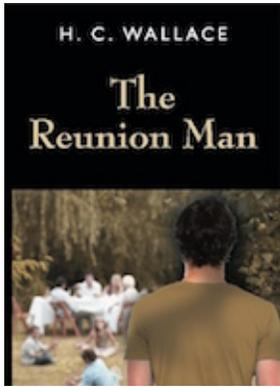


H. C. WALLACE

# The Reunion Man





*David has a single affectionate memory of the mother that abandoned him in early childhood. He is also haunted by a vague, discomfoting experience in childhood. His father has responded vaguely to David's questions about his mother. Maggie, a family friend, offers scant details. He is suspicious of her doting attention. Additional pressures arise. He desires more than a physical relationship with his lover, Darla. The relationship has stalled and he is uncertain if she wants it to progress. The village is abuzz with theories about a young handicapped boy that has been missing. This story explains the circumstances of a boy touching the lives of Darla, David, and his friends.*

*David and Darla share mutual tragedies at Darla's family reunion. Darla reveals that she was a victim of disturbing encounter with a distant relative and David reveals his angst and confusion about his mother. David tells her about the fawning attention of Maggie. Darla confronts Maggie and Harold and uncovers the truth of David's mother. Maggie confesses her involvement with David's mother that played a part her departure. The truth of the involvement leaves David stunned. Is the answer to her disappearance a resolution or does it result in additional confusion?*

## **The Reunion Man**

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# **THE REUNION MAN**

H C Wallace

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First Edition

## FIVE

He was in the dining room sitting in front of the hutch, hunched over, with the album open. There was a large magnifying glass in his hand and he was leafing through the pages of the album. It was the stamp collection. It was his weekly meeting with the little portraits and monuments. It had been years since he had bought a stamp and years since he had been to a meeting with the stamp club, but he continued to performed the ritual with the magnifying glass, inspecting every nuance, every dot, and every feature. He would mutter under his breath, *hum, uh-huh*, as though giving approval, as though reassuring himself that nothing had changed, and to confirm again the significance of the stamp's qualities. His eyes would tire, he would lean back in the chair, rub his eyes, close his eyes for a brief moment then continue with the next album. David would approach him sometimes in the ritual and Harold would point out a stamp of unusual quality or historical importance and explain its history, how he found the stamp or how much of a bargain it had been.

He heard him unlock the door and enter. Harold turned, addressed him quickly and snapped his head back to the album.

“David, you’re home early. What is going on?”

“Yes, I’m home early, but only for today.”

“I understand. You shouldn’t leave early often. You’ll get a bad reputation.” He continued his focus on a stamp while speaking to him.

“My reputation is no longer an issue.”

“I know. They trust you. They know what they have in you.”

“Literally they no longer have me.”

“What are you talking about?” Now, he turned from the hutch, stood and faced David. “What happened to you?”

“I have been terminated, the entire commercial division. We got the news early this...”

“Hell, I never had a chance to ask about it. I don’t believe it. Not one rumor came to me. Not one damn nugget of gossip.” He leaned back in the chair and exhaled deeply.

David walked around to the side of the chair and laid his arm on Harold’s shoulder. Don’t worry about this. It wasn’t meant to be known.”

“No, I know it’s just that it’s such a shock. The old man was a person to trust and so was his son. I believed them. They knew how to run a business. The whole damn division?”

“They kept a couple of the young guys. I suppose to finish with shipping and maybe they will move over to the retail division.”

“Sure, I guess it’s cheaper that way.”

“Thomas says.....”

“Thomas?”

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“He claims that the whole operation will be automated, done by machines. He kept going on about robotics. He claims they are taking over the world.”

“Crazy. They are selling the product line to another company. It’s about the patents, the trademarks and those sweet government contracts. That’s what it has to be. They’ll pocket a pretty penny with the sale. It’s the grandson, that’s what it is. Remember that old adage about the third generation in the family business? That’s when it falls apart. They lose sight of the people that got them to their throne. They sell out or go bust. I trusted the old man. I knew him well. Yes, he was a stern and he was a taskmaster, but fair. And his son, cut from the same mold for sure. Don’t forget we received our largest bonus under him, but not this last one. He was never around. He is the mystery man with that big mansion towering above us like a Pharaoh. But what can be done? You are in the ranks of the unemployed.”

“The pension comes to about three-hundred a month. I can draw it at sixty-two.”

“That’s a long wait. I hope you’ve been saving your money.”

“I’m set for life as long as I die in the next twelve months.”

“I don’t think that’s funny.”

“Gallows humor. Some humor can take the edge off. Though I don’t see something beyond this. Never considered it, that’s what it is.”

“You will recover. There will be another place, another company.”

“Recovery is not something that had ever occurred to me. Before this, it was all about forward motion. Sure, an illness or injury is always a possibility, but this is not something that occurred to me.”

“Think of it as a temporary illness. I suppose that’s the way I would consider it, but then it is not a place that I ever had to visit. I mean a job loss.”

