
Golden Day

Mrs. Cashman needed eighty-seven dollars and I was determined to help her get it.

“But you mustn’t give it to me, I won’t take it,” Mrs. Cashman said, her oversized, pearl-like necklace clanking against the edge of her third refill of coffee in our hotel’s delicatessen. “You mustn’t.” Mrs. Cashman was seventy-three. She hadn’t touched the third cup, but she would, as it was free, and coffee, though she’d never say this, killed the need for food.

“I don’t have it,” I said. Her gaze dropped from mine, into the coffee and the swirl of cream she’d poured in, the coffee white, and she brought the cup to her lips.

“It’s not for me,” she sipped, “but for Mr. Newcomb. He’s eighty-four years old.”

Mr. Newcomb lived on the eleventh floor, two above mine, beside Mrs. Cashman, though to hear her tell it he would soon have to move, “to a lower floor on account of his legs, what with the elevators always busted; or maybe straight to the funeral parlor, cut out the middle men.” The one time I’d spoken with Mr. Newcomb, or rather he to me, he was sitting alone with a cigar in the Carlson’s lobby, staring into the wallpaper. He’d startled me, turning and meeting my eyes. “Cubano,” is all he’d said. And then he’d smiled and turned his attention back to the wall.

“Let’s get more crackers,” I suggested, though my tooth was killing me, the tooth I later had pulled, just to the right of the right incisor, and as I was signaling the waitress, Mrs. Cashman covered my free hand with her own.

“He’s not well. It’s his joints. They ache beyond normal,” she said, and, as if to demonstrate, she pulled up the hem of her navy dress and rubbed her knees. This set her coughing and I checked my pocket for change to see if I had enough to buy her a soup.

“I’ll buy you a soup,” I said as the waitress arrived.

Mrs. Cashman looked up from her knees. “Not too much salt.” Her coughing ceased. “And maybe some extra noodle.”

I’d moved into the Carlson, after my breakup with Lacey, to be with my father, who would die six months after my arrival, though only in my mind did the two events go together. I’d stayed on—living in his front room, on the sofa, not in his bed—where the rent was controlled and my mother’s picture watched over me from the foyer wall. I didn’t have anywhere else to go. My jobs weren’t working out: first the desk job with

the environmental clean-up company, then the retail job with the suit I never earned enough to pay for, that at least I wore to his funeral, and then the selling of vitamins and light bulbs for the handicapped. I'm not handicapped, impaired, challenged, no more than anyone else, not counting my tooth, but these companies hire out to fill the needs around the holidays, and it was November and the Christmas rush was on.

I have no siblings. I am an only child. My mother died when I was ten. I sat in the oak tree in front of the junior high school the day of her death, and watched the students on the playground, and then when it was dark I climbed down and went back to our house, where my father was watching the news, and when I came in he smiled thickly at me, his lips gone dry and the lines around his eyes deep in the light of the television, and he clapped his hands once as if for encouragement.

It had seemed natural to stay on in his apartment, though now that he had been gone, dead, for two and a half months, I was beginning to feel uneasy. The moosehead made me nervous. The apartment had only two rooms, and they were not separated by a wall, only by a change in carpet, from orange (in the bedroom) to brown (in the living room), and above the two TVs he'd mounted what a client from Augusta, Maine, had sent in a crate with the payment that closed out the client's account of twenty-two years.

My father had two televisions, one for picture and one for sound. Near the end, when he was thin and suddenly old, we'd sit eating something I'd brought home, and I'd have the unsettling experience of watching one newscaster while listening to another. The sound up so loud that it distorted, my father never seeming to mind. More recently, the picture tube had begun to go, so I'd hear most programs but see very few. Mrs. Cashman came over sometimes after he'd died, and we'd sit in the glow of the television, and she'd tell me about the successes of her children, and the failures of her grandchildren, a game show on one of the TVs, the other screen blank, the moose up above it all like a big antenna.

