

## **Out to Cannan -1<sup>st</sup> Chapter**

### A Tea and a Half

THE INDOOR PLANTS were among the first to venture outside and breathe the fresh, cold air of Mitford's early spring.

Eager for a dapple of sunlight, starved for the revival of mountain breezes, dozens of begonias and ferns, snake plants, Easter lilies, and wandering Jew were set out, pot-bound and listless, on porches throughout the village.

As the temperature soared into the low fifties, Winnie Ivey thumped three begonias, a sullen gloxinia, and a Boston fern onto the back steps of the house on Lilac Road, where she was now living. Remembering the shamrock, which was covered with aphids, she went back and fetched it out and set it on the railing.

"There!" she said, collecting a lungful of the sharp, pure air. "That ought to fix th' lot of you."

When she opened the back door the following morning, she was stricken at the sight. The carefully wintered plants had been turned to mush by a stark raving freeze and minor snow that also wrenched any notion of early bloom from the lilac bushes.

It was that blasted puzzle she'd worked until one o'clock in the morning, which caused her to forget last night's weather news. There she'd sat like a moron, her feet turning to ice as the temperature plummeted, trying to figure out five letters across for a grove of trees.

Racked with guilt, she consoled herself with the fact that it had, at least, been a chemical-free way to get rid of aphids.

At the hardware, Dora Pugh shook her head and sighed. Betrayed by yesterday's dazzling sunshine, she had done display windows with live baby chicks, wire garden fencing, seeds, and watering cans. Now, she might as well haul the snow shovels back and do a final clearance on salt for driveways.

Coot Hendrick collected his bet of five dollars and an RC cola from Lew Boyd. "Ain't th' first time and won't be th' last you'll see snow in May," he said, grinning. Lew Boyd hated it when Coot grinned, showing his stubs for teeth. He mostly hated it that, concerning weather in Mitford, the skeptics, cynics, and pessimists were usually right.

"Rats!" said Cynthia Kavanagh, who had left a wet scatter rug hanging over the rectory porch rail. Lifting it off the rail, she found it frozen as a Popsicle and able to stand perfectly upright.

Father Timothy Kavanagh, the local rector, had never heard such moaning and groaning about spring's tedious delay, and encountered it even in Happy Endings bookstore, where, on yet another cold, overcast morning, he picked up a volume entitled Hummingbirds in the Garden.

"Hummingbirds?" wailed young Hope Winchester, ringing the sale. "What hummingbirds? I suppose you think a hummingbird would dare stick its beak into this arctic tundra, this endless twilight this . . . this villatic barbican?"

Villatic Barbican was a phrase she had learned just yesterday from a book, and wanted to use it before she forgot it. She knew the rector from Lord's Chapel was somebody she could use such words with -- he hadn't flinched when she said "empiric" only last week, and seemed to know exactly what she was talking about.

While everyone else offered lamentations exceeding those of the prophet Jeremiah, the rector felt smugly indifferent to complaints that spring would never come. Turning up his collar, he leaned into a driving wind and headed toward the office.

Hadn't winter dumped ice, snow, sleet, hail, and rain storms on the village since late October? Hadn't they been blanketed by fog so thick you could cut it with a dull knife, time and time again? With all that moisture seeping into the ground for so many long months, didn't it foretell the most glorious springtime in years? And wouldn't that be, after all, worth the endless assault?

"Absolutely!" he proclaimed aloud, trucking past the Irish Woolen Shop. "No doubt about it!"

"See there?" said Hessie Mayhew, peering out the store window. "It's got Father Tim talking to himself, it's that bad." She sighed. "They say if sunlight doesn't get to your pineal glands for months on end, your sex drive quits."

Minnie Lomax, who was writing sale tags for boiled wool sweaters, looked up and blinked. "What do you know about pineal glands?" She was afraid to ask what Hessie might know about sex drive.

"What does anybody know about pineal glands?" asked Hessie, looking gloomy.

Uncle Billy Watson opened his back door and, without leaving the threshold, lifted the hanging basket off the nail and hauled it inside.

"Look what you've gone and done to that geranium!" snapped his wife of nearly fifty years. "I've petted that thing the winter long, and now it's dead as a doornail."

The old man looked guilt stricken. "B'fore I hung it out there, hit was already gone south!"

"Shut my mouth? Did you say shut my mouth?" Miss Rose, who refused to wear hearing aids, glared at him.

