

PROLOGUE

THE SMELL

On Friday evening the smell has not yet reached its rumored proportions, but the custodian Arthur Inman detects it as he steps off the elevator pushing a canvas bag. He can't place it but knows he has come upon it before, and it hangs at the edge of his memory like a scene from childhood. Later he will say that he recognized it the second it hit him, and that will add to his difficulties, as the transcript of his interrogation confirms.

Q: If you knew what it was, then why didn't you go into the Head's office?

A: He told me not to clean his office.

Q. But the smell . . .

A. He was real definite.

Q. [Expletive.] Does that make any sense to you? Middle of the night? Nobody around?

A. He said not to go in his office.

In fact, it is only as he is leaving the third floor to continue his rounds that it comes to him.

Inman, it is later reported, has spent the past several hours in a bar called Kelly's waiting for his shift to begin. He will, in the course of the investigation, be characterized as "unbalanced" by Sergeant Foulkes, his interrogator, and "barely functional," by Charles Durrell, Associate Professor of English, whose office he cleans, but whatever his mental state, his immediate problem is that he has consumed a considerable amount of alcohol, as his bar tab, produced by Kelly himself, makes clear.

Inside the English Office, he flips on the lights and notes that the smell is stronger—surprising since three is his easiest floor, administrators and secretaries. Four is a different matter. Some of the people on four eat lunch in their offices and throw pieces of half-eaten God-knows-what in the trash. But this is not the smell of garbage, he reckons, then loses his train of thought, distracted momentarily by a long-buried scene—his grandfather’s farm in Lenoir City, the slaughterhouse, the smell of wood smoke and the other smell.

The odor and the memory stay with him as he makes his way among the three desks in the office, emptying the waste paper into the canvas bag. At the middle desk he stoops to look at a framed photograph, a couple and a child on a beach. He studies the young mother in the tiny bathing suit, then straightens, pushes the canvas bag to the last desk and pauses before the door that leads into the adjoining room. The metal plate identifies the office of J. Hollis Sanders, Head, Department of English. He feels something sticky under his foot and bends down to wipe it up with the towel he keeps tucked under his belt. Another surprise for three. Wouldn’t surprise him on four at all. Turning to leave, he notices a smudge by the light switch and gives it a swipe with the towel, turns off the lights, and shuts the door behind him.

He pushes the canvas bag down the lighted hallway, obsessed now with the smell. As he enters the elevator it comes into focus in his head—the smells of the slaughterhouse, the carcass hanging from the metal hook. And he is taken back to the farm in Lenoir City in the early winter when he was first permitted to witness the annual ritual of hog killing.

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By Monday morning the character of the smell has changed. It is now a stench. Margaret Bains, Head Secretary and Office Supervisor, enters at 7:30 and presses a hand to her mouth. She casts about for the source, walks hesitantly through the outer office

and enters the smaller office of J. Hollis Sanders. The scene spread before her will in numerous versions, some of them demonstrably exaggerated, make its way around campus for the remainder of the spring semester. She does not take it in at once, but as her eyes sweep the room she begins to moan softly. Dutiful head secretary to the end, she recovers her senses long enough to telephone the campus police before vomiting directly into the out-tray on her desk.

In the preface to his semi-autobiographical novel based loosely on the J. Hollis Sanders affair, Charles Durrell writes: “Next to defecation, vomiting is the single most repulsive bodily function. The disgorging of the contents of the stomach through the mouth is so repugnant to us that we wish to put it out of mind as quickly as possible. So it is easy to see why the campus police should have missed the significance of the secretary’s violation of her out-tray—at least until it was too late. Had she chosen a more romantic reaction to what she had just witnessed—fainting perhaps—or had she chosen a different target for her emission, events would almost certainly have taken a different turn. On the other hand, it would have been a much less engaging affair, not, in any event, one worthy of being fictionalized.”

