

WANDERERS

When Peter Dolan's daughters, having reached mid-adolescence, decided that no matter what the court had decreed, they would no longer live with him forty percent of the time, he sold his house in the suburbs and purchased an aging duplex that stood in the shadow of his alma mater, Johns Hopkins University. He traded in his Ford Explorer for a Mini and began having flings with his receptionists. As in his undergraduate and law school days, Peter once more became a habitu  of the Charm City Pub, a dark, roomy establishment where a team portrait of the collegiate national championship lacrosse team for which he had starred decades before hung from the paneled wall opposite the bar alongside autographed pictures of such Baltimore sports deities as Johnny Unitas, Brooks Robinson, and Cal Ripken, Jr.

His ex-wife mocked him for imagining that by returning to his

old haunts he could recover something of his youth. Events proved her right. Now more than twice the age of most of his fellow drinkers at the Charm City Pub, he no longer found there the comradeship he remembered. The affairs with the receptionists invariably ended with firings and recriminations. The right knee that he had shredded during the season that followed the national championship had grown so arthritic that climbing the stairs to his second-floor apartment—he rented out the first floor—had become a torment. He had nearly resigned himself to the knee replacement that his doctor had urged upon him for so long.

One dank Sunday night in early April, when Peter had wearied of sitting at home alone with his pain, he hopped down the stairs and limped his way over to the Charm City Pub—a short but agonizing journey, for anything more than the slightest flexing of his bad knee produced a sensation like that of a hammer blow to his patella. With the Hopkins students away on spring break and the bar nearly empty, Peter, carrying on a half-hearted flirtation with the bartender, lingered longer and drank more than a man with a conference call scheduled for 7:30 the next morning should have. It was, he recalled, a year to the day since he had last seen his daughters, but the anniversary evoked in him only a mild melancholy. He had grown accustomed to the girls' absence as he imagined one must grow accustomed to life with a missing limb. One could get used to anything.

The bartender, a cheery brunette in her mid-twenties, dressed in tight blue jeans and a black, short-sleeved blouse that left her flat midriff exposed, regaled him with tales of her recent trek through Nepal.

“And as soon as I’ve saved enough,” she confided, “I’ll quit this job, and I’ll be off again. I never work a day longer than I have to.”

“Where will you go next?”

“Africa.”

“Africa. Cool!” Draining his shot glass, Peter rapped it against the surface of the bar. “I always wanted to go on safari. See some lions and tigers in the wild.”

Deftly scooping up his glass, the young woman answered, with a teasing smile, “There are no tigers in Africa.”

His gaze remained fixed upon her nicely rounded buttocks as she sauntered away.

The front door swung open, and a slight, stooped, elderly man came stumbling inside as if blown there by the blast of frigid night air that suddenly filled the room. The man stood for a moment, tottering slightly, looking about as if trying to puzzle out where he was. Then he shuffled up to the bar, just to Peter's left, and leaned against it. Beside Peter, a burly six-and-a-half footer, who, since his lacrosse-playing days, had acquired a salt-and-pepper beard and a bit of a paunch, the man looked tiny. His rumpled trench coat hung open, and the black and green flannel shirt that he wore beneath it was soaked. His white hair was matted to his temples. He wore black square-framed glasses, their clouded, oversized lenses concealing his eyes. His blanched complexion, labored breathing, and slack, unshaven cheeks gave him the look of someone who had just risen from a sickbed.

"Maybe I should go to Africa," said Peter to the man, whom he felt sure he had seen before. "And not come back."

The man gave Peter a puzzled look and began inching away to the left.

"I wish it had occurred to me that I could have lived the way she does."

"Who?"

"Instead, I had a family. Emphasis on had. And I became a lawyer. Speaking as a lawyer myself, I think Shakespeare had the right idea about us. "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.""

"People who use that line to denigrate lawyers," answered the man sharply, "understand neither the play from which it comes nor the judicial system." Scowling, he removed his glasses and lay them down upon the bar.

