

**THE POLYCHEM PLASTICS PLANT
AND OTHER STORIES**

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Keith R. Parris

Black Knight Classic
San Antonio, Texas

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Black Knight Classic

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION	iv
The PolyChem Plastics Plant	1
Monday's Mail	25
Mrs. Willoughby's Gift	39
Praying for Antonio	55
About the Author	73

INTRODUCTION



The stories presented on these pages reflect the themes and moods of life in today's demanding world and the human challenges faced by ordinary people. Here, the artistry of words is used to paint vivid passages where even the smallest detail is perfectly and seemingly without effort applied to the author's newborn canvas.

These stories are simple and direct, yet original and powerful. They offer no sanctuary to the outworn, the tired or the trivial. The stories are instinctive and not burdened with radical or intellectual contradictions and confusion. Common sense has not been exiled in favor of predetermined convention or the indulgence of imitation.

The author's approach to storytelling is free and unlabored. It flows in unreserved progression from its roots to its conclusion. The author's pen has not been asked to give words to his characters. Indeed, his task and that of pen and ink have been to listen to the characters who present themselves and to faithfully record their stories in their own words, as if these words were being recollected and told face-to-face to the reader.

In *The PolyChem Plastics Plant*, the reader will find the universal themes of human life, which touch on the great hopes and faiths of humankind as well as humanity's imperfections and failures. Stony and Ella Morgan have flaws as certainly as they have dreams and aspirations. Nell O'Connor may be loving or overly possessive and Sophia Costanzia may be as undeniably evil as she is beautiful. Nowhere, however, will one find contempt for the individual fate of any character living within this story.

The other stories contained in this collection offer a wide variety of captivating material. *Monday's Mail* explores the limits

imposed upon Margie Megan (Simpson) Riley in her quest for personal freedom and the obstacles encountered in attempting to hold on to her aging father and maturing sons. In *Mrs. Willoughby's Gift*, William Randal Rollins is confronted by an adult world that offers both understanding and powerful threats. The forces that surround him seem determined to deprive him of health, love and, most of all, the gift from his beloved teacher. Lastly, *Praying for Antonio* brings us to the precipice of incomprehensible destruction. The arguments over the social and political ramifications of illegal immigration are the backdrop for a plot of terror intended to destroy a city, its inhabitants and the social fabric of society itself.

These stories go beyond the boundaries of their settings. Whether the characters are in the grip of innocent or ignorant social forces, or the complexities of mercy or subhuman cruelty, they are true to the realities of their and our world. The author's observations are sharp and inviting. There is no tolerance for lack of clarity or poor quality. The reader will feel a familiarity with the characters and with their experiences. He or she will not be alienated by deliberate baseness of unimaginable depths. Whether the story is about heroes or villains, victims or survivors, the author hopes the reader will enjoy and be entertained by the journey through this collection of creative works.

THE POLYCHEM PLASTICS PLANT

At 2 o'clock on a sweltering Saturday afternoon last July, not much more than a month ago, Stony Morgan sat in his living room celebrating his 40th birthday. He was watching the New York Yankees take on the Boston Red Sox and, as was his custom, arguing with every ball and strike the home plate umpire called. Ella, Stony's wife, had taken refuge from the contentious event and was sitting in her kitchen with a newly opened bottle of wine from somewhere in Burgundy. Though fragments of the verbal exchanges between the TV and her husband filled the house, Ella's thoughts were in a faraway place, which she knew and cared to know little about.

That same afternoon, a young lieutenant from the Grandview Marine Corps Forces Reserve drove past the PolyChem Plastics Plant and stopped a few blocks away in front of Stony and Ella Morgan's house. The dark windows of the motor pool vehicle he was driving were raised full up and a laboring air conditioner was blowing noisy streams of cool air across the car's interior. The solitary driver found himself engaged in a battle to relieve growing anxiety by mouthing the words to his dad's favorite song.

The car's radio was tuned to a syndicated, golden oldies station that had programmed a 2-hour segment devoted to the history and music of *The Mamas and the Papas*. Not surprisingly, *Monday, Monday* was blaring across the airwaves and competing with the rush of air conditioned comfort for the lieutenant's attention. He listened to Mama Cass and the other members of the long-ago-separated group until their words died away. The brief interlude encouraged his fingers to find the door's armrest and, after resting there momentarily, they toggled a switch that lowered one of the windows. His eyes scanned the metallic, black numbers lined up alongside the home's front door before dropping inside to view a piece of official stationery.

There was nothing unusual about the Morgans' house compared to all the others facing the potholed tar-and-gravel street, except for the

large American flag that flew from one of its four pillars. These pillars stood like soldiers at attention across the entire length of the front porch. In their shadows, two rocking chairs in need of fresh paint were stationed near an aging planter that contained a hodgepodge of flowers showing the effects of summer temperatures and obvious neglect.

The lieutenant stared for quite some time at the flag and the brick steps leading to the front door before stepping out of his vehicle and straightening his uniform. He brushed away beads of sweat, which had quickly gathered across his brow. Then he leaned, as a tree that is nearly cut through leans before falling to earth, and ducked inside the car to retrieve his hat and a manila folder containing a single letter within its protective cover.

He didn't remember reaching out with a tremble in his hand to nudge the car door closed and he barely remembered the footsteps that led him up the sidewalk to the brick steps, past the large flag and onto the wide expanse of the porch, but he found himself face-to-face with the door and he raised a clinched fist and knocked, loudly enough that he was certain he could be heard above the play-by-play that filtered its way to his ears. He straightened his uniform a second time and stood at attention. His eyes were riveted on the door, anticipating the arrival of someone to release its latch and respond to his presence with concern and apprehension. He never saw the globe insignia with its eagle and anchor or the ivory colored button in its center that would have announced his arrival, but this oversight was excusable and of no important consequence.

Stony Morgan had married Ella Mabry and served 4 years in the Marine Corps after graduating from high school in 1984. Upon being discharged from military service and returning home, he had been hired at PolyChem. Like his father before him, he had begun work by performing general maintenance throughout the plant. Over the years, he had earned his way to a supervisory position in the extrusion section, where plastic fibers for everything from hairbrushes to street sweepers were fabricated.

Stony had proven to be a carbon copy of his father. Both men were known as rabble rousers and carousers and they had pushed the patience

of the local police to the limits that the law would tolerate until the three-pack-a-day habit that Stony's father enjoyed had eaten up his mouth and throat before sending him unceremoniously to his grave about 10 years ago. That loss destroyed the illusion Stony had used to remain a boy in the footsteps of his father. It had thrown him full time into the role of father and husband and Stony had found himself lacking in both respects.

Ella had tried to look past Stony's failings and to take some measure of satisfaction and joy in her son, but when Stony signed papers that allowed their boy to join the Marines on his 17th birthday, she fell into a depression that led to prescription upon prescription and finally to addiction and the bottomless pit of alcohol. A glimmer of hope that her son would return home safely had blossomed for Ella when he left active duty and joined the Grandview Marine Corps Forces Reserve unit nearby, but the unit had deployed to Iraq almost a year ago and Ella's hope had turned again to despair.

After Ella found herself collapsing into the arms of the young lieutenant who presented the Government's condolences on that July afternoon, she found nothing left in common with her husband of 22 years and very little left in common with life. Life, however, hadn't finished with Ella and, in her turn to alcohol, she found a needy friendship with Travis Bennett, a sometimes' detective who had lost his position with PolyChem's security force for repeated absences and abuse of a whole range of libations. In this regard, he and Ella had much in common and both reached out to grasp as much at what each needed as anything that either had to give. Drink and pity bound their souls.

The loss of his son had a much different effect on Stony. He changed dramatically, most would say for the worse, and his conversion was overnight. While the boy's death created a hero for Stony to take enormous pride in and to measure his own worth by, it also magnified his every trait. He no longer merely supervised those assigned to maintenance in PolyChem's extrusion department. He ruled by fear and he became verbally abusive to subordinates. Employees began to measure good and bad days by how quickly Stony would bring one of the secretaries or clerks in the administrative office to tears.

Stony's carousing took on the semblance of a struggle between predator and prey. The glory of the chase was no longer enough. He lived to conquer, to best his adversary, to impose his will on another. In short, he lived for the kill. His old car failed to meet his new vision of himself and was quick to go. He bought a cannon-blue convertible with red leather interior. He colored his hair. He bought new clothes and new shoes. He spent hard-earned money on women he should have known he could never possess.

* * *

Nell O'Connor was one of the secretaries in the administrative office for all the supervisors of the various operating departments. She had thought herself fortunate to be hired by PolyChem and to work for Stony Morgan after her husband, a policeman, was gunned down in the line of duty. Police theorized that Nell's husband walked up on an escaped convict in the alley behind Angelo's Italian Bar and Grill and was shot multiple times with a small caliber handgun. The caliber of the gun was troublesome to many of those associated with the case, but there were many unresolved issues that had faded as time had moved along. The convict in question was later captured and returned to prison without being charged in the policeman's death. The weapon used in the killing was never found and, although the police threw every resource available into the investigation, the case remained open, now past the third anniversary of the murder.

Nell's daughter, Lena, who was 10 years old at the time of her father's death, was now 13. Though Nell had tried to provide structure, guidance and love to her daughter, Lena had been suspended from school last spring for inappropriate conduct with a 16-year-old boy who had been in and out of juvenile detention facilities most of his life. In order to catch up with her class, Lena was participating, if one could call forced attendance anything remotely close to participation, in summer school. Unhappily for Nell and Lena, school was fast becoming the battleground of choice for a test of wills.

THE POLYCHEM PLASTICS PLANT

No one doubted that Nell loved her daughter more than she loved anything else that she had ever been blessed with in life. She was a giving person. She doted on Lena from the first day that Lena arrived in this world. Her husband had often joked that he had been married to a wife before Lena's birth but, afterward, was married to a mother. Even so, the two had planned to have another child but decided to delay having a larger family so that they could participate in their church's mission to sponsor deserving immigrants to the United States. They accepted a young woman into their home and welcomed her into their lives until she found a job and more permanent accommodations. Nell even helped the new arrival apply for and be hired into a clerk's position in the administrative offices at PolyChem.

There were others, however, who thought Nell to be possessive and thought her devotion and enormous love, almost overbearing love, to be a product of her need to control. There was no doubt that Nell felt a strong drive to manage things and that this characteristic served her well in the circumstances she found at PolyChem. She brought order and structure to everything she touched at work. She was efficient, even sterile, in her conduct and demeanor. Unfortunately, at home her indelicate touch only served to provoke. Lena had become a disorderly child and the more love and attention that Nell heaped onto her daughter, the more rebellious Lena became.

Some saw Lena's inappropriate attraction to older boys as a reflection of an often-rumored affair said to have developed between Nell and Stony Morgan. The mere mention of said affair was attributed to spiteful jealousy by those in Nell's church but was sworn to as the gospel truth by women in the PolyChem administrative office. Chief among Nell's detractors was Sophia Costanzia, the young woman whom Nell and her husband had welcomed into their home 3 years ago. Sophia, better known as "Sophie" to her coworkers, was a dark-haired, dark-complexioned woman with emerald eyes who could steal a man's attention, if not his heart, at the first sight of her undeniable beauty.

As Sophie had begun to establish herself in the community and in PolyChem's inner circle of influential power brokers, gossip about her had also begun to circulate, supposedly from personnel within the

offices of human resources and even from contract workers who were said to have known Sophie before she arrived at PolyChem. Theories abounded that Sophie wasn't a recent immigrant at all. Speculation painted Sophie as a deceitful fraud who was booted out of the military for enticing a married, senior officer into an affair and who subsequently perfected her skills in civilian life by seducing and having a child with one of the up-and-coming state legislators. The child's whereabouts was a matter of great interest, not to mention occasional heated debates, for those who participated in such discussions.

Among the theories surrounding Sophie's arrival was that a certain politically connected parishioner within Nell's church had received a rather substantial donation to facilitate Sophie's acceptance into the community and to ensure her employment. This theory began to find more and more acceptance as Sophie maneuvered her way to the attention of men who could be very helpful to an ambitious young woman with many of the attributes that Sophie so abundantly possessed. Eventually, a reluctant Nell had become aware that her husband was not immune to Sophie's lure. Nevertheless, Nell put the blame for this unforgiveable sin elsewhere and remained a faithful friend until Lena developed an attraction to Sophie that threatened to become more important to Lena than the love she shared with her mother. The thought of losing her daughter, in addition to her husband, had driven Nell to seek advice and solace almost completely in the person of Stony Morgan, who had done nothing to discourage Nell's immediate dependence.

Thus, the circle of tragic events and rumors to which some subscribed closed in upon itself and those who claimed that Nell was having an affair with another woman's husband had their justification. For others, the desire to defend a woman who had suffered as much as Ella Morgan had suffered gave them sufficient reason to discuss the situation among trustworthy associates and to seek the counsel of anyone else who would listen to their complaints. Of course, they were determined that not a single word of their suspicions would ever reach Ella Morgan's ears or cause her a single moment of additional sorrow.

THE POLYCHEM PLASTICS PLANT



The PolyChem Plastics Plant had a policy of hiring part-time, summer employees as a way of providing employment to high school and college kids who needed cash for the upcoming school year. Local families depended on this assistance and a great deal of goodwill was generated by the enormous benefit that flowed out of PolyChem into the community. This year, a young black man by the name of Dwight Anthony Franklin, D. A. for short, had convinced his sister, Adelia, to apply for a job and to work at PolyChem until she was accepted into nursing school.

D. A. had worked at the plant for 2 years. He had married right out of high school and had a 15-month-old son and a daughter who would be 3 months old in a few days. He was a smart, hard-working young man who loved his family and, in order to provide for his wife and kids, held down another part-time job as a mechanic at a local garage and service station. This summer, D. A. had trained Victor Ward, a new guy who would be entering his freshman year in college within weeks, how to clean oil out of the extrusion equipment before the extreme heat required for plastic fiber fabrication caused the oil to break down and the machines to fail.

D. A. liked being married. He loved having a family and having money in his pocket. He enjoyed the training PolyChem had given him, but he hated schooling. To him, the difference between training and schooling was unmistakable and life was much more enjoyable when you were learning how to do things that had a purpose. Though he had suffered under Stony Morgan's supervision and conditions had worsened after Stony lost his son, D.A. knew that Adelia worked for Lynn Curtis and that Stony would never have a chance to insult or harm her, especially not as long as he was there to protect her.

As for Lynn Curtis... well... Lynn had no backbone for any type of confrontation and he hardly spoke a harsh word to any of his employees. In fact, possibly because Lynn and his wife had neither been blessed by a child nor endured the trials of child rearing, Lynn rather

enjoyed the excitement of having the young, summer employees and the optimistic attitudes most brought to this new experience. Adelia had been especially delightful, but also remarkably fragile and youthful in the extreme. She had originally planned on volunteering full time at the hospital until being accepted into nursing school, but D. A. knew the importance of his sister making some of the money she would need in nursing school and he knew that other, younger girls could take over Adelia's Candy Striper duties. So, through her brother's efforts, Adelia Franklin came to work for the summer at PolyChem and left behind her candy-striped uniform and her mostly elderly, adoring patients.

