The Sign

He wasn't sure exactly what he expected or when he hoped to find it, only that he was propelled forward by the certainty that he would soon receive a sign -- a sign that would offer an escape from all his confusion and bring into clear focus the meaning of his past and future. He'd arrived at this conclusion while waiting at the traffic light, in that brief span of less than a minute just before he would make his usual left turn and merge with the brisk flow of cars on the highway that led to the downtown and his office. He studied carefully the drivers of the cars around him in hopes that in the face of one of them he'd discover a clue to the mystery he faced, but as he had expected, he found nothing. Each of the sights was hollow, a mere surface, empty of any significance that might point him toward the solution he sought. He turned his gaze back to the red, traffic light, which seemed a reminder that the more desperate his search became the more futile it seemed.

Closing his eyes and shutting out all the meaningless sights, he felt sweep over him the ever present sense of fatigue he had felt of late, fatigue not so much from anything specific, but from all the routines of life. And then the sound of his blinker was suddenly blaring unbearably, like a drum, beating out the message, "Shut it off, shut it off, shut it off, shut it off." Lowering his left hand from the steering wheel, his eyes still closed, he felt the thin blinker arm, pushed it upward and shut off the signal. In the silence that followed, he opened his eyes and in the distance he saw a star, a fake star atop a flag pole, a remnant of Christmas decorations from a month earlier, and then he thought how the wise men had followed the star, and he suddenly knew that he was not going to work that day, that he would travel in the direction of the star, that it would point him toward the sign he was seeking. And so, when the light turned green, he pressed the accelator and the car leaped forward, and in only several hundred feet his destiny became evident. In the distance a mound appeared above the horizon -- he'd once told the children it looked like the hump of a giant camel walking just beyond the edge of the world -- and then he knew with a certainty that he'd not known anything for months. It was in the mountains, at Lookout Point, where he'd discover the sign he sought.
For a long time he had wanted to tell Margaret or Dr. Flack or somebody, anybody, that something was wrong, that he wanted help, but he couldn't find the words to describe or explain the problem, and in fact, part of his problem was that he couldn't trust his words to mean what he thought they meant. The closest he came to trying to communicate his problem was telling Margaret that sometimes he felt that everything was becoming unhinged, unglued, and disconnected, that familiar sights and sounds seemed strange. Perhaps he should make an appointment with and eye doctor, she said, though he knew what she wanted to say was that they were both just getting older -- he'd turned fifty the week before -- that what he was describing wasn't all that unusual.

As he traveled toward Lookout Point, he passed a convenience store with two rows of shiny, black and yellow gas pumps in front, a large fruit stand with crates overflowing with red, yellow, and green apples lined up beside the road, a mobile homes sales lot that spread toward the horizon with a large American flag in front that drooped in the windless air. A little further, the front and then the back of the car dipped slightly and the soft whirr of the tires was replaced by a loud crunch as the car passed from the smoothe and newer resurfaced road to the pocked, cracked asphalt of the older road beneath it, the line itself indicating a kind of boundary of the normal routines of his life.

In thinking back, he could identify the exact moment when he first discovered the problem. It was early spring. He was surveying his office, noting how neatly Rebekah, his secretary for the past five years, had arranged everything. Papers were organized on his desk in several neat stacks; on the coffee table, completely clear of dust, the up-to-date magazines were arranged so that the cover of each was easily visible to his clients. The photographs of Jennifer and Andy at various stages of their childhood and in their graduation regalia, were spread across the top of the bookshelf which housed regulation manuals, birth and death statistics, and unread books about the local community.
"A place for everything and everything in its place," he was repeating to himself, when his gaze fell on the wall to his right, where a photograph hung. Framed professionally in a shiny, blue frame with white matting, the photograph presented an array of reds and whites with yellow light spilling from an unspecified source to the left. Though he knew he had seen the photograph numerous times, he was unable to discern its subject. No matter how long he stared, the lines, shapes, and colors refused to congeal into recognizable objects. Finally, when he asked Rebekah to remind him what was in the photo, she responded first with a look of shock, which dissolved quickly into laughter, as she called him "silly. Taking several steps back, she slid to one side the drapery on the window that opened onto the sight of a string of small buildings clustered around the restored court house. He was struck immediately that the photo was of the court house, that the photograph itself had been given to him by the city leaders as a sort of trophy for his "tireless efforts to help preserve the city's history."