The scowl startled Peter, who felt certain he had encountered it before. "Professor Whitfield?"

"I'm sorry. I don't think I know you."

The bartender returned, handed Peter a newly filled shot glass, and set a coaster down on the bar in front of her new customer.

"Do you know who this is?" Peter asked the bartender. Leaning far to his left, he draped a beefy arm over the shoulders of the older

man, who tried in vain to wriggle free.

She studied the man for a moment and then, shrugging, replied, “Not really. Should I?”

“This is Professor Lawrence Whitfield.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been Professor Whitfield.”

“This man was the best professor I had in law school by far. He didn’t just teach me constitutional law. He taught me how to think.” With the stereo muted, Peter’s alcohol-fueled baritone resounded through the barroom.

“The extent to which I succeeded appears to be an open question.”

The bartender chortled and gave Peter a playful punch on the arm.

“God, this man used to terrify me,” said Peter. “He’d pace from one side of the classroom to the other, smoking his pipe. And then he’d stop and ask a question it had never occurred to you to think about, and he’d point at you with the stem of the pipe. You felt like you were being skewered.”

But the once imposing Professor Whitfield appeared to have shrunk to half his former size—an impression that Peter found profoundly unsettling. The ache in his knee, tolerable for the last hour or so, began to intensify once more.

“I spent many a night in here trying to forget about how I’d made a fool of myself in class in the afternoon. I never thought I’d run into you here, Professor Whitfield.”

“Yes, well, you wouldn’t have, except that I got a bit lost. I was out running some errands. The weather’s bad, and I seem to have missed a turn somewhere.”

“Where are you going?” Peter asked.

“Where am I going?” Professor Whitfield suddenly looked flustered. “I’m going... I’m going home. Lutherville.”

“Lutherville? How did you end up all the way down here?”

Professor Whitfield answered with an irritable sigh.

“Well, it’s not hard to get back to the highway from here,” said Peter.

The confusion in Professor Whitfield’s eyes belied his repeated

assurances that he understood Peter's directions perfectly well. Borrowing a pen from the bartender, Peter drew a map on a napkin.

"I hope you'll forgive me for not remembering you," said Professor Whitfield as Peter handed him the improvised map. "There's a lot I don't remember these days." With his head bowed and his eyes fixed upon the map, he shambled out the door.

"He shouldn't be out driving on a night like this," said Peter to the bartender. "I suspect he shouldn't be driving at all. But people are stubborn that way. My father wouldn't give up the car until a couple of months before he died. I fought with him for years about it. He could barely see. The only way he could tell that the light had changed was when the guy behind him started honking. It's a wonder he didn't kill himself or someone else."

"My grandmother's the same way," answered the bartender with a yawn. "Drives my parents crazy." Opening the tap above a bifurcated metal sink behind the bar, she squirted a stream of green dishwashing detergent into one of the basins, filling the other with clear water. From the counter beside the sink, she snatched up several glasses, immersed them in the sudsy water, and then plucked them out one by one, giving each a quick going over with a bottle brush.

Peter gulped down his whiskey and handed the young woman his glass. "One more. Last one."

No sooner had she returned with his drink, than he finished it off. He peered into the empty shot glass as if it were a telescope

"The older I get, the less I understand. Parents become like children. Children disown you." He shook his large head mournfully.

"Mm," murmured the bartender in a vaguely sympathetic way, and then she turned her attention back to the glasses in the sink.

"One more," said Peter, holding out his shot glass again. "This is really my last one."

When he had finished his drink, he reached for his wallet and tossed several bills onto the bar, without bothering to check their denominations. Gingerly, he lowered himself from his stool and made his way to the door.

As he stepped onto the sidewalk, he immediately regretted his carelessness in having left his apartment clad in only a t-shirt and

jeans, for now he faced a four-block slog home through a wind-driven downpour. Hunched over, his arms folded across his chest, he started forward. Despite all he had drunk, he suddenly felt sober—far too sober. The last two shots of whiskey had deadened the pain in his knee, but now it returned in full force.

