



STEPHEN

KING

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STORIES

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*For the twins, Thomas and Edward*

# TWO TALENTED BASTIDS

## 1

My father—my *famous* father—died in 2023, at the age of ninety. Two years before he passed, he got an email from a freelance writer named Ruth Crawford asking him for an interview. I read it to him, as I did all his personal and business correspondence, because by then he'd given up his electronic devices—first his desktop computer, then his laptop, and finally his beloved phone. His eyesight stayed good right up to the end, but he said that looking at the iPhone's screen gave him a headache. At the reception following the funeral, Doc Goodwin told me that Pop might have suffered a series of mini-strokes leading up to the big one.

Around the time he gave up his phone—this would have been five or six years before he died—I took early retirement from my position as Castle County School Superintendent, and went to work for my dad full-time. There was plenty to do. He had a housekeeper, but those duties fell to me at night and on the weekends. I helped him dress in the morning and undress at night. I did most of the cooking, and cleaned up the occasional mess when Pop couldn't make it to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

He had a handyman as well, but by then Jimmy Griggs was pushing eighty himself, and so I found myself doing the chores Jimmy didn't get around to—everything from mulching Pop's treasured flowerbeds to plunging out the drains when they got clogged. Assisted living was never discussed, although God knows Pop could have afforded it; a dozen mega-bestselling novels over forty years had left him very well off.

The last of his “engaging doorstoppers” (Donna Tartt, *New York Times*) was published when Pop was eighty-two. He did the obligatory round of interviews, sat for the obligatory photos, and then announced his retirement. To the press,

he did so graciously, with his “trademark humor” (Ron Charles, *Washington Post*). To me he said, “Thank God the bullshit’s finished.” With the exception of the informal picket-fence interview he gave Ruth Crawford, he never spoke for the record again. He was asked many times and always refused; claimed he’d said all he had to say, including some things he probably should have kept to himself.

“You give enough interviews,” he told me once, “and you are bound to stick your foot in your mouth a time or two. Those are the quotes that last, and the older you are, the more likely it becomes.”

Yet his books continued to sell, so his business affairs continued. I went over the contract renewals, cover concepts, and the occasional movie or TV option with him, and I dutifully read every interview proposal once he was incapable of reading them himself. He always said no, and that included Ruth Crawford’s proposal.

“Give her the standard response, Mark—flattered to be asked, but no thanks.” He hesitated, though, because this one was a little different.

Crawford wanted to write a piece about my father and his long-time friend, David “Butch” LaVerdiere, who died in 2019. Pop and I went to his funeral on the West Coast in a chartered Gulfstream. Pop was always close with his money—not stingy, but close—and the whopping expense of that roundtrip said a lot about his feeling for the man I grew up calling Uncle Butch. That feeling held strong, although the two men hadn’t seen each other face to face in ten years or more.

Pop was asked to speak at the funeral. I didn’t think he would—his rejection of the public spotlight spread in all directions, not just interviews—but he did it. He didn’t go to the podium, only stood up where he was with the help of his cane. He was always a good speaker, and that didn’t change with age.

“Butch and I were kids going to a one-room schoolhouse before the Second World War. We grew up in a no-stoplight dirt-road town fixing cars, patching them up, playing sports and then coaching them. As men we took part in town politics and maintained the town dump—very similar jobs, now that I think about it. We hunted, we fished, we put out grassfires in the summer and plowed the town roads in the winter. Knocked over a right smart of mailboxes

doing it, too. I knew him when no one knew his name—or mine—outside of a twenty-mile radius. I should have come to see him these last years, but I was busy with my own affairs. I thought to myself, there's time. We always think that, I guess. Then time runs out. Butch was a fine artist, but he was also a good man. I think that's more important. Maybe some here don't and that's all right, that's all right. Thing is, I always had his back and he always had mine."

He paused, head down, thinking.

"In my little Maine town there's a saying for friends like that. We kep' close."

Yes they did, and that included their secrets.

