A Light in the Window -1st Chapter

Close Encounters…
Serious thinking and crossing the street, he once said, shouldn't be attempted simultaneously.

The red pickup truck was nearly upon him when he saw it. The shock of seeing it bear down with such ferocious speed sent him reeling backward to the curb, where he crashed in a sitting position. He caught a fleeting glance of the driver, talking on a telephone, as the truck careened around the corner.

"Father Tim! Are you all right?"

Winnie Ivey's expression was so grieved he felt certain he was badly hurt. He let Winnie help him up, feeling a numb shock where he'd slammed onto the curb.

Winnie's broad face was flushed with anger. "That maniac! Who was that fool, anyway?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I'm the fool for not looking where I was going." He laughed weakly.

"You're no such thing! I saw the light, it was still yellow, you had plenty of time to cross, and here comes this truck roarin' down on you like a freight train, and somebody in it talkin' on a phone."

She turned to the small crowd that had rushed out of the Main Street Grill. "A phone in a truck!" she said with disgust. "Can you believe it? I should have got his license number."

"Thank you, Winnie." He put his arm around the sturdy shoulders of the Sweet Stuff Bakery owner. "You've got a special talent for being in the right place at the right time."

Percy Mosely, who owned the Grill, ran out with his spatula in his hand. "If I was you, I'd ask th' good Lord to kick that feller's butt plumb to Wesley. Them poached eggs you eat are now scrambled."

The rector patted his pockets for the heavy office key and checked his wallet. All there. "No harm done," he assured his friends. The incident had simply been a regrettably dramatic way to begin his first week home from Ireland.

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Though he'd spent the summer in Sligo, he found on returning that he hadn't, after all, missed summer in Mitford. His roses bloomed on, the grass lay like velvet under the network of village sprinklers, and parishioners were still leaving baskets of tomatoes on his porch.

As he came up the walk to the rectory, he heard a booming bark from the garage. It was the greeting he had missed every livelong day of his sojourn across the pond.

Since returning home less than a week ago, he had awakened each morning to see Barnabas standing by the bed, staring at him soberly. The inquiry in the eyes of his black Bouvier-cum-sheepdog companion was simple: Are you home to stay, or is this a joke?

He walked through the kitchen and opened the garage door, as Barnabas, who had grown as vast as a bear during his absence, rushed at him with joy. Laying his front paws on the rector's shoulders, he gazed dolefully into the eyes of his master, whose glasses fogged at once.

"Come now, old fellow. Slack off!"

Barnabas leapt backward, danced for a moment on his hind legs, and lunged forward to give the rector a great lick on the face that sent a shower of saliva into his left ear.

The victim dodged toward his parked Buick and crashed onto the hood with his elbow. "Sing and make music in your hearts," he recited loudly from a psalm, "always giving thanks to the Father for everything!"

Barnabas sat down at once and gazed at him, mopping the garage floor with his tail.

His dog was the only living creature he knew who was unfailingly disciplined by the hearing of the Word. It was a phenomenon that Walter had told over the whole of Ireland's West Country.

"Let's have a treat, pal. And you," he said to Dooley's rabbit, Jack, "will have beet tops." The Flemish giant regarded him with eyes the color of peat.

The house was silent. It wasn't one of Puny's days to work, and Dooley was at football practice. He had missed the boy terribly, reading and rereading the one scrawled message he had received in two long months:

I am fine. Barnabus is fine. Im ridin the hair off that horse.

He had missed the old rectory, too, with its clamor and quiet, its sunshine and shadow. Never before in his life as a rector had he found a home so welcoming or comfortable--a home that seemed, somehow, like a friend.

He spied the thing on his counter at once. It was Edith Mallory's signature blue casserole dish.

He was afraid of that.

Emma had written to Sligo to say that Pat Mallory had died soon after he left for Ireland. Heart attack. No warning. Pat, she said, had felt a wrenching chest pain, had sat down on the top step outside his bedroom, and after dropping dead sitting up, had toppled to the foot of the stairs, where the Mallorys' maid of thirty years had found him just before dinner.

"Oh, Mr. Mallory," she was reported to have said, "you shouldn't have gone and done that. We're havin' lasagna."