My father and Mrs. Cashman did not speak.

"She's a woman you can't get to know," he once said, though I never had any trouble and it would not be until after his death, after I'd had my day with Mr. Newcomb, that I would understand that what he'd said was so, though not in the ways that he meant.

Sometimes I brought Mrs. Cashman food and she would cook it. Lacey never cooked. In fact, though we were married, I now don't know what I saw in her. "She had a nice chest," my father would say, polishing to his last good day the sample case he kept—inside, the wallets and the key cases, the purses, the letter openers with the leather handles—and also the unsold attachés. "A nice chest is important." And she did have a nice chest, but this did not seem a legitimate basis for matrimony.

"And she had personality."

"Personality? Dad, she left me. She packed up and left me and took our son."

"Still," my father said, and turned his attention to the noise from the upper TV. I must have turned my attention to the window, for it was there that I first saw Mrs. Cashman.

Mrs. Cashman, I'd learn from our lunches, left Poland in the back of a mailsack when she was fifteen. She married Mr. Cashman in Toronto and, when he'd died, she'd found a place with her younger sister, Nora, who'd retired to the Carlson in the late 1970s with a pension from AT&T.

I first saw Mrs. Cashman surrounded by fur from a rug she was shaking out her eleventh-story window. The effect was startling: the red rug flapping like a tongue, white fur rising around her, my father pale on the sofa, the green glow of the TV. After a particularly vigorous shake, the rug dropped from her hands and for a minute it appeared Mrs. Cashman might float down behind it. She lunged after the rug, her fingers snapping in the air, as if calling it back, and then a small dog appeared in the sill beside her, barked twice, and bit onto her dress. She smacked it.

The red rug caught a breeze and sailed over the four lanes of Eddy Street.

I retrieved it. I retrieved the rug and I brought it back to her, maybe because I'm a sucker, or more likely because the look on her face after she'd dropped it reminded me of Crawford's the time I ran over his tricycle with Lacey's Cabriolet.

Crawford, my son, was three when they left. We had almost aborted him, but at the last minute Lacey could not go through with it, and now I am of course thankful to her, though she cheated on me and left me and then for a period I did not know anymore for certain how Crawford was.

I didn't see Mrs. Cashman again until I bumped into her in the laundry where I was washing my father's clothes.

"Spray bleach," she'd said without prompting, and when I turned from my sorting, colors from whites, she was staring at me, two oyster-sized earrings on either side of her loosely swaying neck. "For the shorts."

I'm not one to speak much of personal issues of hygiene. Lacey once said to me, in bed, "I stink, I know, I don't use deodorant," but that was different, as we were of course without clothes, and besides her smell to me was like a damned nectar; but Mrs. Cashman was squeaking toward me, in the building's basement laundry, her feet in blue tennis shoes.

"You spray the front and the back and, if you're a sweaty man, you spray the waist as well." She said this in a way that was perfectly natural, as if it were the weather or maybe that I'd dropped a sock behind the washer.

She snatched my father's boxers before I even saw her arm move. She turned the shorts in her hand, frowning. "What's the matter? You not got a wife?"

"We've separated."

"Big shot," she said.

"She left me."

She paused. "Spray bleach," she finally said. "Front and the back."

My father often surprised me, with his televisions, with his mooshead, even with the announcement that he was dying. He'd known about the cancer for six months before he called, and then he'd only spoken to Lacey, who'd taped a note to the refrigerator saying that he'd phoned.

One night, my father, after a particularly upsetting viewing of the eleven o'clock news, surprised me by sending me up to check on Mrs. Cashman's sister.

"Ask her if she feels safe."

"Nora?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Cashman's sister?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you just call her?"

"She worked forty years at AT&T. She's had enough already with the telephone."

I did as he asked. Nora answered the door as if it were perfectly normal for me to be calling at half past eleven, smiling as if she were glad to see me, squeezing my arm in gratitude when I asked her how she was.

