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In the sixty-first year of his life, Liam Pennywell lost his job. It wasn't such a good job, anyhow. He'd been teaching fifth grade in a second-rate private boys' school. Fifth grade wasn't even what he'd been trained for. *Teaching* wasn't what he'd been trained for. His degree was in philosophy. Oh, don't ask. Things seemed to have taken a downward turn a long, long time ago, and perhaps it was just as well that he had seen the last of St. Dyfrig's dusty, scuffed corridors and those interminable after-school meetings and the reams of niggling paperwork.

In fact, this might be a sign. It could be just the nudge he needed to push him on to the next stage—the final stage, the summing-up stage. The stage where he sat in his rocking chair and reflected on what it all meant, in the end.

He had a respectable savings account and the promise of a pension, so his money situation wasn't out-and-out desperate. Still, he would have to economize. The prospect of econ-

omizing interested him. He plunged into it with more enthusiasm than he'd felt in years—gave up his big old-fashioned apartment within the week and signed a lease on a smaller place, a one-bedroom-plus-den in a modern complex out toward the Baltimore Beltway. Of course this meant paring down his possessions, but so much the better. Simplify, simplify! Somehow he had accumulated far too many encumbrances. He tossed out bales of old magazines and manila envelopes stuffed with letters and three shoe boxes of index cards for the dissertation that he had never gotten around to writing. He tried to palm off his extra furniture on his daughters, two of whom were grown-ups with places of their own, but they said it was too shabby. He had to donate it to Goodwill. Even Goodwill refused his couch, and he ended up paying 1-800-GOT-JUNK to truck it away. What was left, finally, was compact enough that he could reserve the next-smallest-size U-Haul, a fourteen-footer, for moving day.

On a breezy, bright Saturday morning in June, he and his friend Bundy and his youngest daughter's boyfriend lugged everything out of his old apartment and set it along the curb. (Bundy had decreed that they should develop a strategy before they started loading.) Liam was reminded of a photographic series that he'd seen in one of those magazines he had just thrown away. *National Geographic*? *Life*? Different people from different parts of the world had posed among their belongings in various outdoor settings. There was a progression from the contents of the most primitive tribesman's hut (a cooking pot and a blanket, in Africa or some such) to a suburban American family's football-field-sized assemblage of furniture and automobiles, multiple TVs and sound systems, wheeled racks of clothing, everyday china and com-

pany china, on and on and on. His own collection, which had seemed so scanty in the gradually emptying rooms of his apartment, occupied an embarrassingly large space alongside the curb. He felt eager to whisk it away from public view. He snatched up the nearest box even before Bundy had given them the go-ahead.

Bundy taught phys ed at St. Dyfrig. He was a skeletal, blue-black giraffe of a man, frail by the looks of him, but he could lift astonishing weights. And Damian—a limp, wilted seventeen-year-old—was getting paid for this. So Liam let the two of them tackle the heavy stuff while he himself, short and stocky and out of shape, saw to the lamps and the pots and pans and other light objects. He had packed his books in small cartons and so those he carried too, stacking them lovingly and precisely against the left inner wall of the van while Bundy singlehandedly wrestled with a desk and Damian tottered beneath an upside-down Windsor chair balanced on top of his head. Damian had the posture of a consumptive—narrow, curved back and buckling knees. He resembled a walking comma.

The new apartment was some five miles from the old one, a short jaunt up North Charles Street. Once the van was loaded, Liam led the way in his car. He had assumed that Damian, who was below the legal age for driving a rental, would ride shotgun in the van with Bundy, but instead he slid in next to Liam and sat in a jittery silence, chewing on a thumbnail and lurking behind a mane of lank black hair. Liam couldn't think of a single thing to say to him. When they stopped for the light at Wyndhurst he contemplated asking how Kitty was, but he decided it might sound odd to inquire about his own daughter. Not until they were turning

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off Charles did either of them speak, and then it was Damian. "Swingin' bumper sticker," he said.

