

HILDA'S STORY

Slaughter sat at his desk and half listened to the water dripping into a pan in the middle of the living room. Why did his ceiling have to leak? But instead of picturing his landlord's fat head in a vise, he thought instead about Hilda's story. He hadn't intended to ever again get excited by a student's paper. This was, after all, June, and his students were all about to leave high school forever. They didn't care about anything but eating and screwing. So why bother?

And besides, why should someone Slaughter's age get excited about anything? He was sixty years old. He didn't have to look at the cracked mirror in his bathroom to know that his thin band of hair was iron gray, that the skin below his eyes was pouchy and liver spotted, that his neck resembled a rooster's. He was looking forward to visiting his brother's place in Nantucket. But feeling great didn't explain his delight over a student's short story about a tree house. If anything, he should be firing books and ashtrays around this dump of an apartment. How dare a seventeen year old girl accomplish something he probably never would -- write a successful piece of fiction. But anger was not what he felt.

It was an exquisitely puzzling moment that called for a cigar. Slaughter reached up into the bookcase behind him and grabbed a Garcia Lorca. Some time before he retired, he would have to smoke one of these babies in the English department workroom. He could imagine the scene well. Young Kellogg would turn his bony back on his an exaggerated sight and return to grading an honor student's analysis of Iago. Perkins and a few of the other simpletons would actually pretend to enjoy the moment ("Hey look at p;d Slaughter. What a character! Go, dude!") But the rest of his young colleagues would come at him squealing and coughing and pointing out the window to the bleak little clearing by the bus where smoking was still permitted. Christ, twenty years ago he would light up right in class.

He puffed hard before trying one more time to writ comments that fit his feelings. He had already tried seven times because this story -- this slippery little story about a tree house -- was driving him up the wall. It would be wrong for him to ooze too much

praise. Hilda, the author, would find gushing words embarrassing, especially if other yahoos in the class happened to read the comments. But he had to let her know that what she had written was very special. And he had to do it soon because she was about to leave school forever to be swallowed up by some Wal-Mart like monster. He couldn't act too surprised either because that would mean he had no expectations for her.

"Hilda," he wrote, "Be proud. This is a superb story for a high school student or for anyone. The characters all seem real. I was fascinated by the plot and was really surprised at the end, although I'm not sure I completely understand it. Where did this idea come from?"

A good question, he thought, as he tore up the comments and moved to a chair beside his desk. It was an old leather captain's chair generously patched with duct tape. It was the most comfortable thing he owned. From this chair he could see the wall where his favorite picture of Mary hung. In it she was holding a poem she had just sold to The New Yorker.

He looked from the picture back to the cigar and thought once again about Hilda's story. Three weeks ago, when he had given his seniors the choice to write an original story for credit, the few who were listening stared at him and gave a, "Yeah, sure, asshole." smile. He wasn't surprised. After all, the real creative writer's were taking Betsy Brigg's class where they could sit in lotus position and listen to New Age music all period if they wanted. His class was not made up of sensitive types. As Mary put it, they were too dumb for the smart classes and too obedient for the special ones. They had slid through high school with C's and D's and now were about to graduate to a trade school or a job in the city. The missionary's position, not the lotus position was more their style. But he had given them a chance to write a story because he had done this every June since he had arrived at Forest High School thirty years ago. And he wasn't going to quit now. It worked back when he taught the smart kids and it worked with the "special" kids, who loved to tell stories. In recent years, however, only a few took him up on it. This year the number of takers was down to one -- Hilda Thomas.

But last Friday, this utterly unstylish little girl, a student who had never shown one particle of interest in anything he ever said, had walked up after class and dropped a

story on his desk. Before Slaughter could even nod, she was gone.

Back at his desk and alone in his classroom, he read the story three times. Leaning against his car in the parking lot, he read it once more. It was a story about a little girl from an unloving family, who spent most of her days -- and many of her nights - - alone in a tree house in the woods far/near(??) from her house. There she imagined the happy life she had never enjoyed. As her own family fractured further apart, she spent more and more time by herself in this private spot. She continued to think about her family, but she also began to watch the daily life of the squirrels, chipmunks, and other animals that inhabited her world. Then one day the little girl found books and other things that were not there the night before. For the next few weeks, she kept finding this other person's possessions. Then one night she heard someone climbing the tree house stairs. It was her mother. "Don't tell your father," the woman whispered, "I don't want him to know that I like tree houses." That was how the story ended and Slaughter couldn't get it out of his mind.

