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GEORGE WASHINGTON CROSBY BEGAN TO hallucinate eight days before he died. From the rented hospital bed placed in the middle of his own living room, he saw insects running in and out of imaginary cracks in the ceiling plaster. The panes in the windows, once snugly pointed and glazed, stood loose in their sashes. The next stiff breeze would topple them all and they would flop onto the heads of his family, who sat on the couch and the love seat and the kitchen chairs his wife had brought in to accommodate everyone. The torrent of panes would drive everyone from the room, his grandchildren in from Kansas and Atlanta and Seattle, his sister in from Florida, and he would be marooned on his bed in a moat of shattered glass. Pollen and sparrows, rain and the intrepid squirrels he had spent half of his life keeping out of the bird feeders would breach the house.

He had built the house himself—poured the foundation, raised the frame, joined the pipes, run the wires, plastered the walls, and painted the rooms. Lightning struck once when he was in the open foundation, soldering the last joint of the hot-water tank. It threw him to the opposite wall. He got up and finished the joint. Cracks in his plaster did not stay cracks; clogged pipes got routed; peeling clapboard got scraped and slathered with a new coat of paint.

Get some plaster, he said, propped up in the bed, which looked odd and institutional among the Persian rugs and Colonial furniture and dozens of antique clocks. Get some plaster. Jesus, some plaster and some wires and a couple of hooks. You'd be all set for about five bucks.

Yes, Gramp, they said.

Yes, Dad. A breeze blew through the open window behind him and cleared exhausted heads. Bocce balls clicked out on the lawn.

Noon found him momentarily alone, while the family prepared lunch in the kitchen. The cracks in the ceiling widened into gaps. The locked wheels of his bed sank into new fault lines opening in the oak floor beneath the rug. At any moment, the floor was going to give. His useless stomach would jump in his chest as if he were on a ride at the Topsfield Fair and with a spine-snapping jolt he and the bed would land in the basement, on top of the crushed ruins of his workshop. George imagined what he would see, as if the collapse had, in fact, already happened: the living room ceiling, now two stories high, a ragged funnel of splintered floorboards, bent copper pipes, and electrical wires that looked like severed veins bordering the walls and pointing towards him in the center of all of that sudden ruin. Voices murmured out in the kitchen.

George turned his head, hoping someone might be sitting just out of view, with a paper plate of potato salad and rolled slices of roast beef on her lap and a plastic cup of ginger ale in her hand. But the ruin persisted. He thought he called out, but the women's voices in the kitchen and the men's voices in the yard hummed uninterrupted. He lay on his heap of wreckage, looking up.

The second floor fell on him, with its unfinished pine framing and dead-end plumbing (the capped pipes never joined to the sink and toilet he had once intended to install) and racks of old coats and boxes of forgotten board games and puzzles and broken toys and bags of family pictures—some so old they were exposed on tin plates—all of it came crashing down into the cellar, he unable to even raise his hand to protect his face.

But he was nearly a ghost almost made of nothing and so the wood and metal and sheaves of

But he was really a ghost, almost made of nothing, and so the wood and metal and sheaves of brightly printed cardboard and paper (MOVE FORWARD SIX SPACES TO EASY STREET! Great-Grammy Noddin, shawled and stiff and frowning at the camera, absurd with her hat that looked like a sailor's funeral mound, heaped with flowers and netting), which otherwise would have crushed his bones, dropped on him and fell away like movie props, he or they facsimiles of former, actual things.

There he lay among the graduation photos and old wool jackets and rusted tools and newspaper clippings about his promotion to head of the mechanical-drawing department at the local high school and then about his appointment as director of guidance, and then about his retirement and subsequent life as a trader and repairer of antique clocks. The mangled brass works of the clocks he had been repairing were strewn among the mess. He looked up three stories to the exposed support beams of the roof and the plump silver-backed batts of insulation that ran between them. One grandson or another (*which?*) had stapled the insulation into place years ago and now two or three lengths of it had come loose and lolled down like pink woolly tongues.

The roof collapsed, sending down a fresh avalanche of wood and nails, tarpaper and shingles and insulation. There was the sky, filled with flat-topped clouds, cruising like a fleet of anvils across the blue. George had the watery, raw feeling of being outdoors when you are sick. The clouds halted, paused for an instant, and plummeted onto his head.

The very blue of the sky followed, draining from the heights into that cluttered concrete socket. Next fell the stars, tinkling about him like the ornaments of heaven shaken loose. Finally, the black vastation itself came untacked and draped over the entire heap, covering George's confused obliteration.

Nearly seventy years before George died, his father, Howard Aaron Crosby, drove a wagon for his living. It was a wooden wagon. It was a chest of drawers mounted on two axles and wooden spoked wheels. There were dozens of drawers, each fitted with a recessed brass ring, pulled open with a hooked forefinger, that contained brushes and wood oil, tooth powder and nylon stockings, shaving soap and straight-edge razors. There were drawers with shoe shine and boot strings, broom handles and mop heads. There was a secret drawer where he kept four bottles of gin. Mostly, back roads were his route, dirt tracks that ran into the deep woods to hidden clearings where a log cabin sat among sawdust and tree stumps and a woman in a plain dress and hair pulled back so tight that she looked as if she were smiling (which she was not) stood in a crooked doorway with a cocked squirrel gun. Oh, it's you, Howard. Well, I guess I need one of your tin buckets. In the summer, he sniffed heather and sang *someone's rocking my dreamboat* and watched the monarch butterflies (butter fires, flutter flames; he imagined himself somewhat of a poet) up from Mexico. Spring and fall were his most prosperous times, fall because the backwoods people stocked up for the winter (he piled goods from the cart onto blazing maple leaves), spring because they had been out of supplies often for weeks before the roads were passable for his first rounds. Then they came to the wagon like sleepwalkers: bright-eyed and ravenous. Sometimes he came out of the woods with orders for coffins—a child, a wife wrapped up in burlap and stiff in the woodshed.

