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Coburn: The Seed

THE SEED

Andrew Coburn

Lydia Lapham did not ask him in. Wearing gray suit and collar, Austin Stottle brought himself in with all his spiritual luggage and overly good face and planted himself in the overstuffed chair that had been her father's favorite. A month ago her mother had died and her father, as if duty-bound, had followed fast. Tired after a hectic shift at the hospital, she wondered how best to get rid of the reverend while he vainly anticipated an offer of coffee and cookies, which her mother used to provide. She was forced to view long, solemn features that dragged on and on under receding hair, while he drew from memory the image of the nursing school graduate uniformed in the whitest of whites and mimicking a bride without the fancies. She could've been a nun, bride of Christ.

"Matt needs you." The voice came as if from the pulpit. "He's eating himself up over you."

Matt MacGregor was a longtime boyfriend she had stopped seeing, a habit she had broken, a mistake corrected when she touched thirty on her last birthday and surveyed a waste of precious years. "Some things aren't your business," she said and stayed standing while he drummed dry fingers on the arms of her father's chair.

"Gauge your own grief, Lydia, and consider that Matt's may be every bit as great as yours. You've lost your parents, and he's lost his mate."

"We weren't married."

"Ah, but you were as mates, don't pretend otherwise."

But she never would've married Matt. No suddenness to his thoughts, no flashes, nothing nuanced about him. A pug nose caricatured boyish looks while a muscular build evoked days he'd played sports at the regional high school before joining the town's miniature police department. That was Matt. She had led herself on more than she had him. "Again, Reverend, it's none

of your business. I don't even want you here."

"We're all God's creatures," he said with utmost patience. "We must look after each other. Matt has a duty to look after you, but you won't let him exercise it. You'll end up driving him into the arms of whores."

"Tell him to wear a rubber."

"I didn't hear that, Lydia. It passed right over my head. Your lips remain sweet." He started to rise and then stayed put. "God's breath became the beauty of women. I've always believed that. That's why no woman is born without charm."

"Bullshit," Lydia said under her breath.

"We all have unworthy moments, men and women alike. When I was a boy I aspired to become a tailor so I could run a tape around a woman's bust. My uncle on my mother's side was a tailor and regaled my father with off-color stories. My father repeated them to my mother to remind her of her humble origins."

"Your father must've been a winner."

"My mother was a wise woman. When I said dirty words she reminded me that God has big ears. When I threatened to run away she packed a lunch and told me not to eat it all at once because it would have to last forever."

His voice was an irritant, and she was tired, on her feet all day hustling from one patient to another, dealing with demanding doctors. "I'm sorry, Reverend, but I must ask you to leave."

"Yes, yes, I understand. You look all in." He rose. "I'll tiptoe out."

She sank into her father's chair, drew her legs under her, and, half shuttering her eyes, heard her mother's voice somewhere in the house and glimpsed her father's shadow. In a flight of fancy she felt separate from her body and in league with her parents. *Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad.* She nodded off for a minute, maybe not even that, and woke to a stillness too intense to accommodate any more ghosts. *Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad.*

Switching on a light, she mounted the stairs on unsteady legs and used the bathroom. On the way out she clumsily banged

her shoulder against the door and then took deliberate steps into her bedroom. On the floor lay a sprung collar, the three segments of a gray suit, shoes, socks, and everything else. In her bed, covers pulled to his chin, was Reverend Stottle, eyes fervent with a calling.

"I've been waiting," he said.

Lydia turned, descended the stairs, and snatched up the phone. After misdialing, she reached the police station and asked for the chief. Chief Morgan came on the line a half-minute later.

"James, you'd better get over here."



Chief Morgan's lean face looked hard and permanent, as if it would never age more than it already had. He was forty-six, thirty-six when he lost his wife on the highway to a teenager without a driver's license. Reverend Stottle was a few months past fifty. With a firm grip the chief escorted him out of the house and marched him to a battered car bearing the town seal.

Reverend Stottle spoke abjectly. "Are you taking me to jail, James?"

"I'm taking you home. Get in."

The reverend gave a start when the radio crackled. Head bowed, he placed his hands between his knees. Chief Morgan settled in behind the wheel and twisted the ignition key. The motor groaned as if being asked to do too much. The reverend spoke solemnly. "I'm the scum of the earth."