"Do you have plans for lunch, today?" Victor Ward asked as he pulled himself onto a pile of bagged pellets that would soon be converted into broom fibers and installed underneath the belly of a street sweeper.

"I brought my usual sandwich and protein bar," D. A. replied. "I'm go'n to buy one of those new energy meals in a bottle, too. I kind of like that coconut and guava flavor some genius developed to take away all these dollar bills pil'n up in my pocket. Why you ask'n, anyway?"

"Morgan says he needs to borrow my car at lunch," Victor replied, "something about his wife needing his car, today."

"Morgan never even let his wife ride in that new car," D. A. countered. "You listen to me. Morgan needs a car nobody will recognize. He's chas'n that widow, Nell, again. I'll bet you anything! Your old car's go'n to come back smell'n like Nell and Morgan had an up close and private Roman orgy."

"You're crazy," Victor mumbled.

"You already gave him the keys, didn't you?" D. A. asked as much to belittle Victor as to elicit an answer. "All the boss man has to do is say jump and you keep at it until you clear the top rung."

"It's not like that," Victor stated flatly. "You don't have a corner on all the gossip going on around PolyChem. I've heard what the women in the administrative office are saying. Those old biddies see a new soap opera in the making every time two people say 'hello'."

"You got so much to learn, it's pathetic," D. A. laughed. "Don't you know how anything works?"

“Let’s change the subject,” Victor responded. “I’ll buy one of those dry bread and turkey things out of the vending machine. It won’t kill me to put that crap in my stomach for one day.”

“Well, you just make sure you keep your energy up,” D. A. cautioned. “You go’n to have to clean that entire row of extruders by yourself. I been told to move these pellets over to the mix’n hopper and help those guys prepare to start a new formulation by tomorrow morn’n.”

“I thought the project teams set up their own product runs,” Victor complained in a short-hand way of questioning whether D. A. was pushing a maintenance job on him so that D. A. could finagle some unauthorized cross training.

“I got to look out for my family,” D. A. replied. “You only here for a few more weeks. Besides, I hear PolyChem is expand’n. They got this Government contract for build’n some carbon fiber stuff for airplanes or cars or, maybe, for the President’s new golf clubs. That’s it! We gonna build a golf club to use when the President goes up and checks out the moon.”

“You’re full of it, D. A.!” Victor cried. “At least, if they do expand, maybe, I’ll get hired again next summer. Or, maybe, I’ll be full time, if things don’t go the way I’ve planned.”

“You got to make it happen, Victor,” D. A. laughed. “Ain’t nobody’s fault but yours, if it don’t.”

Stony Morgan walked by and glanced sufficiently long in D. A.’s and Victor’s direction to break up their conversation before he headed toward Lynn Curtis’ office. Victor jumped down from the stack of bagged pellets he’d been sitting on and both young men watched as Stony disappeared behind perfectly spaced mountains of computerized inventory into the administrative offices. Stony’s entrance into the outer office and his quick glance at Nell and Sophie broke up a contentious exchange between the two women that had shown every indication of extending well into the lunch hour.

“Lynn, let’s talk in your office,” Stony barked as he cornered Lynn and put his arm around Lynn’s shoulder to usher him toward his office

door. “I hear you’re taking Adelia to lunch as part of some PolyChem appreciation thing.”

PolyChem’s administrative offices were a maze of cubicles and office walls that extended upward about head high and could be assembled or disassembled almost at a moment’s notice. So-called desks amounted to little more than flat slabs of veneer and pressboard connected to the cubicle wall with drawer space on one side and files on the other. A shelf for books and manuals hung near the top of each cubicle wall and a computer sat on the right side of each desktop. Information Services personnel supposedly roamed the corridors to make certain that financial and operational reports were completed and sent to some faceless corporate boss on a daily basis for cash management purposes, but most people thought these guys were nothing more than spies checking computer screens to find who was working and who was involved in less productive pursuits.

“Yes,” Lynn replied. “I’m taking her to Angelo’s to let her know how much PolyChem appreciates its summer interns and to find out her opinion of our plant. You know how management eats up this positive feedback stuff.”

“Right, I know all that propaganda stuff, too,” Stony complained in a dismissive voice that questioned the relevance of many of the policies that came down from PolyChem’s corporate offices. “Listen, I have a favor to ask of you this afternoon. I know you won’t mind, so what I really need is for you to attend a meeting I set up some time ago with a supplier over on Roosevelt. You just give him time to vent all his frustrations over those cancelled orders we hit him with. I know that won’t be a fun meeting, but I have to be in the plant to supervise setting up a new product run this afternoon and I’ve already stiffed this guy twice. Here’s what we can do. You take Adelia to Angelo’s. Have a nice lunch. I’ll stop by after lunch and pick her up on my way back to the plant. You’ll still be able to do the corporate thing, Adelia will be well cared for and I’ll be back in the plant for the afternoon. Heck, she could even walk back from Angelo’s, but it’s hot and I don’t mind stopping by and picking her up. Help me out on this one, Lynn. You’re better at meeting with suppliers than I am, anyway.”

One of Lynn's best known attributes was his ability to put himself in a position to be taken advantage of. Basically, Lynn liked being considered for anything. No one would ever imagine that Lynn had the capacity to say "no" and this time was no different than all the other times that co-workers, especially Stony Morgan, had found an opportunity to manipulate Lynn to suit their needs.

"Do I know the guy on Roosevelt?" Lynn asked.

"I'll fill you in on all the specifics," Stony replied. "You'll save PolyChem a bundle. You'll be a hero... a real, genuine hero."

The conversation between Lynn and Stony had not gone unnoticed. Nell and Sophie, each in her own way, had maneuvered to positions that breached the privacy provided by walls that really weren't walls at all. Nell was particularly upset that Stony was putting a plan into effect that would allow him to be alone with Adelia. Nell was not happy in the least whenever Stony was in the company of another unattached and unattended woman. She had noticed Stony's attraction to Adelia and suspected his intention to conquer the young woman. He would add to his conquests while turning away from her. The thought of being humiliated at Stony's hands infuriated her. She began to brood, some might even say stew, over what she saw Stony's plan to be. Being abandoned was hurtful. No, it was intolerable. As lunch time approached, Nell made her move to intervene.

"Hello," the gravel-like voice of Travis Bennett answered, "Bennett Detective Agency."

"Mr. Bennett, this is Nell O'Connor," Nell whispered into her cubicle's corporate phone. "I don't want to bother you, but I know you're a good friend of Ella Morgan and I have information you might wish to pass on to her."

"Who did you say this is?" Bennett asked.

"Well, I guess it's not important," Nell replied. "I mean, maybe, I shouldn't have called."

"No! Don't hang up," Bennett hastily responded. "It doesn't matter who you are. Did you say this was about Ella Morgan?"

Nell had a way of creating situations that turned things on their head. By tantalizing Travis Bennett with Ella's name, he had become the

one in need of information... information that Nell was desperate to give. Nell had created a scarce commodity with a single sentence and she was determined to get the most out of it. Bennett was her puppet and she was about to start pulling his strings.

“Mr. Bennett, I don’t want to bother anyone, but I think a person should know.”

“I agree and I understand and, if I can be of assistance, I’m more than willing to see what I can do,” Travis Bennett stammered. “What exactly is it that you feel Ella should know?”

“Now, don’t get me wrong...,” Nell began, as if feeling doubts that must be overcome before divulging the invaluable information she called to divulge in the first place.

“No, no!” Bennett interjected as Nell paused to provide adequate time for him to make precisely such an interjection.

“As I was saying,” Nell began again with her well planned train of thought, “there are some things a person should know.”

This time Bennett didn’t barge into the vacuum. He waited in anticipation of Nell filling the void.

“For instance,” Nell continued after her pause created the desired expectation, “I would want to know if my man... er... if my husband were seen in public with a young woman less than half his age and she being... well... what she is.”

“Are we talking about Stony Morgan, here?” Bennett asked.

“The very same,” Nell replied. “Stony Morgan is over at Angelo’s Italian Bar and Grill right now, or soon will be, and poor Ella, who’s been through so much with that man, her losing her boy and all, is about to be hurt again. If she has any idea of hanging onto what’s rightfully hers, she’d better get out of that house and start protecting her own before the cheating is beyond being stopped. I guess that’s all I have to say about the matter.”

Bennett heard the click on the other end of the line and the dial tone was soon buzzing in his ear. He put his finger on the off button and pushed it down. He looked around for a few moments, clicked through the names he had on speed dial and called Ella Morgan. As soon as she answered her phone, he knew she had been drinking.

“Ella,” he said, “this is Travis. Can you hear me?”

After identifying himself, Travis Bennett dispensed with the usual formalities and asked if he could come over. To his surprise, Ella seemed content to be alone with her addictive habit. He exchanged a few tidbits of concern and asked if she needed anything, but being rebuffed a second time, he proceeded to relay portions of his earlier call and pleaded with Ella to accept his offer to pick her up in his car and escort her to Angelo’s to find out what this was all about.

Ella was not receptive to Bennett’s suggestion. She flew into an alcoholic rage and flung the phone into a family picture that sat upon the living room mantel. The call was over and Travis Bennett sat alone, wondering what Ella Morgan would do next.

* * *

Sophie Costanzia had not turned her back and walked away after eavesdropping on the conversation between Lynn Curtis and Stony Morgan. In fact, she had made it a priority to pick up on Nell’s line every time Nell’s light illuminated on Sophie’s office phone. She had heard the entire conversation between Nell and Bennett. She had watched Stony Morgan leave PolyChem and watched Nell leave, as well. She had seen Nell rush out of her cubicle and catch one of the straps to her purse on the arm of her chair, dragging it across the floor until losing her grip and spilling the purse’s contents. It was then that she saw, was certain she had seen, the small-caliber pistol lying on the floor. Nell had brought a gun into PolyChem. Maybe, she had always carried it. Maybe, she had a permit, but, maybe, she didn’t and, yet, there it was, being scraped back into Nell’s purse as she rushed out. Sophie was certain it was a gun she had seen.

Shortly after Nell left PolyChem in her distracted and hurried state, her office phone had rung. No one had picked up and the department’s answering machine had finally answered with Nell’s voice politely asking the caller to leave a message and stating that Nell would return the call as soon as possible. No message had been left, at least not on the

first call. The phone had rung two more times and was answered by Nell's recorded voice two more times until, on the third call, a woman from the school Nell's daughter attended left a message saying that Lena had left school without authorization and, since Nell could not be contacted, the police would be called and put on alert to pick up her daughter. The caller left a name and number Nell could call for information when she returned. Sophie heard all this and smiled.

Ella Morgan was not smiling, however. The lines that grew upon her face and the turn of her lips had not been eased by the calming grace of a soft smile since her son had left the shelter of home. Ella's lips were pursed and her eyes penetrated space as eyes sometimes do when the mind locks all of its gears and emotion takes control of an entire being.

Ella's hastily donned sandals landed heavily upon the wooden boards of her porch and on the red bricks of her front steps before turning toward the PolyChem Plastics Plant. The summer dress she wore hung loosely about her breasts and gathered around her large hips. Her bare, white arms and legs flashed in the sun and showed the strain of weight and middle age, but her shoulders and heart bore the additional weight of the loss of a son and the falling apart of a marriage.

Though there were but a few blocks between the Morgans' home and PolyChem, each succeeding street passed with more difficulty than the previous one. Each breath labored to ease the pain growing in her chest and the veins of her neck pulsed with increasing urgency beneath a reddish curtain that fell over the once-white skin. She was oblivious to the young wives and children sitting and playing around the benches in front of PolyChem's Employee Services office and she marched straight to the front gate without uttering a word to the guard she had known for as long as Stony had worked at PolyChem. Her hand reached for the first of a pair of courtesy phones positioned on top of black, plastic stanchions that grew out of white cement and, before the recorded voice had even begun to welcome her and provide her with options that mostly aggravated rather than eased the questions that plagued her life, she punched in a code more familiar to her than her own name.

The phone in her husband's office began to ring, but Ella knew she would hear only the memory of his voice if she waited for an answer.

She had known before she pushed the front door out of her path and bounded recklessly down the front steps of her home that the only hint of Stony's existence would be the recording that invited her to leave a message and she was tired of leaving messages. She stood there, fanning her face with a flyer taken from a nearby stack that told how to contact PolyChem's employment office. She struggled to catch her breath while absentmindedly gazing at the many-colored vehicles spreading in waves across PolyChem's parking lot. Her eyes floated from section to section, between orphaned trees whose roots pushed up hated asphalt in search of refreshing moisture, until the image of the sign for supervisor parking lodged in her brain.

Suddenly, her mind focused. She forgot the rapid beating of her heart and the panicked search for air that occupied her lungs. She slammed the phone into its cradle and forced her legs to move the increasing burden of her body toward the space where a cannon-blue convertible with red leather interior should be parked. Tears combined with rivers of sweat and swept across her naked cheeks. Even though Stony had failed to answer her call, as he had failed so often before, Ella was driven by an overwhelming need to find the car, his car, and to be a part of it. She prayed for it to be there and prayed to be allowed to touch it, just once. Soon, she was lost in a maze of gleaming reflections and sun-baked metal. Her focus wavered and the search for that one forbidden treasure was replaced by the forgotten search for a single, rewarding, breath of air. She tried to press onward, but her legs refused and all that had been Ella Morgan collapsed in the loneliness of an endless sea of cars.

* * *

At PolyChem's front entrance, the former partner of Nell O'Connor's deceased husband was making his way through the gate. He had been notified of Lena O'Connor's unexcused absence and that she was thought to be accompanied by a young man recently released from juvenile detention. The officer quickly made his way to the

administrative office of PolyChem's maintenance section without waiting for personnel to provide an escort. He was familiar with the plant and with Nell's cubicle and he knew Lynn Curtis, at least he knew him as well as anyone could know a man as quiet and reserved as Lynn.

"Sophie," the officer called out as if he had seen her only yesterday, "where's Nell?"

"I wouldn't know," Sophie replied without volunteering either information or the courtesy of a greeting.

"Let's not play games," the officer replied. "Did you overhear the call that came in about Nell's daughter?"

"Well, I wasn't eavesdropping or anything, if that's what you're asking," Sophie replied.

"Skip the sarcasm and give me a straight answer," the officer demanded. "If you want me to jerk you out of here, you'll lose pay and I promise you I won't give you a ride back. Now, where's Nell?"

"Oh, from what little I heard, she's headed over to Angelo's," Sophie said while looking sideways at the officer and smiling almost playfully. "You know Nell. Maybe, she's with Stony or, maybe, he's with someone else."

"Sophie, I'm only going to ask you this once," the officer stated and paused briefly as he stared into eyes like those he often had seen on the street, eyes he called man-eaters. "Does Nell know that Stony's with someone else?"

"She may have overheard him talking with Lynn earlier," Sophie mumbled. "After lunch, she kind of... rushed out. You know, like something was bothering her. By the way, does Nell have a permit to carry a gun?"

"A what!" the officer yelled. "Are you saying that Nell showed you a gun?"

"Well, she didn't exactly show me anything," Sophie said in defense of her offhanded accusation. "She, like, dropped her purse and spilled a few things and, well, maybe, one of the things that spilled out was this little pistol-looking thing."