\* \* \*

Ruth Crawford had a solid clip-file—I checked. She had published articles, mostly personality profiles, in a dozen places, many local or regional (*Yankee*, *Downeast*, *New England Life*), but a few national, including a piece on the benighted town of Derry in the *New Yorker*. When it came to Laird Carmody and Dave LaVerdiere, I thought she had a good hook to hang her proposed story on. Her thesis had come up glancingly in pieces about either Pop or Uncle Butch, but she wanted to drill down on it: two men from the same small town in Maine who had become famous in two different fields of cultural endeavor. Not only that, either; both Carmody and LaVerdiere had achieved fame in their mid-forties, at a time when most men and women have given over the ambitions of their youth. Who have, as Pop once put it, dug themselves a rut and begun furnishing it. Ruth wanted to explore how such an unlikely coincidence had happened... assuming it *was* coincidence.

"Has to be a reason?" Pop asked when I finished reading him Ms. Crawford's letter. "Is that what she's suggesting? I guess she never heard about the twin brothers who won large sums of money in their respective state lotteries on the same day."

"Well, that might not have been a *complete* coincidence," I said. "Assuming, that is, that you didn't just make the story up on the spur of the moment."

I gave him space to comment, but he only offered a smile that could have meant anything. Or nothing. So I pressed on.

“I mean, those twins might have grown up in a house where gambling was a big thing. Which would make it a little less unlikely, right? Plus, what about all the lottery tickets they bought that were losers?”

“I’m not getting your point, Mark,” Pop said. Still with the little smile. “Do you even have one?”

“Just that I can understand this woman’s interest in exploring the fact of you and Dave both coming from Nowheresville and blossoming in the middle of your lives.” I raised my hands beside my head as if framing a headline. “Could it be... *fate*?”

Pop considered this, rubbing one hand up the white stubble on the side of his deeply lined face. I actually thought he might be about to change his mind and say yes. Then he shook his head. “Just write her one of your nice letters, tell her I’m going to pass, and wish her well on her future endeavors.”

So that was what I did, although something about the way Pop looked just then stuck with me. It was the look of a man who could say quite a lot on the subject of how he and his friend Butch had achieved fame and fortune... but who chose not to. Who chose, in fact, to keep it close.

\* \* \*

Ruth Crawford might have been disappointed in Pop’s refusal to be interviewed, but she didn’t drop the project. Nor did she drop it when I also refused to be interviewed, saying my father wouldn’t want me to after he’d said no, and besides, all I knew was that my father had always enjoyed stories. He read a lot, went nowhere without a paperback jammed in his back pocket. He told me wonderful tales at bedtime, and he sometimes wrote them down in spiral notebooks. As for Uncle Butch? He painted a mural in my bedroom—boys playing ball, boys catching fireflies, boys with fishing poles. Ruth wanted to see it, of course, but it had been painted over long ago, when I outgrew such childish things. When first Pop and then Uncle Butch took off like a couple of rockets, I was at the University of Maine, getting a degree in advanced education. Because, according to the old canard, those who can’t do teach, and those who can’t teach, teach teachers. The success of my father and his best



friend was, I said, as much a surprise to me as to anyone else in town. There's another old canard about how no good can come out of Nazareth.

I put that in a letter to Ms. Crawford, because I did feel bad—a little—about not giving her the interview. In it I said they surely had dreams, most men do, and like most men, they kept those dreams to themselves. I had assumed Pop's stories and Uncle Butch's cheerful paintings were just hobbies, like whittling or guitar-picking, until the money started rolling in. I typed that, then handwrote a postscript: *And good for them!*

\* \* \*

There are twenty-seven incorporated towns in Castle County. Castle Rock is the largest; Gates Falls is the second largest. Harlow, where I grew up, the son of Laird and Sheila Carmody, isn't even in the top ten. It's grown considerably since I was a kid, though, and sometimes my pop—who also spent his whole life in Harlow—said he could hardly recognize it. He went to a one-room school; I went to a four-roomer (two grades in each room); now there's an eight-room school with geothermal heating and cooling.