He had not gone far when he heard a loud thump. A wheat-colored Toyota Corolla, sandwiched into a parking space between two large, black SUVs, had backed into the bumper of the one in the rear. The Toyota then inched forward, its front end angling away from the curb, only to bump against the vehicle in front.

Peter knocked against the passenger-side window.

Professor Whitfield lowered the window a couple of inches. “Yes?” he snapped.

“Are you O.K., Professor Whitfield?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Do you still have the map I gave you?”

“The what? What map?”

“The one I drew for you in the bar.”

“You drew me a map?”

“In the bar. On a napkin.”

Professor Whitfield sifted through the array of fliers, envelopes, and magazines that covered the passenger’s seat. Leaning far to his right, he opened the glove compartment and groped inside it. Then he reached into his coat pockets, shrugged, raised the window again, and gripped the shift lever. But the car did not move.

Positioning himself behind the Toyota, near the curb, Peter turned an imaginary steering wheel sharply to the right and then beckoned with his hands. He had to hop out of the way, landing painfully on his bad leg, when Professor Whitfield missed his stop signal and backed the right rear wheel of the Toyota up onto the curb.

Peter limped around to the driver’s side and tapped on the window.

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you let me pull the car out for you?”

Again, there came the familiar scowl. “I hardly think that’s necessary. Besides which, you’re obviously quite drunk.”

“I’ve driven in worse states than this.”

“That’s very reassuring.”

“I’ll have you out of here in thirty seconds, and you’ll be on your way.”

Professor Whitfield let out a long, sibilant sigh. Shifting the Toyota into park and engaging the emergency brake, he stepped outside, ignoring the hand that Peter proffered him, and walked around to the rear of the car. Bracing his left hand against the trunk, he mounted the curb and stepped onto the strip of wet grass that separated the road from the sidewalk. There, wobbling and wheezing, he halted and gazed about as if he had just alighted in a strange country.

“I can manage it all right,” said Peter, throwing his right arm around Professor Whitfield’s shoulders and deftly steering him toward the passenger’s seat. “No need to stand out here in the rain directing me.”

Professor Whitfield slid backwards into the seat, settling himself atop the mass of paper. On the floor by his feet lay a month-old Sunday New York Times and several issues of *The Economist*, all of which looked as though they had been left out in the rain. There was also a portable urinal, which Professor Whitfield hastily covered over with the newspaper.

Peter, finding the steering wheel nearly flush against his chest, pushed the driver’s seat backward as far as it could go. Though the odometer had yet to register its first thousand miles, the car’s interior smelled of mildew and—more disconcertingly—of urine.

“I suppose I’ve become something of a pack rat in my dotage,” said Professor Whitfield, who, Peter remembered, had maintained a punctiliously ordered office at the university. “Which, in turn, has driven my wife toward the opposite extreme. If I’m not watching her, she’ll throw out the mail before I’ve had a chance to look at it. That’s why it all ends up here.”

“Mine only threw me out. She kept everything else.”

After adjusting the mirrors and turning on the defogger, Peter carefully steered the Toyota away from the curb and out onto St. Paul Street. Then he kept going.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Professor Whitfield demand-

ed.

“I’m driving you home.”

“What? Who are you? What gives you the right?”

“The way I see it, there’s a ‘duty of reasonable care’ standard that applies here. A duty to prevent the foreseeable harm that’s likely to result from letting you drive yourself home on a night like this.”

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Professor Whitfield’s face shone red as a traffic light. “You’ve taken it upon yourself to decide this? What else do you recommend? Should I stop driving altogether? Should I crawl into a corner and die? It’s not enough that I get such advice from my children. Now I’m hearing it from total strangers. From drunks I meet in bars.”

With an empty highway and a pitch-black night before him, Peter pressed hard on the accelerator. The Toyota gradually gained speed—too gradually for Peter’s taste—until the needle edged past 80. For several minutes, neither man spoke, and the only sounds to be heard in the car were the murmuring of the engine—too quiet for Peter’s taste—the pattering of the rain upon the roof, the swishing of the windshield wipers, and the panting of Professor Whitfield as he stared out his window at the rain.