Since there were no cars ahead of them, Liam knew it had to be his own bumper sticker Damian meant. (*BUMPER STICKER*, it read—a witticism that no one before had ever seemed to appreciate.) "Why, thanks," he said. And then, feeling encouraged: "I also have a T-shirt that says *T-SHIRT*." Damian stopped chewing his thumbnail and gaped at him. Liam said, "Heh, heh," in a helpful tone of voice, but still it seemed that Damian didn't get it.

The complex Liam was moving to sat opposite a small shopping mall. It consisted of several two-story buildings, flat-faced and beige and bland, placed at angles to each other under tall, spindly pines. Liam had worried about privacy, seeing the network of paths between buildings and the flanks of wide, staring windows, but during the whole unloading process they didn't run into a single neighbor. The carpeting of brown pine needles muffled their voices, and the wind in the trees above them made an eerily steady whispering sound. "Cool," Damian said, presumably meaning the sound, since he had his face tipped upward as he spoke. He was under the Windsor chair again. It loomed like an oversized bonnet above his forehead.

Liam's unit was on the ground floor. Unfortunately, it had a shared entrance—a heavy brown steel door, opening into a dank-smelling cinderblock foyer with his own door to the left and a flight of steep concrete steps directly ahead. Second-floor units cost less to rent, but Liam would have found it depressing to climb those stairs every day.

He hadn't given much thought beforehand to the placement of his furniture. Bundy set things down any old where

but Damian proved unexpectedly finicky, shoving Liam's bed first one way and then another in search of the best view. "Like, you've got to see out the window first thing when you open your eyes," he said, "or how will you know what kind of weather it is?" The bed was digging tracks across the carpet, and Liam just wanted to leave it where it stood. What did he care what kind of weather it was? When Damian started in on the desk—it had to be positioned where sunlight wouldn't reflect off the computer screen, he said—Liam told him, "Well, since I don't own a computer, where the desk is now will be fine. That about wraps things up, I guess."

"Don't own a computer!" Damian echoed.

"So let me just get you your money, and you can be on your way."

"But how do you, like, communicate with the outside world?"

Liam was about to say that he communicated by fountain pen, but Bundy said, chuckling, "He doesn't." Then he clapped a hand on Liam's shoulder. "Okay, Liam, good luck, man."

Liam hadn't meant to dismiss Bundy along with Damian. He had envisioned the two of them sharing the traditional moving-day beer and pizza. But of course, Bundy was providing Damian's ride back. (It was Bundy who'd picked up the U-Haul, bless him, and now he'd be returning it.) So Liam said, "Well, thank you, Bundy. I'll have to have you over once I'm settled in." Then he handed Damian a hundred and twenty dollars in cash. The extra twenty was a tip, but since Damian pocketed the bills without counting them, the gesture felt like a waste. "See you around" was all he said. Then he and Bundy left. The inner door latched gently behind

them but the outer door, the brown steel one, shook the whole building when it slammed shut, setting up a shocked silence for several moments afterward and emphasizing, somehow, Liam's sudden solitude.

Well. So. Here he was.

He took a little tour. There wasn't a lot to look at. A medium-sized living room, with his two armchairs and the rocking chair facing in random directions and filling not quite enough space. A dining area at the far end (Formica-topped table from his first marriage and three folding chairs), with a kitchen alcove just beyond. The den and the bathroom opened off the hall that led back to the bedroom. All the floors were carpeted with the same beige synthetic substance, all the walls were refrigerator white, and there were no moldings whatsoever, no baseboards or window frames or door frames, none of those gradations that had softened the angles of his old place. He found this a satisfaction. Oh, his life was growing purer, all right! He poked his head into the tiny den (daybed, desk, Windsor chair) and admired the built-in shelves. They had been a big selling point when he was apartment hunting: two tall white bookshelves on either side of the patio door. Finally, finally he'd been able to get rid of those glass-fronted walnut monstrosities he had inherited from his mother. It was true that these shelves were less spacious. He'd had to consolidate a bit, discarding the fiction and biographies and some of his older dictionaries. But he had kept his beloved philosophers, and now he looked forward to arranging them. He bent over a carton and opened the flaps. Epictetus. Arrian. The larger volumes would go on the lower shelves, he decided, even though they didn't need to, since all the shelves were exactly, mathematically the same

height. It was a matter of aesthetics, really—the visual effect. He hummed tunelessly to himself, padding back and forth between the shelves and the cartons. The sunlight streaming through the glass door brought a fine sweat to his upper lip, but he postponed rolling up his shirtsleeves because he was too absorbed in his task.

