

A TALL, IMPERIOUS BLOOM

Also by Agata Stanford

The Dorothy Parker Mystery Series:

The Broadway Murders

Chasing the Devil

Mystic Mah Jong

Death Rides the Midnight Owl

A Moveable Feast of Murder

The Murder Club

Murder Story

A TALL, IMPERIOUS BLOOM



Agata Stanford

A JENEVACRIS PRESS PUBLICATION

A TALL, IMPERIOUS BLOOM

SEPTEMBER 2014

PUBLISHED BY
JENEVACRIS PRESS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



All rights reserved
Copyright © 2014 by Agata Stanford
Edited by Shelley Flannery
Typesetting and Cover Design by Eric Conover

ISBN 978-0-9857803-5-7

Printed in the United States of America

DorothyParkerMysteries.com
Visit 'Dorothy Parker Mysteries' on Facebook

*For Richard, who now resides
in a constant home in my heart.*

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Larry Lockridge and the estate of Ross Lockridge, Jr. for graciously granting me permission to quote from his father's masterpiece, *Raintree County*.

A Tall, Imperious Bloom

“What difference now does it make that love was a tall, imperious bloom beside the river . . . ? There was only love that is the desire for beauty. We were like flowers that seduce each other without memory and without guilt.”

Raintree County

“And naked with uncut hair, he would follow her, riding a winged horse, until he reached the ledge of the great pediment. . . .”

Raintree County

ONE

Winston William Davidson

More and more of late he wondered why he did what he did. And because of the wondering—that self-searching that seemed to creep into his thoughts more and more, making him turn back to look over his past thirty-eight years—he suspected that it was a sure sign of impending middle age. With that sense of urgency that had been creeping into his mind, it dawned on Bill that these thoughts had less to do with what he did and more to do with what he *should* be doing.

After a long day of working on a brochure for the proposed and controversial new trash plant that his public relations firm represented, Bill was tired. Everyone else had left the office early to prepare for an evening of parties, but Bill had remained at his desk. At eight o'clock he left to dine on steak, pasta, and a couple of Jacks on the rocks at the Grist Mill Restaurant. By ten o'clock the food, drink, and day weighed heavily on him and he wanted nothing more than to roll into bed. His girlfriend, Margie, was still in California visiting her parents for the holidays, and it was an opportunity to do nothing but flop, maybe watch Dick Clark and the insane crowd in Times Square at midnight.

Arriving home to the rented bungalow, he showered and then, as was his habit, poured a Jack Daniels before settling into the leather recliner he was awarded in the divorce settlement from Cassie almost two years ago. He stretched his arms and legs, causing the chair to creak loudly. Then, with a gulp of the liquor hot along his throat, first steps toward affecting to crack the crust of tension that had lodged along his back and shoulder blades, he appraised the grim room.

None of the furniture suited the house. The small, two-bedroom bungalow had a rural-rustic interior, from the dark wood paneling and stone fireplace in the living room to the old-fashioned blue floral wall paper in the bedroom. The chrome-and-glass coffee-table and lamps and butter-colored Italian leather contemporary living-room set were more suited to the sky-lighted condominium he had once shared with his ex-wife, Cassie. Closing his eyes against the mishmash, he thought that building a fire in the grate might make the place cozy, the flames making the sad walls recede in the night-darkened space, bringing light and warmth. He was too tired to bother. Too lazy even to exert an effort to dig out the TV remote, which was undoubtedly stuck between the seat cushion and the arm of the chair. With that he drifted off.

The Davidson family joke was that a Viking ship dropped Baby Winston off at the port of Manila where he was found by Air Force Captain Robert Davidson and his wife, Sarah, as they strolled along the harbor one evening in June 1961. The tale was a light-hearted response to those commenting with wonder, upon seeing the brunette couple and their raven-haired children, at the sight of the platinum-locked baby boy.

