



August by Holly LeCraw

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Selected by Tom Perrotta, author of *The Abstinence Teacher*, *Little Children*, *Joe College*, *Election*, *The Wishbones*, and *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies*.

This story happened to appear in the same issue of Post Road as one of mine, and I found it moving and gorgeously written. August is one of those deceptive narratives where nothing much happens--an old man visits a toy store and takes a nap--and yet a whole life is revealed to us, a life full of sadness and denial, but also beauty and love. Holly LeCraw is a wonderful writer--it's amazing how much she packs into what appears at first to be a modest character study. – TP.

He was seventy-eight years old, and could not remember ever being in a toy store. It was early August, sultry, Harvard Square alive with the false busyness of tourists and summer school students. The semester wouldn't start for another six weeks. Tomorrow, he and Cookie were going to Italy, the morning flight; nevertheless, today Paul had found himself out walking, time on his hands. He stood at the window of the store, a place he'd passed dozens of

times without stopping, now entranced by the bright objects in the window—a rideable firetruck, circling trains, a spinning ferris wheel made of interlocking plastic pieces, as high as his head. He was not sure if toys this fantastic had existed when he was a boy or not. Slowly, he walked to the door and pushed it open.

Inside it was cool, with a clean, wholesome smell, entirely different from the rubber-and-chemical odor of the hardware store a block away (still, thankfully, a useful place), or the linty scent of the haberdasher's around the corner, where he had been buying ties for the past forty years. There were two steps up into the store. He negotiated them well. The knee was holding up; that young Dr. Harris did solid work. His knee, however, a new creation of Gore-tex and plastic, was surely not as artful as that small garbage truck over there, with the cunning levers and the open driver's door. He walked closer to inspect it. There was a garbage man clinging to this door with a miniature hand, his own plastic knee bent, ready to hoist himself into his truck and continue on his way, an eternal smile of uncomplicated cheer on his tiny face.

A woman was approaching him, smiling also. Reflexively, he put his hands behind his back and glanced at the closest merchandise (boxed-up trucks piled high, a dollhouse on the top shelf), as though he knew what he was doing, was, perhaps, on a specific errand but only mildly interested in what he saw here. It was a skill of his to let people know, in an entirely courteous way, that he did not need or want their opinions. He wouldn't know, anyway, what to say

to a woman who sold toys. Still smiling, she was moving away. She could have been one of his daughters-in-law; she was in her thirties, settled but still young. Pretty. Curly blonde hair, like his sister had had, long ago, Mamie, there was a name you never heard anymore, Mamie who had stayed in Florida and had died of cancer when she was twenty-three. The toy woman was the age person he found difficult to talk to now. An age Mamie had never got to. Thirties and forties—people who seemed to know so much more than he did, to be able to move so much faster. He remembered how he had felt when he was that woman’s age, full of possibility, yet in control.

From a polite distance the toy woman was looking at him again, her smile now a question, and he realized he had been standing in the same spot for too long.

He roused himself and began to inspect the displays in earnest. The trucks—what an amazing array, and what detail! All manner of earth mover, fire trucks with ladders and without, the little garbage truck, ambulances, harvesters. All made of plastic, but they seemed to be quite sturdy, quite a high-quality plastic. European, of course—the toys. Exacting, the Europeans were. He admired that, always had, the way they had of requiring the highest standards.

A wooden train set on a low table, with a roundhouse and bridges and tunnels, all of nicely-finished wood. Birch, possibly, or ash. Did they make things of ash anymore? In the next bay over, dolls; nearby, high chairs, cribs, strollers, a good English pram. Better construction than Cookie’s little Japanese

car. Paul had a daughter; had Marian ever played with dolls like this? Hard to remember. Had she—or the boys—had they looked like these infant dolls, their foreheads wide and serious, their mouths pursed between round expanses of cheek, fingers fat and creased, newly-hatched? They must have; pictures would tell him they had. Jean would remember. That had been her thing, he had left it to her.

