

The Village Wit

A NOVEL

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Siren & Muse Publishing

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To mom and dad

SPRING

Chapter 1

Richard Bentley knelt inside his bookshop's window case. Wizen hands adjusted a book here, a creased drape cloth there. He wore his favorite jeans, faded and soft and frayed along the bottoms, a split across each knee. The first sunshine in days lay on the sill like a newly dropped doily, cleaned, starched, and showing the lemony tints of age. Bentley's hand moved through the sunlight, holding a book. His brown loafers were hooked over the platform edge in the attitude of a Sunday snoozer. His tie swung as he moved, not unlike Poe's pendulum, he thought, but in this story only helping to dust the book heads. He stopped long enough to look through the window, his way of separating the day into many fragments between work, thought, rest, and a hot meal taken near ten at night.

Bentley breathed. Isn't it enough to call out to the world *I don't know anything!* and be happy with what you have? If said loud enough—in a caustic, soylent voice—you can find enough foresight to help plan the clothes-washing cycle and market shopping. Isn't *that* enough? No, no. I'm not cut out to be a bum, he thought. Sometimes none of us knows what the hell we are doing, but I know where to buy used books and how talk to people dithering between titles held in their grabby, scales-of-justice hands, then send them out the door with both books in a bag, their cash in my pocket. That's useful business and, okay, so take it all and five dollars, too, and you can buy a cup of coffee and ... *a used book*. Not a bad way to spend time. He exhaled.

Outside, Heath-on-the-Wold had awakened late to this year's spring, and nearing noontime now the sunshine had dried storefronts along High Street, their water stains fading into the brick façades and stone foundations, the eaves less weighted in their sag, windows smiling in blue tint, doors agape with laughter, all having felt the force of sheet rain for a full week running under green-blue clouds, like the scene on a William Turner canvas. Bentley was half-surprised not to see roots growing *up* from the ground, their white fingers reaching for the sun's golden life force, shining and blinding. Across the road, a middle-aged mother in blue curlers and red tartan skirt towed her recalcitrant girl child away from a gift shop window. A pointed finger and chilling wail broke the calm warmth the sunlight had promised would stay for a few hours.

At least he liked his bookshop, Bentley thought. "There is that," he said aloud—Bentley was saying a lot of things aloud lately that were meant for himself but where others could hear—he finished with "Every action has its consequence." Shakespeare said: *To business that we love we rise betime / And go to't with delight*. The shop has hardwood flooring that creaks to let you know it's alive.

He picked up a 1962 edition of Borges' *Labyrinths*, ran his thumb down its smooth brown spine, then placed the book upright on the black muslin fabric. His cottage, too, Bentley thought, he liked his two-bedroom cottage on Sycamore Lane with its garden he did not design and seldom saw in daylight anymore. He used them rarely nowadays—cottage and garden—because he found himself always working at the bookshop. Bentley even had doubts about his knowledge of Heath-on-the-Wold, a golden town by virtue of the particular shade of sandstone quarried from beneath the Cotswolds topsoil, stacked like sugar cubes and covered by slate tiles. Heath's buildings glowed in morning and evening sun like the candlelight on a miner's tin helmet. He knew Heath just as much as he needed to know to run a successful business, and so he ran with the idea that people were the same all over because he'd learned this was true, more or less, despite the human impulse towards pettiness and ... Wasn't the one description enough? Yes. So it was good that he liked his little bookshop, he thought again, a place for him to sort his books, shelve them, pack shipments, talk with customers about books and about stories and about reading—and talk of his "house music" came up, too—a place to avoid discussing "the society of watchers" England and America had become in the era where televisions are found in every room of the house. Bentley read some of his books, too. Who owns a bookshop and doesn't open a few covers every hour or so, just to absorb that other place through the colored glass? He also liked the bookshop's name, THE VILLAGE WIT, a title that described all manner of rural life. If the name was pretentious it was so in a literary way, a forgivable gesture at marketing. He had thought about all these things a lot lately, which was also good for Bentley.

Only, the bookshop had taken over his life, of a sort. He had moved from the States not long ago to buy the storefront—eschewing a try in London for obvious reasons—to renovate the space, make it into a used bookshop exactly for a singular purpose: to have a business that could consume the hours, now that Nan was gone. Well, left. So he got what he had wanted, and was happy, mostly. His plan was working. But

then what does *happy* really mean? The word was loaded with innuendo, riddled with assumptions. Both depended on who was being asked, and who was questioning. Bentley had thought about this a lot lately, too, which was less good for him.

Nan had told him she was happy, and that she loved him. She said so using soft voices, screeches, and coos nearly every day of their marriage, right up to the day she told him she wasn't, and didn't. Bentley thought *that* was a case of assumption. Just when they had hit their stride, gotten life working with them, not fighting the current, she decided that marriage was not what she wanted. Odd as her decision was to him that black day, and the gray days following, he felt she'd never meant any harm by leaving him. Before marriage, they had agreed that if either was no longer happy, the other would not prevent happiness being found elsewhere. *Best-laid plans* reads the cliché. Beside the point, really, because now another memory of another time came to mind. Its colors were deep river and autumn aspen leaves. He didn't want to remember that event, so he closed his mind to the image pushing against the membrane he hoped had not grown thin.

Bentley fiddled with four of his newest books, rare volumes of English and Irish and Scottish tales. They stood paddle wheel style on a shelf he'd made with an empty wooden box draped in ivory muslin. Black and ivory columns, chessboard colors to seize attention. Five boxes surrounded him in the window case, each a different height, pedestals stacked with books for a casual glance or discriminate study: old fiction titles, not-quite-new fiction, children's lit, Cotswolds history and countryside cookbooks, a few books on London, a few on Continental travel and American travel. The art of knowing the clientele's tastes is the art of being a good merchant. While he adjusted the books he saw shadows pass across his hands, short fat shadows of people walking past the shop. He didn't look up.

There was a time in his life, he recalled, girlfriend-less days at fifteen and sixteen years old, when he wanted nothing more than to lavish one woman with love, respect, care, and understanding. That had happened for him one-and-a-half times in his life. Hmm. And so ... he was alone now—forty-seven and just about ready to send a postcard to the ex with a bon mot *Thanks for my life back, lady*. He loved his bookshop in little Heath-on-the-Wold, away from everything. This little round of England.

