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Written by Peter Straub

Published by Phoenix

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A Dark Matter

PETER STRAUB



PHOENIX

A FEW YEARS BACK, LATE SPRING

The great revelations of my adult life began with the shouts of a lost soul in my neighborhood breakfast joint.

I was standing in line at the Corner Bakery on State and Cedar, half a block down the street from my pretty brick townhouse, waiting to order a Swiss Oatmeal (muesli) or a Berry Parfait (granola), anyhow something modest. The loudest noises in the place were the tapping of laptop keys and the rustle of someone turning newspaper pages. Abruptly, with a manic indignation that seemed to come from nowhere, the man at the head of the line started uttering the word *obstreperous.* He started out at a level just above ordinary conversation. By the time he found his rhythm, he was about twice that volume and getting louder as he rolled along. If you had to settle on one word to yell over and over in public, wouldn't you pick something less cumbersome? Yet he kept at it, spinning those four lumpy syllables every possible way, as if trying them on for size. His motive, for nothing actually comes from nowhere, soon became obvious.

Ob*strep*erous? ObSTREPerous? OBSTREPEROUS? Ob-strep?-ER-ous? OBstreperous?

Lady, you think I'm obstreperous now? This is what he was saying. *Give me another thirty seconds, you'll learn all about obstreperous.*

With each repetition, his question grew more heated. The momentarily dumbfounded young woman at the order coun-

ter had offended him, he wished her to know how greatly. The guy also thought he was making himself look smart, even witty, but to everyone else in the shop he had uncorked raving lunacy.

His variations were becoming more imaginative.

Ob*streep*erous? Ob*strap*erous? ObstrapOROUS?

To inspect this dude, I tilted sideways and looked down the good-sized line. I almost wished I hadn't.

Right away, it was obvious that the guy was not simply playing around. The next man in line was giving him six feet of empty floor space. Under the best of circumstances, people were going to keep their distance from this character. Eight or nine inches of white-gray hair surged out in stiff waves around his head. He was wearing a torn, slept-in checked suit that might have been ripped off a cornfield scarecrow. Through a latticework of scabs, smears, and bruises, his swollen feet shone a glaring, bloodless white. Like me, he had papers under his elbow, but the wad of newsprint he was clamping to his side appeared to have lasted him at least four or five days. The puffed-up bare feet, scuffed and abraded like shoes, were the worst part.

"Sir?" said the woman at the order counter. "Sir, you need to leave my store. Step away from the counter, sir, please. You need to step away."

Two huge kids in Southern Illinois sweatshirts, recent graduates by the look of them, jammed their chairs back and marched straight toward the action. This is Chicago, after all, where big, athletic-looking dudes sprout out of the sidewalks like dandelions on a suburban lawn. Without speaking to anyone, they came up on the homeless guy's flanks, hoisted him by his elbows, and transported him outside. If he had gone limp, they would have had a little trouble, but he was rigid with panic and gave them no more difficulty than would

a cigar store Indian. He went stiff as a marble statue. When he went by, I took in his blubbery lips and brown, broken teeth. His bloodshot eyes had a glazed look. The man kept saying, *obstreperous obstreperous obstreperous,* but the word had become meaningless to him. He was using it for protection, like a totem, and he thought as long as he kept saying it, he was out of danger.

When I looked into those flat, unseeing eyes, an utterly unforeseen thought jolted me. The impact felt like a blow, and brought with it a cryptic sense of illumination as brief as the flaring of a match.

I knew someone like that. This terrified man with a one-word vocabulary reminded me so vividly of someone that he might have *been* that person, now in the act of being ejected onto Rush Street. But . . . who in the world could it have been? No one I knew was anything like the damaged character now staggering forward and back on the sidewalk beyond the great windows, still whispering his totemic word.

