

Weakness was what got him in the end. He had been expecting something more
5 definite—chest pains, a stroke, arthritis—but it was only weakness that put a finish
to his living alone. A numbness in his head, an airy feeling when he walked. A
wateriness in his bones that made it an effort to pick up his coffee cup in the morning.
He waited some days for it to go away, but it never did. And meanwhile the dust piled
up in corners; the refrigerator wheezed and creaked for want of defrosting. Weeds
10 grew around his rosebushes.

He was awake and dressed at six o'clock on a Saturday morning, with the patchwork
quilt pulled up neatly over the mattress. From the kitchen cabinet he took a hunk of
bread and two Fig Newtons, which he dropped into a paper bag. He was wearing a
15 brown suit that he had bought on sale in 1944, a white T-shirt and copper-toed work
boots. Those and his other set of underwear, which he put in the paper bag along with
a razor, were all the clothes he took with him. Then he rolled down the top of the bag
and stuck it under his arm, and stood in the middle of the kitchen, staring around him
for a moment.

The house had only two rooms, but he owned it—the last scrap of the farm that he
20 had sold off years ago. It stood in a hollow of dying trees beside a superhighway in
Baltimore County. All it held was a few sticks of furniture, a change of clothes, a
skillet, and a set of dishes. Also odds and ends, which disturbed him. If his inventory
were complete, he would have to include six clothespins, a salt and a pepper shaker, a
broken-toothed comb, a cheap ball point pen—oh, on and on, past logical numbers.
25 Why should he be so cluttered? He was eighty-two years old. He had grown from an
infant owning nothing to a family man with a wife, five children, every-day and
Sunday china, and a thousand appurtenances, down at last to solitary old age and the
bare essentials again, but not bare enough to suit him. Only what he needed
surrounded him. Was it possible he needed so much?

30 Now he had the brown paper bag; that was all. It was the one satisfaction in a day he
had been dreading for years.

He left the house without another glance, heading up the steep bank toward the
superhighway. The bank was covered with small, crawling weeds planted especially
by young men with scientific training in how to prevent soil erosion. Twice his knees
35 buckled. He had to sit and rest, bracing himself against the slope of the bank. The
scientific weeds, seen from close up, looked straggly and gnarled. He sifted dry earth

through his fingers without thinking, concentrating only on steadying his breath and calming the twitching muscles in his legs.

Once on the superhighway, which was fairly level, he could walk for longer stretches of time. He kept his head down and his fingers clenched tight upon the paper bag, which was growing limp and damp now. Sweat rolled down the back of his neck, fell in drops from his temples. When he had been walking maybe half an hour he had to sit down again for a rest. A black motorcycle buzzed up from behind and stopped a few feet away from him. The driver was young and shabby, with hair so long that it drizzled out beneath the back of his helmet.

10 “Give you a lift, if you like,” he said, “You going somewhere?”

“Just into Baltimore.”

“Hop on.”

He shifted the paper bag to the space beneath his arm, put on the white helmet he was handed, and climbed on behind the driver. For safety he took a clutch of the boy’s shin, tightly at first and then more loosely when he saw there was no danger. Except for the helmet, he was perfectly comfortable. He felt his face cooling and stiffening in the wind, his body learning to lean gracefully with the tilt of the motorcycle as it swooped from lane to lane. It was a fine way to spend his last free day.

20 Half an hour later they were on the outskirts of Baltimore, stopped at the first traffic light. The boy turned his head and shouted, “Whereabouts did you plan on going?”

“I’m visiting my daughter, on Belvedere near Charles Street.”

“I’ll drop you off, then,” the boy said. I’m passing right by there.”

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25 The light changed, the motor roared. Now that they were in traffic, he felt more conspicuous, but not in a bad way. People in their automobiles seemed sealed in, overprotected; men in large trucks must envy the way the motorcycle looped in and out, hornetlike, stripped to the bare essentials of a motor and two wheels. By tugs at the boy’s shirt and single words shouted into the wind, he directed him to his daughter’s house, but he was sorry to have the ride over so quickly.

30 His daughter had married a salesman and lived in a plain square stone house that the old man approved of. There were sneakers and a football in the front yard, signs of a

large, happy family. A bicycle lay in the driveway. The motorcycle stopped just inches from it. "Here we are," the boy said.

"Well, I surely do thank you."