The officer stared in silence at Sophie. His eyes squinted and his jaw line tightened. After standing in this fashion for more time than was

comfortable for either participant in this interrogation, the officer glanced away. His piercing sight fell directly on the back of Lynn Curtis who was rushing into his office. Sophie immediately saw the change in the officer's demeanor and followed the turn of his head until she, too, found Lynn Curtis. A look of amazement and confusion came over her face.

"What's he doing here?" she stammered.

The comment was lost in the clutter of extraneous noises the brain usually refuses to hear. There was a moment of transition, a moment of changing gears.

"Lynn... hi... do you have a minute?" the officer called out.

Lynn had been absorbed in his private forgetfulness and had not observed the officer talking with Sophie. Earlier, he had rushed to meet Adelia and he had forgotten his briefcase. Lynn Curtis never attended a meeting without his briefcase, even if there was little more than a blank tablet and pen or pencil inside. His preparation for this afternoon's meeting with Stony's counterpart at one of PolyChem's suppliers required that he have his briefcase. The officer's voice distracted him from his single-mindedness of purpose and he wheeled around.

"What's that?" Lynn asked.

The officer stepped forward, away from Sophie. She was left alone. Her purpose in life, once again, was to eavesdrop and to plan her destructive mischief. She turned and looked and listened.

Lynn was startled at the sight of a police officer, even one he'd seen before, walking in his direction. His mind raced ahead looking for a reason as to why a policeman would be in his office. Something must have happened to his wife. No, she was at home. He was certain. Perhaps Stony and Adelia had been in an accident. No, there hadn't been enough time for that. Was it possible there could be a problem at home?

"I'm trying to locate Nell O'Connor," the officer said. "Do you know where she might be?"

"Doesn't Sophie know?" Lynn asked and felt relieved by the expeditious reprieve from his fears.

"Sophie tells me that you and Stony had a conversation before lunch and that Stony might be at Angelo's," the officer replied. "She

seems to think that Nell may have had good reason to try and track Stony down.”

Lynn again became noticeably uncomfortable. He looked over his shoulder, toward his desk, to where his briefcase was neatly positioned on the right-hand desk corner.

“I just came in to pick up my briefcase,” Lynn responded, as if that somehow excused him from answering the question that remained to be addressed.

“Does Nell have any reason to be looking for Stony?” the officer asked more explicitly.

Lynn fidgeted with his hands. He looked past the officer and the pained expression on his face seemed to ask Sophie what she had told the officer. Had she mentioned that Stony had asked him to meet with a supplier or that Stony was with Adelia?

The door to the administrative office opened with a rush of air and the hum of operating noises pushed its way through along with D. A. Franklin and Victor Ward. D. A. spotted Sophie immediately.

“Yo... Sophie... where’s Adelia?” D. A. called out. “Did she have lunch plans or someth’n?”

“You’ll have to ask Lynn,” Sophie called back. “He’s over there, talking to that police officer.”

D. A. and Victor turned their heads in unison. They rested their eyes on Lynn and the officer.

“Girl, what’s go’n on here?” D. A. asked Sophie but received no reply.

Lynn asked the officer to please wait for a moment and stepped toward D. A. and Victor. His fidgeting had been replaced by a hardened rigidity.

“D. A., neither you nor Victor are scheduled for an appointment this afternoon,” Lynn said with considerably less patience than usual. “I had a nice lunch at Angelo’s with Adelia to thank her for her work at PolyChem, but it was necessary for me to leave before she finished her meal, so... she’s returning with another supervisor. She’ll be back to work shortly. You and Victor should return to your shift.”

Lynn turned his back in order to avoid any further discussion with D. A. and invited the policeman into his office. He closed the door. Sophie looked out of the corner of one eye at D. A. and waved good-bye before returning to her cubicle.

“As I started to say,” Lynn began in his search for an answer to the officer’s question, “Stony asked me to meet with a supplier so that he didn’t have to cancel a meeting. He volunteered to pick up Adelia Franklin at Angelo’s before he came back from lunch so that I didn’t have to return to PolyChem, but after I left Angelo’s, I realized I’d forgotten my briefcase. That’s all there is and all I know. Why are you interested in Nell?”

“Why couldn’t Stony keep his appointment with the supplier?” the officer asked in complete disregard of the question Lynn had posed.

“He told me PolyChem had an order that required setting up a new extrusion line this afternoon,” Lynn explained. “He should be on the line shortly and I’m certain he’ll be happy to provide you with answers to whatever questions you might have. I’m late for my meeting on Roosevelt and, if you don’t have any objection, I really must go.”

“If you happen to find Nell before I do, tell her that her daughter left school without providing school officials with a permission slip and the police were called in because the school was unable to contact her about the incident,” the officer responded with obvious irritation. “You are free to go to your meeting.”

Sophie’s and Lynn’s revelations seemed destined to direct everyone’s attention to Angelo’s Italian Bar and Grill. The police officer and D. A. Franklin, accompanied by Victor Ward, wasted precious little time in heading there. The police officer’s vehicle was conveniently parked outside PolyChem’s front gate, but D. A. and Victor decided to brave the heat and run the few blocks to the restaurant since D. A.’s pickup was filled with parts that only a part-time mechanic would haul around and, more importantly, was parked some distance away. Victor’s car, on the other hand, was likely already at Angelo’s with Stony Morgan.



Stony Morgan was, indeed, sitting across a table from Adelia in a corner of Angelo's restaurant. He had put everything in place to make a move and begin the conquest of Adelia Franklin. He had planned to use D. A.'s job as leverage by telling Adelia that PolyChem would be letting a number of employees go and that he was required to cut one position. Adelia was to be told that she had the power to make it "right" for D. A. without explicitly being told what "right" was. Stony had used his routine of charm and threats with women before and he was practiced at bringing his prey under his spell and administering the final, lethal assault at just the right time, the time of greatest confusion, uncertainty and vulnerability.

This time, however, Stony Morgan made an unlikely decision. He made a conscious decision to let his prey escape. From Stony's point of view, Adelia was his, but he could not execute this plan and he accepted that he would never conquer another human being. He knew this to be absolute truth, to be a fact as certain as the fact that Adelia was within arm's reach and that she would have succumbed to his charms and threats. Stony had been confronted by thoughts of his son. He had been assaulted by overwhelming emotion and he couldn't escape the barrage of thoughts that overpowered the defenses he had set up on that day in July.

The instant Stony had stepped through Angelo's door he had been greeted by the sight of marines. Reservists from Grandview had returned home. At first, he had instinctively looked away. He had refused to even acknowledge the presence of men and women he would have celebrated at every other time in his life. Today, however, his purpose shamed him. His purpose was not the purpose of a strong, honorable marine.

As he sat across from Adelia, the walls he had built around himself began to fall. His aversion waned and his eyes began to search out individuals in uniform. His vision settled, almost against his will, on the face of each man and woman who had returned. One marine held a child on his lap while his wife nestled close beside him. A second marine

laughed loudly with his dad as his mom wiped tears from her eyes and a third held the hand of her boyfriend or husband to her face and smiled. Yet, another sat in a wheelchair with a brother or friend by his side.

Stony felt the loss of his son as he had never before felt it. It didn't feel like weakness to acknowledge the void that had devoured his insides. For some urgent, overpowering reason, he wanted to tell Ella that he understood and that he was sorry for what he had done.

"If you've finished your meal, I guess we had better get back to work," Stony advised Adelia with as much strength in his voice as he could muster. "D. A. will have the cops out looking for us if we're a minute late."

"D. A.'s a fine brother," Adelia replied. "He really appreciates what PolyChem did for me this summer. I appreciate it, too."

"You're certainly welcome," Stony said as he stood and helped Adelia with her chair. "I'm parked across the street. I'm afraid Angelo's parking lot was full by the time I arrived."

Stony picked up the bill and directed Adelia toward the cash register, but she pointed in the direction of the ladies' room and headed off without the necessity of an explanation.

Outside Angelo's, Nell O'Connor had been driving slowly through the parking lot, looking for a cannon-blue convertible with red leather interior. Her mind could not accept that the car could evade her or deal with the possibility of its absence. Her fingers strangled the steering wheel, released their grip completely and then strangled it again. She pulled her car toward the street fronting Angelo's and stopped. Stony's car had to be found, but where? Her vision froze in time and she stared into nothingness. The absence of any motion whatsoever made her as invisible as space itself.

As seconds turned into the lengthy minutes that seem to fall upon every living thing when life slows and the hustle of getting on with the future inexplicably pauses, a police car made its way down the street and parked near the bus stop, diagonally across from Angelo's restaurant. A police officer emerged, looked up and down the street and began walking toward the parking lot where Nell sat, too far behind the stucco siding of the restaurant to see or hear his approaching footsteps.

The officer stopped and motioned for a few cars to continue on their journey in the direction of the PolyChem plant. He looked back, beyond the traffic, and suddenly spied two individuals, perhaps teenagers. A boy and a girl were seated on the bench of the bus stop near his parked car. He studied them. Another car slowed as it approached and the driver must have wondered why this police officer had become a living statue in the middle of the street on this quiet afternoon. The officer turned and began to retrace his steps. His hand reached for a device attached to his shoulder and he spoke some private words. The young boy and girl stood, looked only momentarily at the officer and then turned away.

A passing vehicle caught the sun's rays and reflected its glare into Nell's windshield. The flash startled Nell and her car lurched across the sidewalk and extended partially into the street, giving her a clear view of the nearby officer and the young girl and her friend. A horn sounded and a car screeched to a halt before pulling around Nell's offending vehicle, while its driver pointed angrily in Nell's direction. The incident distracted the officer for an instant and the young boy and girl, seeing the possibility of avoiding further unwanted scrutiny, began an anxious retreat toward two men who were partly running and partly walking in their direction.

Stony Morgan, having paid for lunch and having been rejoined by Adelia, pushed the front door to Angelo's open and he and Adelia stepped into the afternoon sun. Stony put one hand on Adelia's shoulder and pointed across the street in the direction of Victor Ward's car with the other. Clutched in his free hand was a set of keys attached to a glittering silver replica of an aircraft with tipped-up wings. As he and Adelia approached the street and began to cross, Stony noticed the car that was partially protruding into the right-of-way and partially parked on the sidewalk, but he paid scant attention to the car or its driver.

"Someone needs to learn how to drive," Stony commented to Adelia.

"Look! There're my brother and Victor," Adelia cried and began to wave and sprint across the street, leaving Stony trailing behind.

Nell seemed unaware of the commotion she had caused. She saw only the policeman, the man who had been her husband's partner and who had consoled her and helped her and her child after her husband's death, but she also saw this policeman as the man who never accepted that his partner had allowed himself to be surprised and killed by a convict in the alley behind Angelo's Italian Bar and Grill. Her right hand released its crushing grip on the steering wheel and searched for her purse. There was more conflict than reassurance that swept over Nell when her hand slid across the purse. Without seeing its contents, she knew what it carried inside.

The police officer's interest in the young boy and girl redirected Nell's attention. Her eyes and brain engaged and her reaction was immediate.

"That's my daughter!" she screamed. "He's taking my Lena! Stop them!"

Nell's foot slammed hard against the gas pedal. Her hands twisted the steering wheel in the direction of the fleeing boy and girl. The car's tires slid sideways, carrying the front of her car toward the far sidewalk and narrowly missing the officer and the side of the officer's parked vehicle. Nell saw nothing but the fading image of her daughter and heard nothing or felt anything except for the pounding of her chest. The car plunged ahead, out of control.

In an instant, there was the thump and bump of a merging of hard metal with soft flesh and the breaking of bones and spilling of the bright red currency of life. A contorted body was flung into the steel beams that formed the backbone of the city's assigned location for awaiting transportation to one's destination of choice. Hanging from a beam safely above the motionless, stained body, a sign advertised the good life brought to you by PolyChem plastics and a second, swept by the afternoon's freshening breeze, invited you to join Grandview in welcoming home the men and women who had given so much in service to our country.

"Adelia...!" D. A. Franklin screamed as he leapt forward and wrapped his arms around his sister's shoulders. "Don't look... little girl.... God, I love you!"

The tiny, silver jet with tipped-up wings skidded to a complete stop on the hot, afternoon asphalt. As the officer spoke hastily into the device on his shoulder and rushed to flip the toggle switch that would activate his vehicle's emergency lights, Victor Ward calmed his nerves and approached Nell O'Connor's idling car.

"Get away from me!" she cried. "Get away!"

Victor stepped back. His foot brushed against steel on asphalt, which caught the sun and reflected its brilliance. He reached down and pressed the object between his thumb and fingers. He wrapped his hand tightly around his reclaimed possession, moved his hand to his side and slipped it safely into his pocket.

"Welcome home," he whispered.

MONDAY'S MAIL

She came bursting through the kitchen door without knocking or pausing to see if anyone was ill prepared to receive visitors. Her steps had clicked across the flagstone pathway, leading from the drive to the red brick steps and onto the small screened porch, the same as they had for the nearly forty-eight years of her life. This had always been her home. Even after she had married and moved into the massive Victorian house, which her husband had constructed in Windsor Estates, she had continued to find reasons to spend much of her time at the old home. Her mother had feared that this contributed to the failure of that marriage.

“Did you get your breakfast this morning?” she yelled.

Margie made a point to check on her father each morning before going to *Simpson's Seed and Feed*, a store that the family had owned in the small town of Franklin for longer than Franklin had boasted of having its own post office. Her dad had long since ceased to participate in the affairs of the business, but his daily routine was unchanged. He unfailingly rose as soon as the sun was above the horizon and had his morning meal before the rural mail carrier brought him his quota of papers, magazines and junk mail offering every conceivable opportunity and product that a person, especially an old one, could wish for.

“Old lady Perkins came by just like always and fixed my usual,” Mathew Simpson called down through the open door of the upstairs bathroom.

Margie could hear her father straining to conduct his morning business and passing enough gas to eradicate any doubt about his digestive difficulties. She had begged him to see Dr. McFarland but had grown weary of arguing with a man as stubborn as her father. Reluctantly, she had given up on ever convincing him to stop smoking and she had agonized over his eating habits, which were little changed even though he had, in her eyes, begun to show symptoms exhibited by those who suffer from minor but recurring strokes.

“What time did she leave?” Margie asked for no better reason than she didn’t see Widow Perkins in any of the downstairs living quarters.

“Who’s to say that she’s left?” Mathew Simpson barked.

The banter between Margie and her father was born of a deep and mutual affection, which had endured her defiant struggle to find an identity and fulfillment as well as his unyielding and authoritarian character. In fact, in the period surrounding Margie’s teenage years, the question among the town’s distinguished citizens as to who would be broken first was the source of considerable hand wrenching, not because of Christian concern for the soul of either individual but because of indelicate wagering.

“It makes no difference to me,” Margie said more to herself than anyone else who might have cared to listen.

The early morning hours were the most enjoyable of the day in the old house. The screened windows were opened, half at the top and half at the bottom, to let the cool morning air flow through and freshen the otherwise musty smell of the aging couches and chairs that occupied the same floor space as they had when Mrs. Simpson had last been in the house. For the past year, Audrey Simpson had lain peacefully with many of her kinfolk and most of her friends in the Franklin cemetery.