After the study came the kitchen, less interesting but still necessary, and so he moved on to the boxes of foods and utensils. This was the most basic of kitchens, with a single bank of cabinets, but that was all right; he'd never been much of a cook. In fact here it was, late afternoon, and he was only now realizing that he'd better fix himself some lunch. He made a jelly sandwich and ate it as he worked, swigging milk straight from the carton to wash it down. The sight of the six-pack of beer in the refrigerator, brought over the day before along with his perishables, gave him a pang of regret that took a moment to explain. Ah, yes: Bundy. He must remember to phone Bundy tomorrow and thank him at greater length. Invite him to supper, even. He wondered what carry-out establishments delivered within his new radius.

In the living room he arranged the chairs in what he hoped was a friendly conversational grouping. He placed a lamp table between the two armchairs and the coffee table in front of them, and the other lamp table he set next to the rocker, which was where he imagined sitting to read at the end of every day. Or *all* day, for that matter. How else would he fill the hours?

Even in the summers, he had been accustomed to working. St. Dyfrig students could be counted on to require an abundance of remedial courses. He had taken almost no vacation—just one week in early June and two in August.

Well, think of this as one of those weeks. Just proceed a day at a time, is all.

On the kitchen wall, the telephone rang. He had a new number but he had kept his existing plan, which included caller ID (one of the few modern inventions he approved of), and he checked the screen before he lifted the receiver. *ROYALL J S*. His sister. "Hello?" he said.

"How's it going, Liam?"

"Oh, fine. I think I'm just about settled."

"Have you made up your bed yet?"

"Well, no."

"Do it. Now. You should have done it first thing. Pretty soon you're going to notice you're exhausted, and you don't want to be hunting for sheets then."

"Okay," he said.

Julia was four years his senior. He was used to receiving orders from her.

"Later in the week I may stop by and visit. I'll bring you a pot of beef stew," she said.

"Well, that's very nice of you, Julia," he said.

He hadn't eaten red meat in thirty-some years, but it would have been useless to remind her.

After he hung up he obediently made his bed, which was easily navigated since Damian had positioned it so there was walking space on either side. Then he tackled the closet, where clothes had been dumped every which way. He nailed his shoe bag to the closet door and fitted in his shoes; he draped his ties on the tie rack that he found already installed. He'd never owned a tie rack before. Then, since he had the hammer out, he decided to go ahead and hang his pictures. Oh, he was *way* ahead of the game! Picture hanging was a

finishing touch, something that took most people days. But he might as well see this through.

His pictures were unexceptional—van Gogh prints, French bistro posters, whatever he'd chosen haphazardly years and years ago just to save his walls from total blankness. Even so, it took him a while to find the appropriate spot for each one and get it properly centered. By the time he'd finished it was after eight and he'd had to turn all the lights on. The ceiling globe in the living room had a burnt-out bulb, he discovered. Well, never mind; he'd see to that tomorrow. All at once, enough was enough.

He wasn't the slightest bit hungry, but he heated a bowl of vegetable soup in his miniature microwave and sat down at the table to eat it. First he sat facing the kitchen alcove, with his back to the living room. The view was uninspiring, though, so he switched to the end chair that faced the window. Not that he had much to see even there—just a sheet of glossy blackness and a vague, transparent reflection of his own round gray head—but it would be nice in the daytime. He would automatically settle in that chair from now on, he supposed. He had a fondness for routine.

