

Robert Boucheron

Shady Grove

Harriet Thigpen got by for seventy-two years on personal charm and a photographic memory. She used her gift to settle an argument or surprise strangers. She could recall the weather on a particular day, recipes to feed a family of six, telephone numbers no longer in use, addresses of persons who were deceased, and passages from books that nobody reads.

Life was not hard, but Harriet toiled and suffered her share. She raised three children and buried two husbands. Before marriage, she worked for a company that published almanacs, directories, and one-volume reference books. The job suited a mind such as hers, though she irritated colleagues. In a disagreement over a matter of fact, Harriet was always right. The second husband, Carl Thigpen, left her a comfortable house in Hapsburg, Virginia, a secure income, and a web of family relationships.

The youngest daughter lived nearby. Helen was preoccupied with raising her own children and advancing her husband's career. Sam Dobbin practiced law—house sales, estate planning, trusts, wills, and probate. He looked after Harriet's affairs. The grandchildren were exposed to regular visits. The family respected Harriet's privacy, which meant she passed much of her time alone.

Harriet had no schedule to keep, no responsibilities. Her health was excellent. She smiled at strangers. Alone, she hummed a popular song or an old hymn tune. Lately, in the course of a day there were gaps she could not account for. She shrugged them off. Short-term memory. At this point, what did it matter if she lost an hour here and there?

In a smart print dress, with coordinated hat and handbag, Harriet went for an afternoon walk. She had no destination. The spring weather was fine, and the streets of the upscale neighborhood were safe. The rhythm of motion and the balmy air led her to wander.

A police officer on patrol spotted Harriet on the brink of a steep bank. He pulled the cruiser to the side of the street, left the lights flashing, and approached on foot. A large man in a dark blue uniform, he called out.

“Ma'am?”

“Why, officer, what a pleasant surprise!” Harriet smiled

warmly and extended her hand as though at a reception. “Do I know you?”

“No, ma’am. Norman Coles. Are you all right?”

“Never felt better in my life. And you?”

“I’m just fine, ma’am.” He grasped her firmly by the elbow and guided her toward the cruiser. “This is a risky place to walk, ma’am. Do you know where you are?”

“Of course, I do,” she said indignantly, then gazed at her surroundings with interest. A river of cars rushed below. “The highway cut. Goodness, how those azaleas have lasted. How did I get here?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, ma’am.”

“I must have walked here on my own two feet.”

“I want to take you home now. Do you live with relatives?”

“No, I’m all alone in the world.” If not strictly true, this statement struck the right note.

“Can you tell me where you live?”

Harriet automatically gave her address. As they drove to the large, Tudor-style house, Coles radioed the station. The dispatcher told him to stay with the wanderer until a family member or friend could be located.

Once home, Harriet treated Officer Coles as a gentleman caller. Sam Dobbin found them seated in the living room, conversing. On a coaster before the officer was a glass of iced tea, untouched. Next to it his service cap lay upside down. He stood as the man in the dark suit entered.

“Must you go so soon?” Harriet chimed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Sorry to drag you into this. Sam Dobbin, attorney.” The men shook hands.

“All in the line of duty, sir. Good day, ma’am.” Officer Coles slipped his hat under his arm and exited. Sam took the patrolman’s place on the sofa.

“All right, tell me what happened.”

“Nothing, Sam, absolutely nothing! I went out for a stroll, which I often do, you know. It’s good exercise, and the spring weather is delightful. That nice police officer stopped and . . . picked me up.” She giggled.

“How long were you out?”

“I don’t know. I lost my way. It may have been an hour.”

“You covered a good three miles.”

“I must have had one of my spells.”

“Spells?”

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“Like sleep walking, but I’m wide awake.”

“So this wasn’t the first time.”

“No, but the first time in public.”

“Requiring police intervention.”

Harriet’s gaiety faded and she turned to face her son-in-law.

“Well, Sam, what shall we do with me?”

“For the moment, nothing. That is, if you’re all right.”

“Yes.” She took an inventory. “Physically I’m all here.”

“Let me talk to Helen. I’ll ask her to call you tonight after supper.”

He glanced at his watch.

“You must get back to the office. I’m a bother, and not even your own flesh and blood.”