Sitting there on the farmhouse window seat, reading Emma's fivepage letter, he had known that Edith Mallory would not waste any time when he returned.

Long before Pat's death, he'd been profoundly unsteadied when she had slipped her hand into his or let her fingers run along his arm. At one point, she began winking at him during sermons, which distracted him to such a degree that he resumed his old habit of preaching over the heads of the congregation, literally.

So far, he had escaped her random snares but had once dreamed he was locked with her in the parish-hall coat closet, pounding desperately on the door and pleading with the sexton to let him out.

Now Pat, good soul, was cold in the grave, and Edith's casserole was hot on his counter.

Casseroles! Their seduction had long been used on men of the cloth, often with rewarding results for the cook.

Casseroles, after all, were a gesture that on the surface could not be mistaken for anything other than righteous goodwill. And, once one had consumed and exclaimed over the initial offering, along would come another on its very heels, until the bachelor curate ended up a married curate or the divorced deacon a fellow so skillfully ensnared that he never knew what hit him.

In the language of food, there were casseroles, and there were casseroles. Most were used to comfort the sick or inspire the downhearted. But certain others, in his long experience, were so filled with allure and innuendo that they ceased to be Broccoli Cheese Delight intended for the stomach and became arrows aimed straight for the heart.

In any case, there was always the problem of what to do with the dish. Decent people returned it full of something else. Which meant that the person to whom you returned it would be required, at some point, to give you another food item, all of which produced a cycle that was unimaginably tedious.

Clergy, of course, were never required to fill the dish before returning it, but either way, it had to be returned. And there, clearly, was the rub.

He approached the unwelcome surprise as if a snake might have been coiled inside. His note of thanks, which he would send over tomorrow by Puny, would be short and to the point:

Dear Edith: Suffice it to say that you remain one of the finest cooks in the county. That was no lie; it was undeniably true.

Your way with (blank, blank) is exceeded only by your graciousness. A thousand thanks. In His peace, Fr Tim.

There.

He lifted the lid. Instantly, his mouth began to water, and his heart gave a small leap of joy.

Crab cobbler! One of his favorites. He stared with wonder at the dozen flaky homemade biscuits poised on the bed of fresh crabmeat and fragrant sauce.

Perhaps, he thought with sudden abandon, he should give Edith Mallory a ring this very moment and express his thanks.

As he reached for the phone, he realized what he was doing--he was placing his foot squarely in a bear trap.

He hastily clamped the lid on the steaming dish. "You see?" he muttered darkly. "That's the way it happens."

Where casseroles were concerned, one must constantly be on guard.

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"Edith Mallory's lookin' to give you th' big whang-do," said Emma.

Until this inappropriate remark, there had been a resonant peace in the small office. The windows were open to morning air embroidered with bird song. His sermon notes were going at a pace. And the familiar comfort of his old swivel chair was sheer bliss.

"And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?"

His part-time church secretary glanced up from her ledger. "It means she's going to cook your goose."

He did not like her language. "I am sixty-one years old and a lifelong bachelor. Why anyone would want to give me a whang ... why anyone would ... it's unthinkable," he said flatly.

"I can tell she thinks about it all th' time. Besides, remember Father Appel who got married when he was sixty-five, right after his social security kicked in? And that deacon who was fifty-nine, who married th' redheaded woman who owned the taxi company in Wesley? Then, there was that salesman who worked at the Collar Button ..."

"Spare me the details," he said curtly, opening his drawer and looking for the Wite-Out.

Emma peered at him over her glasses. "Just remember," she muttered.

"Remember what?"

"Forearmed is forewarned."

"No, Emma. Forewarned is forearmed."

"Peedaddle. I never do get that right. But if I were you, I'd duck when I see her comin'."

I've been ducking when I see her coming for twelve years, he thought.

"One thing in her favor," said Emma, recording another check, "is she's a great hostess. As you have surely learned from doin' your parties, a rector needs that. Some preachers' wives don't do pea-turkey, if you ask me. Of course, if anything's goin' to happen with your neighbor, and Lord knows, I hope it will--you ought to just go on and give 'er a nice engagement ring--then Edith would have to jump on somebody else."

"Emma," he said, ripping the cover off the typewriter, "I have finally got a handle on the most important sermon I've written in a year ..."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," she replied, pressing her lips together in that way he loathed.

