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Half World

Written by Scott O'Connor

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HALF WORLD

A NOVEL

SCOTT O'CONNOR



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For my father

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

—JOHN 8:32

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

—INSCRIPTION AT THE ENTRANCE TO CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY HEADQUARTERS, LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

HALF WORLD

ACROSS COUNTRY

They drove west. Arlington to Charleston, West Virginia. Charleston to Lexington, Kentucky. Henry had purchased a new leather-bound ledger and in it he wrote the dates and distances traveled, what he and Ginnie spent on gas, meals, motel rooms. Seventy-six miles to Louisville. Eighty-one miles to Jasper, Indiana. Seven dollars at the Pine Needles Motel. Six dollars at the Apple Tree Lodge in Carmi, Illinois.

The station wagon jostled along the imperfectly paved county routes, the local thoroughfares. A brown Chevrolet, their first new car in ten years, since just after Hannah was born. A pair of suitcases strapped to the top, the back filled to the ceiling with crates and boxes, all of the clothes and silverware and china that Ginnie hadn't wanted to leave for the movers.

In the rearview mirror Henry checked on Hannah and Thomas in the backseat. Thomas seemed content, for the most part; Hannah less so. She was unhappy about the move, having to leave school before the end of sixth grade, abandoning her friends, the house in Arlington, the high-ceilinged bedroom she loved. She sulked, watching her reflection in the windows, the landscape pulling across the length of the car, the ticking away of each town that took her farther from home.

Carmi to St. Louis, St. Louis to Joplin. They celebrated Thomas's seventh birthday in a roadside diner. Thomas moved along his invis-

ible train tracks to a corner booth where they had hamburgers and milk shakes and a slice of chocolate cake with a line of striped flickering candles. Ginnie had warned the waitresses, but once the cake was presented it was as if they couldn't help themselves, and they burst into a loud, wailing recital of "Happy Birthday." Thomas's hands flew to his ears, he shut his eyes tight, but the waitresses took this as a joke of some kind, a cue to sing louder, and then Thomas was flailing in the booth, swinging his arms, kicking, scattering plates and glasses, sending knives and forks sailing, tines out. Henry and Ginnie were able to grab his wrists and ankles, hold his hands away from the window, keep him immobile. Hannah pulled napkins from the dispenser and cleared glass from the table, out of Thomas's reach. Ginnie whispered in his ear, singing softly. Henry held his son down in the booth, the boy so big, so strong for his age. Sweat from Henry's hands sliding down to Thomas's jackknifing wrists. Pressing into him until it passed, until Thomas had exhausted himself and they were able to carry him to the car and start out on the road again.

In a camera shop in Fort Smith, Arkansas, Henry purchased a used Kodak Signet. He'd never owned a camera before. He told Ginnie it was to document their trip, so they could look back when they were old and forgetful. He took pictures of the scenery, the children in front of the scenery. Hannah pouting or sticking out her tongue. Thomas standing rigid, wary of his father's new device, his hands at his sides, his face without expression, staring at the camera lens, through the camera lens.

The surprise of this seeming indulgence delighted Ginnie. That Henry had finally found a hobby. It had only taken him forty years. It seemed to promise a more relaxed existence the farther they got from Washington. She watched him frame a shot, smiled at the way he approached his new interest, applying to this personal pursuit the same rigid precision he'd always brought to his work. Lifting the camera, leaning in, the lens of his glasses tapping the viewfinder. Taking half a breath, holding it in his chest. She wanted to tell him how happy this made her, but she was careful not to speak while the camera was in front of his face. He startled so easily these days.

Henry recorded the specifics of each shot he took in the ledger, the

type of film, the shutter speed and aperture, the lighting conditions. He kept the ledger in the glove box and every evening in the motel Ginnie read the page aloud, an account of their day in numbers and lists, clipped phrases.

April 2, 1956. Monday. 96 miles. Partly sunny. No wind. Aperture, F3.5. Dinner, $1.90. Motel room, $6.49.

When Henry had come home with the news of his reassignment, Ginnie had taken it upon herself to devise the route west. She'd sat at the kitchen table in Arlington with the *Rand McNally* and a sharpened pencil, plotting points, connecting dots. She'd found the major cities first, then the smaller towns in between, what looked like a good day's drive. Stretches of highway that a vacation guidebook said were particularly beautiful that time of year. Three weeks, coast to coast.

Henry wasn't convinced of the need for a family trip. He would have preferred to accomplish the move quickly and cleanly, driving alone, setting up their new lives in California before Ginnie and the children arrived. But Ginnie did not want him to travel by himself. A year ago, she might have considered it, but after the incident in Washington, she couldn't let him go. She pictured him lost, adrift in the mountains, in the desert, and so she set about to convince him to decide otherwise.

When she was finished with the route, she left the map out for him on the kitchen table, where he would find it in the morning. She knew he could be persuaded by a well-made plan.

There was a small identification tag hanging from the neck strap of the Signet, and while changing film in the car outside Baton Rouge, Hannah pointed out that she had written his name on the paper inside. *Mr. Henry March.* On the address line she had written *Arlington, Virginia,* then had crossed that out and written *Oakland, California* in smaller letters above. Henry thanked her, and then quietly, at their next stop, slipped the paper from the tag and flushed it in the filling-station restroom.

