

# William Gilson

## Maintenance

I HAVE SPENT THE LAST TWENTY-ONE YEARS WORKING HERE. MANY SO-CALLED important people are buried in this cemetery. Two that are in fact important to me are my wife and my daughter.

Jack is my helper. Even he has remarked that Riverside is beautiful, and if any place can cut through Jack's alcoholic buildup then it must have some force. As Greta would have said, Jack is thick, at least when he's on the booze, which is almost all the time. But he can get lively and even accurate.

I was in Korea, in the war, and I lived through it, which every day still amazes me. It was complete chance. You're talking about tolerances of a thirty-second of an inch or less, flying steel. Or rounds aimed right at you from an accurate rifle, missing.

Greta would say I was kept alive by the grace of God, but about that I choose not to speculate.

And the fact is that Greta and Marti did not make it through, at least so far as I have made it through. They are underground, and I am sitting here looking at retirement.

You notice I did not say they are in heaven.

Heaven is a claim I have never seen backed up, but I can back up as a fact that they are underground.

So I am a man on his own, have been for eleven years. I guess I am used to it.

My purpose just now is to go over in a more logical way what I would go over anyway, and do in fact go over every day. Owen Larsford, the big boss, president of the Riverside Cemetery Association, has asked me to set down some basics as to how I run the cemetery, considering I've run it for fifteen years and worked in it six before that, so the new man, when they take him on, will have guidelines. Owen said it is a testament to the type of job I have done. I figure I will have to go over this again, as I am not used to such a presentation, which needs to be logical.

Let's get to the practical aspects.

The method of burying a body. Not many people know how it's done. I mean in the details. Why should they? Who is interested? There is not much to it, really; you are basically putting the person underground and leaving things neat on top.

I get here every morning at twenty minutes to seven. I drive in through that

gateway that was built in 1853, and it is barely wide enough for a car, and one morning Jack, coming in at around eight thirty, late, hit the gate itself and one of the granite posts, and you'd be surprised how little damage was done to the granite, and even the gate was not bent by much.

That was the morning Jack fell into the pond and I fired him.

But he did not stay fired. To replace him, I hired a man named Lou Pagrista, who was strongly recommended by Owen Larsford. I needed someone right away, but I should have listened to my own doubts. Lou turned out to be one of those people who cannot shut up, even for a few minutes. Someone such as you might find yourself having to ride for a long distance with in a vehicle, and he talks on in such a way that you're about ready to open your door and fall out just so you don't have to hear another word.

That's what Lou Pagrista was like, and I fired him, and I re-hired Jack. Jack can be a problem, but I can handle him, and I like him, and on the day he came back he smelled strongly of alcohol but I was glad to see him. And he got right onto the backhoe and dug a grave with no problem.

Marti died of the chicken pox, but it wasn't the chicken pox. It was the wrong medicine. And that was the end of Greta, she didn't have the strength.

Which I did have, though I did not know it then.

Let's start over. I should appreciate the beauty, and the luck, and just being alive. But when you know you won't meet them in heaven, that that's a lot of crap, you sometimes have trouble figuring why you go on. Sometimes I think it is nothing more than the body, it just will not quit, at least not easily. But then you figure Greta's body quit, as did Marti's.

Some die, some live.

Jack lives. He has a belly like a basketball, which he calls his "Milwaukee Tumor," Milwaukee having once been a beer capital.

I have a dog. And I own my house outright, it is well maintained.

As I maintain this old cemetery, within the limits that I can, namely that the city does not give me much money and the Riverside Cemetery Association is nearly broke. They have a small table just inside the gate with a sign asking for donations.

It is summer now and I've got two kids cutting the grass.

There is a big tulip tree up in the old section near the Scovil family that might need to come down. I would certainly hate to see it go, but it has a sizeable area of decay at the base.

Get to know all the trees. There are about two hundred, depending on what you count as a tree, and some are old beautiful giants, such as the red oak on the rise above the pond near the bronze elk.

There was a young fellow named Harrison who worked for me part of one summer five years ago, and the day before yesterday he stopped in to see me. Harrison was my favorite of all the temporaries. And there have been quite a few. So good to see him again. He looks a little older, somewhat more tired, as if he's gone through some hard times. Also, he's grown a beard. He said, Tim,

are you satisfied with what you've done? He came right out and asked me. He meant the whole thing, my entire life, though I at first thought he meant just the maintenance. His asking didn't surprise me because Harrison is what you would call a philosophical type person. In that he would ask that kind of thing while we were drinking coffee at the maintenance shack or standing at a grave while Jack worked the backhoe. He would come out with something that you had to think over, and the reason would be that he himself was thinking it over.

It seems he has inherited some money, possibly enough to make him a free man. That is, so to speak a free man.

