

1974

## Pages of A Story

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## PAGES OF A STORY

As Jeff entered the locker room he caught sight of Ron, his formidable opponent, examining his face in the mirror.

"I'm here, Ron."

"About time."

"Yeh, well. Had to finish some work." He hurriedly stripped down and pulled on his jock and shorts. As he was tying his shoes, Ron appeared and picked up the ball and gloves.

"How's the landlady? You down there much?"

"Yeh. It's a good place to study, pretty quiet."

"I've heard some stories about her, from Tony..."

"She's not so bad. Reads a lot." Jeff was piqued by Ron's attitude, by his willingness to judge people he didn't even know. He knew her better than any one, probably, and he didn't know the entire story. If she were crazy, it was no more than those who judged her, the shopkeepers who gave an "Oh, I see" when they learned of his address.

He stopped for a drink along the narrow hall leading to the courts. He was ready for a good workout, ready to beat Ron and even the score.

"I don't know. I'd be scared to live down there."

"Ah, she's okay. Better than hitting the bottle all the time. Have you heard about Jerry's landlady? Always drunk, gets pretty wild at times."

"So does Jerry. They make a good pair."

"Yeh."

They ducked, slammed the door, and attacked the end wall of the scuffed-white cell. Jeff smacked the ball whenever it came near him, concentrating on the sensation in his hands, rubbing them between shots to get the blood flowing. As he hit straight off the wall, taking the smacks in his padded palms, an image interrupted his light concentration as if his mind had the four corners of the handball court and someone had looked in at the door, demanded a wave of recognition and moved on. He saw Mrs. Greer on her couch, before the TV set. She lay still, a handwoven shawl to her neck, her wispy hair caught in its cob-webbed design.

"Jeff.....Jeff. You ready?"

"What? Yet, I'm ready." His hands were hot and filled his gloves to the point of bursting. He rubbed them hard against each other as he stood in the left service box, eager for the first service.

In the two-story house that he had left, Mrs. Greer lay much as Jeff had imagined--prone on her bony couch, wrapped in a blanket in front of the tiny TV with its tin-foil appendages and bent antenna. She was sitting up now, though, propped against a dusty pillow, reading one of her few books by the yellow light of an ornate lamp. The evening news droned from the set. Pages were flipped back and forth, slicing the air and falling silent against the others. The book was thick and old. As her thin fingers slid across them, the pages seemed pressed into her lap, as if buoying up a great weight. She raised her head slowly, finally looking away from the words, toward the insistent doorbell.

She stiffly crossed the dim room and peered out through the front window. There was no one in sight - must be those kids again. She opened the door by habit, and almost closed it again before seeing the tiny face.

"Ah, it's you, Mindy. Nice to see you. You want more sugar for your cake? I knew you'd need more."

"Yeh, it's going to be a big one," Mindy said as they entered the kitchen. "My mother says you work too hard in the yard. Says you need someone to take care of you."

"Nonsense. It keeps me healthy. Tell your mother I've got plenty of men around. We're all doing fine now. Gregory is back, you know. Here you go."

"Thank you...I guess I better go."

"Don't you worry about me!" she shouted, raising her fist slightly, giving a short laugh.

Jeff entered the house exhausted and happy. His hands were puffy and pink, sore as he grabbed the door handle.

"Hello, Gregory," Mrs. Greer called from the couch.

He sighed and stood in the doorway. "Hello, Mrs. Greer."

"Have a good game?"

"Yes, won two out of three games."

"I knew you would."

Jeff started to say something else, but with the first flip of a page he lost the thought and walked upstairs. Grey paint broke from the walls as he walked, stepping slowly, tasting the air that seemed just an aged version of the sweaty air that had choked the handball court. The hall light that had never worked before was on now and he could clearly see the walls and the widening cracks creasing them like the crow's feet of tired eyes. The glare reminded him of the first time he had been inside the house--in early September, when the house was light and open.

Mrs. Greer had shown him the bedrooms and the front and back porches, after giving him tea and cookies. The slight nervousness he had felt on the porch, as he formulated a sentence in his mind, was quickly dissolved by her casual manner. As his visit lengthened, though, she grew increasingly informal and interested in him. He had noticed the dusty pictures of her sons and husband over the bureau and accepted her familiarity, for the moment, as part of her apparent senility. But the irritation stayed with him as he walked back to campus--the way she tangled his name (she didn't seem hard of hearing), the way she hovered solicitously over him. Had it not been for his aversion to the constant, blaring noise he would have willingly settled for the security of the dorms. But she was pleasant and open-minded, it seemed, and there was no better location.

Jeff continued along the hallway and into his room, thinking of the family pictures he had seen that day, recalling the relaxed afternoon weeks later when she had finally mentioned having any family at all. It had done little to ease his apprehension.

