



HE STEPS CAREFULLY, THE WARM MUG OF coffee wrapped in his arthritic hands, too precious to risk with a one-handed carry. To the couch, where his schnauzer is lying on the heating pad, giving him the side-eye, saying, *look, if you think you're sitting here, think again*. His dog, his couch, his life. Yet, he's had the feeling lately that nothing belongs to him, the connection to his surroundings tenuous, not fully realized. A strangeness, an unfamiliarity he cannot explain. Like the robe he is wearing. How is it that he does not recognize it, cannot remember its provenance? It seems new to him, but the flannel is worn and the stitching on one of the pockets is unraveling. Is that how it starts?

He sits next to his dog, noticing that the heating pad is turned on and set to 4 out of 6. And when on earth did he do that? Right after he came downstairs, he supposes. He shakes his head, stares into his coffee. He has loved coffee longer than he has loved his wife, even if he has loved her better and more passionately. Though her lips do taste better with the memory of coffee on them. And when was the last time he kissed her with the kind of passion she deserves?

He brings the mug to his lips. Ah, the first sip of coffee in the morning. Nothing better. Unless it's that feathered aroma that wings up the stairs and insinuates itself between you and sleep. He is not a coffee snob, requiring only that it be strong and hot, and under these conditions, coffee has never let him down. Like his dog, a faithful companion. Not like his memory, capricious and cruel. A practical joker.

Which brings him to why he is up so early. Or so late, since he hasn't slept at all. What time is it, 3 am? The devil's hour? Oh sure, that he remembers. How is it that he can name every kid in his first-grade class from sixty years ago, recall with aching clarity the sweet piney smell of the Christmas tree when he was a toddler, remember the final score of the Jets' Superbowl win in 1969, but last night when he kissed his wife goodnight . . .

It was like a Jenga block with her name on it had been cleverly teased out and hidden from him. It came to him after a few seconds—Maggie, oh Maggie—but how many more blocks in the tower of his memory bear her name? Or his own name, for that matter? Or the names of everyday objects? Robe, coffee, heating pad, dog. How

long before the integrity of the whole structure is compromised and it comes crashing down?

He shakes his head. He will not go there. If he can shore up the foundation of his own house, the way he did last spring, with a few strategically placed concrete piles, he can shore up his memory. He just needs a plan, and what better way to do that than with a strong cup of joe, squaring the day, getting a jump on it. Vigilance is what is called for. A certain level of alertness to any signs of slippage, a loosening of his grip, a peculiar perception. A few more sips of coffee to prime the pump, and he will be ready.

He sits quietly, drinking his coffee, his eyes resting in the middle distance, each sip the rung of a ladder that allows him to climb above himself, above the cloud of fear that has ruined his sleep. He remembers the first time he danced with Maggie. Seventh grade, the school gymnasium on a spring evening, "Let it Be" gently rocking couples melded together by adolescent ardor—side to side, back and forth. The teachers, those conscripted chaperones, chiding couples to keep an appropriate distance between themselves, prying them apart. The intoxicating essence of flowers coming from her hair, the sweaty funk emanating from him. His right hand on the small of her back, those gently curving lumbar muscles that he later learned, with a lascivious chuckle, were part of the erector muscle group.

He sighs, he sips, he remembers. As if the memory is coming not from his head but the coffee. He pets his dog and remembers a dog he and Maggie had when they first bought the house and Maggie was pregnant with Christina. A beautiful flat-coated retriever with a mischievous streak who would sneak up behind him while he was mowing and goose him. Her name was . . . Her name. It was . . . He stands up and looks around the living room as if the dog's name is hidden in the bookshelves, in the branches of the weeping fig tree by the window, in the ashes of the fireplace. This is exactly what he was talking to himself about earlier—the need to stay focused, to pay attention. He needs more coffee.

While he is pouring himself another cup, he decides he will make one for Maggie too. Plenty of cream and sugar for her, black for him. He

could use her help. It's cheating, he knows, but just talking to her about the dog will help him remember. She won't have to say the name, it will be there in her voice, in her laugh. Context, that's the ticket.

He makes his way up the stairs, down the hallway, his way lit by the motion detector in the carbon monoxide monitor that he installed, apparently; into the master bedroom with minimal coffee spillage. He sets her mug on her nightstand and then gets into bed. "Maggie, Maggie, Maggie," he whispers, as if banking her name for a time when he will need it.

"Bert?"

"Yes."

"What time is it?"

"It's early."

"You okay?"

"Fine. Just fine."

"I smell coffee."

"I made you a cup."

"Oh." Maggie sits up. She loves the smell, misses the taste. "Thank you, honey." This is the third night in a row he has woken her, forgetting that both her ulcer and her doctor ruled coffee out years ago. She wants to cry but doesn't. It would be as useless as the anger she felt the first night, as indulgent as the self-pity that choked any compassion out of her the second night. She takes a deep breath, resignation settling in on the outbreath.

"You remember the dog we had way back when? The retriever with the longish black hair?"

"How could I forget?" she says, wishing she could take back the question as soon as the last word leaves her lips. She moves closer to him. "She would hide in the bathtub whenever it thundered."

He sits very still.

"She would curl up next to you on the couch while you were reading the paper. Her head in your lap. Like she was interested in what the Dow Jones was doing." She knows what he wants. "Her name was . . ."

"Gypsy," he says. He laughs, says it again, softly—"Gypsy."

"Oh, that's right. It slipped my mind. I'm glad you remembered." She takes a sip of his coffee, her tetchy stomach be damned. It is bitter and heady and wonderful. ☼