Bentley backed out of the window case, brushed the lint from his knees, heard the joints crack ligaments roll. His breathing sounded like the noise of a sleeper awakened from a falling dream; behind him a newspaper page was flipped in lazy haste. Then silence as his hearing moved from acute to passive. He walked outside. Songbirds were perched on stunted tree limbs of live oaks planted in sidewalk holes, flora and fauna yet loosening to this early spring. Looking at his window case, Bentley nodded at the effect he'd created with shelves and contrasted muslin, and the books.

Books don't line themselves upright, as though magic plays a role to draw eyes to gilt titles. Two hands put up their spines—the talking part of a book cover—so they attentively look through the window and say to sidewalk shoppers, “Buy Me!” Black covers, smudge-worn from use or neglect ... or negligent use; they do not shine alone against the sun peaking over the windowsill. Form comes from careful attention paid by me: Mr Bookseller. Attention, too, for the townspeople and wanderers through the green fields and stubby hills surrounding Heath, stretching a dozen leagues in every direction: a beguiling English web where one could yet find clear bubbling streams, air scented by white campion and wild rose and lavender and helenium, winding black-earth footpaths leading through green bramble and shadowy forest, within which caramel-colored tits and white-bellied wrens poked for fallen seeds with competitive busyness, a land where gorse-strewn heath meets wooden fences and iron kissing gates, a place of bracken and heather, oak groves and juniper patches, all these bits that put in mind a midsummer's night—fairies whispering behind yews—of idleness and mischief, knights' tales & fated damsels, and moonlit creepies running against the blue-black. He coughed, went inside, and closed the door.

Standing again at the broad window, he watched the world beyond the word. A young man wearing a narrow-rimmed blue cap tripped on the uneven walk; a woman wrapped in brown serge watched him catch his balance in a lurch of shoulders and hips, then look with a stormed expression for witnesses; a green car slowed in one direction as a red car slowed in the other, and once stopped abreast, the drivers, two old men, called to each other between their rolled-down windows while waiting cars built up behind them like water forced into a clogged pipe; a group of children, boys wearing maroon blazers with a silver crest sewn over the breast pocket, rushed past his window going up High Street towards St Catherine's College, all the while pushing tripping poking screaming

dance-walking to the rhythms of their age; across the street a man struggling with his cane paused to look into the sky just as the sun passed behind a cloud that took away all shadows, only to reappear with a sudden burst of yellow light that forced his gaze back to the ground. Without all the people that walk by every day, everywhere, anywhere, writers would have no stories to tell, Bentley thought. The idea so amused him that he shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. Promptly, he frowned.

Here comes a character now, he saw, "And she's about to die." Said with the same drama he'd use ordering toast and coffee.

Mina Daily, seventeen years old and plump and perhaps not long for this world, walked into the street with a bit of a hitch to her step, directly into the path of a truck. She stopped to dance, hands up, hips swaying to a beat known only to her, but one she was willing to teach the truck driver. Then the truck's horn alerted all living things. Wheels locked, tires leaped across the pavement, leaving black hyphens on the street. Mina jumped a foot straight up. It would have been one hell of a dance step, Bentley thought, if she had thrown it for real. Name it The Sheer Terror. He flinched as the truck's fender clipped her trailing skirt just as she found her feet and bolted forward.

"Her savior watches from the fiery depths," Bentley breathed out in a low voice. The words came from his dreams of the Grim Reaper tapping a candidate on the shoulder at those least-expected times.

A second horn blast disturbed birds on a wire, sending them in different directions, wings beating the air in silence beyond Bentley's window. Mina ran onto the sidewalk in front of the store. There she pulled tiny earphones from the drape of her black hair. The shadow-faced driver yelled something from his cab as he jumped the clutch in a cough to move it along. Mina turned and waved. Was this thanks for not squashing her like a piece of spoiled fruit?

Within three heartbeats, all became ordinary again in the street. Death cheated out of a dark delight this time, Mina looked at the bookstore and recognized Bentley through the window. She flashed him a rose-cheeked smile. He grinned at Mina, but it was not that kind of *Hallo, how are'ya?!* squeezed across his lips.

Mina's little white teeth showed behind the window like Huck Finn's picket fence, mounted between black-painted lips greased over as she liked to do with a Picasso flare beyond the ordinary. The shade of her makeup nearly matched that of her tooth enamel. She looked to

have shimmied herself into a green seaman's jacket, tailored at the waist, with a big red stocking cap that slung down across the left side of her head, in the fashion of a 1930's chambermaid out on a day trip, perhaps. A single rope of raven hair showed at her collar, like an asp hanging from a tree branch.

He grimaced at the black lace hosiery covering a pair of thick legs jutting below the hem of a short, pleated skirt, also black. The holes in the stockings looked like cobwebs pregnant with desire, obviously the point intended, though he knew she would not have found that metaphor herself. Her description might have come out as, "It looks fucking *mental*, do 'nit!"

Bentley hadn't minded any of Mina's costuming, even though the Goth thing seemed passé by a good few years for her set. But he knew kids were kids and they all went through phases. He had done so himself (tattered letterman's jacket with a big tennis racket on the back, unwashed for two years) so why step on a kid's right to nonconformity? It toughened them for the larger world on the far side of mum & dad's care, as did simple experiences like being fired from a job. Well, Mina was nearly past her *Ms Dark* phase, he thought; her renewed sense of color in fashion belied the whole bats-in-the-night element that seemed integral to a Goth's image.

Bentley reached over and flipped the lock catch on the door just as Mina gripped the handle. Her smile faded.

"Hey—what's this all about now?" She pushed on the handle but got no satisfaction. "Right. Open up!" She rattled the knob.