No one, including Margie’s father, had thought that Audrey would depart this world before her husband of fifty-nine years and the unanticipated void that was left in the family by her death was nowhere more apparent than in Mathew’s life. His vigor for living had been drained from his body at the very instant that his wife had breathed her last, but he had continued to survive and, some who had known and even shared his and Audrey’s early struggles would say, to prosper.

Margie bolted through the downstairs, inspecting every artifact that she had been accustomed to seeing in each room. As she passed, without the slightest hesitation, from the kitchen and into the dining room, she noticed that every window sill on the west side of the house bore reminders of the previous evening’s rain shower. After whispering an almost inaudible “my goodness” to herself, she determined that she would have to accept more responsibility for managing the daily needs of the old home place even though her father had made it quite clear that

he was not, in any way, answerable to his daughter. With hardly a second thought about how her new obligations would be undertaken, her steps continued and whisked her into the office her father had maintained in the house in order to preside more closely over his growing family. Finally, she passed the stairway and found herself in the warmth and familiarity of the living room.

Pictures of Margie and her younger brother were proudly displayed on the coffee table between two worn and overstuffed brown couches and on a nightstand that had been situated beside her mother's favorite rocking chair. Her father's chair was part of a set that had been purchased with the couches and it sat independently in the room but had been pulled as near as possible to the old rocker. At the end of the room was a large, red brick fireplace surrounded by a dark oak mantel that seemed to preside over the entire room. Pictures of Margie's parents and both sets of grandparents were grouped together on one end of the mantel's elongated top and a lone picture of her older brother, who had not returned from the war, was dutifully displayed on the other. There had been more than ten years between her and her parent's first-born child but the last child was born not more than a year after her. An ornate, gilded mirror that she had strained to see for most of her childhood hung over the fireplace and now seemed to welcome her into the room with anticipation.

Margie worked her way across the room, past all the family photographs, and picked up a tarnished medal that was displayed on a small stand in the center of the mantel. She looked longingly at the small memorial and rubbed her plump fingers over its faded and worn surface.

"Don't you ever knock any more, woman?" her father scolded as he clamored rigidly down the carpeted stairs.

His weathered hands brushed across a smooth, mottled banister rail that helped him accomplish each downward step and limited the extent of his swaying. The years when his lumbering steps could be said to contain a hint of swagger had vanished from memory with many of the other recollections of his youth.

"I thought you were going to move your bedroom downstairs," Margie chided as she caught the first comforting glimpse of her father.

“No need to change where I sleep or where I live,” he replied with a smile of indifference as he struggled to focus on his daughter and give her the requisite hug that her visit demanded.

He moved past the old couches and the littered coffee table without seeing them. His footsteps fell heavily on the boards that supported him with only mild complaint and that had underpinned generations of the Simpson family.

“Old man, you can hardly see to find me!” Margie exclaimed. “How on earth can you continue to navigate through this old house?”

“My feet don’t need my eyes to get around,” he snapped. “I know every inch of this place and all that’s in it, excepting for the havoc you and old lady Perkins wreak every time you and she get it in your heads to clean. The print on the paper is getting to be a chore to decipher, though. My magnifying glass has gotten as cloudy as these old eyes of mine.”

Margie and her father embraced and Margie planted two red lips squarely on his freshly shaven cheek. The scent of spice aftershave and a touch of the fragrance of gardenia hovered faintly about his person and, though almost imperceptible, became recognizable to Margie.

“I guess that’s not the first kiss you’ve had this morning,” she whispered.

“I’m not saying that it is and I’m not saying that it isn’t,” he mumbled. “Where’s that no good brother of yours? I haven’t seen hide-nor-tail of him since last Wednesday.”

“You have too!” Margie retorted, “And it’s hide-nor-hair. Surely, you haven’t forgotten that he and Janie came by Friday evening.”

“No, of course not,” her father shot back. “It just slipped my mind for a spell. How could I forget that floozy wearing that cotton T-shirt with her tits hanging out for the world to ogle? That’s what, four girlfriends this month?”

“You know she’s not a floozy,” Margie countered. “She’s Johnny’s fiancée and they’re going to be married by Pastor Carlyle this coming Labor Day weekend and honeymoon in Daytona.”

“How many more honeymoons am I going to have to pay for?” her father demanded. “I swear I don’t know whether his honeymoons or his divorces have cost me more.”

“I can assure you it’s the divorces,” Margie stated flatly, “and they’ve cost us all a pretty penny.”

“Remind me to change my will and leave the boy out of the thing altogether,” her father demanded.

“Old man, you’d have Mama turning over in her grave if she could hear you,” Margie warned. “Let’s talk about something else. It’s too nice a day to ruin it this early in the morning.”

“Are you going out to see your mother, today?” her father asked as if Audrey would be there to greet them and serve them an afternoon meal with her famous sun-tea.

“The boys and I had planned to go out about lunch time,” Margie answered. “Did you want to join us?”

Mathew Simpson had turned to look at the fireplace mantel and the pictures that occupied one end of it. Even though his eyes could discern none of the characteristics of the faces that resided there, Margie had no doubt that her father could see and smell and feel the presence of her mother.

“I guess I’ll stay here and read the paper,” he answered in due time. “I didn’t get half-way through the Sunday paper yet and Monday’s mail will be here before I can catch up on last week’s news. Maybe you can help me find that damned magnifying glass that fell somewhere over by the chair last evening.”

Margie knew her father could hardly see to read the paper anymore and that he spent most of his time sitting within arm’s reach of her mother’s rocking chair. He would sit there, day after day and late into the early morning hours, staring into the quiet space that surrounded him and closing his eyes whenever they grew tired of whatever he saw in that mind of his. It mattered little to him whether the sun or the moon shown down upon him or that the shadows of the trees danced across his face.

Sometimes Margie would arrive in the early morning hours to find every electric light in the house still burning. She had thought that drinking had become a problem for her father, but she never found an

excessive number of empties in the house and no trace of alcohol was ever on his breath. If anything, she marveled at the ability of her father to wake and rise as soon as the sun broke above the horizon.

“I don’t suppose you’ve given any more thought to closing up this house and moving in with me?” she asked as she had hundreds of times before.

Margie knew what the answer would be. She wondered why she even bothered asking.

“This old house and me take care of each other,” her father said. “You wouldn’t be comfortable with me underfoot all the time, and what would old lady Perkins do?”

Margie smiled and looked down at the medal she still clutched in her hand. After a moment she lifted it back to its honored position and carefully replaced it on its stand. Her face reflected in the mirror but Margie saw only the little girl that had once strained to see above the mantelpiece. There was no trace of the woman inhabiting her body that reached her moist eyes.

“I’m a little tired,” her father said as he turned and carefully maneuvered his way to his favorite chair.

“Is there anything I can get you before I go to the store?” she asked.

“Perhaps you could check to see if Monday’s mail has been delivered,” he said. “Do you see that glass lying anywhere around here?”

Margie was stunned by her father’s request. He never allowed, let alone asked, anyone in or outside the family to take over the task of picking up the morning mail. It was his job, his privilege and his right to walk to the roadside box and inspect what the mail carrier had brought. She looked across the room and contemplated the figure that filled the big over-stuffed chair. He looked up and stared at his daughter or the ceiling or, perhaps, at the mantel.

“Are you not feeling well?” she asked.

“Of course, if you’re in a hurry,” he said, “I can see to it later. I expect some old friends will be stopping by shortly.”

Margie knew of no one who had planned to visit her father today and she walked toward his chair with the intention of inquiring who it

was that would be stopping by. As she approached his chair, she could see that he was already resting peacefully and decided that there was no point in disturbing him now. Her soft brown eyes fell upon a glimmering object barely protruding from underneath the skirt that surrounded the bottom of her father's chair. She stooped to inspect it more closely and her hand found the cold surface of the old man's magnifying glass. She lifted it from the floor and unconsciously found herself rubbing its surface with a piece of silk slip she had delicately gathered in her fingers.

A crack ran completely through the middle of the glass as if it had fallen helplessly to the hardwood floor and had been saved from complete destruction only by the steel rim that held it tightly to its handle. After a moment, Margie placed the glass on the coffee table, near the scattered pages of the Sunday paper, and turned to make the short trek to retrieve the morning mail.

As she moved through the porch's screen door, with no hint of the haste she had arrived in, the coolness of the air rushed across her cherubic face and through her long flowing curls. There was nothing to indicate the worries that sat heavily upon her shoulders or the years that had worn away the correctness of her posture. She delighted in being needed and had struggled with accepting the independence of her own two growing boys.

The walk down the drive to the edge of the road was most enjoyable, even fun. There were butterflies and bees darting among the wild flowers and birds fluttering across the fields in every direction. Nature was showing its most innocent side this morning and Margie was thrilled to be permitted to trace the footsteps her father had made over the years. These simple footsteps that paced the hundred or so yards leading from the porch steps to the road and then back were a gift, a treasure of immeasurable importance to Margie. Her spirits were lifted for the moment and she forgot the duties that awaited her this afternoon.

The aluminum box, perched atop a cedar post at the road's shoulder, was filled with a menagerie of parcels and letters, most of them solicitations of one sort or another. Margie flipped through them quickly and, upon her return to the house, dropped a number of them in

the trash before placing the remainder on the coffee table. Her father was still slumbering peacefully with the labored breathing she had come to accept as normal. There were no other sounds in the house except the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall and the chirping of birds nesting in the trees outside an open window. Her steps turned toward the kitchen door and she was soon clicking across the flagstone pathway and heading down the drive.

The morning passed quickly at *Simpson's Seed and Feed*. There was never a lack of work for an industrious person and Margie had inherited her father's genes for determination and, her boys would say, persistence. There was definitely no shortage of the work ethic in Marjorie Megan Simpson Riley's bones. The store literally hummed with activity most every day and there was nothing in the store's name to indicate the hardware, appliances and general merchandise that was sold from its floor. Expansion had taken place gradually as Franklin had grown and city dwellers had come to outnumber those of the farm community who had originally settled the land. The town had prospered and grown so large that there was even talk that a Wal-Mart might move into the area.

When the noon hour approached, Margie's boys appeared at her side and waited patiently for her to recognize their presence and indicate that she was ready to go. The boys were twins and had begun Franklin Junior College the previous year but would be heading to their state's land-grant university in the fall. Margie dreaded the thought of seeing them leave home but had accepted, or had begun to accept, their departure as a necessary part of their educational preparation. There was no way to hold on to them forever, at least none that she had found so far. There was also no suggestion of Margie's own youthful experiences that entered her thoughts as she watched her boys. She was neither ashamed of nor burdened by the experiences of those early years, but the fields where her experiments in life had flourished were not to be trespassed upon by anyone again.

After a brief delay to finish some unexpected business and work out the details of who would drive to the cemetery and who would drive the return trip, all three piled into the store's pickup-and-delivery van

and headed to what was once the edge of town. The oldest part of the cemetery was directly behind the red brick church that had been rebuilt years ago after a lightning strike had set it ablaze and burned most of the sanctuary. Because of numerous church expansions, the new part of the cemetery had been extended behind the mortuary and across part of the city park, which had been taken from service as pastures and fields so long ago that only a very few remembered. Over the years, the Simpsons had filled up the plots that they owned behind the church and had been forced to purchase additional family plots, along with the Rileys and Perkins and most of the other townfolk, in the newer sections.

Margie and the boys stopped to pick up flowers that had been placed on order a week or more ago at Franklin's first and, until recently, only florist. They had not planned to dally, but friends and neighbors liked to chat and express remembrances. So, they were delayed momentarily, though nothing that was of any consequence.

They arrived at the cemetery with flowers in hand and a bucket of fresh water to fill the copper urn that graced the foot of Mathew and Audrey Simpson's plot. A large granite headstone, with only one side engraved, conspicuously marked the beloved mother and grandmother's final resting place. Margie knelt down to present the flowers and to pray. The boys stood nearby with heads bowed. As they lingered, several of the afternoon's scattered clouds joined to shield them from the hot afternoon sun. Before the prayer was finished, another of the high clouds, quietly and without notice, floated across the afternoon sky and took its place beside the white billows that cast a benevolent umbrella over the entire cemetery.

Margie had never been able to bring herself to speak of her mother in the past tense. Her boys had been asked to bear the burden of supporting her grief, as well as their own, at the funeral and Margie had never visited her mother's grave without being accompanied by her boys. In fact, it had been only at the urging of Pastor Carlyle and with both boys steadying her steps that Margie had consented to enter the viewing room containing her mother's coffin just before the actual funeral service had taken place. For the brief moment that she had looked upon her mother's pale visage, silent tears had poured so fully

down her cheeks that her rouge was washed away and no one was quite sure that she had actually seen her mother's body lying lifeless among the flowers and lace that surrounded it.

With today's prayer complete and nothing remaining to be done at graveside, Margie and her boys concluded their visit and said their individual farewells to the woman who had blessed their lives in so many ways for so many years. The benevolent and billowy white clouds that had hovered high in the sky and paused for one brief moment of prayer were pushed along by the afternoon breeze and disappeared into the heavens. The trip back to the store was quiet, unbearably quiet for Margie.

"Take me by Pa Pa's house," she uttered out of the clear blue. "Turn at the next street and we can miss most of the lunch traffic. I reckon it won't hurt either of you to say a few words to your grandfather this afternoon."

The boys looked at each other in total amazement, but neither questioned their mother's orders or her motives. They had each visited their grandfather not more than twenty-four hours earlier and talked about their acceptance to the university. Mathew Simpson had relished the boys' visit and talked at length about what he remembered or imagined of his college days and the war years that interrupted them. The boys had always been close to their grandfather, despite his combustible temperament, and enjoyed sharing their secrets with him. They could not remember a time that he had ever betrayed their confidence.

The fifteen or so minutes that it took to wind their way around plowed fields and fenced pastures seemed like an eternity to Margie. There was no apparent reason for her anxiety beyond the just completed visit to her mother's grave. Her outward nervousness, however, infected the boys and nearly resulted in the van being steered too tightly around a grated ditch that ran at right angles to one of the intersections they crossed.

"Watch where you're going," Margie screamed! "Do you want me to drive? If you want me to drive, just pull over and say so."

“It’s OK, Mom,” one of the boys finally uttered. “There’s no need to get up tight. Just take a deep breath and everything will be all right.”

“Everything is not all right,” Margie scolded. “There are things you don’t understand and you should remember who you’re talking to.”

After a moment, Margie looked at her son. At that instant she saw a confident young man looking squarely into her eyes. The retiring, young boyish face she had always seen had vanished.

“You’re right,” she stammered. “I’m sorry. Of course, you’re right.”

There were no more sudden turns or outbursts and Margie managed to compose herself until the van began pulling into the drive heading to the old house. It was then that a pressure swelled up inside her chest and the beating of her heart began pounding loudly in her head. She remembered the morning’s walk and the butterflies and bees that had accompanied her. She remembered the birds that had winged their way across the fields. She remembered the coolness of the freshening breeze.

Without knowing that the van had stopped or that she had opened its sliding door, she found her feet slamming hard upon the flagstone pathway and her body straining to clamber up the red brick steps and to burst through the kitchen door. There was no knock to announce her arrival and no words were spoken as she tore through the dining room and what had long been her father’s office. The windows were still open, but the house had warmed considerably and everywhere there was the suffocating stench of the old couches and the chair and the stale smoke that clung to every fiber of every fabric in the house.