By the time Winston was five years old and could understand that he was different from his parents and siblings in coloring, he believed the story as fact. Despite his parent's reassurances that the Viking tale was nothing more than a silly story, the romantic fantasy had taken root. During adolescence, when his family moved back to the States, his father assigned at Kirkland Air Force Base in New Mexico, his imagination expounded on the first of many adventures of the Viking boy, Leif, who was adopted by the Pueblo Indians, riding on the back of his white buffalo, Vittorio, along the vast open plains. The image of the tall, tan, sinewy youth with long, flowing butter-blond mane astride the buffalo companion, poised on the edge of a cliff overlooking a vast open valley, was an image of power and freedom and infinite possibilities that Winston could cling to when life made him feel ordinary and unimportant.

Now, at nearly forty years of age, "Bill," as he had come to be called, after adopting his baptismal name, William (which was far preferable to Winston), stood without his companion Vittorio at a different sort of precipice. Still he was tall and firm-muscled, and if his hair had been cut short and tamed as middle-age approached, he was of sound health on the Eve of the Millennium when people were all hyped-up, wondering if the world was Y2K-ready, if systems would fail, if the world would blow up by means of its own technology. The niggling fears harbored by even the most optimistic of natures had been addressed by the "experts" of various fields of concern over the months preceding the New Year celebrations planned around the globe: The world was not at risk.

But, Bill Davidson was at risk and didn't know it. Having fallen into complacency through an exercise of

routine, he had yielded to feelings of obliviousness, all dreams on hold, if not lost, to a place where he lived cocooned with the odds-and-ends of his passing youth. And if, as he dozed, the imaginings of his childhood has resurfaced from deep within his stores of memory as prescience of future events, Bill Davidson unknowingly stood at the brink of change, a precipice where from one aspect he could recognize the man he believed himself to be, while below, should he venture a valiant leap, stood the stranger he was to become. The remembrance, the sense of warning, of alarm, whatever it was that swept through him, startled him awake.

The telephone was ringing. He decided to let the answering machine screen the call, even if it was Margie calling to wish him a Happy New Year from three thousand miles away. It was John Powel, calling from his car, saying that he'd passed Bill's house earlier and "saw your car in the drive, so pick up the phone, damn it! I've got a flat and no jack!"

Bill reluctantly picked up, and after suggesting that John call Triple-A, John said he'd "wind up waiting for a truck all night. Shit! It's New Year's Eve! Have mercy on me!"

—Give me ten minutes.

John said Bill was the best son-of-a-bitch in the world. Thanking him for the sentiment, Bill hung up.

Bill went to Jerry Raymond's party with John as his date, and wouldn't you know, thought Bill, Cassie was there. He should have guessed she'd be there. Why shouldn't she be? The friends he and Cassie had collected before and during their marriage hadn't taken sides when they split, and it wasn't the first time they'd collided at a public or private function since the divorce. After exchanging polite greetings, complete with fixed

smiles, each would spend the rest of the evening avoiding the other. They had tried to behave like grownups, but that night the children within each sprang out with a petulance that Bill feared might provide the party's sideshow. What started the tiff didn't matter. Perhaps exhaustion had loosened Bill's tongue or the whiskey had lessened his ability to edit his thoughts, but he had said something that caused Cassie to bristle.

He had married a woman he didn't particularly like, even though he thought at the time that he loved her. But he loved her for all the wrong reasons, he realized after the divorce: for what she represented and for how he would be viewed for having her as his wife. They were right for each other by standards that were bloodless and passionless.

After nursing a drink for twenty minutes, all the while feeling more and more isolated and disturbed by the deliberate party atmosphere, Bill escaped the over-decorated and overheated party undetected. He was glad to leave behind the wounded ex-wife and John's callous and drunken take on the sharp exchange prompted by Bill's subdued demeanor: "Forget it, forget her! People fuck and move on! Remember that, Buddy! Move on!"

It was snowing lightly when Bill left Jerry Raymond's house and started off the porch steps: the first snowfall of the season. His loafers flicked the powdery stuff into his socks as he slid to the car, grabbed gloves and an old ski cap from the passenger seat, and once donned, brushed the accumulation off the windshield. All he wanted was a drink and a warm bed without Margie in it, without argument, or compromise, or effort. Just solitude, uncluttered by artifice or forced conversation.