*

At noon, Ron Malcolm appeared at the door, wearing boots caked with dried mud and a red baseball cap.

Being away for two months had given everyone the rector knew, and Mitford as well, a fresh, almost poignant, reality. He had scarcely ever noticed that Ron Malcolm was a man of such cheering vigor. Then again, perhaps it was the retired contractor's involvement in the nursing-home project that had done something for the color in his face and put a gleam in his eyes.

"Well, Father, we're off and running. Jacobs has sent their job superintendent over. He's having a trailer installed on the site today." He shook the rector's hand with great feeling.

"I can hardly believe it's finally happening."

"Five million bucks!" Ron said. "This nursing home is the biggest thing to happen around here since the Wesley furniture factory. Have you met Leeper?"

"Leeper?"

"Buck Leeper. The job superintendent. We talked about him before you left for Ireland. He said he'd try to get by your office."

"I haven't met him. I'll have to walk up--maybe Wednesday aftenoon."

Ron sat down on the visitors' bench and removed his cap. "Emma around?"

"Gone to the post office."

"I think it's only fair that I talk to you straight about Buck Leeper. A few months ago, I told you he's hardheaded, rough. I know I don't have to worry about you, but he's the kind who can make you lose your religion."

"Aha."

"His daddy was Fane Leeper, so called because a preacher once said he was the most profane man he'd ever met. Fane Leeper was also the best job superintendent on the East Coast. He made three contractors rich men, and then alcohol got 'im, as they say

"You need to know that Buck is just like his daddy He learned contractin', cussin', and drinkin' from Fane, and the only way he could get out from under the shadow of his father was to outdo him in all three categories."

Ron paused, as if to let that information sink in.

"Buck's on this job because he'll save us money--and a lot of grief. He'll bring it in on time and on budget, and you can count on it. Out of respect to you, Father, I talked to Jacobs about sending us another man, but they won't send anybody but Buck on a job this size." He stood up and zipped his jacket. "We'll probably hate Jacobs for this, but before it's over, we'll thank him."

"I trust your judgment."

Ron opened the door and was backing out with his hat in his hand.

"You might look softhearted, Father, but I've seen you operate a time or two, and I know you can handle Buck. Just give 'im his rein."

The rector looked out at the maple across the street, which had taken on a tinge of russet since yesterday. "I can't imagine that Mr. Leeper will be any problem at all," he said.

*

"Timothy?"

It was Cynthia, his neighbor, peering through the screened door of the kitchen, her hands cupped on either side of her eyes. She was wearing a white blouse and blue denim skirt and a bandanna around her blonde hair.

"You look like Heidi!" he said to his neighbor. Though she admitted to being fiftysomething, there were times when she looked like a gift. Again he was struck by the fresh, living way in which he saw people, as if he had lately risen from the dead.

She walked past him, unfurling the faintest scent of wisteria on the air. "You said to think of something we could do to celebrate your return."

She went to the stove and lifted the lid on the pot of soup he was making. "Yum," she said, inhaling. Then, she turned to him and smiled. Her eyes were like sapphires, smoky and deep with that nearly violet hue that always caught him off-guard.

"And have you thought about it?" he asked, afraid he might croak like a frog when he spoke.

"They say walls have ears. I'd better whisper it."

He had completely forgotten how easily she fit into his arms.

*

Going to a town council meeting was decidedly not what he wanted to do with his evening. After two months away, he hardly knew what was going on. And he was still feeling oddly jet-lagged, shaking his head vigorously on occasion with some hope of clearing it. But he would go; it might put him back in the swing of things, and frankly, he was curious why the mayor, Esther Cunningham, had called an unofficial meeting and why it might concern him.

"Don't eat," Esther told him on the phone. "Ray's bringin' baked beans, cole slaw, and ribs from home. Been cookin' all day."

"Hallelujah," he said with feeling.

There was a quickening in the air of the mayor's office. Ray was setting out his home-cooked supper on the vast desktop, overlooked by pictures of their twenty-one grandchildren at the far end.

"Mayor," said Leonard Bostick, "it's a cryin' shame you cain't cook as good as Ray."

"I've got better things to do," she snapped. "I did the cookin' for forty years. Now it's his turn."