He tinkered. Tin pots, wrought iron. Solder melted and cupped in a clay dam. Quicksilver patchwork. Occasionally, a pot hammered back flat, the tinkle of tin sibilant, tiny beneath the lid of the boreal forest. Tinkerbird, coppersmith, but mostly a brush and mop drummer.

George could dig and pour the concrete basement for a house. He could saw the lumber and nail the frame. He could wire the rooms and fit the plumbing. He could hang the drywall. He could lay the

floors and shingle the roof. He could build the brick steps. He could point the windows and paint the sashes. ~~But he could not throw a ball or walk a mile; he hated exercise, and once he took early~~ retirement at sixty he never had his heart rate up again if he could help it, and even then only if it were to whack through some heavy brush to get to a good trout pool. Lack of exercise might have been the reason that, when he had his first radiation treatment for the cancer in his groin, his legs swelled up like two dead seals on a beach and then turned as hard as lumber. Before he was bedridden, he walked as if he were an amputee from a war that predated modern prosthetics; he tottered as if two hardwood legs hinged with iron pins were buckled to his waist. When his wife touched his legs at night in bed, through his pajamas, she thought of oak or maple and had to make herself think of something else in order not to imagine going down to his workshop in the basement and getting sandpaper and stain and sanding his legs and staining them with a brush, as if they belonged to a piece of furniture. Once, she snorted out loud, trying to stifle a laugh, when she thought, My husband, the table. She felt so bad afterward that she wept.

The stubbornness of some of the country women with whom Howard came into contact on his daily rounds cultivated in him, he believed, or would have believed, had he ever consciously thought about the matter, an unshakable, reasoning patience. When the soap company discontinued its old detergent for a new formula and changed the design on the box the soap came in, Howard had to endure debates he would have quickly conceded, were his adversaries not paying customers.

Where's the soap?

This is the soap.

The box is different.

Yes, they changed it.

What was wrong with the old box?

Nothing.

Why'd they change it?

Because the soap is better.

The soap is different?

Better.

Nothing wrong with the old soap.

Of course not, but this is better.

Nothing wrong with the old soap. How can it be better?

Well, it cleans better.

Cleaned fine before.

This cleans better—and faster.

Well, I'll just take a box of the normal soap.

This is the normal soap now.

I can't get my normal soap?

This is the normal soap; I guarantee it.

Well, I don't like to try a new soap.

It's not new.

Just as you say, Mr. Crosby. Just as you say.

Well, ma'am, I need another penny.

Another penny? For what?

The soap is a penny more, now that it's better.

I have to pay a penny more for different soap in a blue box? I'll just take a box of my normal soap

George bought a broken clock at a tag sale. The owner gave him a reprint of an eighteenth-century repair manual for free. He began to poke around the guts of old clocks. As a machinist, he knew gear ratios, pistons and pinions, physics, the strength of materials. As a Yankee in North Shore horse country, he knew where the old money lay, dozing, dreaming of wool mills and slate quarries, ticker tape and foxhunts. He found that bankers paid well to keep their balky heirlooms telling time. He could replace the worn tooth on a strike wheel by hand. Lay the clock facedown. Unscrew the screws, maybe just pull them from the cedar or walnut case, the threads long since turned to wood dust dusted from mantels. Lift off the back of the clock like the lid of a treasure chest. Bring the long-armed jeweler's lamp closer, to just over your shoulder. Examine the dark brass. See the pinions gummed up with dirt and oil. Look at the blue and green and purple ripples of metal hammered, bent, torched. Poke your finger into the clock; fiddle the escape wheel (every part perfectly named—escape: the end of the machine, the place where the energy leaks out, breaks free, beats time). Stick your nose closer; the metal smells tannic. Read the names etched onto the works: *Ezra Bloxham—1794; Geo. E. Tiggs—1832; Thos. Flatchbart—1912*. Lift the darkened works from the case. Lower them into ammonia. Lift them out, nose burning, eyes watering, and see them shine and star through your tears. File the teeth. Punch the bushings. Load the springs. Fix the clock. Add your name.

Tinker, tinker. Tin, tin, tin. Tintinnabulation. There was the ring of pots and buckets. There was also the ring in Howard Crosby's ears, a ring that began at a distance and came closer, until it sat in his ears, then burrowed into them. His head thrummed as if it were a clapper in a bell. Cold hopped onto the tips of his toes and rode on the ripples of the ringing throughout his body until his teeth clattered and his knees faltered and he had to hug himself to keep from unraveling. This was his *aura*, a cold halo of chemical electricity that encircled him immediately before he was struck by a full seizure. Howard had epilepsy. His wife, Kathleen, formerly Kathleen Black, of the Quebec Blacks but from a reduced and stern branch of the family, cleared aside chairs and tables and led him to the middle of the kitchen floor. She wrapped a stick of pine in a napkin for him to bite so he would not swallow or chew off his tongue. If the fit came fast, she crammed the bare stick between his teeth and he would wake to a mouthful of splintered wood and the taste of sap, his head feeling like a glass jar full of old keys and rusty screws.