Shreveport to Opelousas. Opelousas to Oklahoma City. Ginnie with the ledger on one of the twin beds in the motel room. Hannah in the other bed, Thomas on the floor with a sheet and a pillow, finally asleep after another bath-time breakdown. Henry with his coffee and cigarettes in the chair by the window. *Kodak Tri-X, 400 speed*. Ginnie's voice in the room, her soft, southern lilt. *Cloudy skies. Slight northwesterly breeze.*

They called him the Mutual Man, younger officers, older officers, after the featureless Mutual of Omaha adjusters who came to Washington periodically to investigate claims or explain benefits. Right-angled and exact in his manner, his movements. Nondescript in appearance, his suit the color of the sidewalk outside.

Their jokes masked their uncertainty. Henry's colleagues found him inscrutable. He was a grudging socializer, a rare participant in after-hours drinks or weekend cocktail parties. He had only a handful of friends in the organization, most kept at arm's length. He did not have the same background, the social connections, the family money. He was a foreigner in class terms.

He had never tried to be liked. The nature of his department's work made this impossible. Finding leaks and weaknesses. Finding the unfaithful, the untrue. Finding those whose loyalty had lapsed, or was never there to begin with. His job was to distrust his colleagues, and so they distrusted him in return. There was only one man Henry had been allowed to trust, whom he had trusted for almost fifteen years, and that man had turned out to be the most faithless of them all.

They were sending him west to keep him away from the agency's vital organs. Moving him to the periphery, the fingertip of the country. He had seen this happen before, to others. He had been the man to send others away. He knew the danger in keeping a damaged individual so close to the company's heart.

What had happened was not something they could look past. With

another officer, possibly, but not with him. For Henry to be of value to the organization, his integrity had to be beyond reproach. If that was no longer the case, then all that was left was his sense of duty, his willingness to follow orders.

Gallup, New Mexico, to Williams, Arizona. Henry used three rolls of film at the Grand Canyon. Shots of Hannah, annoyed and impatient, standing against a guardrail. Shots of Thomas, oblivious to the magnificent sight around him, more interested in the tourist train pulling into the station on the other side of the parking lot. Shots of Ginnie beside the Chevrolet with a demure smile, hands on her hips, her auburn curls standing in the wind.

Ginnie held Henry's hand while she slept, while he lay on his back and stared at what he could see of the ceiling, the dark room around him. He had never slept more than a few hours a night and now he slept even less. Back in Arlington he would have walked the house, the yard, smoked, fixed himself a cup of coffee, the day's work still in his head, trying to untangle a personality, a web of connections. All of the documentation would be back in the safe in his office, but he never needed the paperwork once he'd read through it an initial time. He kept the facts in his head. The facts, the half facts, the outright deceptions. He walked the yard, he sat in the living room, assembling pieces, solving a riddle. Here though, in a motel room in Williams, in Oklahoma City, in Alamagordo, he stayed in bed, looked at the ceilings, the small dark rings of water damage, the bare patches where the paint came away in tiny chips. There was only one riddle now, but he did not know where to begin to untangle it.

At the end of the third week they reached Oakland, the house on the hill that had been rented for them. Three bedrooms and a small den where Ginnie could paint. Henry parked the Chevrolet in the driveway, and they all stepped out and stretched. Thomas chugged into the house along his imagined tracks. Hannah walked in the front door and burst into tears. Henry cleared out what remained in the car: sheaves of paper

the children had filled with backseat drawings, the ledger, the Signet's instruction manual, the box of exposed film. He set the drawings on the floor in the dining room, where the table would eventually sit. He placed the ledger and the box of film in his briefcase and set the locks.

That first night, after Hannah and Thomas were in their sleeping bags in their new rooms, Henry looked for Ginnie in the dark, unfamiliar house. He finally found her outside, standing on the front lawn, looking down the hill to the bay and the bridge. Breathing deeply, her eyes heavy. The salt air was warm and light. She whispered his name, calling him to her. She took his hand and they stood and watched the black water, the lights of the city beyond.

"This is where we begin," she said. She squeezed his hand. "This is where we begin again."

PART ONE

Telegraph Hill

1

San Francisco, Spring 1956

The landlady opened the door and led him into the apartment he'd telephoned about, the rooms above the mechanics' garage on Telegraph Hill. She stood to the side while Henry walked to the far end of the living room and looked out the windows through the last of the morning fog. Alcatraz to the north, the bridge and the bay and the black hills to the east. A beautiful corner view. He would need to cover it.

He held his hat in one hand, his briefcase in the other. The brightness through the windows showed every imperfection in the room, the scuffed wood, the scratched baseboards. There was a nearly matching sofa and armchair, a vase of dusty plastic flowers on the coffee table, a wooden crate of LPs by the bedroom door. The landlady said that a pair of young women had lived there most recently, working girls, secretaries downtown, and that they had left the furniture when they vacated the apartment two months before. Henry asked if there was any chance that they would return for their belongings and the landlady assured him that there was none. The girls had sailed off to Asia with a pair of merchant marines.