"Don't overdo it, Austin." The motor caught, and the car shot forward. The chief clicked on the headlights, which froze a cat. He sped around it.

"You won't tell, will you, James? I'm on shaky ground at the church. My car's back there. People will know."

The chief took a corner. So far, for the most part, he had avoided looking at the reverend. "I'll have it returned to you."

"You're disappointed in me, aren't you?"

"That was my girl you were bothering."

"Not your girl. Matt MacGregor's."

"My girl."

"Yours? Really? James, congratulations. When the time comes, the church is yours free, even the organist, and I'll do the marrying. A deal?"

Chief Morgan ran the car around the village green, swerved into the drive beside the Congregational Church, and pulled up near the parsonage. "Good night, Reverend."

Reverend Stottle looked relieved and almost happy. "God will understand. He's male." He climbed out and looked back. "I owe you."



Matt MacGregor died at home of a gunshot wound self-inflicted while toying with his Magnum, a weapon he duly owned but was unauthorized to carry, Chief Morgan's strict orders. Consensus among breakfast regulars at the Blue Bonnet was that the gun was too big for the boy, who thought he was Clint Eastwood. "Hell, even Clint Eastwood isn't Clint Eastwood," said Millie, a waitress for some thirty years at the Blue Bonnet. "Same as John Wayne wasn't Wayne. Fakes, all of them." Millie had her own take on the shooting. "Suicide," she stated, and Orville Farnham, a longtime selectman, said, "Get out." She looked over her shoulder. "Think about it, Orville." The more everyone thought about it the more they remembered that Matt had always been stuck on Lydia Lapham and was crushed when she dumped him. "Suicide," Millie repeated. "And the chief shares the blame."

"It wasn't suicide," Chief Morgan told Lydia, who harbored a horrible suspicion that it was, and she regretted mean things she had written about Matt in her diary. Immature. Shallow. Premature ejaculator. Cowboy cop.

"A bullet in the gut isn't suicide," the chief went on. "It was an accident, a stupid one, but an accident pure and simple." She

needed the reassurance, and the chief, sixteen years her senior, was almost a father figure. Neither had planned a relationship, but he was lonely and she an overage orphan.

They came together in her house, all hers now that her parents were gone. In his embrace she called him Chief, and he said, "Make it James?" Naked, she was frozen milk, her nipples wintry points. He entered her with a sense of trespass and proceeded cautiously until she urged, "Harder, James. I won't break." After that he had the snort of a bull, she the low of a cow. Inadvertently, his voice tangling in her hair, he called her Elizabeth, the name of his dead wife, which didn't trouble her. She relished being two sides of a spinning disk, flesh and spirit drawing on a common muscle the way darkness and light swing off the same hinge. A little later, sharing a pillow, she said, "Are the stories true?"

Mostly true were accusations at the Blue Bonnet that he spent too much time in the Heights where newcomers lived in extravagant houses, monopolized the country club, and demanded extra police presence. Apocryphal were tales of women wowing him in their garter belts and sleeping with their wealthy spouses in their bed socks. "Use your own judgment," he said, lifting a wrist to check the time. She watched him swing long legs over the side of the bed and reach for sloughed-off boxer shorts.

"Why don't you wear a uniform? You used to."

"Never felt comfortable in one."

"Matt loved his. He was like a boy."

"And died like one." The chief donned chinos and a white shirt left open at the throat and squeezed into loafers in need of a shine. "Any chance I can come back?"

"Your call, James."

Alone, she sank her head deeper into the pillow and mulled over a life in which day-to-day things had little meaning and the episode with Chief Morgan was movie material, cameras whirring, improvisation called for. Eyes closed, she fell asleep and dreamed she was a girl again, few cares, no burdens, and many giggles, her fingers dug into a box of popcorn. The dream

broke, and she opened her eyes to find shadows in the room and the chief gazing down at her.

"I'm back."

She said, "You never left."