“They gave me a ton of paper, brochures to read. I haven’t made sense of it yet. I’ll start digesting the stuff tomorrow. I’ll look around. I’ll see what I can find. I’ll sign up for unemployment while I’m looking around.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something. Don’t give up yet on Honore. David, I know people, maybe another position. Let me see what I can do. This needs to be brought to someone’s attention. Perhaps there could be another department or another position.”

“I think it’s a waste of time, but go ahead with it if you think it’s worth your time.”

“Don’t concern yourself with my time. What else am I doing?”

“If you don’t have anything for me to do, anything for you, I think I’ll go to Darla’s. I never returned her phone call. Will you be fine with that?”

“Spend time with her. No, I don’t need anything.”

“I’m not leaning on you.”

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“It will work out. Yes, visit with Darla. You should have returned her phone call. I can see she likes you. Aren’t I right?”

“She seems to. Yes, I should have called.”

He was the assistant coach of the girl’s baseball team when they first met. It was during the first series of the season. It was a warm, easy morning dotted in small, white clouds stitched on an expansive blue dome. It was a day intended for baseball. Nature and sport had conspired. It was a day that called for them. There were no choices to be made and no alternatives of significance.

She was one of the last to arrive and she took a seat along the first base line. She began cheering with the first pitch. Those sitting close to her were mildly amused with the early enthusiasm. As the game progressed, her voice rose above the lazy hum of the small crowd and it took little time for her to rouse support among them. He noticed that the pace picked up, the girls became more aggressive, enthused and the bantering increased among them. The crowd had joined the game completely. They were immersed and soon become participants. Darla’s spark had ignited the atmosphere. He had a vantage point from his position as the first base coach and he had been taken in with her fist pumping and rooting. He had not recognized her immediately, but then it came to him close to the end of the game. They had attended the same school and she had graduated a year ahead of him. He did not recall her name, but the face was familiar. She had clear, sharp piercing eyes

on a serious, narrow face. The mannerisms; legs apart in aggressive posture, head thrust forward with self-assurance, all of that on a smallish frame. However, to belie those mannerisms she had a clipped, slow, soft style of speech, as though every word was given careful consideration.

He approached her after the game and thanked her for her support and she reproached him for letting *her girls* lose by one run. He had struggled for a phone number for several weeks and after he had proven his interest to her satisfaction, she relented. At first, they would meet after the home games and it would be a simple dinner out, perhaps a movie. The companionship turned with a warmer edge by mid-season and she began to accompany him to the away games through the county. He gave her a team shirt and gave her the title of morale coach. She was as enthusiastic with the final game of the losing season as she had been with the first game of the season.

It was in the summer of a past, the one they now remembered as their halcyon days of bright skies, abandoned duty and the warmth to bring release of chilled wintry burdens. It was the summer that traveled deep into autumn and then faded gently in little slices, as unnoticed as grass growing. They spent afternoons at the lake with a rented boat simply drifting, rowing for a short time and watching the fish rise to peek curiously at them. They would row along the shoreline and stop under an old willow that stretched its limber arms over the water. The shade it contributed was a relief from the bleached sky and the

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supple limbs, feathery leaves of the willow would gather a slight breeze and hold it for them. They relaxed in the fresh breeze. Darla would dip her feet in the water and she would kick and the fish and tadpoles would dart away like missiles and the dragonflies would scatter and skim the water beyond the boat. They would stay under the willow while the lazy waves nudged the boat around gently until late in the afternoon and they would row back to the dock, walk to the meadow, not far from the dock, and spread a blanket and enjoy the simple lunch that Darla brought. After lunch, they would lay on the blanket telling stories, joking with one another, discussing a book or movie. When they were leaving the lake one afternoon Darla told him that she enjoyed their time away since it was the time of theirs to go somewhere, but at the same time to be nowhere. It was where time existed outside of them. David commented that the best of times was the time of pure idleness.

One afternoon, without announcement, she shed her blouse and slipped into the water, swam around the rowboat laughing and splashed the cool water on him. She swam further, out to the middle of the lake, carelessly cutting huge troughs in the glassy water, tuned on her back, kicked her legs and the water splashed up and obscured the rest of her body. An arm rose from the water and waved him on. The watery siren was beckoning. It was a siren's song and it became a seduction in a secluded, sunken castle. She began to descend, head and torso quickly, then her legs slowly, then her feet pointed upward and slipped under the glass.

She did not rise. He was amused, in a moment confused, and then panicked. It was too long. He fumbled with his pants, too much effort, he dove in and swam hurriedly, awkwardly. After a few strokes, he felt a scratch on his foot, his leg and he twitched. She rose, back arched. He stopped and tread water. She grabbed his arms and pulled herself into him and pressed her small breasts into his wet shirt. He grabbed her around the upper body, brought her over him, turned and swam to the boat. She was laughing when he lifted her from the water.

“But I was teasing with you. It was like tag. Say, you’re a good lifeguard.”

“I thought you.... anyone would, foolish, damn it.”

“But I thought.....” She grabbed her blouse and covered herself. “I’m sorry David. I think you were afraid.”