His written comments could wait, but he would have to say something to Hilda in class Monday. He would compliment her, of course, and she would no doubt stare at her feet. He would ask her if she wanted to talk about it, but she would probably say no. She would also say no if he asked to read the paper aloud to the class or if she might submit it to "Scribblings," the school literary magazine.

The phone rang -- a real ring, not one of those silly, splashy sounds the new phones make. Slaughter's was a black dial phone, a source of continuing amusement to his colleagues at his annual Christmas party. To get to it, Slaughter squeezed around his desk full of papers, then took a giant step over the couch which was temporarily in the middle of the apartment to make room for the bucket catching the leaking water. The phone was where it always had been on a small table by the kitchen.

"It's me, Mary," wheezed a familiar voice. "Can we have a sleepover tonight?" This was their joke. They had used it thirty years ago as first-year teachers and now three years from retirement, they still used it. Long ago Slaughter and Mary had discussed marriage but both agreed it was a bad idea. Live alone and have sleepovers was what they decided. In the summer they would go their own ways, but during the

school year they returned to their apartments and their lives of teaching, movies, lectures, plays, The New York Review of Books, and sleepovers. Mary had moved several times, but Slaughter had stayed put.

“A sleepover sounds grand. Your crib or mine?”

“Your house smells of of garbage -- very old garbage. Has that slimeball of a landlord fixed that leak? Come to mine. We can watch Jules and Jim, drink wine, and snuggle up in my bed. You can smoke a cigar.”

This sounded good to Slaughter. He had never paid much attention to his surroundings, but lately his apartment had started to get to him. The leak was one thing, but now the whole building had started to smell. Half the apartments were empty. One night he had passed a pink-eyed, frail junky walking brazenly up the stairs. “You could at least look guilty!” Slaughter had shouted back at him.

Slaughter always enjoyed the walk to Mart’s apartment. (HASN’T SHE MOVED SEVERAL TIMES??) As his own neighborhood teetered towards skid row, hers had kept its looks, not actually becoming a sanctuary for adventuresome yuppies (“Urban pioneers” some journalist had called them). Slaughter never tired of noting the changes as he made the five block walk to her place. The few surviving stores in his neighborhood sold wigs or booze. Her block actually had an art gallery. It made Slaughter smile to make this “dangerous” walk so easily, knowing the teachers in his school would shudder all the way.

“You look distracted,” Mary brayed as she pulled open the door before he had time to push the buzzer. Instead of kissing her extended cheek, he patted her on the shoulder and headed for the couch where he collapsed with a happy grunt.

“Do you know Hilda Thomas?” he asked soon after Mary had filled a Chicago Bear glass with red wine and handed it to him. Her place was neater than his but not much neater. It was still a teacher’s place -- piles of compositions, novels with pieces of paper sticking out, grade books and all the rest of the stuff. And lots of ashtrays and balled up cigarette packs. Mary was a big smoker.

“Of course I know Hilda.” Mary settled into the couch next to him. He could tell that she had been working on the wine for a while. “She’s Charlie Finch’s half sister.

Shy girl, unbelievably quiet.” When Mary talked about other people, she always looked up. “And she wasn’t very friendly in my class, always walking around with a prunish look on that little mousy face. She didn’t have any friends, but the kids liked her for some reason. Once during a fight several of the big kids moved over to make sure she didn’t get hurt. Why do you ask? Has she been stalking your apartment?”

When Slaughter first met Mary at the teachers’ party thirty years before, he thought she looked like someone who had, until just recently, been quite lovely. Now, thirty years later, she still looked just a little overripe. It was as if all through life her real beauty had just departed, leaving behind a handsome, tired woman with a cigarette.

“Charlie, you should remember, quit school and joined the Marines. He was our only former Forrest student to fight in the Gulf War.”

“Macho Charlie. How could I forget the assembly with the band playing. Well, Charlie’s half-sister wrote wrote a story.”

“Let’s hear about it,” Mary half sang as she lit up a cigarette and blew smoke in his face. “Let’s hear why this child has you so upset.”

