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Oh What a Paradise It Seems

JOHN CHEEVER

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Paradise It Seems*

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THIS is a story to be read in bed in an old house on a rainy night. The dogs are asleep and the saddle horses—Dombey and Trey—can be heard in their stalls across the dirt road beyond the orchard. The rain is gentle and needed but not needed with any desperation. The water tables are equitable, the nearby river is plentiful, the gardens and orchards—it is at a turning of the season—are irrigated ideally. Almost all the lights are out in the little village by the waterfall where the mill, so many years ago, used to produce gingham.

The granite walls of the mill still stand on the banks of the broad river and the mill owner's house with its four Corinthian columns still crowns the only hill in town. You might think of it as a sleepy village, out of touch with a changing world, but in the weekly newspaper Unidentified Flying Objects are reported with great frequency. They are reported not only by housewives hanging out their clothes and by sportsmen hunting squirrels, but they have been seen by substantial members of the population, such as the vice-president of the bank and the wife of the chief of police.

Walking through the village, from north to south, you were bound to notice the number of dogs and that they were all high-spirited and that they were without exception mongrels but mongrels with the marked characteristics of their mixed parentage and breeding. You might see a smooth-haired poodle, an Airedale with very short legs, or a dog that seemed to begin as a collie and ended as a Great Dane. These mixtures of blood—this newness of blood, you might say—had made them a highly spirited pack, and they hurried through the empty streets, late it seemed for some important meal, assignation or meeting, quite unfamiliar with the loneliness from which some of the population seemed to suffer. The town was named Janice after the mill owner's first wife.

One of the most extraordinary things about the village and its place in history was that it presented no fast-food franchises of any sort. This was very unusual at the time and would lead one to imagine that the village suffered from some sort of affliction, such as great poverty or a lack of adventure among its people; but it was simply an error on the part of those computers on whose authority the sites for fast-food franchises are chosen. Another historical peculiarity of the place was the fact that its large mansions, those relics of another time, had not been reconstructed to serve as nursing homes for that vast population of the comatose and the dying who were kept alive, unconscionably, through trailblazing medical invention.

At the north end of the town was Beasley's Pond—a deep body of water, shaped like a bent arm, with heavily forested shores. Here were water and greenery, and if one were a nineteenth-century painter one would put into the foreground a lovely woman on a mulberry bent a little over the child she held and accompanied by a man with a staff. This would enable the artist to label the painting "Flight into Egypt," although all he had meant to commemorate was his bewildering pleasure in a fine landscape on a summer's day.

An aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick, unless he sees the bright plumage of the bird called courage—*Cardinalis virginius*, in this case—and oh how his head leapt. But what was a cardinal bird doing on East 78th Street? He called his oldest daughter who lived in Janice, and asked if there was any skating. Their friendship was a highly practical relationship, characterized principally by skepticism. She said that it had been very cold, there was no snow, and while she had seen no skaters on the big pond she guessed that it was frozen. His skates, she knew, were in the attic along with his Piranesi folio and his collection of mounted butterflies. This was on a Sunday morning in late January and he took a train, a local, to the province where his daughter lived.

His name was Lemuel Sears. He was, as I say, an old man but not yet infirm. One would not have to help him across the street. He was old enough to remember when the horizons of his country were dominated by the beautiful and lachrymose wine-glass elm tree and when most of the bathtubs one stepped into had lions' claws. He was old enough to remember the promise of dirigible travel, and he would never forget marching into one of the capital cities of the Holy Roman Empire. Turn and turn-about bombing had left nothing standing of the great crossroads that was higher than a man's shoulder. In the ruined cathedral lay the unburied dead. It was a lovely summer's day. He was armed with the earliest of the gas-recoil rifles (M-1), prepared to kill the enemy and defend with his life the freedoms of speech, religion and travel.

His daughter kissed him lightly. Their relationship was, as I say, skeptical but quite profound. She was the daughter of sainted Amelia, his first wife. She handed him his skates and offered to drive him to the pond but he chose to walk. It was around four miles and he wore a business suit with a vest and a fur hat bought in one of the Eastern European countries where he had frequently traveled on business for a computer-contained manufacturer. He had white hair that grew like quack grass and a cat-boat tan. He was of the generation and class that regard overcoats as a desperate last measure. Of course he wore gloves. The pond he walked to was called Beasley's Pond but no one seemed to remember who the Beasleys had been. The pond was two and one half or three miles if one took the distance from end to end. It seemed to be frozen, although there were only four or five skaters on the ice and this was a clement Sunday afternoon.

Glancing at the scene Sears thought of how the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dutch painters had cornered the skating scene and that before the values of the art market had become chaotic there were usually, at the end of the art auction, half a dozen unsold Dutch skating scenes leaning against the unsold umbrella stand beside the unwanted harpsichord. Brueghel had done some skating scenes but Sears had seen a skating scene—a drawing—from a much earlier period—the twelfth century he thought—and he always happily remembered Alan Gardener, the English paleontologist whose career was built on the thesis that the skate—or shate, since this came before any known language—had given *Homo sapiens*, as a hunter, the velocity that enabled him to outstrip Neanderthal man in the contest for supremacy. That was two hundred thousand years ago, much of the earth was covered with ice and the skate was made of the skull of the Judsas broadbill. That Alan Gardener's thesis was all fabrication was revealed very late in his career, but Sears found the poetry of his idea abiding because the fleetness he felt on skates seemed to have the depth of an ancient experience, and he had always been partial to any attempt to defraud the academic universe.