5 He climbed off, fearing for one second that his legs would give way beneath him and spoil everything that had gone before. But no, they held steady. He took off the helmet and handed it to the boy, who waved and roared off. It was a really magnificent roar, ear-dazzling. He turned toward the house, beaming in spite of himself, with his head feeling cool and light now that the helmet was gone. And there was his daughter on the front porch, laughing, "Daddy, what on earth?" she said.
10 "Have you turned into a teeny-bopper?" Whatever that was. She came rushing down the steps to hug him—a plump, happy-looking woman in an apron. She was getting on toward fifty now. Her hands were like her mother's, swollen and veined. Gray had started dusting her hair.

"You never told us," she said. "Did you ride all this way on a motorcycle? Oh, why didn't you find a telephone and call? I would have come. How long can you stay for?"
15

"Now..." he said, starting toward the house. He was thinking of the best way to put it. "I came to a decision. I won't be living alone anymore. I want in go to an old folks' home. That's what I want," he said, stopping on the grass so she would be sure to get it clear. "I don't want to live with you—I want an old folks' home." Then he was
20 afraid he had worded it too strongly. "It's nice visiting you, of course," he said.

"Why, Daddy, you know we always asked you to come and live with us."

"I know that, but I decided on an old folks' home."

"We couldn't do that. We won't even talk about it."

"Clara, my mind is made up."

25 Then in the doorway a new thought hit her, and she suddenly turned around. "Are you sick?" she said. "You always said you would live alone as long as health allowed."

"I'm not up to that anymore," he said.

"What is it? Are you having some kind of pain?"

"I just decided, that's all," he said, "What I will rely on you for is the arrangements
30 with the home. I know it's a trouble."

“We’ll talk about that later,” Clara said. And she firmed the corners of her mouth exactly the way her mother used to do when she hadn’t won an argument but wasn’t planning to lose it yet either.

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5 In the kitchen he had a glass of milk, good and cold, and the hunk of bread and the two Fig Newtons from his paper bag. Clara wanted to make him a big breakfast, but there was no sense wasting what he had brought. He munched on the dry bread and washed it down with milk, meanwhile staring at the Fig Newtons, which lay on the smoothed-out bag. They were the worse for their ride—squashed and pathetic-
10 looking, the edges worn down and crumbling. They seemed to have come from somewhere long ago and far away. “Here, now, we’ve got cookies I baked only yesterday,” Clara said; but he said, “No, no,” and ate the Fig Newtons, whose warmth on his tongue filled him with a vague, sad feeling deeper than homesickness. “In my house,” he said, “I left things a little messy. I hate to ask it of you, but I didn’t manage
15 to straighten up any.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Clara said. “I’ll take out a suitcase tomorrow and clean everything up. I’ll bring it all back.”

“I don’t want it. Take it to the poor people.”

“Don’t want any of it? But, Daddy...”

20 He didn’t try explaining it to her. He finished his lunch in silence and then let her lead him upstairs to the guest room.

Clara had five boys and a girl, the oldest twenty. During the morning as they passed one by one through the house on their way to other places, they heard of his arrival and trooped up to see him. They were fine children, all of them, but it was the girl he
25 enjoyed the most. Francie. She was only thirteen, too young yet to know how to hide what she felt. And what she felt was always about love, it seemed: whom she just loved, who she hoped loved her back. Who was just a darling. Had thirteen-year-olds been so aware of love in the old days? He didn’t know and didn’t care; all he had to do with Francie was sit smiling in an armchair and listen. There was a new boy in the
30 neighborhood who walked his English sheepdog past her yard every morning, looking toward her house. Was it because of her, or did the dog just like to go that way? When he telephoned her brother Donnie, was he hoping for her to answer? And when she did answer, did he want her to talk a minute or to hand the receiver straight to Donnie? But what would she say to him, anyway? Oh, all her questions
35 had to do with where she might find love, and everything she said made the old man wince and love her more. She left in the middle of a sentence, knocking against a

doorknob as she flew from the room, an unlovable-looking tangle of blond hair and braces and scrapes and Band-Aids. After she was gone the room seemed too empty, as if she had accidentally torn part of it away in her flight.