Ray grinned. "You tell 'em, honey."

"Whooee!" said Paul Hartley. "Baby backs! Get over here, Father, and give us a blessin'."

"Come on!" shouted the mayor to the group lingering in the hall, "it's blessin' time!"

Esther Cunningham held out her hands, and the group eagerly formed a circle.

"Our Lord," said the rector, "we're grateful for the gift of friends and neighbors and those willing to lend their hand to the welfare of this place. We thank you for the peace of this village and for your' grace to do the work that lies ahead. We thank you, too, for this food and ask a special blessing on the one who prepared it. In Jesus' name."

"Amen!" said the assembly.

The mayor was the first in line. "You're goin' t' get a blessing, all right," she told her husband. "Just look at this sauce! You've done it again, sweet face."

Ray winked at the rector. There, thought the rector, is a happy man if I ever saw one.

"How's your diabetes, Father?"

"It won't tolerate the torque you've put under the hood of that pot, I regret to say."

"Take doubles on m' slaw, then," said Ray, heaping the rector's plate.

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"You know what we're here to talk about," said the mayor.

Everybody nodded, except the rector.

"I don't want it to come up in a town meetin', and I don't want it officially voted on, vetoed, or otherwise messed with. We're just goin' to seek agreement here tonight like a family and let it go at that."

She looked at their faces and leaned forward. "Got it?"

Linder Hayes stood up slowly, thin as a strip of baling wire. He placed his hands carefully behind his back, peered at his shoes, and cleared his throat.

"Here goes," said Joe Ivey, nudging the rector.

"Your honor," said Linder.

"You don't have t' `your honor' me. This is an unofficial meetin'."

"Your honor," said Linder, who was a lawyer and preferred the formalities, "I'd like to speak for the merchants of this town who have to make a livin' out of the day-to-day run of things.

"Now, we know that an old woman dressed up in party hats and gumboots, directin' traffic around the monument, is not a fit sight for tourists, especially with leaf season comin' on.

"You say she's harmless, but that, in fact, is not the point. With her infamous snaggle tooth and those old army decorations, think what she'd look like if she came flyin' out of th' fog wavin' at cars. She'd clean th' tourists out of here so fast it'd make your head swim."

"And good riddance," said the mayor testily.

"Madam Mayor, we've fought this tourist battle for years. We've all moved over to give you plenty of room to do your job, and you've done it. Your faithful defense of what is good and right and true to the character of this town has been a strong deterrent to the rape and plunder of senseless development and reckless growth.

"But . . ." Linder gave a long pause and looked around the room. "Two Model Village awards will not suffice our merchants for cold, hard cash. That ol' woman is enough to make babies squall and grown men tuck tail and run. Clearly, I don't have to make a livin' off tourists, but my wife does--and so, incidentally, do half your grandchildren."

"We're in for it," muttered Joe Ivey. "I should've carried a bed roll and a blanket."

"Linder," said Esther Cunningham, "sit down and take a load off your feet."

"Your honor ..."

"Thank you, Linder," the mayor said, measuring each word.

Linder appeared to waver for a moment, like a leaf caught in a breeze. Then, he sat down.

"I'd like us to look at a couple of things before we open for a brief discussion," said the mayor. "First, let's look at my platform. There is no such thing in it as a middle plank, a left plank, or a right plank. It's just one straight platform. Period. Joe, why don't you remind us what it is?"

Joe stood up. "Mitford takes care of its own!" He sat down again, flushed with pride.

"Mitford ... takes ... care ... of ... its ... own. That's been my platform for fourteen years, and as long as I'm mayor, it will continue to be th' platform. Number one. Miss Rose Watson may be snaggle-toothed and she may be crazy, but she's our own. Number two. Based on that, we're goin' to take care of 'er.

"Number three. Directin' traffic around the monument is the best thing that's happened to her since she was a little girl, as normal as you and me. Uncle Billy says she sleeps like a baby now, instead of ramblin' through that old house all night, and she's turned nice as you please to him. Directin' traffic is a genuine responsibility to her. She takes pride in it."

"She does a real good job," said Ernestine Ivory, who colored beet red at the sound of her own voice.

"What's that, Ernestine?" asked the mayor.