It had been long enough now that it took only a nanosecond to remember he could not ask Jean, so little time that it was seamless to him, as if he were doing no remembering at all; just a slight *tick* in the flow of his thought; and any sadness he might have left was subsumed in that *tick*, so that he no longer had to register it, adjust to it yet again. He did not remember Jean often now as anything more than a fact; he had Cookie.

He had never bought gifts for his grandchildren. That had been Jean. They had money enough from him to keep them comfortable for years to come, so he had no cause to feel guilty. And they had toys, he had seen them, plastic rubbish that would shatter if you happened to step on it, proto-computer contraptions that even sounded badly made, with their tinny beeping and clicking. Cookie didn't care for toys either; or children, for that matter; she was charming with them but even he had to admit she did not feel their absence in her life. No, he had no need to buy anyone a thing.

But in the next little bay was a shelf of toys he finally could not resist touching. There was a car, a boat on wheels, and a train, bigger than the one on

the table, pulling two cars. All the toys were wooden, bright as Life Savers, their sturdy corners rounded and their finish thick and glossy. The train was the best. It had a silver bell on top of the engine, and its cars held pegs carrying stacks of colored disks, which he removed, one by one. For a moment, he fought the urge to put one in his mouth. They had a satisfying click and heft, like currency from some sunny country where transactions were simple and straightforward. *One green disk, my darling*, he thought, as if it were a line from an old song, *green as leaves in May, and I will buy you happiness*.

He kept better track of his grandchildren's birthdays than one might expect; knew the months, anyway; little Jonathan would be having a birthday soon. He would be three, or perhaps four. He clicked the disks thoughtfully. He had been in the hospital for some time after he was born, Jonathan had, an early baby, and he, Paul, had gone to see him and had been stunned at his tininess and the little plexiglass house in which he slept and the tube running into his nose. Jean was gone by then; Cookie had accompanied him to the hospital. He had been proud to squire her on this family errand, proud that the nurses had granted the two of them admittance, but when he had beheld his grandson's utter helplessness he had not known what to say, and had been completely uninterested in any observations Cookie had to make. It had been, as a matter of fact, a moment of terror: he had felt, as he had not before or since, a sudden contempt for her and her ideas.

But now Jonathan was a big strapping boy, handsome, a little shy, not compliant about sitting on Paul's lap, if Paul happened to request it. Turning three or four, and he was sure it was August; he remembered driving to the hospital with Cookie, the waves of heat rising from the asphalt of the hospital parking lot, in the first heady days of their courtship.

He replaced the disks and picked up the whole train, the bell dingling faintly, and carried it to the register. The smiling blonde woman came to meet him. "You've found something," she said. "This company has such lovely things. Swiss. So well made." Paul felt unexpectedly pleased that he and the toy woman had some common ground, after all. "Someone is going to be very happy," she said, and began to hunt for the price tag.

"My grandson," Paul said. "He's turning three this month." He humphed, cleared his throat. "Or perhaps it's four." He smiled at the woman; she would forgive him this lapse.

But she was putting down her scanner. "I see." Professional concern clouded her face. "You know, this toy is really designed for a baby. Developmentally speaking. Eye-hand coordination, cause and effect, you know." She smiled sympathetically. "I'm afraid a three-year-old would outgrow it quite quickly. And a four-year-old would want nothing to do with it."

He tried to remember himself at four. He wanted to tell her that he would have felt nothing but delight at receiving such a thing. But now, apparently,

children were different. They were highly advanced. They had exacting standards.

He let the woman sell him one of the trucks from the front of the store—not the garbage truck set out for display, somehow he did not have the temerity to request that one, but an earthmover, still in its box. It came with a tiny wheelbarrow and construction men and minuscule tools for them to hold. Fifteen minutes earlier, he would've been quite pleased with it. But when he found himself back on the sidewalk in the heat, he felt bereft.

He began to walk homeward. Perhaps it was simply odd to be without Cookie. He often went on errands without her, but they were quick, familiar, predetermined, the cobbler or dry-cleaner, or the bakery to buy the almond cookies he must have on hand. Today, she was playing tennis with Doris Coolidge; she expected him home later in the afternoon, to pack. Italy had been his idea. Cookie had laughed at the idea of going in August (“Sweetie, it will be crawling with Germans and Japanese—and the heat!”), but had agreed in the end. He had not been back, astonishingly, since the war.