A man hanging from a noose is a free man. I am somewhat of a free man, that is, I can come and go as I please. And it appears that Harrison also is, in that his mother and father are dead, his sister has moved to Texas with her family, and he himself has no wife or girlfriend. And now he has some money, so he is wondering what to do.

And of all people, he asks me.

I had to laugh.

It was good to see him again.

While working for me that summer five years ago Harrison almost killed himself, which was a memorable event. He fell off a roof. One night, chasing after a girl.

He liked working here. Not everyone does. Bodies and burial never bothered Harrison. Not that you actually see a body anyway. Very unusually some bones in the old section.

During the war I had a friend killed next to me. It was winter, bitter cold, Korea is the coldest I have ever known. I had a lot of people killed near me during my time over there, but the one that always comes back is Quinny, my best friend. I can still hear the sound. Not the round being fired but the sound of it hitting.

The old M1 was a heavy gun. Putting your thumb down in the chamber in that cold. Pull it out fast, it'll snap back on you.

The sound was like a fast-pitched baseball hitting a burlap bag full of wet sand.

I said to Harrison, maybe I'd travel.

But we both felt without saying it, it'd be better to travel with someone. Harrison will get someone, he is young, he is in a temporary disturbance because a woman in California where he was living left him and he came back here.

I said, yes, Harrison, I would say I am satisfied. But I've had some bad luck, is all. My wife had a stroke.

My little girl's face.

Chicken pox. A simple childhood disease.

Not a fatal disease. Not in this day and age.

I thought of killing the doctor. I still do. I killed at least twenty-two men in Korea. That was before I stopped counting.

Walking along frozen roads with my feet numb, my legs numb, my arms

numb, no toilet paper to shit in the snow. The mountains of Korea. Attacking. Running for my life, dropping my rifle. Pieces of steel coming at me in that cold air.

The carbine was smaller and could fire automatic. But unlike the M1, it jammed.

I am drifting.

Let's get to the main points. One, the main people in my life are dead. Two, Greta was a small woman. As our daughter, Marti, would have turned out to be small. And funny. Greta made me laugh. I wish I could remember one of her jokes but I seem to have forgotten them all. Three, I'm going to retire this September and they'll give me a dinner and I'll go home. It's a nice house, I keep it well maintained, it's comfortable.

I would just as soon keep coming to work, to this old cemetery. I could at long last get around to fixing all the vandalized gravestones.

A gravestone is an easy target, it can not duck or run away.

When the Chinese came down in massed attacks, that was something I never thought humanly possible, men running against gunfire like that. I was twenty-two years old and I learned something about what is possible.

Always make your workers get to the job on time and when they don't, give them strong talk. Always be fair and don't begrudge their breaks, sick days, time off. To which they are entitled, as are you. In fact, help them to what they have coming.

And a person looking in from the outside might say, how can you stand it, the whole place is full of stiff.

The world is full of stiff. And most of the world is not half so lovely as Riverside.

Greta died during the night and I slept through her dying and woke next to her. She was cold.

Always keep a good maintenance program.

Lay it out clearly and even if you can't always hold to it, try to keep on with it, always get back to it.

In other words, know what you are doing, don't guess.

Cremation is a space-saver. And most important for your average person, a money-saver. I have started a section near the upper wall, I have called it Section 12, where I took down two trees, dug up the stumps, and leveled the ground.

What you are doing is burying a small box. Most people who favor cremation do not generally want a stone, as a ground-flush plaque will do. For some people not even a cemetery is necessary. The ashes can be kept in an urn on a shelf, or even in a simple can, anywhere. Jack knows some people who put a man's ashes in a mason jar and attached his eyeglasses with a rubber band.

Myself, I do not favor cremation, either the basic idea of burning or the small burial. But I predict in ten years it will be the most common way, and a coffin burial will be old-fashioned.

Harrison is a funny guy. The summer he worked here, when he just missed

killing himself falling off that roof, he said it was a miracle.

I am not a religious man. Unlike my mother. Who is not underground here, but in another cemetery, a very old one.

It was all because of his girlfriend at the time, a girl if I remember correctly who was tempestuous and a cheater. Harrison climbed up the side of her house and fell off from the third floor when the trellis broke, living through it with a mere few scratches and a sprained ankle. Jack said it was the booze that saved him, but I said it was also the booze that put him up there.

Well, now it is the present day and Harrison has come into some money. I said buy a little farm and he said it's not enough for that, and I said, well, a down payment.

Why did he want to come talk to me about it? I was glad to see him. He had left the job very suddenly, that summer, he wanted to start over somewhere else.

Always relegate all responsibility back to yourself. Take the blame, as you are the boss. It is not up to Owen Larsford in the end, you are the man with his hands dirty.

Keep the backhoe well maintained, especially the hydraulics.

In fact keep everything well maintained, from the truck to the hand clippers to the lowering device. I can not defer to that principle too much.