When Pop was a kid, all the town roads were unpaved except for Route 9, the Portland Road. When I came along, only Deep Cut and Methodist Road were dirt. These days, all of them are paved. In the sixties there was only one store, Brownie's, where old men sat around an actual pickle barrel. Now there are two or three, and a kind of downtown (if you want to call it that) on the Quaker Hill Road. We have a pizza joint, two beauty parlors, and—hard to believe but true—a nail salon that seems to be a going concern. No high school, though; that hasn't changed. Harlow kids have three choices: Castle Rock High, Gates Falls High, or Mountain View Secondary, most commonly known as the Christer Academy. We're a bunch of country bumpkins out here: pickup-driving, country-music-listening, coffee-brandy-drinking, Republican-leaning hicks from the sticks. There's nothing much to recommend us, except for two men who came from here: my pop and his friend Butch LaVerdiere. Two talented bastards, as Pop put it during his brief over-the-fence conversation with Ruth Crawford.

*Your mom and pop spent their whole lives there? a city person might ask. And then YOU spent your whole life there? What are you, crazy?*

Nope.

Robert Frost said home is the place that, when you go there, they have to take you in. It's also the place you start from, and if you're one of the lucky ones, it's where you finish up. Butch died in Seattle, a stranger in a strange land. Maybe that was okay with him, but I have to wonder if in the end he wouldn't have preferred a little dirt road and the lakeside forest known as the 30-Mile Wood.

\* \* \*

Although most of Ruth Crawford's research—her *investigation*—was centered in Harlow, where her subjects grew up, there are no motels there, not even a bed and breakfast, so her base of operations was the Gateway Motel, in Castle Rock. There actually *is* a senior living facility in Harlow, and there Ruth interviewed a fellow named Alden Toothaker, who went to school with my pop and his friend. It was Alden who told her how Dave got his nickname. He always carried a tube of Lucky Tiger Butch Wax in his hip pocket and used it frequently so his flattop would stand up straight in front. He wore his hair (what there was of it) that way his whole life. It became his trademark. As to whether he still carried Butch Wax once he got famous, your guess is as good as mine. I don't know if they even still make it.

"They used to pal around together back in grade school," Alden told her. "Just a couple of boys who liked to fish or go hunting with their daddies. They grew up around hard work and didn't expect nothing different. You might talk to folks my age who'll tellya those boys were going to amount to something, but I'm not one of em. They were ordinary fellas right up until they weren't."

Laird and Butch went to Gates Falls High. They were placed in what was then called "the general education" courses, which were for kids who had no plans to go to college. No one came out and said they weren't bright enough; it was just assumed. They took something called Daily Math and Business English, where several pages of their textbook explained how to correctly fold a business letter, complete with diagrams. They spent a lot of time in woodshop

and auto shop. Both played football and basketball, although my pop spent most of his time riding the bench. They both finished with B averages and graduated together on June 8th, 1951.

Dave LaVerdiere went to work with his father, a plumber. Laird Carmody and his dad fixed cars out on the family farm and sold them on to Peewee's Car Mart in Gates Falls. They also kept a vegetable stand on the Portland Road that brought in good money.

Uncle Butch and his father didn't get along so well and Dave eventually struck out on his own, fixing drains, laying pipe, and sometimes digging wells in Gates and Castle Rock. (His father had all the business in Harlow, and wasn't about to share.) In 1954 the two friends formed L&D Haulage, which mostly meant dragging the summer people's crappie to the dump. In 1955 they *bought* the dump and the town was happy to be rid of it. They cleaned it up, did controlled burns, instituted a primitive recycling program, and kept it vermin-free. The town paid them a stipend that made a nice addition to their regular jobs. Scrap metal, especially copper wire, brought in more cash. Folks in town called them the Garbage Twins, but Ruth Crawford was assured by Alden Toothaker (and other oldies with intact memories) that this was harmless ribbing, and taken as such.

The dump was maybe five acres, and surrounded by a high board fence. Dave painted it with murals of town life, adding to it each year. Although that fence is long gone (and the dump is now a landfill), photographs remain. Those murals remind people of Dave's later work. There were quilting bees that merged into baseball games, baseball games that merged into cartoon caricatures of long-gone Harlow residents, scenes of spring planting and fall reaping. Every aspect of smalltown life was represented, but Uncle Butch also added Jesus followed by the apostles (last in line came Judas, with a shit-eating grin on his face). There was nothing really remarkable about any of these scenes, but they were exuberant and good-humored. They were, you might say, *harbingers*.