Perhaps, Peter reflected, many of his troubles stemmed from having given insufficient attention over the years to the qualifier reasonable when exercising his duty of reasonable care. Once, while driving on I-95 at 2:00 AM, he had seen a burning car on the shoulder and a woman frantically waving for help. He had pulled her baby from the flames and, because she could not retrieve her handbag from what remained of the front passenger’s seat, had given her one of his credit cards. Three months later, with fresh charges still appearing on his statements, he had finally closed the account. Perhaps the experience should have taught him something. Perhaps he should have let Professor Whitfield drive himself into oblivion. He should forget the daughters who no longer wanted to see him and cease raging at the woman whom he blamed for turning them against him and the crooked lawyers and biased judges who had abetted her.

The highway began to blur, and the Toyota drifted to the left. Peter shook his head violently to rouse himself, turned down the heat, and cracked the window open.

“The law can be a blunt instrument sometimes,” said Professor Whitfield, “especially where children are concerned.”

“Huh?” answered Peter, who did not realize that he had been ruminating out loud.

“I’m sure your girls will come around, though. They always do.”

Peter shrugged. “That’s what people tell me. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“You said you were a student of mine?”

“Yes, and a devoted one, by my standards. Yours was the one class in law school I found worth attending.”

“When were you in my class?”

“Oh, it must have been about twenty-five years ago.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Wills and trusts. Pretty mundane stuff, mostly. But it’s a decent living.”

“And an honorable one. It’s certainly nothing for which you need to apologize.”

“Sometimes, I even manage to do a little good—when I’m able to temper my clients’ greed, rage, and spite.”

Removing his glasses, Professor Whitfield wiped the lenses with a handkerchief. He put the glasses back on and blinked several times.

“You were a student of mine, you said?”

Peter shook his head. This was vintage Professor Whitfield: the deadpan mockery like a knife between the ribs. But was it mockery? Professor Whitfield looked genuinely perplexed. Could he really have forgotten that he had asked the very same question just moments before?

Leaving the highway, Peter drove along unlit side streets, until directed by Professor Whitfield to turn left into a short cul-de-sac. He brought the Toyota to a stop in the driveway of a modest, gray-shingled Cape Cod house—the only house on the block with its lights on at this hour. In the glow of the headlights, he noticed several chipped shingles.

Turning in his seat and reaching for the door latch, Peter felt not the customary ache in his knee, but a pain like the thrust of a carving knife. He cried out in anguish.

“Are you all right?” asked Professor Whitfield.

“Bad knee,” Peter answered, cupping his kneecap in his hands. “I need to get a replacement. It’s something I should have had done a long time ago, but I’ve kept putting it off. It’s not a pleasant thing when you think about it. It involves having your leg cut into three pieces and then put back together again.”

“Most medical procedures—and, by this time, I believe I’ve endured most medical procedures—are rather grotesque.”

“I had my knee operated on once before, when I was twenty-one. I almost died afterwards. A blood clot floated up to my lung. They had me in a pediatric ward because they had no other place for me. I’m lying in a bed that’s way too small in a tiny room with pictures of giraffes on the walls. A priest is giving me last rites, and I’m gasping for breath and thinking about how undignified it would be to die there.”

Professor Whitfield, turning his face toward the window, let out a harsh, clipped laugh. “You were expecting something more dignified? I do envy the young their expectations.”

“The strange thing was that when I got out of the hospital, everything seemed brighter, clearer, more vivid. Colors, tastes, smells. But that only lasted a day or two, and I’ve never had that feeling since.”

“Interesting. Death recedes, and one finds clarity. Conversely, for me, the fog grows thicker each day.”