In a few hours Hilda would be eating pasta with two English teachers, but now she sat alone in her room and listened to the family noises below. Ozzie and Harriet noises were what she and her friends had decided they were. She could easily identify the clanging of the pots as her mom made chocolate chip cookies or something equally corny. She could pick out her step-father’s whistle as he passed through on the way to another household chore. The twins would return soon and then there would be happy shouts -- especially if they had won at their little league game. At 6:00 p.m. the phone would ring, and it would be her step-brother calling from Fort Bragg and all the family would line up to say hello. And the music surrounding all of this happy hubbub came from Neil Diamond.

In a few months she would be leaving her own room forever, and it made her a little sad, even though this room had little of her in it. She knew what a teenager’s room was supposed to look like. Hers didn’t come close. There were no pom poms, no stuffed animals on the bed, no prom pictures. She did have several pictures over her desk and

on the wall by her bed. Several were of her friends, Ginger and Sophie. She had pictures of Oasis, her favorite rock group. She had a sketch of a serpent drawn for her by Tony from the local gas station. There was a picture of her real dad all by itself on the wall near the closet. He was sitting in a boat with two of his fishing buddies. They all wore silly hats and goofy smiles. Ten minutes after the picture was taken, they had drowned. (HOW DID SHE GET THE PICTURE THEN??) The cop said her dad had consumed two bottles of Southern Comfort. That started more than three years ago, the day Hilda started high school.

On another wall was a photograph of her mom on the day she married Joe Finch. They all said Joe Finch had made quite a second husband for their mother, and they were right. He had moved in and turned her mother from a complaining alcoholic into someone who could run for the Pillsbury Bake Off. By the time they had been married for six months, her mom was doing volunteer work at the same soup kitchen where she herself could have ended up as a customer if Joe hadn't come along. A good Christian lady is what she had become. Joe Finch had found a way to fill her life with the true belief.

But not Hilda's life. Joe had arrived too late for her. He could change her mother because she wanted to be changed. But Hilda was already Hilda by the time this determined Christian came along. Hilda the invisible. She could dress and talk in such a way that no one knew she was there. To the world she was gray and blurry and indistinct. Only her few friends knew anything about her, and she didn't plan to add Finch's name to that list of insiders.

Right away she made it clear just what she would do now that Finch had moved in. Would she attend church with her new family? Occasionally. Celebrations from her step-brothers return from war? Of course. Family dinners? Why not? Trips together? Never. Family meetings? Nope. Religious discussions? Forget it.

Occasionally she would catch her mother or Jay sadly gazing at her and shaking their Christian heads. They would look away when she scowled back at them, but each knew how the other felt. Maybe they would reach her some day. If not, maybe it just didn't matter. She wasn't hurting anyone. Besides they figured it wasn't really her fault:

her father had endowed her with those sullen, angry genes.

Hilda knew that her friends made her parents edgy. They weren't aggressively druggy or dangerous. But like Hilda they seemed sleepy and indifferent. Sophie would come by alone and read all by herself. Ginger called her all the time. She always looked at her feet when talking to adults. Then there were the drop-outs like Mario. She knew her mother wanted more from her friends. Joe Finch proved what motivated people could do. She knew her mother suspected correctly that drugs were involved. But not many. She and her friends had escaped already. Drugs really weren't responsible for Hilda the Invisible.

Her mother had been delighted to hear she was going out to eat with two former teachers. Miss Martinson had done the correct thing and called her mom for permission. Naturally Mrs. Finch thought it could mean college for Hilda after all. And Miss Martinson must have laid on the praise. Too late for more school, mother. It could never wait what was waiting for her in July: a safe job working alone, a quiet apartment with a friend, a big TV set, and quiet -- lots and lots of quiet. Hilda worshipped quiet.

Dinner with Mr. Slaughter and Miss Martinson might not be too quiet but she liked them both so she would go. They would want to know about the short story, of course, even though Miss Martinson said they were going to discuss the future. Miss Martinson said this was a tradition -- taking graduated seniors to dinner. But Hilda figured this was the first time something like this ever happened. At some point, dinner talk would quickly turn to the tree house story. They would want to know if this reflected her life. They wouldn't ask it like that, but they would want to know.

And they would learn that the story came from nowhere important. Would they believe it started with Ginger, who had to write a story for Betsy Brigg's class? Take a sentence, Ms. Brigg instructed, and make it the last sentence in a story. The day after Ginger told her about the assignment, Hilda was sitting alone in her backyard with a perfect view of the tree house Finch had just built for the twins. Somehow this gave her the idea for a sentence. She went upstairs and hurriedly wrote the story. Then she called Ginger and they had a good laugh. At first Ginger was going to turn it in as her own, but then she came up with her own idea and the story sat on Hilda's desk until Mr.