Superbly organized, was Cookie; she could play tennis, have a lunch date the day before a three-week trip; then the afternoon would be an efficient flurry, Cookie drawing out foreign adapters and collapsible walking sticks and extra film from well-marked storage boxes, collecting his medicines, rolling his trousers in the ingenious way she had so that when they arrived in Rome, *ecce!* they would emerge unwrinkled, creases intact. That night they were to have

dinner with the Baldwins, their suitcases clasped shut and ready by the door at home. Yes, Cookie kept him on a marvelous schedule. He knew full well that without her he would drift, would, quite literally, wither and die.

So he was not expected home until, say, two o'clock—although Cookie would suppose him to be home now, having his usual soup, then taking a nap. But it was already noon, and he had this bag, this truck, this piece of heavy equipment, weighing in his hands. He would have to deliver the toy to Jonathan today. His step quickened, and he turned off Brattle Street onto Hawthorn. If he had one of those cell phones, he could call Jennifer, his daughter-in-law, to make sure they were home; but he did not. He did not want, anyway, to be dissuaded. His hurry was greater than he had realized, and when he reached his own driveway he headed straight for his car.

It took only minutes to drive from Harvard Square to Belmont. He thoroughly approved of Teddy's decision to buy a house here, approved of the house itself, neither too big nor too small, a sensible investment, just as he approved of most things Teddy did. He was Paul's youngest son, the one who resembled Paul most closely in personality, although in looks he was all Jean. Yet it occurred to Paul, as he drove, that perhaps Teddy was not aware of the extent of Paul's approval. Or, perhaps, that he didn't care. He hadn't seen Teddy and Jennifer in weeks—couldn't remember the last time. Well, it was a good thing he was going today.

The house was on a leafy side street, a brick Colonial, flowers lining the front walk, raggedy now in August. There were toys scattered on the front lawn—more plastic. He had thought Jennifer ran a pretty tight ship. She had the two little boys now. Jonathan and the baby, Willie. William had been his own father's name. When Willie was born—full-size—Teddy had emphasized that there were Williams on Jennifer's side too. Paul didn't know why Ted would be so eager to dilute his act of homage. For himself, he persisted in ignoring the fact of these other ghostly Williams.

He was standing on the steps ringing the bell when he realized that he could have bought the little train for Willie. Regret knocked him in the chest so hard that he gasped. Just then, Jennifer answered the door. "Paul! What a surprise—are you okay? What's wrong?" She reached out as if to catch him. Maybe he had gone pale too.

"Oh, fine, fine," he squeezed out. "Hello, dear." He reached for her shoulder in a half-hug, leaned on her a little too hard, but by the time they had parted again he was steady. He held up the bag from the toy store. "Brought a little something for the birthday boy."

Jennifer's pretty face was blank for a moment. Then, "Of course! Jonathan. Are you sure you're all right? Come in, come in. His birthday is in a couple of weeks."

"Well, we'll be in Italy, you see." How nicely that worked out. He was beginning to feel much better. He crossed the threshold into the entrance hall.

More toys, and a stack of folded laundry on the steps. He looked around expectantly.

“Oh, he’s not here,” Jennifer said. “He’s at a playdate. One of his best little friends. If we’d known you were coming—” A shade of disapproval crossed her face.

“I see.” Yes, these little children, even they had schedules now. He was familiar with this from his older grandchildren, how if you happened to stop by they would not be gathered in the kitchen doing homework around the table or playing in the yard, but instead off at soccer or violin or clay class. Even little Jonathan, at three, or four. No sense to be disappointed. “Well, there’s the other one,” Paul said. “The little one.” He peered over her shoulder. “Young William.”

Jennifer’s face softened. “Yes, indeed. Come on in here.” She led him into the kitchen, which was attached to a sunny playroom. Good God, more toys. A low red-and-green kitchen set, a play workbench, blocks. These children wanted for nothing. In the center of the rug, with a sort of cloth doughnut wrapped around him, sat the baby, who was very intently examining a yellow cube. “Willie-bee,” his mother crooned, “look who’s here! Your grandpa, come to see you.” She went over and scooped him up, and he settled into her arm like a puzzle piece. “Looky, Willie-bee! Say hello.” And the child looked at Paul and smiled a gummy smile.