When he stood up to take his empty bowl to the kitchen, he was ambushed by sudden aches in several parts of his body. His shoulders hurt, and his lower back, and his calves and the soles of his feet. Early though it was, he locked his door and turned off the lights and went into the bedroom. His made-up bed was a welcome sight. As usual, Julia had known what she was talking about.

He skipped his shower. Getting into his pajamas and brushing his teeth took his last ounce of energy. When he sank onto the bed, it was almost beyond his willpower to

reach over and turn off the lamp, but he forced himself to do it. Then he slid down flat, with a long, deep, groaning sigh.

His mattress was comfortably firm, and the top sheet was tucked in tightly on either side of him as he liked. His pillow had just enough bounce to it. The window, a couple of feet away, was cranked open to let the breeze blow in, and it offered a view of a pale night sky with a few stars visible behind the sparse black pine boughs—just a scattering of pin-pricks. He was glad now that Damian had taken such trouble to situate the bed right.

Most probably, he reflected, this would be the final dwelling place of his life. What reason would he have to move again? No new prospects were likely for him. He had accomplished all the conventional tasks—grown up, found work, gotten married, had children—and now he was winding down.

This is it, he thought. The very end of the line. And he felt a mild stirring of curiosity.

Then he woke up in a hospital room with a helmet of gauze on his head.

He knew it was a hospital room because of the medical apparatus crowded around his bed—the IV pole and the tubes and the blinking, chirping monitor—and because of the bed itself, which was cranked to a half-sitting position and had that uniquely uncomfortable, slick, hard hospital mattress. The ceiling could only be a hospital ceiling, with its white acoustic tiles pocked and cratered like the moon, and nowhere else would you find the same sterile taupe metal furniture.

He knew his head was bandaged even before he reached up a hand to touch it, because the gauze covered his ears and turned the chirping of the monitor into a distant peep. But not until he reached did he realize that his hand was bandaged also. A wide strip of adhesive tape encircled his left palm, and in fact his palm stung sharply across the padded part now that he thought about it. Exactly where his head was injured, though, he couldn't tell. It ached uniformly all

over, a relentless, dull throbbing that seemed connected to his vision, because looking at the blinking lights of the monitor made it worse.

He knew from the square of pearly white sky framed by the plate-glass window that it must be daytime. But *which* day? And what hour of the day?

Any second now an explanation would occur to him. There had to be one. He had fallen down some stairs or he'd been in a car wreck. But when he searched his mind for his last available memory (which took a distressingly long moment), all he could find was the image of going to sleep in his new apartment. His new apartment's address was 102C Windy Pines Court; what a relief to be able to produce that. His new phone number was . . . oh, Lord. He couldn't recall.

But that was understandable, wasn't it? The number had been assigned to him only a week ago.

The exchange was 882. Or maybe 822. Or 828.

He gave up the search for his phone number and returned to the image of falling asleep. He tried to invent a next act. So: in the morning he had awakened, let's say. He might have wondered where he was for an instant, but then he'd oriented himself, gotten out of bed, headed toward his new bathroom . . .

It didn't work. He drew a blank. All he could remember was lying on his back in the dark, appreciating his sheets.

A nurse came in, or maybe an aide; hard to tell, these days. She was young and plump and freckled, and she wore baby-blue pants and a white smock printed with teddy bears. She punched a button on the monitor and it stopped chirping. Then she leaned over his face, too close. "Oh!" she said. "You're awake."

"What happened?" he asked her.

"I'll tell them at the desk," she said.

She went off again.

He could see now that a tube ran from the IV pole to his right arm. He sensed that he had a catheter, too. He was fastened down like Gulliver, trapped by cords and wires. A flutter of panic started rising in his chest, but he subdued it by gazing steadily out the open door, where a blond wooden handrail followed the corridor wall in a predictable and calming way.

Surgery. Maybe he'd had surgery. Anesthesia could do this to you—wipe out any sense that time had passed while you were unconscious. He remembered that from his tonsillectomy, fifty-odd years ago. But he had awakened from the tonsillectomy with a clear recall of going under, and of the hours leading up to it. It had been nothing like this.