A voice only I could hear said, *No one? Think again, Lee.* Deep in my chest, something big and decisive—something I had been ignoring and thrusting out of view literally for decades—stirred in its sleep and twitched its leathery wings. Whatever had nearly awakened tasted, in part, like shame, but shame was by no means all of it.

Although my first response was to turn away from whatever was causing my internal tumult (and turn away I did, with as much of my native resolve as I could summon), the memory of having witnessed an inexplicable illumination clung to me like a cat that had jumped onto my back and stuck its claws into my skin.

The next thing I did involved a typical bit of unconscious misdirection—I tried to believe that my distress was caused by the register girl's stupid language. Maybe that sounds

snobbish, and maybe it is snobbish, but I've written eight novels, and I pay attention to the way people use words. Maybe too much attention. So when I finally stood in front of the young woman who had told that ruined creature that he "needed" to leave her "store," I expressed my unhappiness by ordering an Anaheim Scrambler, which comes with smoked bacon, cheddar cheese, avocado, and a lot of other stuff including hash browns, and a corn muffin, too. (Alas, I am one of those people who tend to use food as a way of dodging unwelcome emotions.) Anyhow, when did people start framing commands in terms of neediness? And how long had people in the restaurant business been calling their establishments "stores"? Couldn't people see the ugliness and inaccuracy of this crap? The creature within me rolled back into its uneasy sleep, temporarily lulled.

I parked myself at an empty table, snapped open my paper—the *Guardian Review*—and avoided looking at the big front windows until I heard one of the staff bringing my tray to me. For some reason, I turned around and glanced through the window, but of course that wretched, half-sane character had fled. Why did I care what had happened to him, anyhow? I didn't, apart from feeling a sort of generic pity for his suffering. And that poor devil did not remind me of anyone I knew or had once known. For a couple of seconds, a kind of misguided déjà vu had come into play. Nobody thought of déjà vu as anything except a momentary delusion. It gave you an odd buzz of recognition that felt like occult knowledge, but the buzz was psychic flotsam, of no value whatsoever.

Forty-five minutes later, I was walking back to my house, hoping that the day's work would go well. The minor disturbance in the Corner Bakery hardly counted even as a memory anymore, except for the moment when I was sliding my key into the front-door lock and saw once again his glassy, blood-

shot eyes and heard him whispering *obstreperous obstreperous.* "I need you to stop doing that," I said out loud, and tried to smile as I stepped into my bright, comfortable foyer. Then I said, "No, I do *not* know anyone even faintly like you." For half a second, I thought someone was going to ask me what I was talking about, but my wife was on an extended visit to Washington, D.C., and in the whole of my splendid house, not a single living thing could hear me.

Work, unfortunately, was of no use at all. I had been planning to use the days my wife was gone to get a jump-start on a new novel then known as *Her Level Gaze.* Never mind the total lameness of the title, which I intended to change as soon as I came up with a better one. Atop my oversized desk, a folder bulging with notes, outlines, and ideas for chapters sat beside my iMac, and a much smaller folder beside it held the ten awkward pages I had managed so far to excrete. Once I started poking it, the novel that had seemed so promising when still a shimmer of possibility had turned into a slow-moving, snarling animal. The male protagonist seemed to be a bit slow-moving, too. Although I did not want to admit it, the main character, the young woman with the disconcertingly level gaze, would have eaten him for breakfast in a single bite.

At the back of my mind was a matter I did not actually want to think about that day, a far too tempting suggestion made some years ago, God, maybe as many as five, by David Garson, my agent, who told me that my publisher had, who knows how seriously, proposed to him over lunch that at least once I should write a nonfiction book, not merely a memoir, but a book *about* something.

"Lee," David said, "don't get paranoid on me, he wasn't saying he wanted you to stop writing novels, of course he wasn't. They think you have an interesting way of seeing

things, that's their main point here, and they think it might be useful if just once, and I mean *just once,* Lee Harwell could turn this reader-friendly yet challenging *trait* of his onto some event in the real world. The event could be huge, or it might be something smaller and more personal. He added that he thought a book like that would probably do you some good in the marketplace. He has a point there, actually. I mean, I think it's an extraordinarily interesting idea. Do you want to consider it? Why don't you just mull it over for a couple of days, see what occurs to you? I mean, just as a suggestion."