"Miss Rose does a real good job of directing traffic. 'Course that's just me . . ."

"That's just you and a lot of other people who think the same thing. She's very professional. I don't know where in th' world she learned it.

"Now, here's what I propose, and I ask you to consider it in your hearts. Every day from noon to one o'clock, traffic drops off and Mitford eats lunch. My stomach starts growlin' right on th' button, like th' rest of this crowd.

"I propose we let Miss Rose direct traffic five days a week, from noon 'til one, which'll give her just enough cars to keep her happy.

"Now, Linder, I have to hand it to you about those cocktail hats and funny clothes, so I propose we give 'er a uniform. Navy hat, skirt, and jacket from my old days in th' Waves. Be a perfect fit. I was skinny as a rail, wasn't I, doll?"

Ray gave the mayor a thumbs-up.

"Ernestine, I want you to go with me to dress her in th' mornin' at ten o'clock, and Joe, how about you givin' her a nice haircut. We'll bring 'er up to your shop about eleven."

"Be glad to."

"Father, I wish you'd make it your business to pray about this."

"You have my word," he said.

"And Linder, honey, I really appreciate the way you're lookin' after the merchants. God knows, somebody needs to. Any questions?"

Before anyone could respond, the mayor pounded her desk with a gavel. "Meeting adjourned. All in favor say aye."

"I declare," said the rector, walking home with Joe Ivey, "every time I go to a meeting with Esther Cunningham, I feel like somebody's screwed my head around backwards."

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You'll be coming home to a new Dooley, Marge had written just before he left Ireland. When he read that, his heart sank. He had managed to grow fond of the old Dooley.

He's actually learning to speak English, his friend wrote from Meadowgate Farm. Just wait; you'll be thrilled.

He couldn't say he had been thrilled, exactly, on seeing his twelve-year-old charge again. First, the cowlick had miraculously disappeared. When he left for Sligo in July, it had been shooting up like a geyser; now, it simply wasn't there, and frankly, he missed it. Then, he noticed that Dooley's freckles appeared to be fading, an upshot that he especially regretted.

He also found a new resoluteness in the boy that he'd only fleetingly glimpsed before, not to mention the fact that he was putting the top back on the catsup and the mayonnaise. How could so much change have taken place in two short months?

"I refuse to take credit," Marge told him on the phone from Meadowgate the morning after his return. "It's all that wonderful spade work you'd already done, laced with a strong dose of cow manure and fresh air. Last weekend, he helped Hal deliver a colt, which was like a shot of Miracle-Gro to his self-confidence. Furthermore, I'm crushed to tell you that Rebecca Jane took her first step to . . . guess who? Uncle Dools!"

I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase, the rector mused as he approached the rectory from the council meeting. Joe Ivey had offered him "a taste of brandy" if he cared to walk up the stairs to the barber shop, but he declined. He could hardly wait to get home and into the old burgundy bathrobe he'd sorely missed in Ireland.

After a quick trip with Barnabas to the Baxter Park hedge, he took a bottle of mineral water from the cabinet, and the two of them climbed the stairs.

"Dooley!"

"Yessir?"

Yessir? He walked down the hall to the boy's room and found him sitting against the head of his bed, reading and absently scratching his big toe. The room seemed remarkably well-ordered.

"How's it going?"

Dooley looked up. "Great."

"Terrific." He stood in the doorway, feeling an awkward joy. "What's the book?"

"Dynamics of Veterinary Medicine."

"Aha."

"See this?" Dooley held the book toward him. "It's a picture of a colt being born. That's jis' the way it happened last weekend. It's the neatest thing I ever done ... did. I want t' be a vet. Doc Owen said I could be one."

"Of course you can. You can be whatever you want to be." He stepped into the room.

"I never wanted to be anything before."

"Maybe you never saw any choices before."

"I never wanted to be an astronaut or a rock star or anything, like Buster Austin wants t' be."

"That's OK. Why rush into wanting to be something?" He sat down on the bed.

"That's what I thought." Dooley went back to his book, ignoring him but somehow comfortable with the fact that he was there.

"So, how's Buster?" Only months ago, he and Buster Austin had been the darkest adversaries, with Dooley whipping the tar out of him twice.

"Cool. We swapped lunches today. He likes 'at old meatloaf you make. I got 'is baloney."