He put on his skates and moved off. This was quite as natural to him as swimming. He wondered why there were so few skaters on the ice and he asked a young woman. She was barely marriageable, with dark hair and gold rings in her ears, and she carried a hockey stick like a parasol. "I know, I know," she said, "but you see it hasn't been frozen over like this for over a century. It's been more than a century since it's been this cold without snow. Isn't it heavenly? I love it, I like it, I like it, I love it." He had heard exactly that exclamation from his lover so many years ago that he could not remember her name or the color of her hair or precisely what the erotic acrobatics were that they were performing.

He skated and skated. The pleasure of fleetness seemed, as she had said, divine. Swinging down a long stretch of black ice gave Sears a sense of homecoming. At long last, at the end of a cold, long journey, he was returning to a place where his name was known and loved and the lamps burned in the rooms and fires in the hearth. It seemed to Sears that all the skaters moved over the ice with the happy conviction that they were on their way home. Home might be an empty room and an empty bed to many of them, including Sears, but swinging over the black ice convinced Sears that he was on his way home. Someone more skeptical might point out that this illuminated how ephemeral is our illusion of homecoming. There was a winter sunset and in this formidable show of light and color he unlaced his skates and returned to his apartment in the city.

But next Sunday he was back on the ice and this time there were more people. There were perhaps fifty—a small number for such a vast expanse of ice. A hockey rink had been improvised and somewhere to the left of this was an area where most of the skaters seemed to be accomplished at cutting figures; but most of the population, like Sears, simply went up and down, up and down, completely absorbed in the illusion that fleetness and grace were their possession and had only to be revealed. Sears fell once or twice but then so did almost everyone else. Toward the end of the afternoon he maneuvered an accomplished brake-turn and stopped to listen to the voices of the skaters.

It was late. The shadow of a hill had darkened half the ice. The hockey game was in its last moments and the figure skaters had taken off their gear and gone home. The voices, considering the imminence of night, had an extraordinary lightness that reminded him of voices from a Mediterranean beach before, through the savagery of pollution, that coast was lost to us. He and his companions on the ice seemed to enjoy that extraordinary preoccupation with innocence that absorbs people on a beach before the fall of darkness. So he skated again until the sunset, kissed his skeptical but loving daughter goodbye and returned to his place in the city.

It was two weeks or more later when Sears returned with his skates to find that the ice had melted and Beasley's Pond was being used for a dump. It was a blow. Nearly a third of it had already been despoiled and on his right he saw the shell of a ten-year-old automobile and a little closer to him a dead dog. He thought his heart would break.

Why celebrate a dump, why endeavor to describe an aberration? Here was the discharge of a society that was inclined to nomadism without having lessened its passion for portability. Most wandering people evolve a culture of tents and saddles and migratory herds, but here was a wandering people with a passion for gigantic bedsteads and massive refrigerators. There was a clash between their mobility—their driftingness—and their love of permanence that

had discharged its chaos into Beasley's Pond.

Why dwell on a disaster—and it was an absolute disaster that Sears saw, but a disaster with a power of melancholy. Most men have bought for their beloved an electric toaster or vacuum cleaner and have been rewarded with transports of bliss. To see these souvenirs of our early loves spread-eagled, rusted and upended by the force with which they were cast off can be a profoundly melancholy experience. Thousands upon thousands of wire clothes hangers sounded the only homely and genuine note.

When he returned to the city Sears called his law firm and asked them to investigate the tragedy of Beasley's Pond. He also wrote a letter to the newspaper.

THE revolutionary discovery of the cerbical chip with its memory capacity infinitely greater than the silicon chip's had necessitated Sears's making several trips to the cerbical mines in the Carpathians and to the new deposits that had been discovered in the Danube Valley. At the time of which I'm writing both the silicon RAM and the ROM contained fewer than 16,000 facts, and while the silicon 64K contained 65,536 bits of information, the new VL circuit, introduced by the cerbical chip, contained more than a million pieces of information. A study completed by Thompson-Howard tended to support the superiority of cerbical chips. TH had tested 300,000 chips and found the cerbical freer of defects. The fact that the first Sears worked for manufactured intrusion systems for computer containers kept him continuously exposed to the computer memory with its supernatural command of facts and its supernatural lack of discernment, and this may have heightened his concern with sentimental matters such as the end of his skating and the destruction of Beasley's Pond. Quite recently yet another sentimental encounter had become his concern.

The time of which I'm writing was a time in our history when the line or queue had been seriously challenged by automation, particularly in banks. Customers were urged by newspaper advertisements, television and mailings to make their deposits and withdrawals by inserting cards into responsive machines, but there were still enough men and women who had mislaid their cards or who were so lonely that they liked to smile at a teller to form a friendly line at a bank window. They were of that generation who imagined there to be a line at the gates of heaven. Some force of change could be felt in the lines, but it was no more than the change one might notice in an airport a day or so after the fare to Rome or San Francisco had been increased. The air was filled with faint and random music.

