

From “Three Blind Mice”

Humboldt Denton, a small, elderly man wearing blue jeans and a “Bowling for Dollars” sweatshirt, drove along the road at the edge of the Oregon cliff. He shifted his aging Plymouth into second and began the steep descent to Coast Highway. At twilight, the ocean below was colorless. A line of suds frothed at the edge of the gray beach.

“Do good tonight,” he said, leaning toward his wife and patting her on the knee. “Hilda dealin’?”

“As far as I know.”

Humboldt sighed.

“What’s the matter? She too quick for you?”

“Damn right. I can’t add that fast.”

He turned onto a gravel road and entered Pacific Trailer Court, a small community of mobile homes tucked beneath magnificent Douglas firs. Humboldt parked in front of the fourth coach to the left, the Glynnises’ mobile home. Maggie moved closer and Humboldt put his arm around her. They sat for a while and listened to the wind in the firs. The foghorn out on the jetty blew its single note every twenty seconds.

“Happy?” he asked.

Maggie nodded. “You?”

“Never better.” He breathed deeply and smelled the sea and the docks and the sweet, gluey smell of the plywood mill working the night shift. “If I was young again I’d have me an outrigger and—”

“And you’d be a lumberjack and drive logging rigs and build a cannery and—”

They smiled at each other. Coming toward them along the gravel path from the far end of the court was Hilda, the dealer, a large woman of fifty. Blowing rhododendron bushes cast moving shadows on her broad head and shoulders as she walked toward the trailer, looking neither right nor left, a slow-moving freighter with the right of way. They waved, but she did not respond.

From “Always On Thursdays”

From Geraldine’s stout little house, the ocean could be heard pounding the Oregon coast, particularly after ten in the evening when highway traffic decreased and the night grew still.

One night in February, 1983, Geraldine sat at her lighted window proofreading a court transcript. Down at the harbor the voice of the disinterested fog horn alternated with the wash of surf, systolic and diastolic pulse of Brooks Beach.

Humboldt and Maggie Denton always looked for the light in Geraldine’s window when returning home from visiting their grown children in California. If she was still awake, they would stop in town to see her before winding five miles north along Pacific Coast Highway to their redwood home on the cliff with its high, sweeping view of the ocean.

“Let’s not bother her,” Maggie said as Humboldt removed the key from the Plymouth’s ignition. “She’s working.”

“Nonsense. Let’s bother her. She’ll be glad to see us.” Humboldt came around and opened the door for his wife. It had been drizzling ever since they crossed the California border into Oregon. As they climbed the damp steps to the cottage, Geraldine turned on the porch light. She knew the sound of their car. “You’re back!” she said, and opened the door wide.

“Ready for some hot chocolate?” Humboldt pulled three envelopes of instant cocoa from his jacket. “But if you’re busy. . .”

“Never too busy for hot chocolate,” said Geraldine. “I’ve missed you.”

“Exactly what I told Maggie,” said Humboldt. Geraldine had adopted the Dentons as her parents in Brooks Beach. They often visited her in the cottage whose front door faced the two-

room post office across the street. Her back door nestled against the alley and the Knotty Pine Tavern. Coast Highway lay just beyond.

“Seen Guy lately?” Humboldt asked as the three of them walked to the kitchen.

Geraldine shook her head. “Haven’t seen him.” She took milk from the refrigerator.

“Marshmallows?”

“I never say no to a marshmallow.”

Minutes later she stood waiting for bubbles to form at the edge of the pan. Lowering the flame, she said again, less certainly, “I haven’t seen Guy for a while.”

Maggie folded her hands on the table. “Is he still in town?”

“As far as I know.”

Geraldine poured the chocolate. Maggie lifted her mug and the other two followed suit. “Here’s to home. We’ve had a lovely trip, but it’s good to be back.” The clink of ceramic was satisfying.

“You found your family well?” Geraldine asked. But adult children in California were not as interesting to talk about as a good-looking man with curly hair and brilliant blue eyes who, without trying, drew women to him.

“The kids are fine,” said Maggie. “So you haven’t heard anything about Guy?”

Geraldine didn’t answer but sat gazing intently into her cup of hot chocolate.

“We saw him just before we left for California,” said Humboldt.

Maggie laid a hand on her husband’s arm. “Let’s talk about something else.” Outside, the drizzle was turning to rain, accompanied by rising wind.

Humboldt scooped up marshmallow froth floating on his cocoa. “Tell you what,” he said, “after we’re finished here, let’s go over to the Knotty Pine and play a couple hands of Black Jack.”