"David," I said, "no matter what my intentions are, everything I write winds up turning into fiction, including my letters to friends." Yet David is a good guy, and he does look out for me. I promised to think about it, which was disingenuous of me because in fact I already had been turning over the possibility of doing a nonfiction book. An unpublished and unpublishable manuscript I had come across on eBay a couple of months earlier, a kind of memoir by a Milwaukee homicide detective named George Cooper, seemed to crack open an old, officially unsolved series of murders that had much interested my friends and me when we were in grade school and high school. Of even greater interest to me right now was that these "Ladykiller" homicides appeared to have an at least tangential connection to a dark matter that involved these friends of mine, including the amazing girl who became my wife, though not me, in our last year in high school. But of that I did not wish to think—it involved a young man named Keith Hayward who had been, it seemed, a sick, evil child tutored in his sickness and evil by a truly demonic figure, his uncle. All of that was in the sort-of memoir Detective Cooper had written out in his cursive, old-school hand, and even as I put the story together I was determined to resist the gravitational pull it worked on me. The immense theological question of

evil felt too great, too complex to address with the tools and weapons I possessed. What I knew best had only to do with stories and how they proceeded, and a mere instinct for narrative wasn't enough to take on the depths of the Hayward story. That my wife and our friends had come in contact with creepy Keith Hayward also put me off.

At the usual hour of one-thirty, hunger pulled me into the kitchen, where I put together a salad, warmed up some soup, and made half a sandwich with pumpernickel bread, Black Forest ham, coleslaw, and Russian dressing. Dinah Lion, my assistant, who would otherwise have been present, did not come in on Mondays, so the isolation of morning remained intact. Dinah would be gone for the next ten days or so, also, in an arrangement we had worked out with my accountants that was going to let her join her parents in Tuscany at half pay in exchange for some juggling with the vacation she normally took in August.

For some reason, the second I sat down before my solitary little meal, I felt like weeping. Something vital was slipping away from me, and for once this sense wasn't just a fantasy about the novel I was writing. The huge wave of sadness building up within me was connected to something more critical than *Her Level Gaze*; it was something I had lived with for much longer than I had my foundering book. Tears steamed up into my eyes and trembled there. For an excruciating moment, I was in the ridiculous position of grieving for a person, a place, or a condition that remained hidden from me. Someone I loved had died when we were both very young—that's what it felt like—and I had committed the dim-witted crime of never stopping to mourn that loss until just now. This must have been the source of the shame I tasted before I started ramming scrambled eggs, avocado, and cheddar cheese into my mouth. *I had let this person disappear.*

At the thought of the breakfast I had forced down my throat in the Corner Bakery, my hunger curdled. The food on the table looked poisoned. Tears slid down my face, and I stood up to turn toward the counter and grab some tissues. After I had wiped my face and blown my nose, I bagged up the half sandwich, covered the salad bowl with clingy film, and slammed the soup bowl into the microwave, where I could be counted on to forget about it until the next time I opened the thing. Then I made an aimless circuit of the kitchen. The book I had begun writing seemed to have locked me out, which I usually take to mean that it's waiting for some other, younger author to come along and treat it right. It would be at least a day before I could face my desk again, and when I did I would probably have to dream up some other project.

Her Level Gaze had never been right for me, anyway. At heart, it was a tidy little story about a weak man and a woman like a jungle animal, and I had been dressing it up as a kind of postmodern love story. The book really should have been written by Jim Thompson sometime in the mid-fifties.