CHAPTER ONE

THE WOMEN IN CARS MYSTERY

The smell of cut grass is pungent enough to call up earlier summers, and Robert Cory stops on the front steps of the Walter Stevens Library to watch a man mowing the lawn in front of the Law College. Waiting for his sight to adjust to the late afternoon light, he piles his books on the steps and sits down to watch the steady motion of the mower, winding down in smaller and smaller squares. He feels groggy and a little disoriented, the way he used to feel as a kid after a Saturday matinee, walking out of the theater into an afternoon so brightly tinted that it seemed less real than the black and white world of the Bijou.

He squints into the low sun and tries to reconstruct the conversation he has just overheard. It had taken him some time to realize that the elderly librarian he saw five days a week was not describing the plot of a novel but a real even—something incredible. He had picked it up in fragments, but it appeared that a man had been killed in his office, an important man, a dean perhaps. His body had been discovered only hours earlier after lying there for days over the spring break. The smell must have been atrocious, the librarian had guessed, wrinkling her nose, then pushed his books across to him with a little smile and turned back to her companion behind the desk.

A dean. Who would kill a dean?

The mower has obliterated the middle patch of his square and Cory rouses himself from the steps and walks to the parking lot behind the Law College. He stows his books in the back seat of a BMW and eases out of the lot into the Jefferson Avenue traffic. He

glances at his watch—5:20. He might have made his exit earlier and missed the worst of the rush hour, but he doesn't mind the slow drive. His ex-wife once remarked that he must surely be the one man alive who actually enjoyed being stuck in traffic. The observation is not altogether true, but it captures something essential about him.

He makes his way through the business section west of the university and ponders the dead dean. Who would kill a dean? Another dean perhaps, a rival dean of another college. An associate dean on the way up. But surely in the hierarchy of the university a dean can be eliminated by nothing less than a provost.

Then perhaps he was not killed as a dean but simply as a man. Perhaps he had been discovered in an affair with his secretary or a student or an associate dean. Or perhaps he himself had discovered something . . .

Cory catches himself in mid-thought and grimaces as he brakes in the congestion by Kelly's Bar. He realizes that he is on the brink of a fallacy he has himself described and labeled. It is part of a theory he once called the Women in Cars Mystery, and its essential assumption is that life is not extraordinary but ordinary. What fascinates us, the theory assumes, is the imagination's play in the absence of fact, the mind filling in the blanks—the runaway bride, the disappearance of the pregnant wife. It follows then that only a charming illusion could concoct rich and fascinating mysteries from the death of a dean.

He also remembers quite distinctly the origin of the theory. It had been on a summer evening in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that he lived there so successfully disguised as the husband of Sally Cory, an evening much like this one with the same summer smell of cut grass. Jack and Janice Abbott had stopped in for a drink after a movie at the old State Theater on Gay Street where the Federal Office Building now stands. Jack Abbott was in his first year in the English Department at Western Appalachian, and the two couples were in the first year of a blossoming friendship.

It was during the time he and Sally were living in the Sequoyah

Apartments and he was managing the local branch of his father's furniture stores. A time of significant glances and private jokes. But he had not known until later what a good time it was because he was bored with his job and Sally hated the apartment and was even then conducting a campaign to borrow the money from his father for a house she had found on Cherokee Boulevard. An advance on his inheritance, she argued. He remembers her once dancing through the apartment singing, "We're gonna be rich, we're gonna be rich." But that's another story.

This one begins after a drink in the living room of the Sequoyah apartment with Jack Abbott's observation that lately he has been seeing an unusually large number of very attractive women driving alone in expensive cars. "Is there something here I'm missing?" He shakes a cigarette out of the pack, and Cory, sitting in the traffic on Jefferson Avenue, is startled to remember how recently people smoked cigarettes inside their houses.

"I have a theory about that," Cory says, half seating himself on the arm of the sofa beside Janice.

"Why are we not surprised?" Sally is freshening her drink—too soon, he thinks—at the counter that divides the tiny kitchen from the living room.

"Let the man talk," Jack Abbott says. "Why is there never an ashtray in this place?"

"Just use the vase," Sally says. "It's a filthy habit. You should give it up."

"Tell us your theory, Robert." Janice Abbott has a lovely throaty voice. She stretches back on the sofa and smiles up at Cory.