Paul felt himself dazzled. He put his hands, still holding the toy bag, behind his back— what if Jennifer offered the baby to him? In compensation, he leaned forward. “Hello there,” he said. He felt the bag hanging against his calf. “I’ve brought something for you,” he said. Oh, the train. His heart pinched again. “For you and your brother.” He set the bag on the kitchen counter, realized the box was not gift-wrapped. Well, so much the better. He drew the box out of the bag and held it before the baby’s eyes. “Look here!”

“Oh, my,” Jennifer said. “How wonderful. Jonathan will *love* it.”

Paul wagged the box in front of the baby. “I’ll bet your brother will share with you,” he said. He wanted so badly to give something to the child.

But Jennifer eased it out of Paul’s hands and placed it back in the bag, still holding Willie on her hip. Willie watched with interest. “Oh, we’ll save it, won’t we, Willie? It has a lot of little pieces that you would just love to put in your mouth.” She smiled at Paul. “A good thing he’s so little. In a few months he’ll be screaming for it.”

“Yes, well.” Paul put his empty hands in his pockets. “When will Jonathan be back?”

“After lunch, I’m afraid. Can you stay? Why don’t I fix you something?”

“Well.” He felt unexpectedly free. Cookie had no idea where he was. He was an independent agent. “I’ll have some soup, if you’ve got it.”

“Soup?” Jennifer frowned. “My goodness. In this heat. Let me see what I can find.”

She rummaged in the pantry; no soup. Could she make him something else? A sandwich? Paul dug in his heels. No need to change his routine. No, nothing. He'd have to leave soon.

"Oh, can't you stay?" He couldn't tell if she was sincere or not. She wanted to hear about the Italy trip; they were leaving tomorrow? She and Teddy had had no idea. So he wouldn't be in Maine. They had already gone in July, she and Teddy, but they were heading up again next week. "And you enjoyed Rhode Island, I'm sure," she said politely.

Cookie had a place down in Narragansett, and Paul now went there with her for the month of July. He did not regret this change in his summer routine, just as he did not regret any changes Cookie had made in his life. The long Maine summers of his children's childhoods seemed very distant, and when he was in Maine (where he would ordinarily be in August, but for Italy), parties with his old tennis partners and fellow cocktail-drinkers seemed more like college reunions, with people whose youth he had shared in a faraway dream, instead of real, ongoing life. His children said they missed him in Maine. He was not sure this was true.

But the thought made him consent to a cup of tea. It was Willie's lunchtime too, and Paul sat at the kitchen table and watched Jennifer spackle orange goo from a small jar into his mouth. It was hard to resist glancing at his watch. Just as he had decided he would make his move, however, the phone rang, and Jennifer went to answer it. "Oh, no," he heard her say. "Poor little

guy.” She hung up, and then, oddly, kept her back to Paul for an extra moment. “Hmp,” she murmured, and then turned to him with a quizzical expression that brightened as she spoke.

“Jonathan’s little friend has gotten sick,” she said. “Throwing up. So I have to go get him early. Of course, this way he’ll get to see you. The thing is”—he felt himself tense—“if I take Willie with me, he might fall asleep in the car. And that would be disastrous. Because then Jonathan would wake him up, and there goes the nap!” Paul smiled weakly. “But I could leave Willie here. It wouldn’t be for long.”

“Oh, now, I don’t think--”

“He’s good as gold,” Jennifer said, taking the baby out of his chair. “He’ll just sit here on the floor and play.” She walked over to the rug and set him down, demonstrating. “In a few months it’ll be a different story. He’ll be crawling all over the place.” She seemed to be implying that this was Paul’s best, his only chance. “He’s not going to poop”—she smiled as Paul blanched—“he did that right before you got here. He’s been fed. Really, you can just get to know each other. I’ll be back in half an hour. Less.”