A grim, heavy tide of grief went through me again, and this time it seemed that I was mourning the death, the real death, of all my childhood and youth. I groaned out loud, baffled by what was happening to me. A treasure house of beauty and vitality, all of this drenched yet hard-edged sense of pleasure, sorrow, and loss, had vanished, been swept away, and I had barely noticed. My parents, my old neighborhood, my aunts and uncles, a whole era seemed to call out for me, or me for it, and in rapid succession, as if in a series of frames, I saw:

the way a snowfall had looked on a December night in 1960, the big flakes tumbling softly as feathers from a measureless black sky;

a lean hound coursing through the deep snow at the bottom of our sledding hill;

the shredding lacquer on the tops of our sleds, and the chips and dents in the long, cool runners;

a glass of water shining from within on my mother's best white tablecloth.

Circling half blind with tears around the marble counter in my Chicago kitchen, I saw the stunning, inelegant west side of Madison, Wisconsin, the place where I had grown up and which I had escaped pretty much as soon as I could. My amazing girlfriend, now my wife, Lee Truax, had fled with me—we drove across the country to New York, where I went to NYU and she waited tables and tended bar until she could enroll at NYU, too, and cause a great fuss and commotion wherever she went. What was speaking to me, though, was not our college years and the East Village, but Madison's west side, so different then and so much the same, the place where Lee Truax and I had met as children and gone to school with all of our troubled, gorgeous friends.

Then I saw them all, our friends, who had needed to be convinced I was not a jerk because my father was a professor at the University instead of being absent or being nothing, really nothing, like theirs. For a moment their faces shone as clearly as the glass of water that had burned itself into my memory atop my mother's prize white tablecloth . . . their young faces tilted toward the Eel's fine-tuned heart-stopping face. Although they called me Twin, meaning hers, I never really looked like that. And in the next moment, before I could fully take them in, a curtain slammed down like a prohibition. Bang! *No more of that for you, bud.*

"Please," I said, then "What's happening to me?" What a baffled moment, filled with what terrible pain—the pain of *what I had not done,* of *what I had lost because I had not done all of that which I had not done.* Whatever it was, I had no idea, I knew only that *I had not done it.*

Then, as if on a giant screen before me, I saw the moving lips, the unshaven face, the torn horrible feet, and I heard the ragged, almost mechanical voice sucking on the four syllables that represented safety to a ragged soul. At that moment, shut out from a realm I long ago had been happy to abandon, I wished I had a totem, to protect me from Madison—the peeling glaze on the Flexible Flyer; the coursing hound; the sound of lockers banging shut in a high-school hallway; the precise way light from the windows in Room 138 fell across the Eel's face and Dill Olson's at the beginning of our senior English class, giving them a gorgeous, washed-out glamour.

Looking for release, I switched on the radio, tuned as is generally the case to NPR. A man whose name I had temporarily blanked out even as I recognized his voice said, "The really unexpected thing is how melodious Hawthorne sounds when you read him aloud. We've lost that, I think, the idea that the sound of writing is important, too."

And Nathaniel Hawthorne turned the key; Hawthorne gave me entry to the lost realm. Not the idea of reading him aloud, but that of hearing his words recited: the sound of his writing, as the man on NPR said. I knew exactly how the Hawthorne of *The Scarlet Letter* sounded, because I had once known a boy who had the ability to remember everything he read, and this boy often quoted long passages from the Hawthorne novel. He also liked to throw into ordinary conversation the crazy words he had discovered in a book called *Captain Leland Fountain's Dictionary of Unknown, Strange, and Preposterous Words.* (He had once told me he found it extremely odd that while nostology was the study of senility, nostomania had nothing at all to do with old age but simply meant a serious case of homesickness.) His name was Howard Bly, but we, our little band, all called him "Hootie." For some reason, all of us had silly nicknames. The kid couldn't help memorizing everything

he read. When a string of words entered through his eyes, it printed itself on some endless scroll in his brain. Although I certainly wish I had this capacity, I don't have the faintest idea of how it works, nor did it seem particularly helpful to Hootie Bly, who was not at all literary.

