

## Regrets

He'd been away a long time. Now he'd returned to the same town where he'd been born. But why? What was the good of it? Oh, there were gravestones to visit, those of his family—parents, siblings, grandparents, a few cousins. But he hadn't visited them before, so why now? Something else compelled him. Something important but left undone, something that must be finished before he joined his family on the cemetery's sunny hillside. Something about himself and the town that had to be put right in his mind, even though he couldn't name it.

He rented a small house, just four rooms and a bath with a carport. The owner allowed pets, his two cats, both calicos, which he had gotten from an animal shelter right after moving in. For the three of them the house was a proper size.

When his wife was still alive, they'd lived in another state and enjoyed modest financial success. They'd owned a large Tudor house with a yard and trees. Their children had grown up there, before time sent them away, all three off in their turn, linked to him now only by an occasional phone call and a few useless Christmas presents arriving by UPS.

Still, there had been successes—his education, his job as chief chemist in a large plant, the money he and his wife had saved. But even those years were riddled with regrets—his wife's vague unhappiness and their children's disaffection.

Now he'd returned to the place where, it seemed to him, his regrets began, recalling the time before he even realized what regrets were. One by one, they seemed harmless enough as they occurred. Easy enough to overcome tomorrow or the next day. But he had allowed them to accumulate. All his life he allowed it until now. Like rubbish left in the hallway, his regrets stank of loneliness.

Each day he drove about the town to learn what had gone wrong, like someone who goes to his high school reunion to discover why he hadn't married this girl or that one, wondering how his life might have been different if he had. He drove past the house where he'd grown up. Past the schools he'd attended. Past the fields where he and his friends had played ball. Past the places where he'd worked. Past the homes of girls he'd liked but hadn't dated, had never kissed, and now never would, though he still imagined how soft their touches must have been for other men.

Occasionally, he'd ask here and there about his old friends or people he thought might have known them. But they would just scratch their heads and say, "Name sounds familiar," and then say nothing more. A few would add that their grandparents might know and that they'd ask for him. But none ever did. Not surprising. The town had shrunk, nearly emptying itself of his generation.

On days he didn't ramble about town, he'd shop for groceries, buying less than he needed so he could return sooner, always at the same time and talking with the same cashiers. At the local discount store, he'd do the same. One day, on impulse, he bought a second litter box and two automatic cat feeders. He thought it would be nice for each cat to have its own.

In good weather he'd walk to the coffee shop near his house, just a few blocks away. It was good for him, he thought. The proprietor now called him by name. "Good morning, Joe! Espresso today?"

"Yes, please," he'd say and add his feeble joke, "I'm just a cup of joe at home but an espresso here."

Each time he returned home from his outings, the calicos would stalk about the laundry room and complain about being left alone. He'd hoped that two cats wouldn't do that. But when he went

to the pantry, where their food was stored, they'd cease complaining and sit at his feet, mewing sweetly until he fed them.

After eating, they'd all resume their leisure in the living room, the cats on the small sofa he'd conceded to them—the curious one by the window in the sun, often rising to look out when it heard street noises, the other next to a large pillow at the sofa's other end, sleeping soundly. Then, before he'd fall into his easy chair, he'd turn on the local news, trying while he watched the TV to understand what had happened to his town in the past fifty years.

He had neighbors, of course. There was Mrs. Rideout, a widow younger than himself who lived next door. An attractive, outgoing woman, she spoke to everyone. She'd wait to fetch her mail until she saw Joseph going for his. Then she'd fly down her front walk while calling, "Hello, Mr. Drear. How are you today ... and those calicos? They're such pretty cats."

He wondered how she knew they were pretty cats. She seemed to know everything about the neighborhood. The coffee shop owner had told him that she routinely called the police to report crimes, especially drug use, which was becoming rampant in their town. And her reports were rarely wrong, the shop owner assured Joseph.

She was especially vigilant about the young couple who lived across the street. The husband, when he drank, which was often, would beat his pretty wife. Mrs. Rideout, who had once been a pretty girl herself, wouldn't tolerate such a thing. "What has the world come to," she'd ask anyone who would listen, "when a man beats a woman like that?" Even the husband, once released and sober, would thank her, all the while praising his bruised wife's beauty and forbearance, swearing never to abuse her again. "See that you don't!" Mrs. Rideout would caution.

When she'd call out to Joseph on her way to the mailbox, he'd nod and mumble his own greeting while appearing to be focused on his mail. Then he'd hurry back to the tiny portico that sheltered his front door. From there he'd watch for a moment or more behind an arborvitae as Mrs. Rideout collected her mail. *Still slender*, he thought. *She can't be seventy yet!* Sometimes, she'd look up from the envelopes in her hands, smile, and wave to him a second time. Embarrassed, he'd hurry inside, imagining her laughing at his impertinence. And when he'd look outside again, she was always gone. *Next time I'll speak with her properly*, he'd promise himself. But he never did.

One spring day when the wind was especially strong and cold, he went for the mail, leaning into the gusts while trying to hold his hat in place. Suddenly, without so much as a sweater for protection, Mrs. Rideout appeared in a bright green dress with yellow sunflowers bordering the hem. It fluttered and flapped about her legs as the wind blew back her long gray hair. Still, she smiled at him. He thought how nice it would be to drive her to the coffee shop. It would be good for them. But he didn't ask. Again, he simply watched from his portico as she returned to her house, harried as she went by the wind. Afterwards, he cursed himself until he was sick at heart. The next day he gave up his daily drive, realizing now there was no need searching for answers he already possessed.

*And so, you returned. And what you see, it's changed, like nothing you've known before. But the changes make you remember. And in the end, nothing else matters. Only that you were there before and shared with these people this place and that time. Even their foibles and their pettiness are gone. Time has desiccated their shortcomings, like a butterfly's chrysalis broken open and blown about by the wind, having served its purpose. All that's left is the love you had for them. Whatever hurt there was is gone so that when you return, you see more clearly than before the essence of them and this place. See it all for the first time, really, complete and true. And it's true*

*because, while you were gone, they've become their own essence ... and nothing more. That's all they can be ... the people and the place and the time. Just an essence and nothing more. Just as you will one day soon, in your due time, become an essence for those who love you or remember you ... if any do.*

Later that spring, Mrs. Rideout noticed one day that Joseph didn't go for his mail. She wondered about that, for his car was still in the carport. The next day, the same. So, she went to his door and knocked. Nothing. She called the police.

"Yes, Mrs. Rideout, wife-beating again? At this hour!" asked the dispatcher, a young woman who by now knew Mrs. Rideout well.

"No, Cynthia, the elderly gentleman next door, Mr. Drear. He hasn't gotten his mail for two days now. I knocked at his door, but he didn't answer. I can see his cats sitting in the window, and his car is still here. I'm afraid he's not well."

"Probably just the flu. We'll send someone around to check on him."

Within an hour a police car arrived, then another. One officer went to the front door, the other to the side. When no one answered their knocking, they forced open the side door. They found him, stiff and cold in his easy chair, the TV still on, two cats meowing furiously at his feet.