Shortly after Uncle Butch died, a LaVerdiere painting of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe strolling hand-in-hand down the sawdust-floored midway of a smalltown carnival sold for three million dollars. It was a thousand times better

than Uncle Butch's dump murals, but it would have looked at home there: the same screwy sense of humor, set off by an undercurrent of despair and—maybe—contempt. Dave's dump murals were the bud; *Elvis & Marilyn* was the bloom.

Uncle Butch never married, but Pop did. He'd had a high school sweetheart named Sheila Wise, who went away to Vermont State Teachers College after graduation. When she came back to teach the fifth and sixth grades at Harlow Elementary, my father was delighted to find she was still single. He wooed and won her. They were married in August of 1957. Dave LaVerdiere was Pop's best man. I came along a year later, and Pop's best friend became my Uncle Butch.

\* \* \*

I read a review of Pop's first book, *The Lightning Storm*, and the reviewer said this: "Not much happens in the first hundred or so pages of Mr. Carmody's suspenseful yarn, but the reader is drawn on anyway, because there are violins."

I thought that was a clever way to put it. There were few violins for Ruth Crawford to hear; the background picture she got from Alden and others around town was of two men, decent and upstanding and pretty much on the dead level when it came to honesty. They were country men living country lives. One married and the other was what was called "a confirmed bachelor" in those days, but with not a whiff of scandal concerning his private life.

Dave's younger sister, Vicky, did agree to be interviewed. She told Ruth that sometimes Dave went "up the city"—meaning Lewiston—to visit the beer-and-boogie clubs on lower Lisbon Street. "He'd be jolly at the Holly," she said, meaning the Holiday Lounge (now long gone). "He was most apt to go if Little Jonna Jaye was playing there. Oh my, such a crush he had on her. He never brought *her* home—no such luck!—but he didn't always come home alone, either."

Vicky paused there, Ruth told me later, and then added, "I know what you might be thinking, Miz Crawford, most everyone does these days when a man spends his life without a long-time woman, but it's not so. My brother may have turned out to be a famous artist, but he sure as hell wasn't *gay*."

\* \* \*

The two men were well liked; everyone said so. And they  *neighbored*. When Philly Loubird had a heart attack with his field half-hayed and thunderstorms in the offing, Pop took him to the hospital in Castle Rock while Butch marshaled a few of his dump-picking buddies and they finished the job before the first drops hit. They fought grassfires and the occasional housefire with the local volunteer fire department. Pop went around with my mother collecting for what was then called the Poor Fund, if he didn't have too many cars to fix or work to do at the dump. They coached youth sports. They cooked side by side at the VFD pork roast supper in the spring and the chicken barbecue that marked the end of summer.

Just country men living country lives.

No violins.

Until there was a whole orchestra.

\* \* \*

I knew a lot of this. I learned more from Ruth Crawford herself at the Korner Koffee Kup, across the street from the Gateway Motel and just about a block down from the post office. That's where Pop got his mail, and there was usually a pretty damn good budget of it. I always stopped at the Koffee Kup after grabbing the post. The Kup's java is strictly okay, no more than that, but the blueberry muffins? You never had a better one.

I was going through the mail, sorting out the trash from the treasure, when someone said, "May I sit down?"

It was Ruth Crawford, looking slim and trim in white slacks, a pink shell top, and a matching mask—that was the second year of Covid. She was already sliding into the other side of the booth, which made me laugh. "You don't give up, do you?"

"Timidity never won a fair maiden the Nobel Prize," she said, and took off her mask. "How's the coffee here?"

"Not bad. As you must know, since you're staying right across the street. The muffins are better. But still no interview. Sorry, Ms. Crawford, can't do it."

"No interview, check. Anything we say is strictly off the record, okay?"

"Which means you can't use it."

“That’s what it means.”

The waitress came—Suzie McDonald. I asked her if she was keeping up with her night classes. She smiled behind her own mask and said she was. Ruth and I ordered coffee and muffins.