When we were seniors at Madison West and he was seventeen, Hootie looked about thirteen or fourteen, small, blond, pink-cheeked, and cherubic. He had eyes the ceramic, cerulean blue of dolls' eyes, and his hair flopped over his forehead like bangs. Think of Brandon De Wilde in *Shane,* put a few years on him, and that would be Hootie. People tended to love him, if only because he was so beautiful and didn't say a lot. He wasn't smart, like the Eel, my girlfriend, Lee Truax, but neither was he stupid or slow—it was just that Eel was *really* smart. Hootie was not aggressive or forward or pushy in any way. I guess he was born with natural modesty. That doesn't mean he was passive or wishy-washy, because he was not.

This is what Hootie was like: When you look at a group photo, particularly a picture of a bunch of people doing something like hiking across a meadow or hanging out in a bar, you can always spot one person who stands mentally off to one side, enjoying the spectacle before him. Digging things, as Jack Kerouac would say. Sometimes Hootie liked to just lie back and, well, *dig* what was going on around him.

I can say this about Hootie Bly, that he was good through and through. The guy didn't have a mean-spirited or cruel cell, never mind a bone, in his body. Unfortunately, because of his size and the way he looked, people who were not as good-hearted—bullies, jerks—sometimes went after him. They enjoyed picking on him, teasing him in a way that went beyond teasing, sometimes actually shoving him around, and at times we who were his best friends felt we had to step in to protect him.

Hootie could speak up for himself, though. The Eel told me that when a truly ugly and unpleasant fraternity boy insulted him in a grungy State Street coffee shop named the Tick-Tock Diner but called the Aluminum Room, Hootie gave the asshole a murky look and baffled him with a quote from *The Scarlet Letter:* "Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?" Less than a minute later, the UW student widened his insult to include Hootie's parents, who, the kid knew from having seen all of them in the place, owned Badger Foods, the little triangular grocery store two blocks down on State Street. Hootie came back at him with another bit of Hawthorne. "What a strange, sad man is he! In the dark night-time, he calls us to him, and holds thy hand and mine, as when we stood with him on the scaffold yonder!"

The fraternity boy, the same sick, twisted Keith Hayward I had recently been reading about in Detective Cooper's unhappy memoir, apparently charged toward him, but was held back by his roommate and only friend, Brett Milstrap, who did not want them to be thrown out of the Aluminum Room before the (probable) arrival of this gorgeous blond girl they coveted so greatly that just the sight of her sipping a cup of coffee could keep them warm and happy for three or four days. Meredith Bright was her name, and like Hayward and Milstrap she played a huge role in the story I began trying to figure out over the next weeks and months. She must have been one of the most beautiful young women ever to appear on that campus. The same would have been true if she had gone to UCLA instead of UW. Meredith Bright detested Keith Hayward and thought nothing of Brett Milstrap, but the first time she laid eyes on Hootie Bly and Lee Truax, she was enchanted by them. For a number of reasons.

It would be fair to say that the whole long, crazy story I wound up trying to unearth began when Meredith Bright, seated alone in the Aluminum Room's last booth, lifted her eyes from her copy of *Love's Body,* gazed down the length of the counter to spot Hootie and the Eel, and rocked them both by smiling at them. But before I get even farther ahead of myself, I have to go back to where I was and explain a few more things about Hootie and our little group of friends.

I said that hearing one of those comfortable NPR voices talk about the experience of hearing Hawthorne read aloud was all I needed—all I needed, that is, to understand the intense, unexpected deluge of emotions that had been chasing me around the room since I had looked into the bloodshot eyes of Mr. Obstreperous as two fullbacks from Carbondale toted him by on his way to the exit. I had fought so tenaciously against the sudden sense of recognition that unmediated images and passages from my childhood had streamed back to me in a painful flood. The reason for my doomed tenacity was that Obstreperous reminded me of Hootie, who had spent four decades in a Wisconsin mental hospital, communicating entirely in individual words from Captain Fountain and, maybe when feeling particularly nostomaniacal, sentences like "Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?" *The Scarlet Letter* and the Captain's obscure gewgaws: that isn't craziness, it's fear, the same kind of absolute terror that turned Obstreperous into a muttering statue.