Another nurse, or some such person, entered so swiftly that she set up a breeze. This was an older woman but her smock was equally ambiguous, patterned all over with smiley faces. "*Good* afternoon!" she said loudly. It turned out that hearing stabbed his head just as much as seeing. She took something from her pocket, a little penlight kind of thing, and shined it painfully into his eyes. He forced himself not to close them. He said, "It's afternoon?"

"Mmhmm."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Concussion," she said. She slipped the penlight back in her pocket and turned to check the monitor. "You got a little bump on the noggin."

"I don't remember anything about it," he told her.

"Well, there you are, then. That's what concussion does to people."

"I mean I don't remember being in a situation where I could *get* a concussion. All I remember is going to bed."

"Did you maybe fall out of bed?" she asked him.

"Fall out of bed! At my age?"

"Well, I don't know. I just came on duty. Let's ask your daughter."

"I have a daughter here? Which one?"

"Dark hair? A little bit curly? I think she went to the cafeteria. But I'll try and track her down for you."

She checked something at the side of the bed—his catheter bag, he supposed—and then left.

It was absurdly comforting to know that a daughter was here. The very word was comforting: *daughter*. Someone who was personally acquainted with him and cared about more than his blood pressure and his output of pee.

Even if she *had* absconded to the cafeteria without a backward glance.

He closed his eyes and fell off a cliff, into a sleep that felt like drowning in feathers.

When he woke up, a bearded man was prying open his eyelids. "*There* you are," the man said, as if Liam had stepped out of the room for a moment. Liam's oldest daughter was standing at the foot of the bed, her sensible, familiar face almost startling in these surroundings. She wore a sleeveless blouse that must not have been warm enough for this refrigerated air, because she'd wrapped her solid white arms around her rib cage.

"I'm Dr. Wood," the bearded man told Liam. "The hospitalist."

Hospitalist?

“Mr. Pennywell, do you know where you are?”

“I have no idea where I am,” Liam said.

“What day is it, then?”

“I don’t know that either,” Liam said. “I just woke up! You’re asking impossible questions.”

Xanthe said, “Dad, *please* cooperate,” but Dr. Wood raised a palm in her direction (never fear; he knew how to handle these old codgers) and said, “You’re quite right, of course, Mr. Pennywell,” in a soothing, condescending tone. “So,” he said. “The president. Can you tell me who our president is.”

Liam grimaced. “He’s not *my* president,” he said. “I refuse to acknowledge him.”

“Dad—”

Liam said, “Look here, Dr. Wood, I should be asking the questions. I’m completely in the dark! I went to bed last night—or some night; I wake up in a hospital room! What happened?”

Dr. Wood glanced at Xanthe. It was possible that he didn’t know himself what had happened—or had already forgotten, in the crush of his other patients. At any rate, Xanthe was the one who finally answered. “You were injured by an intruder,” she told Liam.

“An intruder?”

“He must have gotten in through the patio door, which, incidentally, you left unlocked for any passing Tom, Dick, or Harry to waltz through as the whim overtook him.”

“An intruder was in my *bedroom*?”

“I guess you struggled or shouted or something, because the neighbors heard a commotion, but by the time the police came the man had fled.”

"I was there for this? I was conscious? I was fighting off an attack?"

He felt a deep chill down the back of his neck, and it wasn't from the air conditioning.

"They need to keep you here a while for observation," Xanthe told him. "That's why they've been waking you so often to ask you questions."

It was news to Liam that he had been awakened often, but he didn't want to admit to yet another failure of memory. "Have they caught the man?" he asked her.

"Not yet."

"He's still out there?"

Before she could answer, Dr. Wood said, "Sit up for me, please, Mr. Pennywell." Then he led Liam through a series of exercises that made him feel foolish. Raise this arm; raise that arm; touch his own nose; follow Dr. Wood's finger with his eyes. Xanthe stood to one side, narrowly watchful, as the soles of his bare feet were scraped with a pointed object. During the whole process, Dr. Wood remained expressionless. "How am I?" Liam was forced to ask finally.