Have respect for the living and the dead. The dead are just as important, it is pretty much their place. Even though I do not believe that any of them, not a single one, is in heaven.

As far as hell goes, I don't think there is such a place. If there was one we'd all be there. Except for possibly the children.

But the way the world is set up is not logical. Which is why we have to be logical, to have something to hold onto.



It has been nearly a month since I have worked at the list of instructions. Owen Larsford is champing. I want to finish, as it is a mistake to leave a job incomplete. But in the meantime I have met Claire. Who I am afraid has got an old widower feeling foolish.

Although I prefer not to go into it I more or less have to, it is that much on my mind. And not in a completely logical way.

It happened through Harrison, as she is Harrison's mother's sister. One day, it was a Monday, I was at the shack trying to fix one of the rotary mowers that had suddenly stopped running. I suspected the kid using it had done something on purpose.

She is not thin, as was Greta, and I have never preferred a heavy woman.

You could actually say fat, at least somewhat.

But her face, and all of her actually, I find pleasing, very pleasing. In such a way that I had forgotten, but now the memories of old pleasures have been getting clearer. Two months ago this was something impossible, and today I feel

almost that I am a younger man again.

The main change and pleasure came when I found that she felt it too, it all happened very fast.

And, my fear is, too fast.

But I am going on sixty-five, and so is she. Almost to the day we are similar ages, though different birthdays. So we both appreciate that we don't have all that much time left, when we look straight at it.

I like her face, it has a kindness as well as a jokingness. When I first saw her she was sitting somewhat low in the seat, it is a way she has of riding in a car, making her seem shorter.

She has gray hair, straight and cut short, and right away I felt I knew what it would feel like to move my hand through it, to brush my hand back and forth. She has dark eyes but is not overall a dark type.

Her husband, whose name was Glenn—that's a first name—is dead, has been dead six years. And she has thought, as have I, that she was alone for the duration.

In Korea, which was before I met Greta, I used to imagine a woman. It was part of what got me through. And when I met Greta, she was not that woman that I imagined, but it did not matter.

But Claire is, somewhat. Although with more weight.

If you were to be watching this from the outside you might laugh, an old gravedigger fooling himself.

Risks. Just like Korea. Sometimes they are necessary.

And there is Harrison, who I trust. "Tim," he said, "you two were made for each other."



I have never been an early riser, only getting up to go to work, having coffee with my breakfast at Track's diner on West Main. I used to read the paper while eating but I lost interest in the news.

These days I am waking before the sky is getting light, which at this time of year is pretty early. I have breakfast and coffee at home while Claire sleeps.

A cemetery is much like any other business or action in that you have what comes in and what goes out, though in this case what comes in stays. That is, in the ground. And of course you must therefore give attention to your space, your land, as there is only so much room. For that you need to keep your map accurate, though there will always be inaccuracies as you are inheriting directions from people who went long before. And you will now and again cut with the backhoe into a coffin. If you are careful and are watching, and here you have got to keep your eye on Jack, you hold back at once. Most likely it will be old without a liner as the concrete didn't come in until more recently, so there will be wood and bones. And maybe not much wood. Then it is judgment. Given your need for the grave, you will have to make room.

But in general and where at all possible let the dead be.

The sky gets light very slowly, it is hard to tell when it starts. I haven't wanted to see it for many years and until now I did not enjoy the early hours because of the war where I remember the dark coldness and a man, a friend, frozen to death. That he was dead became visible in first light.

Everything has changed.

We are sleeping together, she has pretty much moved in.

The first time, she said, "Not bad for a couple old fogeys."

We had a good laugh. Like two kids, naked under the sheet. She said she liked my wrists, and my strong hands.

How it happened was that when she and Harrison drove in that day, Claire sitting low in the seat, Harrison at the wheel, I walked up to the driver's side to speak with him. She was quiet. But watching. And I could feel her looking at me and then out at the pond, then back to me. There was some strong feeling. I wasn't used to it.



Jake is going on ten years old, and he is gray around the muzzle. Claire remarked right away about his sadness, as people often do, but if you know him, the way Claire is getting to know him, you understand it is not sadness so much as Jake just trying to make you feel sorry for him, as that way he can get you to do things, such as give him a dog biscuit or a piece of food you might yourself be eating, or just give him a pat on the head. I am not a person who claims great intelligence for animals, especially dogs, but I do see that Jake knows more than he wants to let on.

A corpsman I knew, on the way north he adopted a puppy. He carried it in a sort of pouch. But not for long. A single 4.2-inch mortar round, one of our own, took them both.

Jake's ears are so long they touch the ground when he is checking a scent, which is most of the time, as he is that kind of a dog, part basset.