Reverend Stottle motored out of Bensington on a mission of mercy. Mrs. Dugdale, the eldest member of his church, childless, widowed, lay dying in Lawrence General Hospital. He entered the unkempt little city with foreboding, for he knew failure. Never had he penetrated the inconsolableness of someone who had lost a mate, a child, or a parent, and untrained in marital counseling, he had made messes of several marriages. But he'd always tried to do his duty and never shirked a responsibility, and that surely was in his favor, though it didn't prevent a shiver as he parked in the visitors' lot. Whose frigid hand was that around his heart? Satan's was hot, he'd been told at Bible College.

He didn't need to ask directions to the room, though he paused near the nurses' station, where an older nurse was mapping out patients to an aide. Emphysema was sharing 213 with Diabetes, Impaired Kidney was next door, and Anorexic had been discharged. The nurse looked up. "Can I help you, sir?" No help needed, and he strode on. The last time he had seen Mrs. Dugdale she was propped in a wheelchair like a rag doll, and he'd needed to look twice to determine that she was breathing. He saw that this time she was wired to a glinting monitor whose jagged streaks of hieroglyphics looked evil.

"It's Reverend Stottle," he said, approaching the bed. "Fear nothing," he went on, aware that lately he feared much. "You've had ninety-three long years, more than most people." Mrs. Dugdale's eyelids fluttered but did not open. Toothless, her face gathered around her mouth. The bed seemed to be swallowing her, as though she no longer had permission to exist. "Nothing is deeper and darker than aloneness." He spoke with thoughts of episodes in his own life, including a crisis of faith. When Mrs.

Dugdale's lids shuddered, he gripped one of her hands, a mess of bones gloved in loose skin speckled like a tiger lily. "Life is the light leading to the final darkness where we each shall lie alone."

Her lids went still. He released her hand and stepped back. In the subdued light her face shone luridly and revealed all her years. With a rush of emotion, he pressed a button on a cord and waited. Two minutes that seemed like twenty passed before the nurse who had spoken to him appeared.

"Mrs. Dugdale is gone," he said, flushed with purpose. "I saw her off."

The nurse pushed past him and bent over the bed. Her bottom was substantial, and the pink of her underwear blossomed through the white nylon of her trousers.

"No, Reverend, she's just asleep."

His face fell from a sense of betrayal. "Are you certain?"

"Quite."

He rode the elevator to ground level and went into the public lavatory. At the urinals he stood wedged between a burly security guard and a slender Latino and relieved himself with a dash of dignity. Afterwards at one of the sinks he splashed his hands with much ado when realizing they were not going to wash theirs. Watching them leave, he wondered whether Jesus had always washed his. In those days feet received the greater attention.

As soon as he stepped into the cafeteria he glimpsed Lydia Lapham sitting by herself, stark and lovely in her whitest of whites, and he made a beeline to her and seated himself before anything in her eyes could drive him away. "I apologize for what happened the other day. My only excuse is that I've been under much pressure doing God's work."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be doing it." Lydia lifted her coffee cup. "Let's not discuss it."

"I agree. It was an aberration. I'm here to warn you about the ugly stories going around town. People say Matt MacGregor killed himself over you. I defended you, and so did the chief. Rest assured."

Blood rushed into Lydia's face, anger into her voice. "It was an accident. Matt shot himself in the stomach."

"He wanted to suffer," Reverend Stottle said off the top of his head, as if God had guided him.

"No, Reverend, you want *me* to suffer."



"We need to talk," Lydia said. "Not here." They went for a drive in the chief's unmarked car, away from the town to a narrow road that followed a stretch of the Merrimack River bordered by a purple haze of loosestrife. A breeze delivered the fresh smell of lumber, the essence of a tree still in it, from an extravagant house being built near the water. "When I was teenager I had a crush on you. A lot of the girls did."

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"No." A groundhog fed boldly where roadside weeds were greenest. "Did you know there was a man in my life before Matt? Of course you did. Not much gets by in this town. He was a married doctor. His wife never knew, so I was the only one who got hurt. We've each had our losses, haven't we, James? When you lost your wife, why didn't you pull up stakes and go, just *go*?"

The chief swerved slightly to avoid cyclists. "I nearly did. I wanted to go to a part of the world where it was already tomorrow. But I couldn't act, couldn't move. I was paralyzed."

