older men, but at 54, I told myself, I wasn't really that old.

*

I invited Art from church over to my house when football season started like I said I would. It turned out that as two widowers we had much in common. I even went with the church men to fix up the houses of the needy, and not a one of them proselytized to me after I told them to back off. I hated being preached to, but I like hammering things, but please don't ask me to paint within the lines.

*

I would like to be able to say my son got better, but it was a day to day thing. We were able to see each other more often, although he still had outbursts of animosity toward me. The best thing about our relationship was that we were both able to talk about Ed. I dreaded the day when Ed should exit our lives. When the next semester started he was able to get enrolled back in school, in his old degree program, and he and I frankly told his professors about his needs. That required a great deal of trust on Robert's part, but his faculty advisor was a great help. He took Robert under his wing.

And the great thing was when Robert started coming by my house for dinner now and then without Ed. He used my office to study in because it was quiet and I had a great computer/printer setup. He would sometimes fall asleep in the office and wake up and leave the next day. It made me glad that he could sleep under my roof at all. I felt as though we might be on the first steps of a long road to building the kind of relationship that would eventually let him trust me again. Once he hinted to me about a girl. I never asked about it – he could tell me when he wanted to.

*

Ed was kind enough to get me a copy of "Fly Whither, Finch." I was all ready to make fun of it, but damned if it didn't make me cry. Three generations of women, all meeting at flea markets hunting for antiques and pining for lost loves that could never be. It was written as broad and cheesy as hell, but something about it was compelling:

"And so she ran into the night, young Jenna Finch, free free, the farmhouse and the mill behind her, the love she thought she needed gone, shed like a ribbon from her long hair, now blowing wildly in the grain-sweetened breeze, the love of her mothers, the love out of duty, gone gone, at long last abandoned in the moonlight, the heart at war with itself no longer, free to remember what it was, what if was made for, what it could be, free free, free to fly whither but to wonder, desire made pure by its own purity, at last the possibility recovered from predictable design, now rediscovered, a door opened because she chose it to be, for her, for now, the waiting strong arms of the farm hand and the night train to the West, chugging slowly with the red rhythm of life, leading to where life still unfurled into broad limitless tomorrows. No more butter churning for her. No more making soap from hog fat. Free free."

We all had hearts that knew love even before we even had a name for it, and at some point in our lives we lost that forever. If I ever yearned for anything, it was for a memory of love when it was young and

strong before the world numbered and encumbered it. But that was deep as my thoughts ever got. Free free.

*

I hoped I could fall in love with the lady I met at work. She seemed to sympathize with me. And I hope I might invent one more really big thing before I died. And I hoped for a cure for my son.

I feel like I have survived difficult things. I have tried to write down some of it, and I get displeased with what I've written, but I'm old enough to tell myself not to try to be perfect, so I jot down what I can. Maybe my son will understand me better when he reads it.

It is good that to have things to hope for. I drink less scotch than before. I still enjoy my musty house and my too-big chair. Maybe Robert will come over tonight. Or Robert and Ed. It is good to have visitors to look forward to. In some ways it is better to have visitors than friends.

End

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