It is also a fact that his penis almost touches the ground, and at an angle that can make you uncomfortable to watch. Claire said one night as we were sitting on the couch and Jake was standing in front of us, as he often will do, his lower eyelids drooping, she said, "His private parts are so visible." Which made me laugh, as I'd never thought of it exactly like that, but once you consider it, it's true, he walks around or just stands there with everything showing.

I guess I am getting a little like Jake, which is also funny, as I am no Tarzan, but it is Claire's doing, and what can happen when you trust. She can walk or sit stark naked, when it is just the two of us, and she is no Brigitte Bardot. So there's the two of us naked, the house warm, the curtains pulled, sitting on the couch watching TV and eating a pizza. This is after we have had a time for ourselves in the bedroom, which I have to say is fairly often.

I choose not to speculate on how long this frequency will last, as I know nothing lasts. But my hope is that when it tapers off it will hold at a certain level. It is hard to imagine us getting completely tired of it.

I especially like the way she smells, twenty-four hours a day, as it changes. And I'm pretty sure the reverse applies.

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Quite a length of time has gone by. And time has speeded up, as it can. And I am ready for it to slow back down.

Some good, some bad has happened.

I have not done anything on the list for Owen Larsford, and that is not like me, once I have set to a task.

However, that particular issue, namely who will get my job, may somewhat take care of itself.

The first thing is, I hired Harrison to paint my house. I should say *our* house, as Claire is in it and I hope is here to stay. I should explain that the house has two floors, as I bought it when Greta was alive and Marti was a baby, and I have paid it off over the years and I now own it clear. I had thought to sell the place and get something small, but I never did. I like it, Claire does too, and I'd say we are here for the duration. Which has made me think more about maintenance. So I said to Harrison, how about painting the house, I'll pay you the going rate, and he said okay.

Harrison does careful work, he has primed it and has nearly finished a top coat, a very handsome dark red chosen by Claire. But we will be glad to see Harrison wind up the job. This is because of his problem with heights and ladders.

Harrison could have broken his neck. It happened one afternoon when I was at the cemetery and luckily Claire was home. He was painting up under the eaves at the back and the ladder started tilting sideways underneath him. He had to let go of almost a gallon of paint, but he was able to grab onto the rain gutter with both hands, and it was a very good thing that I had properly maintained that gutter. It held. Claire, hearing his yells, managed to get outside and raise the ladder back up before he lost his grip.

It was three days before he could get back on the ladder and begin to finish the job. I told him he didn't have to, that I'd get someone else, but he said no, he preferred to see it out himself. I said okay. And since then he's had that ladder tied very securely. Every time he moves it, he ties it again.

His keeping on, his bravery, his steadiness and his dedication to getting the job done, this has all added to my decision to offer him my job, running the cemetery.

Claire and I expected him to turn it down, as he has been talking about traveling, speculating about a trip across Russia, and then he seemed about to go to Ireland, as he likes to read books by Irish writers, and it seemed to us that the last thing he'd want to take up at his age was gravedigging, but Bob's your uncle, as Claire says, he is going to do it.

Owen Larsford will need some arm-bending on this. I feel sure that he will

come around, as he always has. He likes to see himself as Mister Necktie behind the polished desk, and he wants to run Riverside the way he runs his bank, but in the end he must admit I'm the one who knows where the bodies go.

Now that Harrison has done the house painting, he has been coming to work with me every day, going over the basics. He has a sharp mind and remembers. He has even found a book about the history of cemeteries. It goes way back before the Egyptians. Archaeologists have discovered a grave made by cave men where they laid flowers on the dead person's chest.

Claire is a good cook. I have started to enjoy the approach of a meal. She is also trying to teach me to knit, which to my surprise interests me, the weave, how what is basically a ball of string becomes a piece of cloth. But my hands have not taken to it, nor my eyes, and I may have to give over.

I have wished that Greta could come back and visit, to see me sitting on the couch naked, knitting.



Last night I told Claire something that I was wary of telling anyone.

It was in the weeks after Greta died, when I was alone in the house. My daughter and my wife were gone, and in the mornings I had to drive myself into work and pass the day in the place where they were buried. It got to where I was feeling life was too hard. Maybe it might be better to have no life at all, nothing. I'd never felt that before, not even in Korea. The feeling got so strong that I had begun to figure by what method. And one morning at Track's I looked down at a fried egg on my plate and I felt like maybe it was time. Then, as if my hands were doing it on their own and I was just watching, I picked up the *Republican*. I turned the pages, not paying much attention, and I saw a story about outer space. It was a small story and I read it. Some scientists had launched what they called a "probe." My eyes went to the word because it was a combat word we used. There was a picture of the device, it was a sort of Sputnik, it was small and compact and had fuel. They had launched it in a rocket out past the gravity of earth so it would keep going. They were sending it to look at some of the planets, to send back pictures. In the story one of the scientists said that if the probe kept going it might keep on for thirty or forty years. He said he hoped it could last that long. Then he also said, and here he said he was just "dreaming," that there was an object, a galaxy or such, that he was personally interested in, but that object was so far away that if the probe was to get to it, it would take ten thousand years.