Margie no longer noticed the artifacts that filled the house, nor did she see the three glasses sitting on the coffee table. The melted ice that earlier had cooled an old man’s and his guests’ favorite beverages remained trapped in its crystal containers. The condensation on the outer sides of each vessel, however, had gathered around the bottom surfaces of the crystal and left a permanent trace of its presence as it touched and spread across the table before being absorbed by the remnants of Sunday’s paper and Monday’s unopened mail.

Mathew Simpson's left hand was turned toward the rocking chair that had held and comforted his family and had been his constant companion. His eyes were fixed at a point near the ceiling or, perhaps, toward the corner of the mantel. There was no labored breathing and the afternoon sun shone through the trees and cast the shadows of a thousand dancing leaves across his peaceful face.

Margie struggled with her steps as she came to an abrupt halt before walking hesitantly over to his side. She seated herself in the old rocking chair that had been the source of so much joy during her childhood and gently placed her father's hand in hers. She leaned forward and fell miserably into a crouch upon her knees. Her spirit crumbled and her body heaped itself in a pile. Tears filled her eyes and the soft sobbing that ached in her bosom and escaped with each gasp of breath echoed imperceptibly through the old house.

She had not prepared herself for this, just as she had not and could not have prepared herself to visit her mother. The past year had been difficult. Her father had carried on with life but had given up on living. Margie had assumed the role of chief caretaker and supporter. She had refused to let her father wither away alone. Now, that role had been stripped summarily from her grasp and she felt the ache of emptiness, an emptiness that grief consumed and then convulsed without pause. How could she be asked to endure another loss? How could she ever open her eyes and behold the affliction that had fallen all around her? Her boys looked upon her absolute despair and quietly retreated into the kitchen.

They wished that they were not a part of this, that their grandfather was still alive and that their mother could tell them what to do. They had been on the perimeter of death before, but never in the center. They had been called into a room and told when someone close had died, but never had they found death in the open, firsthand. They had played their parts, but never had they written their own roles. They needed help. They would call Dr. McFarland and Pastor Carlyle and they would wait and, maybe, it would all go away. Maybe, they wouldn't have to enter that room. Maybe, they wouldn't have to stand beside their mother and steady her steps. Maybe, it would be different if they prayed. Maybe, but they guessed otherwise.

MONDAY'S MAIL

Margie searched through her darkness for answers and found none. Her tortured mind could see only the loneliness. She needed the comforting hand of an older brother. She wished for a younger brother who could accept responsibility and share her enormous grief. If she accepted her father's death and the impending departure of her two boys, she instinctively knew she would be truly alone for the first time and the overwhelming burden of her independence, the independence that she had fought tooth-and-nail against her father to achieve, would be hers to bear for evermore.

“My God, why?” she cried. “Why?”

MRS. WILLOUGHBY'S GIFT

“All right children, let's calm down and take our places.

Everyone find your seat. Mildred, Jennifer can find her own seat without your assistance. Tommy, if I see you punch either one of the Brewster boys in the back again, you're going to find yourself wishing you had kept your hands where they belonged. I'm not going to tolerate a face like that, either. If you want to avoid revisiting Mr. Jamison, you should think carefully about our little talk yesterday. William, would you come to the front of the class and tell everyone about the special treat we have planned for this morning?”

William Randal Rollins had endeared himself to Mrs. Willoughby. He was usually a pretty good kid, but most kids are still pretty good when they're in the third grade. He was bright enough and he studied as hard as any third grader to have come through Houston Elementary in the recent past. He read extremely well, loved science and geography, and was determined to memorize his multiplication tables before anyone else in the class, especially Jennifer Johnson.

Not all of his classmates, however, cared to devote their energies in productive ways and not everyone liked Mrs. Willoughby. There could have been jealousy involved in how some feelings came to be, but Mrs. Willoughby was very old, very much set in her ways and not as permissive as many of the younger teachers. In any case, kids' opinions and motives are difficult to figure out sometimes.

Tommy Ratcliff was the class bully. He was as incorrigible as any child Mrs. Willoughby had ever been asked to teach. He had inexorable and, to some extent, inexcusable troubles with his studies and he craved attention. Unfortunately, the kind of attention he received was usually a stern word, a quick jerk by the arm and a stinging paddle to the backside, like the one administered squarely to the posterior of his faded britches by Mr. Jamison several days ago. Tommy had tired of the attention lavished on William by Mrs. Willoughby and had intentionally hit him in the face with an elbow during recess. Tommy was always one

to act more on impulse than on any thoughtful plan and, unfortunately for him, his ill-conceived playground action was carried out precisely in front of Mrs. Willoughby. Before he could pounce and take complete advantage of the cowardly ambush he had perpetrated on William, Mrs. Willoughby had him by the arm and was literally dragging him to Mr. Jamison's office.

The corporal punishment he received within minutes of arriving in the office relieved him of further classroom activities for the afternoon but did not relieve him from having to work math problems in the company of the principal. It also gave him time to agonize over the possible measures his father, a raucous and angular man who was known at most of the local night spots as "Mean Gene," would take when the elder Ratcliff learned that his son had instigated, rather than finished, the rebellious altercation. Even though Mrs. Willoughby had accompanied Eugene Ratcliff to Mr. Jamison's office many times during Eugene's own formative years, he frequently managed to overlook the inconvenience of *his* defiant transgressions when it came to disciplining his headstrong son.

Mrs. Willoughby and Mr. Jamison had shaken their heads in disbelief many times at the tragic similarities between the father and his boy. Mrs. Willoughby had worn a path to the principal's office with Eugene and was well on her way to wearing out her nearly exhausted patience with Tommy. Mr. Jamison had even commented that the father and son were the only two individuals during his tenure at the school who had run more frequently from the paddle than they had run to keep from being tagged on the playground.

William's misfortune at recess, while leaving him with a painful and swollen reminder on his upper lip, had the unintended benefit of attracting the attention of Jennifer Johnson. Jennifer was a lanky, blue-eyed platinum blond who, if she hadn't been a girl, would have been first pick to be on every team that was formed to play any of the games that occupied the kids during recess. As it was, Jennifer had become the most sought after second round draft choice on the playground and was undeniably the smartest student in the third grade. Her attentions were secretly enjoyed by William and he had played the wounded soldier

routine for much longer than his injuries justified without actually realizing the true nature of the game he was playing. After delivering Tommy to Mr. Jamison's office, Mrs. Willoughby had returned to the scene of the morning's juvenile confrontation to collect her remaining wards and to assure herself that William would survive. Her positive assessment of William's remarkable healing powers curtailed further efforts by William to solicit Jennifer's sympathy and concluded with everyone back in his or her proper classroom seat.

Today was a new day and it was supposed to be a special day. The class was scheduled to spend the afternoon in the library learning to find and file books using the "system," the Dewey Decimal System. Agnes Blackthorn, known to the kids as "Miss Bookthorn" because of her propensity to hide in the most obscure recesses of the library with her calloused hands enveloping the latest number one bestseller, had prepared a program to instruct the children on the proper use and functions of the library. Her reputation notwithstanding, the kids knew full well what had been planned and were eager to get out of their seats and out of the classroom for any reason. Their faces literally beamed with anticipation as William slid from his desk and appeared at the front of the class poised to speak to his classmates.

"Gracious sakes alive, William!" Mrs. Willoughby exclaimed. "What on earth have you got on your face? Come here child and let me have a closer look."

William was more than a bit flushed at this unannounced inspection in front of his friends. After all, the swelling in his lip had practically disappeared and he had done nothing out of the ordinary during his one-mile hike to school. He hadn't even chased any of "Brer Rabbit's" relatives this morning. The sudden rush of excitement, however, reddened his complexion and produced a detectable sweat across his brow. Mrs. Willoughby surveyed his face and hands and, without the slightest hesitation, pulled his shirttail from his pants and lifted it over his shoulders to unveil the faint but unmistakable red splotches across his back and stomach.

"You've got the measles, young man," she explained as she lowered his shirt and returned him to a more modest state of dress.

“How could I have missed seeing these this morning?” she asked herself. “Does anyone at your home have the measles?”

William wasn't exactly sure what the measles were. He had withstood the misery that was called the “chicken pox” and his first reaction was a sudden rush of fear that permeated every ounce of his thin frame. He looked into Mrs. Willoughby's animated eyes and sensed that something was terribly wrong. His eyes began to squint and become blurred. His brow furrowed and moisture was squeezed into his nose. He sniffled and his horrified expression asked only that whatever the measles were, they not be like the chicken pox. He began to itch for no reason that he understood. His entire body heated itself hotter than he could remember being, even when the sun had beaten down upon his shirtless back as he hoed the garden last summer, and he began to sweat. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and spoke.

“No mam,” he stammered. “I don't think there's any measles at my home.”

“Well, this is nothing for you to get upset about,” Mrs. Willoughby responded.

Mrs. Willoughby could see William's rapidly mounting concern for his well-being and she immediately regretted having frightened him. She had allowed herself to become prematurely overwhelmed by the prospect of measles invading her entire class and had momentarily forgotten the feelings and insecurities of the child that she had before her.

“Let me take a look and see if any of my other children have developed these little red splotches on their skin,” she said. “With any luck, these will turn out to be German measles and, I promise you, they'll be gone before you can enjoy a few days home from school. You wait right here while I take a closer look at all of your friends.”

Mrs. Willoughby usually ambled purposefully but leisurely around her classroom. Her every movement among her children and at the blackboard seemed precisely choreographed. Even the excess flesh that hung beneath her wrinkled arms moved to the beat of the metronome's pendulum when she raised her hand to point or write. She was normally the epitome of all that was calm and in control, but not now. Now, she

literally scampered up and down each row and from one desk and one child to the next. Her touch was firm and quick. Her eyes raced across the face, hands and arms of each youngster. There was a hushed buzz that filled the air as Mrs. Willoughby pursued the telltale red signposts of measles.

William remained alone at the front of the class and surveyed the unusual scene that was being played out in front of him. His flushed body cooled somewhat and the moisture that had threatened to overflow from his nose and his eyes with an unmerciful vengeance subsided. He concluded that he would not be going to the library today. No one had told him as much, but somehow he just knew. If anyone had asked him where he would be spending the next few days, he would have said, "Home." It was simply one of those things that he had figured out for himself.

As Mrs. Willoughby's inspection progressed, the children began to look at themselves and at each other. The boys began to giggle and seek to attract the attention of their classmates. Some of them began pulling up their shirts and laughing the loud, shrill laughs that only children can create. The girls, while seemingly more modest, were not immune from participating in the activities that had miraculously presented themselves. Then, without warning, the commotion that had swept through the classroom found its focus and became centered on one child, one young boy. All the children began to point and laugh at none other than Tommy Ratcliff.

Mrs. Willoughby was quick to restore order. The clash of her spotted hands slapping together and her cracking, raspy voice rising above the high-pitched voices of her class brought an immediate and intended response. The return to order had been conditioned during the many months Mrs. Willoughby had instructed and cared for her children. The chastened boys and girls looked at each other and snickered, but the pointing and uncontrolled laughter stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Little eyes began rolling around in little heads, half anticipating the shaky but firm hand of their teacher to latch onto them and severely reprimand them. The specter of authority, the temporarily abandoned

laws of the classroom as laid down by Mrs. Willoughby, had brought them back across the line that marked what was acceptable and what was not. The children had been retrieved from the land of the burgeoning savage that lurked so close, yet unseen, beneath the surface of childish civility.

Tommy Ratcliff had attracted the teasing gestures of his classmates for good reason. Their jeers and the finger pointing of even the Brewster boys was brought on by the readily apparent splotches of red that marked him as clearly as having the word “measles” printed across his chest. Mrs. Willoughby expedited her investigations of the other children and maneuvered her steps in Tommy’s direction. Tommy Ratcliff could always be found in the last seat of the first row, nearest the door. He had a yearning to escape. He wanted to be everything he wasn’t and nothing that he was, which left him upside down in a world that required one, especially a child, to be right side up.

Upon her arrival at Tommy’s severely abused desk, Mrs. Willoughby confirmed the expectations of the other children. Tommy was dramatically more advanced in the progression of his infection than William was and similarly as concerned as William about the unknown consequences of his condition. How his parents could have ushered him off to school without becoming aware of his illness was a question that blazed like a wildfire inside Mrs. Willoughby’s head, but her utmost concern was separating Tommy and William from the rest of her class.

The two boys spent the rest of the school day in quarantine, isolated from their friends but very much under the scrutiny of every adult in the small school. The elbow that had caused William’s swollen lip and the attention shown by Jennifer Johnson seemed to become lost and forgotten in the patterns of red splotches that became more apparent as the hours passed. Neither boy would be picked up until his father came home from work and was informed of the infection that had been contracted by his son. Until then, there was nothing to do but wait and watch the grownups that paraded by to catch a glimpse of the boys with red splotches. It was a very long afternoon.

William missed five days of school and Tommy missed six. Mrs. Willoughby sent reading assignments to them each day and told them to

work on their multiplication tables, but she emphasized that their most important job was to get well. The day after Tommy returned to school, she gave the entire class a party and brought a cake and cookies that she had baked herself. She also brought a large jar of freshly made lemonade that she sat squarely on the activity table at the front of the class. Tommy and William became class heroes in the battle against the measles, which none of the other kids ever contracted. As a special recognition, Mrs. Willoughby presented William with a rare, blue-backed dictionary that had belonged to her family for generations and she presented Tommy with a book that had been her primary reader in grammar school.

Though neither boy understood the significance of the deep affection and caring behind his gift or the long and proud history that would end with the eventual retirement of their teacher, William made a promise to learn every word that was contained on the pages of the old dictionary and his eyes fell with considerable but surprising sadness on the wrinkled handwriting that wriggled its way across the top of one of the pages. Mrs. Willoughby had signed her name with all the precision her trembling hands would allow. As Mrs. Willoughby could probably have anticipated, Tommy was more perplexed than appreciative of his gift and more intent on the consumption of sugar-filled cookies than on the kindness of the sweetest and dearest teacher he would ever know. In spite of their differences, Mrs. Willoughby felt a connection to both boys. They stood out from the other, quieter kids and she knew that these two very special boys would be her last.

After the party, the entire class was presented with another surprise. As soon as they cleaned up the last remnants of the cake and washed away the stickiness left by the lemonade that had found its way onto the activity table, they were going to be given their day at the library. Miss Agnes Blackthorn was already waiting, with growing annoyance, for their arrival.

The library was Miss Blackthorn's life. It was a large space but densely populated with books in which she could find refuge from her otherwise solitary existence. Most of her days were spent hunched over a table with orphaned books that had to be returned to their prescribed

homes. The pleasure that came into her life, quite predictably, was found on the pages of written passages, which she devoured more voraciously than she consumed her daily sustenance. No matter what clothes she wore or what their color, she bore an aura of grayness about her person and all that surrounded her. She was a punctual woman, as punctual as the bell that heralded the beginning and ending of each school day. She was never sick. When it rained, she had her umbrella and, when it was cold, she wore her shawl and overcoat. She never smiled at the sun or frowned at the clouds. Her life spun about in the same well-worn groove, never advancing to the next and often causing one to wonder if she had been cast into the library with no past and certain of no future.