With the slight curve of the road, the sun slid behind a hill that stretched across the horizon on his right. Spilling around the edges of the hill, the sunlight cast an orange glow on a clumps of clouds gathered above that resembled gray rolling hills hanging upside down in the sky, but which became thin white strands as they stretched across the aqua sky. Then he saw the sign that, just as it had many years ago, served to confirm that he was headed in the right direction. The wide, rectangular sign, he noticed, was leaning a few degrees to the right so that, unless someone straightened it out, would fall of its own accord in another several years. The once white background was now a dull brown, the green mountain that once spread across the sign had faded except for its jagged outline, and the words, "Lookout Point, 47 MILES," were clearly visible, though only a shadow of the former dark brown letters. Instinctively, he thought to himself, "We'll be there in about another hour or so," and "Better start chewing some gum," as he announced many years earlier when they passed this sign.

He had forgotten his difficulty in recognizing the picture of the court house until one
morning, as was his usual routine, he retrieved the newspaper from the front yard, slid off the plastic wrapper and spread the paper across the table to read as he ate his breakfast, but all he saw was a jumble of black lines and dots and smudges of colors, as if the paper were a victim of defective printing. This first time it happened, he closed his eyes and then reopened them, and words and pictures once again emerged from the page. With each subsequent day, however, the dark lines increasingly resisted re-connecting so that finally, fearing a day when he'd be unable to get the alien marks to resolve into familiar sights, he left the newspaper in the yard for Margaret to pick up.

Gradually, other things started to become disconnected.

The large signs bearing the names of "BP," "Shell," "Citgo," "Burger King," and "Hardees," clustered at the intersection of the bypass and the small state road, signs that served as markers of his daily journey to work, suddenly became strange, indecipherable things. With letters of red, yellow, orange or green spread across fibreglass rectangles of contrasting colors, these signs loomed high above the ground so that they could be seen from a distance by travellers on the interstate for whom they signaled the availability of gasoline, soft drinks, candy, and food, or were a sign of home for those who lived nearby. Suddenly, one day, they all seemed ugly and horrifying, grotesque freaks of nature, cancers that had sprung up overnight like monstrous toadstools, excrescences of nature with no purpose or meaning. He soon learned to ignore them by focusing his eyes narrowly on the road ahead when he approached the intersection, afraid that if he peeked at the signs as he drove by, he'd find them wilted like giant tulips and ready to collapse in the winter cold.

The mountain in front of him grew larger as he passed between two fields where husks of cotton plants, a few white strands still dangling from their dark limbs, stretched in neat rows toward the horizon. In the distance, a smoke stack, tall and flattened against the horizon, puffed out plumes of smoke that formed thick white clouds. He remembered telling Jennifer and Andy
many years ago that the factory was a cloud maker, that it was one of the places that made the
clouds that floated across the sky.

After he became accustomed to ignoring the road signs -- to inhabiting a world devoid of
such object -- he became afflicted with another, and a more frightening, type of
disconnectedness: he found that at times he was unable to decipher the words and gestures and
movements of people. The first time he experienced the problem, he couldn't be sure that the
confusion was his fault. Early one morning in early summer, he'd just arrived at his office, when
he heard the front door open, and since Rebekah had not yet arrived, he walked into the
receptionist area where he found a young woman holding open the door with her left hand while,
with her right hand, she guided into the office a small round-faced child who moved slowly with
a clumsy waddle of one barely able to walk. He could remember thinking that the temperature
was already high outside as he felt a wave of warm air rush through the opened door. After the
child entered, the woman stepped forward to let the door close behind her and, noticing the
insurance agent, said hello. He could tell that her eyes were dark, her complexion pale brown,
and that she was wearing a yellow and brown dress that hung loosely on her thin frame, but her
facial features were lost in the shadow of the sun that shone brightly through the glass window
behind her. "Could you tell me how to get to...," she began in a bright, friendly voice, but then
her words suddenly became unintelligible, as if she had switched to another language, perhaps
her native tongue. She stopped speaking, apparently waiting for his answer. The several
seconds of silence that followed were interrupted by Rebekah's arrival. When her explanation of
her lateness was perfectly clear, he asked her to see if she could help the young woman find what
she was looking for.