"I said gone south! Dead! Yeller leaves!"

He went to the kitchen radiator and thumped the hanging basket on top. "There," he said, disgusted with trying to have a garden in a climate like this, "that'll fire it up again."

The rector noted the spears of hosta that had congregated in beds outside the office door. Now, there, as far as spring was concerned, was something you could count on. Hosta was as sturdy a plant as you could put in the ground. Like the postman, neither sleet nor snow could

drive it back. Once it emerged from the dirt, up it came, fiercely defiant -- only, of course, to have its broad leaves shredded like so much Swiss cheese by Mitford's summer hail.

"It's a jungle out there," he sighed, unlocking his office door.

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After the snow flurry and freeze came a day of rain, followed by a sudden storm of sleet that pecked against the windows like a flock of house sparrows.

His wife, he noted, looked pale. She was sitting at the study window, staring at the infernal weather and chewing her bottom lip. She was also biting the cuticle of her thumb, wrapping a strand of hair around one finger, tapping her foot, and generally amusing herself. He, meanwhile, was reading his new book, and doing something productive.

A low fire crackled on the hearth.

"Amazing!" he said. "You'd never guess one of the things that attracts butterflies."

"I don't have a clue," said Cynthia, appearing not to want one, either. The sleet gusted against the window panes.

"Birdbaths!" he exclaimed. No response. "Thinking about the Primrose Tea, are you?"

The second edition of his wife's famous parish-wide tea was coming in less than two weeks. Last year at this time, she was living on a stepladder, frantically repainting the kitchen and dining room, removing his octogenarian drapes, and knocking holes in the plaster to affect an "old Italian villa look." Now here she was, staring out the window without any visible concern for the countless lemon squares, miniature quiches, vegetable sandwiches, and other items she'd need to feed a hundred and twenty-five women, nearly all of whom would look upon the tea as lunch.

His dog, Barnabas, ambled in and crashed by the hearth, as if drugged.

Cynthia tapped her foot and drummed her fingers on the chair arm. "Hmmm," she said.

"Hmmm what?"

She looked at him. "T. D. A."

"T. D. A.?"

"The Dreaded Armoire, dearest."

His heart pounded. Please, no. Not the armoire. "What about it?" he asked, fearing the answer.

"It's time to move it into our bedroom from the guest room. Remember? We said we were going to do it in the spring!" She smiled at him suddenly, as she was wont to do, and her sapphire-colored eyes gleamed. After a year and a half of marriage, how was it that a certain look from her still made him weak in the knees?

"Aha."

"So!" she said, lifting her hands and looking earnest.

"So? So, it's not spring!" He got up from the sofa and pointed toward the window. "See that? You call that spring? This, Kavanagh, is as far from spring as . . . as . . ."

"As Trieste is from Wesley," she said, helping out, "or the Red Sea from Mitford Creek." He could never get over the way her mind worked. "But do not look at the weather, Timothy, look at the calendar! May third!"

Last fall, they had hauled the enormous armoire down her stairs, down her back steps, through the hedge, up his back steps, along the hall, and finally, up the staircase to the guest room, where he had wanted nothing more than to fall prostrate on the rug.

Had she liked it in the guest room, after all that? No, indeed. She had despised the very sight of it sitting there, and instantly came up with a further plan, to be executed in the spring; all of which meant more unloading of drawers and shelves, more lashing the doors closed with a rope, and more hauling -- this time across the landing to their bedroom, where, he was convinced, it would tower over them in the night like a five-story parking garage.

"What are you going to do about the tea?" he asked, hoping to distract her.

"Not much at all 'til we get the armoire moved. You know how they are, Timothy, they want to poke into every nook and cranny. Last year, Hessie Mayhew was down on her very hands and knees, peering into the laundry chute, I saw her with my own eyes. And Georgia Moore opened every cabinet door in the kitchen, she said she was looking for a water glass, when I know for a fact she was seeing if the dishes were stacked to her liking. So, I certainly can't have the armoire standing on that wall in the guest room where it is clearly" -- she paused and looked at him -- "clearly out of place."

He was in for it.

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He had managed to hold off the move for a full week, but, in return for the delay, was required to make four pans of brownies (a specialty since seminary), clean out the fireplace, black the andirons, and prune the overgrown forsythia at the dining room windows.

Not bad, considering.

On Saturday morning before the big event the following Friday, he rose early, prayed, studied Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and sat with his sermon notes; then he ran two miles with Barnabas on his red leash, and returned home fit for anything.