Though nearly invisible among her abundantly visible books, she appeared at the entrance to her walled city and greeted Mrs. Willoughby and her wide-eyed flock. The children approached Miss Blackthorn with apprehension and uncertainty. The library was a confusing assembly of lettered and numbered rows and columns. It was exciting in its newness and threatening in its expanse. This unknown but fertile field of knowledge and entertainment was waiting to be discovered. Miss Blackthorn began to explain the workings of the library and the ways to unlock its secrets, but no matter how ardent or well presented her words, there seemed to be no obvious order, no reason for the artificial boundaries that catalogued each book. It was impossible for the children to comprehend such a place. For all of its apparent organization, the children became lost in what grew uncontrollably around them, as a jungle would grow around a clearing until it was totally obscured.

Notwithstanding the overabundance of information needing to be absorbed by the eager minds that had been brought to this new place, Miss Blackthorn knew that there would be many more days for advancing their education and she led Mrs. Willoughby and her children on a tour of the collection of books that had been entrusted to her for safekeeping. In the process of seeing numerous classifications of books being pulled and discussed by Miss Blackthorn, William, as frequently happened, was overcome by the need to participate.

“Where does my book go?” he asked in a voice that boomed more loudly than even he anticipated.

Miss Blackthorn's first impulse was to ignore the unsolicited interruption, but William would not be denied a response. He held the book that Mrs. Willoughby had given him, and which he had kept in his possession since first unwrapping it, above his head until Miss Blackthorn acknowledged him.

"What on earth do you have there?" Miss Blackthorn asked.

Under the pressure of William's grip, the deteriorating cover of the old dictionary had begun to separate and the first few yellowed pages were hanging precariously close to falling free from the glue that had secured them for over one hundred years. Mrs. Willoughby saw William's struggle to hold the book that had so recently become his proud possession and which he was so eager to share. A smile broke across her thin lips and accentuated her many wrinkles. Even though they lay beneath a cover of rouge and facial powder, the makeup that had been applied with painstaking attention had long since ceased to hide their existence.

"William!" Mrs. Willoughby exclaimed. "You shouldn't interrupt Miss Blackthorn. Where are your manners?"

"I forgot," William confessed. "I'm sorry."

"Let me keep the book for you until it's time to go," Mrs. Willoughby said politely as she moved in William's direction and gently caressed the book back into proper form.

"Yes mam," William said, "but don't forget to give it back when I go home."

"I won't forget," Mrs. Willoughby responded. "I promise."

The exchange between Mrs. Willoughby and William did not go unnoticed by Miss Blackthorn. Anything involving a book, especially in her library, was without question under her jurisdiction.

"What does the boy have there?" Miss Blackthorn asked with utmost curiosity and interest.

"William has a dictionary, a very old one. The book is a gift that he received from me this morning," Mrs. Willoughby answered.

"May I see the book?" Miss Blackthorn asked forcefully as she stepped toward Mrs. Willoughby and thrust out her hand without waiting for any indication of permission to be granted.

Mrs. Willoughby was not one to be intruded upon, but the nature of Miss Blackthorn's request took her by surprise and left her momentarily defenseless. The outstretched and beckoning hand of Miss Blackthorn drew the book from her possession without the need for consent. Mrs. Willoughby had intended no concession to Miss Blackthorn's demand, but the book made its way into the librarian's hardened grip and was summarily retracted to a range that allowed for closer inspection.

"This is a treasure," Miss Blackthorn whispered. "This is a wonderful and rare treasure that must be preserved and enjoyed by everyone."

William had kept a watchful eye on his book and had begun to feel the same anxiety that had presented itself when Mrs. Willoughby had begun inspecting his measles. Just as he had known that he would be going home the day the red splotches appeared, he knew the whispers emanating from Miss Blackthorn's lips were a threat to his book. Even though the concepts of legal ownership and property rights were as foreign to him as many of the words in his recently acquired treasure, he knew the old dictionary had been given to him and his squinting eyes and furrowed brow turned toward Mrs. Willoughby for reassurance.

"You can't possibly mean to give this priceless treasure to a child!" Miss Blackthorn protested with not a hint of concern for William but with every intention to chastise and question Mrs. Willoughby's mental faculties.

"Miss Blackthorn, if you please," Mrs. Willoughby stated forcibly. "I must request that you return the book without delay and complete the children's lesson."

Miss Blackthorn stared at length at the raised eyebrows and pursed lips of Mrs. Willoughby. Reluctantly, she managed to coax her hardened fingers to release their unyielding grip on the dark blue book that she heard crying out to her for protection and transferred its possession to Mrs. Willoughby. There was nothing in her manner, however, that conveyed a willingness to accept that the book had not been placed in her eternal care. She knew that she, alone, understood the significance of this book and she would have to preserve its future.

For days and weeks after the incident with the book, Miss Blackthorn would appear in her walled city and wander aimlessly among the rows of fiction and put out a tentative finger to brush first one of her favorite works and then another but withdraw from each before she felt a welcoming touch. The grayness that surrounded her person became more ominous and her punctuality slipped into tardiness. Her calloused and hardened fingers coursed through her hair so often that the strands fell tangled and grew thin at her temples. Her statuesque appearance became undeniably disheveled. Her untidiness became the topic of conversation at the teachers' morning coffee. Books began to pile themselves irregularly on the tables and chairs that had always been scrupulously clean. Even the delivery of the next installment from her faithful book club failed to stimulate her desire to devour the masterful revelation of another storied existence. She languished and retreated more fully into the darkness of her preoccupation with the lost book.

Her thoughts were never very far from the book she considered to be manifestly hers. Whatever energy she possessed was expended in thinking, if one dared call her ruminations even remotely akin to thought. Her mind became as disorganized as the library she had once labored to maintain. Her closest acquaintances, none of whom could truthfully be referred to as friends, became concerned and sought to dispel her obvious and deepening anguish. They tried in vain to identify the source of her despair.

There were rumors of heartbreaking death and unprincipled lovers, but Miss Blackthorn withdrew without regard to the overtures of all concerned. If she were aware of the rumors, she consciously or unconsciously disregarded them and avoided the mere allusion to their existence. No one was entrusted with the remotest of clues as to reasons for Miss Blackthorn's fall into the depths of depression. Her fellow instructors began to watch her from a distance and, after a respectable amount of time, abandoned both hope and her altogether. Occasionally, a comment would float across the teachers' coffee table like an epitaph across the obituary page, but, for the most part, Miss Blackthorn had become a most uncommon curiosity.

Then one morning, William happened to appear, as though caught and framed within the library's door, at the very instant that Miss Blackthorn's eyes looked across space and somehow focused on his exact position. Miss Blackthorn's mind seized upon his image and a plan that had been beyond reach, beyond comprehension, suddenly fell with all its simplicity into place. The uncultivated ground, which had been laboriously plowed for weeks, became inexplicably fertile and Miss Blackthorn's heart skipped an impatient beat. The bewilderment that had imprisoned and paralyzed her every movement vanished at the instant that William came back into her life. The stage was set and a determined face with chiseled features rose from the intemperate flame of renewed ambition and arrived directly in front of William.

"Young man," Miss Blackthorn whispered, "would you please tell your mother that the school is having a rare book show and you are invited to bring in a contribution to be displayed for everyone to enjoy. Have your mother call me. I'll give her the details. The children who bring in books, magazines, periodicals and even old dictionaries will receive extra credit. I'll give you a letter. Wait here until I return."

The curtain on Miss Blackthorn's stage had been raised. She could see the book in her hands, safe and protected. The smell of the old book reawakened in her nostrils and the yellow pages that had hung loosely from its splintered binding touched her flesh. She saw herself ceremoniously maneuver them back to their sheltered domain. The unfortunate circumstance that had removed the book from her protective custody would not reoccur. She couldn't be blamed for having lost possession to those who didn't and couldn't possibly understand its importance. She had not been accountable for its preservation then, but she willingly assumed that role now and would not relinquish it for any reason.

Miss Blackthorn beamed. Her mind ran wildly in anticipation of regaining the book she treasured. The library became hushed. Books lay stagnant in random stacks that stood like trees in the darkest confines of the forest. There was no motion, no sun, no clouds, no rain and no cold. Time had stopped and in the stillness stood William. Hurriedly, Miss Blackthorn finished scribbling the note to his mother and reminded him

to be certain to give it to her. She knew it would be delivered. William could be trusted. He was a good kid. The calloused fingers that would soon hold the coveted book pushed the note into his pocket.

William felt Miss Blackthorn's hardened fingers pressing against him and saw the edge of the white paper as it slid easily into his pocket. He stood motionless, waiting to be released. He felt betrayed. He understood the message he was to deliver to his mother and he knew the outcome of the actions its content would set loose upon him. His heart sank. He saw his book vanishing. His mother wouldn't understand. She would make him bring his book to Miss Blackthorn's rare book display. He would come later to pick it up, but it wouldn't be returned. His mother wouldn't come to school with him and ask for it to be returned. Miss Blackthorn would say she had given the book back. She would say that he had lost it. He would be punished for his carelessness and that would be the end of it. All this was clear in his mind. That was how it would end. There was no other way.

"Run along, William," Miss Blackthorn's voice echoed as it broke into the quiet sadness encompassing the youngster. "If Mrs. Willoughby asks where you were, tell her I delayed you."

"Yes mam," William politely replied.

William shivered in the cold that invaded his body. He stared expressionless at the books that towered over him in every direction. It was unfair. The book belonged to him. He should be able to say who saw it, who touched it, even who knew that it existed. Mrs. Willoughby was his teacher. She had given the book to him as a gift. He didn't want to lose it like he had lost his baseball to the boy in the sixth grade. His mother made him share everything. He had nothing for himself. Everything he had ever gotten was eventually taken away, lost forever. There were always people, bigger people, with reasons why he shouldn't have anything and they should have everything.

William dropped his head. He felt and looked pitiful. His own frailties infuriated him. He cocked his head and looked at Miss Blackthorn as he turned to walk away. He saw the hardness in her face and the inflexible line of her smile. She would win. She had already won. He would be punished for having his book taken from him. There

was nothing he could do. He knew her eyes were following him as he struggled to take each step down the hall. Her stare weighed heavily upon his back and its burden was impossible to escape. His innocence wilted under the oppression of all he believed to be true and all he knew to be wrong. Miss Blackthorn's voracious appetite for books, his book, had consumed him. She had struck at the object most dear to his heart and found his greatest vulnerability.

Life had rotted, like the apples and peaches that offered so much promise in the spring only to fall upon the ground after a wind and lie in the dirt and weeds until the earth reclaimed them. He could sense her behind him, glaring at the insignificant obstacle that had stood between her and the book she passionately desired. Soon, he would not feel anything. It would be no different than the pain that had throbbed in his sore lip after Tommy Ratcliff had ambushed him on the playground. His pain would be replaced by numbness and it would eventually be forgotten. Except, this time, he would not let himself forget. He would lie in bed every night for the rest of his life and remember the gift Mrs. Willoughby had given him. He would listen to the wind that blew the seasons in and out. He would count the raindrops that pounded down upon the tin roof covering the room he shared with his brother. The rains would not wash away his memory. No matter how many times their pounding into the night brought sleep, the rains would not cause him to forget.

William had reached the door to Mrs. Willoughby's classroom, his classroom. He stood quietly and brushed the hair from his moist eyes. He raised his arm and touched his sleeve to his nose and then brushed it clean with his other hand. The hall was deserted. He could hear Mrs. Willoughby going over the multiplication tables again, the ones he had learned before Jennifer Johnson had learned them. He told himself not to look back. It didn't matter whether Miss Blackthorn was there or not. The school bell would be ringing soon. He knew because he was exhausted. No one had to tell him that this day was nearly over. His mind wandered to some rarely visited corner of its universe. He had been there before but had nearly forgotten it. It was here that he could find his grandfather, the one who had died before he was born.

MRS. WILLOUGHBY'S GIFT

This grandfather lived only in pictures and in this special corner of his mind. He could talk with this grandfather and this grandfather would understand. William was confident that he would understand. As the comforting embrace of his grandfather's arms surrounded him, the school bell rang to announce the end of the day. It didn't surprise William. He had known it was time to go home. He wished he could stay in the other universe, surrounded by his grandfather's love and understanding, but it was time to go home. The school bell had rung and had pulled him back into his pain. He would go home and say his multiplication tables to his mother after supper, before going to bed. It would be then that he would give her the letter and maybe the rain would pound down on the tin roof and he could find sleep. If only he could trust the rain to fall on this night, maybe he could find sleep.

THE POLYCHEM PLASTICS PLANT AND OTHER STORIES

PRAYING FOR ANTONIO

Twenty-four-hour newscasts from CNN, Fox and MSNBC were being scanned by the eyes of men and women working in a Command Center that had grown accustomed to ordinary events and mostly quiet days. Even the broadcast from Al Jazeera, which was deemed important enough to be given a place of prominence, had its volume turned so low as to be imperceptible. Occasionally, pictures from ESPN would pop up on one of the monitors that hung from overhead and filled the room with flat-panel screens. Someday, much of this information might be important, but right now the skeleton crew was mostly interested in seeing whether or not the streets and highways were ready for the rush of early morning traffic and checking out the fresh doughnuts that had just arrived. The executive suite, with its long mahogany table, fine leather-grained chairs and banks of telephones that included cell, as well as secure and satellite lines, was already occupied by the Mayor and his Chief of Police.

“Chief,” the Mayor began, “I’ve reiterated our list of concerns to the City Manager and our city council. ‘The list is too long,’ they say. ‘There’s not enough money for roads and schools. Addressing these security issues is not a priority for our constituency,’ they say. I only have so much political capital to spend and my arm twisting is coming perilously close to assault.”

“What is it they want us to push to the back burner?” the Chief asked. “Our vulnerabilities are not that difficult to figure out. We can’t close our eyes because some council person is afraid an arts exchange with Egypt or a billboard removal program might be in jeopardy. Should we forget about working with the railroads and other hazardous cargo shippers like the guys with ammonium nitrate and propane? We’re in the middle of the oil and natural gas industry, for Christ’s sake, and we have fertilizer plants serving our farmers’ agricultural needs.”

“The Intelligence Division project is dead,” the Mayor said. “We don’t have the resources to coordinate directly with London, Moscow

and Tel Aviv or some other place like Istanbul or Singapore. Al Qaeda and anthrax are just words on the evening news. Bird flu is history. H1N1 is the big concern. The council is as tired of hearing about cyberterrorism from me as they are of hearing about jihadist in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even the project to crack down on illegal aliens and ID fraud is off the table. It's not something anyone wants to hear about."

"What about our program to investigate and develop best practices?" the Chief asked.

"If we can find a military person in the city with a background in intelligence and knowledge of international terrorist organizations, as well as at least a hint of exposure to the fine art of diplomacy," the Mayor answered, "then, maybe, we can hire him or her to review our counterterrorism efforts on a contract basis. Maybe, we'll get lucky and find a retiree who'll work cheap enough for the council to approve the expenditure."

"Perhaps, we should call the Feds and tell them we're going to lose the global war on terror at the local level because we have too many potholes to refill this year," the Chief cracked sarcastically. "I suppose our financial undercover operations are dead in the water, too."