He rolled down the window as he drove away from the curb. The cold air felt good on his face, refreshing,

and his spirits lifted with each clean breath. The silence of the streets was broken only by the swish of the intermittent wipers. Year-two-thousand. He relished being alone and felt protected from the frenzy of too much celebration and the dangers of human encounters. The night lent an odd sense of comfort: to experience this historic juncture of passing time with gentle and quiet observation.

Bill pulled to the side of the road, turned off the ignition, and got out of the car. The village side street was dark, the streetlamp barely aglow. With face raised toward the sky, he watched the pattern of the snow's descent, interweaving tumbling threads shed from the fathomless heavens. A barely audible tinkling, like thousands of toasting glasses, as the flakes pinged the windshield filled him with a sense of wonder. He'd forgotten "wonder," and saw that it was beautiful, and was content not to dwell on the incongruity of the simplicity of the complex nature of the earth.

He checked his watch: 12:03. The second that marked the new millennium had arrived and passed, just as any other moment measured by our time schemes surely would have, with silent inevitability.

The thought that next year would be the start of the new century, the New Millennium, made him smile. Were people in such a hurry to find something to celebrate that they needed to rush ahead of schedule? Are their lives so empty they must find reasons to have fun through manufactured joy? Is my life any better? he asked himself brutally. Perhaps, he thought, getting back into the car, he might spend the passing as he had tonight, in reverent solitude. Nice. At peace and at one with the universe.

As he drove off, the brightness of the last few minutes was shrouded by darker thoughts. Turning onto the main route for the mile-long trip home, he tried to restore that midnight feeling, the pleasure he'd felt in the stillness. How good it had been. Being alone didn't mean being lonely. . . .

But, the truth was he was alone, had always felt alone, had always *been* alone, and moments of peaceful solitude were few and overshadowed by loneliness.

As he turned off the main route and onto the street where he lived, there was a sudden break in the short stream of the headlights as something shadowy moved in the car's path.

Steering to avoid the dark bulk, and then punching on the brakes, the tires skidded on the icy pavement.

Suddenly, the shadowy figure was again in his headlights.

An impact on the fender, a dull thump, signaled the hit. The car lurched and rocked. Bill lost his bearings, not knowing if the car was still on pavement or heading into the woods that lined the road.

He fought for control of the wheel, but as soon as he secured it, the thrust of the car over uneven terrain broke his tenuous hold on it. A wall of snowy branches battered the windshield as the car rushed forward at an incline.

Now Bill realized which side of the road he was traveling, and he prepared himself for the worst. If he could only slow the car by allowing the brush and trees to tighten their limbs against the vehicle, he might have a chance. The car slid down a flat course, like a sled, and when the car's thrashing had settled into a more even slide, Bill caught onto the wheel.

The path ahead was black and unobstructed, and no brush or saplings plummeted to strike at the windshield now. He could actually see out, in time for the approach toward the final ledge of boulders: a thirty-foot drop into the Kresskill River.

Peripherally, he glimpsed the trunk of a big tree, and abruptly steered toward it, aiming for a direct hit, hoping the tires would respond by gripping onto something so that he might make a last-ditch effort to swerve again just at the right moment to graze the side of the car to a stop.

I'm going to die, he thought, and felt the strange calm acceptance of the fact, the final moment when survival is no longer a consideration.

The car lurched upward off the ground like the lift of a carnival ride, and although prepared for impact, Bill instinctively turned the useless steering wheel toward the tree. Once again he lost hold on the wheel and it swung out of his grip and veered to the left.

The car landed hard, crushing the brush beneath it, branches scraping glass and steel like chalk on a blackboard, as it grazed the big oak and finally came to a stop. The airbag deployed, and for a couple of mindless seconds Bill sat motionless, feeling the prickle of adrenaline rushing down into his feet. When he tried to open the door the tree was obstructing it.

His brain wasn't working. The obvious was hard to come by, but when it did, Bill got out through the passenger door. Standing proved difficult and he had to concentrate to keep his knees from buckling under him. He began to shiver, not from the cold, but from shock.

