

**Copyrighted Material**

# 1

I am a man you can trust, is how my customers view me. Or at least, I'm guessing it is. Why else would they hand me their house keys before they leave for vacation? Why else would they depend on me to clear their attics for them, heave their air conditioners into their windows every spring, lug their excess furniture to their basements? 'Mind your step, young fellow; that's Hepplewhite,' Mrs. Rodney says, and then she goes into her kitchen to brew a pot of tea. I could get up to anything in that basement. I could unlock the outside door so as to slip back in overnight and rummage through all she owns—her Hepplewhite desk and her Japanese lacquer jewelry box and the six potbellied drawers of her dining-room buffet. Not that I would. But she doesn't know that. She just assumes it. She takes it for granted that I'm a good person.

Come to think of it, I am the one who doesn't take it for granted.

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On the very last day of a bad old year, I was leaning against a pillar in the Baltimore railroad station, waiting to catch the 10:10 a.m. to Philadelphia. Philadelphia's where my little girl lives. Her mother married a lawyer there after we split up.

Ordinarily I'd have driven, but my car was in the shop and so I'd had to fork over the money for a train ticket. *Scads* of money. Not to mention being some appointed place at some appointed time, which I hate. Plus, there were a lot more people waiting than I had expected. That airy, light, clean, varnished feeling I generally got in Penn Station had been crowded out. Elderly couples with matching luggage stuffed the benches, and swarms of college kids littered the floor with their duffel bags. This gray-haired guy was walking around speaking to different strangers one by one. Well-off guy, you could tell: tan skin, nice turtleneck, soft beige car coat. He went up to a woman sitting alone and asked her a question. Then he came over to a girl in a miniskirt standing near me. I had been thinking I wouldn't mind talking to her myself. She had long blond hair, longer than her skirt, which made it seem she'd neglected to put on the bottom half of her outfit. The man said, 'Would you by any chance be traveling to Philadelphia?'

'Well, northbound, yes,' she said, in this shallow, breathless voice that came as a disappointment.

'But to Philadelphia?'

'No, New York. ~~Copyrighted Material~~

‘Thanks anyway,’ he said, and he moved toward the next bench.

Now he had my full attention. ‘Ma’am,’ I heard him ask an old lady, ‘are you traveling to Philadelphia?’ The old lady answered something too mumbly for me to catch, and instantly he turned to the woman beside her. ‘Philadelphia?’ Notice how he was getting more and more sparing of words. When the woman told him, ‘Wilmington,’ he didn’t say a thing; just plunged on down the row to one of the matched-luggage couples. I straightened up from my pillar and drifted closer, looking toward Gate E as if I had my mind on my train. The wife was telling the man about their New Year’s plans. They were baby-sitting their grandchildren who lived in New York City, she said, and the husband said, ‘Well, not New York City proper, dear; White Plains,’ and the gray-haired man, almost shouting, said, ‘But my daughter’s counting on me!’ And off he raced.

Well, *I* was going to Philadelphia. He could have asked me. I understood why he didn’t, of course. No doubt I struck him as iffy, with my three-day growth of black stubble and my ripped black leather jacket and my jeans all dust and cobwebs from Mrs. Morey’s garage. But still he could have given me a chance. Instead he just flicked his eyes at me and then swerved off toward the bench at the end of the room. By now he was looking seriously undermedicated. ‘Please!’ he said to a woman reading a book. ‘Tell me you’re going to Philadelphia!’

She lowered her book. She was thirtyish, maybe thirty-five—older than **Copyrighted Material** marm sort, in

a wide brown coat with a pattern like feathers all over it. 'Philadelphia?' she said. 'Why, yes, I am.'

'Then could I ask you a favor?'

I stopped several feet away and frowned down at my left wrist. (Never mind that I don't own a watch.) Even without looking, I could sense how she went on guard. The man must have sensed it too, because he said, 'Nothing too difficult, I promise!'