To reassemble the dismantled clock, the back plate of the works is laid upon a bed of soft cloth, preferably thick chamois folded many times. Each wheel and its arbor is inserted into its proper hole, beginning with the great wheel and its loose-fitting fusee, that grooved cone of wonder given to mankind by Mr. Da Vinci, and proceeding to the smallest, the teeth of one meshing with the gear collar of the next, and so on until the flywheel of the strike train and the escape wheel of the going train are fitted into their rightful places. Now, the horologist looks upon an open-faced, fairy-book contraption; gears lean to and fro like a lazy machine in a dream. The universe's time cannot be

marked thusly. Such a crooked and flimsy device could only keep the fantastic hours of unruly ghosts. The front plate of the works is taken in hand and fitted first onto the upfacing arbors of the main and strike springs, these being the largest and most easily fitted of the sundry parts. This accomplished, the horologist then lifts the rickety

lined or the sundry parts. This accomplished, the horologist then fits the tickety sandwich of loose guts to eye level, holding the works approximately together by squeezing the two plates, taking care to apply neither too much pressure (thus damaging the finer of the unaligned arbor ends) nor too little (thus causing the half-re-formed machine to disassemble itself back into its various constituent parts, which often flee to dusty and obscure nooks throughout the horologist's workshop, causing much profaning and blasphemy). If, when the patient horologist has finished his attempt and the clock, when thumbed at the great wheel, does squeak and gibber rather than hum and whirl with brass logic, this process must be reversed and tried again with calm reason until the imps of disorder are banished. Of clocks with only a going train, reanimating the machine is simple. More sophisticated contraptions, such as those fashioned with extra abilities, like a pantomime of the moon or a model fool juggling fruit, require an almost infinite skill and doggedness. (The author has heard of a clock supposedly seen in eastern Bohemia that had the likeness of a great oak tree wrought in iron and brass around its dial. As the seasons of its homeland changed, the branches of the tree turned a thousand tiny copper leaves, each threaded on a hair-thin spindle, from enameled green to metallic red. Then, by astounding mechanisms within the case (fashioned to look like one of the mythical pillars once believed to hold up the earth) the branches released the leaves to spiral down their threads and strew themselves about the lower part of the clock-face. If this machine in fact existed, Mr. Newton himself could not have sat beneath a more amazing tree.)

—from *The Reasonable Horologist*,
by the Rev. Kenner Davenport, 1783

George Crosby remembered many things as he died, but in an order he could not control. To look at his life, to take the stock he always imagined a man would at his end, was to witness a shifting mass, the tiles of a mosaic spinning, swirling, reportraying, always in recognizable swaths of colors, familiar elements, molecular units, intimate currents, but also independent now of his will, showing him a different self every time he tried to make an assessment.

One hundred and sixty-eight hours before he died, he snaked into the basement window of the West Cove Methodist Church and rang the bell on Halloween night. He waited in the basement for his father to whip him for doing it. His father laughed so hard and slapped his own thigh, because George had stuffed the seat of his pants with old *Saturday Evening Posts*. He sat at dinner silent, afraid to look at his mother because it was eleven o'clock at night and his father wasn't home and still his mother made them sit in front of cold food. He married. He moved. He was a Methodist, a Congregationalist and finally a Unitarian. He drew machines and taught mechanical drawing and had heart attacks and survived, sped down the new highway before it opened with his friends from engineering school, taught math, got a master's degree in education, counseled guidance in high school, went back north every summer to fly-fish with his poker buddies—doctors, cops, music teachers—bought a broken clock at a tag sale and a reprint of an eighteenth-century manual on how to fix it, retired, went on group tours to Asia, to Europe, to Africa, fixed clocks for thirty years, spoiled his grandkids, got Parkinson's, got diabetes, got cancer, and was laid out in a hospital bed in the middle of his living room, right where they put the dining room table, fitted with its two extra leaves for holiday dinners.

George never permitted himself to imagine his father. Occasionally, though, when he was fixing a clock, when a new spring he was coaxing into its barrel came loose from its arbor and exploded, cutting his hands sometimes damaging the rest of the works, he had a vision of his father on the floor

cutting his hands, sometimes damaging the rest of the works, he had a vision of his father on the floor, his feet kicking chairs, bunching up rugs, lamps falling off of their tables, his head banging on floorboards, his teeth clamped onto a stick or George's own fingers.

His mother had lived with him and his family until she died. Upon occasion, at meals mostly, maybe because that was the site of her being preempted, outsmarted by her former husband, left at the dinner table with her plans to have him taken away, she would recall what a frivolous man his father had been. At breakfast, she scooped oatmeal into her mouth and pulled the spoon from the clutches of her dentures with a stupendous clanking and sucking and would say something like, A poet, ha! He was a birdbrain, a magpie, a loony bird, flapping around with those fits and all.

But George forgave his mother her contrary heart. Whenever he thought about what her bitter laments sought to stanch, he was overtaken by tears and paused, looking up from the headlines of the morning paper, to lean over and kiss her camphored brow. To which gesture she would say, Don't you try to make me feel better! That man cast a shadow forever over my peace of mind. The damned fool. And even that would make George feel good; her incessant litanies soothed her and reminded her that that life was over.