"I share your frustration, Chief," the Mayor replied. "We're on the same team. I think I've found an ally in funding a stronger terror-sensitive business squad. The head of the Security Committee of the Hotel Association is going to join me at our next council meeting and emphasize the necessity of visiting our business concerns every week to develop intelligence on possible terrorist activity. I think the south side will see this as benefiting its people. A lot of families in this city depend on tourism and our hotel industry for their livelihood. I'm also talking with our local truck-rental industry to encourage them to work with us in combating this threat. I think they'll come on board when they see that we're not going to be citing them for safety violations every day."

"When will our local people realize that we're not here to destroy lives and jobs?" the Chief asked. "We need a whole new program just to educate them that we're trying to understand what's going on so that we can protect them."

“It’s easier for people to understand what we’re trying to do when we focus on infrastructure protection,” the Mayor concluded. “They understand bridges and our water supply. The financial system is a little more difficult for them to grasp. Even our Fire Department hasn’t accepted that its HAZMAT people could be responding to a crime when they show up at a chemical spill. If a terrorist can train for his pilot’s license, why is it so hard to connect the dots to a tanker-truck license or a job with Southern Pacific Railroad?”

“The meeting that Raul set up this morning won’t be much better than a flogging,” the Chief complained. “We say we want everyone to work together, the Feds and us, but when it comes to the border problem and illegals, we’re telling people that the Police Department is not Immigration. If a terrorist is an illegal, I guess he can’t be asked about his citizenship or, Heaven forbid, we turn one over to the Feds.”

“Let’s not emphasize that concern with Raul this morning,” the Mayor advised. “Look at it this way. If we can make the terrorists find another city more appealing, then our people have one more chance to figure this war out. Maybe that’s all we can do, give them one more day to figure it out.”

“Maybe,” the Chief repeated. “I’ll see you at Raul’s after my morning briefing. My granddaughter has been trying to teach me how to bow. Do you think Raul would be satisfied if I just took a knee?”

“As long as you grovel when you do it,” the Mayor quipped, “everything should be fine.”

* * *

“It’s got to rain someday,” Christina lamented as much to herself as to the men scattered across the floor of her childhood home.

A nervous waver and cracking of her voice reached her ears as well as those of her visitors and increased the tension that was becoming as troublesome as the sweat seeping from her brow and stinging her eyes. She knew that she had to keep control of herself as well as these uneasy strangers. Any sign of uncertainty, any sign of weakness, would

allow fear to creep into and overwhelm what little authority she held over the poor souls sprawled before her.

“Stay away from those windows. No one will come as long as you don’t show yourselves,” she warned in her mother’s native tongue. “No one cares that you are here.”

The room was filled with illegal immigrants who had arrived by truck in the early morning hours of the hottest September she could recall in any of her 19 years. Their dark, long-sleeve shirts and heavy denim trousers magnified the insufferable heat that hovered over the room like a stagnant pool, bubbling and festering but incapable of moving or flowing along.

This group was luckier than most. These men had not run and then plodded along to the point of exhaustion in the sweltering heat of south Texas. They had not been abandoned without food or water in the oven-baked trailer of a broken-down rig. They were not alone, parked on the side of some dusty farm-to-market road.

Christina had almost grown accustomed to the periodic arrival and departure of people like this. In a day or two, many of them would be standing on a street corner, waiting to be loaded onto other trucks and taken to construction sites or handed over as day laborers to those who dealt in the city’s shadowy goings on. This was life along the Texas border, but Christina had decided that the world of shadows was not the world she wanted her children to live in.

“You can’t keep using this house,” Christina whispered to Antonio, her man of three years and father of her two children. “There are too many and it’s too dangerous.”

Her statements were uttered in perfect English this time to prevent the new arrivals from understanding what she was saying and to let Antonio know that she meant every word that grew from deep within her bosom. Antonio, as usual, showed his aggravation. His manhood had been insulted and he wanted to respond quickly, but this was Christina and he knew that fire burned hot in her depths and her will was unbreakable.

“This is the last bunch,” Antonio whispered into her ear as he walked behind her and turned her chin to look in the direction of three men who stared stone-faced in her direction.

“Stop it!” she protested with a jerk of her head and a turn to look away. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Those men are special,” Antonio grunted as he grabbed her chin again and forcibly pulled her head to look straight into his weathered face with its dark brown eyes and its tangled black hair. “Those men are worth more than three times all these other scum and I’ve got a special delivery for Napoleon that will answer all your mother’s prayers.”

“My mother’s prayers are for us,” Christina responded forcefully. “You promised her and you promised me you were through with Napoleon. You promised!”

“I keep my promises,” Antonio shot back. “You know I keep my promises, but we need this money. After I get paid, your mother can have a *new* life and your babies can have *new* clothes.”

His voice was drowned out by the roar of an engine downshifting as one of the big commercial rigs maneuvered to negotiate the abrupt turn coming off I-37 north and heading into downtown San Antonio on Durango Boulevard. This was the same point that he had arrived at only hours earlier after making the crossing from Matamoras into Brownsville and then traveling without incident through the night’s cool darkness past Kingsville before picking up Napoleon’s special package in Corpus Christi and turning for home.

He and Christina lived in the shadow of the Alamodome, a location that allowed him to take Durango, head west past Hemisfair and the river and then turn north on the Pan American Expressway. He would drive past Dolorosa, Commerce and Houston streets to I-10 west. From here he could turn east to access San Pedro and then south on I-37, which would bring him back to Christina. This route ringed the inner city and made for fast work when he had important cargo to deliver.



In the heart of the city, two uniformed patrolmen were leaving the morning briefing and preparing to begin their duties. One, a young man with a thick European accent, fidgeted nervously with four new electronic communications devices. He trailed behind a coal-black mountain of a man who moved with the burden of more than his enormous weight.

“Let’s go!” Napoleon shouted. “We’ve promised to escort an old friend through the city. I hope that hasn’t escaped your memory.”

“No,” the young man replied in his heavy German voice. “It’s very much on my mind, but I don’t think that’s what has made you so impatient. I saw your look when the Chief briefed us on the latest victim found in the King William district... a woman, didn’t he say? Why should that incident concern us this morning?”

“It shouldn’t,” Napoleon snapped, “but it does. Maybe that sort of thing happens in Hamburg, but not down in Stockdale where you and your cousins live or in my community of China Grove and certainly not in King William. You get shot here and you get knifed here. You don’t get beheaded here.”

“It’s probably domestic,” Napoleon’s partner chuckled nervously. “Someone may have been cleaning up a complication in a tangled relationship or settling an argument in the heat of passion.”

“Or sending a message,” Napoleon argued, “and I don’t like it when someone is sending that kind of message. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

The pair’s police cruiser made its way to Market Street and turned toward the Alamodome, a monument to the political power of the city’s most famous and most notorious son. The atmosphere inside the cruiser was tense as the radios crackled their broken messages and slow moving traffic delayed the two men from arriving at their rendezvous on time. It also kept the cruiser’s air conditioning from negating the effects of the ever-present sun that poured through the darkened windshield. Napoleon was not one to tolerate heat very well and, this morning, his temperature began to rise in more than the usual sense.

Across town, two Hispanic council members were engaged in a contentious meeting of another type. They had been summoned by the

League of Latin Americans and had responded as if their political lives depended on their punctuality, which it might well have. What they had believed to be a common, garden-variety LOLA emergency turned out to include the Mayor and the Chief of Police, fresh from his early morning briefing.

LOLA's spokesperson was Raul Garza, often accompanied by Delores Garcia. Raul was a thoroughly practiced Harvard man who enjoyed bringing cities to their knees as much as he enjoyed the considerable financial rewards of his many varied political endeavors. He had a knack for remembering names and faces, even those he successfully dispensed with in relatively short order. Many of his adversaries believed he played the game of advocacy to the point of abusing the system and, some believed, he enjoyed tearing down what others had sacrificed in blood and fortune to build far more than he enjoyed building anew from the ground up."

Delores Garcia was Raul's personal assistant, and a beautiful, accomplished one at that. Rumors were that she was more accomplished at meeting Raul's personal, as well as his professional, needs than was Raul's wife of seventeen years. But rumors, being no more or less than what rumors are, were taken by each recipient of their message according to that person's own persuasion.

"Gentlemen... and lady," Raul's voice erupted as he arrived unaccountably late for his distinguished guests, "I trust Delores has kept you entertained. Let's not waste more precious time. I am happy to see each of you again and I ask your forgiveness and your indulgence. I wish we had the time to inquire as to the state of each other's health and the wellbeing of our beautiful families, but my schedule, and I'm sure your schedules as well, demand otherwise. As soon as we conclude our business, I'm afraid I shall be off to meet with the Department of Homeland Security about the lack of Hispanic involvement in the higher echelons of their agencies. There have been terrible and unacceptable oversights that simply must be addressed."

"Enough of that... my purpose for asking to meet with you is a simple one, a painless one. Your constituents, your faithful supporters, want me to remind you of their trust and their belief that too much

pressure, an unfair and unjust pressure, is being seen on the streets in our predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods. I'm here to request that our representatives of the justice system be asked to administer a more sensitive hand to our law-abiding citizens. Granted, some of our people have committed transgressions that cannot be condoned, but the letter of the law must not be allowed to lose touch with the spirit of the law. I feel certain that my friends on the council agree with me and wholeheartedly support me on this issue."

"Raul," the Chief muttered, "this city casts an enforcement net that's little more than a sieve, allowing all but the worst of the worst to pass through undeterred. We're a big city with big-city problems and big-time crime. I dare say, if we could somehow slow the criminal activity associated with our daily marijuana traffic, we'd probably eliminate enough air pollution to avoid half of our air quality noncompliance days. Even you know that this city doesn't have the computing power to calculate the number of illegals on our streets. Our enforcement policies make 'Don't ask, don't tell' look like the Spanish Inquisition and the Feds are more of a hindrance than a help. What would you have me do, confine my men to policing Dunk'n Doughnuts?"

The Mayor raised his hand in a gesture that as much silenced as it soothed the Chief. He looked at Raul and smiled. Then he gave a discrete wink, an undetectable nod, to Delores.

"I share your concerns, Raul," the Mayor calmly spoke, "as I share the Chief's concerns. Our Hispanic citizens are the heart of our city. They are our cultural core. Ethnic and religious awareness and sensitivity are important parts of our many traditions, as well. These are elements that must be constantly encouraged and that *are* being encouraged. Let me remind you, however, that I should also like to see greater political participation from all of our citizens, especially in the funding of our political machinery. I feel certain that LOLA would want to encourage this type of participation."

"We seem to have concocted an intriguing mix of political and religious references," Raul laughed, "but let me remind *you* that, whether we hark back to the excesses of the Spanish Inquisition or the

Catholic Reformation, even the Pope was rebuked by Luther for his sale of indulgences.”

“Yes,” the Mayor agreed, “and the Church responded with the dogma of Papal Infallibility. Well, enough of that, as you say. We’ve listened to your arguments and we’ve heard your ideas. I must admit that, at first blush, these concerns have more merit than your crusade to close our Black Hawk base and turn its facilities into low income housing and minority businesses. To some degree, I believe even you understand that our military brings a lot of value in manpower and *money* to this city, not to mention the *freedom* we all enjoy.”

The Mayor’s cell phone chimed at the precise instant that he finished speaking and, almost on cue, the Chief’s phone began playing one of Sousa’s renowned marches, *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Both men answered and stood in unison. Their conversations were curt and, while their thoughts were pulled elsewhere, their focus returned to the meeting at hand.

“Raul,” the Mayor said, “I’m sorry to cut our meeting short, but I must attend to more pressing matters. It seems that the propane tanker that disappeared in New Braunfels last weekend just crashed on the outbound lanes at the junction of Durango and the Expressway. We’re fortunate that the tanker didn’t rupture, but the Chief and I must make an appearance. I trust we’ll have no need to revisit today’s topic. Give my regards to your lovely wife.”

The Mayor grabbed the Chief by the elbow and pulled him in the direction of the door. His words were brief but firm.

“Chief, I have a bad feeling about this. If someone had stolen that tanker to sell off the gas, like all the pundits thought, that gas would have been transferred to different carriers by now. Instead, this time bomb is on its side in the middle of my city. Meet me at the Command Center as soon as you can get down there.”

“I’ll head straight there,” the Chief replied. “I’ll make sure our HAZMAT team is on its way to the scene and we’ll begin the process of asking residents in the area to make arrangements to leave, just in case there might be foul play.”

“I think we should alert the bomb squad, too,” the Mayor replied. “We don’t want to start a panic, but I think we should err on the side of preparedness on this one. As soon as we receive an update on what’s happening over there, you and I are going to have a joint news conference. I don’t want the press having a field day on speculation about how a missing propane tanker made it to the center of town with a driver that’s nowhere to be found. By the way, you might seriously consider having an answer to that question before we see each other again.”

As the Mayor relinquished his grip on the Chief’s arm, another of Sousa’s marches began to play. The Chief struggled to keep up with the departing Mayor and read the numbers on the screen of his cell phone. He paused and punched a key with bright green backlighting.

“Darling, you’ve caught me at a bad time. Is anything wrong?”

“I just wanted to let you know that I picked up your prescription pills this morning...the little purple ones,” she teased. “Would you like me to come down and bring lunch?”

The Chief hesitated before he replied. His plans had, unfortunately, already been made for him.

“I’ll need a rain check on lunch,” he finally responded. “We can make time for a test drive this evening on the other, but I have to go, Sweet. The Mayor has me on a short leash this morning. I’ll call when I’m able to get away.”

* * *

Napoleon’s morning had not improved after he and his partner met with Antonio at Christina’s home and received the special package. He had expected money... money that he was supposed to deposit into one of the city’s most prestigious banks and then wire to a diplomatic account in Mexico City. That was how it was supposed to work, how it had worked every time he had been told to escort a package. He knew the front man, the face at the bank with so many new faces, and he knew that the bank deducted considerable fees for its services. That was all he

knew, however, except that the bank was none of his concern. His concern was why he had not received the money he expected and why Antonio had given him what looked like medical vials, wrapped in dry ice.

Then, there was his young partner. His partner had made friends with the three men that Antonio had been paid so handsomely to transport from Matamoros. Napoleon had even thought that his partner had become friends too fast, too easily. The possibility that his partner was branching out into ventures involving his old European connections began to formulate in Napoleon's uncertain mind.

The men had expressed an urgent need to be taken to a restaurant on the northwest side of the city to meet a friend who would help them with accommodations. True, they had suitcases, but the suitcases were unlike anything Napoleon had ever seen and the three men hovered over them like a hen hovering over her baby chicks. Napoleon's aggravation at his partner and at Antonio was intensified by his anxiety at not having his usual package safely in hand. Nevertheless, despite the uncertainties of the moment, his partner convinced him that they could do nothing except wait for instructions. They knew Antonio had been given this package and there could be no mistake about his part in its journey. Everything happened for a reason and the package was what it was for a reason.

Napoleon hesitated, not wanting to be pulled into the affairs of these strangers. He hated being in this house with these people. He wanted out. He wanted all the complexities of this morning to vanish and leave him at peace. He had to move, to do something to get out. Finally, impetuously, he agreed to escort Antonio and the men his partner had so easily befriended to the restaurant. He even kept his wits about him when one of the men said he was ill and would stay behind until he felt better and could join the others.