Dr. Wood said, "We'll need to keep you here another night just to be on the safe side. But if all goes well, we can release you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Xanthe said. "Are you serious? Look at him! He's weak as a kitten! He looks like death warmed over!"

"Oh, that will change," the doctor said offhandedly. He told Liam, "Nothing to eat today but liquids, I'm afraid, in case we have to take you very suddenly to the OR." Then he nodded in Xanthe's direction and left the room.

"Typical," Xanthe muttered when he'd gone. "First he says

they're booting you out and then in the same breath he says you may need emergency brain surgery."

She spun away with a flounce of her skirt. Liam feared for a moment that she was leaving too, but she was only going over to the corner for a green vinyl chair. She dragged it closer to his bed and plunked herself down in it. "I hope you're satisfied," she told Liam.

"Well, not completely," he said drily.

"I knew you shouldn't have moved to that place. Didn't I tell you when you signed the lease? A sixty-year-old man in a rinky-dink starter apartment directly across from a shopping mall! And then to leave your door wide open! What did you expect?"

He hadn't left his door wide open. And he hadn't meant to leave it unlocked. He hadn't known it *was* unlocked. But it was his policy not to argue. (An infuriating policy, his daughters always claimed.) Arguing got you nowhere. He smoothed down his bedclothes with his good hand, accidentally tugging the tube that ran from his arm to the IV pole.

"A sixty-year-old man," Xanthe said, "who can still move all his belongings in the very smallest size U-Haul."

"Next smallest," he murmured.

"Whose so-called car is a Geo Prizm. A *used* Geo Prizm. And who, when he gets hit on the head, nobody knows where his people are."

"How *did* they know?" he asked. It only now occurred to him to wonder. "Who called you?"

"The police called. They'll be in to question you later, they said. They got my number from your address book; I was the only entry with the same last name as yours. I had to

hear it over the phone! At two o'clock in the morning! If you don't think *that's* an experience . . ."

He was accustomed to Xanthe's rants. They were sort of a hobby of hers. Funny: she was so completely different from her mother, his first wife—a waifish, fragile musician with a veil of transparent hair. Millie had taken too many pills when Xanthe was not yet two. It was his second wife who'd ended up raising Xanthe, and his second wife whom she resembled—brown haired and sturdy and normal-looking, pleasantly unexceptional-looking. He wondered sometimes if genetic traits could be altered by osmosis.

"And here's the worst of it," Xanthe was saying. "You invite a known drug addict into your home and give him total access."

"Excuse me?" he said. He was startled. Had there been some whole other episode he had lost to his amnesia?

"Damian O'Donovan. What were you *thinking?*"

"Damian . . . *Kitty's* Damian? Kitty's boyfriend?"

"Kitty's drug-addict, slacker boyfriend whom none of us trust for an instant. Mom won't even let them be alone in the house together."

"Well, of course she won't," Liam said. "They're seventeen years old. But Damian's not a drug addict."

"Dad. How can these things slip your mind? He was suspended last year for smoking pot backstage in the school auditorium."

"That doesn't make him an addict."

"He was suspended for a week! But you: you're such a patsy. You choose to forget all about it. You say, 'Oh, here, Damian, let me show you where I live. Let me point out my

flimsy patio door that I plan to leave unlocked.' In fact I wouldn't be surprised if he unlocked that door himself while he was there, just so he could get back in and mug you."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Liam said. "He's a perfectly harmless kid. A little . . . vacant, maybe, but he would never—"

"I don't want to say you had it coming," Xanthe said, "but mark my words, Dad: 'Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it.' Harry Truman."

"The past," Liam said reflexively.

"What?"

"'Those who cannot remember the *past* are condemned to repeat it.' And it's George Santayana."

Xanthe gazed at him stonily, her eyes the same opaque dark brown as her stepmother's. "I'm going to find someplace where my cell phone works and let the others know how you're doing," she said.

Even though she could be a bit wearing, he was sorry to see her leave.

