

My brother and I hadn't seen each other in six years. After leaving Salt Lake I lost touch with him until, in the fall of my second year at Concrete High, he wrote me a letter and sent me a Princeton sweatshirt. The letter was full of impressive phrases—"In a world where contraception and the hydrogen bomb usurp each other as negative values . . ."—that I tried to use in conversation as if they had just occurred to me. I wore the sweatshirt everywhere, and told strangers who picked me up on the road that I was a Princeton student coming home for a visit. I even had my hair cut in a style called "The Princeton"—flat on top, long and swept back on the sides.

I decided to make my way there. My mother was busy campaigning for Senator Jackson and John F. Kennedy. Dwight called Kennedy "the Pope's candidate" and "the senator from Rome." He didn't like him, possibly because

of his effect on my mother, who was stirred by Kennedy's hopefulness and also a little in love with him. With her out of the house so much Dwight had grown casual about pushing me around. He didn't really beat me but he kept the possibility alive. I hated being alone with him.

My idea was to hitchhike to Princeton and hand myself over to Geoffrey. I had no money for the trip. To get it, I planned to forge a check. For some time I had been struck by the innocence of banks, the trusting way they left checkbooks out on the service tables for their customers. People walked in off the street, wrote down their wishes, then walked out again with their pockets full of money. There was nothing to keep me from taking a few blanks to fill out later. I couldn't cash them in Chinook or Concrete, where I was too familiar to use a false name, but in another town it would be easy.

I belonged to the Order of the Arrow, a Scout honor society whose annual banquet was to be held in Bellingham that year. I drove down in the afternoon with some other OA members from my troop, and shook loose from them soon after we arrived. First I went to a bank. Before going inside I put on the horn-rimmed glasses my mother had bought me so I could see the blackboards at school. They made me look owlish, but older. I walked across the bank to one of the tables and tore off a check from the convenience checkbook. I waited in line for a while, then, snapping my fingers as if I had just remembered something, turned on my heels and walked back outside.

At the main branch of the public library I took out a card in the name of Thomas Findon. I chose "Thomas Findon" because I'd worked as a camp counselor with a boy of that name during the summer. He was an Eagle Scout from Portland, a soft-spoken athlete with the body of a man and an easy way with the girls who came to camp to visit their little brothers. We taught swimming together until I got demoted to the archery range, where

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I almost lost my job altogether for arranging twenty-five-cent matches with the young Scouts I was supposed to be teaching.

The library was as simple as the bank. All I had to do was give the librarian my name, and an address I'd copied at random from the telephone book. She typed up the card while I waited.

I WALKED THE streets for over an hour, looking at stores, at the people behind the counters. I was searching for someone I could trust. I found her in a corner drugstore in the business section, just up the street from the Swedish Sailors' Home. For several minutes I walked back and forth and watched her through the drugstore window. Then I went inside and stood by the magazine racks, pretending to read and nervously shifting my overnight bag from shoulder to shoulder. She was gray-haired but her face was smooth, her expression direct and open as a young girl's. A guileless, lovely face. She wore half-moon glasses that she peered over to look at her customers while she rang up their purchases. Afterward she passed the time with them, mostly listening but sometimes adding a comment of her own. Her laugh was soft and pleasant. She made the store like a home.

I picked up copies of *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Reader's Digest*, then prowled the aisle for other adult items. I collected some Old Spice aftershave, brass-plated fingernail clippers, a hairbrush, and a package of pipe tobacco. As I approached the cash register she smiled and asked me how I was today.

"Grand," I said "just grand."

She added up my bill and asked if I wanted anything else.

"I believe that will do the trick," I said. I put my hand
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patted my other pockets. "Wouldn't you know it," I said. "I seem to have left my wallet at home. Drat! Sorry for the inconvenience."

She refused my offer to return the merchandise to the shelves and told me not to worry, it happened all the time. I thanked her and turned away, then turned back. "I could write you a check," I said. "Do you accept checks?"

"We sure do."

"Terrific." I produced the check I'd taken from the bank and laid it on the counter. "I'll make it out for fifty if that's all right."

She hesitated. "Fifty should be fine."

She watched me fill the check out. I had seen Dwight do it and knew the tricks, like writing "fifty and no/100" on the amount line. I signed it with a flourish and handed it to her.

She studied it. I waited, smiling patiently. When she spoke, her voice had changed somehow. "Thomas," she said, "do you have any identification?"

"Of course," I said, and reached for my rear pocket again. Then I stopped. "That darn wallet," I said. "It's all in there. I don't know, maybe I've got something." I searched through all my pockets, and with a show of relief I discovered the library card. "There we go," I said. "Now we're back in business."

She studied the card as she had studied the check. "Where do you live, Thomas?"

"Sorry?"

She looked at me over her glasses. "What's your address?"

I had utterly forgotten what the card said. I stood there, blinking stupidly, then I leaned over the counter and plucked the card from her fingers and said, "It's right here." I read the address to her and handed the card back.

She nodded, watching me. Then she raised her head _____ 195

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and called out, "Albert, could you come here a minute?"

A short, frail old man in a white jacket came slowly down the aisle from the prescription desk. She handed him the check and library card. She fixed her eyes on him and said in a deliberate voice, "Albert, the young man here wrote us this check. Take care of it, please." He looked at her, uncertainly at first, then with some sharpness. "Right," he said. "I'll take care of it." He walked back down the aisle. I began to follow him but she said, "He'll be right back, Thomas. Just wait here."