Jennifer could be pushy. He’d always known that. Not pushy—insistent. But there was a quality to her insistence, a clarity—he had admired it before—she usually did not insist on a bad idea. He tried to quell his panic. She seemed to know what she

was doing; it seemed important to her. "All right, dear," he said. "If you think it best."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" She leaned down to Willie and cupped the back of his round little head in her hand, stroked his yellow fuzz with an absolutely sensual gesture. "I love you, baby." She turned to Paul, her face still tender. "Thank you so much."

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps Willie was at an ideal age. He didn't blink when his mother disappeared and the back door slammed. When he finally looked up at Paul, with his watery smile, Paul wondered if it actually did matter if he was there, if the baby would register his presence in any meaningful way at all. Paul looked around at the toys. There were some plastic stacking rings, low-rent cousins of the bright rings of the unpurchased train. He leaned down and dumped them in front of the baby and set the plastic spindle beside them. Willie regarded them solemnly, and then reached for one with a wavering hand. But Paul had placed them too far away, and when the baby reached he collapsed from the middle, stuck with his face on the rug.

Paul watched him, alarmed. Couldn't he get up? Apparently not. The baby, folded in half, started to whimper. This would not do. Paul bent his good knee and, by holding on to the nearby coffee table, was able to ease himself down to the floor. He propped the baby up inside his doughnut cushion. Clever thing, that. Paul was surprised at how small and soft the baby felt, how Paul's hands could span his spongy little middle. He seemed made of a wholly

different substance from Paul himself, from Cookie, sinewy and aged. When he was propped, Willie made a satisfied noise. Paul handed him the green ring and he took it, with an underwater motion, his fingers wrapping one by one, careful as a watchmaker. Paul shoved the spindle near. The baby batted at it with the ring, and completely by chance managed to hook it; he took his accomplishment in stride, however, and looked around with a purposeful air. Paul handed him another ring.

He hoped he was doing the right thing. He cleared his throat and said, "Willie, I'm your grandfather." Willie ignored him. "William," Paul said experimentally. "Bill." His father had been Bill. Had his father ever sat on the floor and played with him, Paul, like this? He had honestly never thought about it before. It seemed irrelevant; he would not remember if he had, just as Willie would not remember this day; but all at once Paul wished very hard that he could know for certain. His father had not been a playful man, although no less so than Paul himself. Had his father brought him toys? "Willie," Paul said softly, "I'm going to get you a train. It's a lovely thing, this train." Willie looked up at him. He had not yet hooked the second ring, and instead put it in his mouth. A long silver thread of saliva descended from his lower lip and landed in a jewellike drop on the carpet. "Willie," Paul said sternly. He meant it only in fun. But the baby took the ring out of his mouth, gave Paul a look of betrayal, and began to cry. "Oh, now, Willie," Paul said, in a more sympathetic tone, but the baby rubbed his eyes and cried harder. Bringing his hands to his face threw

him off balance, and he collapsed again, this time to the side, so that he was draped over the doughnut. He thrashed around and managed to get onto his back, but now he was stuck like a beetle, his arms and legs waving helplessly in the air.

Paul reached out to sit him up and saw him rub his eyes again. Why, the child was tired! For a moment he felt ridiculously proud of his deduction. Well, he would put the child in his crib. What was so difficult about that? He would find it, somewhere upstairs. The child would go to sleep and Jennifer would come back to an orderly, serene house; then he would leave, fully vindicated, and go home to his soup. He reached forward and picked Willie up. The baby's crying abated somewhat and Paul felt another surge of confidence. Now—to rise himself. He held the baby around the stomach, facing out, with his left arm, and reached for the coffee table with his right. The knee did not seem to be bending very well. He got his other leg under him and held the edge of the table harder. If he pivoted forward, he would be able to get up on the bum leg too. He pulled; went forward more quickly than he had intended; and with a sickening *thwack* the baby's head hit the table.