That number set me back. I didn't finish my breakfast, in fact I never started it. I drank the coffee, but that was all. I got in the car and drove to Riverside. All day, thoughts of that little machine kept coming back to me. The idea that anything at all might keep going out into space for ten thousand years. That there was that much distance out there.

Now, why did that make me feel I could not kill myself? I have puzzled over that question ever since. Somehow it made it seem that the only thing to do was

to keep on. To see what would happen. To see my days out to their natural end.

That same week I acquired a dog. A man who was working for me, doing what is now Jack's job, his dog had a litter and I took one, and that was Jake's mother. Her name was Kate, and she eventually had a litter, five puppies of which I gave away all but one, and that was Jake. For a while I had two dogs and then Kate died at the age of six and Jake and I kept on together.

When I finished telling Claire this she had tears in her eyes. She shook her head and hugged me and said, "I don't understand, Tim. But I love you."



It was morning and we were getting ready to dig a grave. I'd sent the two lawnmower boys to cut the pond banks and trim the flower beds. Harrison and Jack and I were finishing our coffees.

Jack said to Harrison, "Why'd you shave off the beard?"

"Claire said she didn't like it."

I said I understood that.

Jack took a long draw on his Camel and then coughed.

"Pussywhipped," he said. "The freakin' two of you."



First was knitting, and now has come fishing.

Claire owns a rod with spinning reel, and some other pieces of equipment, and we went to Blakeman's in Watertown to get a rod and reel for me. She said I'd need a chair, and when I saw hers—the canvas was split and about ready to let go—I took the opportunity to buy two brand new ones, aluminum folding with each the same color canvas, dark green.

After Blakeman's we went to Claire's older sister's house, also in Watertown, where Claire lived after Glenn died. I was wanting the sister, Adelaide, to look on me with trust and not feel suspicious of a gravedigger.

People generally like me, although they find me quiet. At such times I try to help along whatever it is that makes them feel inclined to friendliness. We ate lunch at Adelaide's kitchen table. The two sisters are similar in appearance. It is curious to note that the differences between close relatives can seem small when you look at them but differences of the personality can be large.

It reminds me of when I helped herd a bunch of Chinese infantry that we captured on the way back north after the retreat. How they all looked almost exactly alike, but it wasn't long before I began to notice their different ways. Some laughed and made jokes in spite of being captured. That probably had to do with their being out of the fighting.

Adelaide and I got on all right. Claire had already told me that she was a widow and that her husband, whose name was Ben, had fought in Korea before she married him.

"He got wounded north of Taegu," Adelaide said. She pronounced it

“Teegu.” “He was a forward observer and he got mortared.”

“What weapons was he observing for?”

“Howitzers I think it was. When he got mortared he nearly lost his leg. Had a pin. You could feel it.”

“What unit?”

“I forget. The Twenty-third something. The Eighth Army, I know that.”

“People probably asked him about MASH.”

“Oh, sure.” She has a kind of a barking laugh, not at all like Claire’s. “I got a picture,” she said.

She went into the next room and came back with a photo with a crease where it’d been folded on the diagonal. It was a typical shot from the war days, black and white, two young guys standing close, smiling, facing the camera. Right away I thought the guy on the left looked like Pete Quinell, “Quinny”—my pal who’d been killed.

But of course it wasn’t him. The guys in the photo were in a maintenance outfit. “Ben’s on the right,” Adelaide said.

“Yes,” I said. There was a pause.

“Ben always talked about the smell. Human shit. He said the whole country—”

“Yeah.”

I handed the picture to Claire and I said to Adelaide, “Yeah, that looks like Korea.”

Claire looked at it but didn’t say anything, then handed it to her sister. I could feel Claire looking at me but I didn’t look back.

I felt like they both were expecting me to say something more, but I couldn’t get talking.

Finally Claire said, “Glenn never got called.”

“Lucky,” I said. I had to clear my throat to say it.

Finally Adelaide changed the subject.

“So, Tim,” she said, “I understand you know our Harrison.”

“Oh, yes. He worked for me and he’s an old friend. Quite a character.”

“He’s our little sister’s oldest. Sheila. Little Sheils. She’s dead. Cancer of the breast. Her husband died last winter out in Southbury. He left Harrison some money.”

“Which is burning a hole in Harrison’s pocket,” Claire said. “He asked Tim for advice on how to spend it.”

“What’d you say?”

“Buy a farm.”

“Hah! You’d be as good with money as Harrison. *Men.*”

“Tim’s good with money,” Claire said. “His house is paid for.”

“Wish this one was.”