"Done your homework?"

"Yessir."

Yessir. It rang in his ears like some foreign language. "How's the science project coming? Are we finishing it up Sunday evening?"

"Yep. You'll like it. It's neat."

Since he came home from Ireland, he'd been peering into Dooley's face, searching it out. Something was different. A wound had healed, perhaps; he was looking more like a boy instead of someone who'd grown old before his time.

It had been nearly a year since Russell Jacks, the church sexton and Dooley's grandfather, had come down with pneumonia and was rushed into emergency treatment. The boy had come home with him from the hospital, and he'd been here ever since.

One of the best things he had ever done was bring Dooley Barlowe home. Yes, he'd been trouble and calamity and plenty of it--but worth it and then some.

"I hear you went to see your grandpa every week. Good medicine."

"Yep."

"How is he?"

"That woman that's lookin' after 'im, she says he's doing good, but he ain't had any livermush since you left ..."

"Uh-oh."

"And he was riled about it."

"We'll take him some. And I'll see you at breakfast. Has Jenny been around?"

"I ain't into 'at ol' poop, n' more."

The rector grinned. There! he thought. There's my old Dooley

In his room, Barnabas leapt onto the blanket at the foot of the bed, then lay down with a yawn as the rector stepped into the shower. While the faltered room in the Sligo farmhouse had been perfectly comfortable, the long passage down the hall to the finicky shower was another story entirely. As far as he could see, it might be months before the thrill of his own bathroom, en suite, began to wane.

He felt as mindless and contented as a steamed clam as he sat on the bed and dialed his neighbor.

"Hello?"

"Hello, yourself."

"Timothy!" said Cynthia. "I was just thinking of you."

"Surely you have something better to do."

"I was thinking that my idea of how to celebrate was too silly"

"Silly, yes, but not too silly," he said. "In fact, I was wondering--when are we going to do it?"

"Ummmm ..."

"Saturday night?" he asked, hoping.

"Oh, rats. My nephew's coming. I mean, I'm delighted he's coming. You must meet him. He's very dear. Saturday would have been so perfect. Could we do it Monday evening?"

"Vestry meeting," he said.

"Tuesday I have to finish an illustration and FedEx it first thing Wednesday morning. Could you do it Wednesday around six-thirty?"

"Building committee at seven."

"Darn."

"I could do it Friday," he said.

"Great!"

"No. No, wait, there's something on Friday," he said, extending the phone cord to the dresser where he opened his black engagement book. "Yes, that's it. The hospital is having a staff dinner for Hoppy, and I'm giving the invocation. Would you come?"

"Dinner in a hospital? That's suicide! Besides, I can't stand hospitals. I nearly died in one, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"And I don't know how you ever will know these things unless we can figure out a way to see each other. What about Sunday evening? That's usually a relaxing time for you. Sunday might be lovely"

"I'm helping Dooley finish his science project. He has to hand it in Monday morning." A nameless despair was robbing him of any contentment he had just felt.

"I could meet you on the bench by your German roses at six o'clock tomorrow. We could do it there and get it over with."

But he didn't want to do it and get it over with. He wanted to linger over it, to savor it.

"You're sighing," she said.

"It's just that there's so much going on after being away for two months."

"I understand," she said simply.

"You do? Do you really?"

"Of course I do."

"I'll call you tomorrow. Let's not waste it on the garden bench."

"All that lumpy, wet moss," she said, laughing.

"All that cold, damp concrete," he said forlornly.

"I hope you sleep well." He could hear a tenderness in her voice. "Jet lag really does persist for days."

"Yes. Well. So," he said, feeling immeasurably foolish, "blink your bedroom lights good night."

"I will if you will."

"Cynthia?"

"Yes?"

"I . . ." He cleared his throat. "You . . ."

"Spit it out," she said.

He had started to croak; he couldn't have uttered another word if his life depended on it.

"I'm not going to worry anymore about being too silly. It's you, Timothy, who are far too silly!"

His heart pounded as he hung up the phone. He had nearly told her he loved her, that she was wonderful; he had nearly gone over the edge of the cliff, with no ledges to break his fall.

He went to the window and looked down upon her tiny house. He saw the lights blink twice through the windows of her bedroom under the eaves. He raced around the bed and flipped his own light switch off, then on again, and off.