Maggie brightened. In glum agreement, Geraldine drank her chocolate. A half hour later they were crossing the back yard to the alley behind her narrow garage. Several cars had overflowed the highway frontage parking onto the packed dirt behind the Knotty Pine.

“Feelin’ lucky?” Humboldt asked Maggie, buttoning his windbreaker and hunching against the weather.

“Not lucky. Skilled,” Maggie said. “I feel skilled.” But before she could start the next sentence, Geraldine grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back. A car idling behind the garage roared to life, and, spitting gravel, reversed out of the dead-end. Whoever was in the passenger seat held a large purse against the window to hide her face.

“Lovers’ lane,” said Humboldt.

“The slum behind the Knotty Pine,” Geraldine murmured, dismissing her garage, her house, and, it seemed, her life. The car backed into the street at a reckless speed, shifted sloppily into forward gear, and squealed off toward Coast Highway. Maggie pulled Geraldine to her.

“I’m sorry I bought here,” the younger woman said, her voice muffled in Maggie’s shoulder. “A lovely residential neighborhood this is not.” They crossed the alley. Under the blinking sign advertising beer, Geraldine’s skin glowed pale gray-green. Chestnut hair pulled back from her forehead lacked vitality.

Her husband, the curly-haired, blue-eyed Guy Falkenburg, had enough vitality for both of them.

From “Recesses of the Mind”

The patient stirs behind the railing of the hospital bed. Outside, gray light could be either dawn or dusk. At this best of all moments, when the pain-killer begins to take effect but before mental fog obscures thought, a voice whispers, “It’s not safe. Tell them. . .” And yet words remain just beyond reach, like a blanket that cannot quite be grasped when the room grows too cold for comfort.

Humboldt Denton stood at the plate glass window of his redwood home and stared out over the Pacific. From their perch high on a Southern Oregon cliff, he and Maggie often heard the surf more clearly than they could see it. In squalls, thick air and sleet obliterated the view. But on a day like today, blue and gold, all glittering water and smiling sky, the surf far below sloshed merrily and the little armada of fishing boats floating on the water rested as if held in a cupped hand.

“What time is he coming?” Humboldt asked, wandering into the kitchen where Maggie stood crimping the edges of a cherry pie.

“Six o’clock.” She took a sideways step to the stove. “Scoville is never late.”

Absently watching the pie-making operation, he stood rubbing his light growth of beard. By the time she’d adjusted the metal racks, tucked the pie in the oven, and stepped into the dining room, his electric razor was already buzzing faintly from the back of the house.

Flushed from the warm kitchen, Maggie fluttered a cloth over the dining room table where tonight they would not need the extension leaf for their party of three. In the bathroom, Humboldt leaned into the mirror and went over his upper lip again.

He and Maggie were thinking the same thing: what had Jim Scoville, detective in the Crescent County Sheriff's Office, learned about the recent crime that, for the first time in twenty-five years of criminal investigations, touched him personally? Should they mention it? Would he want to talk about the murder and kidnapping in the house where he'd grown up? His mother had been injured and a renter in her house killed; the woman renter's little son had been kidnapped. It was hard to believe, and hard to connect the private, imperturbable Scoville with such events in his own life.

Separately, in the bathroom, in the dining room, they came to the same conclusion: follow their guest's lead. Only Scoville knew whether he wanted to talk about the tragedy or not.

It turned out he did want to talk about the tragedy, although through dinner nothing was said about the desecration of his boyhood home in Portland three hundred fifty miles to the north. Rather, conversation focused on the local Brooks Beach economy—fishing, logging, illicit marijuana crops—until dessert when Scoville leaned back in his chair and drew in a deep breath of air still laced with cooked cherry.

“Homemade pie is a favorite of mine,” he said.

Maggie, who stood at his elbow with a fresh pot of coffee, sensed an opening for discussion of mothers and, indirectly, the crime in Portland. “As children, I think we all grew up eating our mothers' homemade pies.”

“Bought pies can’t hold a candle to homemade pies,” said Humboldt, in case Scoville would rather talk about pie than mothers.

“My mother baked a good cherry pie,” Scoville murmured, satisfying everyone. “By the way, they have a suspect.”

“Oh?” Maggie whispered.

“Who is it?” said her husband.

“Our Brooks Beach killer.”

“But he’s in state prison,” Maggie objected.

Scoville unfolded, then refolded his linen napkin. “He escaped three nights ago.”