Bentley shook his head. He had an expressive face, people had told him, and sometimes he used it consciously. His communications often came with a series of fluid smiles, frowns, puckers, and all sorts of animal-kingdom ticks, letting people know, subtly or not, when-how-and-even-what he was thinking. In one look he revealed how he might answer, at the next he gave the answer, his voice electric with enthusiasm, even if the subject were death, sexual excess in rural England, or home repair. He had no fear of self-contradiction because he liked a good argument, even with himself. He moved in front of the glass door and spoke to her through the barrier.

"You're fired, *Mizzz Dark*."

The news smoothed the wrinkles of spreading glower. She looked up at her boss, tilting her head as a puppy does to her master, an

expression of insistent questioning—*where is the ball? WHERE is the ball!* Bentley held up his hand, fingers spread wide for Mina to see clearly.

“That’s five days in a row, Mina. An hour late each day! I don’t need another slacker. Come pick up your wages on Friday, past noon.”

Mina’s cheeks got pudgy with a show of regret. This might have comforted Bentley with the possibility that he’d just taught her a valuable lesson, only she stopped short of striking that image when she raised her right hand in a fist, flipped him her middle finger, and tapped the window. The black nail had chipped ends. She turned with a swirl of her short skirt and walked off. Bentley watched her pleats bounce with her bobbing hips.

His hand went to his face, shamed by his poor efforts to hire good assistants. Was Mina the third or fourth he’d had to fire? His finger ran over the slight bump on his nose at the bridge, the blemish from a childhood pool accident where he came up a foot long against the concrete edge in an eyes-closed race from the deep end. He wrinkled his nose and blinked. About the only thing Bentley thought left to his once-youthful appearance was that he didn’t yet need glasses. At a few years beyond midlife, he couldn’t even foresee needing reading glasses. He knocked on the door’s frame, just for spite.

A draft rushed through the door jambs to chill his neck. The frame was old and did not seal properly anymore, and he kept second-guessing the end of the heating season. Heat was expensive. This minor frugality forced him to dress to the English weather’s whimsy. Today between his jacket and body he wore an undershirt, purple button down, and cobalt tie. Whimsy and comfort kept him in Levi’s nearly every day in the shop. He’d lived enough of life inside stiff suits, so his take on being sole proprietor meant cutting himself some slack. That went for shoes, too. He liked these loafers, beaten into soft submission and goddamit-they-were-comfortable. A new pair of black Nikes was his other nod to carefree life; on his feet all day, and bone spurs, hammertoe, or *peroneal tendonitis* would not to be tolerated in the second half of his life.

He turned from the door and hollered to the one other person in the shop. “Did you see that? She plays the imp with me but she just - she’s just...” Mouth clamped, he breathed through his nose like a mythical dragon.

Nearly surrounded by stacked books, Mr Whipple leaned on pike elbows, his head in a newspaper. A *mise en scene* to pillars of an artifact civilization, Bentley thought. Without lifting his eyes from the

newspaper, Mr Whipple said, "I certainly did." Thick tufts of white hair stuck out at crooked angles beneath his sandy golf cap; a blue windbreaker was zipped to the throat. He pushed a thumb at the corner of the page and lifted it. This would be *The Times*.

Copies of *The Mirror* and Heath's bi-weekly, *The Current*, were stacked at arm's reach. Mr Whipple had a process for news reading that would not be disrupted for anything but late delivery: his morning began with the honorable newspaper for all Englishmen; afterwards a rest with a cup of tea, then a peak at world markets to give him a lift for conversation; this led to a trashy look at *The City*, which gave him material for jokes later at *The Speckled Hen* or *McDoughnat's Irish*; finally, by afternoon he could comfortably read through the local news without fear of where the world was headed. That direction he already knew.

Mr Whipple dabbed his thumb on his tongue, then looked up and past Bentley. "Especially her little white ass cheek when the breeze caught her skirt." The old man's blue irises rippled into shark-belly grey behind saucer-size glasses. He closed his eyes and sighed. "What I would pay to put her over my knee for a proper spanking. There's your little imp getting her comeuppance."

"That's filthy," said Bentley. "She could be your grand ... no, great-granddaughter." Despite this rebuke, a picture stuttered through his mind, where he substituted himself as the spanker. "Besides, take the rail down to London for that. Twenty quid would probably get you a sweet morsel."

Whipple peered beyond him, over his shoulder. Bentley followed his eyes: between the light traffic they watched Mina Daily meet friends outside the *Speckled Hen* pub. Two lads, another girl. The girl, dark hair falling across her eyes, adjusted a yellow scarf around her neck. They took seats at an outside table, animated by talk, hair flapping absurdly in the wind. Together, they looked toward the bookshop and laughed.

"Nothing wrong with a proper spanking, lad," Mr Whipple said. "Right well over the knee. Slap, slap, slap! Tears. Sorry, I'm sorry, *I won't do it again*. Bloody good things for a child, spankings are. Gone out of style. Use to correct a child right well. Done enough, you wouldn't have these idgit teens with all their sass. So don't talk to me about sweet morsels. Besides, who's got twenty quid? Well, *you* do. Not me, boy-o." He turned back to his paper. "British pensions don't go far these days. Not even for street-corner pussy."

"I just made three times that by firing your lap hussy," Bentley said.

Mr Whipple shook a finger at him, but behind the mottled digit his face stayed a playful mockery. "But you'll need to hire another, Richie. Quick, now! The mid-morning rush should crash through the door right about *never*." He covered his mouth behind the newspaper's edge, hiding an incendiary snicker. "High season coming, too, lad. Just wee *weeks* away." More laughter.

Bentley folded his arms, but his reply caught in his mouth as Mr Whipple suddenly slapped a flat palm sharply on the counter.

"By the way, Richard, can you *please* stop trying to sound English? One long year from a Florida citrus patch doesn't make you a countryman in name or tongue." Mr Whipple straightened his back and adjusted his hat. "course I mean no offense by that, lad."

"It's called a 'grove,' Shakespeare."

"Eh? Oh, whatever—patch, grove, or bog. All the same to me. Mind you, it still doesn't make you privy to the Queen's speech."

"Christ, Whip. Stop your insufferable nagging!"