"Good Lord," he said, breathlessly, standing there in the dark. "Who is the twelve year old in this house, anyway?"

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When he called at noon, her answering machine emitted a long series of beeps followed by a dial tone.

He had just hung up when the phone rang.

"Father!" It was Absalom Greer, the country preacher.

"Brother Greer! I was going to call you this very afternoon."

"Well, sir, how bad a mess did I leave for you to clean up?"

"People are still telling me how much they enjoyed your supply preaching at Lord's Chapel. We caught them off-guard, you know. I hope it didn't go too hard for you in the beginning."

"The first Sunday was mighty lean. Your flock didn't mind you too good about throwin' their support to an old revival preacher. Then the next Sunday, about half-full, I'd say. Third Sunday, full up. On and on like that 'til they were standin' on the steps.

"If you hadn't come home s' soon, we'd have had an altar call. It was all I could do t' hold it back toward the end."

Father Tim laughed. "You're going to be a tough act to follow, my friend."

"I tried to hold back on the brimstone, too, but I didn't always succeed. `Repent and be saved!' said John. `Repent and be saved!' said Jesus. There's the gist of it. If you don't repent, you don't get saved. So, you're lookin' at the alternative, and people don't want to hear that nowadays."

"You'd better prepare your crowd for me when I come out to the country."

Absalom laughed heartily. "That might be askin' the impossible!" He could see the faces of his rural Baptist congregation when they got a load of a preacher in a long dress.

"I've got something for you," said the rector. "I'd like to bring it out one day and hear what another man saw from the backside of my pulpit."

"Just let us know when you're comin'. We'll lay on a big feed."

"I'll do it! And God bless you for all the effort you gave us here. It counted for something. Ron Malcolm said you were as plain as the bark on a tree in delivering the Gospel."

"A man has to stand out of the way of the Gospel, and that keeps us plain if we let it."

The rector sat smiling after he hung up. There was nothing, in fact, plain about the old man with the craggy brows and mane of silver hair. His tall, lean frame made a stunning sight in the pulpit, Cynthia said, with his blue eyes blazing like flint striking rock and a sprig of laurel in his buttonhole.

Greer, he wrote on the calendar for the third week of October.

*

He was walking home from the office in a misting rain when the heavens erupted in a downpour.

Drenched at once, he raced to the wool shop and stood under the awning that was drumming with rain, pondering what to do. Hazel Bailey waved to him from the back of the shop, signaling that he should come in and take refuge. Already soaked, he decided he would make a run for it.

He lifted his newspaper over his head and was ready to dash toward the next awning, when he heard a car horn. It was Edith Mallory's black Lincoln, which was approximately the size of a condominium.

The window slipped down as if oiled, and her driver leaned across the seat. "Father Tim," Ed Coffey yelled, "Miz Mallory says get in. We'll carry you home."

The water was already running along the curb in a torrent.

He got in.

Edith Mallory might have been Cleopatra on her barge, for all the swath of silk raincoat that flowed against the cushiony leather and the mahogany bar that appeared from the arm rest.

"Sherry?" she said, smiling in that enigmatic way that made his adrenalin pump. It was, however, his flight adrenalin.

"No, thanks? he exclaimed, trying to do something with the sodden newspaper. A veritable cloud of perfume hung in the air of the warm interior; he felt instantly woozy, drugged, like a child of four going down for a nap.

That's the way it was with Edith; one's guard weakened when needed most.

"Dreadful weather, and you above all must mind your health ..."

Why above all, he wondered, irritated.

". . . Because you're our shepherd, of course, and your little flock needs you to take care of us." Edith looked at him with the large brown eyes that overpowered her sharp features, rather like, he thought, one of those urchin children in paintings done on velvet.

"Well, yes, you have a point," he said stiffly He saw Ed Coffey's eyes in the rearview mirror; the corners appeared to be crinkling, as if he were grinning hugely

"We want you to stay strong," she crooned, "for all your widows and orphans."

He looked out the window mindlessly, not noticing that they had passed his street. The awning over the Grill had come loose on one corner, and the rain was gushing onto the sidewalk like a waterfall.