She was two or three ahead of him—a remarkably good-looking woman who was an inch or so shorter than he although she wore high heels. She was small enough to be held—consideration that he had come to think of as practical. Her figure was splendid and endearing. He thought that perhaps it was nostalgia that made her countenance such a forceful experience for him. It could have been that he was growing old and feared the end of love. The possibility of such a loss was much on his mind. When in the movies he saw a man and a woman kiss ardently he would wonder if this was a country which tomorrow or the day after he would be expected to leave. When he saw a couple in the street embrace with deep tenderness or walk delightedly shoulder to shoulder, he would be reminded, for no more than a moment, of his approaching age. This could have contributed to the fact that he thought her presence stunning. Her looks aroused the most forthright and robust memories—the flag being raised at the ballpark before the first pitch while a baritone sang the National Anthem. This was an exaggeration; but the memories her appearance summoned involved only brightness. Her hair was a modest yellow. Her eyes, when she took off her large dark glasses, would, he knew, be violet. In her rather small features he saw nothing at all like a mountain range and yet here was very definitely a declaration of paradise, either mountainous or maritime, depending upon one's tastes. He might have been regarding some

great beach on another day of the week, but today he seemed to see the mountains, seemed disposed to raise his eyes, his head, and brace his shoulders as we do when, driving along some ghastly gambling-house strip, we see snow-covered mountains and feel how enduring their challenge and their beauty. The components of his life seemed to present the need for a bridge and she and he seemed competent to build one that morning in the bank. She would, as a girl and a young woman, have been thought very pretty and this was an element—grain—in the presence. She could have been the winsome girl on the oleomargarine package or the Oriental dancer on his father's cigar box who used to stir his little prick when he was about nine.

The music that filled the air of the bank at that hour was a Brandenburg Concerto, played as ragtime. He imagined the smoothness of her naked back—its marked absence of declivity—so like a promised land. He wanted her as a lover, of course, and he felt that a profound and gratifying erotic consummation is a glimpse at another's immortal soul as one's own immortal soul is shown. Our lovers are always as tall as or taller than we. He stepped out of line, tapped her lightly on the shoulder and said: "I wonder if you can tell me what the music is that they're playing. You look to me as if you understood music."

"You don't understand the first thing about women," she said. She laughed sweetly and dropped some papers she carried. Most of these he saw, when he picked them up, were real estate advertisements, and when he passed them back to her he asked if she was in the real estate business. She said yes and he said he was looking for an apartment. She gave him a card with the name Renée Herndon and they returned to their places in line.

Sears was quite content with his apartment on East 78th Street. He was not a dishonest man and when he telephoned Renée Herndon a few days later he fully intended to reward her generously for any time she spent with him. He said he was looking for a one- or two-room apartment, and that he was prepared to pay a substantial rent and sign at least a two-year lease. She agreed to show him what was available the next afternoon.

The offices where she worked struck him as being characterized by a kind of netherness. They were on the nether floor of a nether building in a nether neighborhood, and when he entered the place he saw nothing that was not distinguished by its portability. The reception room decorated with a vast urn, filled with artificial grasses and weeds, the receptionist at the desk, the receptionist herself all seemed highly mobile as if they could be moved, at short notice, to another building, another state or even another country. Renée Herndon, when she joined him, seemed quite permanent. Her hold on his attention, his senses and his intelligence was quite the most he knew of permanence, at that point in his life.

She was, he guessed, thirty-five or perhaps forty and would have been married once or maybe twice. Her past was, at this point, none of his business. She was the sunny side of the street. The uniformity with which women of her age then dressed—widowed or divorced, showing real estate or working in china shops—seemed nearly ordained. She wore a suit, a little good perfume and no hat. He would have liked to kiss her, as she well knew, and when they got to the street and he offered her his arm she took it warmly and smiled or laughed with pleasure. She said they could either walk or take a cab and he said that he would be delighted to walk.

They had walked for no more than half a block when she was attracted—magnetized by the word—to a display of embroidered scarves in a window. Still holding his arm she admired these. He offered to buy her one of the scarves and she politely refused, but her refusal was, he thought from his experience, genuine. He had known many women whose refusals were transparent. He felt that her distinct refusal to let a stranger buy her a present displayed a glimpse at the proportions of her self-respect. He thought this intimate and lovely. He was also delighted to see that in the three blocks they had to walk from her office to the apartment she was to show him she stopped to look at the display in absolutely every window with the exception of a window that displayed surgical appliances. They looked at shoes and hats and dresses and pottery animals and jewelry and china, and her interest in everything there was for sale charmed him and seemed to promise that she shared with him an undisciplined enthusiasm for men and women and circumstances and changes in the weather. The apartment she showed him was very different.

At about this time the high incidence of criminal rapes and robberies made it difficult to go into apartments in some neighborhoods, and though she had keys and credentials they had great difficulties with a doorman, whose uniform was unbuttoned and who cleaned his teeth while he talked to them, with an old-fashioned kitchen match. When they finally got inside the uniformity of the dim lights in the corridors, the sameness of the doors and the great difficulty she had in finding the place seemed to expose him to the loneliness of penance. The apartment that she showed him was a sort of nomadic hideout—it was still furnished with the chairs and tables of a divorcee whose lover or gigolo had abandoned her, although she still had photographs of him—many of them naked—hung on her bedroom wall. There was a narrow terrace from which you could see some blue sky, but the broad light of day could never reach the apartment.

She knew, of course, that he would not want it and said so. “I don’t,” she said, “know what I ever showed it to you. I detest the place myself.” “It’s given me an opportunity to ask you to dinner,” he said. “I’d love to have dinner with you,” she said, “if you don’t mind having late dinner. I’m busy early in the evening.” “The time,” he said, “makes no difference.”

They walked back, now on the other side of the street, looking at the gloves, shoes, antiques, embroideries and paintings that were displayed. “When do we meet?” he asked when they reached the door to her office. “Thursday?” she asked. “Meet me in the parish house of St. Anselm’s at about nine-fifteen on Thursday.” Then she was gone.