His heart still pounding from the final sprint across Baxter Park, he burst into the kitchen, which smelled of lemons, cinnamon, and freshly brewed coffee. "Let's do it!" he cried. And get it over with, he thought.

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The drawers were out, the shelves were emptied, the doors were lashed shut with a rope. This time, they were dragging it across the floor on a chenille bedspread, left behind by a former rector.

" . . . a better way of life!"

Cynthia looked up. "What did you say, dearest?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Mack Stroupe will bring improvement, not change . . .

They stepped to the open window of the stair landing and looked down to the street. A new blue pickup truck with a public address system was slowly cruising along Wisteria Lane, hauling a sign in the bed. Mack for Mitford, it read; Mitford for Mack.

" . . . improvement, not change. So, think about it, friends and neighbors. And remember -- here in Mitford, we already have the good life. With Mack as mayor, we'll all have a better life!" A loud blast of country music followed: "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything . . ."

She looked at him. "Mack Stroupe! Please, no."

He wrinkled his brow and frowned. "This is May. Elections aren't 'til November."

"Starting a mite early."

"I'll say," he agreed, feeling distinctly uneasy.

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"He's done broke th' noise ordinance," said Chief Rodney Underwood, hitching up his gun belt.

Rodney had stepped to the back of the Main Street Grill to say hello to the early morning regulars in the rear booth. "Chapter five, section five-two in the Mitford Code of Ordinance lays it out. No PA systems for such a thing as political campaigns."

"Startin' off his public career as a pure criminal," said Mule Skinner.

"Which is th' dadgum law of the land for politicians!" The Mitford Muse editor, J. C. Hogan, mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

"Well, no harm done. I slapped a warning on 'im, that ordinance is kind of new. Used to, politicians was haulin' a PA up and down th' street, ever' whichaway."

"What about that truck with the sign?" asked Father Tim.

"He can haul th' sign around all he wants to, but th' truck has to keep moving.' If he parks it on town property, I got 'im. I can run 'im in and he can go to readin' Southern Livin'." The local jail was the only detention center the rector ever heard of that kept neat stacks of Southern Living magazine in the cells.

"I hate to see a feller make a fool of hisself," said Rodney. "Ain't nobody can whip Esther Cunningham -- an' if you say I said that, I'll say you lied."

"Right," agreed Mule.

" 'Course, she has told it around that one of these days, her an' Ray are takin' off in th' RV and leave th' mayorin' to somebody else."

Mule shook his head. "Fifteen years is a long time to be hog-tied to a thankless job, all right."

"Is that Mack's new truck?" asked Father Tim. As far he knew, Mack never had two cents to rub together, as his hot-dog stand by the Exxon station never seemed to rake in much business.

"I don't know whose truck it is, it sure couldn't be Mack's. Well, I ain't got all day to loaf, like you boys." Rodney headed for the register to pick up his breakfast order. "See you in th' funny papers."

J.C. scowled. "I don't know that I'd say nobody can whip Esther. Mack's for improvement, and we're due for a little improvement around here, if you ask me."

"Nobody asked you," said Mule.

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He dialed the number from his office. "Mayor!"

"So it's the preacher, is it? I've been lookin' for you."

"What's going on?"

"If that low-down scum thinks he can run me out of office, he's got another think coming."

"Does this mean you're not going to quit and take off with Ray in the RV?"

"Shoot! That's what I say just to hear my head roar. Listen -- you don't think the bum has a chance, do you?"

"To tell the truth, Esther, I believe he does have a chance . . .

Esther's voice lowered. "You do?"

"About the same chance as a snowball in July."

She laughed uproariously, and then sobered. "Of course, there is one way that Mack Stroupe could come in here and sit behind th' mayor's desk."

He was alarmed. "Really?"

"But only one. And that's over my dead body."

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Something new was going on at home nearly every day.

On Tuesday evening, he found a large, framed watercolor hanging in the rectory's once-gloomy hallway. It was of Violet, Cynthia's white cat and the heroine of the award-winning

children's books created by his unstoppable wife. Violet sat on a brocade cloth, peering into a vase filled with nasturtiums and a single, wide-eyed goldfish.

"Stunning!" he said. "Quite a change."

"Call it an improvement," she said, pleased.

On Wednesday, he found new chintz draperies in the dining room and parlor, which gave the place a dazzling elegance that fairly bowled him over. But -- hadn't they agreed that neither would spend more than a hundred bucks without the other's consent?