“No, not afraid, angry. Dry yourself off.”

It was the only awkward moment between them. He was suspicious of a testing feint and she believed, and told him later, his overreaction was anger because of her careless actions. He had not objected to her interpretation. It remained unresolved and it was not spoken of again.

It happened quickly, naturally and neither stretched for the companionship. The familiar feeling evolved as though they faintly recalled each other from a past encounter and that serendipity, the chances of their pairing, had turned its face on them. Their time brewed in the warmth of small talk, teasing and the comparisons of mutual likes and dislikes. They accepted each other casually, though

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profoundly by occurrence, and without the burden of demands. They came together without the recriminations of losing in the affairs of the heart and he was relieved to move past the futile, stale pursuit of the impossible Carol. The arrangement was fitting together without a discussion of possibilities, they were simply aware that they were pleased in their comfortable harbor. However, the subtle undercurrent exerted its force, as it always does, given the relationship with the daily and weekly proximity in anticipation. It was felt remotely, abstractly and then gained energy. They had not spoken of it. There wasn't a message in body language and no verbal subtle hints before the affair of the moment. It came without invitation and they reached for each other simultaneously and eagerly. It was not a mood of surroundings or some particular anniversary of their meeting or some wound that required comfort or any overt realization. The risks were not considered and they exchanged their undemanding comfortable companionship for the twisting, sensual and desperate path of liaisons in flesh. They remained absorbed in mutual relief and it was not relief from the single dimension of friendship, but relief from the underlying tension that had constricted them. The early days of friendship had turned sharply into a heightened entanglement in the new space. The anticipation, daily and weekly consumed them and they thought of one another in their absence.

Her car was in the parking lot. He had not phoned. There was no consideration of the hour. He parked in the

space under the carport marked ‘visitors’, walked up to the second floor and knocked on door 12B. He knocked a second time. He could hear a disruption inside, then a shuffling noise and the door opened.

“You couldn’t call?”

“I could have, thought I would drop in, and knew it would be okay.” She reached through the door, grabbed his arm and tugged gently.

“You know that you are welcome. Quit the polite stuff, David. I called but you never returned my call.” They walked into the living room and sat on the couch together. Stacks of lined notebook paper covered the coffee table in front of them.

“I know I was busy and it... well, little time left. Really forgot when you phoned.” He looked down at the papers spread on the table. “Damn, I am sorry. You are grading papers tonight.”

“Yes, it’s time to see if they are successful and if I am successful they will pass. I will be all night with it.”

“I should leave you to your work.”

“No, don’t leave. We’ll chat a little while I work. I’ll work on the multiple-choice questions while we talk. I can handle that. You were busy, busy with what? Harold is healthy I hope.”

“Yes, fine. I was laid off from the plant today. Finished.”

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“No. I don’t recall you mentioning that there were any problems, difficulties at the plant or with your job. What happened?”

“It was the division, in its entirety. I heard rumors, but it was sudden. Very sudden. Just rumors and opinions as to the reason, they claimed we were losing money. I don’t see how though. Everyone had an opinion and dismissed the company line. There were a multitude of opinions.”

“What’s the difference? It happened and that’s the story.”

“Although one has to be curious.”

“Janus has something for you. The closed door followed by a new door, a new path.”

“Janus?”

“The Roman God of doors, gateways. The doors of endings followed by new beginnings, new opportunities.”

“I’m in the multitude of the non-believers, mythology that is.”

“Don’t be in the company of non-believers in opportunity.”

“I’ll be a believer when I see the opportunity.”

“You’ve got it all backwards. So it was everyone?”

“In its entirety. Poof, up in smoke.”

“It’s easier to take that way, meaning that it’s not personal.”

“It’s personal and impersonal.”

“You’re one of many. You have to find another way. You’ll continue.”

“Certainly, but in what other direction? That’s what I have to think about.”

“You could have gone in another direction to begin with. It’s not too late.”

“I always felt comfortable there and it was honest work.”

“As for the honesty, there are numerous honest ways to make a living.”

“If there are numerous ways to make a living I shouldn’t have a difficult time finding another job, right?”

“I wouldn’t promise that. I’m not in the recruiting business. There are numerous people out there with honest jobs.”

“Promises were made. Not in writing, not spoken. That’s what they led us to believe. Everyone assumed that. The future was always in the crosshairs. It was always next year, next quarter, in the future. It was talked about. The supervisors and the managers upstairs were always optimistic.”

“Stop, David. So you are a victim of your expectations. I know what you’re looking for, the direction that you’re going in and I’m not going to give it to you. Back up and restart.”

He did not answer. They were staring at one another. Her expression was grim and he had not witnessed that expression before. He had been penetrated.

“I was going to ask you out for a movie but I can see that you are swamped.”

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“There are a couple of beers in the refrigerator. I can take a little break from this.”

“That suits me. Then I’ll leave you to continue.”

He went to the kitchen, rummaged through the refrigerator and gathered the two bottles.

“Special.” He delivered the bottles on a tray.