As he lay on his deathbed, George wanted to see his father again. He wanted to imagine his father. Each time he tried to concentrate and go back, tried to burrow deep and far away from the present, a pain, a noise, someone rolling him from side to side to change his sheets, the toxins leaking from his cancer-clogged kidneys into his thickening and darkening blood, reeled him back to his worn-out body and scrambled mind.

One afternoon, in the spring before his death, George, his illnesses consolidating, decided to dictate memories and anecdotes from his life into a tape recorder. His wife was out shopping and so he took the recorder down to his work desk in the basement. He opened the door between his workshop and tool shop. There was a woodstove in the tool shop, between the drill press and metal lathe. He crumpled up some old newspaper and put it in the stove, along with three logs from the half cord of wood he kept stacked in a remote corner of the shop, near the door to the bulkhead. He lit a fire and adjusted the flue, hoping to warm the concretey chill of the basement. He returned to his desk in the workshop. There was a cheap microphone plugged into the tape machine that would not stay upright on the clip collared around it. The clip was so light that the twist in the wire running from the microphone to the recorder kept flicking it over. George tried to straighten the wire, but the microphone would not stand, so he merely placed it on top of the tape recorder. The levers on the recorder were heavy and required some effort to push down before they clicked into place. Each was labeled with a cryptic abbreviation and George had to experiment with them before he felt confident he had found the right combination for recording his voice. The tape in the recorder had a faded pink label upon which had been typed, Early Blues Compilation, Copyright Hal Broughton, Jaw Creek, Pennsylvania. George recalled that he and his wife had bought the tape at one or another of the Elderhostel college courses they had taken during one or another summer years ago. When George first pressed the PLAY lever, a man's voice, thin and remote, warbled about a hellhound on his trail. Rather than rewind the tape, George felt that such a complaint might be a good introduction to his talk, so he just began recording. He leaned forward into the microphone with his arms crossed and resting on the edge of the desk, as if he were answering questions at a hearing. He began formally: M

name is George Washington Crosby. I was born in West Cove, Maine, in the year 1915. I moved to Enon, Massachusetts, in 1936. And so on. After these statistics, he found that he could think only of doggerel and slightly obscene anecdotes to tell, mostly having to do with foolish stunts undertaken after drinking too much whiskey during a fishing trip and often enough centered around running into

after drinking too much whiskey during a fishing trip and then through centered around turning the warden with a creel full of trout and no fishing license, or a pistol that a doctor had brought into the woods: If that pistol is nine millimeters, I'll kiss your bare, frozen ass right out here on the ice; the lyrics to a song called Come Around, Mother, It's Better When You're Awake. And so forth. But after a handful of such stories, he began to talk about his father and his mother, his brother, Joe, and his sisters, about taking night courses to finish school and about becoming a father. He talked about blue snow and barrels of apples and splitting frozen wood so brittle that it rang when you split it. He talked about what it is like to be a grandparent for the first time and to think about what it is you will leave behind when you die. By the time the tape ran out an hour and a half later (after he had flipped it over once, almost without being conscious of doing so), and the RECORD button sprang up with a buzz, he was openly weeping and lamenting the loss of this world of light and hope. So deeply moved, he pulled the cassette from the machine, flipped it back over to the beginning, fitted it back into its snug carriage of capstans and guiding pins, and pressed PLAY, thinking that he might preserve such a mood of pure, clean sorrow by listening back to his narrative. He imagined that his memoirs might now sound like those of an admirable stranger, a person he did not know but whom he immediately recognized and loved dearly. Instead, the voice he heard sounded nasally and pinched and, worse, not very well educated, as if he were a bumpkin who had been called, perhaps even in mockery, to testify about holy things, as if not the testimony but the fumbling through it were the reason for his presence in front of some dire, heavenly senate. He listened to six seconds of the tape before he ejected it and threw it into the fire burning in the woodstove.

Saw grass and wildflowers grew high along the spines of the dirt roads and brushed the belly of Howard's wagon. Bears pawed fruit in the bushes along the ruts.

Howard had a pine display case, fastened by fake leather straps and stained to look like walnut. Inside, on fake velvet, were cheap gold-plated earrings and pendants of semiprecious stones. He opened this case for haggard country wives when their husbands were off chopping trees or reaping the back acres. He showed them the same half-dozen pieces every year the last time he came around, when he thought, This is the season—preserving done, woodpile high, north wind up and getting cold, night showing up earlier every day, dark and ice pressing down from the north, down on the raw wood of their cabins, on the rough-cut rafters that sag and sometimes snap from the weight of the dark and the ice, burying families in their sleep, the dark and the ice and sometimes the red in the sky through trees: the heartbreak of a cold sun. He thought, Buy the pendant, sneak it into your hand from the folds of your dress and let the low light of the fire lap at it late at night as you wait for the roof to give out or your will to snap and the ice to be too thick to chop through with the ax as you stand in your husband's boots on the frozen lake at midnight, the dry hack of the blade on ice so tiny under the wheeling and frozen stars, the soundproof lid of heaven, that your husband would never stir from his sleep in the cabin across the ice, would never hear and come running, half-frozen, in only his union suit, to save you from chopping a hole in the ice and sliding into it as if it were a blue vein, sliding down into the black, silty bottom of the lake, where you would see nothing, would perhaps feel only the stir of some somnolent fish in the murk as the plunge of you in your wool dress and the big boots disturbed it from its sluggish winter dreams of ancient seas. Maybe you would not even feel that, as you struggled in clothes that felt like cooling tar, and as you slowed, calmed, even, and opened your

eyes and looked for a pulse of silver, an imbrication of scales, and as you closed your eyes again and felt their lids turn to slippery, ichthyic skin, the blood behind them suddenly cold, and as you found yourself not caring, wanting, finally, to rest, finally wanting nothing more than the sudden, new, simple hum threading between your eyes. The ice is far too thick to chop through. You will never do

simple hair threading between your eyes. The ice is far too thick to chop through. You will never do it. You could never do it. So buy the gold, warm it with your skin, slip it onto your lap when you are sitting by the fire and all you will otherwise have to look at is your splintery husband gumming chew or the craquelure of your own chapped hands.