"You might have just the weensiest sherry," she said, filling a small glass from a decanter that sat in the mahogany bar like an egg in a nest.

"I really don't think . . . . "he said, feeling the glass already in his hand.

"There, now!" she said. "That will hit the nail on the jackpot!" When she smiled, her wide mouth pushed her cheeks into a series of tiny wrinkles like those in crepe paper. Some people actually found her attractive, he reminded himself--why couldn't he?

He gulped the sherry and returned the glass to her, feeling like a child who had taken his croup medicine.

"Good boy," she said.

Where were they, anyway? The windows were streaming with, rain, and the lights of the car didn't penetrate far enough to give him any idea of their whereabouts. They had just passed the Grill, but he couldn't remember turning at the corner. Perhaps they had driven by the monument and were on their way to Wesley

"Why ah, haven't we gone to the rectory?" He felt a mild panic.

"We're going in just the weensiest minute," she said, blinking at him. He could not believe that her hand snaked across the seat toward his. He remembered the dream about the coat closet, and how he had pounded on the door and shouted for Russell Jacks.

He drew his hand away, quite unobtrusively, he thought, and scratched his nose. The sherry had turned on a small light in a far corner of his mind. Perhaps she imagined he'd be after her money for the Sunday school rooms and willing to do a little hand-holding to get it. It was going to take a cool two hundred thousand to turn that sprawling airstrip of an attic into the Sunday school Josiah Baxter had envisioned. But his own hand would most certainly not milk it forth. On his visitation meeting with the vestry, he had gone over a list of wouldn'ts, so no one would be aggrieved down the road.

He wouldn't, for example, participate in fund-raising efforts outside the pulpit. Period. He would not personally court, cajole, preach to, sweet-talk, or exhort anyone for money to build anything.

"Ah, Timothy," sighed Edith Mallory, rubbing the tweed of his sleeve as if it were a cat, "Ireland has done wonders for you, I can tell." She moved closer. "It's so lonely being a widow," she said, sniffing. "I sometimes just . . . ache all over."

When he was finally delivered to the rectory, nearly soaked to the skin, Puny was getting ready to leave. She stared at him with alarm as she put on her coat.

"You look like you been through somethin' awful!"

"Hell!" he exclaimed.

She was shocked to hear him use such language.

There was a red pickup truck parked in front of the office when he arrived on Monday Someone inside appeared to be talking on a car phone.

The rector fished the key from his pocket as the man got out of the truck and slammed the door. He flipped a cigarette to the sidewalk and ground it out with a quick turn of his heel.

He was big, beefy, and heavy, wearing chinos stuffed into high boots, a flannel shirt under a quilted vest, and a hard hat.

"You the father?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

The man took a package of Lucky Strikes from his shirt pocket, shook a cigarette out, lit it, and inhaled deeply

"Buck Leeper," he said, walking to the rector and extending his hand. The handshake lasted only an instant, but in that instant, the rector felt an odd shock. The hand seemed hugely swollen and red, as if the flesh might burst suddenly from the skin.

"I'm glad to meet you," he lied, hearing the words automatically form and speak themselves. Yet, in a way, he was glad to meet him; the deed was done. "Come in, Mr. Leeper, and have a cup of coffee."

"No coffee," he said, wedging through the door ahead of the rector. The rector hung his jacket on the peg, noticing how the man's presence had made the room suddenly smaller.

"Malcolm said to ask you about the garden statues."

"Garden statues?"

"Lyin' up there on the site. We dozed 'em up. Maybe a dozen pieces, some broke, some not. I don't have time to mess with it." He exhaled a fume of smoke.

"How extraordinary. Of course. I'll be right up. Give me an hour."

The superintendent took a quick, deep drag off his cigarette. "At fifty smackers an hour for dozers, I don't have an hour."

"Well, then. What would you suggest I do?"

Leeper's tone was insolent and hard. "Tell me I can doze that crap off the side of the mountain."

The rector felt ice water in his veins. "I'd appreciate it," he said evenly, "if you'd put your cigarette out. This small room doesn't tolerate smoke."

The superintendent looked at him for a long moment, dropped his cigarette on the floor, and ground it out with a turn of his heel.

He opened the door. "I don't have time to tun errands for your building committee. If you want th' statues, come and get `em," he said and was gone.