Slaughter gave his extra credit assignment.

Mr. Slaughter must have given this assignment for years, but he still seemed interested in his own words (????). He had not always sounded so determined in the past few months. He hadn't given up, but he looked old. She heard that the younger teachers ignored him, even though he knew a hundred times more than nay of them. These young teachers -- especially the men in their pony tails -- made Hilda sick. Even if Mr. Slaughter had hair, he wouldn't wear it in a pony tail. She decided he deserved to get at least one story. It was easy and a little mysterious how how smoothly it came out. She had never done anything that felt like that. Maybe that's what Mr. Slaughter wanted to happen. "Don't make it obvious." he had said and she followed his advice.

His life with Miss Martinson gave Hilda and her friends something to talk about. Someone described her as a former bombshell. And she had a temper. Earlier in the year, she smashed a senior on the head with an American Literature anthology. She had published poetry. Once she invited students to come to hear her read at a bookstore. Afterwards she took them out and they all got drunk. Her department chairman was terrified of her and let her do whatever she wanted.

The phone rang. This would be ginger. Hilda grabbed a cigarette from her dresser and walked to the window. By sitting on her bed, she could blow the smoke out the window. She could also see Finch in the far corner of the yard digging away at one of his new projects. Ever since they met freshman year, Hilda and Ginger would talk for hours about things that made them laugh. Sometimes they would look at pictures from the high school year book and howl at the people with no chins or at the nerds in the chess club. Last week Ginger told her a story about a dumb kid in her class. They had all been reading out loud. When it came to Eddie's turn, the teacher had told him to reads and he did, but he read to himself his lips moving furiously. When it became clear what was happening, the teacher said in a most kindly voice, "Aloud, Eddie. I want you to read out loud just like the others." Hilda and Ginger would take turns retelling this story. It would become part of their permanent collection.

Hilda's family was vaguely aware of the conversations, but quietly paid the phone bills. Finch had once said pointedly at dinner that it's better to laugh "with" people than

“at” people. But that was about it.

Lately they had been reliving graduation. Ginger had been sitting near the principal so she could see his shaking hands and sweaty neck as he fawned all over the school board president and a local banker with kids who went on to do great things at eastern schools. Hilda had an even better angle. She could see Billy Perkins lighting up a joint a passing it back and forth with a few friends. She was offered a drag, but turned it down. Their favorite moment had been when Porky Hubt walked up to get his diploma and all the graduates in their caps and gowns made pig noises. Then Porky, walking across the stage with diploma in hand, threw back his head and unleashed the loudest snort of all.

Today Ginger wanted to know about Slaughter and Miss Martinson. “What are you going to wear?” she hooted. “Why not go leather?”.....“Are you going to show them the tattoo on your thigh?”.....“What if they ask you to come by for kinky sex?”.....“Will you tell them about sending the night with the guy from the gas station?”.....“Maybe you should pretend to be a religious nut like Finch and try to convert them.”

After she hung up, Hilda finished her third cigarette and moved from the bed and walked around her room. On the desk were several copies of her tree house story, one with Mr. Slaughter’s single comment: “I love this.” Then she thought about dinner one more time. She hoped she would be able to laugh about it afterwards, but she wasn’t sure. Miss Martinson would have too much to drink. Slaughter would be a bit too earnest. What were her choices? Would they want to hear the truth that the story just kind of happened. Sure it made her feel good at the time and she was flattered by the attention, but that’s all. Would they really want to know she had no intention of going to college? No intention at all? The thought of college revolted her.

But then a new thought hit her. Maybe she could lead the conversation somewhere. These two old war horses wanted to be led. They would cling like leeches to her answers. She would day something about the influence they both had -- which was not a total lie. They would like that. In the end, just after dessert, from out of nowhere, she would suggest that the two of them get married. Old? You guys aren’t old.

And so what if you are. You should have the same last name. Hilda liked that idea. Reaching for another cigarette, she picked up the phone and punched in Ginger's number. They would have to work out the details.