No woman ever bought a piece of jewelry. One might lift a pendant from its bed and rub it between her fingers. She would say, It sure is, when he said, Well, now, that's a beautiful piece. Sometimes he saw a woman's face seize for the slightest part of a second, the jewelry stirring some half-forgotten personal hope, some dream from the distant cusp of marriage. Or her breath would hitch, as if something long hung on a nail or staked to a chain seemed to uncatch, but only for a second. The woman would hand back the trinket he offered. No, no, I guess not, Howard. Case slipped back into its drawer, he would turn his cart around in the yard and start back out of the woods, winter already sealing the country people in behind him.

The local agent for Howard's supplies was a man named Cullen. Cullen was a hustler. One day a month, he sat at a table in the back room at Sander's store and rooked his agent of his due. He spread Howard's receipts for the month out across the table and leaned forward and looked at them through the smoke of the cigarette that always dangled from his lip. When he did this, Howard always thought that the agent looked like he was dealing cards for a hand of poker or a magic trick. Cullen squinted at the receipts: Only five boxes of lye; need six to make discount. Ten cotton mop heads. Good, but my cost went up. Need to sell a dozen now. You get a nickel less than before. What about that new soap? I don't care it's tough to convert these backwoods biddies; you're a salesman. What the hell are you doing out there? Sniffing daisies? Godammit, Crosby, what are you doing with those iceboxes and washing machines? How many brochures have you handed out? I don't give a good goddamn if they don't understand installment plans—installment is the *future*; it is the *grail* of selling! Cullen scooped up the receipts and crammed them into his case. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of money. He peeled a ten and seven ones out of the roll. He dug in his other pocket and pitched a fistful of change onto the table (like dice, Howard thought) and flicked fifty-seven cents' worth of coins out of the pile with a forefinger and put the rest back in his pocket so quickly, it was as if that, too, were one of his tricks. Sign here. Crosby, how are you going to be one of my twelve? This was the part of every meeting with the agent that Howard dreaded—when Cullen quoted Bruce Barton. Who was the greatest businessman ever, Crosby? The greatest salesman? Advertiser? Who? Howard looked at the knot in Cullen's cheap tie and smiled, trying not to look put out but trying not to answer the question either. Come on, Crosby. Haven't you read the book? I practically gave it to you for cost! Howard sighed and said, It was Jesus. That's right, the agent said, half getting out of his chair, pounding a fist on the table, pointing a finger out toward heaven, past the new snowshoes hanging high on the walls. Jesus! *Jesus was the founder of modern business*, he quoted. *He was the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem. He picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world!* How are you going to be one of my twelve, Crosby, if you can't sell, if you are not *on fire to sell*?

One hundred and thirty-two hours before he died, George awoke from the racket of the collapsing universe to the darkness of night and a silence, which, once the clamor of his nightmares faded, he could not understand. The room was lit only by a small pewter lamp set on one of the end tables near the couch. The couch ran along the length of the hospital bed. At the far end of the couch, leaning toward the light on the table, sat one of his grandsons, reading a book.

oward the light on the table, sat one of his grandsons, reading a book.

George said, Charlie.

Charlie said, Gramp, and put the paperback book on his lap.

George said, Why so damn quiet?

Charlie said, It's late.

George said, Is that right? Still seems awful damn quiet. George turned his head to the left and the right. To the left was the Queen Anne armchair and the fireplace in which he had not built a fire for thirty years, not since he quit smoking pipes. He remembered the pipe tree he had kept in the basement, at his work desk. At first he had imagined his enthusiasm for pipes to be like that which he had for clocks; he had bought the pipe tree at a flea market in Newburyport. How do I remember this he thought in the bed, concerned with parsing the quality of the silence he experienced almost as a noise, of finding its source, and, instead, here was the flea market in Newburyport and the table of junk with the pipe tree and what the old crook who ran the table looked like (some sort of retired sailor or merchant seaman, with an Irish sweater and Greek fishing cap) and sounded like (salt-cured Yankee via Bangor via Cape Breton) and almost every item on the table (rusted trowels, eyeless dolls, empty tobacco tins, flaking sheaves of sheet music, a candy thermometer, a statue of Christopher Columbus) and how he had bartered with the man for the tree (How close to ten cents would you take for that pipe tree? Five bucks! How'd a thief like you get in here? Two bucks? Well, you'd better hold on to it a while longer. A dollar and a quarter? Sold.). He bought a dozen pipes from various collectors. He put them in the tree, with the intention of cultivating a taste for a range of expensive tobaccos and using each pipe for one type of tobacco only. Within a week, he smoked the cheapest house blend from the local tobacconist in a pipe he had bartered as part of a deal for a box full of clock parts, and which, when an occasional puff tasted sour, he suspected of being made not from wood, but plastic. He smoked bowl after bowl of cheap shag while he fixed clocks. At the end of the day, after dinner, he sat in the Queen Anne chair (which he had bought cheaply at an estate sale because two of its legs were broken) by the fire and smoked the last bowl of the day. When he developed a precancerous blister on his lower lip, he threw out his pipes and the tree and the tins of tobacco and contented himself with smoking half of an occasional cigar when he had to sweep dead leaves out of the garage. Although he had not sat in the Queen Anne chair since he quit smoking his pipes, there remained a sort of shadow of his outline on the fabric of the chair's backrest; it was not so much a stain as a silhouette of just slightly darker fabric, which could be seen in just the right light from just the right angle, and which still would have fit his shape perfectly, had he been able to rise from his sickbed and sit in the chair.