He picked up one of the papers and reviewed the questions and answers while she continued with the grading. She stopped reading and drank from the bottle. She leaned over and kissed him and he returned the kiss.

“Do you ever tire of it?” He pointed to the stack of papers.

“I did at the high school. There is a certain laziness that sets in with the static curriculum. That’s why I went to the university. Besides, I know the students are there by choice. It is an adjunct position that we refer to as *adjunctivitus*. It translates into low pay with twice the course load. However, I have been recharged. My enthusiasm has returned.”

“Adjunctivitus sounds like a dreadful illness.”

“You pay your dues, pay more dues, grovel and take your chances. Tenure is on the other side of the flaming hoop.”

They held one another for a few moments, kissed, she rubbed his neck and she leaned back on the couch.

“You can stay for awhile. I’ll turn on the television and you sit here and relax while I finish.” She flicked on the remote. The news had just concluded.

“Good, I missed the news. It’s as well since it’s all dreadful. Isn’t that so?”

“It’s never about good news. Who would get titillated with that?”

“I might.”

“You might today considering your new status.”

“Yes, my new status. I like that term. It adds a certain dignity as opposed to ‘unemployed’.”

“Speaking of the news, I never told you this but I know the boy that is missing from The Valley Center.... the boy in the news report.”

“How did you come to know him?”

“Do you remember when I volunteered there last fall?”

“Yes, I recall. As I remember it was two days a week.”

“It was Saturday morning and Monday afternoon. I started a little program in rudimentary science. It was basic nature. I had some demonstrations designed for them. It was moths and tadpoles. What excitement that caused. They treated me as though I were a magician. Anyway, little Henry was a dear. He was always eager to volunteer. He was my little helper. He was as quiet as a church mouse when I first met him and he really opened up when the little tadpoles and moths made their appearance.”

“Did you meet the parents?”

“Yes, I did. We had a little function for the parents and children after the program. I spoke with them for a few minutes and I came away from the short conversation

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thinking that they were in the category of the ashamed, ashamed of his condition. A few of the parents were in that category, but most were not.”

“It’s too late for good news.”

“I suspect that you are right. There are numerous potholes for a person to fall into, but for those like Henry the whole world can be a pothole.” She moved closer to him and they stared at the television. Neither focused on the televised program. The images moved past them with little notice and without comment. She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. They finished their beers and she resettled to her end of the couch and continued with her papers.

“You were fairly rough with me earlier, weren’t you?”

“Only because you deserved it and you know you did.” She was hesitant, glanced at him, turned her head, glanced at the papers on the table and then managed to summon the courage. “Do you need money?”

“Not from you.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m not taking money from a woman.”

“Sure, we are so dependent. We are only little lambs aren’t we? We need to be protected and.....” She mimicked a little pout and clasped her hands to her chest.

“Enough. I mean it doesn’t set well. I would feel like a gigolo. It wouldn’t feel right.”

“I’m willing to pay handsomely for your service.”

“For the first time you have put me out of the mood.”

“I understand. It’s best that we keep it free. I would run out of money before I ran out of the urge.”

“We’re both gluttons, aren’t we?”

“Call me. You’ll need me.”

It was still light, but diminishing quickly, when he left her apartment. He drove slowly, reflecting on the day that made little sense. The facts, events were rearranged, rationalized and categorized and came out the same way. The train sputtered. The wheels had rusted, the trip abandoned. Where was the next train, the continuation? The familiarity was draining quickly. He tried to filter out all of the comments and anger from the meeting at the parking lot and he began to laugh. A motorist drove beside his car and stared at him and David turned his face from the window momentarily, depressed the accelerator, made a turn on a side street that he never used on his way home and then doubled back to the usual route.

He said little to Harold when he returned. Harold offered to make dinner for him and he declined. He ate a sandwich, retired to his room and read a book until the words ran together and lost meaning. His concentration had run its course and his mind started to wander. He laid the book on the desk and stared at the company brochure laying next to the book. He ran his fingers over the dark, bold lettering then opened the brochure and thumbed through the stale paragraphs. He laid the brochure down. It could wait.

He collapsed on the bed. He looked out the window. The moon shown through the white curtain. He needed to

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return now. He had not visited with her in many months. It always brought comfort in its beginning and fear in its end. He could bring it back if he did not try too hard or too often. It was a subtle hint and he had to coax it. He must not overwhelm it for it would unravel at its beginning. He would keep his eyes open and start the reconstruction and after it took hold he could close his eyes and it would slowly develop.