“Do you know *everyone* in the three towns?” Ruth asked when Suzie was gone.

“Not everyone, no. I used to know more, and a lot more people, when I was still Superintendent of Schools. Off the record, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Suzie had a baby when she was seventeen and her parents kicked her out. Holy rollers, Church of Christ the Redeemer. Went to live with her aunt in Gates. Since then she’s finished high school and is taking classes at the County Extension, associated with Bates College. Eventually she wants to be a vet. I think she’ll make it, and her little girl is doing fine. What about you? Having a good time? Learning a lot about Pop and Uncle Butch?”

She smiled. “I learned your father was quite the hot-rod before he married your mother—sorry for your loss, by the way.”

“Thanks.” Although in that summer of 2021, my mother had been gone five years.

“Your dad rolled some old farmer’s Dodge and lost his license for a year, did you know that?”

I hadn’t, and told her so.

“I found out Dave LaVerdiere liked the bars in Lewiston, and had a crush on a local singer who called herself Little Jonna Jaye. I found out he bolted the Republican Party after the Watergate thing, but your father never did.”

“No, Pop will vote Republican until the day he dies. But…” I leaned forward. “Still off the record?”

“Totally!” Smiling, but her eyes were bright with curiosity.

I lowered my voice to a near whisper. “He didn’t vote for Trump the second time. Couldn’t bring himself to vote for Biden, but he had a bellyful of the Donald. I expect you to take that to your grave.”

“I swear. I found out that Dave won the annual town fair pie-eating contest from 1960 to 1966, when he retired from competition. I learned that your father

sat on the ducking stool at Old Home Days until 1972. There are amusing pictures of him in one of those old-fashioned bathing suits and a derby hat... waterproof, I assume.”

“I was totally embarrassed,” I said. “Such a ribbing I took at school.”

“I learned that when Dave went west, he packed everything he felt he needed into the saddlebags of his Harley-Davidson motorcycle and just took off. Your father and mother sold everything else he owned at a yard sale and sent him the money. Your dad also sold his house for him.”

“At a pretty nice profit,” I said. “Which was good. By then Uncle Butch was painting full-time, and he used that money until he started selling his work.”

“And by then your father was writing full-time.”

“Yes, and still ran the dump. Did until he sold it back to the town in the early nineties. That’s when it became a landfill.”

“He also bought Peewee’s Car Mart and sold that. Gave the proceeds to the town.”

“Seriously? He never told me.” Although I was sure my mom knew.

“He did, and why not? He didn’t need the money, did he? By then writing was his job and all the town stuff was just a hobby.”

“Good works,” I said, “are never a hobby.”

“Your father taught you that?”

“My mother.”

“What did *she* think of the sudden change in your fortunes? Not to mention your Uncle Butch’s change in his?”

I considered her question while Suzie brought our muffins and coffee. Then I said, “I don’t really want to go there, Ms. Crawford.”

“Call me Ruth.”

“Ruth, then... but I still don’t want to go there.”

She buttered her muffin. She was looking at me with a kind of sharp-eyed bewilderment—I don’t know what else to call it—that made me uncomfortable.

“With what I’ve got I can write a good piece and sell it to *Yankee* magazine,” she said. “Ten thousand words, full of local color and amusing anecdotes. All the Maine shit people like, lots of *ayuh* and *I sh’d smile and kiss a pig*. I’ve got pictures of Dave LaVerdiere’s dump murals. I’ve got pictures of your father—the famous

author—wearing a 1920s-style bathing suit while townies try to dump him into a tank of water.”

“Two bucks for three throws at the big Ducking Lever. All profits to various town charities. They cheered every time he went kersplash.”

“I have photos of them serving chicken dinners to tourists and summer people, the two of them wearing aprons and joke toques that said YOU MAY KISS THE COOK.”

“Plenty of women did.”

“I’ve got fishing stories, hunting stories, good deeds done—like getting in the hay for the man who had the heart attack. I’ve got the story of Laird joyriding and losing his license. I’ve got all of that, and I’ve got *nothing*. Which is to say nothing of real substance. People love to tell stories about them—I knew Laird Carmody *when*, I knew Butchie LaVerdiere *when*, but none of them explain what they *became*. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

I said I did.