His head was propped up with pillows. In front of him, at the foot of the bed, he could see a narrow part of the Persian rug that covered the floor. Beyond the rug, at the far wall, was the dining table, with its leaves taken out and its wings lowered. It ran nearly the width of the wall. At either end of the table was a ladder-back chair with a cane seat. Hanging above the table (on which there was always a bowl of wooden fruit or a crystal vase of silk flowers) was a still life done in oil. It was a dim, murky scene, lit perhaps by a single candle not visible within the frame, of a table on which lay a silver fish and a dark loaf of bread on a cutting board, a round of ruddy cheese, a bisected orange with both halves arranged with their cross sections facing the viewer, a drinking goblet made of green glass, with a wide spiral stem and what looked like glass buttons fixed around the base of the broad cup. A large part of the cup had been broken and dimly glinting slivers of glass lay around the base. There was a pewter-handled knife on the cutting board, in front of the fish and the loaf. There was also a black rod of some sort, with a white tip, running parallel to the knife. No one had ever been able to figure out what the rod actually was. A grandchild once remarked that it looked like a magician's wand, and, in fact, the object did resemble the type of wand that amateurs use to conjure rabbits or make nitchers of water disappear into their top hats at children's birthday parties. But the rest of the

make pictures or watch disappear into their top hats at children's birthday parties. But the rest of the picture, no matter how recently or distantly it had been painted, was by influence or origin Dutch or Flemish, and the rod certainly not a pun or clever joke. And so it remained a small household mystery, which the family was content to puzzle over now and then for a moment when they were waiting for someone to get his coat on, or were daydreaming on the couch during a winter afternoon, and which no one cared to research.

To his right, past the right end of the dining table and the chair next to it, was the small entryway, which consisted of the doorway into the living room, the front door on the right, the door to the coat closet on the far side, and the door to the unfinished attic (which, when he had built the house fifty years before, George had fitted for plumbing and electricity, with the intention of eventually making the space into a single large family room) on the left. To the right of that was a rolltop desk, in which George kept bills and receipts and unused ledger books. There was another oil painting hanging above the desk, this one of a packet schooner sailing out of Gloucester in stormy weather. It was a scene of roiling dark greens and blues and grays swarming around the lines of the ship, which was seen from the rear. The insides of the very tips of the waves were illuminated from within by a sourceless light. If you watched the straight lines of the schooner's masts and rigging (storm up, the ship was not under sail) long enough in the dim light of an early evening or on a rainy day, the sea would begin to move at the corners of your vision. They would stop the moment you looked directly at them, only to slither and snake again when you returned your gaze to the ship.

Directly to George's right was the blue couch and its end tables, where his grandson sat, now looking at him, book in lap. Behind the couch, there was a large bay window, which looked out onto the front lawn and the street behind the couch, but heavy curtains, which his wife had kept closed day and night since he had come home to die, obscured it. The curtains were as thick and heavy as those of a theater. They were cream-colored, with broad vertical pillars of a maroon so dark it was almost black. The pillars were festooned with leafy tendrils that spiraled up and down their lengths. In between the diagonals of the bunting were alternating images of songbirds with scraps of ribbon or grass in their beaks and of marble urns. Looking at the curtains, it seemed to George that his grandson sat in front of a small, obscured stage and that he might at any moment stand up, step aside, and, with arm outstretched in introduction, present some sort of puppet show.

Instead, the grandson said again, You okay, Gramp?

Awful damn quiet.

When he could not turn his head any farther, he had to imagine the rest of the room behind him. There was the console television, the red velvet love seat, the hand-colored photograph of his wife taken when she was seventeen, set in an oval rosewood frame, and there was the grandfather's clock.

That was it, he realized; the clock had run down. All of the clocks in the room had wound down—the tambours and carriage clocks on the mantel, the banjo and mirror and Viennese regulator on the walls, the Chelsea ship's bells on the rolltop desk, the ogee on the end table, and the seven-foot walnut-cased Stevenson grandfather's clock, made in Nottingham in 1801, with its moon-phase window on the dial and pair of robins threading flowery buntings around the Roman numerals. When he imagined inside the case of that clock, dark and dry and hollow, and the still pendulum hanging down its length, he felt the inside of his own chest and had a sudden panic that it, too, had wound down.

When his grandchildren had been little, they had asked if they could hide inside the clock. Now he wanted to gather them and open himself up and hide them among his ribs and faintly ticking heart.

When he realized that the silence by which he had been confused was that of all of his clocks having been allowed to wind down, he understood that he was going to die in the bed where he lay.

Clocks are all stopped, he croaked to his grandson.