St. Anselm’s was Presbyterian and he wondered what she could be doing there on a weekday night. This was in Lent and the only church observations would be mournful. He didn’t know but he thought the Presbyterians had a less exacting calendar than his own Episcopal Church, and he guessed that Thursday was not a church holiday and that she had not gone to church to pray. None of his wives or lovers had been enthusiastic church members and this might be the first time in his life that he had gone to church to meet a woman. St. Anselm’s was on Park Avenue in a good neighborhood—that is a neighborhood where wealth was of the first importance. The main entrance to the church was dark and locked, but the parish-house door around the corner was lighted and unlocked. He let himself into a large vestibule. There was a second door—royal in its proportions. A sign was thumbtacked to this: MEMBERS ONLY, THIS IS A CLOSED MEETING. The sign was amateurish and he could

imagine some woman—neither young nor beautiful but charmingly earnest—working on the sign at a kitchen table. Sears's imagination was inclined to be optimistic and that the gathering beyond the closed doors involved membership—some vow or commitment or oath—did not seem to him sinister. He thought perhaps that dues were paid. He did not feel that to take a look at the gathering would in any way involve an intrusion and he opened the door a crack.

He saw an ecclesiastical meeting room or auditorium—one of those places where the rummage sale would be held and the nativity play would be performed. He looked into the faces of forty men and women who were listening attentively to a speaker at a podium. He was at once struck by his incompetence at judging the gathering. Not even in times of war, with which he was familiar, not even in the evacuation of burning cities had he seen so mixed a gathering. It was a group, he thought, in which there was nowhere the force of selection. Since the faces—young, old, haggard and serene—conveyed nothing to him, he looked at their clothing and found even fewer bearings. They wore the clothes of the rich, the clothes of the poor and a few cheap imitations of the rich. Who were they: who in the world could they be? Here were the plain, cheerful faces of the mixed nationalities that distinguished his country.

He looked at the woman on the podium. She was a black-haired woman, perhaps in her forties, wearing one of those long nondescript dresses known as evening dresses although they are worn to weddings, christenings and barbecues. She was reading a list of names. Three men and two women came to the platform as she called their names. One of the women was bent with age, surely a septuagenarian. One of the men was perhaps nineteen. He had three cowlicks and a high color and wore a sweatshirt with Odium University printed on it. Beside him was a blond young man in a full suit and next was his beloved Renée wearing one of those very simple frocks that cost a little less than a good used car. She looked as lovely—as bright—as she had looked to him from the start.

“Turn out the lights, Charlie,” said the woman in the long dress. The lights went out and after a minute or two of suspense a door opened and a man came in carrying one of those flat, cheap cakes with candles that are ordered to celebrate the retirement of the building maintenance assistant or the oldest member of the stenographic pool. The lights went on and the gathering got to their feet and sang in the customary genuinely sincere and tuneless voices, “Happy anniversary to you, Happy anniversary, dear celebrant ...” Renée smiled and laughed, and seemed truly happy with their wishes, and he looked back at the congregation. It seemed that he should be able to make some sense of the variety in their faces, and then he found himself, countenance by countenance, man and woman, young and old, trying to imagine how their faces would look contorted by the throes of erotic love. He was chagrined at his willingness to invade their lives—he was ashamed of himself and he closed the door.

A workman was sweeping the vestibule. “What is going on in there?” Sears asked. “I don't know,” the workman said. “They're either trying to stop smoking or drinking or eating but I don't remember which bunch is in there tonight. It's the no smokers that give me a pain in the ass. I smoke a pack, maybe a pack and a half a day, I sweep up cigarette butts, that's my job, that's what I get paid for and it's nobody's business but my own. For instance I went to pay my state tax last week. This is in a government building, this is in a building I pay for

and right on the wall there is this sign that says THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING. How the hell do they know that I'm not going to smoke? How do they know that I'm not going to piss or fart or go for a hard-on? Thank you for not smoking. What the hell business is it of theirs? Thank you for not breathing....” Then he went out a door.

A few minutes later Sears heard the group recite something in unison. He guessed from their eagerness and clarity in their voices that it could not be an occult mantra. It was difficult to imagine what it could be. The cadence had for Sears the familiarity of church scripture and might have been the Lord's Prayer or the Twenty-third Psalm, but there was some sameness to the cadence in the seventeenth-century translations of scripture and unless he was told he would never know what they were chanting.

Then the doors opened and they came out—not like a crowd discharged at the end of an entertainment or a lecture but gradually, like the crowd at the close of a social gathering, and he had, after all, seen them blow the candles out on a cake. He looked for her, he sought her brightness as he had for all his long life looked for lovely women in airports and railroad stations and ships' piers and now in a parish house. He saw her, as bright as ever, and he went to her and she took his arm as they went out the door and he hailed a cab on the avenue. “What in the world were you doing in there?” he asked, when they were in the cab. “Will you promise not to ask me that again?” she said. “I know this must sound unreasonable—I would think it unreasonable if I were you—but I spend quite a few nights in parish houses and I'd just as soon not tell anyone why. If you ever take me out on Friday you'll have to pick me up at the New School for Social Research. If you want to know what I'm doing there I'll tell you.”

“What are you doing at the New School for Social Research?”

“I'm taking a course in accounting.”

“Is this for business?”

“No. It's to help me understand my income tax.”

“That's clever.”

“You don't,” she laughed, “understand the first thing about women.”