A dog yelped in the distance.

Had he hit a dog?

There had been a figure at the windshield, too tall for a dog. A deer?

What if it was a person? *Oh, God!*

He struggled and slid up through a maze of branches, knotted brush tripping his frantic advance up the embankment. It was dark, and the car's headlights facing away from the road lent little light for the progress upward through the woods. Finally, seeing a clearing, the road above, he risked the support of several downed saplings to pull himself up the final few feet toward level ground.

Something lay on the road, a shadowy figure fifty feet away. A dog was circling, pawing and crying at a shapeless heap.

Bill felt detached, as if floating above his body. His mind told him to move, but he just stood there waiting for something to break through the paralysis that confined him.

When suddenly the dog settled in motionless guard beside the figure, Bill broke out of shock, and suddenly free, set into motion.

As he hurriedly approached, the dog met him, then turned back to lead the way.

Oh, my God, I've killed someone. Oh, my God!

He was beginning to function again in fits and starts.

His cell phone was back in the car. Why hadn't I thought to call 911? I should go back and get it!

No!

I should get the person off the road before another car—

Then, the cell phone—

No . . . check to see if he's alive.

The dog paced and circled as Bill stared down at the figure, and the sight transfixed him with a panic he had not known since he was nine years old.

I'm not nine years old, for God's sake, he told himself, stifling a childlike scream that was forming in his throat. The person was face-down in the road, and if alive, moving might cause more harm.

The decision was prompted by common sense, when he saw the dual pinpoints of headlights turning off the main route and moving over the first rise in the road before disappearing in the dip that led to the next.

The dog circled nervously as Bill lifted the body, and as he carried the weight to the side of the road, headlights flashed over the last rise illuminating long hair and a woman's face. The dog whined as Bill placed the woman down. He took hold of its dragging leash and stepped out into the road in time to wave down the car.

A man in a red sports car yelled through the window —What the hell?

After a quick appraisal of the situation, the driver got out of the car, saying, —Cover her up, she's going into shock if she hasn't already.

—I live about a hundred yards down this road.

Both men considered the two-seater and discarded the obvious solution.

—If you can carry her to your house, directed the man, I'll call 911 from my car. Start walking. Give me the leash. I'll take the dog.

Bill lifted the woman into his arms. Her warm breath on his collar told him she was alive.

Arrived at the house, the man preceded Bill in, asking where the blankets were kept. He found them, and covered the woman on the sofa.

She moaned, opened her eyes and stared blankly at Bill.

A rush of relief flooded through him as he gazed down at her. But the sense of relief was followed by a crushing sorrow. She had an identity he had failed to see on the dark road. There, she was an unidentifiable mass, could have been a dark-plastic garbage bag fallen from a truck. Here she was flesh, blood, color, and texture: green eyes, auburn hair, pale skin, and perhaps quite pretty.

As he pulled off his ski-cap, snow fell onto the blanket and a couple of flakes onto her face. She blinked, and he cursed his carelessness.

He was about to ask if she was in pain, but never got a chance to utter a word, for her face transformed into a look he would later remember as luminescent.

—William!

Tears welled up in her eyes; tears of joyous recognition.

—Oh, my Will!

Everyone called him Bill. He had gotten stuck with Winston at birth, but once off to college it was W. William Davidson. He'd answer to William, but his friends called him Bill. She knows me, though, but how? From where?

—Find out if she's bleeding, the man said, as he went out the door to look for the ambulance.

—Oh, my William, my heartbeat!

Eyes dilated and bore into his eyes, and for a moment Bill felt heady, dizzy, disoriented, yet captured.

A siren whined and then a light strobed through the living-room windows. Paramedics tramped in followed by two policemen. One of the officers asked

Bill to come into the kitchen to answer a few questions. Sweat trickled down his back and his palms itched.

The woman called out again and reached for Bill. The paramedics were cutting away the turtleneck sweater and in doing so cut a gold chain that was around her neck. She grabbed frantically as the chain and locket slid to the floor. Bill picked up the necklace, displayed it for her benefit, then slipped the jewelry into his pants pocket, promising its safe return later at the hospital.