The strands of her hair were strewn across the pillow as though scattered from the aftermath of a storm and fell onto his pillow. She was breathing lightly and she lay on her side. Her ribs moved up, then down and when her ribs raised with her breath the outline of them were visible through the thin fabric of her nightgown. She stirred and brought her arm up and stretched it across her side and rested the palm of her hand on her hip. Her fingers spread out in long thin translucent twigs. His eyelids were shuttered to a squint. When she stirred, he closed his eyes tightly and quit breathing and when she settled he would open his eyes in a squint and resume breathing. She whispered, he did not know what she said, but the tone was tender and softly passed her lips like a light breeze. She gently ran her thin fingers through his hair and leaned into him and pressed her lips to his forehead. He inhaled deeply and he could detect the familiar scent of soap that always surrounded her. He watched as she sat up quietly, turned and rested her feet on the floor in a seamless motion. He could see the outline of her spine through the sheer

nightgown. He stared at her back and she sat there for a few moments and then she stood. She turned to look at him and he closed his eyes quickly as she turned. She turned back and she seemed to glide across the room, the white gown fluttered around her as though she had caught a light breeze and then she walked through the door and closed it, but not completely so that a shaft of dim light spread across the floor. His legs stiffened and he broke into a sweat. This was the point of departure. The curtain fell. He could not see beyond this scene but he knew there was more. He could not raise the curtain. He would always bring it to this point and in a perverse way he would yearn for the emptiness, the cliff at the edge of the mountain where he would fall in darkness hoping that he would hit bottom and find what was remaining. But it never happened. It was the endless fall that came and he knew that he deserved the emptiness since he could not bring the vision to its conclusion and it was his duty to bring the conclusion of the images.

## NINE

He was humming early the next morning as he went into the shower. He did not remember staying awake for long the previous night and if he had a dream, he couldn't recall it. Sleep had been in a solemn and peaceful place. The peaceful sleep had come from the new proximity. The release had reared its head, not fully, but enough to know its presence. It was on the horizon.

He dressed quickly, bounded down the stairs and met Harold in the kitchen. He was sitting at the table with the newspaper sipping a cup of coffee.

"Did I hear you galloping down the stairs? It sounded like a horse bolting from your room."

"Beautiful day isn't it?"

"What has changed?"

"Only everything. Almost everything."

"I won't ask. You must have come by some good news. Perhaps you won the lottery."

"Yes, it was a kind of lottery."

"A *kind* of lottery?"

"Yes, the kind that lasts forever."

"I'm through asking, but I told you about losing sleep and eating breakfast. You should try it." He sighed and drew the newspaper up to his face."

"What is new in our little fish wrapper?"

“It is the story of that young boy from the handicap center, activity center. There are no leads and no witnesses. No one has seen him. It’s as though he vanished.”

“Yes, he disappeared from The Valley Center for the Disadvantaged. I have seen some of the posters around the town and read the story. Incidentally, Darla told me that she knew the boy.”

“How did she come to know him?”

“She volunteered at the center. He was a student in her class.”

“What did she have to say about him?”

“He was like the others in one way and in another way he wasn’t.”

“Anyway, they have finally offered a reward.”

“That could jog someone’s memory. Some little clue, some little detail that was overlooked may come to light.”

“They claim he wandered away. How did that happen? You would think that they would watch those people like a hawk.”

“That was too long ago. I think that it will end tragically. It usually ends in bad news if they are missing for that long.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. That’s how those cases usually end.”

“Heads will fall over that bit of incompetence.”

“How was the reunion? Enjoy yourself?”

“I had a great time of it. It was a lot of fun with perfect strangers.”

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“Good. You needed that after the bad news about the job. It is a good way to relax and have some fun. And how is Darla?”

“She is simply darling.”

“That’s a new description.”

“What do you have planned for the day?”

“Off to the doctor for my check-up. I have an appointment for this morning.”

“I had forgotten. Be sure and tell him that you have been cutting your medication. I am going to check on you. I’ll call the nurse and find out if you confessed.”

“Now you admit that you were snooping. Yes, I promise. That damn stuff is costing me a fortune.”

“It will cost more than a fortune if you don’t follow instructions.”

“Yes, I’ve got it. What do you have planned for the day?”

“The newspaper.” David pointed the newspaper spread out on the table.

“What?”

“I have to go through the help wanted ads.”

“I see. You’re getting started. Good idea and good luck. I have some good advice for you. Stay in touch with your former co-workers. They may have some leads.”

“Yes, stay in touch. I know you would do that. Stay in touch. I’ve been thinking of that lately.”

He began pouring through the want ads and it seemed to him as though he were reading information from another

planet. He had never passed a glance at the want ads. He quickly passed over the sections for truck drivers, nursing, financial and tradesmen and settled into the column for semi-skilled and unskilled labor and then sales positions. He underlined several prospects in the columns, reviewed his selections, crossed out several of the sales positions and service positions. There were not many options remaining and then he considered Missy's offer. Was it a subtle offer or was the application a mere formality? He thought better of it. It was best not to rely on her relatives. He flipped the paper back to the front page and looked at the photo at the bottom of the page. He appeared lost before he was missing. The drooping eyelids, mouth agape and un-kept wild hair and a pimply face stared back. He read on. The parents were distraught. He was an only child. They could not endure life without him. He was a sweet young boy and he was always trying to help others. No bad youngster is ever missing. No, that is cruel, snide. He deserves to be reunited. He deserves to be found. Parents must have their justice. Family histories must not run in reverse.