He had booked a table at the most expensive restaurant where he was known. To his surprise, she was just as well known as he. The headwaiter greeted him warmly but he greeted her just as warmly. That she was intelligently aware of her attractiveness was apparent to Sears as he walked behind her to their table and saw how she carried herself. She was knowledgeable—so much so that he saw one waiter wink to another. This only increased the fun so far as he was concerned. For a first course he ordered some cold trout, most of which she ate. He ordered a '73 Montrachet but he noticed that she hardly drank her wine. She tasted his soup and said it was too salty but when he was served his duck *printanier* she ate as much of it as he did. She also enjoyed her own meal. Sears seldom ate sweets but she ate a *crème brûlée* while she told him what she pleased about herself.

She was divorced from a successful dentist named Arthur and had two children. Her son, who was eighteen, was absorbed in Eastern religions, but from what she said Sears wasn't sure whether or not he was in Tibet. Her daughter was in a ballet school in Des Moines where Arthur lived. She said without sarcasm or laughter that she was at a turning point

her affairs. He felt that the time had not yet come for him to tell her that he was not really looking for an apartment although, considering the gait of her conversation, she might already know. "I hope we can go back to your place after dinner," he said. "My place is such a wreck that I would be ashamed to show it to you."

"But that's why I'm here," she said with a brightness that threatened to depress him for a moment but seemed then only a fair maneuver on her part. "I'm going to show you a new apartment. There is supposed to be a place in the eighties with two bedrooms and a marvelous view of the bridges. I thought we could see it after dinner."

He paid for the dinner with a credit card and when she saw the amount of the tip he wrote on the receipt she said, softly and sadly: "That's too much, that's really too much."

They took a cab to the apartment that was for rent. There was no difficulty with the doorman but the building seemed to Sears vast and labyrinthine. Forty or fifty stories in the air she unlocked the door on a tiny room that had a view of the river and its bridges and the lights. This was charming but distant. There were a very small bedroom and a kitchen and a locked door. She tried several keys in the door. "I know there's another bedroom with a view of the city," she said. "It says so here." She showed him some duplicated piece of paper that described two bedrooms, one spacious with a view of the city. But the door was locked. None of the keys she had would unlock it. She tried them all and so did Sears. "It doesn't really matter," he said. "I don't want to see the other bedroom. The living room is really too small. I mean I couldn't get any of my furniture into it. Don't worry about showing me the other room."

Worry was it; she was worried. When the keys wouldn't open the door she tried to force the lock with her hand. She kicked the door. Sears then remembered a scene with Estelle, his second wife. It was in some airport—London, he guessed. They had taken a night flight and it was three-thirty by their watches—an unholy hour. They were exhausted and deeply disoriented, and because of some strike or slowdown or some increase in passengers because of some historical catastrophe or celebration—an earthquake or a coronation—the whole process of claiming one's luggage and having its contents checked for contraband was unconscionably delayed. Before they were cleared there was dawn over London—a despairing light on this particular morning. He cleared the bags and was carrying them to the queue for cabs when Estelle stopped and tried to open a door on which NO ADMITTANCE was written in every known European language as well as in the Cyrillic alphabet. She tried to force the door's hardware as Renée had done. She pounded on the EINTRITT IST VERBOTEN sign with her fists and then, as Renée was doing now, she began to cry, to sob.

He felt then for his wife how much he loved her and how absolutely ignorant he was of the commandment that ruled her life. She seemed, pounding on the door in the London dawn, to have come from a creation about which he knew nothing although they had slept in each other's arms for years. His feeling for Renée was confused and profound and when she began to cry he took her in his arms, not to solace her for the locked door of course but to comfort her for Arthur and every other disappointment in her life. She wept on his shoulder for a little while and then they locked up the apartment and took a cab downtown. He kissed her in the cab and her lips were as soft as anything he had ever known and he thought that he would never forget their softness; and he never did. She wore a little more perfume than she

wore in business hours, and he loved the smell, but when he touched her breasts she gently took his hand away and said: "Not tonight, darling, some other time." She lived in the fifth floor and he kissed her goodbye in front of her apartment and asked when he could see her again. "I'll be at the 83rd Street Baptist Church on Monday night," she said. "Sometime between nine-fifteen and nine-thirty. You can't ever tell when the meeting will end."

On the next day Sears received a letter from a junior member of his law firm—a man he had not met—announcing the death, the murder, of the lawyer Sears had asked to investigate the pollution of Beasley's Pond. The lawyer had ascertained, before his murder, that the Janice Planning Board had rezoned the pond for "fill" and given the property a tax-exempt status as a future war memorial. If Sears wanted to pursue the matter the young lawyer recommended an environmentalist named Horace Chisholm.

I WISH this story I'm telling began with the fragrance of mint growing along a stream be-
 where I'm lying, concealed with my rifle, waiting to assassinate a pretender who
 expected to come here, fishing for trout. What I can see of the sky is blue. The smell of mint
 is very strong and I hear the music of water. The pretender is a well-favored young man and
 thinks himself quite alone. There is, he seems to think, some blessedness in fishing trout with
 flies. He sings while he assembles his rod and looks up at the sky and around at the trees to
 reassure himself of the naturalness of this garden from which, unknown to him, he is about to
 be dismissed. My rifle is loaded and I put it to my shoulder and take the location of his head
 in my cross-sights. The smell of mint seriously challenges the rightness of this or any other
 murder.... Yes, I would much sooner be occupied with such matters than with the death of
 the Salazzos' old dog Buster, but at the time of which I'm writing the purity of the water was
 of inexorable interest—far more important than dynasties—and the Salazzos are linked to the
 purity of Beasley's Pond.