They were announcing my train now. ('The delayed 10:10,' the loudspeaker called it. It's always 'the delayed' this or that.) People started moving toward Gate E, the older couples hauling their wheeled bags behind them like big, meek pets on leashes. If the woman in the feather coat said anything, I missed it. Next I heard, the man was talking. 'My daughter's flying out this afternoon for a junior semester abroad,' he was saying. 'Leaving from Philadelphia; the airline offers a bargain rate if you leave from Philadelphia. So I put her on a train this morning, stopped for groceries afterward, and came home to find my wife in a state. It seems our daughter'd forgotten her passport. She'd telephoned from the station in Philly; didn't know what to do next.'

The woman clucked sympathetically. I'd have kept quiet myself. Waited to find out where the guy was heading with this.

'So I told her she should stay put. Stay right there in the station, I said, and I would get somebody here to carry up her passport.' **Copyrighted Material**

A likely story! Why didn't he go himself, if this was such an emergency?

'Why don't you go yourself?' the woman asked him.

'I can't leave my wife alone that long. She's in a wheelchair: Parkinson's.'

This seemed like a pretty flimsy excuse, if you want my honest opinion. Also, it exceeded what I would consider the normal quota for misfortunes. Not only a lamebrain daughter, but a wife with a major disease! I let my eyes wander toward the two of them. The woman was gazing up into the man's face, pooching her mouth out thoughtfully. The man was holding a packet. He must have pulled it from his car coat: not a manila envelope, which would have been the logical choice, but one of those padded mailers the size of a paperback book. Aha! Padded! So you couldn't feel the contents! And from where I stood, it looked to be stapled shut besides. *Watch yourself, lady*, I said silently.

As if she'd heard me, she told the man, 'I hope this isn't some kind of contraband.' Except she pronounced it 'counterband,' which made me think she must not be a schoolmarm, after all.

'No, no!' the man told her. He gave a huff of a laugh. 'No, I can assure you it's not counterband.'

Was he repeating her mistake on purpose? I couldn't tell. (Or maybe the word really *was* 'counterband.') Meanwhile, the loudspeaker came to life again. The delayed 10:10 was now boarding. Train wheels squealed below me. 'I'll do it,' the woman decided.

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‘Oh, wonderful! That’s wonderful! Thanks!’ the man told her, and he handed her the packet. She was already rising. Instead of a suitcase, she had one of those tote things that could have been just a large purse, and she fitted the strap over her shoulder and lined up the packet with the book she’d been reading. ‘So let’s see,’ the man was saying. ‘You’ve got light-colored hair, you’re wearing a brown print coat. . . . I’ll call the pay phone where my daughter’s waiting and let her know who to watch for. She’ll be standing at Information when you get there. Esther Brimm, her name is—a redhead. You can’t miss that hair of hers. Wearing jeans and a blue-jean jacket. Ask if she’s Esther Brimm.’

He followed the woman through the double doors and down the stairs, although he wasn’t supposed to. I was close behind. The cold felt good after the packed waiting room. ‘And you are?’ the man was asking.

Affected way of putting it. They arrived on the platform and stopped short, so that I just about ran over them. The woman said, ‘I’m Sophia—’ and then something like ‘Maiden’ that I couldn’t exactly hear. (The train was in place but rumbling, and passengers were clip-clopping by.) ‘In case we miss connections, though . . .,’ she said, raising her voice.

In case they missed connections, he should put his name and phone number on the mailer. Any fool would know that much. But he seemed to have his mind elsewhere. He said, ‘Um . . . now do you live in Baltimore? I mean,

are you coming *back* to Baltimore, or is Philly your end destination?’

I almost laughed aloud at that. So! Already he’d forgotten he was grateful; begun to question his angel of mercy’s reliability. But she didn’t take offense. She said, ‘Oh, I’m a *long-time* Baltimorean. This is just an overnight visit to my mother. I do it every weekend: take the ten-ten Patriot Saturday morning and come back sometime Sunday.’

‘Well, then!’ he said. ‘Well. I certainly do appreciate this.’

‘It’s no trouble at all,’ she said, and she smiled and turned to board.