As paramedics began to assess her injuries, the policemen beckoned. Again, as Bill started out of the room, the woman called out to him.

—William! she cried out, with enough despair in her voice that he turned to the officer and asked if he might stay with her for a few more minutes. The officer acquiesced, so Bill remained, reassuring the woman of his presence by holding her gaze as the paramedics worked to ready her for the trip to the hospital

—Don't go away again!

—It's going to be all right. They know how to help you.

—You'll take me with you!

He didn't know what to say. Hers wasn't a command, it was a plea, strained with poignant desperation, and the sound of her voice touched something in him that was tender and new. He shut it away behind a door, thinking, this delirium is a result of shock.

—Promise! I've waited for you! I've waited for you to come for me!

An oxygen mask was placed over her mouth and Bill was told to move aside. As they lifted her onto a stretcher and wheeled her out of the house, Bill offered sincere, if empty reassurances.

It took about twenty minutes to explain to the police officer the course of events leading up to the arrival at his house. The Good Samaritan, Wayne Morgan, corroborated the account from the point of his arrival at the scene. Wayne was on his way to a party.

How much had Bill had to drink that evening? Three drinks since about eight-thirty. It was about twelve-fifteen when the accident occurred.

The officer said that the woman's name was Ariel Trent.

—That's the name on the dog's tag. She lives at number three Harvard Road. She's your neighbor.

—Number three . . . ? That might be . . . that's the old Quaker Meeting Hall, isn't it, near the turnoff from Route 22?

—That's it.

—Yes! I know that place. It's a residence, now. I wondered who . . .

—Then you do know the woman?

—No.

—She knew you. Called you by your name.

—What I mean is, I know the house and I've seen a woman working in the front garden. We've never met before, at least not to my recollection; and I've never been close enough to her when driving by to see her face clearly.

—Strange that she would know your name.

—I don't have an answer to that, officer.

Wayne shifted several times in the chair with obvious impatience.

—Well, did somebody contact her family, or anything? he asked, stretching his legs out and leaning back so far in the chair Bill thought the wood might snap.

—Everything will be taken care of, Mr. Morgan.

—Oh, yeah? Well, somebody's got to come and deal with that dog. It's still in my car.

—Well, if one of you doesn't take it until we reach her family, then it goes to the pound tonight.

For some reason, guilt, perhaps, Bill volunteered.

That settled, and passing a blood alcohol test, the officer suggested Bill call his insurance agent later in the morning, "as I'm sure he would appreciate not being hauled out of bed at this time of night."

The car and the scene of the accident had been gone over, so a tow truck could be called in the morning, too.

Bill followed Wayne and the officer outside and got the dog from the car. Wayne said, —It's been great! and squeezed his bulk into the seat of his sports car. The officer said he'd be in touch, and joined his partner in the police vehicle.

The snow had stopped, and it had gotten colder. Every surface had a stiff, stark edge under the gray night sky. Wind whipping through the bare branches of the tallest pines wailed with the plaintive whistle of a reed instrument. Bill shivered. The dog, poised, watching the cars' tail lights in the distance, turned to look up at him as if asking, what next?

—Hello, I'm Bill Davidson.

The dog responded by tugging at the leash and stooping to pee.

Bill led her toward the front door and into the house, where she went directly to the sofa and sniffed around for her mistress. When her lady didn't appear, she sat on her hind legs facing the sofa. It was an opportunity to look at her collar tags. "Little Eva." Bill called her name aloud, and sat on the sofa and scratched behind her ears. With her mouth hung open she appeared

to smile. She was a sleek mixed breed, probably black lab and Dalmatian. A reasonable assumption, as Bill noted a lacy-looking triangle of white sprinkled with black fur running from neck to chest. In the lamplight her short black coat shined a velvety texture: A very-well-cared-for animal.

Bill missed Coco, his exiled shepherd puppy, and as if Little Eva sensed his regret, she licked his face with her fuzzy tongue. He laughed, which encouraged her to leap up on him. He fell back against the cushions as she nuzzled his face and neck.