After an endless, outraged intake of breath, Willie began to howl. "Oh, Jesus," Paul said. There was no blood, but the baby's face was so red Paul thought he might be having cardiac arrest. "Oh, Willie. Oh, Willie." He held him with both arms. At least they were upright now. Motion seemed to be called for. He swayed back and forth. Still the baby cried. He bounced. That

seemed to be better. The baby's face was still red, and Paul remembered, from the deep past, that Jean had called such times "the cardiac cry." One of them did it particularly often. Was it Rob, their middle? Yes, it was coming back. Paul held the baby as well as he could and bounced. They had all lived, hadn't they? His four children? Cardiac cries and all?

But still Willie cried, his outrage turning to an elemental sorrow. Paul began to walk. Then walk and bounce. "Yes, love, be quiet," Paul said. "Little Willie. There you go." He still felt strange talking out loud, resisted the urge to look around and assure himself that no one was watching. Walking. Dr. Harris had said to walk a great deal, at this point the knee needed gentle exercise. Too hot to walk outside; if he walked to the front of the house, back to the kitchen, around the island, it made a circuit. "All right, Willie." Back again to the front hall; the dining room needed painting. He had thought Jennifer ran a tight ship. Back to the kitchen. "Now, now." She had said half an hour. When had she left? He didn't know. The baby was quiet. Another circuit. The rhythm of it was good. Dr. Harris might approve of the bouncing too—a gentle bounce. Like the old bounce of the tennis court. Maybe he would get there again. He thought of the clay courts in Fred Sprague's back yard, in Maine, the white light of high summer, just before it turned gold, the *pock* of the ball radiating up his arm, the power of it, how each knee, his whole body, had been an instrument. "Yes, Willie," he said absently, and looked down at the child. His head was drooping. My God, my God—but then Paul realized that he had gone to sleep.

“Well, how about that,” Paul whispered. The baby startled, then went limp again. Paul stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked at them doubtfully. Upstairs, somewhere, was the crib; but he realized he would not be able to hold on to the bannister, carrying the child; and what if the knee gave out completely?

He made two more slow tours of the house. He missed his soup. And there was his nap. Suddenly he was exhausted, that delicious peak of afternoon tiredness that meant if he lay down he would be asleep almost immediately. He fought it. What if he dropped the child? Well, he could lie down on the sofa. Put the baby on the chair next to it. Yes, cradle him down where the cushioned back and seat met. There was a smear of something that looked like peanut butter on the chair’s arm. He leaned down to place the baby and a thought emerged from the dim, cardiac-cry reaches of his memory—did they stay asleep if you put them down? Sometimes they woke right up. His tiredness now was like vertigo.

All at once he remembered Jean, a very clear picture, Jean and an infant lying on a sofa, both asleep, the baby’s head right under Jean’s chin. They had been curled together like one organism. Who had it been? Marian? Rob? Teddy? Or little Paul, Paul junior, their first and most miraculous--Paul whom he never saw anymore--Portland, Oregon--what sort of a place was that to move to? Most likely it had been Paul. For after that, how would Jean have been able to lie down, so peacefully, with only one baby in her charge? She had been good at it, Jean had. The babies. The kids. They had not been his concern, not the

dailiness of them, their cries and diapers and skinned knees, the weight of them like the weight of this little Willie, the softness of his hair, the defenseless droop of his sleeping head. He remembered seeing Jean like that, with little Paul, and how suddenly moved he had been, caught in a different kind of vertigo, how his love had been so overwhelming that he could do nothing but tiptoe out of the room and leave them alone.

He turned Willie around from his sack-of-potatoes position so they were chest to chest, and sat down on the edge of the sofa. There was a pillow, the perfect size and loft for his head; yes, there. The bum leg went up, then the good one. His shoes were still on; well, there was nothing to be done. Willie was surprisingly heavy. When they were horizontal, the baby burrowed a bit and then was still again, his breathing quiet and regular. Paul curved his arms around the baby's cushioned bottom. His head fit under Paul's chin. Yes, a good solution. Jennifer—was it Jennifer?—would be home soon. He felt himself falling, falling, falling.