I had been hoping to sit next to her. I was planning to start a conversation—mention I’d overheard what the man had asked of her and then suggest the two of us check the contents of his packet. But the car was nearly full, and she settled down beside a lady in a fur hat. The closest I could manage was across the aisle to her left and one row back, next to a black kid wearing earphones. Only view I had was a schoolmarm’s netted yellow bun and a curve of cheek.

Well, anyhow, why was I making this out to be such a big deal? Just bored, I guess. I shucked my jacket off and sat forward to peer in my seat-back pocket. A wrinkly McDonald’s bag, a napkin stained with ketchup, a newspaper section folded to the crossword puzzle. The puzzle was only half done, but I didn’t have a pen on me. I looked over at the black kid. He probably didn’t have a pen, either, and anyhow he was deep in his music—long brown fingers tapping time on his knees.

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Then just beyond him, out the window, I chanced to notice the passport man talking on the phone. Talking on the phone? Down here beside the tracks? Sure enough: one of those little cell phones you all the time see obnoxious businessmen showing off in public. I leaned closer to the window. Something here was weird, I thought. Maybe he smuggled drugs, or worked for the CIA. Maybe he was a terrorist. I wished I knew how to read lips. But already he was closing his phone, slipping it into his pocket, turning to go back upstairs. And our train was sliding out of the station.

I looked again at the woman. At the packet, to be specific.

It was resting on top of her book, which sat in her feather-print lap. (She would be the type who stayed properly buttoned into her coat, however long the trip.) Where the mailer was folded over, staples ran straight across in a nearly unbroken line. But staples were no problem. She could pry them up with, say, a nail file or a dime, and slip them out undetectably, and replace them when she was finished. *Do it*, I told her in my head. She was gazing past her seatmate, out the right-hand window. I couldn't even see her cheek now; just her bun.

Back in the days when I was a juvenile delinquent, I used to break into houses and read people's private mail. Also photo albums. I had a real thing about photo albums. The other kids who broke in along with me, they'd be hunting car keys and cigarettes and booze. They'd be tearing through closets and cabinets and drawers. I sat on the sofa

poring over somebody's wedding pictures. And even when I took stuff, it was always personal stuff. This little snow globe once from a nightstand in a girl's bedroom. Another time, a brass egg that stood on scaly claw feet and opened to show a snapshot of an old-fashioned baby inside. I'm not proud of this. I'd sooner confess to jewel theft than to pocketing six letters tied up with satin ribbon, which is what I did when we jimmed the lock at the Empreys' place one night. But there you are. What can I say.

So when this Sophia woman let the packet stay untouched—didn't prod it, didn't shake it, didn't tease apart the merest corner of the flap—I felt something like, oh, almost envy. A huge wave of envy. I started wishing *I* could be like that. Man, I'd have been tearing into that packet with my bare teeth, if I'd had the chance.

The conductor came and went, and the row houses slipping by turned into factory buildings and then to matted woods and a sheet of gray water, but I was barely conscious of anything beyond Sophia's packet. I saw how quietly her hands rested on the brown paper; she was not a fidgeter. Smooth, oval nails, pale pink, and plump white fingers like a woman's in a religious painting. Her book was turned the wrong way for me to read the title, but I knew it was something worthwhile and educational. Oh, these people who prepare ahead! Who think to bring actual books, instead of dashing into a newsstand at the last minute for a *Sports Illustrated* or—worse yet—making do with a crossword puzzle that someone else has started!

It bothered me more than I liked to admit that the passport man had avoided me.

We were getting close to Wilmington, and the lady in the fur hat started collecting her things. After she left, I planned to change seats. I would wait for Sophia to shift over to the window, and then I'd sit down next to her. 'Morning,' I would say. 'Interesting packet you've got there.'

'I see you're carrying some kind of packet.'

'Mind if I inquire what's in that packet?'

Or whatever. Something would come to me. But when the train stopped and the lady stood up, Sophia just turned her knees to one side to let her out. She stayed seated where she was, on the aisle, so I didn't see any natural-seeming way to make my move.