Sammy Salazzo ran one of the three barbershops in the village. He was a good man and a
 good barber but he never seemed to make ends meet. He lived in one of those little houses on
 Hitching Post Lane, a neighborhood that was once mentioned on Metropolitan television
 when it was swept by a plague of measles. The occupancy of a house there was signified by
 the fact that some sort of brazier for cooking meat over coals stood in the backyard. When
 the brazier went it meant that the family had gone and the house was for sale. The
 architecture was all happy ending—all greeting card—that is, it seemed to have been evolved
 by a people who were exiles or refugees and who thought obsessively of returning. The
 variety of these homesteads was international. They were English Tudor, they were Spanish,
 they were nostalgic for the recent past or the efficient simplicities of some future, but they all
 expressed, very powerfully, a sense of endings and returns. Anything about these houses that
 seemed artificial or vulgar was justified by the fact that they were meant to represent
 serene retirement.

It had been a bad day at the tag end of winter. No one had come near the barbershop
 excepting the mailman and he had only delivered bills. Sam closed up the place at five and
 went home, coasting down the hills in his car to save gasoline. It is with the most genuine
 reluctance that I describe the house he returned to and the asininity of the game show that
 his wife and two daughters were watching on television. It was a show where a wheel was
 spun and when the winner was given merchandise, travel tickets and sometimes cash the
 award-giving was very noisy and demonstrative. Buster, the old dog, greeted him. "Where
 my supper?" Sammy asked. He had to shout to be heard over the television.

"There isn't any supper," his wife said, "there's nothing to eat in the house but dog food."

"I give you money to buy food," shouted Sammy. "What do you do with it? Throw it in the
 street?"

"With the money you give me I can't buy nothing but dog food," shouted his wife.

“Well, if we ain’t going to eat, Buster ain’t going to eat,” shouted Sammy. “If I have to shoot Buster to get that through your dumb head that’s what I’m going to do.” His wife and his daughters either didn’t believe him or were too absorbed in their television show to pay any attention to his announcement.

He got his rifle together and loaded the weapon. Then he went into the living room and turned off the TV. “You’re all going to see this,” he said. “It’s about time somebody around here realized how serious life is. We can’t go on welfare because I got this business but we got to make sacrifices and Buster is going to be the first sacrifice we make.”

Both of the children began to cry, “Oh no, no, Daddy, no, no.” In years to come, both of his daughters, lying naked in the arms of strangers, would say with as much intimacy as a declaration of love: “Did I ever tell you about the night Daddy shot the dog?” But now they were children, bewildered by the adult world and by a scene that would bewilder anyone because of its grotesqueness. We know very little about the canine intelligence and nothing at all about the canine sense of eternity, but Buster seemed to understand what was expected of him and to welcome the chance to play a useful role in the life of the family even if it cost him his own life. The children were screaming. Maria’s sobbing was profound and life appeared to her a chaos with no guiding lights of any sort. Sammy led the old dog out into the backyard and asked him to sit down a little to the right of the charcoal brazier. He then backed away a few yards and shot him through the heart.

As soon as she saw this, Maria went to the telephone and called Sam’s Uncle Luigi and said she had to see him. Sam came from one of those south of Naples families whose bonds had been strengthened by their emigration to a new world. Luigi ran the family restaurant out on the old post-road spur that fed into the four-digit interstate. She didn’t ask to see Luigi, she simply told him that she was on her way.

Luigi’s was one of those Italian restaurants that remind us all of how truly new is our settlement on this continent and how many of us here are still strangers. The rudiments of southern Italy—its archways and masonry—were here, but like some plant that has been transported thoughtlessly to alien soil the archways seemed to have lost some of their ancient usefulness and beauty and taken on new attributes. The place had passed from one branch of the family to another and had changed its name and its specialties again and again. It had been Emilio’s and Giovanni’s; it had had topless dancers and black singers and at one time had even advertised Chinese cooking. When Maria came into the place that night a stranger in a dirty tuxedo asked her what she wanted and when she said that she wanted to see Luigi he said Luigi was unavailable. She pushed past him and opened a door beyond the bar, where she found Luigi watching a news show on television.

“Oh Lou, Lou,” she said, and she was crying. “I know I’m not Italian and none of you think I can cook and most of the family treat me like a stranger but now you’ve got to try and help. Like about twenty minutes ago he took the dog out in the backyard and shot him when everybody could see. It’s just that we don’t have any money. We don’t need very much. We don’t need much at all. He doesn’t have nobody but the family. He won’t even join the volunteer fire department. I’m too old to work in fast-food places and I can’t sew fast enough for that sweatshop in Lansville. You’ve got to help us.”

“Sam’s not sick?”

“No, he’s not sick, he’s not even sick in the head, he’s just worried sick that’s all.”

“You live near the pond she’s a called Beasley’s?” Luigi asked.

“Yes. We live on Hitching Post Lane. It’s about half a mile away.”

“You tell him he comes here tomorrow afternoon.”

The chain of energy in the Salazzo organization was exactly familial and traditional. Their home in southern Italy had been along the sea before the Mediterranean had been bankrupted but they had none of the attributes of a maritime people with the exception of pirates. Nor were they like a mountain people. Perhaps all one could say was that they were a people who had been very poor. The exalted members of the family asked the governor for their weddings and two of them had had dinner in the White House. Sam knew this rank of the Salazzos mostly from what he read in the papers. He was one of a large number of barbers, gas pumpers and masons who made up the Salazzo proletariat. All of this was true until the night he shot the dog. The next night a large black car stopped by the house and a young man—not a member of the family—invited Sam to be vice-chairman of the governor’s committee for the impartial uses of Beasley’s Pond. He would be paid a salary three times what he made on a good day in the barbershop. He was to avoid any sort of show—he was not, for example, to buy a new car—but the organization would help him to profitably invest his savings. His only duties were to collect cash payment for the dumping of fill in Beasley’s Pond.