A queasy silence ensued, until Peter, unable to endure it anymore, eased himself out of the Toyota. Standing in the rain, holding the car door open for Professor Whitfield, he spied through the living room window a ghostly female form—a diminutive, bent woman dressed in white pajamas and a white terrycloth robe. She had a pallid complexion, a puffy, careworn face, and hair of white ringlets. Perched upon the edge of a plush, dark-blue sofa that sat behind a low coffee table, she repeatedly dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

“May I have my keys back, please? If you don’t mind.”

Grinning sheepishly, Peter handed them over.

“Eunice,” said Professor Whitfield, turning his own gaze toward the living room window, “is a worrier. The last couple of years have been hard on her.”

Haltingly, he made his way up the gravel path to the front door, beside which a pale yellow bulb, enclosed in a cracked glass cylinder, emitted a sickly light. Peter stood frozen in place. In the living room, Mrs. Whitfield had risen from the sofa and begun pacing rapidly back and forth across the room, just as her husband had once paced at the head of the classroom.

“Aren’t you coming in?” Professor Whitfield asked. He had the door open now and one foot over the threshold.

Peter hesitated. “Well, maybe just for a few minutes, while I wait for a cab.”

“We have a guest room. You’re welcome to stay the night.”

Peter answered with a noncommittal shrug, though soaked and weary as he was, the prospect of sinking into a warm bed seemed quite enticing. He followed Professor Whitfield inside and found himself in a gloomy, overheated hallway illuminated—barely—by a brass chandelier with eight tear-drop-shaped bulbs, only two of which were lit.

The shadow that Eunice Whitfield cast on the wall preceded her as she came charging down the passageway, eyes distended, cheeks dripping tears, hands balled into fists, the right one clutching a tissue. “Where have you been?” she cried. “You said you were going out for a container of milk.”

Professor Whitfield rolled his eyes, then calmly removed his coat and hung it on the coat tree beside the door. “I knew I forgot something,” he muttered.

“You think it’s a joke? You’ve been gone for seven-and-a-half hours. I called the police.”

“I just got a bit lost. That’s all. There was no need to call the police.” Nodding in Peter’s direction, Professor Whitfield added, “This man was kind enough to help me find my way back. He’s a former student of mine. I’m sure he’d appreciate a cup of hot tea and a little less hysteria, though I suspect he’s too polite to say so.”

“Please don’t bother,” said Peter.

“A bit lost? A bit lost? What have you been doing for seven-and-a-half hours? Where were you? Do you even know where you’ve been?”

“I’m here now, am I not? There’s no need to get so upset.” Sidling past his wife, Professor Whitfield trudged up the hallway.

Despite his head start, she needed just a few strides to catch him. “How many times are you going to do this to me? You promised not to drive anymore at night.”

“It was still light out when I left.”

“It was raining. You shouldn’t have gone out.”

“No, I should be entombed here.”

Left alone, Peter yawned loudly, slumped against the wall, and reached into his pocket for his cell phone.

From the living room, there came a despairing plea: “Will you please leave me alone?”

“No, I won’t leave you alone. Look at what happens when I leave you alone. Next time, I’ll hide the key.”

“The address? I don’t know the address,” said the sleepy-voiced Peter to the sleepy-voiced taxi dispatcher. “No, I don’t know the name of the street either. Hold on a minute.” He took a few tentative steps toward the living room and peeked inside.

“Professor Whitfield?”

Professor Whitfield sat slumped upon the sofa, his right elbow perched on the armrest, his hand braced against the side of his head. His brow was creased; his mouth, a taut, colorless line. Eunice Whitfield, gesticulating wildly with her arms, hovered about him, now on his right side, now on his left, weeping, accusing, admonishing.

“I feel like a prisoner in my own house!” cried Professor Whitfield.

“I’ll call you back in a minute,” said Peter to the dispatcher. “As soon as I find out what the nearest intersection is. I’ll wait there. Yes, I know it’s pouring.”

Peter slipped out the door as quietly as a burglar. Dragging his right leg, he lurched up the street toward the corner, the wind and the rain at his back, goading him onward.