We left Wilmington behind. We traveled past miles of pipeline and smokestacks, some of them belching flames. I could tell now that it was rap music the kid beside me was listening to. He had the volume raised so high that I could hear it winding out of his earphones—that chanting and insisting sound like the voices you hear in your dreams.

'Philll-adelphia!' the conductor called.

Of course Sophia got ready too soon. We were barely in sight of the skyline—bluish buildings shining in the pale winter sunlight, Liberty Towers scalloping their way up and up and up—but she was already rising to wait in the aisle. The exit lay to the rear, and so she had to face me. I could see the pad of flesh that was developing under her chin. She leaned against her seat and retreated gently with the swaying

of the car. *Critics are unanimous!* the back of her book said. The mailer was almost hidden between the book and her cushiony bosom.

I put on my jacket, but I didn't stand up yet. I waited till the train had come to a stop and she had passed me. Then I swung out into the aisle lickety-split, cutting in front of a fat guy with a briefcase. I followed Sophia so closely, I could smell the dusty smell of her coat. It was velvet, or something like velvet. Velvet always smells dusty, even when it's fresh from the cleaners.

There was the usual scuffle with that automatic door that likes to squash the passengers—Press the button, dummies!— and the usual milling and nudging in the vestibule, and then we stepped out into a rush of other people. It was obvious that Sophia knew where she was going. She didn't so much as glance around her but walked fast, coming down hard on her heels. Her heels were the short, chunky kind, but they made her as tall as I was. I had noticed that while we were standing on the train. Now she was slightly taller, because we'd started up the stairs and she was a step above me.

Even once we'd reached the waiting room, she didn't look around. Thirtieth Street Station is so enormous and echoing and high-ceilinged—a jolt after cozy Baltimore—that most people pause to take stock a moment, but not Sophia. She just went clicking along, with me a few yards to the rear.

At the Information island, only one person stood waiting. I spotted her from across the sea of mar-  
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a girl in a denim jacket and jeans, with a billow of crinkly, electric red hair. It fanned straight out and stopped just above her shoulders. It was *amazing* hair. I was awestruck. Sophia, though, didn't let on she had noticed her. She was walking more slowly now, downright sedately, placing her toes at a slight angle outward, the way women often do when they want to look composed and genteel. Actually, she was starting to get on my nerves. Didn't that bun of hers just sum her up, I thought—the net that bound it in and the perfect, doughnut shape and the way it sat so low on her head, so matronly and drab! And Esther Brimm, meanwhile, stood burning like a candle on her stick-thin, blue-denim legs.

When we reached the island I veered right, toward a display of schedules on the counter. I heard Sophia's heels stop in front of Esther. 'Esther Brimm?' she asked.

'Ms. Maynard?'

Husky, throaty voice, the kind I like.

'Your father asked me to bring you something. . . .'

I took a schedule from the rack and turned my face casually in their direction. Not till Esther said, 'Right; my passport,' did Sophia slip the mailer from behind her book and hold it out.

'Thanks a million,' Esther said, accepting it, and Sophia said, 'My pleasure. Have a good trip.' Then she turned away and clicked toward the Twenty-ninth Street exit.

Just like that, I forgot her. Now I was focused on Esther. *Open it!* I told her. Instead she packed up the army duffel

lying at her feet and moved off toward the phones. I meandered after her, studying my schedule. I pretended I was hunting a train to Princeton.

The phones were the unprivate kind just out in the middle of everything, standing cheek to jowl. When Esther lifted a receiver off its hook, I was right there beside her, lifting a receiver of my own. I was so near I could have touched her duffel bag with the toe of my sneaker. I heard every word she said. ‘Dad?’ she said.

I clamped my phone to my ear and held the schedule up between us so I could watch her. This close, she was less attractive. She had that fragile, sore-looking skin you often find on redheads. ‘Yes,’ she was saying, ‘it’s here.’ And then, ‘Sure! I guess so. I mean, it’s still stapled shut and all. Huh? Well, hang on.’

She put her receiver down and started yanking at the mailer’s top flap. When the staples tore loose, rat-a-tat, she pulled the edges apart and peered inside—practically stuck her little freckled nose inside. Then she picked up the phone again. ‘Yup,’ she said. ‘Good as new.’