He had been on the front porch, stretched on a lawn chair struggling to fit together bits of writing from pages of forced words. He glanced up occasionally, finding solace in the trees that hid doorways, swingsets and gardens.

"Hello, Gregory." Mrs. Greer had sighed as she eased herself into her rocker.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Greer."

She wiped some crumbs from the stained apron that covered her lap with loud letters: Chief Cook: Move or I'll bake your buns. "Anna, Anna. You should call me Anna. You're just too stuffy, Gregory."

"It's Jeff, Mrs. Greer, Jeff."

"Oh, you are difficult, but I appreciate your coming home. I know your father does too. The other boys call me Anna. Try it. See if it's not better."

"I...I just wouldn't feel right about it." He could just see Tony calling her Anna. He hadn't talked to her more than five minutes since he moved in.

"How do you like my apron?" She was suddenly standing with her arms out, circling slowly.

"Yeh, that's really, that's quite something."

She laughed loudly. He smiled, added a chuckle to her continuing laughter, wanting desperately to lose himself in the papers his wet fingers held. "I was noticing the pictures on your bureau earlier. You certainly have a nice looking..."

"Yes, yes, a wonderful family we are. You should meet your father soon I think. Oh, I love this apron." She began laughing again, her voice rapidly becoming gruff, cracking into coughs as she went inside. Jeff searched the pages, listening to the cough slow to wheezing and then die away. The sound was replaced by the shuffling of pages, back and forth, back and forth. He waited until that too slowed and stopped; and then, quietly gathering his papers, he eased the door open and creaked along the hall.

"Gregory, come sit down for a moment."

Jeff saw no way out, no excuse that would put her to sleep. His arm pits and crotch were hot as he sank into the green love seat recessed into the living room wall. Dark curtains hung behind him, hiding most of the sunlight. Two tall planters framed the short couch, green ivy stringing down its arms. What should he say? He felt as if he had been called upon to give a short talk on the virtues of the long life that now lay curled on the couch. So natural. Just like she was asleep. He felt underdressed, having forgotten his eulogistic collar and Bible. But she moved. She sat up and pulled her frown into a slight smile.

"Gregory, have you been writing a lot lately?"

Unsure what she would make of his words, he coughed. "Yes. I've been working on my short story writing lately. Doing a little poetry too, but mainly short stories."

"I'd like to read some of your things if you'd let me."

"Sure. I have some already typed up."

"No, no, not right now. I'm too tired. Just put them on the chair sometime. I do wish your father would fix that darn TV. He just isn't around enough."

"Maybe I could look at it."

"No, you've got your studies, Gregory. We'll have a repairman come. There's no problem with money now, no problem." She sank on the couch, closed her eyes, and flopped her arm idly on the top of the book. Jeff glanced at her, climbed to the edge of the love seat, and brought his palms together. A wave of heat swamped him as he rose, leaving tiny drops of sweat.

"I'd better go do some studying." There was no response. It took four steps to cross the room, to find the cool hallway.

That uneasiness and misunderstanding seemed far in the past to Jeff, though it had been less than two months since he had moved in.

It was as though the problem were solved, now that he had defined it and was determined to deal with it somehow. It was a tiresome performance, this reader's theatre he was caught in, reading a part he had no desire to read. It was in large part the comforting thought that he could, in fact, change the script that kept his spirits from deflating whenever the front door of her house closed behind him.

Since he had moved in he had been into her apartment several times; had helped with her laundry and seen her few family histories and scrapbooks in the basement, behind the rickety staircase than ended on a dirt floor. He had eaten a meal with her in the cramped dining room just off the kitchen. There had been the dishes to wash and put away and the lettuce and bread to put back in the purring refrigerator. The more he was around her, the more persistent he became in his efforts to direct their conversations. He spoke of what was happening on campus and asked what the college had been like before. There were times when their conversation flowed,

when she smiled deeply and memories fell like coins from the folds of her skin. He held on to those conversations, as if they were tangible and of value. But inevitably she would suck the discussions into a single point, a single stubborn remark that placed Jeff miles away though he stood just beside her.

Sitting at his desk, wrapped in a blanket against the increasingly cold room, Jeff reworked the stories, read religion and history. He felt as if he were rooted there--straight in his chair, staring out onto the yard and road. It was an evening like so many others: he wore a sweater and his wool socks, had his tea cup and crackers before him. And the shuffling sound poured from the heating duct in place of heat, regularly tearing him from his work. He had long ago given in to it, would listen attentively for a moment, to appease it, before turning back to his writing. But it would again become loud-pages slicing, cutting his silence--and he would gaze at the window.