It wasn't until after my father's death that I started to see more of Mrs. Cashman. My job at the handicapped phone bank freed up my days, and so I'd often see her at breakfast or at lunch in the hotel's delicatessen where she'd call me to her table. With Crawford gone and Lacey gone and my father gone, I did not mind the company. There were long periods of silence, with Mrs. Cashman maybe eating half my sandwich, and sometimes she'd talk about her life in Canada, about growing up in Toronto with an uncle and aunt, about her husband who, like her father, had been a jeweler, and I'd compliment the jewels she wore and she'd tell me how they were only fakes, but she'd blush. I liked that she'd blush. At seventy-three years old. She was graceful. She wore a hat, for instance, whenever she went out of her apartment. And she'd always motion for me to sit with her, there in the lobby delicatessen, extending a thin arm to the empty chair, her bracelets sweeping toward it. And Mr. Newcomb, the time I'd seen him sitting in the Carlson lobby, just sitting there with his cigar, he wore a necktie. Even my father never left in the morning without shaving twice.

I started to bring her vitamins. I was stealing them, true, but the phone job paid under the minimum wage, and I could not afford them otherwise. When the clients invariably asked if I was crippled, I could not bring myself to lie. I'd sold only twelve orders in four weeks, and I knew my vitamin days were numbered.

Once I smuggled her out a light bulb.

"What's this?"

"A light bulb."

"Why?"

"It lasts a lifetime."

"With me, then, you got ripped off."

The vitamins she accepted, though she said they burned her stomach. "Take them with food," I told her.

"They turn my pee extra yellow."

"Spray bleach," I said.

Lacey was a health nut. I hated to think that I'd been attracted to the vitamin angle of the handicapped job for this reason, but it is true that my vitamin sales outnumbered

my bulb sales by nearly four to one, though as I say they were far from providing a steady salary. Lacey went off with the guy who sold me life insurance, which is a good racket to be in, though I wouldn't like it, always fencing people's insecurities. She did aerobics, sometimes twice a day, and some nights she'd go out with her friends from the gym after the dinnertime workout and I realize now that she was probably then with Edward.

There'd be something in the freezer or the fridge. I'd sit with Crawford in our small yard, and to see over our fence, and the fences that made boxes of all the yards, we'd climb the near branch of our oak, and watch the sun drop down behind the old athletic park and the fireflies rise up from the grass.

I could guess where Lacey had taken him: to her parents, or to Edward's house, and I knew the number of Edward's office as I mailed a check there every month, but I figured I'd wait and let Lacey call, that Crawford would need time to adjust, that he didn't need a scene right then, with his mother and father screaming at each other, and this new man with whom he'd have to learn to get along.

Because she rarely had much to eat, once I bought Mrs. Cashman a fish. A whole fish that was maybe two days old but I'd been assured was fresh enough. My father had left five hundred and sixty-four dollars worth of silver dollars—nine coins—in a ladies' handbag that was fastened with a three-number combination lock. After paying rent and back rent, I had nineteen dollars left.

"It's a celebration," Mrs. Cashman announced when I arrived at her apartment with the fish.

We sat at Mrs. Cashman's card table and ate the fish she'd broiled. During the entire meal her schnauzer, Alfred, was humping my leg. Whenever I was in the house he lunged toward me with the heat of a pervert. Though small, he was fat, as Mrs. Cashman and Mr. Newcomb often left their apartments' adjoining door ajar, and, as Mrs. Cashman put it, Mr. Newcomb "was a dog person." I'd knocked on Mr. Newcomb's door after inviting Nora to dinner, but there had been no answer.

"He rests," said Mrs. Cashman.

"He dances," said Nora, and I thought for a moment she was referring to Mr. Newcomb until I saw that she was pointing at Alfred doing a kind of dance on my poor leg.

"About the eighty-eight dollars," Mrs. Cashman said as she spooned a broth across my fish. In it were bits of green and flakes of black and it looked nice. "Maybe your father left you a little money?"