There was great hilarity at the Baldwins' that night about how he had spent his afternoon. Somehow, he and Willie had slept on the sofa together for three hours. "I didn't want to wake you," Jennifer had said, when he finally did stir, disoriented, a little nauseated, Willie rustling under his chin with an insistent swimming motion, Paul's shirt damp from their perspiration. Jennifer

was standing over them, her face alight, soft. "You were sleeping so soundly. Both of you."

Of course Paul had had to call Cookie, who by that point was frantic with worry and, he suspected, annoyance. In the kitchen, Willie on her shoulder, Jennifer had taken in his end of the conversation, all his assurances and apologies; for some reason he hadn't left the room, as he could have with the cordless phone. And then a most extraordinary thing had happened. Gently, Jennifer removed the phone from his hand and talked Cookie down. "Of course I would have called if I had known," she had said. And then, "I assumed he was in charge of his own schedule."

Paul walked over and sat down with Jonathan, who, big-eyed, was examining his new earthmover. Silently, Paul handed him a construction man, and Jonathan (who was turning four) said "Fank you," not looking at him, and placed the man inside the cab. Behind them, Jennifer was saying, with a kind but ironclad firmness, "He was visiting his grandson. If you could have seen them, you wouldn't have woken them up either." Pause. "Well, my belief is that if you're sleeping, it's because you need it." A longer pause. "Yes, you too. I hope you have a good trip."

By the time he got home, Cookie had decided his little escapade—this was how she referred to it—was charming. By the time they reached the Baldwins' (she had packed without him), the story was fully formed. "Sleeping right here,"

Cookie said, patting her chest, as if she had seen it herself. "One of the best naps you ever had, right, dear?"

"Yes, it was." He did not repeat what Jennifer had said that afternoon, as he had stood in the kitchen, dizzy in the bright afternoon light. "Willie will remember this," she had said. "There's a place for memories like this. In your core. This afternoon will always be a part of him."

The dinner party broke up early; Cookie said they needed their rest—"or at least I do, dear. Your tank is full," she said, and everyone laughed again, Henry Baldwin with that enormous booming laugh that made Paul think he never really listened, as if Paul's Willie-nap had been some youthful, jumping-in-a-fountain sort of prank. At home, Cookie performed her swift bathroom routine—swipe of cold cream, blur of toothbrushing—and got straight in bed. "Don't stay up too long," she said. "Long naps aren't REM sleep, you know. Not quality."

"All right. Good night, dear." He stood at her side of the bed, leaned over and gave her a kiss, as if he were tucking her in. Before he had left the room, she had snapped off the light.

He wandered downstairs, feeling adrift. Usually he was in bed first. The kitchen was dark, appliances faintly humming; the set alarm by the front door blinked red. The only light he could find still on was in the living room, the lamp that stood next to his reading chair. The chair itself was new, or at least unfamiliar, whether of his or Cookie's lineage he couldn't remember, and recently reupholstered. But the lamp was old, he knew that, it was attached to a

little table, a lamp from the house in Belmont, his and Jean's house. He sat down in the chair, in the yellow pool of light. That had been a big barn of a house. Had to be, to hold all of them, his children, his towering sons, their friends, always exuding a faint odor of sweat, as if they had just come from a playing field—which they usually had. Big enough, too, to hold the dining room table where they would all fit, the refridge with their endless gallons of milk, the stove that produced piles of spaghetti and parades of roast chickens and mountains of rice—and Jean in the middle of it all. Jean. What pictures did he have? Of Jean, of his children? Were there any baby pictures set about? Any Willies of yore?

He stood up and made a quick inspection of the room, all the shelves and tables and desk-tops. No. In all of these pictures—Rob in his baseball uniform, Marian graduating from Winsor, young Paul and Teddy on the beach—his children were older, evinced some hint, more, of who they were to become. Cookie liked having the pictures of his family out. She liked the fact of his family, accepted it unquestioningly. Yes, she had accepted a great deal. But there were no pictures of Jean. He did not remember retiring them for Cookie's benefit, but he must have. Would she care? Did she know that there had been a completeness to his life then, a heady busyness, before any child had grown up and left—that they had been a unit unto themselves, no appendages, no gaps, the past and present and future all balanced and bright? He sat down again in his reading chair. Ah, Jean. He had not expected this, the hot streaming tears, how momentarily alien this room felt, the room of his new beginning. Jean would

understand. The tears, and why he shed them so infrequently, and where he was now. She wouldn't fault him for it.