After we left Adelaide’s we headed for Long Pond. I was driving and Claire was over against her door, sitting low in the seat, and there was a silence between us. All the way down 6A I could feel the buildup of tension. Just before the

turnoff to Windfer Road she said, “Tim, what’s going on?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Tim. Please don’t bullshit me. It’s not like you. At least I hope it’s not. I don’t want another silent man. Please.”

She moved closer and gave me a little pat on the thigh.

I had to clear my throat again. “It was the picture. The guy her husband was next to, he looked like Quinny. My pal.”

“The guy who got killed.”

“Yeah.”

“You think maybe it was?”

“No. No, Claire. The guys in the picture, they were two guys in a maintenance unit. I don’t get it, because Adelaide said he was a spotter for artillery. Maybe he got moved around. But—”

“Or he lied to her.”

“Why would he?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“Not to me. Anyway it wasn’t Quinny. It just looked like him. I got spooked.”

“But you’re okay? ”

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

I looked at her. I could see caution in her face. I smiled, wanting to reassure her.

“It’s the war, Claire. Even now, it comes back. I was scared all the time.”

“And it was how many years ago—”

“Forty-one.”

“But—Tim—when it comes back again, try and talk to me? It’ll save us some trouble.”

“Sure.”

“No, really.”

“Okay. Yes. Really.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Okay. Now let’s fish.”

The walk to the pond was a short one, and I carried the chairs and she carried her pole and tackle box. Since I didn’t yet have my license, she fished and I watched. We sat side by side, me on the left so she wouldn’t hook me when she cast. I could see she knew what she was doing but she didn’t catch anything.

“Adelaide sticks up for Ben even though she hated his guts,” she said.

I laughed at that.

“It’s true. You wouldn’t know it the way she brags about him.”

“You two’re different.”

“You think I’m nicer?”

“Yes.”

I could sense her smiling even though we were both looking out at the water. I touched her arm as she reeled in.

“So when you look back on it, Tim, you don’t have regrets?”

Harrison was sitting at my kitchen table, we were drinking coffee. Claire was out in the yard spading up the garden.

“Oh, I have regrets, Harrison. Believe me. But everybody does. It’s normal.”

“I’ve got too many.”

“You’re down on your luck is all.”

“I’ve got a book of poems now.”

“That you wrote?”

“Yes. But no one wants it.”

“Harrison! That’s quite an achievement. How in the heck do you write poems?”

“With a pencil.”

We both laughed but there was a sadness that we weren’t looking straight at.

“Now I’m gonna write a novel.”

“About what?”

“A man who commits suicide.”

“Harrison—”

“Oh, he may not. But he thinks about it all the time.”

“Put some jokes in there.”

“Yeah. I should. That’s good advice.”

“Maybe you should get out of Colchester. Are you sure you want this Riverside job?”

“Definitely. I can do it for a few years. I’ll like it, Tim. I love Riverside.”

“So do I.”

“Later, I’ll go to Africa. The Congo.”

“What for?”

“I’ll go up the Congo River in a canoe. Be a lot to write about.”

“I’d stay away from there. They got terrible fevers.”

“Do you regret not having more adventures, Tim?”

“Korea was enough. Plenty.”

I sipped my coffee. Harrison was thoughtful for a long pause.

“I’ve got a confession, Tim.”

“Oh?”

“The reason I didn’t get drafted for Vietnam was because I pretended to be crazy at the physical.”

“No kidding.”

“I fooled the shrink. The psychologist who interviewed me, I fooled him. I pretended I wanted to go in. But I made up so many crazy things I’d done, he told me he had to reject me. He said he was sorry.”

“I never thought of trying that.”

“And I told him I thought I might be a homosexual. I said I’d never done anything but I had desires.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said that’s normal.”

“There’s a lot of guys, if they’d done what you did, they’d be alive today.”

“You know what bothers me? That I was so believable.”

“About being a homosexual?”

“About being crazy.”

“We’re all a touch crazy, Harrison. Be glad you’re above ground.”

We heard Claire on the back porch and a few seconds later in she came. She gave off a good smell, a mixture of fresh dirt and sweat. She went to the sink and washed her hands.

“I need lunch,” she said. “What’re you two looking so grim about?”

“Harrison thinks he might be crazy.”

“Confirmed on that,” Claire said.



A person’s luck takes turns in going up and down, and it may seem for a while that one direction will keep on, it won’t go into reverse or even ease up. That is not logical.

For a while now Claire and Harrison and I, all three of us, have been in a period of going down, and it began one evening when I was in the bathroom running hot water into the tub. I heard Claire yell and then she yelled a second time and the door opened and I knew it was trouble.

“It’s Jake!” She turned as she said it, and I followed her into our bedroom where he was lying on the bed and I thought right away he was dead. His chest wasn’t moving and his eyes were open but they didn’t seem to be seeing and some yellowish liquid was coming out of his nostrils.