When she let Bill sit up again, she followed him to the kitchen, fascinated by the various smells of a new environment. Her nose led her around the room.

Bill took out a bag of cookies. The crackling sound of its paper packaging brought the dog to attention, and she sat, waiting expectantly. Bill ate a cookie. Only her eyes moved, following the path of his hand from bag to mouth and back. He offered her a cookie. She rose and walked nonchalantly to sit at his feet, taking the offering carefully from Bill's fingers. He ate a cookie; she had another.

Bill filled a mixing bowl with water and placed it on the floor. She lapped up a bit before following him back into the living-room, where she jumped up on the sofa, circled a couple times on the blanket, and after a great sigh, nestled down to sleep. Bill wished he could sleep as easily. If life could be as simple as a dog's. . . .

He was tired, but knew he would not sleep. But, what should he do next?

The evening had ended abruptly, and now Bill stood rooted in the middle of the living-room as if waiting for Divine direction. He felt frustrated, fearful:

not only for the woman's life, but for his own. What if she dies?

He went over to the liquor cabinet and poured a drink for something to do and to calm his nerves. His mind was racing. He fell into unconscious activity, aware that *doing* filled time that might otherwise be spent in contemplation. Thinking had often gotten him into trouble or resulted in depression. He was trying to view life without judgment, as it was easy for him to evaluate the facts and come to an opinion on just about any issue political, social, or philosophical. When he felt passionate, he had never feared voicing those opinions, though in recent times he had learned to compromise.

Sometimes, outspokenness can be good in public relations. It can also make one a hypocrite when espousing the virtues of some plan, some project, or some lie the company he was representing wants to perpetrate on the community: a stock-car racetrack; a new trash plant; a PCB problem in the river. . . .

When he was hired to work for Harris & Reynolds Public Relations, located in the small city of Linden Falls, the company's biggest client was the Coalition for Parkland Conservation, a group that held firm the belief that it was not right for the state to sell parcels of one of the biggest and most beautiful reserves to private individuals. Bill happened to agree wholeheartedly with the CPC; He had two friends on their board of directors, and after working fifteen months on the project, felt accomplished and happy when the Coalition won. To Tom Reynolds, Bill's boss, Bill was a prince.

But then there came the real test. The test in the name of the County Waste Facility, a euphemism for *dump*.

The county of Dunham is composed of Linden Falls, a small city of about twenty thousand people. The city is landlocked by a surrounding township that contains three villages and further out is ringed by farmland, miles and miles of grazing, dairy and corn, ending on the east and west at mountain ranges, and at the north, Paradise Lake, which brings in lots of tourist cash from New York City every summer. Bill jokingly calls Linden Falls “the final circle of hell” because of its geographic position on the county map, at smack-center to its satellite villages and hamlets.

Farmers don’t like garbage unless it is of the organic variety. Never mind the smell of a dump; you can’t argue that. The smell of treated manure they spray in great gushes into the air to fertilize their crops twice a year can make some summer days unbearable. It wasn’t the smell so much as the taking of land, albeit at a premium price, that got the activists going. The argument had to do with spoiling the beauty of the land farmers had a right to farm. Bill had to learn to swallow hard.

So Bill would do his work and get through the nights without determining right or wrong, good or bad about practically anything.

I’ve got to find another line of work, he’d think. But, where? Doing what?

The drink didn’t mellow him, just made him more weary. He called the hospital to inquire of Ariel Trent’s condition. They told him nothing.

Triple-A promised to tow his car from the ditch as soon as possible. Then, he called and left a message for the insurance agent.

By four A.M. Bill was revved up and wide awake. He had to get his car. If there was too much damage,

he had to rent or borrow one, and damn it if it *was* New Year's Day, he had to get to the hospital. His anxiety was building. He felt that time was of the essence. He just couldn't sit idly by when a woman he had injured was in pain or dying and alone in some hospital emergency room.

He went into the bedroom for a change of clothes, taking out jeans and a sweater.