He settled in front of the television, gathered in the local morning news, which was full of notices about the heat wave, and drank his coffee. Harold left for the doctor and announced the time that he would return and David wished him luck. After the news, he watched a game show for a few minutes, became bored, went back to the newspaper, and reviewed his selections. He underlined a

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couple of positions, crossed off a few more selections, thinking that they were futile pursuits.

Restless, he rose from the chair and crossed the room to the front door. The same brown, lifeless lawn lay before the porch. The limbs on the trees were bowed and giving in to the drought and the humidity. The morning sun pulsated in a cloudless sky. Dystopia could fall over them and he would hold Darla tightly in their final days and defiantly embrace in the face of all the scorching mayhem that could be showered on them. Not to survive it, but not to surrender willingly. He walked through the shower of all endings, clutched her tightly as the sun crept closer and burnt them, melted them and they were careless in the demise.

The mail truck coasted down the opposite side of the street and stopped at the Berman's house and the postman deposited his duty in the tin mailbox and continued to the Johansen's home. She must have been watching for the postman since as quickly as the mail was deposited in the rusted, lopsided box she emerged from the front door and strolled down the sidewalk to the curb. She stumbled over the curb, opened the mouth of the box, retrieved the mail, dropped an advertising flyer on the lawn, bent over with effort and retrieved the piece. She detoured from the route to her house and cut across the lawn toward the Berman's house, halted in mid-stride, looked back across the lawn, stood there for a moment and then began walking to her house. It was last month that he had first witnessed the evidence of her confusion. It could be explained as the act

of some imagined emergency. She had bolted from her front door in her underclothes to retrieve her garbage can. She had not hesitated, did not realize the comedy of the scene and went about her duty. The two miscues could now be added to signify an alteration. With that realization, he could not follow any direct line though her life. It was a gap in time lost, perhaps to both of them, and he could only point to the beginning of that line. He imagined that the interior of the little house and supposed that after so many years it probably had changed little. It would remain, stranded in that time, with the camel back floral couch, the curio in the corner, the cracked leather chair to the side of the curio and the thin carpet curled at the edges, crouched to snare an unwary foot. It would be a time capsule of one of the typical solitary elderly. There were accounts of them and the accounts were not kind. One day would drain away into the following day and a memory of the distant past would rise to supplant a memory from the previous day. Routines would be observed as though they were catechisms and any deviation, a duty inadvertently skipped, forgotten from the routine, would bring a sinking uncertainty and an effort to routines on the following day would be redoubled. But then it would collapse back to the past and they would enter that capsule, lost in their era of security, gaining comfort in its certainty. It had the trait of fear. It lurked outside the door and it was something new that defiled the memories of their era.

## *The Reunion Man*

He would exit the school bus eagerly since she was always waiting at the door with a treat. It could be a candy bar, a slice of cobbler or a bowl of ice cream. She would embrace him and ask what he had learned that day or ask if there had been an amusing miscue in school. She would always ask about Tommy. He had told her funny stories about Tommy, the class clown, the unintentional clown. She laughed and she relished the sight when he told her about the day Tommy arrived at school with a fly trapped in his oily hair. It struggled, buzzed and flapped its exhausted wings desperately for escape without success and unnoticed by Tommy. However, it was not unnoticed by the other children and they would not tell him since it became the day's amusement. It was a respite from the drone of a day of study. He would tell that story repeatedly and they would laugh until her tears came. He would also concoct outrageous stories about Tommy just to watch her laugh. They would play board games like Parcheesi or checkers and they would watch cartoons together. She did not seem to mind watching the cartoons with him and she would laugh along with him. At five-thirty, never a minute late, Harold would arrive from work. He would coast up the driveway and David would hug her at the door and run down the sidewalk to meet him.

He had not visited with her after those early days. Later in his youth, he was allowed to return home after school. Now, some morning or afternoon when he was returning or departing for work, he would wave to her as he

drove by. Sometimes she would acknowledge him and wave in return, but other days she would simply stare, perplexed. Some days were cruel and memories were reluctant to register with her. He should visit with her, but as the years drifted by he felt that both of them might be uncomfortable with a sudden visit. It was rude to simply wave in her direction and not extend some small talk with her. He always felt the obligation when he saw her, when the delicate, pale hand signaled him with a wave. He would pass her, slowly to show his recognition and continue on his way. There was the beginning and there was now. In-between was the alteration.

He walked quickly through the door, down the steps, across the street and stood at her front door. He knocked and waited. There was no answer. He knocked again and waited. The doorknob turned slowly and the door opened. She was wearing a frayed housecoat, her hair was wild as though struck by a flock of Jays and her face was pasty white. She looked at him briefly, stuck her head through the doorway in the direction of the driveway then stared at him.

“Where is your truck?”

“Truck?”

“How is it that a repairman arrives without a truck?”

“No, Mrs. Johansen. It’s me David.” He turned and pointed in the direction of his house. I am your neighbor, David Haverstall.”