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5 Getting into an old folks' home was hard. Not only because of lack of good homes, high expenses, waiting lists; it was harder yet to talk his family into letting him go. His son-in-law argued with him every evening, his round, kind face anxious and questioning across the supper table. "Is it that you think you're not welcome here? You are, you know. You were one of the reasons we bought this big house." His
10 grandchildren when they talked to him had a kind of urgency in their voices, as if they were trying to impress him with their acceptance of him. His other daughters called long distance from all across the country and begged him to come to them if he wouldn't stay with Clara. They had room, or they would make room; he had no idea what homes for the aged were like these days. To all of them he gave the same
15 answer: "I've made my decision." He was proud of them for asking, though. All his children had turned out so well, every last one of them. They were good, strong women with happy families, and they had never given him a moment's worry. He was luckier than he had a right to be. He had felt lucky all his life, dangerously lucky, cursed by luck; it had seemed some disaster must be waiting to even things up. But
20 the luck had held. When his wife died, it was at a late age, sparing her the pain she would have had to face, and his life had continued in its steady, reasonable pattern with no more sorrow than any other man's. His final lot was to weaken, to crumble, and to die—only a secret disaster, not the one he had been expecting.

He walked two blocks daily, fighting off the weakness. He shelled peas for Clara and
25 mended little household articles, which gave him an excuse to sit. Nobody noticed how he arranged to climb the stairs only once a day, at bedtime. When he had empty time he chose a chair without rockers, one that would not be a symbol of age and weariness and lack of work. He rose every morning at six and stayed in his room a full hour, giving his legs enough warning to face the day ahead. Never once did he
30 disgrace himself by falling down in front of people. He dropped nothing more important than a spoon or a fork.

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Meanwhile the wheels were turning; his name was on a waiting list. Not that that meant anything, Clara said. "When it comes right down to driving you out there, I
35 just won't let you go," she told him. "But I'm hoping you won't carry things that far. Daddy, won't you put a stop to this foolishness?"

He hardly listened. He had chosen long ago what kind of old age he would have; everyone does. Most, he thought, were weak and chose to be loved at any cost. He had seen women turn soft and sad, anxious to please, and had watched with pity and impatience their losing battles. And he had once known a school teacher, no weakling
5 at all who said straight out that when she grew old she would finally eat all she wanted and grow fat without worry. He admired that—a simple plan, dependent upon no one. “I’ll sit in an armchair” she had said, “with a lady’s magazine in my lap and a box of homemade fudge on the lampstand. I’ll get as fat as I like and nobody will give a hang.” The schoolteacher was thin and pale, with a kind of stooped, sloping
10 figure that was popular at the time. He had lost track of her long ago but he liked to think that she had kept her word. He imagined her fifty years later, cozy and fat in a puffy chair, with one hand moving constantly between her mouth and the candy plate. If she had died young or changed her mind or put off her eating till another decade, he didn’t want to hear about it.

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He had chosen independence. Nothing else had even occurred to him. He had lived to himself, existed on less money than his family would ever guess, raised his own vegetables, and refused all gifts but an occasional tin of coffee. And now he would sign himself into the old folks’ home and enter on his own two feet, relying only on
20 the impersonal care of nurses and cleaning women. He could have chosen to die alone of neglect, but for his daughters that would have been a burden too—a different kind of burden, much worse. He was sensible enough to see that.

Meanwhile, all he had to do was to look as busy as possible in a chair without rockers and hold fast against his family. Oh, they have him no peace. Some of their attacks
25 were obvious—the arguments with his son-in-law over the supper table—and some were subtle; you had to be on your guard every minute for those. Francie, for instance, asking him questions about what she called the “olden days.” Inviting him to sink unnoticed into doddering reminiscence. “Did I see Granny ever? I don’t remember her. Did she like me? What kind of person was she?” He stood his ground,
30 gave monosyllabic answers. It was easier than he had expected. For him, middle age tempted up more memories. Nowadays events had telescoped. The separate agonies and worries—the long, hard births of each of his children, the youngest daughter’s chronic childhood earaches, his wife’s last illness—were smoothed now into a single, summing-up sentence: He was a widowed farmer with five daughters, all married,
35 twenty grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. “Your grandmother was a fine woman,” he told Francie; “just fine.” Then he shut up.

Francie, not knowing that she had been spared, sulked and peeled a strip of sunburned skin from her nose.

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Clara cried all the way to the home. She was the one who was driving; it made him nervous. One of her hands on the steering wheel held a bailed-up tissue, which she had stopped using. She let tears run unchecked down her face and drove jerkily with a great deal of brake slamming and gear gnashing.

“Clara, I wish you wouldn’t take on so,” he told her. “There’s no need to be sad over me.”

“I’m not sad so much as mad,” Clara said. “I feel like this is something you’re doing to me, just throwing away what I give. Oh, why do you have to be so stubborn? It’s still not too late to change your mind.”

The old man kept silent. On his right sat Francie, chewing a thumbnail and scowling out the window, her usual self except for the unexplainable presence of her other hand in his, tight as wire. Periodically she muttered a number; she was counting red convertibles and had been for days. When she reached a hundred, the next boy she saw would be her true love.