Three days later Sam put a FOR RENT sign in the barbershop window and at seven o’clock in the morning went out to Beasley’s Pond where a five-axle, eighteen-wheel dump truck was waiting. The rate was eighty dollars a load and on his first day Sam took in close to a thousand dollars. He kept a ledger to record the dumping and had been given a leather bag for the cash. He knew enough to be scrupulously honest, and while the reputation of southern Italians as murderers was highly exaggerated, he had no disposition to steal. Each night at seven with some punctuality, two men in a large black car stopped at his house to collect the cash.

The collectors were not particularly sinister. The older of them was one of those small, old Italians who always wear their hats tipped forward over their brows as if they were, even in the rain, enduring the glare of an equinoctial sun. These same old men walk with their knees quite high in the air as if they were forever climbing those hills on the summits of which so much of Italy stands. The younger man had a mustache and smiled a great deal. They both refused wine and coffee—they refused to sit down—and on Fridays they paid Sam his salary. It was a great deal more money than he had ever had before and he parceled this out to Maria although he was not ungenerous.

The only other witness to the assassination of Buster had been Betsy Logan, who lived in the house next to the Salazzos. She was a young woman with two small children whose husband worked in the post office. The Salazzos and the Logans were not friendly neighbors perhaps because the Salazzos’ daughters were too old to play with Betsy Logan’s sons. The only closeness had been with Buster, who came over to the Logans for table scraps; and when Betsy saw Sam murder the old dog she felt nothing for her neighbor but hatred and contempt. She noticed the FOR RENT sign in the barbershop window and saw from her kitchen window the

strangers who came to the house each night at dusk. From the rubbish that was dumped in the pond Sam had salvaged a broken overstuffed chair and he sat in this while he collected his fees. Betsy had seen Sam reposing in this as she drove out toward Buy Brite on the interstate. He seemed to be supervising the death of Beasley's Pond, although Betsy would always think of him as the murderer of an old and friendly dog.

IN the next month or so Sears became familiar with a great many parish houses and church basements as well as with the vicinity of the New School for Social Research, where she studied accounting on Friday nights. He was constitutionally a traditional specimen with a traditional and at times benighted concept of a woman's role in the world, but her unchallengeable good looks seemed, so far as he was concerned, to secure her place in the stream of things. A good-looking woman studying arithmetic seemed to him something of a lark, and the people in her class in accounting presented an earnest, friendly and readily acceptable appearance. However, the other gatherings where she sometimes spent three nights a week continued to disturb him with their violent lack of uniformity. Night after night they looked like the crowd scattered by a thunderstorm on the evening of some holiday in any park in the Western world.

The janitor had told him that these gatherings aimed at abstinence in sex, food, alcohol and tobacco. He had suffered a good deal of embarrassment from carnal importunacy but he could not imagine tempering this in a drafty parish house. He had never smoked, his weight was constant and he thoroughly enjoyed drinking. As I say, the authority of her good looks—she seemed too friendly to be thought a beauty—made her association with this weird crowd somewhat palatable. She let him kiss her goodnight and he would, for the softness of her lips and the fragrance of her breasts, have waited for her in a condemned mine shaft. She was, like all women go, relatively punctual and Sears had come to believe that punctuality in engagements was an infallible gauge of sexual spontaneity. He had observed that, without exception, women who were tardy for dinner engagements were unconsciously delayed in their erotic transports and that women who were early for lunch or dinner would sometimes climax in the taxi on their way home.

Renée had nothing to do, of course, with the length of these sessions that she attended and Sears knew nothing but pleasure in waiting for her in parish houses and church basements and watching the crowd with whom she chose to associate had begun to interest him, partly because they were her associates, partly because he was obliged by circumstances to regard them and because they so disconcertingly challenged his common sense. The traditional forces of selection—the clubs, the social register and the professional lists—were all obsolete to him, he knew, but some traces or hints of caste seemed necessary to him for the comprehension and enjoyment of the world. These people seemed not only to belong to no organized society, they seemed to confound any such possibility. They were a genuine cross-section—something he abhorred.

But since abstinence, continence, some intangible moral value was at the bottom of the group, how could he have expected anything but a disparate gathering? The life of the spirit had no part, it seemed, in the establishment of caste. Not, at least, in the Western World. Early Christianity cut the widest swath. So, coming from a generation that could, perhaps, be characterized by the vastness of its disposition to complain, he didn't suppose that he could scorn men and women who must be looking for something better. That things had been better

was the music, the reprise of his days. It had been sung by his elders, by his associates, he had heard it sung in college by Toynbee and Spengler. Things had been better, things were getting worse, and the lengthening moral and intellectual shadows that one saw spreading over the Western World were final. What a bore it had been to live in this self-induced autumnal twilight! He supposed that these strangers—this queer congregation—would agree with him. However, he would not dream of abdicating his airs and pretenses for the company.

But she was always there—lightness and swiftness and the sense of an agility that flatteringly complemented his age. They dined and joked and she kissed him goodnight in the street by her house until one evening when she telephoned him and invited him to meet her not in some church basement but in her apartment. “Don’t bother to make a reservation,” she said. “I’ll cook the dinner here.”