I wanted to know more about that fear. Now that I had opened up this seam, it came to me, I wanted to follow it right to the end. Once I understood the causes of Hootie's paralysis, I thought, a layer of reality that had been closed to me for nearly forty years would at last become visible.

But it wasn't all about me, not by a long shot.

Off and on, over the decades since the mid-sixties, this hidden world—the whole question of the wandering guru named Spencer Mallon, what he had accomplished, what he had not, what he still meant to those who had loved and admired him—had troubled me, more than troubled me, aroused an ongoing doubt and misery that stuck to me like a shadow whenever the whole issue swung back into view. Part of this continuous disorder was rooted in the silence of a single human being. She wouldn't talk to me about it, and neither would the others. They shut me out. I mean, I don't want to go overboard about something that happened so long ago, but was that really *fair*? Everything was fine, everything was chummy, and just because I didn't want anything to do with this Mallon faker, they closed ranks against me. Even my girlfriend, who was supposed to look like my twin!

You know what happened? Like a dumb kid, I thought I was, I *told* myself I was, sticking to my principles, when actually the whole business of this amazing man who had been to Tibet and seen someone cut off someone else's hand in a bar, who talked about the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and a philosopher named Norman O. Brown, who was besides that tied in to ancient magic, all this stuff kind of scared me. It sounded like total bullshit, but it also seemed far out of my league—because, who knows, there might have been some reality in it, after all. I think I was afraid that if I met this guy, I might have to believe in him, too.

The Eel knew exactly how I felt, that's how smart she was. She understood that my reaction was a lot more complex than I was willing to accept, and that I was backing away from a fear she found second rate to begin with made her lose a crucial degree of respect for me. Given that I had no interest in pretending to be a college student and had therefore stayed at home the first time my friends all went to the Aluminum

Room, I had two chances to make things right: I could have come along to the Italian restaurant where they first heard Mallon's spiel, and I could have made up for my lapses by joining everyone at the second Mallon-séance, in the Henry Street apartment that turned out to be where Keith Hayward and Brett Milstrap lived. Those were my two chances. But after I said no the second time, the door slammed shut, and I was left alone outside, where I had deliberately gone and placed myself.

While they were all trailing after Mallon, I took long walks by myself and wound up, some of the time, shooting lonely hoops at a grade-school playground. Or trying to. I remember missing fifteen free throws in a row, one after the other. On the big day itself, Sunday, the sixteenth of October, 1966, I just stayed in my room and reread Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River,* a novel I loved to distraction because it seemed to describe me, Lee Harwell, exactly, a sensitive, lonely, brilliant young fellow obviously destined for literary success, or if not me *exactly,* at least the person I'd be if I'd gone to Harvard and traveled around Europe, O lost, O soulful, word-crammed wanderer on this earth, a stone a leaf an unfound door.

For two whole days, I had no idea where she was. When I did get some information, it was infuriatingly circumscribed. This was, precisely, all that I was allowed to understand: in one way or another, under circumstances forever closed to me, things had exploded. There had been a gathering, a meeting, perhaps some sort of ceremony, and at this event everything had gone spectacularly to hell. A boy had not only been killed, he had been hideously mutilated, ripped to shreds. One of the inevitable rumors about this cataclysm had been that the dead boy seemed to have been torn apart by enormous teeth. During the months that followed, over in fact the next four decades, the one person I still knew from those days who had

been part of Mallon's ill-fated entourage, my wife, had refused even to try to explain what had happened to them all.