His head was pounding so hard that it made a sound inside his ears like approaching footsteps. His injured palm was stinging, and something seemed to be wrong with his neck. A twisty pain ran down the left side.

He had fought with someone? Physically struggled?

Let's try this again: he had gone to bed in his new bedroom. He had felt grateful for his firm mattress, his resilient pillow, his tightly tucked top sheet. He had looked out the window and seen the stars sprinkled above the pine boughs.

Then what? Then what? *Then what?*

His lost memory was like a physical object just beyond his grasp. He could feel the strain in his head. It made the throbbing even worse.

Okay, just let it go. It would come to him in good time.

He closed his eyes and slid toward sleep, almost all the way but not quite. Part of him was listening for Xanthe. What was she telling her sisters? It would be nice if she were saying, "Such a scare; we almost lost him. I've been out of my mind with worry." Although more likely it was "Can you believe what he's done *this* time?"

But it wasn't his fault! he wanted to say. For once, he wasn't to blame!

He knew his daughters thought he was hopeless. They said he didn't pay attention. They claimed he was obtuse. They rolled their eyes at each other when he made the most innocent remark. They called him Mr. Magoo.

At St. Dyfrig once, invited to view a poem on the English department's computer, he had clicked on *How to listen* and been disappointed to find mere technical instructions for playing the audio version. What he had been hoping for was advice on how to listen to poetry—and, by extension, how to listen, *really* listen, to what was being said all around him. It seemed he lacked some basic skill for that.

He was hopeless. His daughters were right.

He reached for sleep as if it were a blanket that he could hide underneath, and finally he managed to catch hold of it.

When he opened his eyes, a policeman was standing at his bedside—a muscular young man in full uniform. "Mr. Penny-

well?” he was saying. He already had his ID card in hand, not that one was needed. Nobody would mistake him for anything but a cop. His white shirt was so crisp that it hurt to look at it, and the weight of his gun and his radio and his massive black leather belt would have sunk him like a stone if he had fallen into any water. “Like to ask a few questions,” he said.

Liam struggled to sit up, and something like a brick slammed into his left temple. He groaned and eased himself back against his pillow.

The policeman, oblivious, was tucking away his ID. (If he had given his name, he must have done so before Liam woke up.) He took a small notebook from his breast pocket, along with a ballpoint pen, and said, “I understand you left your back door unlocked.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“Pardon?”

“That’s what they tell me, I said!”

He had thought he was speaking quite loudly, but it was hard to know for sure inside all that gauze.

“And when did you retire?” the man asked, writing something down.

“I’m not exactly calling it retirement yet.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m not exactly calling it retirement yet! I’ll have to see how my money holds out.”

“When did you go to *bed*, Mr. Pennywell. On the night of the incident.”

“Oh.” Liam reflected for a moment. “Wasn’t that last night?”

The policeman consulted his notebook. “Last night, yes,” he said. “Saturday, June tenth.”

"You called it 'the night of the incident.' "

"Right," the man said, looking puzzled.

"It was your wording, you see, that caused me to wonder."

"Caused you to wonder what, Mr. Pennywell?"

"I meant . . ."

Liam gave up. "I don't know when I went to bed," he said. "Early, though."

"Early. Say eight?"

"Eight!" Liam was scandalized.

The policeman made another notation. "Eight o'clock. And how soon after that would you guess you fell asleep?" he asked.

"I would never go to bed at eight!"

"You just said—"

"I said 'early,' but I didn't mean *that* early."

"Well, when, then?"

"Nine, maybe," Liam told him. "Or, I don't know. What: you want me to make something up? I don't know what time! I'm completely at a loss here, don't you see? I don't remember a thing!"

The policeman crossed out his last notation. He closed his notebook in an ostentatiously patient and deliberate way and slid it into his pocket. "Tell you what," he said. "We'll check with you in a few days. Oftentimes a thing like this comes back to folks by and by."

"Let's hope so," Liam said.

"Pardon?"

"Let's hope it comes back!"

The policeman made a sort of gesture, half wave and half salute, and left.

Let's hope so, dear Lord in heaven. Even if it were some