Nana said it would drive you mad

Nana said it would drive you mad.

(In truth, his wife had said that the ticking, never mind the chimes, drove *her* mad and that she could not bear the vigil with all of that clatter. In actual truth, his wife was soothed by the sound of ticking clocks and their chimes, and for many years after her husband's death, in the condominium she bought at a retirement complex with the cash he had hidden away for her in the basement and in half dozen safety-deposit boxes located around the North Shore, she kept a dozen of the finest pieces from his collection running and arranged around her living room in such a way that they seemed, in their precise alignment, with which she fussed and fine-tuned for months, to strike a chord that nearly conjured her dead husband, almost invoked him in the room; he always seemed just out of sight among the ticks and tocks and, at midnight, when she lay alone in her canopy bed and all of the clocks struck twelve at the same time, she knew without a doubt that her fastidious ghost of a husband was drifting around in the living room, inspecting each machine through his bifocals, making sure that they were all even of beat, adjusted and precise.)

Drive me mad nothing, he said. Get up and wind them. And so the young person, whose name he could not recall, moved from clock to clock and wound each one.

But not the striking trains, the young person said. It'd be too loud; we'd raise hell if all of these things struck; Nana would kill us.

George said, Okay, okay, and the blood in his veins and the breath in his chest seemed to go easier as he heard the ratchet and click of the springs being wound and the rising chorus of clocks, which did not seem to him to tick but to breathe and to give one another comfort by merely being in one another's presence, like a gathering of people at a church dinner or at a slide show held in the local library.

Besides fixing pots and selling soap, these are some of the things that Howard did at one time or another on his rounds, sometimes to earn extra money, mostly not: shoot a rabid dog, deliver a baby, put out a fire, pull a rotten tooth, cut a man's hair, sell five gallons of homemade whiskey for a backwoods bootlegger named Potts, fish a drowned child from a creek.

The drowned child was the daughter of a widow named La Rose. She had been playing at the edge of the creek and slipped on a wet stone and split her head and passed out facedown in the water. The current had tugged her farther into the water, carried her for several hundred feet, and then deposited her on a sandbar in the middle of the creek. Howard took his shoes off and rolled up his trouser legs and waded out to the child. When he first bent to lift her, he did so as if to hoist an errant lamb onto his hip, but when he put his arms under the little body and felt its cold and saw its hair trailing in the current and thought of the child's mother standing behind him on the bank, he turned her face up and raised her and carried her as if she were asleep and he taking her from the back of a wagon to her pallet bed near the woodstove after returning from a trip visiting relatives.

The man whose hair he cut was named Melish. He was nineteen years old and due to be married in an hour and a half. His mother was dead; his sisters and brothers, all much older than he, were married off already and gone to Canada or New Hampshire or south to Woonsocket. His father was plowing their fifteen acres of potatoes and would have just as soon scalped the boy as cut his hair, because his getting married meant the last helping hands were abandoning the farm. Howard took a pair of shears and a medium-size tin pot from his wagon. He fitted the pot over the boy's head and cut in a circle

around its circumference. When he was done, he took a hand mirror from its wrapping paper and gave it to the boy. The boy turned his head left and then right and handed the mirror back to Howard. He said, I guess that looks pretty smart, Mr. Crosby.

The man whose tooth he pulled was named Gilbert. Gilbert was a hermit who lived deep in the

The man whose tooth he pulled was named Gilbert. Gilbert was a hermit who lived deep in the woods along the Penobscot River. He seemed not to live in any shelter other than the woods themselves, although some men who hunted in the woods for deer and bear and moose speculated that he might live in some forgotten trapper's cabin. Others thought he might live in a tree house of some sort, or at least a lean-to. In all the years he was known to live in the forest, never had a winter hunting party seen so much as the ashes from a fire or a single footprint. No one could imagine how a man could survive one winter alone and exposed in the woods, never mind decades of them. Howard, instead of trying to explain the hermit's existence in terms of hearth fires and trappers' shacks, preferred the blank space the old man actually seemed to inhabit; he liked to think of some fold in the woods, some seam that only the hermit could sense and slip into, where the ice and snow, where the frozen forest itself, would accept him and he would no longer need fire or wool blankets, but instead flourish wreathed in snow, spun in frost, with limbs like cold wood and blood like frigid sap.

Gilbert was a graduate of Bowdoin College. According to the stories, he had liked to boast that he had been a classmate of Nathaniel Hawthorne's. Although he would have to be nearly 120 years old for the rumor to be true, no one cared to refute the claim, because they found too delightful an image to dispel the notion that the local hermit, dressed in animal skins, muttering litanies (as often as not in Latin), and, in warmer seasons, attended by a small but avid swarm of flies, which constantly buzzed around his head, crawled over his nose, and sipped the tears from the corners of his eyes, had once been a clean-faced, well-ironed acquaintance of the author of *The Scarlet Letter*. Gilbert was apparently not his real name and no one really knew when he had been born so the people left it at that.

People liked to speculate and tell stories about Gilbert the Hermit, especially when they sat around their woodstoves on winter nights with a blizzard howling outside; the thought of him out there in the maelstrom gave them a comforting thrill.