Bentley suddenly remembered the locked door and spun around to unlatch it. He checked his watch, wondering where the customers were today. The sun is out! Get off your lazy asses and come shopping! He sidled over to a box of books on the floor beneath the high shelves he'd bolted into the three walls. The wood was blanched with white oak stain and rubbed to a gloss. This had brought out the grain in an otherwise cheap cut of lumber. He'd had the rough plaster walls painted limestone. The colors brightened the shop interior, drew the sidewalk shoppers' eyes deep into the shop, in from the oft-dark skies and rain-wetted streets. Inside the bookshop, under the bulb lighting (he hated fluorescent light, the white noise constantly heckling the reader's mind) he was sure the shelving and walls glowed, which highlighted his books and all their colorful spines, like a box of crayons.

"Go back to your lechery, old man," Bentley grouched to himself. He couldn't get loose from Whipple's cutting reminder of his lost helper, and wanted to send back his own barbed dart. He plunged his hands into the jumble of boxed books, grabbing randomly. "That's why you stand behind my counter every day, I'm sure, to hide your woody from female customers—*young and old*." The comeback charged him with a grin.

Whipple slapped the counter top again. "You see!" he said. "That's what I'm talking about. 'Woody' is so American!" Newsprint rose with

his hand this time, a sheet stuck to the palm. He peeled the paper as his voice dropped an octave. "You should use more of your own slang and stop muck'n'round in ours. Actually might teach this town something, you know." He chuckled, blinked hard at Bentley. He put the edge of his thumb against his tongue and stamped the newspaper corner.

Bentley crossed his mouth at Whipple, but the old man had gone back to the newspaper again, his lips shiny and hangdog. He thought he saw a blue iris jerk his way behind the glasses.

"Speaking of lap hussies and harpies," Mr Whipple said. "Will you be heading to the public house tonight for one of your soirées? I'd not mind a pint with ya before you wade into a crowd of them laughing thimbles."

"I don't know," Bentley said. "If I feel up to it after all this added work now. I have to pack books for shipping that came through the computer orders, too. Bernie's coming round today for a pickup. More books to catalogue." He kicked the box at his feet. "Books to shelve, too." He slid a book gently into place on the shelf. "Do you think- No. Never mind." Bentley felt sometimes that he was the old man's surrogate on those nights at the pub, aiming for a pickup. Mr Whipple had confided to him a while back how he'd partaken in his last mating game some years ago, but still enjoyed watching others from a safe distance, and with the spectator's delight. This image didn't sit well with Bentley on the best of nights, but especially not when he and a lady friend got back to his cottage (or her B&B bedroom) to turn the lights down and toss another log on the fire.

"Hmm," mused Mr Whipple. "Feel *up* to it. Ain't that the word for the day."

"I see you're a right recipe for a spring afternoon. Did you think to wax on about birds and bees today, too?"

Mr Whipple ignored him. His voice rose with each word he spoke next. "Richie, what you need is a woman."

"I get them often as I like," he said. He stopped himself, smiling at his irony. "Actually, I probably should say, 'as often as *they* like.'"

"No, Rich. I'm not talking about that. You need a *woman*."

Bentley turned from the bookshelves. Whipple had his hands spread, taking in the space around him, them, the shop, perhaps even England. Bentley mulled this over until he thought he had caught on.

"Yes-yes! That's right. No more children working here. A responsible woman is what the shop needs. Someone who knows retail

books and ... *books*. She'd be able to talk with customers, not stutter like a moron and turn feeble, worry about her black lipstick or pop pimples in the bathroom mirror. Wouldn't hurt me for good conversation now and again, either."

He leaned against the shelf to ponder the possibility. Someone older *would* be ideal to hire. One of Heath-on-the-Wold's retirees looking for part time work so they didn't just curl up and die from abject boredom. He thought of his "rules for the life to be lived" but shook his head with irritation. Maybe a pensioner would work out. Glancing at Whipple, he thought *Not too old, though*.

Mr Whipple gasped. "No, lad. *No*. I mean you *need* a woman."

Bentley's hand slipped, and now he held his chin awkwardly, like a fumbled cup of tea. His face must have shown faded red as he finally caught what Whipple was suggesting.

"You mean a *wife*, don't you?"

Whip let the newspaper slide from his hands. "Let's not get hasty now - that's for future consideration - but for now someone who, you know, can set you right."

"*Set me right*. What the hell does that mean? Like ... sexually?"

"What the bloody hell you running on about *now*? You just said you get that hanging around the pubs. What I said is what I mean. You need a woman, that person who cares for you and talks to you at night before bedtime. The woman *you* cook ham and eggs for on Saturday mornings, and don't burn the toast. Someone to love, Richie."

Bentley thrust his hands in his pockets and walked to the edge of the sales counter. "You must be out of your mind, Whip."

"Don't be an idiot. You tell me all the time that you *know* story." Whipple didn't let Bentley's smirk halt him. "*Love*, Richie. *Love*. We've all been there. I maybe once too many-" He waved his hands. "*You*-well, you've known love. I think you can again, regardless of-" More hand waving. "*And-and*-you're still young, lad. You've got time to love lots more women." Whipple took a second to think about this, then shrugged. "At least one more," he said. He tapped the counter. "I tell you, lad, you've been a part of this town long enough. People accept you. They *like* you. Women have spoken about your situation."

Bentley almost asked *Which women?* but held the words in his mouth like tepid oatmeal. He thought of a new route. "Did you think you might suggest a few names?"

Mr Whipple stood mute. To Bentley, Whipple's ambush made no sense—he'd not mentioned anything to the geezer about wanting a girlfriend since ... no, *after* Susan Castle ... the last woman in his American life. Now he preferred to ogle and ... do anything but love.

"You can't just bounce around like a battling top, Richie."

"Whip, where has this come from? Why are you so concerned about my romantic life, not that I have one beyond, well"

"That's just what I mean. The hanky-panky is meaningless. It's self-serving and only bloody sad after a while, if you ask me. I have some experience in these matters, lad. I'm not so foolish as some think. Having someone you love, now, that has implications on a life. Happiness, safety, someone to share your dreams and she yours." He nodded his golf-capped head. The white hair and knob nose, the too large yet ever-growing ears of the old men caste, all seemed to mock Bentley.