It had never occurred to Slaughter that Hilda could walk with such confidence. He had figured that she would sneak into Mario's cringing and shuffling. Like a frightened rabbit, she would survey the restaurant nervously and then scurry over to the red, plastic booth, where Mary and Slaughter would warmly welcome her. That was how she had always entered the classroom. But not tonight. She strode into the restaurant like a model strutting down the runway. In her brown sweatshirt, jeans and baseball cap, she looked as plain as ever, but there was nothing plain about that bounce. Even Mario stopped scolding the bus boy and watched as she flowed past him and headed directly to their booth.

"Hi, you two," Hilda chirped as she slid in across from them. "This is a really great idea. My boyfriend, the greaseball from the gas station, is related to the family that owns this place. He works here on crowded nights. One time he got into a fight with this Mexican guy and Mario had to call the cops." She looked around quickly, stopping to note the green plastic hanging vines and the gaudy murals of Naples. Then she lit up a cigarette and blew the smoke across the table where Slaughter and Mary sat staring at her. "You don't come here a lot do you?"

Actually they did. In fact Slaughter had been there himself the night of his fight. But right now he felt off balance. He had not expected Hilda to be so at ease with ordinary conversation. Was this what leaving the hated high school had done for her? Mary, on the other hand, did not seem upset by this display of confidence, but she had already polished off a couple of scotches. "Hilda, honey," she oozed, "we're so proud of you. You've done such a good job."

Slaughter frowned. That wasn't part of the plan. Mary was supposed to let Slaughter start things off. He would gab about summer travel or something else unremarkable, but not at all about Hilda. They had agreed on this strategy once they decided that dinner was not such a good idea after all, even though it had seemed so inspired after drinking all that red wine at Mary's. Instead of using dinner to find out

about the story, the plan was snow to get through the meal without embarrassing anyone. If Hilda mentioned the tree house story, fine. But they wouldn't bring it up.

But now Mary had opened her big mouth. What was she thinking?

"Proud?" Hilda snorted, removing her cap and shaking out her stringy hair. "For graduating? You don't think it's an achievement do you to graduate from Forrest High School? I had a C average. I passed chemistry by cheating. My only B;s were in your classes. But thanks anyway. I do feel good. Next week I move out of my house forever." This said, she leaned back and draped her arms over the side of the red plastic booth.

What a happy little scene that would make. Where's the photographer Slaughter mused.

"And now?" Mary was not going to stop.

"Now I'll be with Ginger. I'll have a job and freedom. Maybe I'll even visit you guys. I'll go to Las Vegas if I feel like it." Hilda looked back at the next table and bit her lip lightly.

This was more the look that Slaughter knew. But then she looked right at him.

"I suppose you want to know about the story?"

Mary pivoted and looked right at her with a curious smile on her face. Slaughter felt sick. This was happening way too fast.

Mary kept on. "Well, yes, Hilda, we did think about that, but not only that, but not only that. You see we like you and when we like people, we take them out to eat."

What is she saying? Slaughter considered taking the scotch away from her.

"Don't fib, Mary." Mary had always let the kids call her by her first name. "You have never done this before in all the years you two have taught at Forest. You have never, ever taken a student out to dinner. This is special. Come on." This was a voice Slaughter did not recognize. It accused; it mocked. It enjoyed itself.

"Well then," he managed to say, "you should tell us about the story. You're right. We did want to know how this happened."

"Let's order first," Hilda announced breezily and she signaled for the waiter, a dark, little man, who obviously had met Hilda before. "Rocco, let me have a big order of zitti with clam sauce and a glass of red chianti." Mary ordered the same with another

scotch while Slaughter went for his favorite lasagna.

“Now do you want to hear about the story? Here goes,” Hilda shrugged, “but I’m warning you it’s not very interesting.”

When she had finished, Slaughter sat silently for a second. He could imagine Hilda and her friend -- maybe slightly stoned -- laughing about the assignment. He could see Hilda on the lawn staring at the tree house and then up in her room scribbling away. He was disappointed, of course, that the original inspiration had come from another teacher. He should probably have known it would be something like this. What did he hope she would say? It just saddened him to tie this magical story about a tree house to such ordinary events. He didn’t want it to stop here.

He placed his palms down on the table and looked hard at Hilda. “But it is a good story, Hilda, and you wrote the whole thing. You can’t forget that it’s a good story. I can’t forget that. It’s a good story. I know what a good story is.” He wanted her to think about it one more time.