Howard supplied Gilbert. Gilbert's needs from the world of men were few, but he did require needles and thread, twine, and tobacco. Once a year, on the first day that the ice went out of the pond sometime in May, Howard rode his wagon to the Camp Comfort Club hunting cabin, itself remote, and from there toted on his back the supplies he knew Gilbert required down an old Indian trail that followed the river. Somewhere along the way, Howard would meet Gilbert. The men would greet one another with nods of their heads. They struggled through the bushes down to the river's edge, Howard with his bundle, Gilbert with his court of flies and a buckskin bag. There they would each find a rock or a dry tuft of grass to sit on. Howard took a tin of tobacco from the bundle of supplies he had brought for Gilbert and handed it to the hermit. Gilbert held the open tin to his nose and inhaled slowly, savoring the rich, sweet near dampness of the new tobacco; by the time he met Howard each year, he was down to the last flakes of his supply. Howard imagined that the fragrance of new tobacco was a sort of confirmation to Gilbert that he had indeed lived another year, endured another winter in the woods. After smelling the tobacco and looking out at the river for a moment, Gilbert held out his hand to Howard. Howard took a pipe from one of his jacket pockets and gave it to the hermit. Howard did not otherwise smoke and kept the pipe for this one bowlful a year. Gilbert packed Howard's pipe and then his own (which was beautiful—carved from a burl of dark red wood and which Howard imagined belonging once, long ago, in a brass stand on a dean's desk) and the two men smoked together in silence and watched the waters rush. While he smoked, Gilbert's flock of flies temporarily dispersed, but seemingly without rancor or resentment. When the pipes were spent, each man tapped the ashes out against his rock and put his pipe away. The flies settled back in their orbit around the hermit's head (*Circum caput*, he muttered) and he opened his buckskin bag and produced two crude wooden carvings, one which seemed to be a moose, the other a beaver, or perhaps a woodchuck, or even a groundhog. The work was so poor that Howard could only say for sure that the little raw wooden lumps that the hermit placed in the winter-dead grass between them were supposed to be

wooden ramps that the hermit placed in the winter dead grass between them were supposed to be animals of some kind. Next to the carvings, Gilbert then lay a beautifully skinned fox fur, head included, that smelled like rotting meat. There was a moment of panic for the flies as they decided which was more rancid, the hermit or the skin. In the end, they were loyal to their more pungent, living host. Howard placed the bundle of supplies on the grass and each man collected his goods. The men had exchanged few words during the first few years of this spring ritual and these only to refine the order of Gilbert's supplies. One year he said, More needles. Another year he said, No more tea—coffee now. Once the list had been refined and finally established, the men no longer spoke at all. For the past seven years, neither man had uttered a single word to the other.

The last year Howard met Gilbert in the woods, though, the men spoke. When he came upon the hermit, he saw that the man's left cheek was as swollen and as shiny as a ripe apple. Gilbert shuffled his feet and stared at the ground and held his hand against the cheek. Even the flies were solicitous of their sponsor's pain and seemed to buzz more gingerly about him. Howard cocked his head in a silent question.

Gilbert whispered, Tooth.

Howard could not imagine that this old husk of a man, this recluse who seemed not much more than a sour hank of hair and rags, had a tooth left in his head to ache. Nevertheless, it was true. Stepping closer, Gilbert opened his mouth and Howard, squinting to get a good look, saw in that dank, ruined purple cavern, stuck way in the back of an otherwise-empty levy of gums, a single black tooth planted in a swollen and bright red throne of flesh. A breeze caught the hermit's breath and Howard gasped and saw visions of slaughterhouses and dead pets under porches.

Tooth, the hermit said again, and pointed into his mouth.

Oh, yes, awful thing, Howard said, and smiled in sympathy.

The hermit said, No! Tooth! and continued pointing. Howard realized that the poor afflicted man wanted him to take the tooth out.

Oh, no, no! he said. I have no idea—

Gilbert cut him off. No! Tooth! he squeaked, an octave higher than before.

But I haven't any—Again the hermit cut him off, shooing him back toward where his wagon stood three miles away at the Comfort Camp Club cabin.

Howard returned two and a half hours later with a small flask of corn whiskey from Potts's mountainside still and a pair of long-handled pliers he used when he had to solder small pieces of tin to leaky pots. At first, Gilbert refused any liquor, but when Howard grabbed the tooth with the pliers, the old man passed out. Howard dashed a handful of cold river water on Gilbert's face. The hermit came to and motioned for the whiskey, which he drank in a single draft, then passed out again from the alcohol on the bedeviled tooth. Another splash of water revived Gilbert, and the two men sat for a time watching a pair of sparrows chase a crow above the fir trees on the other side of the river.

The river was high after an early, fast melt, and loud. Voices seemed to mingle in the water, as if there were a race of men who dwelled among the rapids. When Gilbert began to list and recite Virgil, *Uere nouo, gelidus canis cum montibus humor liquitur*, Howard reached into the hermit's mouth with the pliers, grabbed the fetid tooth, and pulled with all of his strength. The tooth did not budge. Howard let go. Gilbert looked baffled for a moment and then passed out again, flat on his back, the flies neatly following him from upright to laid out. Howard was convinced at first that his customer was dead, but a damp whistle from the hermit's fly-rimmed nose indicated that he could still be counted among the relatively quick.

The old man's mouth hung wide open. Howard straddled his shoulders and grabbed the tooth with the pliers. When he finally succeeded in excavating the tooth, Gilbert's face and beard were covered blood. Another splash of river water revived the patient. When he saw Howard standing before him with the *gory* pliers in one hand and a tooth extraordinarily long of root in the other, Gilbert fainted

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