*The Reunion Man*

“Oh, David! How nice to see you.” She hesitated for a moment, opened the door further. “Come in. So you are out of the hospital at last.”

David stepped through the door. He would enter first then correct her afterward.

“Thank-you.” He scanned the dark room. His suspicions were correct. He entered the secluded time capsule. The carpet was worn to its base and its color muddled, the same television stared back with a yellowed screen and the same couch lounged collapsed in its middle. “You were expecting a repair man today?”

“The washing machine is giving me fits.”

“Perhaps I can be of some help.”

“You are a repair man?”

“No, but I have some skills around the house.”

“That is good, but I will wait for the repair man. I think he will arrive soon. Please sit. You must take it easy. Please, here on the sofa. You will be comfortable here.” There was a small oscillating fan on the table next to the sofa and it turned slowly, stuck at the end of its radial path, shook nervously and then continued its path.

“Yes, I’ll sit with you for a few minutes. But, it was my father who was in the hospital.” He bowed his head slightly as though apologizing. The air from the fan brushed across his face. Its faint breeze was warm.

“David, David.” She started at him for moment from beneath a furrowed brow. “Yes, A nice young boy. You

would stay here when you were a little boy. Yes, after school. We had fun together. You liked the cartoons.”

“We would watch television together and you would always prepare a treat for me.”

“Yes and your father fell ill. When will he get out of the hospital?”

“He is improved and he is home now.” He removed the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

“I’m sure he is glad to be home. You have returned to care for him?”

“Yes, until he gets on his feet.”

“You are devoted. Isn’t it terrible the way some children abandon their parents?”

“I think you are right, but I suspect that most don’t.”

“It is best to be suspicious of all of them.”

He had to digress least she would be lost in the popular topic of ungrateful children. There is nothing more tedious than castigating the younger generation.

“You could call me any time that you need a house repair. I’m very handy around the house. There are several things that I can repair. I have a lot of time on my hands so it is not an imposition. Also, I would write it off as a neighborly favor.”

“Oh, I’ve never been one to ask for charity.” She sighed as though she had resigned to a tremendous burden.”

“Or, if you would be more comfortable, there is an organization in the town that lends assistance to the elderly.”

*The Reunion Man*

“Yes, and they will come here and try to get me to give them a tip after they create a mess. It is best that I continue to get along as I usually have. Only just last week.....”

“Of course not. It is free. No one will sell anything to you. It is a charitable organization, a local organization, only for our town.”

“I don’t want strangers in my house. You can never trust them. They come in and snoop around and the next day something turns up missing. I was afraid to call for a repairman yesterday but I was desperate. They will fix what is broken, charge double and then they will take your valuables when you are not watching.” She looked away from him quickly, back again and pointed her finger at him. “Not that I have anything that valuable around here.”

“I understand your concern, only if I....”

“No, don’t bother. I am fine as it is.”

“It wouldn’t be that much trouble, really.”

“I did call that town councilman. What’s his name? Yes, Nelson. I complained about the blackout last month. He told me to complain to the power company. What kind of an answer is that? Aren’t they supposed to investigate and explain these inconveniences to us? They are supposed to hold these utilities to their duty. Don’t you think so?”

“That would seem right to me.”

She nodded her head thoughtfully. She had a small kerchief stuffed into the pocket of the housecoat and she

brought it to her face and wiped her forehead. “Wasn’t it terrible about Mrs. Collins leaving?”

“Mrs. Collins?”

“Yes, going into that nursing home?”

“Oh, yes, but I am certain that she is comfortable there.” He searched his memory for the name but neither the name nor event was familiar.

“I doubt it. They get you in there and you’re a prisoner until you die. That is what happens to the old people. Disposable, that is what we are. Tossed aside like a banana peel.”

“I think that would describe the worst of them, but for the most part I think they provide a reasonable quality of life.”

“I hope you are right, but I don’t think so.”

She rose from her chair with some difficulty, stood in place for a moment, looked at David, opened her mouth as though she were about to speak, then perhaps thought better of it and walked to the door. She opened the door, a crack, and peered outside. She looked left then right and stood with her hands on her hips. She closed the door with authority and a sigh.

“Late, they are never on time and when they come into your house they steal your valuables and they charge you double.” She added a ‘tsk, tsk,’ then dropped in the chair. “It wasn’t always that way. It used to be an honest world. People kept their word. There was such a thing as duty.

*The Reunion Man*

That was the neighborhood I lived in. Everyone knew each other and there was trust.”

“You were one of the first in this neighborhood. I think that you have known everyone. You watched the young grow and go to school, to work, get married and others move away.”

“All the people are moving away. It’s as though no one wants to live in this neighborhood anymore. Everything has changed. I remember when I moved here there were so many children playing in the streets and so many friendly people.”

“Yes, I agree. Now it is like living on a deserted island. I suppose you knew most of the people in the neighborhood from the beginning. It is quite different now.” He was sweating and his shirt had stuck to his skin.

“Yes, up and down the street. I knew them all and we relied on one another, but then many moved away, died and some, I think just disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“That’s what I always told my brother when someone left and did not leave word of their destination. There were a few who just went up in smoke it seemed.”