So I never got a chance to see for myself. It could have been anything: loose diamonds, crack cocaine . . . But somehow I didn’t think so. The phone call was what convinced me. She’d have had to be a criminal genius to fake that careless tone of voice, the easy offhandedness of a person who knows for a fact that she’s her parents’ pride and joy. ‘Well, listen,’ she was saying. ‘Tell Mom I’ll call again from the airport, okay?’ And she made a kissing sound and

hung up. When she slung her duffel over her shoulder and started toward one of the gates, I didn't even watch her go.

The drill for visiting my daughter was, I'd arrive about ten a.m. and take her on an outing. Nothing fancy. Maybe a trip to the drug store, or walking her little dog in the park. Then we'd grab a bite someplace, and I'd return her and leave. This happened exactly once a month—the last Saturday of the month. Her mother's idea. To hear her mother tell it, Husband No. 2 was Superdad; but I had to stay in the picture to give Opal a sense of whatchamacallit. Connection.

But due to one thing and another—my car acting up, my alarm not going off—I was late as hell that day. It was close to noon, I figure, before I even left the station, and I didn't want to spring for a cab after paying for a train ticket. Instead I more or less ran all the way to the apartment (they lived in one of those posh old buildings just off Rittenhouse Square), and by the time I pressed the buzzer, I was looking even scruffier than my usual self. I could tell as much from Natalie's expression, the minute she opened the door. She let her eyes sort of drift up and down me, and, 'Barnaby,' she said flatly. Opal's little dog was dancing around my ankles—a dachshund, very quivery and high-strung.

'Yo. Natalie,' I said. I started swatting at my clothes to settle them a bit. Natalie, of course, was Miss Good Grooming. She wore a slim gray skirt and sweater set, and

her hair was all of a piece—smooth, shiny brown—dipping in and then out again before it touched her shoulders. Oh, she had been a beauty for as long as I had known her; except now that I recalled, there'd always been something too placid about her. I should have picked it up from her dimples, which made a little dent in each cheek whether or not she was smiling. They gave her a look of self-satisfaction. What I'd thought when we first met was, how could she *not* be self-satisfied? And her vague, dreamy slowness used to seem sexy. Now it just made me impatient. I said, 'Is Opal ready to go?' and Natalie took a full minute, I swear, to consider every aspect of the question. Then: 'Opal is in her room,' she said finally. 'Crying her eyes out.'

'Crying!'

'She thought you'd stood her up.'

'Well, I know I'm a little bit late—' I said.

She lifted an arm and contemplated the tiny watch face on the inner surface of her wrist.

'Things just seemed to conspire against me,' I said. 'Can I see her?'

After she'd thought that over awhile, she turned and floated off, which I took to mean yes.

I made my own way to Opal's bedroom, down a long hall lined with Oriental rugs. I waded through the dachshund and knocked on her door. 'Opal?' I called. 'You in there?'

No answer. I turned the knob and poked my head in.

You'd never guess this room belonged to a nine-year-old. The bedspread was appliquéd with **Copyright with Watkins** and the only



posters were nursery-rhyme posters. By rights it should have been a baby's room, or a toddler's.

The bed was where I looked first, because that's where I figured she would be if she was crying. But she was in the white rocker by the window. And she wasn't crying, either. She was glaring at me reproachfully from underneath her eyebrows.

'Ope!' I said, all hearty.

Opal's chin stayed buried inside her collar.

I knew I shouldn't think this, but my daughter had never struck me as very appealing. She had all her life been a few pounds overweight, with a dish-shaped face and colorless hair and a soft, pink, half-open mouth, the upper lip short enough to expose her top front teeth. (I used to call her 'Bunnikins' till Natalie asked me not to—and why would she have asked, if she herself hadn't noticed Opal's close resemblance to a rabbit?) It didn't help that Natalie dressed her in the kind of clothes you see in Dick and Jane books—fussy and pastel, the smocked bodices bunching up on her chest and the puffed sleeves cutting into her arms. Me, I would have chosen something less constricting. But who was I to say? I hadn't been much of a father.