After a silence Lydia said, "I suppose you and I are a juicy item at the Blue Bonnet. I know they're blaming me for Matt's death. They must be blaming you too."

"In a way Matt's lucky," the chief said. "He doesn't have to grow old. And who's to say that's bad. Look at Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Princess Di. Forever young."

"I'd call that a waste."

"I'm rationalizing."

"I know what you're doing." Gradually the riverbank grew tall with brush, summer at its fullest. Lydia lowered her voice.

"I can't take the town anymore, James. I'm leaving soon. I've a

job lined up at Bellevue Hospital in New York.”

“Bellevue? That’s a—”

“I know what it is. My penance.”

“For a crime you didn’t commit?”

“For whatever,” she said, and he maneuvered the car onto the shoulder of the road and twisted off the ignition. Birdsong wafted through the tick of insects and the heat of day. Spoiling the scene were crushed cola containers and McDonald’s wrappings. “Thank you, James. You’ve held me together.”

He took her into his arms as if to secure her. “Maybe if I hold you tight enough you won’t go.”

“Come with me.”

“I’d be a minnow out of water.” His smile was at once rueful and ironic. “What would I do? Work security at Bellevue?”

Three weeks later, kissing goodbye, each had a queasy feeling, as if someone were closing a book on them. Lydia said that as soon as she was settled in she’d write or phone. She did neither. And eight years would pass before they saw each other again.



On the village green a little girl with a porcelain face asked Reverend Stottle if there was really a God, and the reverend shot a finger skyward. “Those big fluffy clouds are God’s laundry. That’s how we know He’s up there. Always looking down on us. Loving us.”

“Why don’t I ever see Him?”

Reverend Stottle heard church bells in his head and saw himself wearing his first long pants. “If God wanted you to see Him, He’d throw down a rope ladder or give you magical seeds to grow a bean stalk.”

The answer didn’t go over, and the child appraised his gray suit. “Are you really a minister?”

He held up three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

He drove to Lawrence General Hospital in a Honda Accord purchased with money Mrs. Dugdale, long gone, had willed

him. At the hospital he roamed corridors with an eye out for women in johnnies and, if lucky, glimpsed a bare bottom or two, a harmless activity for which he forgave himself. He knew that if he strayed too far from righteous ways his dear wife Sarah would promptly set him straight. Thank God for Sarah. He also assigned some credit to the chief.

In room 202 he visited a woman whose childhood in memory was not in the least remote, but yesterday was. She chatted about songs she had liked and sang the words to "Mairzy Doats" while the reverend held her arthritic hand. When she broke wind, he pretended not to hear. "You're kind," she murmured.

He knew times when he hadn't been and hoped no one was keeping score. Black marks in a notebook. Years of good deeds down the toilet. He left the hospital feeling glum, his face torn between a grimace and a scream, as if something bad were going to happen. And within the week something did. His Sarah died.

Parishioners gathered to comfort him. His face stark, he told each he was a flower trying to stand up to frost. After the funeral he went to pieces and blew hot and cold about God. He took the pulpit on Easter Sunday and said, "I'd like to know why He created cockroaches. Roaches spread disease and give asthma to poor children. I'd like to ask why He gave our organist a fine face and her sister a banal one, not to mention a lisp. Was He being playful or plain cruel? And how about innocent babies born with Down Syndrome? With cleft palates? And what did Lou Gehrig ever do to deserve the disease he got?" Voice breaking, Reverend Stottle suddenly gripped the pulpit for support. "And what reason did He have for taking my sweet Sarah?"

Privately he told people that God was a terrorist.

Within the week the church board voted him an open-ended sabbatical and trooped into his little office to announce the decision as he toyed with a bronzed baby shoe that served as a paperweight. The date of his birth was stamped into the sole, making him his own unforgettable child.



The breakfast crowd had dissipated, the communal table of regulars vacant, when Chief Morgan seated himself at a window table and checked in on his cell phone. Meg O'Brien told him that gravestones had been tipped over during the night, and Eugene was on it. Eugene was his sergeant, and Meg, her voice a growl from years of cigarettes, was his civilian dispatcher. "I'm at the Blue Bonnet," he said

"I know where you are."