"My dreams have already been fulfilled. You're standing in my dream. This is all I want. How do you like it?"

"It's antiseptic and loveless."

Bentley was shaking his head. His suspicions had raised hackles beneath his collar.

"Who are we talking about here, you or me? No, no, I know what you're doing. I've told you just enough about my history to make you dangerous, Whip, but that doesn't mean I need a relationship mentor—or, by God, second-go-round nuptials." Not after what happened with my Nan, Bentley thought. Whipple might have been reading his mind, though, or trying; the old man's face rippled with agitated frown lines cut from a long life. "Thanks all the same, Whip."

Mr Whipple only shook his head and returned to the paper.

"I mean that, you know," Bentley said. He pressed his lips together. Then his mouth spread outward like he was fighting off a pain, maybe an internal injury from a kick on the football field. It was his way of not letting himself talk even when he wanted badly to say something. You're wise to know when advice is inappropriate, he told himself. Yes, and I'm human, too.

"Just trying to help a fellow traveler," said Mr Whipple, loud enough for someone in the back of the stacks to hear, if the shop had customers.

"Traveler. Sure. When have I traveled further outside town to do more than pick up boxes of musty books?"

"You're so literal, boy. How can you have all these books around and not know metaphor when it *kicks* your conscience in the shins? I mean *travel*. The space-time thingamajig that's your life. Shortening every day, if you've stopped to notice. I see lots of gray around your temples that wasn't there last year."

"Not slow enough for you, Whip?"

The old man pointed a bony finger at Bentley, his hand steady with purpose. "Don't blaspheme the gift of life, Richard. Books only serve the mind."

"Don't forget 'and fortune the heart'," said Bentley.

Mr Whipple looked at his newspaper again. Bentley waited for more. He knew it was coming. He walked back to the books waiting on the floor for him like a passenger waits at the stop for the overdue bus.

"I've a mind to spring one on you whilst you aren't looking."

Bentley shoved a book to the wall with a thump. "Why would you want to do that? You'd embarrass her more than me. Where do you get these ideas, anyway? You'd think one woman — or two — in a life would be enough, considering my history with them." He grabbed another book from the box just so he didn't act on the impulse to run across the open space and twist Whipple's neck. He slid the book into a spot on the top shelf, but was unsure if he'd even read the title. "Apart from all the implications of your suggestions, I've discovered that one weekend is about all any woman can take of me. Vice-versa on that. For what it's worth, you of all people can imagine how I think living with another woman will turn out in the wash."

Mr Whipple lifted a hand in truce. "Just making conversation."

"Is that so?" Bentley laughed, untying his annoyance from Whipple's farcical summing up. "At least you're not a religious zealot, always looking after my soul. I've no patience left for that. I'd have kicked you out months ago."

"Americans with their theological battles," mused Whipple. "How that country of yours isn't in flames every day I'll never understand. You won't see those kind living here, boy-o. First mention of whose God you worship, people'll tell you to stick that back in your pocket. Send you off quick."

"Hmfff," Bentley murmured. "A different breed for other times." For a while the shop was quiet except for the sandpaper melody of books fitted into tight shelf spaces. The whistling at the doorjamb sent Bentley into the back room to turn on some music. He flipped

through his CD cheat book. His eyes leapfrogged onto Vivaldi, The Rolling Stones, Willie Nelson, the movie theme music of George Gershwin, Buddy Guy Chicago blues, French *femmes* pop, American Funk, Dave Brubeck, Lynyrd Skynard, Miles Davis and there were far too many choices. He pushed the button for random play and turned up the volume. The carousel player blinked to life with its lemon-lighted heartbeat and spun in search of a CD. He walked back into the bookshop to the first bars from Pink Floyd thumping mantra-like pulse rhythms across the aisles.

Between bouts of mentally battering the nice weather for just about everything that had happened to him this morning, Bentley watched a woman enter the shop, look around uncertainly but ignore him standing behind the sales counter. In earnest, she began looking at titles on the nearest shelf. Bentley stared over the top of his computer. She didn't know how the books were organized on the shelves but didn't want to look lost. She had honey-streaked hair, parted on the side, falling long in back over a wool, dishwater-colored turtleneck, no coat, with yellow jeans that hugged her legs like fresh glue. Why don't people know enough to ask what they're looking for? wondered Bentley. It's a simple, civilized process of easy communication: Hey, do you have any McEwan? Sure I do, follow me! Is there nothing easier? He said *Hello* but didn't bother her with obsequious sales questions. She replied quickly and continued to flounder. He lowered his eyes to the computer screen but surreptitiously studied her, like Fosse her silverback apes. Those jeans outlined her ass like a sculptor's nude in marble, attenuated hemispheres separated by thick denim sewn over her seam with golden thread. He would not try to dream of finding her golden seam, though. Soon enough she spotted one ceramic nameplate on the bookshelf and, with a visible breath of relaxation, began to browse. Her head swiveled up, down, side-to-side; she touched a book, another, finally pulling a third out and opening the cover. The top half of her body was equally enticing as the oft-praised lower half too-much focused on by "leg" and "ass" men. Bentley kind of liked her small feet, slipped into Chuck Taylor black highs. He suspended his book auditing for this better, if torturous, pre-occupation, and leaned an elbow atop the stack of books so he could properly ogle this creature with unabashed admiration for female beauty. He was aware that the loveliest parts of the female sex looked best when fully covered or nearly nude. The sweater hid small breasts, small enough