I did want the best for her, though. I would never intentionally hurt her. I walked over to where she was sitting and squatted down in front of her. 'Opal-dopal,' I said. 'Sweetheart.'

'What.'

'Call off your dog, Hilda, and my wall.'

She started to smile but held it back. Her mother's two dimples deepened in her cheeks. The dog really was nibbling at my wallet. George Farnsworth, his name was; heaven knows why. 'George Farnsworth,' I said sternly, 'if you're short of cash, just ask straight out for a loan, okay?'

Now I heard a definite chuckle. I took heart. 'Hey, Ope, I'm sorry I'm late,' I said. 'First I had car trouble, see—'

'You *always* have car trouble.'

'Then my alarm clock didn't go off—'

'It *always* doesn't go off.'

'Well. Not always,' I told her. 'Then once I got to Penn Station, you'll never guess what happened. It was like a secret-agent movie. Guy is walking up to people, pulling something out of his coat. "Ma'am,"' —I made my voice sound menacing and mysterious— "'would you please take this package to Philadelphia for me?'"

Opal didn't speak, but I could tell she was listening. She watched me with her pinkish-gray eyes, the lashes slightly damp.

"Take it to my daughter in Philly; all it is is her passport," he said, and I thought to myself, *Ha! I just bet it's her passport!* So when this one woman said she would do it, I followed her at the other end of the trip.'

'You followed her?'

'I wanted to see what would happen. So I followed her to her rendezvous with the quote-unquote daughter, and then I hung around the phones while the daughter placed a call to—'

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‘You hung around the phones?’

I was beginning to flounder. (This story didn’t have what you’d call a snappy ending.) I said, ‘Yes, and then—um—’

‘You were only dawdling in the station all this time! It’s not enough you don’t look after your car right and you forget to set your alarm; then you dawdle in the station like you don’t care *when* you see me!’

It was uncanny, how much she sounded like her mother. Her mother in the old days, that is—the miserable last days of our marriage. I said, ‘Now, hon. Now wait a sec, hon.’

Which was also from those days, word for word. Some kind of reflex, I guess.

‘You promised you’d come at ten,’ she said, ‘and instead you were just . . . goofing around with a bunch of secret agents! You totally lost track of where you were supposed to be!’

‘In the first place,’ I said, ‘I take excellent care of my car, Opal. I treat it like a blood relative. It’s not my fault if my car is older than I am. And I did not forget to set my alarm. I don’t know why it didn’t go off; sometimes it just doesn’t, okay? I don’t know why. And I honestly thought you’d like hearing about those people I was so-called goofing around with. I thought, *Man, I wish Opal could see this*, and I followed them expressly so I could tell you about it later over a burger and french fries. Wouldn’t that be great? A burger and fries at Little Pete’s, Ope, while I tell you my big story.’

It wasn’t working, though. Opal’s eyes only got pinker, and for once she had her mouth tightly shut.

‘Look at George Farnsworth! *He* wants to go,’ I said.

In fact, George Farnsworth had lost interest and was lying beside the rocker with his nose on his paws. But I said, ‘First we’ll take George for a walk in the Square, and then we’ll head over to—’

‘It sounds to me,’ Natalie said, ‘as if Opal prefers to stay in.’

She was standing in the doorway. Damn Oriental rugs had muffled her steps.

‘Am I right, Opal?’ she asked. ‘Would you rather tell him goodbye?’

‘Goodbye?’ I said. ‘I just got here! I just came all this way!’

‘It’s your decision, Opal.’

Opal looked down at her lap. After a long pause, she murmured something.

‘We couldn’t hear you,’ Natalie said.

‘Goodbye,’ Opal told her lap.

But I knew she didn’t mean it. All she wanted was a little coaxing. I said, ‘Hey now, Ope . . .’

‘Could I speak with you a minute?’ Natalie asked me.

I sighed and got to my feet. Opal stayed where she was, but I caught her hidden glimmer of a glance as I turned to follow Natalie down the hall. I knew I could have persuaded her if I’d been given more time.

