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A Brief Meeting with Mr. Eliot

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The half-filled bus out of Webster came slowly to a halt in front of City Hall. A dense cloud of diesel smoke floated over the sleepy riders as they stepped off onto the sidewalk. In front of them, the massive clock tower of the nineteenth century building stood unflinching in the freezing morning air, its hands reading quarter past nine. It was five after seven. Wide marble stairways leading to an unseen entrance on the second floor swung out on either side of the structure. Each was roped off and had *Respect Worcester, No Graffiti* signs placed in front of them. David Willard was the last to get off the bus. He stood blinking half-awake under the cloudy, cement-colored sky. The bus pulled away from the curb, swinging its doors shut. With a bag lunch and a bottle of spring water, he made his way to work.

There hadn't been much snow the entire winter, and what was left was brown and gritty. A thin layer of ice covered the sidewalk. David walked across the common, then along Franklin Street past Mr. Zonia's Wig Shoppe and its display window crowded with silent styrofoam heads. Next door, the Paris Cinema, an X-rated movie theater, was dark and empty. Two gray-haired women in dusty overcoats shuffled by shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm to steady themselves on the ice. Up ahead, a heavy iron grate covered the front window and entrance to Bancroft Liquors. Four drunks stood in a hunched circle waiting patiently for the grate to come up, blowing on their hands and sharing a cigarette. David turned down an alleyway that led to Salem Street.

"Hello?" David rapped against the locked front door of the bookstore. Inside, Mr. Andrews was working at the register area, shuffling packing slips and receipts into manageable piles. Only a few lights were on, giving the long shelves of books an enhanced air of importance. David knocked again. Mr. Andrews finally looked up and made his way over to the door.

"Yes, good morning, good morning. Didn't hear you out there," Mr. Andrews said as he unlocked the door. "When you get a chance, I think it would be a very good idea if you would sweep up the back half of the store to start things off. Seems we had someone in yesterday tracking mud all over the place." Mr. Andrews spoke in the clear, scholarly tone of a person who had made books his life's business. He was now nearing sixty and had started the store back in '71 when, he said, young people actually made it a point to develop a taste in literature. Having the main branch of the city library right across the street attracted people into the place, and he appreciated the benefits of the location. At the same time, the combined effects of suffocating central heating in the winter and a lack of air conditioning in the summer forced him to keep the rear entrance open continually. The entrance faced the back alleyway, and as the years passed, he found himself growing tired of

the drunks who would wander bleary-eyed into the store asking for change.

After sweeping the floor, David began working on returns in the back room. Titles that proved to be slow sellers out front were piled all over the floor and on rows of ceiling-high shelves. His job was to write up invoices for the books, box and send them back to their publishers. The store would use the credit received for purchasing more titles. It wasn't demanding work and he liked the fact that he was left alone for much of the day.

Without windows and open space, the area was dominated by books. His favorites were mass-market classics that no one seemed interested in reading anymore. The works of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau lay scattered all over like worn parts at a junkyard. David spent his breaks sitting on the dusty floor between the stacks, reading the neglected works of neglected writers, wondering why no one cared about them anymore. After awhile he began to see them as saints, humans possibly a notch above average people. Their words had a purity and toughness he couldn't quite explain. They seemed to come from a creative vein alien to the present. The fact that Thoreau often walked from Concord to Worcester to see acquaintances those many years ago was the ultimate of ironies. Whom would he talk with today?

By ten o'clock the second invoice of the day was finished with ISBNs, titles and prices neatly listed in their appropriate columns. Carefully he arranged the books into a used Random House box and filled the gaps with packing paper. As he dropped in a copy of the invoice, he heard Sara's voice from around the corner.