Poor Jake. He was breathing but only barely and I picked him up off the bed and we wrapped him in a blanket and put him in the back seat of the car and took him to the vet, Doc Stephanie out in Millville. I’ve known Doc ever since his wife died and he buried her at Riverside, and I knew it was okay to knock on the door of his house at a late hour. There was no use to it, though, as Jake was dead. Doc said he could do an autopsy to figure out what killed him but both Claire and I said what’s the point.

We took him back home and the next day we buried him at Riverside next to the compost pile. Harrison dug the hole and he and Claire and Jack and I stood for a few minutes, as if it was a funeral. Jake was still wrapped in the blanket from the night before. I took the shovel myself and filled the grave.

About a week and a half after that, things got worse. As if Jake had given us a warning.

I had a meeting with Owen Larsford, and it did not go according to my predictions.

When you are looking at Owen Larsford you are not seeing a pleasant sight. I sometimes think of his wife and I picture her not being glad when he comes home from the bank, or when she wakes in the morning and there he is, his

head on the pillow next to her. He has a small moustache that he keeps closely trimmed, and it is a light shade of gray but the tips of the hairs are dark, almost black. Two-toned, and I do not understand how that has come to be, for it never changes. It's not as if the hairs could get dark as they grow, dark at the tips while the shafts stay light. Maybe he dyes it that way, but why would he? The hair on his bony head is gray and thin and he combs it straight back. His eyebrows are black. They curve up and back down with a look of angry surprise. His forehead has deep furrows.

As usual he was at his desk and we shook hands and I sat facing him and he asked me how I was getting on. He praised the job I was doing and said he was going to miss me when I retired. Then he told me that he had decided that my plan to hire Harrison as my replacement was "unfortunately not a good idea."

"Not enough experience, Tim," he said. "I've decided to bring in Lou Pagrista to fill your slot."

I looked at him and there was a silence. He has a habit of pausing with his eyebrows raised.

I said, "Why?"

"Because Lou is the man I consider qualified for the job. Believe me, Tim, I am aware that you and Lou do not see eye to eye."

In a situation like this I often do not talk enough. My argument wasn't forceful. I regret this. I should have fought.

He said Harrison did not have "the necessary qualifications."

Owen Larsford reminds me of certain officers in Korea, in particular a battalion commander we very seldom saw, a man who made the plans that usually left our men dead.

"Lou doesn't have a logical approach," I said. "He talks more than he works."

"That's my decision, Tim." He stared at me for a second as if he was feeling sorry for me. Then he said, "Lou's son Tony will take Jack's place."

I opened my mouth to speak but before I could he said, "Tim, we are going to have to let Jack go. We cannot have a drunk working at Riverside. Operating equipment. This is a cemetery with prominent people buried in it. The Scovils, the Tuttlés. Henry Goss."

"Jack's a good man," I said. "A good worker. He's been with me for going on seven years."

He ignored this.

"Tony has been putting in a new septic tank and drainage field at my place out in Millville, and he does solid work."

Owen has a big estate up on South Street. And he is a mean cheap son of a bitch and I wish there was a heaven so he could be denied it and get shunted down the rails to hell.

He also reminded me they would be giving me a farewell dinner. I said that under the circumstances I would forego the dinner.

"Well, that is up to you, Tim. But I would prefer to round off this matter without hard feelings."

I chose not to take up this argument any further and said goodbye and left

his office. I could see no good reason to start coming back at him with hard words, although I did feel the urge. Claire said I should have told him to fuck off.

I had to admit that might have felt good, at least for a time.



Two days after my meeting with Owen Larsford Lou Pagrista made a visit to Riverside. By the very fact that he did this, you get an indication of what type of a man I am talking about. He brought his son Tony with him and they pulled up at the maintenance garage where Jack and I were changing the oil and the filter on the backhoe.

“Tim!” he said, walking up to me as if we were longtime friends. He held out his hand. I didn’t pause, I shook it, but that is something I could not do a second time.

I will say this: Lou has a certain way of seeming likeable. Claire would say “charm.” I have to admit, I can get caught off guard by that type of person. You get to be my age and you realize you are still making the old mistakes.

Lou has a round face and smooth skin and he wears glasses made with brass-plated wire. When he works he has a habit of removing his glasses and cleaning the lenses with his shirt. That’s when he is liable to get to talking, and if you’re working with him you have to wait.

“It’s gonna be an easy fit, Tim,” he said. “You retiring and me and Tony slipping right in. You been keeping everything shipshape, and I know all how it goes. Oh—I forgot—this is my son Tony—”

Jack and I shook hands with Tony. He looked like a decent sort. I think he was embarrassed by his dad.

After they left Jack and I didn’t say much. We knocked off for lunch. The day was clear and sunny and we sat in our chairs in front of the shack and after a while we exchanged some sharp observations about Lou and Owen Larsford. We agreed Tony didn’t seem so bad.