“You must know some of those things, Mark. What the fuck *happened*? Won’t you tell me?”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said. I was lying, and I think she knew it.

\* \* \*

I remember a call I got in the fall of 1978, the dormitory mom (there actually were such things back then) puffing up to the third floor of Roberts Hall and telling me my mother was on the phone and sounded upset. I hurried down to Mrs. Hathaway’s little suite, afraid of what I might hear.

“Mom? Everything okay?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. Something happened to your father while they were on their hunting trip in the 30-Mile Wood.” Then, as if an afterthought: “And to Butch.”

My stomach dropped; my testicles seemed to rise up to meet it. “Was there an accident? Are they hurt? Is someone...” I couldn’t finish, as if to ask if someone was dead would make it so.

“They’re all right. Physically all right. But something happened. Your father looks like he saw a ghost. And Butch... the same. They told me they got lost, but



that's hogwash. Those two men know the 30-Mile like the back of their hand. I wish you'd come home, Mark. Not right now, this weekend. Maybe you can get it out of him."

But when I asked, Pop insisted that they'd just gotten lost, finally found their way back to Jilasi Creek (a slurred, Americanized version of the Micmac word for hello), and came out behind the Harlow Cemetery, pretty as you please.

I didn't believe that crap story any more than Mom did. I went back to school, and before Christmas break, a terrible idea surfaced in my mind: that one of them had shot another hunter—which happens several times a year during hunting season—and killed him, and buried him in the woods.

On Christmas Eve, after Mom had gone to bed, I finally summoned the nerve to ask him about that idea. We were sitting in the living room, looking at the tree. Pop looked startled... then he laughed. "God, no! If something like that had happened, we would have reported it and taken our medicine. We just got lost. It happens to the best of us, kiddo."

My mother's word came to me, and I almost said it: hogwash.

\* \* \*

My father had a dry sense of humor, and it was never on better display than when his accountant came up from New York—this was around the time Pop's last novel was published—and told Pop his net worth was just over ten million dollars. Not J.K. Rowling numbers (or even James Patterson's), but considerable. Pop thought it over and then said, "I guess books do a lot more than furnish a room."

The accountant looked puzzled, but I got the reference and laughed.

"I won't be leaving you broke, Markey," Pop said.

He must have seen me wince, or maybe just realized the implication of what he'd said. He leaned over and patted my hand, as he had when I was a child and something was troubling me.

I wasn't a child any longer, but I was alone. In 1988 I married Susan Wiggins, a lawyer in the county attorney's office. She said she wanted kids but kept putting it off. Shortly before our twelfth wedding anniversary (for which I'd purchased a string of pearls), she told me she was leaving me for another man.

There's a lot more to the story, I suppose there always is, but that's all you need to know, because this story isn't about me—not really. But when my father said that thing about not leaving me broke, what I thought of—what I believe we both thought of—is to whom *I* would leave that ten million, or whatever remained of it, when my time came?

Probably Maine School Administrative District 19. Schools always need money.

\* \* \*

“You must know,” Ruth said to me that day in the Koffee Kup. “You *must*. Off the record, remember?”

“Off the record or on it, I really don't,” I said. All I knew was something happened to Pop and Uncle Butch in November of 1978, on their annual hunting trip. After that Pop became a bestselling writer of thick novels, the kind critics used to call three-deckers, and Dave LaVerdiere gained fame first as an illustrator and then as a painter “who combines the surrealism of Frida Kahlo with the American romance of Norman Rockwell” (*ArtReview*).

“Maybe they went down to the crossroads,” she said. “You know, like Robert Johnson was supposed to have done. Made a deal with the devil.”

I laughed, although I would be lying if I hadn't had the same idea cross my mind, mostly on stormy summer nights when the rolls of thunder kept me awake. “If they did, the contract must have been for a lot more than seven years. Pop's first book was published in 1980, the same year Uncle Butch's portrait of John Lennon was on the cover of *Time*.”