We didn’t stop in the living room. We went on through to the kitchen, at the other end of the apartment. I guess Natalie figured my jeans might soil her precious upholstery. I had never seen the kitchen before, and I spent a moment

looking around (old-fashioned tilework, towering cabinets) before it sank in on me what Natalie was saying.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ she was saying. ‘Maybe it would be better if you didn’t come anymore.’

This should have been okay with me. It’s not as if I enjoyed these visits. But you know how it is when somebody all at once announces you can’t do something. I said, ‘What! Just because one Saturday I happen to run a little behind?’

Her eyes seemed to be resting slightly to the left of my left shoulder. Her face was as untroubled as a statue’s.

‘I’m traveling from a whole other city, for God’s sake!’ I told her. ‘A whole entirely other state! No way can you expect me to arrive here on the dot!’

‘It’s funny,’ she said reflectively. ‘I used to believe it was very important for Opal to keep in touch with you. But now I wonder if it might be doing her more harm than good. All those Saturdays you’ve come late, or left early, or canceled altogether—’

‘It was only the once or twice or three times or so that I canceled,’ I said.

‘And even when you do show up, I imagine it’s started to dawn on her how you live.’

‘How I live! I live just fine!’

‘A rented room,’ she mused, ‘an unskilled job, a bunch of shiftless friends. No goals and no ambitions; still not finished college at the age of thirty.’

‘Twenty-nine,’ I corrected her. (The one charge I could argue with.) **Copyrighted Material**

‘Thirty in three weeks,’ she said.

‘Oh.’

There was a sudden silence, like when the Muzak stops in a shopping mall and you haven’t even been hearing it but all at once you’re aware of its absence. And just then I noticed, on the windowsill behind her, our old china cookie jar. I hadn’t thought of that cookie jar in years! It was domed on top and painted with bars like a birdcage, and it looked so dowdy and homely, against the diamond-shaped panes. It made me lose my train of thought. The next thing I knew, Natalie was gliding out of the kitchen, and I had no choice but to follow her.

Though, in the foyer, I did say, ‘Well.’ And then, in the hall outside, I turned and said, ‘Well, we’ll see about this!’

The door made almost no sound when she closed it.

My train home was completely filled, and stone cold to boot. Some problem with the heating system. I sat next to a Spanish-type guy who must have started his New Year’s partying a tad bit early. His head kept nodding forward, and he was breathing fumes that were practically flammable. Across the aisle, this very young couple was trying to soothe a baby. The husband said, ‘Maybe he’s hungry,’ and the wife said, ‘I just fed him.’ The husband said, ‘Maybe he’s wet.’ I don’t know why they made me so sad.

After that, it seemed all around me I saw families. A toddler peeked over his seat back, and his mother gave him

a hug and pulled him down again. A father and a little girl walked toward me from the club car, the little girl holding a paper cup extremely carefully in both hands. The foreigner and I were the only ones on our own, it seemed.

The father glanced at us as he came close (at the foreigner's head bobbing and reeling, and me with my jacket collar flipped up and a wad of cottony white stuff poking out of a tear in one sleeve), and then he glanced away. It made me think of the passport man, refusing to meet my eyes. And that made me think of the woman in the feather coat. Sophia. So honorable, Sophia had been; so principled. So well behaved even when she thought nobody was looking.

Oh, what makes some people more virtuous than others? Is it something they know from birth? Don't they ever feel that zingy, thrilling urge to smash the world to bits?

Isn't it possible, maybe, that good people are just *luckier* people? Couldn't that be the explanation?

The company I work for is called Rent-a-Back, Inc. How I got into it is a whole other story, but basically we provide a service for people who are old or disabled. Any load you can't lift, any chore you don't feel up to, why, just call on us. Say you want your lawn chairs piled in your garage in the fall. Or your rugs rolled up and stored away in the spring. We can do that. A lot of our customers have a standing order—like, an hour a week. Others just telephone as circumstances arise. Whatever.

On the Saturday of my dud trip to Philadelphia, I came home to find a message from my boss on my answering machine. 'Barnaby, it's Virginia Dibble. Could you get back to me as soon as possible? We have an urgent request for this evening.'