“Harriet, stop. If you need anything, call us, either one. We’ll talk to you tonight.”

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With a phone call to Helen’s sister in Minnesota, the family council convened. Their half-brother was in a sailboat somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean, cut off from communication.

“Harriet should not be left alone all the time,” Helen began.

“You can’t take me in,” she said to the Dobbins. “You have enough to do as it is.”

“We could hire a home health aide,” Sam said.

“I’m not that far gone.”

“What about a companion?” asked Constance. The speakerphone made her voice sound tinny and irrelevant.

“That sounds lovely,” Harriet said. “Are educated young women of good reputation still available for a pittance?”

“Why don’t we ask Theodore Percy,” Helen said. “Harriet is a member of St. Giles. Maybe he will have an idea.”

The next day, Sam phoned the rector of St. Giles Episcopal Church, a respected and well-loved figure. He responded with sympathy.

“How is she? I have missed seeing her at church.”

“Her physical health is good. Her mind is sharp except for the spells.”

“I am a trustee of the Shady Grove Rest Home,” Percy said. “Let’s invite Harriet to lunch there. The residents’ lending library is in need of a volunteer coordinator.”

“She’s bound to know what’s afoot.”

“A dignified pretext. At Harriet’s age, though we seldom admit it, we contemplate the end. Shady Grove is one step closer.”

They set a date for the lunch. Harriet’s tact was a match for Percy’s.

“My research skills are outdated. How much would they benefit the lending library?”

“Consider it a social occasion.”

“I look forward to it, then.”

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Late one morning, another fresh spring day, Sam and Helen fetched Harriet in their car. Harriet wore the same print dress as on the day she was apprehended. It was new, after all.

As they looped up the drive to the main entrance, Theodore Percy and Dr. Etheridge Vowles, the director of Shady Grove, stood in the neoclassical porch. A large, florid man with a dark, curly beard, Dr. Vowles wore a plaid suit and a fawn-colored vest with a gold watch chain draped across. He beamed and chuckled, as though life were a continual feast.

“Welcome, welcome everyone! Father Percy arrived this very minute. Mr. Dobbin, Mrs. Dobbin.” He seized their hands. “And Mrs. Thigpen, what a lovely dress!”

Greetings were exchanged all around, with remarks on the fine weather. Harriet was intrigued by the house, a mansion converted to its current use. On the fascia over the columns, a motto was inscribed.

“*Deus nobis haec otia fecit*,” she read aloud. “Vergil, isn’t it? The *Bucolics*. A god has made this leisure for us. Or just God.”

“Really, Mrs. Thigpen,” said Dr. Vowles, “you’re the first person to identify that tag on the spot. Are you a classical scholar?”

“Oh, no!”

“How did you manage?”

“I attended college, Dr. Vowles.”

“No doubt it dates from the time this was the Lockhorn estate,” said Father Percy. “Quite apt even now. Back then, a smattering of Latin was taken for granted among the Virginia gentry.”

A spry, white-haired man, evidently a resident, emerged from the shrubbery.

“*Fortunate senex!*” Harriet said gaily, with a wave of the hand.

Startled, the old man passed without a word.

“O lucky old man,” Harriet translated. “It’s from the same poem. Two shepherds meet in the country outside Rome . . .”

“You’re just the person we need to organize our library,” Dr. Vowles said. “Won’t you come in and have a look?”

Like a potentate receiving an honored guest, Dr. Vowles offered his arm to Harriet and escorted her inside. The Dobbins followed, and Percy brought up the rear. Harriet inspected the former parlor, with its fine woodwork and heart pine floor. The old drapes remained, as well as a brown leather sofa. Sprinkler

pipes hung from the ceiling, spoiling the effect. Shelves carried a hodgepodge of books donated by the residents. More books lay in random stacks and cardboard boxes on the floor. A wooden card catalogue salvaged from a school stood in a corner, like a child being punished.

The party progressed to the administrative office, once the morning room. They saw the vast game room, equipped for billiards, ping-pong, and cards. The card table had a jigsaw puzzle spread on top. They peeked in the lounge with its massive stone fireplace. Through glass doors, they glimpsed the terrace, paved with marble tiles and decorated with urns.