He was scanning the Boston papers over a second cup of coffee when Reverend Stottle joined him. The reverend's eyes were puffy, his face drawn. "They've put me out to pasture, James. They don't want me anymore. I'm just an old thing."

Morgan turned a page, away from civil war in Angola, killings in Kosovo. "I heard it was just a sabbatical. A leave of absence."

"Call it what you will. In the bigger picture, we're two widowers drifting in the same boat. We've lost our oars." He raised a finger to Millie, who anticipated his order, green tea and a buttered blueberry muffin. His eye sped to the page Morgan was scanning, a long run-over from Page One. "Sad," he said. "Poor Gorbachev has lost his Raisa, but that's what life is. Loss. Everyone loses someone. I wonder if President Clinton knows how lucky he is having Hillary. I understand his physical needs. I was there, James. Lucky I had Sarah. You lost your wife—how many years ago?—and you're still crying inside. Don't tell me you're not."

Morgan wanted to tell him to shut up and instead turned to the comics, to *Garfield*, often a laugh, to *Herman*, off-center and richly absurd, the way he often pictured himself, whether in a calamity of conflicting emotions or the shambles of a relationship. He seemed always at the end of something, never at the beginning.

The reverend was given his tea and a hot muffin absorbing butter. Sipping, munching, he looked forlorn and bewildered

with a glare of crumbs around his mouth. "I don't know if God is good or bad, James. Worse, I don't even know if He's there."

Morgan folded the newspaper. "Do I need this, Austin?"

"Perhaps not, but listen anyway. He spoke in a whisper. 'I've come to terms with my lust. Have you come to terms with yours?'"

The last woman Morgan had held close had a finely drawn face refurbished with Botox and complaints that her husband was a cold fish with an unfailing eye for flaws, especially hers. Morgan was relieved when she ended it with him. "Not really your concern, Austin."

"I'm worried about your soul."

"Worry about your own. I'll tend to mine."

Reverend Stottle made insufficient use of his napkin. "Do you hear from her, James? You know who."

"Not a word." He scraped his chair back. "She could be married, probably is."

"Do you think she's forgiven me?"

"She's a nurse. She's seen it all." Morgan was on his feet. "I've a town to take care of."

"Maybe the town takes care of you, James."



In the presidential election, Reverend Stottle voted for Al Gore and Chief Morgan voted for no one. Nearly a year later came the horror known as 9/11, and not long afterwards Lydia Lapham returned to Bensington, moved in with a widowed aunt, and reconnected at Lawrence General Hospital. Her first morning, a scrub nurse dealing with knives, scissors, a drill, and a saw, she had a miserable headache and cut herself on a scalpel. Unwilling to cry, she laughed. Later she had a reunion lunch in the cafeteria with Chief Morgan and saw a face leaner than she remembered, a few extra lines added in. He saw her as still fetching, though in a somber sort of way, and asked, "Why didn't you ever phone?"

"It was over," she said. "I was making a break from everything."

"And now you're back. Bring me up to date."

She used as few words as possible. There was a marriage that didn't survive the honeymoon and a child that didn't reach birth, after which she threw herself into nursing duties in Bellevue's trauma unit, where her first patient was wheeled in with a pulverized foot, bones ground into meal. Weekends she volunteered at a Brooklyn clinic and blew her stack at a male doctor giving elderly women perfunctory exams and young women exhaustive ones. "They didn't fire him or even reprimand him because they doubted they could replace him." Then came 9/11, a tiny taste of Hiroshima, history biting the USA in the ass. "Can't be real, I thought. Must be smoke and mirrors. But there was ash, James. Everywhere ash. And after that, all those workers at Ground Zero. We knew they were breathing in metallic air, no matter what Christie Whitman said."

Morgan spoke softly. "You OK?"

"You had to be there," she said and lost interest in her salad.

"I'm sorry about your marriage, your child."

"Thank you. And let that be the last we talk of it. I'm glad I'm out of New York, out of my cockroachy little apartment, though I'll probably miss it. How's Reverend Stottle? Has that silly son of a bitch been defrocked?"

"He's trying to straighten himself out. He lost his wife."

Lydia altered her expression to erase the nasty picture she'd drawn in her mind. Morgan didn't want the second half of his sandwich and asked if she did. She didn't. "Ten years ago, James, were you in love with me?"