“There are always some who are secretive. I suppose they stick together.”

“Yes, now I remember, when you were young, just a baby. Your sister would push you around in that little buggy, all around the neighborhood. She was a tall, cute girl

and I remember she would bring vegetables for me from her garden. She was always in a hurry.”

“Sister? In a hurry? In what way was she in a hurry?”

“She would run out to the curb to catch the taxi, seems as though she was always late for something.”

“She would take a taxi? Every day?”

“No, I don’t believe it was every day. Yes, it was in the morning. Did she have a part time job?”

“Yes, that’s it and when did she return?”

“Late in the afternoon. No, it wasn’t. I think it was after I had lunch.” She closed her eyes as though she were in a trance. “Yes, after lunch.”

“Was anyone with her?”

“No, no one was with her. Do you mean in the taxi?”

“Yes, in the taxi.”

“It is difficult to get a taxi these days. You wait forever and by the time they arrive you are late for an appointment and they always take the long route to cheat you.”

“That’s true, but in the taxi. Was anyone with her?”

“No. She was alone. Why would someone go to work with her?”

“Yes, that’s a good point.”

“I remember your sister would push you around the block in that little buggy. You would wave at all the cars that passed by.”

“Yes, my sister. You remember her?”

*The Reunion Man*

“Did she get married and move away? What was her name? She was not here for long, but she was always in a hurry. Do you still have that garden?”

“No, we have little time for gardening.”

“I know. Everyone is too busy these days. What is everyone doing?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think that everyone knows one another as they did in the past. We are all close strangers.”

“Yes, I feel abandoned now. I woke one day and found myself in a foreign country,”

“I have time. I wish you would let me help you in some way. It must be difficult for you. Living alone is not easy.”

“I have always been self-sufficient. I manage quite well on my own. You needn’t be concerned about my age if that is what you are thinking. I am in better health than those twenty or thirty years younger.”

He looked around the room. “Nothing has changed. Everything is the way that I remembered it, exactly.”

“I have no reason to change anything.” She examined the couch where he was sitting. “Although I suppose that I should buy a new couch.”

“You have an older brother, don’t you?”

“What do you know about him?”

“We were friends. Have you spoken to him lately?”

“Only last month. He still lives in California. He will come to visit next spring.”

“Have you considered living with him, in California?”

“No, it is far from here and confusing there. Besides, I don’t care for his children.”

“What is it that you don’t like about his children?”

“They are foul mouthed brats. Do you still have that garden? Your sister would bring fresh vegetables for me.”

“Yes, I do. I will bring something for you.”

“You are so kind.”

“I would really like to call your brother. I have not seen him in many years. Could you give me his phone number?”

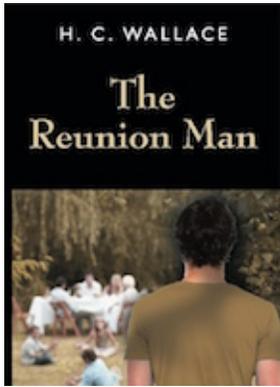
“Yes, wait right here. I will get it for you. I can never remember it.” She clutched the arm of the chair for support, gradually rose, plopped back into the chair, rose again and trundled down the hallway.

He looked at his handkerchief. The white cloth was stained brown. The dust in the room was a thick cloud and the little fan had disturbed the cloud and the dust had covered his face. He was smothering. He was smothering in the heat and dust and smothering with the convoluted exchange with a ghost. Sister indeed. Vegetable garden. Was there ever a vegetable garden? Perhaps another neighbor that had brought the gift. But the taxi. She was confused. Someone else was taking the taxi. It was the woman she called his sister. The past and present collided in the heat and dust of a lost morning. Was her brother aware of this discord?

*The Reunion Man*

It was silent for several minutes. He heard her footsteps in the hallway.

“I want you to see these pictures.” She was standing at the entry to the hallway and she was holding a photo album. She held it in her outstretched arms as though it were a communion offering.



*David has a single affectionate memory of the mother that abandoned him in early childhood. He is also haunted by a vague, discomfoting experience in childhood. His father has responded vaguely to David's questions about his mother. Maggie, a family friend, offers scant details. He is suspicious of her doting attention. Additional pressures arise. He desires more than a physical relationship with his lover, Darla. The relationship has stalled and he is uncertain if she wants it to progress. The village is abuzz with theories about a young handicapped boy that has been missing. This story explains the circumstances of a boy touching the lives of Darla, David, and his friends.*

*David and Darla share mutual tragedies at Darla's family reunion. Darla reveals that she was a victim of disturbing encounter with a distant relative and David reveals his angst and confusion about his mother. David tells her about the fawning attention of Maggie. Darla confronts Maggie and Harold and uncovers the truth of David's mother. Maggie confesses her involvement with David's mother that played a part her departure. The truth of the involvement leaves David stunned. Is the answer to her disappearance a resolution or does it result in additional confusion?*

## **The Reunion Man**

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