"Lilka!" Nora was sixty-six. The sister born between the two of them had, like the parents, as Mrs. Cashman once briefly put it to me, not survived.

"He left me a handbag full of silver dollars," I said.

"Maybe you can cash them?"

"Your father was a nice man, Mr. Nye," said Nora.

"I've only nine dollars left."

Alfred sighed, settled down on the red rug. Mrs. Cashman re-smoothed the napkin in her lap. Nora began to talk about a new man in her life.

"He's a painter."

Mrs. Cashman speared a bean. "Houses?"

Nora frowned. "What about you, Neil?"

"There's no new man in my life," I said, thinking Mrs. Cashman might get a kick out of this but she just frowned, and so now they were both frowning. My tooth was killing me, but I took another bite, packing the left side of my mouth.

"So, Nora," said Mrs. Cashman, "this man?"

"He's divorcing."

"He's a painter *and* he's divorcing? What next, that he's purple?"

"He's a very nice man," Nora said. She flipped Albert a red potato. "And what about your oldest?"

Mrs. Cashman waved her fork. "He's troubled. He's worried that Julie will take everything. He sent thirty dollars."

Nora spoke down to her plate. "Thirty dollars."

"He's doing the best that he can. I told him never to marry that . . . that *girl*." Mrs. Cashman shook a little, shut her eyes. When she opened them, she was looking at me. "I'd give it to Mr. Newcomb if I didn't have to pay rent. The poor man's legs."

"And where are *his* children?" Nora asked.

"Oh, Nora, where are any of our children?"

I excused myself from the table. Alfred jumped into my chair, and Mrs. Cashman swatted at him but not before he grabbed what he could. He'd choke on a bone and I'd have to take him to the vet and I didn't even have the money to loan to Mrs. Cashman for Mr. Newcomb's weak legs.

Crawford had something to do with my guts feeling bad. They'd been bad for a while, not at the start, when I had my father to watch over, but lately nothing had been staying in me. I sat on the toilet in Mrs. Cashman's bathroom, and stared into the mirror that was across from me.

I'd hit Crawford once. He'd run out into the road and an ice-cream truck nearly took him, or at least had to brake, its horn blaring, the clown on top spinning, and I overreacted because when I got to Crawford I cuffed him and even though I felt so bad that I bought him two creamsuckles I couldn't help feel that this was something he might still think about, maybe at night, alone in a bed that was not yet his own.

Nora was whispering when I emerged.

"His own son," she was saying.

"His *only* son."

I went through the opened door across from the bathroom and was in Mr. Newcomb's den. I suddenly had a desire to see this Mr. Newcomb and his frail legs, to get his butt over here and tell me why I should give him eighty-eight dollars when I was broke, too. And I was going to tell him, crossing the den, until I pushed open the den's other door and saw Mr. Newcomb spread out in his bed. An old duvet across him, his body barely a wrinkle in the fabric, he could not have weighed one hundred pounds. And beside his bed a sandwich, a small bite mark in the half that was left, hardening, and an untouched glass of milk.

Stealing the money was not hard. Rather than spend what would be my last shift on the telephone, I moved from station to station talking. The supervisors I worked with

were never eager to see me, and they would turn to the phone after a couple of words and then I would just grab their banks. Between three banks, I collected fifty-one dollars in cash. I left whatever checks there were in a pile on my station, headed toward the bathroom, and just kept walking. I did not feel badly that I was stealing from the handicapped, as I was giving to the handicapped, cutting out the middle man.

I phoned Mrs. Cashman before I went to her room and knocked. She hadn't been in the delicatessen, where I'd treated myself to a coffee with the money I had stolen. I felt a little bad doing so, but I was thirty-six dollars short as it was, so I did not feel that seventy-five cents, a dollar with the tip, would affect Mr. Newcomb's legs one way or the other.