An unfamiliar weight in his pants pocket, and he pulled out the necklace he had pocketed earlier. It was a seashell, a small clamshell, polished to a soft pink, edged in gold metal and fastened like a locket. Given the force of the car when it hit her, he was amazed that the delicate shell had not been crushed.

He pressed the clip that held it closed and onto the dresser-top fell a piece of folded paper and a tiny photo. The face of a man, blond and smiling, ageless. Maybe forty, maybe fifty.

He picked up the paper. It was folded many times over. It was a letter. The handwriting was small, and whoever had written it had little paper available to write it.

He was about to read the letter but stopped. It was like entering a stranger's home to find a person naked, unaware of his presence. He had no right to be there, to view the imperfections one shields from the world, no right to read something that was intensely personal, if the salutation was any indication of the letter's content and she wore it close to her heart.

Bill refolded the paper and, together with the photo, returned them to the seashell.

By five A.M. the car had been pulled out of the ditch and the tow truck driver managed to get it started. The only damage visible was a long scrape on the driver's

side of the car and a mangled side-view mirror. Nothing a few thousand dollars' worth of body work couldn't fix.

Little Eva slept on the sofa as he made his way to the frigid car.

Upon arrival at the hospital, he was told that Mrs. Trent was in the recovery room, her condition was stable and she would remain there for several hours before going into ICU. He should check back in the afternoon.

Once home, Bill made bacon-and-eggs and toast for breakfast. He rarely cooked since the divorce, but there was a dog to feed and no dog food, so he cooked for the dog as well as himself. He brewed coffee, drank a couple of cups, walked Little Eva, and then fell asleep next to her on the sofa.

The phone rang at ten-thirty. He had slept for three hours, felt groggy, but was alert enough to listen as the insurance agent went over a list of things for the claim. Not to worry, he was amply covered.

So my ass is covered, he thought.

At noon he called the hospital. Mrs. Trent was now in ICU. She couldn't have visitors until seven o'clock. He opened a can of Dinty Moore Beef Stew for Little Eve's lunch, then walked her.

On the way to the hospital he passed the Old Quaker Meeting Hall that was now Mrs. Trent's home. The day had not brightened much since dawn. The sky and earth looked gray in spite of any attempt by nature to brighten the winter landscape with snow. And yet, the residence had a charm about it, a warm spot on a drab barren plane, a square structure with a clapboard exterior. The windows were tall, and a cupola rested daintily on its peaked roof. It was tri-color painted, red on its board, with cream-and-black trim accenting the windows and portico. A picket fence ran the length

of the road frontage and an arbored gate led to the front entrance. Bill imagined how it might look in late spring and summer with flowers in the front garden and canopying the arbor. He had moved into the rented house in October, and had seen Mrs. Trent raking leaves off the lawn. He had been more than a little curious to see the inside of the house.

Now he was curious to know more about the woman. Was it guilt? He felt a responsibility to her even though her injury was something he could not have prevented. There were no excuses. Reliving the moments before the accident, he knew he was driving more slowly than the speed limit because of the snowfall. He was not intoxicated, and had tried to avoid hitting her at risk to his own life. There was nothing he could have done differently. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time. So was Mrs. Trent.

After calling into the ICU, as commanded by the sign on the entry doors, Bill was told to check in with a nurse. The ICU was one huge room with a nurses' station at center and curtained cubicles circling the outer walls. The station was equipped with video monitors. He could visit for five minutes, and was directed to cubicle 8.

A nurse was coming out as Bill was about to enter. She was a slim woman in her late twenties, with long, dark-brown hair tied back in a ponytail. Her name, as indicated on her pin, was Matilda Chanson. When she smiled, the world became a better place.

—Are you William?

—I'm William, he replied.

—She's been asking for you.

—Oh?

—She's dozing, go on in.

Bill turned to enter, then stopped.

—Has her—I mean, have family members been called?

—I don't know. I just came on my shift. I'll try to find out.

Along with a deep, strengthening breath, a final intuitive thought resounded loudly in his head as he moved the curtain aside to enter.

My life will never be the same.