

The Man Comes Around

Parker Stenseth

The town was small and getting smaller. The census kept track of these things, but Raymond didn't know about that. He couldn't cite figures, but he knew that there used to be a bowling alley, and a theater, and several Catholic churches, and now there were empty lots with bits of rock and broken bottles. There used to be three diners where men who had once worked the railroads and oil fields would gather every morning for cups of coffee. It wasn't about the coffee.

Raymond had belonged to the White House Café, but the White House Café closed. Their early bird and senior specials had been practically free. For twenty years, Raymond had ordered raisin oatmeal with toast which cost him \$2.75. The men he sat with had their own personal orders, orders they hadn't had to speak aloud for years. Darrell once left town unexpectedly for a reunion with his army regiment, and his over-easy eggs sat on the counter until noon. There was no more counter. The windows were boarded up in early winter. Raymond couldn't stop himself from driving to the White House Café early in the morning, sitting alone in the parking lot for hours, watching the snow fall or flipping through a book on rare coins. Sometimes another one of the regulars would arrive in their worn pickups, and they'd flash their headlights at each other for a few minutes before growing bored.

In the middle of January, Raymond tried to force his way in through the locked doors. He struck at the glass with a tire iron. Someone called the police, and they led Raymond away with gentle voices and firm hands. They brought him to the general practitioner who ran a series of tests and decided that Raymond hadn't been confused. He'd been upset. The police brought him home without needing to ask his address.

Once he was alone, Raymond sat in his green armchair and cried. He listened to Johnny Cash and looked at his coins, portfolios of wheat pennies and buffalo nickels, the same ones as the day before and the day before that. Most of them weren't worth anything. He had a few from 1943 and 1944 that were, but they were kept in a safe under the floorboards of his bedroom. It hadn't been opened in years. The Johnny Cash record finished, and Raymond was asleep.

In the midafternoon, he was woken by a knock on the screen door. His mailman, Josh, was peering through.

"You breathing in there, Ray?" Raymond coughed in his chair. "Because if you're not, I can quit dropping off the mail."

Josh was in his fifties, walked from house to house with a hobble, and Raymond approved of him.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"It'd make my route shorter."

"Lazy bastard. Come in for a minute?" Raymond asked, something he offered most days. Josh accepted periodically.

"Only for a minute."

Josh came in through the door. Raymond wheezed and pushed out of his deep chair as Josh told him to stay where he was. Raymond got two bottles from the fridge and set them on the counter, waiting for Josh to open them.

"I'm starting to think you only invite me in because your hands can't work the bottle opener anymore." Raymond shrugged, and Josh cracked the tops off. "You know what I've been hearing today?" Josh asked. Raymond shrugged again, taking a sip. "You got picked up this morning, trying to break into the White House."

"Bullshit."

"Really?"

"It's true, but it's bullshit."

"Why'd you do something like that?" Raymond wasn't sure but didn't know how to say that, so he shrugged again. "There are other places, you know. Darrell, Scott, Fred, all those guys are at Sue's place now."

"Sue's place is downtown."

"So?"

"Too much traffic."

"If the entire town was there, it'd be half full."

"I'm getting old."

"I'm getting old. You were old twenty years ago."

"Right. Too much traffic."

"This is fatalism."

"Me driving there would be fatal, for someone."

Josh set his beer down, half finished, and dug through his mailbag, putting three letters on the table.

"Your daughter wrote," he said.

"Which one?"

"The only one who writes you."

"Stay out of my family business."

Josh laughed. "You want me to open any more before I go?"

Raymond got two more bottles from the fridge. Josh opened them and then the house was silent. Raymond restarted the Cash record. He shuffled to his chair with his bottles and the letter from his daughter. Her note was handwritten on a pharmacy greeting card, one that she found amusing. She and her husband were getting a divorce, the letter said. Raymond couldn't remember if this was the first time she had told him this. It didn't feel like the first time. There were spots where tears had caused the ink to bleed. Her eldest daughter was going to college out-of-state. More tears and more bleeding. She said that she was going to come visit at the end of the month. Raymond would have to think of something to do with her. She didn't want to sit around and look at coins; she had said as much. He thought they might be able to clean out the garage together.