“Almost forty years for LaVerdiere,” she mused, “and your father's retired but still going strong.”

“Strong might be too strong a word for it,” I said, thinking about the pissy sheets I'd changed just that morning before setting sail for the Rock. “But he is still going. What about you? How much longer are you going to spend in our neck of the woods, ferreting out dirt on Carmody and LaVerdiere?”

“That's kind of a shitty way of putting it.”

“I'm sorry. Bad joke.”

She had eaten her muffin (I told you they were good) and was mashing up the few remaining crumbs with a forefinger. “Another day or two. I want to go back to the elder care place in Harlow, and maybe talk to LaVerdiere’s sis again, if she’s willing. I’ll come out of this with a very salable piece, but no way is it the piece I wanted.”

“Maybe what you wanted is something that can’t be found. Maybe creativity is supposed to remain a mystery.”

She wrinkled her nose and said, “Save your metaphysics to cool your porridge. Can I pick up the check?”

“No.”

\* \* \*

Everyone in Harlow knows our house on Benson Street. Sometimes fans of Pop’s books from away stop by for a peek if they happen to be on vacation, although they tend to be disappointed by it; just your typical New England saltbox in a town that’s full of them. A little bigger than most, set back from a good-sized lawn dotted with flowerbeds. My mother planted those and tended them until she died. Now Jimmy Griggs, our handyman, keeps them watered and pruned. Except for the daylilies growing along the picket fence out front, that is. Pop likes to see to them himself, because Mom loved them best. When Pop waters them, or just walks their length, limping slowly along on his cane, I think he does it to remember the woman he always called “my dear Sheila.” Sometimes he bends to caress one of the blossoms—crowns that form on leafless stems called scapes. The blooms are yellow, pink, and orange, but he particularly likes the red ones, which he says remind him of her cheeks when she blushed. His public persona was crusty and a bit cynical—plus there was that dry sense of humor—but at heart he was always a romantic and could be a bit corny. He told me once that he kept that part hidden, because it bruised easily.

Ruth knew where the house was, of course. I’d seen her cruise past in her little Corolla several times, and once she stopped to snap pictures. I’m sure she also knew that Pop was most apt to walk our picket fence, looking at the

daylilies, at midmorning, and if you don't know by this point that she was a very determined lady, I haven't done my job.

Two days after our off-the-record talk in the Koffee Kup, she came slow-rolling down Benson Street, and instead of driving past, she pulled over and stopped right next to the little signs on either side of the gate. One says PLEASE RESPECT OUR PRIVACY. The other says MR. CARMODY DOES NOT GIVE AUTOGRAPHS. I was walking with Pop as I usually did when he inspected the daylilies; he turned eighty-eight in that summer of 2021, and even with the cane he sometimes tottered.

Ruth got out and approached the fence, although she made no effort to try the gate. Persistent, but also mindful of boundaries. I liked her for that. Hell, I liked her, period. She was wearing a flower-printed mask. Pop wasn't, claimed they made it hard to breathe, but he'd had no objections to the vaccinations.

Pop looked at her with curiosity, but also with a faint smile. She was good-looking, especially in the light of a summer morning. Checked shirt, denim skirt, white socks and sneakers, hair pulled back in a teenager's ponytail.

"As the sign says, Miss, I don't give autographs."

"Oh, I don't think that's what she wants," I said. I was amused by her chutzpah.

"My name is Ruth Crawford, sir. I wrote and asked for an interview. You turned me down, but I thought I'd try one more time in person before getting on the road to Boston."

"Ah," Pop said. "Me and Butch, right? And is serendipity still your angle?"

"Yes. Although I don't feel I ever really got to the heart of the matter."

"The heart of darkness," he said, and laughed. "Literary joke. I've got a bunch of them, although they have been gathering dust since I retired from giving interviews. A vow I intend to keep even though you seem like a nice woman, and Mark here tells me you're well about it."

I was both surprised and pleased to see him extend a hand over the fence. She seemed surprised, too, but she shook it, being careful not to squeeze too hard.

"Thank you, sir. I felt I had to try. Your flowers are beautiful, by the way. I love daylilies."