“Garbage, it’s a gimmick. I worked it out like a puzzle. Please don’t make it more than that.”

Who would ever guess that she could speak so defiantly.

Slaughter’s hands trembled. He actually felt like shaking this plain little creature. Is this how a daughter makes a father feel? He felt he had to keep talking. “But at some point, Hilda, you must have taken it seriously. It must have felt like more than a gimmick. Sure it was an exercise to make a sentence work as the last sentence. But while you were piecing it all together, it must have felt good.”

“How,” Hilda’s voice raised enough to get the attention of the fat lady at the next table, “can you be so sure? I just sat down and wrote it. Things like that are easy for me.”

“But what did it feel like when you were doing it?” Slaughter was aware that Mary was looking at him nervously. Even after the Johnny Walker and the zitti, she must have known how badly dinner was progressing. And then he said something that must have sounded especially stupid to Hilda or to anyone else within earshot. “Just because you don’t remember it, it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen?”

“It?”

“It! The feeling of pleasure that came from working in something that was really good and from knowing that you were going to finish that thing that was really good.”

Mary finally broke in. “Slaughter, this is really silly. You’d think you had drunk four scotches.” Mary leaned forward and touched him. “Let’s just drop it. What can all of this prove? Hilda, don’t let this old guy get to you. He just loved that story.”

Hilda kept talking. “Slaughter, what do you want me to say? OK it felt good. I remember that. Big fucking deal. It didn’t feel any better than having a laugh with my friends. Now what are you going to ask me? Will I ever write again? Probably not. Am I going back to school? Never. Am I happy with my future? You bet. Am I happy with my past? It sucked until my real father killed himself once and for all. Then at least my mom was free to become a phony Christian.” She reached across the table and grabbed one of Mary’s cigarettes.

For a few seconds no one spoke. Slaughter steered his last pillow of lasagna around his plate with his fork and stared at Mario escorting an older couple to a table in the far corner.

“Look,” Hilda began again in a softer voice, “I know why you’re pleased and I’m glad. I’m glad you got me to say writing the story felt good. It did feel good. You were right. We just can’t go any further with this talk. You’re a great teacher. You act younger than those new people. You should be doing what you love for a long time. Don’t quit. But please, no more talk about me.”

Mary patted her mouth with the napkin. Then she lit a cigarette with a book of red Mario matches. She started to talk, but Hilda interrupted her.

“You know, i actually thought a lot about this dinner. I had decided to trick you two into getting married.”

Mary gulped.

Slaughter felt a smile grow across his face.

“I got he idea. Then Ginger and I worked it out. I was going to tell you that I was writing a new short story about two English teachers who fall in love for real after being lovers for many, many years. I was going to say that you two were the inspiration for

this story. I was going to ask why you had never married and say what a great couple you make. Then I was going to sit back and see what you had to say.”

What would they have said? Mary would have done the talking. She would have explained the sleepovers and the movies. He might have mentioned the long walks and reading the Times together on Sunday mornings. At some point they would have stopped explaining and Mary would have smiled at him pleadingly and he would have excused himself to go to the bathroom.

“The more I thought about it,” Hilda continued, “the more it intrigued me. Has a student, ever, at any time in history, tried to trick her teachers into getting married? Now that, Mr. Slaughter, was a feeling I will never forget. And besides, i do like you guys a lot. I want you to know that.”

Mary was in tears. “Hilda, Hilda, Hilda. How sweet you are. What a wonderful child you are!” She reached across the table to give Hilda an awkward hug, but Hilda wriggled free and kept talking. “But I never had the chance to play matchmaker because you pushed the conversation in another direction. And now you are here.” She looked straight at Slaughter.

“And now you are here,” Slaughter repeated. “You are here.” For an instant he thought of the permanent public maps on the stands outside of forts and along rivers in all the foreign cities he had visited. The maps almost always included a red dot with an arrow and the words: “You are here.” Once you knew that, you could find whatever else the map wanted you to know.

Tonight Hilda had provided the red dot.

“Hilda,” Slaughter cleared his throat. “Go home. It’s late. That religious fellow at your house is saying things that are making your mom nervous. Mary, go with her, but let her drive. I’m going to stay here and finish off your scotch, drink one more and then walk home to pack. I’ll see you both in the fall.

As they walked away, he reached into his pocket for a cigar.