He wiped his eyes with his pajama sleeve and imagined the room thronged with pictures, Jean, his babies, Cookie too, his parents. He imagined all his own memories, the unseen ones that held him up, like buried stones of a foundation, plastered-over oak beams. Who had held him as a baby? His mother, dark-haired, with her little humming songs? Had Mamie, still practically a baby herself, stroked his cheek, had they looked at each other with clear, unremembering eyes? And his father—he knew now that his father had brought him toys. A train, going around and around. Yes, he could see the house, the white farmhouse with the orange trees coming right up to the yard, could feel the relentless heat and the mosquitoes, saw the inside neat and dim, himself in the living room, on the round rag rug, next to the corner cupboard, his father beside him. Was not himself but saw himself, as if passing by a plate glass window, the scene confused with his reflection; but his movement was inexorable, and the picture shrank, wavered and vanished.

He had left Florida too soon, too thoughtlessly. He knew that too. He had wanted the life his father had rejected, the life he had sensed was superior, the life, indeed, he now had, of books and ideas and the symphony and the university and all these things that had had weight long before he arrived, and would after he was gone. Yes, he knew he had left too easily, too eagerly, but he knew also that his mother and father and even Mamie had forgiven him by now.

And Jean? The children? Had they forgiven him all his faults, his lacks, his omissions? He did not think his roster of sins was any longer than the next man's. Or any shorter. Well.

He got up from the chair, his knee needing oil, and switched off the lamp. The room went dark, but not as dark as he had expected; cold light flooded in from the window, and as his eyes adjusted the whole room melded into a photographic black and white. He went to the window. High above, the moon was fiercely bright. The back garden was silver in its light, the shadows sharp as rulers, colors asleep but the thingness of the things not. The rose arbor at the end of the walk cast a tall, rounded shadow on the grass (of which every blade seemed visible) that was clearer than it would have been on a cloudless afternoon. He could almost make out the thorns. How could this be? How was it that now, at seventy-eight, he was seeing the brightest moonlight of his life? He stood at the window, wondering. And he realized he was going to die.

He had thought about death before, of course, many times. He had thought about it in 1943 in particular, with Fred Sprague beside him at Mignano, and also that blond, blue-eyed boy from Nebraska who had seemed a prime poetic candidate to get his brains shot out before Paul's eyes; but he had not, had survived as well as Paul and Fred, and still sent Christmas cards. Paul had been terrified then, had looked death in the face and not liked what he saw, but he had had no premonitions. Now, however, he knew quite simply that his time would soon be over. He wondered when it would be. Hopefully not in Rome. What a

burden for poor Cookie. Yes, Cookie. He thought of her upstairs, sleeping her well-earned sleep, and felt boundless gratitude. He would be sorry to leave her.

He turned away from the window and the room seemed ordinary again, still a little ghostly but the furniture seemed right, the pictures, whatever their number. It was where he was now; it was his life. Paul knew it was possible to be nostalgic for anything, as long as it was in the past. Look at John Andersson, from Nebraska, and even Fred, sentimental about the war. So many of them were. So many deaths then—but he had made it this far.

He went back to the hallway and slowly climbed the stairs. He barely noticed the knee; he knew that it was a temporary inconvenience. Ah, Cookie, down the hall, Jean, waiting for him, if one could indulge in a bit of religious romanticism. And little Willie?—out in Belmont, safe in his crib, small limbs flung wide in the hot night—Willie he would have to leave, for now. The weight of that baby on his chest. Something he would have liked to give Cookie, in another life. But there was only one life to think about now. One line. One beginning, one middle, one end. Where had this come from? This knowledge? This moonlight? A shift of mere seconds. Now he felt a little dazed. But stronger than he would have expected. Yes, quite strong. The house, this particular house, all the houses, all of his time, cradled him in endless arms, and when the falling began, or whether, in fact, it was flying, he could not say.

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