Several weeks later, as he spoke to Marty Calhoun, he experienced the problem again.
Marty complained about taxes and politicians and seemed impatient with his insurance agent's
apparent ignorance of the latest news, ("Where've you been?" he asked. "Don't you read the
newspaper?") but then he turned his attention to the matter that had brought him to the office: he was concerned that his life insurance, purchased ten years earlier before his children were born, may no longer be sufficient. As the agent repeated, in his usual friendly, warm tone that Marty's most important gift to Barbara and the children (he always remembered a client's spouse's name, though he had more difficulty in remembering their children's names), especially after the grief of losing their husband and father, was to make sure they never had to worry about finances or their future. "Not to worry about the future," Marty nodded in agreement, but as he continued, his words were suddenly transformed into a string of random sounds void of all significance, though his facial expression remained unchanged. The agent nearly laughed as for a moment he concluded that Marty had been taking Spanish lessons and had decided to try out his new language in their meeting, but then he remembered the woman several weeks earlier, and recognized that what had happened with the newspaper and roadsigns was now happening to the words of his client.

Having reached the foot of the mountain, he slowed the car to make a steep turn back to his left, and saw on the edge of the road in the hollow of the moss-covered stones the small pool of dark water that he had told Jennifer and Andy -- just as his mother had told him -- was a bottomless pool, that if they were to accidentally run into that pool they'd keep going down until they came up in China, to which Jennifer and Andy listened the first time with childlike credulity, but then laughed several years later, even after he told them of the man everyone thought had drowned in the pool, but who showed up several years later with a Chinese woman and three half-Chinese children. The story prompted in Jennifer the question of whether things on the other side of the world were upside down, and if so, why didn't they fall off, to which the agent replied that it was just the way things are.

Several days after Marty Calhoun's visit, he experienced the confusion again when Edith Marston, wife of one of his long-time clients, came to inquire about purchasing a life insurance
policy, "as an investment," for her newborn grandson. She sat with her left hand resting on the arm of the chair while her extended right hand bounced slightly with every third or fourth word. As she continued to speak, her hand seemed to the insurance agent to take on a life of its own as its movements, jerky and frisky as a poodle on a leash, lost all connection to the rhythm of the words. It seemed that at any minute, the hand would detach itself from Edith's arm and run about the room or out the door. Suppressing his desire to slap the delinquent hand and press it to the table to subdue it, he tried to remain focused on each word that Edith spoke, "He looks zwing blomb daddy wam gag zwosh hair gad waemog..." As gracefully as possible, the insurance agent interrupted Edith's jumble of words, told her that he was suddenly feeling ill, and asked if she could come back later or perhaps meet with another agent. Consumed by the pleasure of her own stories, Edith noticed nothing wrong and was pleased to have Rebekah schedule her for another date.

With each passing day, the insurance agent assumed that his problem would disappear as quickly as it had appeared, but instead, it seemed only to grow worse. The harder he worked to keep focused on what his clients said the more difficulty he had in comprehending them. Gradually every one who came into the office seemed to be nothing more than an assemblage of skin and hair with appendages that wiggled and moved at the direction of some hidden force; their faces and heads appeared as blocks of flesh with various holes that emitted random sounds of various frequencies, speeds, and rhythms, punctuated by snorts and grunts.