"Did you doubt it?"

"You never said. I could only suspect. Do you believe in second chances?"

"I'm looking at one," he said. "Do you know you've never stepped foot in my house?"

"How about tonight?"

His house was more Gothic than Victorian and not in total repair, for he tended to let things slide. He waited on

the front porch. Near the rail among roses was a spiderweb to which a powdery moth was fastened like a miniature angel. He considered rescuing it but hesitated interfering with the balance of life, which he felt was tenuous enough. She arrived within minutes, the sky not yet dark. "I'm fifty-six years old," he told her, and she said, "I know how old you are." He said, "It may not be the same."

But it was.

Same sounds. Same sensations. Same intensities. Even Elizabeth crept into the act.



Reverend Stottle ran into Lydia near the Blue Bonnet and looked as if he wanted to clutch the moment. "I heard, I heard. You and James are planning to marry. Word gets around fast." His smile showed new teeth. "I promised James I'd do the marrying. No charge. A promise is a promise."

"I didn't say I wanted you to marry us," Lydia said evenly.

"I understand, but I've rid myself of demons. I fill in now and then for the new minister. When asked, I christen babies. I marry people. The parish has set me up in a condo near the cemetery, close to my sweet Sarah. When I lost her, I lost what was most precious."

"When you lose a child, you lose a world," Lydia said. Reverend Stottle wasn't sure he entirely understood, and she wasn't about to enlighten him. She wasn't even sure why she said it. Her voice stayed level. "It's impolite to stare."

He blinked. "You'll be a beautiful bride, a vision in white."

Two months later, married by a justice of the peace, Lydia and James Morgan honeymooned at a seaside hotel in Maine and then settled into the chief's revitalized house. New windows and wallpaper, new siding and roof. The kitchen was expanded to accommodate a breakfast nook overlooking a recently pruned crabapple tree. Lydia said, "I feel myself taking root here." Their love life was vigorous, the only off-note her concern that without

precautions she might get pregnant. "You're not always careful. James. And I don't want to lose another world." Lydia took time before continuing. "I'm forty and afraid, James. And the times we're living in are scary."

"According to the History Channel, we had scarier times. The Dark Ages were no picnic. Nor were Biblical days. Lots of slaughter, horrible plagues."

Their mouths moving toward each other, they let their lips brush. She whispered, "Just try to be careful."



On nights Reverend Stottle couldn't sleep he visited the cemetery to talk to his wife, sometimes lightheartedly. "I bet you don't know who turns the stars on and off." His gaze fell from the lit sky to Sarah's stone. "No one. They're on a timer." Sometimes he bitched. "What business did God have making me the way He did? He makes a mistake, I pay the price. Fair, Sarah? Fair or unfair?" Sometimes he suspected she turned deaf when he spoke, his voice no longer meaningful to her, her world oblivious of his, as if hers existed and his did not.

People more and more saw him as ministerial in a cartoonish way. His gray suits were shabby, his collars not always clean. Over muffins at the Blue Bonnet he confided to the town clerk that as a youth he had frequented prostitutes. "Fallen angels, I called them." Spelling the reigning minister one Sunday, he delivered a tirade against America's invasion of Iraq, "a deed done in the dark by a president who doesn't know his belly button from his weenie." Key worshippers wondered whether he was still Christian and made sure he gave no more guest sermons. One day, visiting someone at the hospital, he came face to face with Lydia Lapham, who for two years had managed to avoid him. He had forgiven neither her nor the chief for letting a stranger marry them, though he had come to terms with her keeping her own name.

"I don't hold a grudge," he said.

Lydia spoke in a busy voice. "Nor I, Reverend."

"I see you're still not pregnant, not necessarily your fault. If you allow me, I'll talk to James man-to-man. The problem could well be his seed."

"Reverend, please go away."

Deep in his mind, his face revealing nothing, he pronounced her guilty of bitchery.



Soon into the third year of the war in Iraq, the town clerk learned that his only grandson, nineteen years old, had lost both legs to a roadside bomb. TV crews from Boston descended on Bensington for local reaction, and some of the footage appeared nationally. Reverend Stottle, to his dismay, had not been interviewed. Chief Morgan, a Vietnam veteran, was and said he never thought he'd see history repeat itself so soon. Glimpsing himself on CNN, he changed channels.