He wandered out to the garage to see what kind of shape it was in. The door opened slowly and shuddered with every inch. Brown leaves matted the edges of the floor, and little flurries of snow drifted over them. Tools lined the north wall. Ten hammers were grouped together. His arthritic hands no longer formed around any of them. He had saws

and oil pans and tools of such specialized purpose that they'd been purchased, used once, and forgotten in rusty drawers and cardboard boxes. The south wall was strung with antlers and skulls and the feathers of regional birds, things he had found or purchased or been given. They were temporary and eternal and had watched over him for some time. Raymond didn't think about them much anymore and often couldn't remember why he had gathered them in the first place. There was also a rusty grill, broken lawn chairs, and steel signs advertising oil. A few boxes in the back were piled full of coins and couldn't be moved without being emptied first.

Raymond stood in the middle of it all, turning and taking in the lifetime of acquisitions. He wanted to rid himself of it all. He stood in the driveway to smoke a cigarette and figured that it would be fifteen days before his daughter arrived. She would help him take these things to the thrift store or the dump and then he'd be free of them. He walked back into the garage. The air was cool. It was damp and smelled like gasoline. Raymond threw down his cigarette and stepped to smother it. He slipped on a patch of leaves before the wall of skulls. His right arm hit the concrete. He closed his eyes but didn't cry from the pain. He lay there for quite some time, suspecting that he was going to die.

Cold light washed over him from outside. Tendrils of snow reached in and fell over his face. He tried his best not to move, as if motion was what invited the pain. For a long time, he didn't think. He was crooked and angry on the ground, angry at himself for having done something as stupid as falling. The day sunk, and it became dark around Raymond. He was stiff and cold and had only just begun to think about rising to his feet, a task that seemed far away, like the beams in the ceiling. Raymond had put them there, the beams, fifty years earlier. It didn't seem so long ago. He'd built the garage when they'd bought their second car after having their third child. It had been filled with bicycles and basketballs and sewing machines that no longer worked. These things were gone now and had been replaced by something else. His daughter would be back soon, Raymond thought, but he needed to get up first.

He tried pushing against the ground, but his wrist seemed to be

broken. He pushed with his feet, scooting on his back to the wall where he was able to prop himself up. He was chilled and sweating through his jacket, which was stained and torn. There was a tightness to his chest as he rose, leveraging himself against the wall. It was a sturdy wall and Raymond knew that he would live. His movements were careful. The moonlight was blue, and every surface could have been ice. Raymond's eyes weren't sure, so each step was methodical, a meditation or offering to whoever might care that he made it back inside. He felt like Dante's inverse, taking a frozen pilgrimage through his own suffering. It wasn't as serious as that, and the comparison did not occur to him until later. In the moment he was only concerned that both feet continued to follow each other.

The night was singing to him, and he listened despite himself to words that he'd heard before, words that repeated again and again: *Beneath the stains of time, the feelings disappear.* It wasn't the night singing to him because the night doesn't sing; it whispers. His record was skipping and had been crying the entire time. Raymond felt he needed to save Cash from this state and climbed the stairs like a man ten years younger. The door banged shut. Raymond entered a warmth he hadn't realized he was missing, and the needle came unstuck as his hand reached out for it. *You are someone else. I am still right here.* He unplugged the turntable and noticed that he was shaking. It was the cold, he thought, and so he lost himself in his green chair.

His wrist woke him in the morning. It was purple, edging on crimson, and he couldn't feel it much. He hid it under his blanket, but the pulsing was incessant. The blanket was moist; so was Raymond and the chair. He felt like he was dissolving rather quickly. His daughter would come soon, he thought, and everything would be okay as long as she didn't see him like this. He needed to put himself together. He needed to shower and dress and do the things that a man does. Coffee. The White House was closed. Raymond cried once from the back of his throat and hit his wrist against the arm of the chair. He was silenced. His daughter was coming soon. They were going to clean the garage, he hoped. It was any day now or several weeks from now. He'd have to

clean for her, wash sheets and take out the garbage. She'd make some concessions—he was a bachelor after all—but he wanted his daughter to be proud. More than anything she had to be proud. He always told the men at the White House about her and about whatever she told him about her siblings. The White House was closed. He would tell Josh though, of course. Josh would hear it and smile, knowing that it began with a letter he delivered or was intermediated by a letter he delivered, that he had played a hand in it all by handing over the letter. Josh would be coming by soon. Maybe he could help a little bit, at least with getting up from the chair. Raymond was pretty sure he could do the rest. A little help to get started though, that was the thing. He'd be around any minute. Raymond sat waiting, planning what he was going to say, hosting entire conversations. He was shivering rather violently but didn't notice. Under his blanket, the purple was deepening and spreading. Josh would come soon, and Raymond would be there waiting for him to come around.

Parker Stenseth is an undergraduate student studying English, Economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, and is planning on pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.