The two-car convoy set out northwest and had hardly cleared the site of the propane tanker's accident when additional reports began flooding across police frequencies. There were, indeed, serious questions about the accident, but Napoleon's cruiser was not tasked and he had no thoughts of responding before his human cargo was delivered and he had

personally met with his banking contact. Someone... someone he could see with his own eyes, was going to have to give him answers.

Traffic on the outbound lanes, beyond the accident, was light and less than five minutes were consumed in covering the western leg of the inner-city loop. As Napoleon slowed to make his exit and drive the last few remaining blocks to the designated restaurant, a white sedan that had caught his notice earlier cut into the exit lane and forced him to use every skill he could muster to bring the cruiser to a stop. It was then that he felt a sharp instrument plunge deep into his neck and fill him with cold and silence. He tried to look in the direction of the partner who had betrayed him, but in that instant, he was frozen. In little more than a moment, he slumped over the steering wheel and his world turned terribly dark.

The doors and trunk lid of the white sedan flew open and four men jumped out. One was wearing what had all the appearances of a postal worker's uniform. Two wore green medical smocks and jogging pants and the other had Southern Pacific Railroad insignias on his cap and shirt. They dragged Napoleon's body out of its seat and the four men summarily hoisted its lifeless weight upward and deposited it in the open void of the sedan's trunk. This enormous hulk of a man was lost from the earth just as a drop of rain is lost from the storm once it is embraced by the vast waters of the oceans or the lands of the continents.

At the same moment as Antonio witnessed this scene that completely overwhelmed his powers of comprehension, a cell phone was placed to his ear and another began ringing in a U-Haul truck carrying Christina and her children. The stranger who had remained behind answered and placed his phone to Christina's lips and ordered her to speak.

"Antonio... Antonio," Christina's voice cried into Antonio's ear. "He has her head!" she screamed in Spanish. "He has my mother's head!"

One of Antonio's two passengers ripped the phone from his ear and ordered him into the back seat. A few words in a language that was unfamiliar to Antonio were spoken and then the caller tossed the cell phone to the floor and gave an order to his comrades from the white

sedan to continue with their plan. The three cars sped away with so much precision that most ordinary commuters were left wondering what had happened to slow traffic in front of them. Even the Texas Department of Transportation's cameras, TXDOT's omnipresent cameras that spied on and captured every detail of life in the city, had gone unnoticed as employees celebrated a birthday of one of their own and munched cake and sipped what was jokingly referred to as "fiesta" punch.

Without further violence and in little more than ten minutes, Antonio was released with his car. He had been wired with an explosive vest and given what looked to be an accountant's large, black briefcase with a cell phone and a global-positioning device attached to its side. He feared... no, he knew, with all the certainty that could be known by man, that Christina's life was in his hands. He also understood, as completely as anything could be accepted by his mind, that his life was melting away, drip by drip, under the glare of the oppressive summer sun and the watchful eyes of the men whom he had been guaranteed would make him rich.

* * *

Before the Mayor arrived at the Command Center, reports began to trickle in that a Southern Pacific train had derailed near the juncture of I-35 and I-37. Calls quickly followed that this train included two tank cars filled with ammonium nitrate that was originally being shipped to a Houston-based chemical plant from a fertilizer plant that had closed in either Mississippi or Arkansas. A Southern Pacific spokesperson confirmed that the shipment had been diverted to San Antonio en route after a foreign chemical company with trading operations located in Hamburg, Germany, acquired title. Efforts to contact the company's San Antonio offices had so far proven unsuccessful.

The Mayor burst through the Command Center's enormous, doublewide doors just as information about the derailment was flashed across the big screen overlooking the entire room. His rapid movements

were as animated as anyone had ever seen and his voice boomed across the room.

“Get me the Governor,” he demanded of the staff scurrying around him, “and find out where the Hell the Chief is!”

“Sir, the Governor’s in China,” someone responded with trepidation. “He and the toll road proponents from TXDOT are offering to exchange infrastructure and tax holidays for investment dollars. It’s some kind of sale/leaseback venture... I think.”

“He’s where?” the Mayor barked. “Forget about him! I don’t give a damn about his schemes. Get me the Lieutenant Governor and establish a direct link with Homeland Security... and call the Pentagon and find out if our project for open communication channels to our city’s four military installations is functional yet.”

“Sir,” a voice squeaked, “I think you should know that the HAZMAT team’s preliminary assessment concluded that the propane tanker is safe for unloading to another transport. One has been dispatched to the site. In addition, we’ve just been told that none of the railroad tank cars with ammonium nitrate were damaged in the derailment. TXDOT has begun to divert traffic for safety. Investigative teams are on their way to the scene but, at this time, we’ve been unable to confirm exactly why this material was shipped to San Antonio. We do know that it belongs to a German trading company.”

“Mr. Mayor, I’m sorry I was delayed,” the Chief called out as he entered the room and caught sight of his boss.

The Mayor spun around and focused his eyes squarely on his Chief of Police. He hesitated for a moment, as if he had to materialize from being transported from the world of chaos back into the world of reason and order.

“What, in the name of all that’s righteous, do you make of this Chief? Are we in a different universe this morning?”

“Mr. Mayor, it could be coincidence,” the Chief began. “We’ve been lucky so far. The driver of that propane tanker has been found and is being questioned. Unfortunately, a lawyer’s already gotten to him so we’ve had to be careful, kid gloves and all. I understand he’s not been cooperative except to say that he was just a driver. We’ll have the

outbound lanes of the Expressway cleared before the afternoon traffic becomes a factor. No one was injured in the train derailment and traffic is still moving on all lanes of both nearby interstate highways. I'd say we've been incredibly lucky. I would caution against any course of action that might panic the city."

"Chief, I don't feel lucky," the Mayor confided. "I feel like we're in the eye of a hurricane."

The conversation between the two men was suddenly interrupted. An analyst who had been monitoring a police-band radio stepped forward and handed the Chief a note. The Chief glanced at the folded piece of paper and silently read the quickly scribbled information.

"It appears that reports of an altercation on the northwest side of town involving one of my police cruisers and a white sedan filled with four or more men who were believed to be office or possibly service workers has been called in by several motorists," the Chief explained slowly. "There are no details, but we've identified one cruiser that has not checked in this morning. All other personnel have been put on alert and asked to report any sighting of the cruiser or the two patrolmen. We're attempting to trace the vehicle's location now."

"Let's hope this is not what Raul and LOLA have been waiting for to mount a campaign against us," the Mayor lamented. "This game they've embarked on could blow our city wide open."

As the words escaped his mouth, the TXDOT cameras picked up a flash that completely engulfed the area that had been occupied by the wrecked propane tanker. A fireball of rolling flames leapt toward the sky and expanded outward with unbelievable velocity. In a heartbeat, everything on the ground became vapor, the picture was lost and, for a moment, every heartbeat seemed to stop.

"That can't be!" the Mayor exclaimed. "God help us, that can't be!"

The floor of the Command Center trembled. The lights flashed off, then on. Every breath was held. Every voice was hushed.

"Where's that call to Homeland Security?" the Mayor called out. "I don't think I have to worry about panicking our city."

The Chief turned away from the pictures that had been restored to the big screen and once again flashed the spectacle of destruction across the room. He searched frantically and found his cell phone. In near desperation, he fumbled with its flip-open case before pushing a single digit. Its double ring took an eternity. Finally, a loving voice answered.

“Hello, Darling.”

“Listen to me,” the Chief interrupted. “Don’t ask questions. Just trust me and do what I say and do it now. Do you understand? I want you to drive over to Shelby’s and take her and the grandkids to the house at Canyon Lake. Don’t ask questions. Don’t pack anything. Just do it now. I love you. Go now!”

The Chief turned to face the screen again and unconsciously flipped the case of his cell phone closed. He had done what he had to do, what any man would have done.

As a phone was placed in the Mayor’s hand, a man drove his car toward the main columns supporting the causeway that cut across eight lanes of traffic near the I-10 and Expressway interchange. It was Antonio. As he parked his car and looked around, tears filled his eyes and flooded down his cheeks. He bowed his head and prayed that Christina and the children would be saved. In a second, he was gone. Huge concrete and steel sections flew skyward like twigs in slow motion and a massive cloud filled the space where portions of the interchange had stood. TXDOT’s cameras flashed this incomprehensible scene across the Command Center’s big screen. The Mayor collapsed into a chair with the phone clasped precariously in his stone-white hand. Five seconds, then ten, then twenty seconds passed without a word being spoken. The Chief grabbed the phone.

“Hello!” he roared at whoever might be listening on the other end. “San Antonio is under attack!”

“Please hold,” an operator responded. “I’ll connect you with the Operational Intelligence Division.”

“What?” the Chief replied. “What did you say?”

Before the Chief could gather himself, the tank cars loaded with ammonium nitrate detonated. Buildings for three city blocks in all directions felt the force of the blast and some began crumbling like

matchsticks. Parts of the I-35 and I-37 interchange were torn apart. The Mayor put out his hand and motioned for the phone.

“We’re trapped,” he told the listener on the other end. “Everyone in downtown San Antonio is trapped. Explosions have damaged or completely cut three of the four main arteries out of the city. The only major route out of downtown at the present is south, toward Mexico. Do you understand what I’m telling you? They’ve cut our evacuation routes. Do you know what that means for my city? I think I can make a pretty good guess. My guess is that we’ll have one more bomb to endure. I think all of us here know what kind of device that will be.”

As the Mayor spoke, a lone police cruiser escorted a white sedan onto I-37 south. In the backseat of the cruiser, a young man in his neatly pressed police uniform and muttering in his thick European accent fidgeted nervously with his remaining electronic communications device. Across the road, the Alamodome stood as a glowing symbol of the city that had built it. A rented U-Haul truck was visible on the top floor of a nearby parking garage. Inside, Christina lay tied and gagged beside a cell phone that was wired to give life to what would become her instrument of death.

Her body was covered in its own sweat and other fluids that seeped from beneath her. She looked into the terrified eyes that once had belonged to her loving and gentle mother, and saw the reflection of her children. They were motionless, as if they existed in a frame of celluloid that had become captured by the projector and would soon be burned by the very light that gave them life.

Beside the children lay Napoleon, still magnificent in his pressed blue uniform, his body even larger now than in life. His shoes, which had long been polished to perfection by huge hands, were scraped and scarred from being dragged across asphalt and through the rubble of some nameless city street. An empty package rested comfortably by his feet, its contents to be delivered by a postman using hand-drawn maps that would lead him to cities and towns over the aquifer supplying the city’s water and to Canyon Lake.

Tears came and clouded Christina’s view of her world. Heat rose in waves from the steel and wood bed of the truck’s stained floor. The

stench of death took her breath and dared her to fight for any hint of air to sustain life. A rumble echoed in the far distance and reminded her that someday the thunder and the rain would return and bring life back to the parched land. She closed her eyes and began praying for Antonio.

* * *

“Black Thunder Zero One, this is the Director. Call contact.”

“Black Thunder Zero One has visual contact with one police cruiser being followed by one white sedan,” radioed a young captain flying one of the Texas National Guard’s Black Hawk helicopters out of San Antonio’s Martindale Army Airfield.

“Contact is target,” the Director’s solemn voice spoke from the Guard’s Command Center. “Imagery confirms TXDOT’s and onsite police reports. Director requests you confirm armament configuration.”

“Zero One’s armament consists of eight laser-guided Hellfire missiles, a 20-millimeter cannon pod with 2,000 rounds of HEI and two 7.62-millimeter machine guns mounted in the doors. Request clearance to fire,” the captain radioed calmly.

“Roger Zero One, go guns. Cleared to fire,” the same voice came loud and clear. “Confirmation is Romeo... Tango... Alpha.”

“Zero One, Roger, copy cleared to fire,” the young captain radioed. “Understand confirmation is Romeo... Tango... Alpha.”

“Black Thunder Zero One, the Lieutenant Governor is requesting notice when code Victor.”

“Zero One, Roger that and Wilco. We’ll oblige the Lieutenant Governor, momentarily.”

“Black Thunder, your breakaway heading will be three five zero. Your next target will be twelve o’clock, two niner miles. Target is a stolen postal van. Select Hellfire. Call contact.”

“Roger, Black Thunder Zero One copies breakaway heading three five zero. Second target will be postal van at twelve o’clock, two niner miles. Select Hellfire.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keith R. Parris began devoting himself to his lifelong passion of writing in 2001. His first endeavor, **TORI**, was a collection of poems and short stories privately published in 2002 with limited distribution. His next book, **The Servants of Freedom**, was independently published in 2004 and reflects his admiration and appreciation for the sacrifices of the men and women of the United States Armed Forces. In this novel of 1970s Europe, he uses simple, yet powerful, language to make timeless themes of adversity and courage live in the minds of his readers. This book is available through *Amazon.com*, other major distribution outlets and a private website.

In 2006, Mr. Parris electronically published **REMEMBER**, his first complete book of poetry. This poetry is beautifully descriptive and vigorously musical. From the sensibilities of life's most intimate moments to the celebration of life's most festive interactions and from the continuity of social order to the undercurrents of social unrest and even to death itself, these poems embrace an unmistakable heartfelt vitality and sincerity. This work was published through his company, *Black Knight Classic*, and can be found on his website at <http://www.keithparris.com/>.

PETER'S DREAMS AND OTHERWORLDLY THINGS, the author's 2008 project, became a concept in the author's mind before the "New Millennium," but its birth was carefully guarded until it could be wonderfully illustrated. This work stands as a creative triumph, delving into the imagination of a young boy and dealing with his growing awareness of self and the challenges of his changing world. The view of the world, however, is colored with a brush that carefully paints a range of perspectives seamlessly into the youthful exploits of our hero. This story will both amuse and reach to the very soul of the reader. This work is available through *Amazon's* Kindle reader.

In **THE POLYCHEM PLASTICS PLANT AND OTHER STORIES**, the author's latest work, the reader will find the universal themes of human life, which touch on the great hopes and faiths of

mankind as well as the moral imperfections and failures. These four short stories provide an entertaining variety of subject matter which can be enjoyed by the busiest of readers. This work will be made available through *Amazon's* Kindle reader and the author's website mentioned above.

Mr. Parris' writing style reflects his admiration for the literary works of such outstanding nineteenth and twentieth century authors as Ernest Hemingway, Eudora Welty, C. K. Williams and William Wordsworth. Three of his favorite works by these authors are, in the order mentioned, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Curtain of Green* and *Repair*.

Mr. Parris was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 1946. His father, a veteran of World War II, made his living in the cotton mills of the South, and his mother, a native of Iowa, traveled to the South while serving as a Civil Servant during the War and remained there with her husband to rear their three children. Mr. Parris graduated from Clemson University with a Bachelor of Science Degree in 1969 with Highest Honors and was a Distinguished Military Graduate. He served nearly eight years as a fighter pilot, flying F-4E Phantom II aircraft, in Europe, Asia and the United States. He married Janet K. Baugh of Waco, Texas, in 1974 while serving in the Federal Republic of Germany. They lived in Europe and Asia before moving to San Antonio, Texas, in 1977 after Captain Parris resigned his commission and was honorably discharged. He returned to school and graduated at the top of his class from The University of Texas at San Antonio in 1979 with an MBA Degree. He worked for 21 years in the gas and gas liquids industry.