That was a rainy night. It would be very unlike Sears to ally the sound of rain to his limited knowledge of love but there was, in fact, some alliance. It seemed that the most he knew of love had been revealed to him while he heard the music of rain. Light showers, heavy rain, torrential rains, floods, in fact, seemed joined in his memory to loving although this did not cross his mind while he bathed, very carefully, and dressed that evening. The importance of rain is agricultural and plenty may have been involved, since plenteousness is one aspect of love. Darkness to some degree belongs to rain and darkness to some degree belongs to love. In countless beds he had numbered his blessings while he heard the rain on the roof, heard it drip from a faulty gutter, heard it fall into fields and gardens and on the roofs and backyards of many cities. He walked across the city that night in the rain.

At the time of which I’m writing jogging was very popular in every city of the world with which he was familiar. Toward the end of the day in Rotterdam or Moscow, in the brilliant winter afterglow that New York sometimes enjoys or in the early snows in Copenhagen you would find men and women of every imaginable age and specification going forth to enjoy a run. The only rewards for these exertions were small and worthless trophies. Commercialization would come, of course, but it would come later, and jogging was then one of the few taxing human endeavors that had absolutely nothing to do with the banks. One evening in Amsterdam or Leningrad—Sears couldn’t remember the city but he must have known something of the language—Sears had stopped a dozen joggers and asked them why they ran. “I run to find myself,” they said, “I run to lose weight, I run because I’m in love, I run to forget my debts, I run because I’ve had a stiff prick for the last three weeks and I hope to cool it, I run to escape my mother-in-law, I run for the glory of God.” He found all the answers gratifying and understandable, and now whenever at dusk in Bucharest or Des Moines, in Venice or Calgary he saw the runners appear they seemed to him the salt of the earth, they seemed to him stubborn and irreducible proof of man’s determination to excel. As he crossed the city that rainy night he was passed by many runners.

She met him at the door wearing a wrapper, a shabby blue wrapper. He was out of his clothes in a minute. “You were hardpacked,” she said sweetly, sometime later. “You’ve burned the vegetables,” he said. “I put everything on the back of the stove when you telephoned from the lobby,” said she. He spent the night and left at around nine. Elevator men, janitors, the whole service population play an important role of approval or shock.

our extracurricular appearances, and the elevator man in Renée's apartment seemed surprised and bewildered by Sears's appearance. His look of bewilderment was followed by a look of solicitude as if Sears aroused in him some concern. He asked if he could get Sears a taxi. Sears thanked him and said no. Sears thought him already a member of the cast and wondered how the tip for Christmas was arranged in that particular building, although it was not yet Easter.

Oh the wind and the rain! Back in Janice Maria Salazzo bought some wind chimes at Brite when she had some extra money after Sam shot the dog.

Betsy first heard the chimes one night in early spring when she was getting supper. Sears had hung them from the ceiling of the Salazzos' back porch, which was very close to the Logans' kitchen, and even when Betsy closed the window she could hear the music of the wind chimes. That night their music woke her. It was three in the morning and she couldn't get back to sleep. The wind chimes seemed to speak to her although she wanted nothing to do with them. She blamed herself. She disliked the Salazzos because they had killed their dog and she disliked everything else about them including their wind chimes. It was her fault that she couldn't get back to sleep until dawn and when the alarm woke her the next thing she heard was the music of the wind chimes.

Betsy was working part time as a file clerk at the Scandinavian Lamp Factory, but when she came home from work and paid off the old lady who sat with Binxie she heard the wind chimes again. She closed the window. She still seemed to hear them and she went upstairs and closed all the windows on that side of the house. It was a warm evening for that time of year and when Henry came home and kissed her he asked why all the windows were shut. "The Salazzos' wind chimes are driving me crazy," Betsy said. "I may be neurotic or something but I hate the noise they make." "I'll turn up the TV so you can't hear it," said Henry, and he did, but when he turned off the TV and they went to bed at about eleven she could hear the wind chimes again, telling their dumb, continuous story in a language she could not understand. She imagined the Salazzos to be much less sensitive and refined than she and Henry and she guessed that their insensitivity involved an indifference to the sounds of the world around them, including the sounds of their wind chimes. However, they woke her again at three and kept her pretty much awake until dawn. She could not discern what she found so troubling in the noise they made but she thought they made a troublesome noise. When she came home the next night and was taking off her shoes she called her friend Liz Holland and told her about the problem.

"Well, ask her to take them down," Liz said. "Just tell her they're driving you crazy. Or maybe first ask her politely if she can hear them and if the noise doesn't bother her. Why don't you try that?"

At that time of year the Salazzos almost never came out of their house except to go to work. It was too cold for them to have filled their new stand-up swimming pool and there wasn't any grass to cut. Betsy didn't want to bring up the problem on the telephone but the next night when she was unwrapping some frozen vegetables she saw Maria Salazzo come down the back stairs with a garbage container. Betsy ran out of the house and crossed the yard. "Hasn't it been a nice day?" she asked.

"It depends on what you were doing," said Maria. She banged the garbage container against the pail. Betsy had been told that she sometimes drank a lot. She hoped she wasn't drunk.

see you have new wind chimes,” said Betsy.

“I got them at a sale at Buy Brite,” said Maria, “but I think they’re all gone. I got a friend at the Oriental Arts business who might be able to get you a set.”

“Oh, I don’t want any,” Betsy said. “I just wondered if you can hear them as loudly as we can.”

“Of course I can hear them,” Maria said. “What do you think I bought them for?”

“Well, the thing is we can hear them too much,” said Betsy. She was struggling. To say that they kept her awake would seem to state that she was an enfeebled sleeper. “I mean I wondered if you couldn’t turn them off at night.”

“You must be going crazy,” said Maria. “You think I can turn off the wind?”

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