"I've always thought of it as the Brief Encounter or Face in the Crowd theory, but we could just as easily call it the Women in Cars Mystery," Cory says. "It involves the inconsistency Jack has just observed. The number of beautiful women one sees only for a brief moment—in automobiles, for example—is way out of proportion to the number of beautiful women one actually sees routinely, present company excepted of course."

Janice raises her glass to him. "Is there a certain type you have

in mind?”

“That’s the wonderful part of it. They’re beautiful in every conceivable way. You have your tan society types in Mercedes. Secretaries fixing their lipstick in the rear view mirror. Country girls in beat-up old—”

“Oh, please.” Sally glares at him from the counter. “Do we have to listen to your sexual fantasies? What about men in cars? Does your theory apply to men?”

“My theory applies to women. You’ll have to formulate your own theory about men in cars. I’m sure the same principles apply, but I’m not alone in this. Jack was obviously struck by it too.”

“Don’t forget the sunglasses,” Jack says. “Sunglasses add a touch of mystery.”

“I’ve thought of that, and the fact that their bodies are mostly hidden, but these don’t go to the heart of the mystery. Why is the proportion of beautiful women in cars so high?”

“Do you have a solution?” Sally asks.

“There are several solutions, and I’m afraid the one I’m forced to is a little disappointing. It’s not nearly as interesting as the problem.”

“We were afraid of that.” Sally moves to the sofa beside Janice.

“But then that’s what recommends it as the true solution. It’s so commonplace. It involves a notion you’ve never accepted.” He pauses. “Our illusions about life are always more interesting than the lives we lead, which are, after all, very ordinary. We have glimpses of people as they pass us by, and we imagine that their lives are full of romance and beauty, but if we talked to them for fifteen minutes we would see that they are as dull as everything and everyone else we know.”

“Present company excepted of course,” Janice says.

Cory raises his glass to her and smiles. “Women in cars are fantasy women, but it’s a fantasy we all carry around with us. Our illusion that life is really wonderful after all. It’s directly related to the false expectations that make us disappointed with our lot.” He waves his glass in a circle to take in the apartment. “It’s what

makes us think that a house on Cherokee Boulevard would solve everything and make us happy ever after.”

Sally gives him an unamused smile. “I don’t see what cars have to do with it.”

“It doesn’t have to be cars. Jack brought up the cars. It could be the Women in Expensive Restaurants Mystery or Women in Glossy Magazine Ads, but they don’t have the same ring.”

“Women in Kroger,” Janice says.

“No, no. That has the opposite effect.”

“Women in Walgreens,” Jack says.

“Women in Shoe Stores.” Janice again, nudging Sally beside her on the sofa.

“Now you’re making it absurd.”

Well it is absurd, somebody says, and the talk turns to the movie they’ve just seen and debates whether Woody Allen can really be taken seriously as a lover and then moves to the price of gasoline.

Cory brakes for a gang of skateboarders at the entrance to Tyson Park, the memory trailing off. Or maybe more invention than memory, since he is never quite sure how much was actually said that summer evening and how much his imagination has filled in.

But no matter—no one left to verify or dispute. The little gang that had seemed so solid is scattered now. Sally lives in a condominium in Fox Den and the Abbotts have drinks with other more interesting couples and he spends his time working on a hopelessly complicated book in the university library, avoiding the people who now compose his fantasies.

He has seen Sally only half a dozen times in the years since the divorce, although he occasionally receives second-hand reports of her career as fashion model and dinner-theater actress. He has managed to avoid Jack and Janice altogether.

He has managed to avoid almost everybody altogether. The money allows him to do that. People with money are expected to be a little eccentric, to spend their days in idle solitude. There

are always stories about people who suddenly come into a great deal of money, and Cory has heard enough to guess at the kind he has inspired. In keeping with his theory, they are of course much more interesting than the actual circumstances. Essentially, they are stories of the only son of a fine old Knoxville family who, preferring the world of letters, rejects his position as heir to the family business and is cut out of the father's will, replaced by a favorite nephew from North Carolina. They center, however, on the irony of the lovely ambitious wife who, learning of her husband's bleak prospects, divorces him only to discover that the old man has had a death-bed change of heart. Only months after the decree her ex-husband is the possessor of a chain of furniture stores, assorted real estate, and several million dollars.