to make him wonder if she bothered to wear a bra and live with the freedom to wiggle when she walked, knowing as she does, as all women know, that she held the pass key to simple justices and men's desire. Her brown hair had spring highlights streaked through its freshly tossed design, an appearance of windswept expedition that would hold shape on a calm afternoon. Her hair exploded like a shooting star when she tossed her head up to read titles on the higher shelves. It was her face, he noticed — the pointed nose, the rouged cheeks over permanent tan, hometown-girl looks, too much makeup — that revealed her American origins. California was his guess, or a Southern Gal, Georgia or the Carolinas. She looked at him. Her eyes decided it: mascara on a spring hike, and still no partner had followed her into the shop. He smiled and waited for her to return the quiet signal of mannered rapport. Only he kept alive his ogle as though she were on a beach and he, the lifeguard, held a bottle of suntan lotion in case she began to drown and needed her shoulders moisturized. He said to her, she just breaking a smile, "Are you looking for that one book you can't do without?" Now her teeth showered him with joy, and she blinked wet eyes. Those eyes bounced to the book in her hands and back to him. "Just browsing, thanks." He changed his mind: New England. And he should have known by the tan, a manufactured depth achieved on a lighted bed, not Southern Sunshine in April. His eyes undressed her, leaving only the book to cover her belly button. So this is the place that you've sunk, *eh* Rich? Is it revenge, a symptom, or the cause? A subject to be discussed later. "Take your time," he said, looking away now and lifting his elbow from the books, "looks like the sun will hold through lunchtime." In ten minutes she was gone. He didn't think his once-too-many once-overs of that magnificent body had frightened her away—if that were so she'd have left immediately, because he didn't look at her again until he saw her denim-clad ass flex left-right-left as she walked out the door. She hadn't minded because that's what pretty ladies do, not mind interested men admiring them for a few moments; it's why they choose clothes carefully in the morning (as men do in the evening); and get their hair done once a month and tan their bodies in the winter and go on vacations alone and slip into a bookstore for a look at some books and the local stable hands. He hadn't stopped her from leaving nor had sent her away. She left on her own terms and, in his mind, fully clothed.

Afternoon minutes skipped forward while Whipple turned newsprint pages as if he were dropping manhole covers. Music spread

from the corner-mounted speakers with intermittent silences to change discs, the only moments through which Bentley heard the songs. He slipped a volume of Albert Speer's autobiography onto a low shelf. There he leaned his shoulder to look out the window. It occurred to him that lately he looked out that window as much as through his books, leant against the shelves as much as rang up a sale. One song ended and another began. He kept the volume low to soften music's overreaching effects; loud enough to let it caress the mind while you read a book.

In three notes he knew he was hearing "Since I've Been Loving You" from the bygone *Zeppelin*. The song's Blues riff tripped Nanette's image, she of the constant energy bounding to him from the car, its engine left running, the door rocking on its hinges. She used to burn the tires to a stop in their driveway, jump from the car with a bird in her throat and cry "I'm home, Richie, I'm home!" These were times when their fierce love and passion had stretched for months before a bump in the road might upset the ride. Bentley turned his head and followed the rippled book spines along the shelf. He was too late, though, because Nan lay over them like celluloid images on psychedelic wallpaper. As lovers Nan and he had found this song aphrodisiac. It would heat them as well as any artful touch beneath bedroom blankets. He would lean over her on one elbow—she prone, nude, looking up at him or eyes closed to absorb the music, skin almost rippling with anticipation, that smile like she knew something was about to happen—then he labeled her skin with kisses along her ribs, belly, breasts, thighs. Soft kisses and light nibbles, some barely pressed to the skin, others indelible with an imprint. Making love to this song was ritual, floating on buoyant passion, a winding stream that often doubled back against its rush forward, clashing currents frothing the waters. He found most erotic two moles near Nan's navel, one slightly larger, a shade darker. Pinhead-size henna freckles really, that defined the edge of her waist. He covered one with the tip of his finger, the other the print on this thumb, and kissed the spot between them, feeling her stomach shimmy. How subtly different they were to the skin just away from the points, noticeably so, like dark stars against the literal Milky Way of her abdomen. He could feel now, still, when he tried, the sensation her skin had made on his fingertips. Cool, followed by heat radiated from her belly. In darkness, under the sheets on nights she slept and he lay thinking, his fingers could find those two moles on the map of her body he knew better than his own. He only woke her once when he touched her like this. One

night they had somehow fallen asleep on the other's side of the bed: he simply couldn't find the moles because he was searching on the wrong side of the map. Telling her this, he laughed; she swatted him across the temple and said "Curl up beside me like a big bear." This song they could fuck to—and hard, sure—the stony cracks of lead guitar running a riff to drive their hips, lips, tongues, fingers, cool blowing and warm gasps. More than those movements in the act of coitus, it lighted the intensity of their passion of those early months in her apartment high up on a cul-de-sac complex, overlooking broadleaf poplars screening the parking lots of the nearby building. Somehow living up there was like looking at the world from a plinth. Bentley could never keep those memories hidden when this song, other songs—smells, sounds, the contact with light female laughter—kept his memories of Nan alive even when he'd rather not have them reach out to touch him like a prankster's hand reaching through Stygian night. Time had not diminished the size of Nan. Maybe she had even grown. He often wondered if Nan had such striking memories as his own, but on this he was dubious. Less than a year after she had left, during one of their brief, ridiculous phone conversations—she called only while walking on the street, in *media res* luncheons with friends, or just before getting on a noisy subway car—she said to him "I think of you almost every day."

Bentley scratched away a spot of dirt dried on a book's faded spine, gone from scarlet to dull pink. He spent a few more moments straightening the books on the lower shelves, pushing them in or pulling them out until all were flush about an inch inside the edge. He didn't want all memory of Nan to disappear, even if he could have willed it. That would have dissipated fourteen years of *his* life for the sake of ... nothing? Stupid thoughts. Bentley believed that if you don't have a past, you lose your humanness. No one can live only in the present. He had tried. Nan had tried. She'd experienced more success, having packed up childhood memories and, like someone who'd finally waded into an overcrowded attic, threw as much out as the garbage collectors could haul away. Whole episodes of her life had been off limits to him, a small concession made right by her vivid retellings of her libidinous youth. He had liked their life together, almost every day of it.

A new song played behind him, interrupting this memory and bringing no others. He looked toward the window, found outside a painted red-white swirl on the side of a tour bus as it crawled through the frame, chuntering its way up High Street to the municipal car park

where Heath crested around its town square, a tidy green, with benches and the old village stockade found in no less than St Catherine's church basement, sometime in the 1950s. Just when tourism was coming back to the British isles. Bentley counted one hundred seconds: seven people walked by the shop; nine cars and four trucks passed behind them; three shoppers stopped to peer at the display books, each looking into the shop on a glance. He smiled at them all. A few smiled back. One woman was covered in a plastic sheet, but on second look turned into a rain parka. She pointed at her wristwatch and nodded. Mrs. Goodie Manners, if anyone could believe that name existed outside a Dickens story, or only inside England. Bentley waved back as she walked on.