I knocked on her door a few more times but she did not answer. I thought about coming upstairs again later, but I did not really feel like going back to my father's apartment. I knocked on Mr. Newcomb's door. I knocked loudly and then louder still. I had the money he needed. He would be happy that I woke him.

"Who is it?" His voice startled me as it had once before.

"It's Neil," I said. "From downstairs."

"Hold on, hold on," Mr. Newcomb said, his voice coming from across the apartment. "I'll be a minute."

When the door finally opened, it opened only a crack, and I saw Mr. Newcomb, a cane in his hand, his body wrapped in a robe. "Yes?"

"I have your money."

"One hundred four dollars?"

"Fifty-one. Fifty, actually."

"You got a car?"

"Huh?"

Mr. Newcomb seemed to look back over his shoulder. "Go downstairs and get me a newspaper, will you? Will you do that, Neil?"

"Sure."

"Thanks, Neil. Thanks very much," Mr. Newcomb said, and as I tried to look over his shoulder, he quickly shut the door.

He had dressed. He was wearing tan slacks and white tennis shoes and a green V-neck sweater over a cream-colored shirt, and every inch, if baggy, was pressed. His hair was wet and combed and he moved, for a man with bum legs, well enough to take the paper from me, take my arm, motion for me to sit, and get himself into the chair beneath the picture of his wife and a photo from the War.

I was looking at the photo, trying to figure which of the five young soldiers that leaned on a donkey cart was now this old man thumbing through the newspaper, his cane against the cushion of the chair, when Mrs. Cashman appeared in the connecting doorway wearing her red hat.

"Hello, Neil."

"Hello, Mrs. Cashman. Are you just getting in?"

"No," she said. "Did you knock? I must have been napping—"

"Are you going out?" I asked.

"No, dear—"

She smiled at me, and then her eyes briefly met Mr. Newcomb's as she closed the doors that adjoined the two apartments, her red hat the last thing to go.

Mr. Newcomb had the paper in pieces around his chair, was tearing one page in half. "Golden Day," he said. I looked at him, at his face that I'd seen as so frail, and it did not seem now that way at all, but rather seemed taken over by his eyes, which all but jumped from their sockets.

"I'm sorry that I'm a little short with the money," I began, but he cut me off. He was trying to stand. I got to my own feet and offered him my arm.

"Good," he said. "Good. You got a car?"

"No."

"That's OK. Twenty-two times two is forty-four, that leaves six dollars. What's twenty-two times one and a half?"

"Thirty-six," he continued before I could answer. "Thirty-six dollars, yes, that's OK." He was up now, with his hand on his black wooden cane, and he was heading toward the closet.

"Go into my kitchen, in the cabinet beside the sink."

The kitchen was clean, and as small as my father's, and when I opened the cabinet beside the sink it was empty. I opened the cabinet opposite. Inside were two cans of mini-ravioli, a can of soup, a tin of tuna, and one box of Ritz crackers.

"Never mind," Mr. Newcomb called. "I've got it here."

I looked in the cupboard for a minute longer, and then turned to see Mr. Newcomb emerging from the bedroom with two glasses and a bottle of Canadian whiskey. He was holding them in the hand that didn't hold his cane and I rushed to him to make sure he did not drop them.

"Fill 'em," Newcomb said.

I poured.

"Three fingers and then we'll go."

I poured about an inch into each tumbler, tumblers that were already wet.

"Pretty thin fingers," Mr. Newcomb said, and then he raised his glass and drank it back and I did the same. "To Golden Day," he said and he smacked his lips.

I thought maybe the Golden Day was a hospital, or a prescription drug, or God forbid it sounded like the place that buried my father. "Yes, it is a golden day," I said, "and I'm glad I could be of help."

Mr. Newcomb was fitting onto his head a green fedora with a red feather in the band. "Let's blow out of here," he said, and we left the Carlson, and twenty minutes later we were on the number 7 bus to the track.