My retirement has gotten under way.

Soon after my last day I went up to Owen Larsford’s office at the bank and told him I was going to take Greta and Marti and Jake out of Riverside and rebury them somewhere else. I didn’t say where.

This caused Owen’s eyebrows to raise higher than I’ve ever seen them go, then snap back down. Which I enjoyed, but I did not crack a grin.

After a pause he said, “Well, if that’s the way you feel, Tim.”

“It is,” I said.

I pretty much set the terms, I was that fed up with him and his ways. I specified that Claire and Harrison and I would come in to Riverside on a certain day, it was a Friday, and first thing in the morning we would dig up Jake. I said I

did not want Lou and Tony nearby, and I did not want them watching from any distance. And I specified that later that morning I would expect Jack to be able to run the backhoe and open the graves of my wife and daughter. I explained that I had arranged for two men from C & K with a flatbed truck with a lifter to come in and load the coffins onto the truck. And again, I made it clear I did not want Lou or Tony or any other persons nearby or watching.

Owen agreed to all of this. He knew I meant business.

A few days later I drove out to Millville and stopped in to see Jack and his wife, Bobbie. They didn't look too well, but they could understand my talk. I gave Jack a personal check in the amount of five hundred dollars and I apologized for not being able to save his job. His bleary eyes were merry as usual, but when he looked down at the amount on the check he started to cry. I predict most of the money will go for drink, but that is his and Bobbie's business. I asked Jack if he would be able to run the backhoe at Riverside to open the graves and he said yes. And he held to it, he was there. I expect Jack and Bobbie won't last long, but, again, that is their business.



It was raining. We drove to Riverside as planned. Lou and Tony stayed in the shack and we dug up Jake. Harrison and I had made a plywood box and we set him carefully into it, still in his blanket. He had by then begun his decomposition and the smell was strong.

Jack got there soon after, and he started up the backhoe, the old International. Lou and Tony had the good sense to stay inside, although I did see Lou peering through the window. Jack, with his nicotine yellow fingers on the levers, wearing his dirty T-shirt, opened the two side-by-side graves. He lit a cigarette which the rain extinguished but he kept it in his mouth as he worked.

The C & K boys showed up with their truck right on time. Both coffins were inside concrete liners which they lifted out without a problem. I did not take the lids off and look inside. Jack and Harrison helped get both liners secured onto the truck with ratchet straps. I had Jack fill the graves so there would be no complaining from Lou, which I know there will be anyway.

I am done with Riverside. I will never go through those old gates again.

The drive out to Millville was slow. I kept close behind the truck. Claire sat up front with me, Harrison rode in the rear seat. There wasn't much to be said. Jake's box hadn't fit all the way into the trunk so we'd had to tie it, leaving the trunk lid up. We could hear the rain drumming on the plywood. People turned and looked at the truck and the two liners, it was pretty obvious what was inside them, the rain smearing the dirt on the sides.

As we passed the Watertown Road I looked in the rearview mirror and I could see that Harrison was having trouble keeping back the tears.

"They'll be better off out in Millville, Harrison," I said.

Claire turned and looked back and said, "You feeling sad, hon?" He nodded. She reached for his hand and said, "Tim said you shaved your beard off for me."

“I knew you’d prefer it gone. I realized I never did like it.”

Claire laughed. “It was a bit thin.”

“I’m not going to Africa,” Harrison said. “I’m going to Ireland. Writers in Ireland don’t pay taxes.”

Claire said, “Are you sure, Harrison? Have you actually looked into that?”

“No, I haven’t. You’re right, Claire. I’d better check on it. No use moving over there and finding out I was wrong.”

I had gotten permits from the City of Colchester and the town of Millville, and I had arranged with Bob Fenn, an old friend who is in charge of the Millville cemetery where my mother and father are buried, to have the new graves ready.

Bob was waiting. His backhoe is a new Kubota, and he was sitting in the cab. The C & K boys did a good job of lowering the liners carefully into the holes, with Harrison and me steadying. Greta and Marti have a nice location at the top of a small hill.

The previous week, when I’d met with Bob, I’d bought two plots for Claire and me, not far from Greta and Marti. I showed them to her. She had told me she didn’t want to be next to Glenn out in Prospect.

We drove home. It rained harder, hammering onto the roof of my old Honda and onto Jake’s box. Harrison and I had already dug a grave in the backyard and we put Jake in and filled it. Harrison came into the house and the three of us stood at the kitchen table for a few minutes, not saying much. We each had a shot of brandy. When Harrison had gone Claire and I turned up the thermostat in spite of it being summer, and we took hot baths. Then we got into bed, naked under the blankets. We hugged and Claire cried some and then we just lay quiet, holding hands. After a while we slept.