He figured that was probably the reason she had come on this trip—a greater exposure to red convertibles.

Whatever happened to DeSotos. Didn’t there used to be a car called a roadster?

They parked in the U-shaped driveway in front of the home, under the shade of a poplar tree. If he had had his way, he would have arrived by motorcycle, but he made the best of it—picked up his underwear sack from between his feet, climbed the front steps ramrod straight. They were met by a smiling woman in blue who had to check his name on a file and ask more questions. He made sure to give all the answers himself, overriding Clara when necessary. Meanwhile Francie spun on one squeaky sneaker heel and examined the hall, a cavernous, polished square with old-fashioned parlors on either side of it. A few old people were on the plush couches, and a nurse sat idle beside a lady in a wheelchair.

They went up a creaking elevator to the second floor and down a long, dark corridor deadened by carpeting. The lady in blue, still carrying a sheaf of files, knocked at number 213. Then she flung the door open on a narrow green room flooded with sunlight.

“Mr. Pond,” she said, “this is Mr. Carpenter. I hope you’ll get on well together.”

Mr. Pond was one of those men who run to fat and baldness in old age. He sat in a rocking chair with a gilt-edged Bible on his knees.

“How-do,” he said. “Mighty nice to meet you.”

5 They shook hands cautiously, with the women ringing them like mothers asking their children to play nicely with each other. “Ordinarily I sleep in the bed by the window,” said Mr. Pond, “but I don’t hold it in much importance. You can take your pick.”

“Anything will do,” the old man said.

Clara was dry-eyed now. She looked frightened.

10 “You’d best be getting on back now,” he told her. “Don’t you worry about me. I’ll let you know,” he said, suddenly generous now that he had won, “if there is anything I need.”

15 Clara nodded and kissed his cheek. Francie kept her face turned away, but she hugged him tightly, and then she looked up at him as she stepped back. Her eyebrows were tilted as if she were about to ask him one of her questions. Was it her the boy with the sheepdog came for? Did he care when she answered the telephone?

They left, shutting the door with a gentle click. The old man made a great business out of settling his underwear and razor in a bureau drawer, smoothing out the paper bag and folding it, placing it in the next drawer down.

20 “Didn’t bring much,” said Mr. Pond, one thumb marking his page in the Bible.

“I don’t need much.”

“Go on—take the bed by the window. You’ll feel better after awhile.”

“I wanted to come,” the old man said.

“That there window is a front one. If you look out, you can see your folks leave.”

25 * * * * *

He slid between the bed and the window and looked out. No reason not to. Clara and Francie were just climbing into the car, the sun lacquering the tops of their heads. Clara was blowing her nose with a dot of tissue.

“Now they cry,” said Mr. Pond, although he had not risen to look out himself. “Later they’ll buy themselves a milkshake to celebrate.”

“I wanted to come. I made them bring me.”

5 “And so they did. I didn’t want to come. My son wanted to put me here—his wife was expecting. And so he did. It all works out the same in the end.”

“Well, I could have stayed with one of my daughters,” the old man said, “But I’m not like some I have known. Hanging around making burdens of themselves, hoping to be loved. Not me.”

10 “If you don’t care about being loved,” said Mr. Pond, “how come it would bother you to be a burden?”

Then he opened the Bible again, at the place where his thumb had been all the time, and went back to reading.

15 The old man sat on the edge of the bed, watching the tail of Clara’s car flash as sharp and hard as a jewel around the bend of the road. Then, with nobody to watch that mattered, he let his shoulders slump and eased himself out of his suit coat, which he folded over the foot of the bed. He slid his suspenders down and let them dangle at his waist. He took off his copper-toed work boots and set them on the floor neatly side by side. And although it was only noon, he lay down full-length on top of the bedspread. Whiskery lines ran across the plaster of the ceiling high above him. There was a
20 cracking sound in the mattress when he moved; it must be covered with something waterproof.

25 The tiredness in his head was as vague and restless as anger; the weakness in his knees made him feel as if he had just finished some exhausting exercise. He lay watching the plaster cracks settle themselves into pictures, listening to the silent, neuter voice in his mind form the words he had grown accustomed to hearing now: Let me not give in at the end. Let me continue gracefully till the moment of my defeat. Let Lollie Simpson be alive somewhere even as I lie on my bed; let her be eating homemade fudge in an overstuffed armchair and growing fatter and fatter and fatter.