She read his mind. "So, the draperies cost five hundred, but since the watercolor is worth that and more on the current market, it's a wash."

"Aha."

"I'm also doing one of Barnabas, for your study. Which means," she said, "that the family coffers will respond by allotting new draperies for our bedroom."

"You're a bookkeeping whiz, Kavanagh. But why new draperies when we're retiring in eighteen months?"

"I've had them made so they can go anywhere, and fit any kind of windows. If worse comes to worst, I'll remake them into summer dresses, and vestments for my clergyman."

"That's the spirit!"

Why did he feel his wife could get away with anything where he was concerned? Was it because he'd waited sixty-two years, like a stalled ox, to fall in love and marry?

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If he and Cynthia had written a detailed petition on a piece of paper and sent it heavenward, the weather couldn't have been more glorious on the day of the talked-about tea.

Much to everyone's relief, the primroses actually bloomed. However, no sooner had the eager blossoms appeared than Hessie Mayhew bore down on them with a vengeance, in yards and hidden nooks everywhere. She knew precisely the location of every cluster of primroses in the village, not to mention the exact whereabouts of each woods violet, lilac bush, and pussy willow.

"It's Hessie!" warned an innocent bystander on Hessie's early morning run the day of the tea. "Stand back!"



Furnished with a collection of baskets, which she wore on her arms like so many bracelets, Hessie did not allow help from the Episcopal Church Women, or any of her own presbyters. She worked alone, she worked fast, and she worked smart.

After going at a trot through neighborhood gardens, huffing up Old Church Lane to a secluded bower of early-blooming shrubs, and combing four miles of country roadside, she showed up at the back door of the rectory at precisely eleven a.m., looking triumphant.

Sodden with morning dew and black dirt, she delivered a vast quantity of flowers, moss, and grapevine into the hands of the rector's househelp, Puny Guthrie, then flew home to bathe, dress, and put antibiotic cream on her knees, which were skinned when she leaned over to pick a wild trillium and fell sprawling.

The Episcopal Church Women, who had arrived as one body at ten-thirty, flew into the business of arranging "Hessie's truck," as they called it, while Barnabas snored in the garage and Violet paced in her carrier.

"Are you off?" asked Cynthia, as the rector came at a trot through the hectic kitchen. "Off and running. I finished polishing the mail slot, tidying the slipcover on the sofa, and trimming the lavender by the front walk. I also beat the sofa pillows for any incipient dust, and coughed for a full five minutes.

"Well done!" she said, cheerily, giving him a hug.

"I'll be home at one-thirty to help the husbands park cars."

Help the husbands park cars? he thought as he sprinted toward the office. He was a husband! After all these months, the thought still occasionally slammed him in the solar plexus and took his breath away.

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Nine elderly guests, including the Kavanaghs' friend, Louella, arrived in the van from Hope House and were personally escorted up the steps of the rectory and into the hands of the Altar Guild.

Up and down Wisteria Lane, men with armbands stitched with primroses and a cross directed traffic, which quickly grew snarled. At one point, the rector leaped into a stalled Chevrolet and managed to roll it to the curb. Women came in car pools, husbands dropped off spouses, daughters delivered mothers, and all in all, the narrow street was as congested as a carnival in Rio.

"This is th' biggest thing to hit Mitford since th' blizzard two years ago," said Mule Skinner, who was a Baptist, but offered to help out, anyway.

The rector laughed. "That's one way to look at it." Didn't anybody ever walk in this town?

"Look here!"

It was Mack Stroupe in that blasted pickup truck, carting his sign around in their tea traffic. Mack rolled by, chewing on a toothpick and looking straight ahead.

"You comin' to the Primrose Tea?" snapped Mule. "If not, get this vehicle out of here, we're tryin' to conduct a church function!"

Four choir members, consisting of a lyric soprano, a mezzosoprano, and two altos, arrived in a convertible, looking windblown and holding on to their hats.

"Hats is a big thing this year," observed Uncle Billy Watson, who stood at the curb with Miss Rose and watched the proceedings. Uncle Billy was the only man who showed up at last year's tea, and now considered his presence at the event to be a tradition.

Uncle Billy walked out on the street with the help of his cane and tapped Father Tim on the shoulder. "Hit's like a Chiney puzzle, don't you know. If you 'uns'd move that'n off to th' side and git that'n to th' curb, hit'd be done with."