"David, come over here a second." Sara spoke in a loud whisper designed to elude the ear of Mr. Andrews, who didn't like seeing his help unoccupied. David hesitated a moment, then made his way around a set of shelves to her desk. "I'll never understand kids," she began, giving her head an exaggerated shake. Sara was the store's part-time bookkeeper. She was a hefty woman, originally from Chicago, with two kids in junior high. Her husband, a computer salesman, spent much of his time on the road, leaving duties at home to his wife. As she spoke, Sara steadily flicked M&M's into her mouth from a large "Pounder Bag" that sat tucked in the back of one of her drawers. "Last night my Pat says to me, she says, 'Mommy, I'm sick of violin.' She says, 'I can't stand Mrs. Kent, I can't stand Bach. The whole thing is foolish, and it's your fault.' She's been playing now for two years under the Suzuki method and it's just such a great experience for her. I can't understand where she got this snotty attitude. I mean, at fourteen you'd think she'd be able to finally appreciate all of the things I've done for her. Stuff like coaching youth soccer for the past three years, chaperoning school field trips. I know it's hard to practice an instrument two hours a day and to play on weekends, but look at the alternatives. Hey," Sara said forcefully, "we live in a nice house out of the city, and I want my kids to grow up right." David

switched his weight from one foot to the other. "I'll tell you one thing, they'll never ride that bus to school as long as I'm around. Just think of the head lice and all of those creeps that sit in the back."

David began fiddling with the controls of the copy machine that sat on top of the bench nearby. Three weeks ago the machine had started to make strange rattling sounds. Soon faint vertical lines began to appear on all of the copies. A repairman was due in any day to look at the thing. "It's not that we're not close. Pat just takes things for granted sometimes," Sara said conclusively.

"Kids are something, all right. Afraid I don't know much about how to handle them. By the way, did you get all of yesterday's invoices? I left them on your desk before I went home last night."

"Whaat?" Sara said, crunching steadily.

"The invoices from yesterday. Did you get them okay?"

"Yeah, no problem... I tell you, I just can't figure it... Now Jonathan wants to play football. Christ, he's barely thirteen and I *do not* like the guy coaching. He has absolutely no idea how to communicate with the kids. And then there's the body hair." Sara rolled her eyes. "He's got it all over his back. God, I mean what next?"

"Kids have a way of turning out fine. I wouldn't worry."

"I just can't help it."

"Has the guy come in to look at the copier yet?"

"You kidding?" Sara rooted through the M&M bag and pulled out a small handful. A wide smile crossed her face as she emptied the M&M's into David's palm. "Here. That's a thing I always tell my husband when he comes home after a long trip. I tell him 'Hon, because you've got such a good job, we can afford to be generous, and that's nice.'"

After eating lunch in the break room, David walked over to Bancroft Liquors to pick up a dollar scratch ticket. An old woman behind the counter tore off a Draw Poker card and handed it to him. She had a bad cold and blew her nose into a dirty handkerchief. David pulled a dime out of his pocket, imagining he was playing against all the state bureaucrats in their blue pinstriped suits who ran the lottery in Boston. Quickly he scratched the card and dealt himself a pair of tens to the bureaucrats' full-house. He flipped the card into a wastebasket filled with other cards and walked out.

Halfway down the back alley, he noticed a man crouched over a small fire. The man wore a ripped down jacket and woolen pants that had a hole in one of the knees. David could hear him talking into the fire.

"Back in '73 was when I got the call from Ted Williams to join him and Gowdy for some marlin fishing in the Gulf. We got the whole damn thing on tape. Best show they ever did. Caught this huge motherfucker of a beast that took me about five hours to get anywhere near the boat. Curt was too clumsy to use the gaff right, so they got some big black guy to do it. Then

Ted, being the melodramatic fuck he is, pulls out this thirty-six inch Louisville Slugger he had hidden somewhere in the flooring and whacks that beautiful fish up side the head, knocking out one of its eyes... Christ."

He slowly straightened himself and adjusted the Bruins stocking cap on his head. Without looking at David he motioned for him to come over to the fire.

"My eyes may be bad, buddy, but I'm not blind," he growled in a low voice.

Though he didn't really want them to, David's legs began to move him closer to the fire. Standing on the opposite side, he glanced into the man's distorted face. His eyes seemed to work independently from one another and pointed in different directions.