The tour ended at the dining room, where residents gathered at the double sliding door. Like famished souls in the underworld, Harriet thought. The white-haired man they had flushed from the shrubbery led the pack. Jovial Dr. Vowles greeted them by name.

“Mrs. Drake, Mr. Wentworth, Mr. McCloud, Miss Arrington. And Mr. Greenleaf, with your nose in the door as usual.”

The grandfather clock in the hall struck noon. The double door parted, and the crowd surged forward. Several small tables filled the large room. Dr. Vowles guided his party to one in the middle, set with a white cloth, china, silver, and a glass vase of cut flowers.

“From our own gardens,” he said. “Many of our residents are avid gardeners. We encourage them to pursue the activities they have always enjoyed.”

A waitress appeared with menus, each a single page headed by the date. She wore an old-fashioned costume of black and white, like a serving maid, and a name pin: Selena.

“The selections vary from day to day,” Dr. Vowles said. “There are alternates for those with special dietary needs. Do you see anything to tempt your appetite?”

Selena hovered nearby, ready to take their orders. Dr. Vowles offered suggestions, asked questions, and facilitated decisions. With a ready supply of anecdotes, he made sure the talk was lively. Selena reappeared with a tray, and the table was laden with good things.

The Dobbins gazed around the room in wonder. A chandelier hung from a ceiling adorned with plaster garlands of fruit. Harriet was animated and gracious. She flirted with Dr. Vowles, who gamely returned the compliment. As Selena brought coffee, Harriet opened her arms to include the table, or perhaps the whole room.

“When can I move in?”

“We will be delighted to have you join our merry band,” Dr. Vowles said, “as soon as there is a vacancy.”

“As a trustee,” said Father Percy, “I see nothing to stand in the way of your acceptance as a new resident. The application is pro forma.”

“I can look into the financial side,” said Sam Dobbin, “which will include selling the house.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for this, mother?” asked Helen.

“Yes, dear, as sure as can be. I’m tired of living alone, tired of living in the past. Did you bring me here to organize a library when I’m losing my mind?”

Dr. Vowles let someone else take the question. As no one did, it hung in the air.

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The vacancy appeared, the house was sold, and a date was set for the move to Shady Grove. Sam Dobbin did all the work, legal and financial. Harriet hoped he collected a fee for his effort, but it seemed indelicate to ask. Besides, it all happened in a rush. Hardly was the decision made, when it became a reality. No time for regret. Her life was no longer in her own hands, but in those of inexorable fate.

Movers came at the end of August. Much of the furniture went into storage. Grandchildren would divide it at some uncertain date. Harriet’s private room could accommodate a few pieces. Helen helped her choose a bed, a bureau, and a small desk. She rejected a rocking chair as too old-ladylike. They settled on a French armchair upholstered in tapestry.

Harriet never cared much for furniture, so it was no great loss. Still, she wondered. Torn from familiar surroundings, with objects and pictures to jog her memory, would she forget more and more? As it was, her two husbands blurred together. She caught herself skipping over the second and attributing everything to the first. The spells seemed to be getting no worse, but how could she tell? She was jumping off a cliff and expecting a breeze to waft her to safety.

Alone in the empty house, Harriet perched on a windowsill and traced a finger on the dusty glass. It was shocking how dirty the house was, denuded of carpets, curtains, and sofas. How could she have lived like this? The air was hot and sticky. The power was turned off. With people away on vacation, August seemed more final than December, more of an end to things.

Dead in the water, her sailor son would say.

Harriet groped in her handbag for a cigarette. She found things in it that couldn't be hers. Then she remembered that she and Allen had quit smoking years ago. Or was it Carl?

Sam Dobbin was busy that day, and Helen had the children to manage. Theodore Percy would drive Harriet to Shady Grove. Years ago, when he arrived at St. Giles as a young priest, he was eager to win souls and carve a niche for himself. He grew in stature, while from a busy mother, Harriet shrank to an irresponsible child.

At last, the rector strode through the front door, a trim man of sixty clad in black with a plume of snow-white hair.

"Father Percy," she cried impulsively, "into thy hands I commend my spirit!"