"People forget," Lydia said.

They were in bed, pillows propped, his foot touching hers. For a reason he couldn't fathom, Morgan asked, "Do you ever think of Matt MacGregor?"

She said, "Tell me again it wasn't suicide."

"It wasn't suicide."

"Then I don't think of him." She squinted sideways at Morgan, their feet still touching. "Something you ought to know. I'm pregnant." The screen flashed more news, this from Fox. WorldCom's former chief, Bernard Ebbers, found guilty of fraud and conspiracy. *In Cold Blood* star Robert Blake acquitted of killing his wife. Morgan said, "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Are you scared?"

"Petrified. I'm too old."

Turning to each other, their breaths touched. He spread his hand over the heated width of her thigh and listened to her stomach making sounds between a drum and a chant. "So what do we do?" he asked.

As a child, Lydia had thought babies were brought into being by sleight of hand, by Mandrake the Magician, a wand waved, a bottom slapped, talcum at the ready, birth an infinite remove from death. Childhood was fairyland, Peter Rabbit, Little Bo-Peep. Her voice rode in on Morgan. "Let's sleep on it."



Reverend Stottle squatted on his heels and spoke to the stone. "Same ol', same ol', Sarah. Makes you sick. They're killing themselves and killing us, and we're killing them. Bush says 'Stay the course,' but he went AWOL in Texas. What would he do if his feet were on the ground in Iraq? Mess his pants. That's what I think. I can see you smiling, Sarah."

The air held a chill, and the reverend shivered. Moonlight blanched him. He figured that every graveyard is full of messages from the ground, all silently conveyed. "You're probably saying something right this second, Sarah, but I don't hear so well anymore. Could be wax."

When his eyes filled, he dried them with backward swipes of his hand. "Here's the latest from the home front, straight from the Blue Bonnet. Yesterday Lydia Lapham gave birth to twins. There's significance in that, Sarah. When James lost his first wife, she was six weeks along, and I don't think he told that to anyone but me. That was when I was trying to counsel him in his grief. So Lydia giving him twins sort of makes up for the one he lost. I heard Lydia was once married to somebody else and had a stillborn, but I don't know that for a fact. You can't believe everything you hear at the Blue Bonnet, but if it's true there's justice at work."

A sound alerted him as a shadow maneuvered between moonstruck stones. A messenger from God? From Sarah? Then he recognized the pear shape in a uniform that was no longer a comfortable fit. The voice was Sergeant Eugene Avery's.

"Chief know you're here, Reverend?"

Reverend Stottle rose from a squat to a standing position,

moonlight snagging on the outcroppings of his face. "James has more on his mind than keeping tabs on me. A family to look after, not to mention a whole town. Get with it, Eugene."

A few years ago Sergeant Avery had broken a toe that now predicted the weather. "It's late and gonna rain. You'd better go home."

"When I was young, Eugene, still in Bible College, I sometimes sneaked off to Boston's Combat Zone. Most exciting thing in the world is a prostitute with a pious face. Gives a Godlike presence to sex."

Sergeant Avery was jarred. "You telling me something I should hear?"

"I wanted her to dance like Salome."

"You say stuff like that at your wife's grave? Go home, Reverend. Go home now."

Home was a five-minute walk in the small hours, and presently he was back in his bed, in his underwear, and in a dream so tenuous he was equally in it as out of it. And Sarah was in it too, as if she had followed him home. "Sarah, I love you," he said. She was a half-revealed presence and both his present and his past. With affection, he remembered she had hiccougths the first time they made love. "Don't know what I'd do without you," he said, and, without warning, he woke. "Sarah, are you there?" She wasn't, but he knew where to look and fell back to sleep.



He should've shaved, would've looked better going into the Blue Bonnet. Millie served his usual and asked if he'd heard the news about that pervert congressman in Washington hitting on pages with instant messaging, *utterly lewd, disgustingly dirty*. "I'm quoting TV," she said. No, he hadn't heard. "The man probably needs help," he offered, and Millie snorted, "How about deballing?" Reverend Stottle didn't necessarily disagree, though he did murmur, "Everybody needs help."