She put my purchases in a bag and we stood without speaking for a time. "I don't usually keep that much cash on hand," she finally said.

I looked toward the rear of the store. I couldn't see the man.

"So how long have you been living here, Thomas?"

"About six months," I said.

"And how do you like it so far?"

"Okay. I mean I really like it."

"Good. I do too, it's a nice place to live. People here are nice."

Then I saw that she was trembling, close to tears, and I knew she had betrayed me. I glanced toward the empty prescription desk again and said, "You know, I've got some other things to do, I'll just come back later."

I started down the aisle. She said, "Wait, Thomas." When I reached the door I looked around and saw that she had come from behind the counter and was following me. "Wait," she said, holding me with her eyes as I stood there, and I saw in her eyes what I had heard in her voice earlier: sorrow. I pulled the door open and stepped outside and began walking fast down the street. I passed a few shops and then I heard her voice behind me again—"Thomas!" I quickened my pace. She kept following and calling out to me. I looked over my shoulder. She was running, slowly and clumsily, but running. I squeezed the

overnight bag against my side with my elbow and broke into a run myself. The two of us ran down the street, twenty, twenty-five feet apart. I was holding back, just loping along. "Thomas!" she said, "Thomas, wait!" and every time she spoke I felt a tug from this voice so full of care. I felt she knew all of me, all my foolishness and trouble, and wanted only to take hold of me and set me right.

The sidewalk was crowded. If the men and women we ran through had thought there was any reason to stop me, they would have. If she had yelled "Thief!" just once, I would have been mobbed on the spot. Everyone must have thought it was a family affair. They must have heard what I heard, the voice of a mother trying to reach her child.

I turned the corner at the end of the block, and this somehow broke her hold on me. All the speed I'd been saving seemed to come to me at once. I tore down to the next corner, turned, turned again half a block later and ran through an alley. Only then did I slow down and look behind me. She could not possibly have kept up, but I needed to look to be sure. She wasn't there. I had lost her. I believed I had lost her forever, but in this I was mistaken.

The alley ended across the street from a diner. The street was under repair. No cars, only a few pedestrians. I waited for a time, trying to get my wind back, then crossed over to the diner. It was almost empty. The cashier grunted when I came in but didn't look up from the tablet he was writing on. I walked to the back and locked myself in the men's room.

I leaned against the door. I stood there, just letting myself breathe. My eyes burned with sweat and my shirt was soaked through. My throat was raw. I bent my head to the faucet and let the water run into my mouth. Then I stripped to the waist and bathed myself with paper

towels. When I was dry, I took off my pants and stuffed them into the overnight bag with my shirt and my glasses. I took out my Boy Scout uniform and slowly, carefully, unfolded it and put it on. I ran a damp tissue over my shoes, then straightened up and inspected myself. Everything was as it should be, the set of my scarf, the alignment of my belt buckle, the angle of my cap, the drape of my two sashes. One was the Order of the Arrow sash, a red arrow on a brilliant white background. The other was my merit-badge sash. It was thick with proofs of competence. At camp that summer, with little else to do, I had worked myself into a delirium of badge-grubbing. I was a Life Scout now, with only one merit badge to go for Eagle. That badge was Citizenship in the Nation. I had already fulfilled the numerous requirements for it, including attendance at a jury trial to observe the rule of law, but Dwight refused to send in my papers. He wouldn't explain why, except to say I didn't deserve to be an Eagle. It was an issue between us.

I shouldered my bag and left the diner.

BETWEEN MY FLIGHT from the drugstore and my return, no more than fifteen minutes had gone by. An empty police car was parked outside the store with its light blinking. Calmly, eyes front and center, I walked past and up the street to the hotel where the banquet was to take place.

Though an hour remained until chow time the lobby was already full of Scouts in OA sashes, preening themselves and looking each other over. I checked my bag and said hello to some acquaintances from other troops. One of them was in charge of setting up chairs. He asked me to help him out, and when that job was done he posted me at the door with a couple of other boys to greet the guests as they arrived. The three of us sparked each other.

By the time people began filing past our table we were laying down a steady line of scintillant repartee. Between gags I checked off names on the invitation list, the second boy wrote them down on adhesive nameplates, and the third escorted the guests to their tables.

Then she was there, in line behind an old couple. I looked up and saw her watching me. The room bucked but I kept my balance. I didn't even blink. I checked off the old couple's name, and made a friendly joke they laughed at.

And then I turned to her. I gave her a welcoming smile and said, "Name, ma'am?" She stepped up to the table and stood there thoughtfully, holding her pocketbook in front of her with both hands. She still had on the white sweater and plaid skirt she'd been wearing in the store. I felt no fear, nor any surprise after the first shock had passed. I knew she hadn't followed me here. Of course she would have a boy in the Scouts, and of course he would belong to OA. She read my nameplate and looked me up and down, and I could see her face grow smooth and serene as she decided that she had been mistaken, that it couldn't possibly be me. She returned my smile and gave me her name. I saw from the list that she had two boys in the Order. Already she was searching for them, glancing around her and peering into the noisy hall. She picked up her nameplate, gave her arm to the boy at the door, and passed into the banquet.