I really liked Mrs. Dibble. She was this dainty, fluttery lady a whole lot older than my mother, but I'd seen her tote a portable toilet down two flights of stairs when we were



shorthanded. So even though I wasn't in such a great mood, I dialed her number. 'What's up?' I asked her.

'Oh, poor, poor Mrs. Alford,' she started right in. 'She needs a Christmas tree put together.'

'A what?'

'An eight-foot artificial Christmas tree. It's in her attic, she says, and she needs it brought down and assembled.'

'Mrs. Dibble,' I said. 'It's New Year's Eve.'

'Oh, you have plans?'

'I mean, it's a week after Christmas. What does she want with a tree?'

'She says her seven grandchildren are stopping by for a visit. They're spending the night on their way home from skiing, and she wants the house to look cheery, she says, and not old-ladyish and glum.'

'Ah.'

Grandchildren ruled the world, if you judged by most of our clients.

'She needs it decorated too,' Mrs. Dibble was saying. 'She says she can't manage the upper branches, and if she climbed onto a step stool, she's scared she might break a hip.'

Breaking a hip was what else ruled the world—the fear of it, I mean. Big bugaboo, in the circles I traveled in.

I said, 'Couldn't she tell her grandchildren she did have a tree but took it down? Plenty of folks get rid of their trees on December twenty-sixth, tell her!'

But I knew what Mrs. Dibble's answer would be ('We're the muscles, not the brains, she always said'); so I didn't

wait to hear it. 'Besides,' I said, 'my car is in the shop and I won't have it back until Monday.'

'Oh, Martine can drive,' Mrs. Dibble told me. 'I thought I'd send the two of you, so as to finish that much faster. Can you do it if Martine picks you up?'

'Well,' I said. 'I guess.'

'All the others have New Year's plans. I'll call Martine back again and tell her to come fetch you.'

There were eleven full-time employees at Rent-a-Back. That meant nine people that I knew of had New Year's plans. And these were not particularly successful people. Several might even be looked upon as losers. But still, they'd found something to do with themselves on New Year's Eve.

I lived in the eastern part of the city, in the basement of a duplex out Northern Parkway. Martine lived down on St. Paul. It would take her twenty-some minutes to reach me; so I had time to fix myself a peanut butter sandwich. (My only meal all day had been a bag of chips in Penn Station.) Then I grabbed a Coke and went to eat on the patio, where I could see a sliver of the driveway. I never hung around my apartment if I could help it. It was nothing but a rec room, really, which the family above me rented out because they needed the income.

By now the sky had clouded over and darkened. When the patio lamps switched on, they made a noticeable difference, even though it could not have been much later

than four o'clock. The patio had these tall pole lamps that were activated by motion. If anybody came near, they would all at once light up. Then after thirty seconds they shut off again. Usually, I enjoyed teasing them. I would take a step, freeze, take another step. . . . Once, when the Hardestys were gone and I was grilling steaks with this girl I'd met, I told her there was no way to make the lamps stay lit nonstop (which was a flat-out lie) and we would have to keep moving if we wanted to see what we were eating. So there we were, shifting hugely in our chairs, lifting our forks with these exaggerated gestures that the lamps would be sure to notice. Then after supper we got to making out and the lamps, of course, went dark, and we forgot about them till she stood up to pull her T-shirt off, and *whang!* they all flared on again. I laughed until my stomach hurt.

That afternoon, though, I wasn't feeling so playful. I just sat hunched over my sandwich in a shreddy mesh lawn chair, and pretty soon the lamps clicked off.

I'd finished eating by the time Martine pulled in. She was driving her boyfriend's battered red pickup, high off the ground and narrow through the eyes. I set my Coke can in a planter and came around to climb in on the passenger side. 'Hey, Martine,' I said. 'No date for New Year's Eve?'

'He's in bed with the throwing-up flu,' she said, backing into the street. 'What's *your* excuse, Mr. Peanut Butter Breath?'

'I've turned against women,' I told her.

'Ha!'

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