At six to one, Golden Day figured to pay \$216 on our thirty-six-dollar bet. After bus fare and the dollar admission, we were able to buy two beers and split a knockwurst. Standing in the concrete fairway beneath the grandstand, Mr. Newcomb talked horses nonstop: see the way that one leans, see the way that one carries, that one has rot, that one's ribs are heavy. He had a comment for each horse that paraded past. And then it was the third race, and out came Golden Day.

I hadn't planned on becoming involved in what I perceived to be an old man's last cry at life, and I was a little uncomfortable about his health, but he'd seemed so

eager, this seemed so important to him, that I went along, without questioning. And Golden Day was a magnificent horse: her mane lit with the sun, her head held higher than the horses around her. I'd give the old man his thrill, put him back on the bus—I'd been smart enough to buy round-trip passes—then get him back to bed before his legs gave out completely. When he slept he might dream of his younger days, and I was glad for it.

I was surprised, then, as the two of us watched Golden Day bank back toward the starting gate, to hear Mr. Newcomb say, "So, your wife left you?"

I took my eyes from the horse. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your wife? She up and left with your own son, Mrs. Cashman says."

"That's private. Mrs. Cashman was supposed to keep that to herself."

"People talk," Mr. Newcomb said, and then he elbowed me hard in the ribs and jutted his narrow chin back toward the track. "Here we go—Golden Day!"

The gun fired, the gate—which was hooked to the back of a truck—sped off, and Golden Day immediately took advantage of her position on the rail. Like lightning she bolted off.

"Golden Day!" I said.

"You must miss him," said Mr. Newcomb.

I looked down at the little man, whose right arm was looped through my left, his other hand clutching the knob at the top of his cane. Then the elbow again, and Newcomb was pointing toward the track.

"Look at her take that turn. Golden Day, Golden Day, Golden Day at six to one!"

She was in the lead. The number-three horse was closing. The number-eight horse, a giant animal that looked prehistoric, was muscling in from the outside. You could see the mad flair of its nostrils, the hatred in it of losing. "She's got to hold the rail," I said, "come on Golden Day, come on golden girl!"

"You were cheating, maybe?" I felt Mr. Newcomb's face near mine once more.

"No."

"You don't like girls?"

"Of course I like girls."

Mr. Newcomb shrugged his frail shoulders. The feather in his hat blew a little in the wind.

"Here, here," he said, suddenly excited again, "halfway in the lead, and she's a closer."

"What about the number-eight horse?" That horse's nose was at her tail, and he seemed to be pressing in.

"It's going to be close," Mr. Newcomb said and we inched up toward the rail. The announcer was calling faster now, the race heating up and while the crowd was sparse, a roar began from the grandstand.

Golden Day by half a length, Lightning Strike closing, Golden Day into the turn, fast finisher, dry track, Golden Day, Golden Day, Golden Day—

"Come on, Golden Day," I shouted, "Come on, COME ON, COME ON—"

The horses were streaking toward us, the finish line twenty feet to my right. We were at the fence before the rail, ten feet from the horses, I could smell them, I could feel their approaching heat—

Lightning Strike—Golden Day—Lightning Strike—Golden Day—

A dead heat, neck and neck, a line of spit behind each horse, the jockies' faces clamped to the streaking necks—

“GOLDEN DAY, GOLDEN DAY, GOLDEN DAY,” I was screaming and Mr. Newcomb was pounding at the fence, his teeth gritted together—

“GO-GO-GO-GO-GO—” he cried, “GOLDEN DAY!”

And they streaked past, the two horses identical, stretching out, every last inch toward the finish line. The crowd's roar, the blur of the announcer's mad call, Mr. Newcomb with his arms raised up over his head—

And then I realized I was crying, big tears down my dumb face, and when I turned toward Mr. Newcomb he was watching me, the horses crossing the finish line, the crowd's roaring blanket, his arms opening wide to me, the sunlight across his face.