He stood up now and wandered to Tony's room, as he occasionally did when the door was open, to hear something said, anything: to look at anything but words. He found Tony packing, angrily, stuffing shirts into a bag, throwing things on the bed.

"Tony, what's up?"

"I'm leaving."

"What? The semester's only half over."

"I know. I got a place on Baker Street."

"But why?"

"Come on, Jeff. She's driving me nuts."

"About Cindy sleeping with you?"

"Yeh, but more than that, just everything. It's no good. I think she needs help, I really do."

"What about your rent?"

"It'll be worth it, paying double for a while. This new place won't be any hassle."

"Can't you get some back?"

"I don't want to talk to her about it. I couldn't even take it, really. She needs it more than I do."

"Well, she can probably get someone else to take your room."

"I doubt it. Not now, that's for sure. Maybe not even next semester. Not that many people move off in the middle of the year...I hope she finds someone, though."

"Yeh."

"Did you hear about her substitute teaching? I heard some old bags in Jenson's Market saying she might lose her job if there were any more complaints."

"Wow. I didn't know that. She'd really be hard pressed. As it is she has to pinch for hotdogs and lettuce."

"Yeh, I know. Social Security isn't much."

"Maybe I can talk someone into moving in."

"At least keep your ears open. Say, give me a hand with this trunk. I've got to be out of here tomorrow."

Tony had been upset, and had even mentioned getting out at the end of the semester, but Jeff had hardly expected him to leave now. He slept poorly for several nights, weighted down, as if Tony had displaced all responsibility to his shoulders. He had to do something. Tony was not running from anything. It was no one's fault, he thought, but this entire circumstance was a real heaviness on him. He squirmed at night, struggling for a way to roll from under it.

He thought the easiest part would be finding it. It must be under some stack of papers near the couch, or on the mantle.

But as he searched, it was in none of the obvious places. He looked under the couch, through the stack of papers below the TV, behind the love seat. The more he looked the more he ran to the window and glanced down the street. She said she was going to mail some letters and buy some things and be right back. Maybe she stopped to talk to someone. Highly unlikely. Where was she? It's been fifteen minutes. He ran to the basement, to the row of dusty black volumes along the wall. He listened for the door. He had to do this. Sweat ran down his side. As he pulled a volume from the row a cockroach crawled over his hand. He dropped the book, Goddamn, and shook his hand until the bug dropped and disappeared. He ran back upstairs, into her room, opened every drawer, checked the closet. Twenty minutes. He felt along the bed, pushed the pillow aside. There it was, heavy, loosely bound. He carefully turned the cover and the first pages. "Carlyle Brightton." He read out loud. "From the Shoreline." MCMXXVII, one thousand, nine hundred...nineteen twenty-seven. The front door opened and then the door to the living room...Jeff walked out of the room, his face set, the book dangling at his side.

"Oh, Gregory. Come help me with this package."

"I have to talk to you." He swallowed and held out the book. "Mrs. Greer."

She dropped the bag onto a chair, walked into her bedroom and turned at the sight of the pillow. "Give it to me. Give it to me! You have no right. Damn you, give it to me!"

Jeff backed into the living room. "Please, sit down."

"You stole it. You stole it, damn you."

Jeff caught her wrist as she reached for the book. He squeezed it unconsciously, feeling the thin muscles like a bundle of strings. He drew back again and pointed the book at her. "This is just a book. These people don't exist. It's just words. Your husband is gone, your family is gone. You have your students, your neighbors, but not these. There is no Gregory. I'm Jeff. And that's Tony upstairs, and Carl. But this. This is just fiction, understand. Understand?"

In the long silence his arm continued to shake, he continued to hold the book in front of him. Her quivering glance jumped from his eyes, to the book, and back.

"Do you understand?"

Her face still quivering, she slowly took the book in both hands and laid it on the table. And as slowly she put her arms around Jeff's neck, buried her face in his shoulder and cried, softly at first then harder, until her whole body racked with sobs. Jeff wrapped his arms around her and blinked. "It's all right. It's all right. It's all right."

Jeff looked through the frosted glass of the front window and rubbed his hands together before knocking on Mrs. Greer's door. The snow came down silently, softening the sound of cars rolling by. "Mrs. Greer?" He cracked the door open and slid his head in. "Mind if I watch the news with you?" Getting no answer he walked in and sat on her couch. She was on the love seat, huddled under a blanket.

"Been a lot of car accidents lately," he said cheerfully.

She turned to the TV momentarily and then back. "I prefer the snow..."