There are doubtless also stories of attempted reconciliations and rejections and of the husband's eccentric behavior, most specifically his sudden obsession with privacy—"The Hermit," he once overheard in a loud aside. Altogether, it's not a great story, as such things go, but it does have some of the ingredients that feed the imagination—money, love, betrayal, and a beautiful woman.

Given the opportunity, Cory could have corrected a number of the rumors. For one thing, the extent of his wealth has been somewhat exaggerated. It is true he no longer has to work for a living, but his income is not much larger than that of a successful lawyer or physician, and the house on Cherokee Boulevard, the one that Sally always fancied, is a rare indulgence. One of the companies he inherited, a regional chain that rented portable toilets for construction sites, Cory found somehow unseemly and sold almost immediately, using a portion of the proceeds to purchase the house on Cherokee. A few years later, after experiencing the tedium of the world of buying and selling, he sold the furniture stores and then, one by one, the other properties until he was left with the clean slate that is now his life.

As for the ill-timed divorce by the wife, the irony most crucial for making it a good story, that is totally mistaken. Cory's version is simpler and it does not involve the issue of the inheritance.

Returning home a day earlier than expected from a buying trip to North Carolina, so it goes, he had pulled into the apartment parking lot beside a black Mercedes. Inside he saw his wife nestled comfortably against a man he did not recognize but whose face he thought he would never forget.

But that, it turns out, had been a highly romantic reaction. Sitting now at the light of the Neyland-Kingston Pike intersection across from the Unitarian Church, Cory tries to conjure up that face but draws a blank.

Instead he imagines a scene in which a distinguished looking old gentleman lies on a carpet in a pool of blood, a knife, cartoon-like, protruding from his chest. But the murdered dean has ceased to interest him, and the image fades as, waiting for the light to change, he studies the remarkably bland architecture of the Unitarian Church. He would have found it ironic to learn that at this moment, even as his interest dims, events are conspiring to make the dead man (who was not, he will learn, a dean) his sole occupation for the week ahead.

Cory, who is interested in irony, recognizes however that almost any event seen in retrospect takes on an ironic quality. Somewhere in the back seat of the BMW under a *New York Times* piece on the evolutionary function of the female orgasm is a novel titled *Prosperity* by a man named Robert O'Brian, who writes, "If any event is ultimately ironic when seen from the broadest perspective, then the notion of irony loses its distinctive appeal. Irony, in one sense, is only the ignorance of the meaning of the present."

CHAPTER TWO

THE CHANCELLOR'S PLAN

On a first meeting, Michael Joseph O'Connor might seem a poor fit for the position of Chancellor of a large regional university. He comes off as a bit young and brash, bearing little trace of the thoughtful scholarly demeanor assumed to be requisite for the position. Appearances are, however, deceiving and O'Connor has received generally high marks for his five years as Chancellor of Western Appalachian. The faculty respect him because he is indeed a scholar, an historian who maintains the instincts of a professor. The administrators and bureaucrats who viewed his candidacy with some foreboding were relieved to discover that he is a talented executive, decisive and surprisingly tactful when it serves his purposes. His reputation in Stockton Tower, the seat of campus administration, is that of a man who gets things done, keeps his faculty and the legislature happy, and maintains a cool head in a crisis.

Late on Monday afternoon, long after the departure of the secretarial staff, O'Connor is engaged in his current crisis, although his manner betrays no hint of it. Leaning back in a leather chair with his feet on the desk, he taps a pencil idly on a sheet of paper in his lap and stares absently at the two men across the desk. The sheet contains a single column of names, all but three of which have been marked through.

The two men across the desk contemplate identical lists. James Houghton, Assistant to the Chancellor, is a young zoologist assumed to be looking toward a bright future as an administrator. The older man, Edgar Ammons, has been for many years Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs. It was he, the heir apparent,