After several more steep turns and another faded advertisement for Lookout Point just 24 miles away, the insurance agent reached a point in the trip where the children always quarreled about the images they saw in the shapes of the mountain across the valley. Jennifer claimed to see the profile of a large man's head, as in her view a few jagged points formed the chin and lips and another, larger section jutting up made the nose, while the adjacent rounded dip and mound made the eye sockets and forehead. Refusing even to try to see the image of the man's head,
Andy insisted that the mountain looked more like a large table, with a plateau forming the table top and the jutting hills around the chairs surrounding the table. The quarrel always came to an abrupt end as, with the next steep turn, their perspectives were so altered that the mountain beside them and the valley below became a patchwork of greens, browns, grays, yellow light and black shadows created by the sunlight streaming across the irregular line of the mountaintop to form what looked like yellow ribbons laying gently on the treetops below.

While his normal routines and usual discourses were disrupted by his problem, he also discovered a mystery in things he never really noticed until then. At times, the agent found that as he tried to listen to a client sputtering gibberish, his attention became absorbed in the motions of the mouth -- the strange up and down movements of the lower lip, the flash of teeth behind the lip, the tongue darting elusively in and out of view, the tiny explosions that erupted with certain letters. He had never known before his affliction the enormous variety in noses and eyes. As he gave the appearance of taking in all his clients were saying, the agent studied the curve of his client's eyebrows, and the way, as the person spoke, they arched upward and fell back into place as if communicating in a secret code. He came to recognize that no two noses were exactly alike, that each existed on a continuum somewhere between narrow and rounded to wide and flat, and he became intrigued by their downward slope, the way they came to a point or a rounded bulb, and the flare of nostrils, that seemed at times as broad as a cave and at other times nearly closed by the puffy flesh that surrounded them.

Gradually he learned that the best way to deal with his problem was to ignore it, pretend to listen when people spoke to him by nodding his head, smiling occasionally, and intermittedly saying "yes." He discovered that whenever a client ceased sputtering out sounds and looked at him as if waiting for a comment or reply, all he had to do was repeat the little speeches he had given for nearly thirty years on the importance of "being prepared in case something were to happen," "of making sure that the client's family would not have to worry about finances." As
long as he did what was expected of him, and gave his often-rehearsed speech, it seemed that no one could discern anything wrong with him. It was as if long ago someone or something had come to inhabit the normal routines of his life and could carry on perfectly well without him, that he was himself unnecessary to his own life.

The stacks of documents Rebekah brought into him each day to review and sign, in keeping with their normal routine, increasingly made no sense to him at all, resembling more than anything hand drawn pictures of tractors, bowls of spaghetti, and giraffes, but somehow he knew it was okay to sign his name. On one occasion, while he nodded in agreement to the inchoate sounds spilling from Richard Sampson's mouth, Rebekah rushed in the office, her lips pressed together tightly as if trying to contain a secret seeking to escape from her mouth. She offered the agent a pink piece of paper folded over once, that evidently bore some type of important message. When he opened the note, he discovered a crudely drawn representation of a woman's torso. He looked up at Rebekah, smiled and shrugged his shoulders, which, evidently was the response she wanted since she breathed a deep sigh of relief as she quickly retreated from his office.

Several miles later, he passed the road they had once taken to find the Christmas tree farm the year they planned to chop down their own tree and take it home to decorate. Unable to follow the directions, they found themselves instead driving slowly up steep hills and then gliding down the other side, gathering speed as they approached the bottom, which caused the children in the back seat to scream "wheeeee" as if they were riding a roller coaster. The agent recalled stopping to ask for help from a lanky man with denim overalls and wire-rimmed glasses and several tufts of gray hair on his shiny, bald head. Leaning against the tractor, the farmer gave the agent a bemused stare while he listened to the agent's question, and then directed him to follow the road beside the river and after several miles he'd see the mountain covered with Christmas trees, that he couldn't miss it, a pronouncement the agent knew would doom him to
further aimless wandering. Unable to find the river, much less the road beside it, they had
decided to go home and buy a tree, when they finally convinced Jennifer, who had been whining
to pee for the past half hour, that she could go to the bathroom beside the road, that no-one
would see her. Just as Jennifer pulled her pants down and squatted to relieve herself the sound
of an engine erupted suddenly from behind a nearby hill followed immediately by the
appearance of a tractor with a man on top of it. As Margaret stepped forward to shield the
horrified Jennifer, Margaret told the man they were looking for "Johnson's Christmas Tree
Farm," to which the man replied that they had found it, and as they looked in the direction of the
man's open left hand as he lifted it from the tractor's steering wheel and swept it across the sky,
they saw the mountain covered with Christmas trees, which in the mid-afternoon, cast long,
cone-shaped shadows against the gray mountain. Every year when they passed that road, they
told the story, which seemed to make them laugh even louder each year.