The landlady's name was Mrs. Barberis. A widow, she said, God rest her husband's soul. Henry asked her about the mechanics, and she told him that they had been renting the garage for as long as she'd owned the building. They kept to themselves, and so did she. She had moved out of the city after her husband passed and she rarely came back, preferring

the rent be sent by mail, that the tenant handle any necessary maintenance or repair. She asked Henry if this was acceptable, that she would be an absentee landlord, and he told her that it was.

The kitchen was to his left. There was a Formica-topped table with three vinyl-padded chairs, a stove and a white refrigerator that looked like the model Ginnie had bought for the house in Arlington. There was a pair of small windows above the sink and a larger, lower window that led out to a fire escape. Henry leaned out, looked down three floors to the alley. A Negro mechanic in a blue jumpsuit stood there, smoking a cigarette, the bald oval at the crown of his head shining in the midmorning sun.

He had spent his first week walking the streets of the city. Every morning after breakfast, he left the house and drove across the bridge into San Francisco. He walked in loops around the financial district, gradually widening his radius until he could form an accurate picture of each street, the connections between them. Ten, twenty blocks a day. Only then would he move farther. He had a map, but he rarely used it. He needed to know the place in his own way. He had been taught not to work within a landscape that he didn't understand.

He opened a bank account with the two letters of recommendation he'd been given before he left Washington. He had never heard of either of the recommending businessmen whose signatures closed the letters. He wasn't sure if the men existed or if they existed only enough to open a bank account. Once it was open, he deposited the check he'd brought with him and sent the account number back east.

His new name was printed at the top of the bank letters. He wrote the name in his ledger. He repeated the name to himself while he walked the city. He repeated it at night in the house in Oakland as he circled sleep, knowing that the last thing on his mind at the end of the day would be the first thought he woke to in the morning. Sitting up in bed with the name on his lips, surrounding himself with the name while he shaved and washed and dressed, while he kissed Ginnie and Hannah and Thomas good-bye, while he drove into the city and walked the unfamiliar streets.

* * *

The bedroom was small, dimly lit. There was a single window above the alleyway, two twin beds, a dresser standing against the south wall. Mrs. Barberis pulled the chain for the overhead light, the cord for the ceiling fan. The walls were painted mustard yellow, except for one which was covered with dark-patterned paper, tightly wound floral swirls framing the bathroom doorway.

The toilet flushed and Mrs. Barberis gave a proud nod. She turned the taps over the sink to demonstrate the water pressure. Henry opened the medicine cabinet, empty except for a bottle of aspirin sitting alone on one of the glass shelves.

He knew no one in the city. Most days he didn't speak to another person except for a brief exchange at a newsstand or a market. He could drive home in the evenings and count the number of words he'd spoken throughout the day.

He repeated the new name as he walked, as he looked for apartments, drank coffee in an automat. He repeated it at the dinner table, silently, while asking Ginnie and Hannah about their days, while helping Thomas cut his meat. He practiced writing the name in the ledger. He let it enter his body, so that after a few days when he stepped onto the bustle of Market Street and passed his reflection in car windows, shop windows, the new name was the only one that identified the man he saw there.

They crossed the small vestibule and Mrs. Barberis showed him the south apartment, which was also available. The two apartments were mirror images of each other, she said, the only difference being that the southern rooms had views of the city, and the northern rooms had views of the bay. He could take his pick, whichever he preferred. She told him that the north apartment was two hundred dollars a month. He asked about the rent for the south apartment and she said that it was the same.

They stepped into the south bedroom. Henry looked up at the molding along the ceiling, down at the baseboards. The rent was due on the first of the month, Mrs. Barberis said. No exceptions. All utilities were paid. He could make alterations to the apartment, within reason. New paint, new drapes, carpet, whatever he liked.

He stood at the wall that was shared with the bedroom in the north apartment. He touched the paint with a fingertip, as if determining a place to hang a picture, and when Mrs. Barberis turned her head to clear her throat, he tapped the wall once, twice, to test its thickness.

At the end of that first week of walking he reached the Embarcadero. Sea level, suddenly. The fisherman's wharves, rows of sailor's bars and flophouses. He turned and looked at the city rising behind him. Off to the side, a concrete tower protruded from a thick grove of trees. He consulted his map. This was Telegraph Hill, high above the waterfront, standing apart, seemingly, from the rest of town. An isolated, private perch.

The next morning he began looking for rooms to rent.

They stood in the vestibule between the two apartments, at the top of the stairs that led down to the front entrance. Henry opened his wallet and began unfolding the bills for the first month's rent. He had two phone numbers on a slip of paper in his wallet. The first number belonged to an electrician and the second, he had been told, belonged to a cop. They had given him the new name and the letters for the bank and the paper with the phone numbers, with the instruction to call the numbers, in the order they were written, once he had secured a location.

Mrs. Barberis produced a small note pad and asked his name and Henry told her and she wrote that on the page, *Mr. Henry Gladwell*. Then she asked him which apartment he would prefer, the north or the south. He passed her the money and told her that he would take both.