He tucked the last book from the box into a space midway up the shelf. On the face of the shelf was fastened a narrow ceramic plaque at eye level, with *History-Biography* enameled in black cursive script atop an ivory background. Each shelf carried these plaques to identify its contents — *Fiction A-C*, *Gardening*, *World War II* — some with arrows pointing up, down, or sideways. Bentley had hired an in-town ceramist whose work he admired to make the plaques. She had suggested the cursive lettering. Random customers say they look nice, very home-spun “and all that.”

The aisles ran front to back, a logical order that let window shoppers see customers in a happy, thriving shop. Bentley had not wanted to construct a labyrinth into which his guests would get lost, but wanted his books to be the labyrinth through which they wandered into hilarity, peace, drama, vicarious thrills and exotic lands, mystery, history, objective truths, outlandish fibbery, or simple entertainment.

Not every wall surface was covered by shelves. Six vertical spots in the room were left wanting because old water pipes and electrical lines crept from ceiling to floor like waterfalls in verdant jungles. In these fissures he'd hung old mirrors on the downspouts, and fitted a grandfather clock with a cracked glass at the break between *Psychology* and *Religion*; a pair of narrow leather chairs angled toward the office door, and two tall ferns, low light survivors, gave the idea if not the reality of life in the room. When he'd finished this decorating, when half the books still lay in boxes, he thought he had something of a space people would want to visit.

Across the street at the Speckled Hen, more teens gathered on two benches. A moment later the daytime bartender, Albert, swung his shaved head and bodybuilder's torso around the door to send the teens

off with a quick thumb jerk showing them the way to go. They trundled off to the left and right. Bentley felt the pang for kinship with society strike him like a doctor's shot in the ass. He had to get out more often. Out under the sunshine, or even to dodge raindrops. The society he wanted to grasp was for him like a bag of marbles whose light winked from inside their glass. At the Speckled Hen, the kids returned.

He grabbed the empty box at his feet and walked around Mr Whipple into the sales booth. This was the one fixture that had come with the space. He'd thought first off it was horseshoe shaped, but one morning while standing on a ladder changing a lamp bulb, he saw it from a different aspect. Up high, near the ceiling, he recognized the booth's true geometry: a teardrop. A month later the metaphor came to him again after reviewing the first week's receipts. The Teardrop had its name struck in brass.

A whiff of flatus soured the air around Bentley. He turned and looked at Mr Whipple.

"Did you fart, old man?"

Whipple hardly stirred. "Just a little."

Bentley's breath spilled out between clenched teeth.

"Sorry, lad. I've had the touch of the winds since going on this new medication. Maybe it's Harriet's spring-pumpkin pie, though. I can't put my finger on it."

"Then shove your finger in it to stop your farting!"

Whipple looked up this time. He smiled weakly. "Don't you think I'd explode then? That'd be a sight more mess than a bit of fetid air. Your bookshop girlfriends won't notice. I hear them farting all the time, the old dears. They try to hide it with a cough or by slapping a book shut. That never really works."

Bentley mirrored the old man's smile because he knew Mr Whipple's wit lay in telling truths. Nonetheless...

"People won't want to stand in a shop with your Zyklon-B odor, Whip!"

Whipple started at the insult and stiffened. "Richie! A bit harsh there, don't ya think?"

Bentley drummed his fingers; the comment *was* over-the-top. He thrust his thumb toward the history section. "I just got done shelving Albert Speer's autobiography. Bad association, I guess. Don't expect me to apologize, though. Not with your foul stench lingering around the checkout counter."

“Ah!” Whipple said. “Go on.” He tossed a wave that ended the scuffle.

“Pills, though. What for?”

Whipple waved his hand again, but now just a short movement. “For! How about old age and the things that kill us?”

“You wouldn’t be taking a piss?”

“A vulgar phrase I never caught onto, I’m happy to say. And coming out of an American’s mouth, it sounds worse. I don’t lie. Ever!”

“Fair enough.”

Bentley placed the empty box on the counter next to stacks of books. He picked up two and looked at the titles, then stacked them spine up on the bottom of the box. He liked to get his latest purchases on the shelves quickly. His regular customers depended on him for this. The work helped him stay true to the phrase stenciled on the window: New Arrivals Weekly!

Looking down over the edge of the box to double-check a title, a lock of hair fell in his eyes. He brushed it back, tucking it behind his ear. His mouse-brown hair fought nobly against middle age; it refused to retreat past the hereditary widows’ peak boundary he’d had since, well, a grade-school boy. On one of his cottage walls he had a framed photograph of himself in kindergarten, a little blond girl standing next to him—his first girlfriend, if any five-year-old can claim such prizes—his crew cut showed how deep his hairline would always reach just above his temples. For spite, though, the family gene pool had given him early graying at the temples and salty streaks. Only long hair hid it well enough for vanity’s satisfaction. Hippy long, he’d heard a couple say in not-so-hushed words between the bookshop aisles one day. He hadn’t been sure if they were joshing him or were offended by him. They bought a book.

Mail-order catalogues lay along the counter with that month’s issue of *The Bookseller*. He scanned titles on the front cover while filling the box. His eye fell on the cash register, its green computer lights showing zero-point-zero-zero, the time, today’s date. A white polygon below the counter pulled his vision down, where he’d tacked a calendar on a storage door. He had chosen for this year New York City photographs in contrast to last year’s Yosemite National Park, lots of Ansel Adams monochromatic landscapes. The photo for April highlighted colorful Madison Square Park in spring blossom, at the cross between 5th Avenue

and Broadway, the Flatiron building shadowing the background. He had worked for five years just two blocks from that park.