"No more parking on Wisteria," Ron Malcolm reported to the rector. "We'll direct the rest of the crowd to the church lot and shoot 'em back here in the Hope House van."

A UPS driver, who had clearly made an unwise turn onto Wisteria, sat in his truck in front of the rectory, stunned by the sight of so much traffic on the usually uneventful Holding-Mitford-Wesley run.

"Hit's what you call a standstill," Uncle Billy told J. C. Hogan, who showed up with his Nikon and six rolls of Tri-X.

As traffic started to flow again, the rector saw Mack Stroupe turn onto Wisteria Lane from Church Hill. Clearly, he was circling the block.

"I'd like to whop him upside th' head with a two-by-four," said Mule. He glared at Mack, who was reared back in the seat with both windows down, listening to a country music station. Mack waved to several women, who immediately turned their heads.

Mule snorted. "Th' dumb so-and-so! How would you like to have that peckerwood for mayor?"

The rector wiped his perspiring forehead. "Watch your blood pressure, buddyroe."

"He says he's goin' to campaign straight through spring and summer, right up to election in November. Kind of like bein' tortured by a drippin' faucet."

As the truck passed, Emma Newland stomped over. "I ought to climb in that truck and slap his jaws. What's he doin', anyway, trying to sway church people to his way of thinkin'?"

"Let him be," he cautioned his secretary and on-line computer whiz. After all, give Mack enough rope and . . .

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Cynthia was lying in bed, moaning, as he came out of the shower. He went into the bedroom, hastily drying off.

"Why are you moaning?" he asked, alarmed.

"Because it helps relieve exhaustion. I hope the windows are closed so the neighbors can't hear."

"The only neighbor close enough to hear is no longer living in the little yellow house next door. She is, in fact, lying right here, doing the moaning."

She moaned again. "Moaning is good," she told him, her face mashed into the pillow. "You should try it."

"I don't think so," he said.

Warm as a steamed clam from the shower, he put on his pajamas and sat on the side of the bed. "I'm proud of you," he said, rubbing her back. "That was a tea and a half! The best! In fact, words fail. You'll have a time topping that one."

"Don't tell me I'm supposed to top it!"

"Yes, well, not to worry. Next year, we can have Omer Cunningham and his pilot buddies do a fly-over. That'll give the ladies something to talk about."

"A little further down," she implored. "It's my lower back. Ugh. It's killing me from all the standing and baking."

"I got the reviews as your guests left."

"Only tell me the good ones, I don't want to hear about the cheese straws, which were as limp as linguine."

'Perfect' was a word they bandied around quite a bit, and the lemon squares, of course, got their usual share of raves. Some wanted me to know how charming they think you are, and others made lavish remarks about your youth and beauty."

He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek, inhaling the faintest scent of wisteria. "You are beautiful, Kavanagh."

"Thanks."

"I don't suppose there are any special thanks you'd like to offer the poor rube who helped unsnarl four thousand three hundred and seventy-nine cars, trucks, and vans?"

She rolled over and looked at him, smiling. Then she held her head to one side in that way he couldn't resist, and pulled him to her and kissed him tenderly.

"Now you're talking," he said.

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

Dooley! "Hey, yourself, buddy."

"Is Cynthia sending me a box of stuff she made for that tea? I can't talk long."

"Two boxes. Went off today."

"Man! Thanks!"

"You're welcome. How's school?"

"Great."

Great? Dooley Barlowe was not one to use superlatives. "No kidding?"

"You're going to like my grades."

Was this the little guy he'd struggled to raise for nearly three years? The Dooley who always shot himself in the foot? The self-assured sound of the boy's voice made his hair fairly stand on end.

"We're going to like you coming home, that's what. In just six or seven weeks, you'll be here . . ."

Silence. Was Dooley dreading to tell him he wanted to spend the summer at Meadowgate Farm? The boy's decision to do that last year had nearly broken his heart, not to mention

Cynthia's. They had, of course, gotten over it, as they watched the boy doing what he loved -- learning more about veterinary medicine at the country practice of Hal Owen.

"Of course," said the rector, pushing on, "we want you to go out to Meadowgate, if that's what you'd like to do." He swallowed. This year, he was stronger, he could let go.

"OK," said Dooley, "that's what I'd like to do."

"Fine. No problem. I'll call you tomorrow for our usual phone visit. We love you."

"I love you back."

"Here's Cynthia."