"You know, I've been down here for a while now, pulling in all sorts of things." The man's voice was deep and rough. It didn't sound like the same person who had fished with Ted Williams. "And you're missing it all, buddy. I hope you realize what I'm saying 'cause once it comes out of me that's it. I ain't repeating myself to nobody." He let out a hacking cough. "You got a cigarette by chance?"

"I don't smoke," said David thickly. His throat felt tight.

"Yeah." The man let out another violent cough and spit into the fire causing it to sizzle. "Anyway, I been watching you, man. Like I seen you walking to the bookstore everyday and shit. You ain't seen me, but I seen you. You're a straight-looking fella, sharp too, can see it in your eyes. You're not buying all of this shit that's going on around you but your feet are still stuck in it. The problem is that you're too busy listening to the noise. You gotta build up some filters, take off them blurry goggles you been wearing in your head. Slow it all down to geological time, man. Put yourself in the Pleistocene and feel them glaciers coming tear-ass from the poles. And don't for a second think they aren't gonna come creeping back down again either." He tipped his head to one side and peered at David. "Listen to God once in a while. You hear what I'm saying? You gotta learn to be patient and still 'cause He's not gonna be shouting nothing to nobody. If you just listen, He's got some crazy things to show you."

The man stopped and became quiet. Bowing his head, he let his eyes slowly drift out of focus. Very quietly he spoke in a slow harsh whisper:

The worlds revolve like ancient women.

Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

He reached into a dirty canvas sack on the ground and pulled out a pear. A sharp breeze blew through the alley. The man now ignored David completely. Carefully he bit into the pear and let its cool sweetness flow softly through his body.

It was half past five as David went to pick up his coat in the break room. During the afternoon he'd screwed up two invoices but hadn't told anyone. He knew Sara would at some point figure out something was wrong with the

numbers. She'd tell Mr. Andrews, and he'd give David a stern lecture about not doing his job. As he thought about this more his head began to pound until all he wanted to do was get back to his apartment, drink a beer and fall asleep.

Sitting at a small table in the break room was Mary. She came in this time of day and worked till closing as a cashier. She was David's favorite co-worker, and he often wished they had the same hours. After retiring from teaching English at Worcester South High, where she'd spent forty years, she figured it would be nice to make a few extra bucks and keep in contact with interesting people. As it turned out, no one paid her much attention at the place except David. He always found her wit and keen sense of humor fun to be around. He was surprised to see her looking tired.

"Miranda's platelet count is down again. I heard from the vet today," she said quietly. Miranda was Mary's old Siberian husky and only companion at home since her husband had passed away. Two weeks earlier the dog had been diagnosed as having a rare immune system disorder that had no known cure. "Everyday she's alive is a gift as far as I'm concerned. The thing is I have to make a decision at some point to put her to sleep."

David took a seat next to her and shook his head. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"Shame on me to weigh you down with all of this. You've had a long day, I can see." Mary smiled. "You'll be happy to hear that I've been looking at gowns. What was the color of that cummerbund again?"

"You've forgotten?... Red, for passion. Remember?" For months the two had had a running gag that they were going to the spring prom together.

"Of course... though I'm not sure how much passion can be left in this body of mine. In any case, I hope you remember to wax your dad's car before you pick me up."

"No need for that, fair maiden. I'm in the process of making arrangements with a highly reputable limousine service to take care of the driving. Get ready to be queen for a night."

"How wonderful!" Mary threw back her head and laughed. "You're too much, David. You know that?"

"We'll take the limo into Boston, ride the elevator up to the observation deck of the Prudential Building at midnight and have the world at our feet." David could see Mary's face brighten. "I'll give you a small rose and we'll drink a toast, if I can find a liquor store where I can buy. Our parents will never know."

"That sounds wonderful," she said quietly. A fine mist began filling her eyes. "Just perfect." She reached across the table and put her hand over David's and closed her eyes. Listening to the sweet whispers of her dream, she gazed down upon the lapping tide of the dark harbor, the lights of the city and the clear midnight sky stretching silently on forever.