Today was the 13th of April, Bentley reminded himself. Thursday. Only last week Mr Bullshit Winter had dusted the town with fresh snow. If you hadn't known the time of year, you'd have thought Christmas morning had come in a flash. He watched folk come out to see the spectacle. The snow was a good omen, many claimed. "Light snow on a spring day meant God was playing the trickster." Bentley didn't know for that, but publicly he approved the general idea.

He did know that spring and summer would be busy through the Cotswold villages. Heath sat atop the junction between three Gloucestershire walking paths, leading between Heath and Winchcombe, and Broadway and Heath. On a map the connection made an oblong triangle with bulging sides, like a ouiji divining instrument. Heath was more a pass-through than destination, but along the western edge of the town green one could see distant Wales, on a clear day. To promote tourism—a business plan working for summer dollars—the town wardens from a generation ago initiated clear-cutting of trees that had stood beside St Catherine's for a millennium. Fortunately, the scheme worked, and the wardens avoided being locked into the old stockades just put out after a hundred years in storage. Word got out that "lunch on the hill" was just the place to dot the "i" in Hike.

Those five months through which Spring and Summer spread like the fingers of a glove brought hundreds of people each week to Heath. Bentley kept his doors open into the night for the hikers that stayed in Heath's B & Bs, and for the London weekenders who found country towns calmed their city nerves. American visitors especially liked to wander streets after their evening meal, so he presented a well-lighted place to draw their attention.

Bentley hadn't needed to devise a plan where seasonal sales played crucial against the slow winter months. Luck had seen to that. Whip was right, though, he thought. He needed a part-time helper. No more teenagers, though. They wasted the time he put into training them. He needed someone ... bookish. He looked at the book in his hand, rubbed the spine with his thumb, smiling at its dimpled texture, the care put into its manufacture probably thirty years ago. His thumb came off the surface darkened with dust and what looked like coal soot. He wondered when the last time this volume of – he read the title: *Wordsworth's Essex* by T.E.R. Denton – was opened. So he opened it. The type was small: 12

point Garamond, a font of German cast, he guessed. He closed the cover and walked over to the Literary Criticism shelf. A thought occurred to him, and he turned to face Whipple.

"The Midwest," Bentley said. He watched the old-timer smooth the newspaper so it hardly looked gone through. Whipple's lips worked side to side, two worms mating.

"What about it? Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska. Abe-the-Rail-Splitter and Paul Bunyon, what? Did Bigfoot ever get down there from the Canuck's underbelly? Iowa and Corn Country! Pig-shit. '*Herbert Hoover for President!*' Who cares?"

"That's where I'm from," Bentley said, seeing through a thought's moment the dense woods in his home state, the wide lake, as cold and deep as an ocean, the places he had walked, explored as a teen, the middle prairie through which he ran as a boy. "Not Florida."

He'd told the old man he never *had* wanted to live in that state. At least, not once he felt its swamp plants poison his bare legs along the Gulf coast whenever he fished, or to see the flat, scrub brush interior that lacked any charm like his rolling Midwest hills, those northern trees he grew up with and pined to see smile with colors each fall.

"You won that lottery in Florida, wasn't it?"

"Does it matter?" Bentley had wanted to say, "It doesn't matter." Was there a difference? Anyway, it was gone, all gone.

Yet his idea—first as a kid, then chronically into adulthood—was not to live in just one city his whole life. This had got him into some trouble; mentally, if not financially. The idealized life was his disease, and it infected him like this: If life's destination is death, why would you want to stop moving and changing just when it got really interesting? The idea took shape when he was twenty, as the end of college rushed at him like a black-sky storm on the American plains. Life is a passage, and can be lived as an uninterrupted journey if you take the reigns away from your master. If he got bored living in a Midwest suburb, then he would move to the city, where he could feel the cold sidewalks and whipping wind curling around sky scrapers, a place he could talk to not only Big-Whitey Catholics but to Baptist blacks and nationalist Cubans and atheistic communists, South American immigrant dishwashers and people like those Ethiopians he saw on public television who started a new life in Minnesota (they came from their African desert to America in the middle of winter, and he wondered how they didn't freeze their asses off); and when Bentley had learned what he could from that city

experience, it would be time to move to a BIGGER city, New York City (yeah!) – to feel its human crush on the subway platform, feral cheers at Yankee or Shea, softball games in Central Park, SRO movies in Times Square, dinners at home in a 300-square-foot apartment, get robbed of his wallet at a UNICEF rally. When that proved cumbersome and irritating, and Northern weather had finally gotten to him, then he could move south. Yeah, The American South, and near a beach! So hot, sweat-through-your-clothes humid, filled with retirees hiding inside their air-conditioned homes. But when that place would fail to bend the imagination, he could move back to the city that he knew he would miss once gone. But now let's say city life had changed his perception of where he should "be" in life—say in the country, not in the city—so he moves to a farm on the outskirts of a small town, and just commutes to THE CITY, where he can make lots of money but live in THE COUNTRY, the place he can walk slowly across a field, take in a sunset over rolling hills, sit quietly along a stream next to a sun-bleached trail. That would be the answer. Of course!

Of course, yes, he had stubbornly rejected his father's advice to use holidays as substitutions for leaving "home." Richard Bentley was not Will Bentley, though, with all due respect. Will was a hard-working accountant who naturally spoiled his children with a taste of a good life: travel, dining out in good restaurants, learning how to speak to people and to listen well, and to learn; but Will expected Richard and Wayne and Catherine and Anne to be content with that brand of "the good life" (except perhaps to earn more money). Leaving home was risky though; too much chance for failure, Will had said. "Where does that get you? Right back to the same job you should have taken in the first place." A life not lived with chance and risk was not for Richard. Not in the cards, as Midwesterners say (cigarette shoved to the side of the mouth: optional). So Bentley had lived all sorts of lives in different places. Of course, living a simple life of the nomad lets you find yourself, but otherwise you learn (as he had learned) that you never have grounding, not in place or life, or the good life. Recently he had this thought pass through his mind: Suburbs aren't terrible places to live. It had been a fast thought.

Mr Whipple sighed. "So now you're here—I don't know why as yet—which means you can be *from* anywhere you want, if it suits you."

Bentley shrugged. No reason to answer.