"Hey," she said.

Hey, yourself." It was their family greeting.

"So, you big galoot, we sent a box for you and one to share with your friends."

"What's in it?"

"Lemon squares."

"I like lemon squares. Plus raspberry tarts, pecan truffles, and brownies made by the preacher."

"Thanks."

"Are you OK?"

"Yes."

"No kidding?"

"Yep."

"Good!" said Cynthia. "Lace Turner asked about you the other day."

"That dumb girl that dresses like a guy?"

"She doesn't dress like a guy anymore. Oh, and Jenny was asking about you, too."

"How's Tommy?"

"Missing you. Just as we do. So hurry home, even if you are going to spend the summer at Meadowgate, you big creep."

Dooley cackled.

"We love you."

"I love you back."

Cynthia placed the receiver on the hook, smiling happily.

"Now, you poor rube," she said, "where were we?"

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He sat on the study sofa and took the rubber band off the Mitford Muse.

Good grief! There he was on the front page, standing bewildered in front of the UPS truck with his nose looking, as usual, like a turnip or a tulip bulb. Why did J. C. Hogan run this odious picture, when he might have photographed his hardworking, good-looking, and thoroughly deserving wife?

Primrose Tee Draws  
Stand-Out Crowd

Clearly, Hessie had not written this story, but had given her notes to J.C., who had forged ahead without checking his spelling.

Good time had by all . . . same time next year . . . a hundred and thirty guests . . . nine gallons of tea, ten dozen lemon squares, eight dozen raspberry tarts . . . traffic jam . . .

The phone gave a sharp blast.

"Hello?"

"Timothy . . ."

"Hal! I've just been thinking of you and Marge."

"Good. And we of you. I've got some . . . hard news, and wanted you to know."

Hal and Marge Owen were two of his closest, most valued friends. He was afraid to know.

"I've just hired a full-time assistant."

"That's the bad news? It sounds good to me, you work like a Trojan."

"Yes, but . . . we won't be able to have Dooley this summer. My assistant is a young fellow, just starting out, and I'll have to give him a lot of time and attention. Also, we're putting him up in Dooley's room until he gets established." Hal sighed.

"But that's terrific. You know Dooley's looking forward to being there -- however, circumstances alter cases, as my Mississippi kin used to say."

"There's a large riding stable coming in about a mile down the road, they've asked me to vet the horses. That could be a full-time job, right there."

"I understand. Of course. Your practice is growing."

"We'll miss the boy, Tim, you know how we feel about him, how Rebecca Jane loves him. But look, we'll have him out the first two weeks he's home from school, if that works for you."

"Absolutely."

"Ah . . ."

"Yes?"

"Will you tell him?"

"I will. I'll talk to him in the next couple of days, get him thinking of what to do this summer. Be good for him."

"So why don't you and Cynthia plan to bring him out and spend the day? Bring Barnabas, too. Marge will make your favorite."

Deep-dish chicken pie, with a crust like French pastry. "We'll be there!" he said, meaning it.

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"Will you tell him?" he asked Cynthia.

"No way," she said.

Nobody wanted to tell Dooley Barlowe that he couldn't spend the summer doing what he loved more than anything on earth.

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She opened her eyes and rolled over to find him sitting up in bed.

"Oh, my dear! Oh, my goodness! What happened?"

He loved the look on his wife's face, he wanted to savor it. "It's already turned a few colors," he said, removing his hand from his right temple.

She peered at him as if he were a butterfly on a pin. "Yes! Black . . . and blue and . . . the tiniest bit of yellow."

"My old school colors," he said.

"But what happened?" He never heard such tssking and gasping.

"T. D. A," he replied.

"The dreaded armoire? What do you mean?"

"I mean that I got up in the middle of the night, in the dark, and went out to the landing, and opened the windows to give Barnabas a cool breeze. As I careened through the bedroom on my way to the bathroom, I slammed into the blasted thing."

"Oh, no. Oh, heavens. What can I do? And tomorrow's Sunday!"

"Spousal abuse," he muttered. "In today's TV news climate, my congregation will pick up on it immediately."

"Timothy, dearest, I'm so sorry. I'll get something for you, I don't know what, but something. Just stay right there and don't move."

She put on her slippers and robe and flew downstairs, Barnabas barking at her heels.

T. D. A. might stand for "The Dreaded Armoire" as far as his wife was concerned. As far as he was concerned, it stood for something else entirely.