Jeff watched the news. The excitement of the first heavy snows sweeping across the country filled him with nights of hot chocolate and sleeping in front of the fireplace. Public schools announced they would be closed tomorrow. Then the broadcast switched to basketball and Jeff looked up. Mrs. Greer remained quiescent, frozen into the scene. The floor ducts struggled to cough up heat. The words that left his mouth warm and sincere congealed into a frosty blast.

"How about a checker game, Mrs. Greer? I haven't got much to do tonight." He unfolded the game board and laid it out on the table. "Ah, come on."

She turned toward his smile, examined it and slowly swung her feet to the ground like dead weights. Pulling herself to the end of the love seat, she wrapped the blanket closer, up under her arms.

"You can have white, like the snow and I'll take black, like all the crazy printed words I've been reading lately." He noticed her mouth twist almost to a smile and pulled the couch out slightly, closer to the game. The snow deepened. It swirled about the house and whistled occasionally against the thin windows. At the end of the game she eased back and stared at the board. Her remaining white piece was in a corner, boxed in by aggressive black pieces stacked together.

As the Christmas vacation neared, Jeff's work load increased. Papers were due, tests to take, a thousand things to do. Yet he continued to visit her in the evenings before he studied, after he had eaten. The thought of a Christmas tree came to him as he sat with her one evening. His hands were wrapped about a steaming cup of tea when he said out loud, "Of course, that would liven up the place." Mrs. Greer sat across from him, her hands folded on her lap, watching the snow filter down upon her empty bird feeder. She noticed neither his remark nor the spot of tea he spilled.

The next day Jeff bought the smallest tree the Jaycees had to offer, nailed a square block of wood to it and stuck it on the wobbly table that leaned in front of the window. He hurried up the steps before she could walk from her bedroom, pleased with himself. That night he had a deep strong sleep. The next evening when he sat down to watch the news, Mrs. Greer was still considering the sloppy street. The tree sat nearly three feet high on the table. It looked flat, like it belonged to the wallpaper. It added neither color nor warmth.

"You know, a string of popcorn might be just what it needs. Want to make some?...Mind if I make some?...Do you have any oil? Do you have any popcorn?" He searched the kitchen, she would probably help when he tried to put the needle through. It must be somewhere. Ah, yes. "Hey! Colored popcorn! Did you know you had colored popcorn?"

He popped a small amount, put it in a bowl, salted it heavily and laughed at salting it as he took it into the living room. Mrs. Greer sighed feebly and wheezed "Pin's on the bureau." She watched as he strung every kernel onto the thread and hung it around and around the tree. Several days went by. The tree still belonged to the wall paper. He thought of ginger-bread men, but if she was her typically taciturn self he might not make it out of her kitchen for hours. He settled on a jelly bean string. One evening he strung and hung hard jelly beans, pricking himself twice as she absently looked on.

In the last week before vacation, papers and words consumed him completely. The day before he left he walked into her living room, noticed the burdened but bright tree and walked on into the kitchen. It was the first time he had seen her in days. Her face was drawn, her arms more folded in skin than he had remembered. There was nothing to do but say goodbye and leave the Christmas card he had made for her. He laid it on the table and walked away. The next morning, his head light with visions of comfort, Jeff walked from the house, sucking in the delicious air. Later that day, on the airplane, somewhere in the fine fuzz between waking and sleeping, he thought back on the tree and his efforts and he smiled into sleep.

He had no way of knowing that the tree lay on its side at the foot of the TV, many of the jelly beans mashed into the thin rug. Nor could he have known, as he sat down to dinner with his parents, sister, and two brothers, that at that moment Mrs. Greer was sitting crosslegged on her kitchen table, laughing and coughing, rocking back and forth, tears



streaming down gulleys in her face onto her chin. The radio in the dining room was blaring out in wiry nasal tones. It spoke of roasting chestnuts. Mrs. Greer sat swaying to the music, squeezing the can in her hands, sending lines of short-lived flames across the dirty floor, up the gas stove, across the blue cooking rings, onto the wall.

Jeff approached the house from the road, taking long strides, feeling light. The snow made everything look clean and new, there was none of the dirty slush that had covered the yard just before Christmas. He pulled his new ski cap lower on his ears with one hand and turned up the short driveway, holding a bag of toiletries under his arm. He had it down to a routine now--every semester, a visit to the drug-store for three of everything. He was eager to be inside, cold scraped the inside of his nose. He was eager, also, to crack his new course books. They looked good, and he was ready for a change, ready for a little less writing.

Pulling the door shut after him, he stood at the bottom of the steps, drinking in the warm air, pulling off his cap and gloves. Mrs. Greer's door was just cracked and Jeff could see her on the couch, apparently asleep. He tip-toed up the creaky stairs, reaching the third one before her voice caught him.

"Gregory, come sit down for a moment."

**Peter Porteous**