For a week or so, she just clammed up. The only details she was willing to share with me had to do with the conduct of the police during the subsequent investigations, the confusion and rage of her useless father, her impatience with our teachers and fellow students, her despair about poor Hootie. After things had calmed down a bit and the mystery of Hootie's location had finally been clarified, Eel tried on at least two occasions to visit him at the Lamont Hospital, where it turned out he had been all along. The first time she spoke to someone there, whoever it was (apparently, descending to such details was a waste of time) forbade her to come out: Mr. Bly's condition was too grave, too precarious. A month later, she tried again. This time, the gatekeeper invited her to visit the hospital, and it was Hootie Bly who turned her down. Using words borrowed from Hawthorne, he refused even to see her. Ever. His refusal stayed firm throughout our senior year, and I guess finally Lee gave up. After we took off for New York, she never mentioned him again.

From time to time I thought of that smiling, blue-eyed kid and wondered what had become of him. He was still important to me, and I knew that he must still have meant a great deal to my wife, who eventually ceased to be the Eel and became widely known, in certain circles, under the name she was born with. I wished him well. After six months, I thought, eight months, he must have left the hospital and picked up his life again. He probably moved back in with his parents. On their retirement, he would take over Badger Foods, maybe liven it up a little. Or get out of Madison, marry a girl who looked a lot like him, work in an office, and raise two or three blond, cherubic children. People like Hootie Bly were *supposed* to have uneventful, essentially unexamined, but deeply

appreciated, truly lived-in lives. If the world didn't turn out well for them, the rest of us didn't have a chance.

Hootie's true fate remained a mystery to me until the summer of 2000, when on a rare vacation together my wife and I went to Bermuda. I tend not to take vacations, and my wife prefers to visit places that she already knows, where she has both friends and something to do. She spends a lot of time at conferences and board meetings, and she has a busy, useful, completely admirable life. Marriage to a novelist can be as lonely as being one yourself, without even the companionship of imaginary people. I am happy that Lee has created such a fulfilling life for herself, and I enjoy those few times when we go somewhere together for no reason other than to relax and walk around. (Of course I always bring my work, and Lee travels with her own gadgets.) So we were having a nice lunch at a place in Hamilton called Tom Moore's Tavern, and across the room I saw a man of about my age with blond hair going gray, a good tanned face full of character, seated at a table with a very appealing woman who looked a good deal like him. If my wife were not present, despite her age the blond lady would have easily been the best-looking woman in the room. The former Eel remains completely unaware of this, and she gets irritated if someone points it out, but no matter where she happens to be, Lee Truax is always the most beautiful woman in the room. I mean that. Always.

The well-off, affable man across the room could have been the grown-up, prosperous Howard Bly, if Hootie had made all the right choices and enjoyed a fair bit of good luck. "Honey," I said, "Hootie Bly could be sitting across the room from us, and he looks great."

"It's not Hootie," she said. "Sorry. I wish it were, though."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

"Because Hootie's still in that hospital. The only thing that's different about him is that he got older, just like us."

"He's still there?" I asked, aghast. "In the Lamont?"

"That's where he is, the poor guy."

"How do you know?"

I watched her measuring her fish with her fork, then severing a morsel she moved carefully onto its tines. Other people seldom notice this, but my wife eats in a very particular way. I always enjoy watching her go through the necessary rituals.

"I have my ways," she told me. "From time to time, people communicate with me."

"That's all you're going to tell me, isn't it?"

"This conversation is about Hootie, not who told me about him."

And that was that. Her refusal to speak returned us to the familiar ancient silence, where I had no right to ask for information because I had chosen first not to prowl around the university campus, then, more condemningly, not even to meet, much less adore, Spencer Mallon. My friends, even the Eel, they all but worshipped this guy. I should say, especially the Eel. Who do you think she thought she was protecting by refusing to name her source?

That's enough of Mallon, at least for a while.