At the library, he looked anonymous and abandoned. Seated, he scanned Newsweek with one eye while the other browsed Mrs. Wickelman the librarian, hair carefully colored blondish, hips flaring. Quite easily he pictured her in a hot bath, soapy knees protruding from the suds. Leaving, he timed it so that he was walking behind her, following her stride for stride, cheeks of her ass talking to each other. He joined their conversation with a quick little pat. She whirled and slapped his face hard enough to dislodge his denture. He had to suck it back in place.

Outside, his face stinging, the sun whacked him in the eyes, and he stood stunned for a moment. "You all right, Reverend?" someone asked, and he said, "Right as rain." He drove away in his Honda Accord, orange cones forcing him one way, then another. At home was a message from the police dispatcher, Meg O'Brien, her voice a bit of a bark. "Chief wants to see you."

The police station occupied the rear of town hall. Meg O'Brien looked up from her metal desk, her mouth a rupture of big teeth. Reverend Stottle imagined outsized roots anchoring them. His own mouth was a razor slash, his sudden smile a knife wound. "What's he want?" he asked and knuckled his left eye as if to unscrew it.

"You don't know? Of course you do."

He entered the chief's office with a hangdog look, stood before a battered desk, and fixed his gaze on an upright picture of the twins. Suddenly his voice gushed. "They're beautiful, James. Absolute angels. Always suspected you had a superior seed, and Lydia, she's a super mom."

Morgan's face was expressionless. "Mrs. Wickelman isn't pressing charges on condition you never set foot again in the library. If you do, all bets are off." Morgan paused dramatically. "Anything about that you don't understand?"

Reverend Stottle spoke with a dry mouth. "I've disappointed you, haven't I?"

"Better if you disappointed yourself. What's wrong with your eye?"

"I was rubbing it. I'm not myself, James. I miss Sarah."

"I know you do, but that's no excuse."

"And my health isn't a hundred percent."

"That's no excuse either."

The reverend's head listed on narrow shoulders, a sign he was thinking, brooding. Winter was coming. He remembered a long-ago winter when he and Sarah each wore a woolen cap with a red ball dangling from the tassel, a smile shivering on Sarah's mouth. "What am I going to do, James? You have a life, I don't."

"You have more than you think."

He moved to the door, looked back. "Why is it, James, you want to go one way, life makes you go another?"

"I don't suppose it's personal, Reverend."

"Only if you make it so. I guess that's the answer."



Election night he voted for a black man for governor and bet Sergeant Avery a dollar that the candidate, Deval Patrick, would win. Sergeant Avery said, "It'll be the easiest buck I've made." The Blue Bonnet, usually closed at seven, stayed open. When Millie served him a second cup of tea, he said, "As a flower bursts from a seed, so the universe burst from a seeming knot of nothing. A primordial bang created our world, Millie." She gave him a look.

"What brought that on, Reverend?"

"I saw James Morgan and Lydia today with the twins. James proved he has a powerful seed, a world-maker."

Millie rearranged the salt and pepper shakers. "Go home, Reverend. Get a good night's sleep."

Driving past the cemetery, he meant to stop but didn't, knowing he'd probably talk to Sarah later and give her an account of his day, though he was not always sure she was interested. After parking the Honda, he approached his condo but found he couldn't ignore an urgency. Stopping, he opened his pants and made a wine-yellow puddle that frothed and sparkled. "Ahh,"

he said, and someone passing said, "Disgusting."

In bed, windows open, he heard the wind flushing leaves from the street. The TV was on for election returns, but he wasn't paying attention. He didn't mean to die and had no intention of doing so. It simply happened, though for nanoseconds bits of his brain still sparked and time went haywire, veered through space, and spiraled him into a different domain.

Sarah, remember me?



At Drinkwater & Son Funeral Home, the chief and his wife stood at the casket and breathed in flowers. Cosmetics gave the deceased a demeanor of contentment as if, all things considered, death were a comfortable fit. Morgan said, "It wasn't personal, Austin. I'd bet on it."

Lydia said, "Don't rile him, James. Let him rest in peace."