His actions at work unfolded so readily from their own inertia and his words rolled so
easily from his mouth that he might have forgotten his problem altogether, if he hadn't started
hearing laughter. It had begun just a few days earlier while he was uttering the familiar words,
"...being prepared in case something were to happen," when the motions of his lips and tongue
felt uncoordinated and contorted and the previously comfortable words suddenly felt strange in
his mouth, like he was struggling to eat harsh, foreign food. As he paused, attempting to conjure
up the familiar sounds, he heard someone laugh. The first time he heard it, the laughter was
short and stopped abruptly, but with each day it became louder, more uncontrolled, and lasted
longer.

Reaching another incline that thrust the car's engine into an even higher-pitched whine,
he passed between two high walls of jagged brown stone that made dwarves of the road, his car,
and himself. It was at this point that, many years earlier, Margaret had asked the children if they
knew how the mountains had been formed, and when they shook their heads no, explained that
long, long ago, molten rock beneath the earth surface was pushed upward, as if in a vice, by the pressure of different part of the earth's crust -- she held up her hands and pressed them against one another to demonstrate the subterranean processes. Andy responded that he thought God made the mountains, to which Margaret replied that of course He did, that she was just describing the way He did it, and Jennifer said that she couldn't understand how anybody could look at the mountains and not believe in God. He remembered more than anything that as Margaret turned toward him to look at the children in the back seat he was struck as never before by the beauty of her neck, its smoothe, feminine, sweet-scented skin offered for viewing like a painting on exhibit.

After several more sharp upward turns that caused his ears to open and close again, he came to the familiar stretch of road that ascended to a point where a slice of land, covered with stones, protruded out on the right between the road and the edge of the mountain, a space large enough for four or five cars. Before the new highway was finished and several fancy resorts opened on the other side of the mountain, reducing to a trickle the traffic on this narrow, rugged road, Lookout Point had been one the favorite spots for people to stop and gaze at the scenery. In the summer or fall, the small space was usually filled with cars parked at irregular angles and often jutting out into the road, while a string of tourists -- gazing, pointing, talking, and taking pictures -- were lined against the stone wall that marked the lip of the cliff. He had stopped here often on his trips to the farm near the top of the mountain where his grandfather and great grandfather had lived, and which was the subject of many of his mother's stories.

Just several days before he began his journey to Lookout Point, he recognized the source of his laughter and the reason for hearing it. The laughter was his own. He was laughing at himself. He had finally recognized the hilarity of his own life, of the fact that he spent the last thirty years talking to others about dying and preparing for death, and not once had he spoken the word "death." He'd always said to his client, "If 'something' should happen to you," as if that
'something' were unknown, that it might refer to having a clogged toilet, being caught in traffic, or winning a sweepstakes, just as easily as to dying.

Having discovered the comedy of his own situation, he found it impossible to complete his sentences in the usual way, to talk in his customary manner. He said to one client that he needed to be ready to "kick the bucket," and to another that he should prepare for the day when he would "croak," and "go kaput." The look of shock on his client's face made him roar with laughter. With the second client, he laughed so loudly that Rebekah came in to make sure that he was okay, and when he told her what he had just said, he laughed even more raucously than earlier. Rebekah joined in the laughter, but called the clients scheduled for the afternoon, telling each that her boss was feeling badly and needed to rest. Yet, with one client Rebekah failed to reach, the agent told the unsuspecting visitor to feel his own pulse, and even grasped his own wrist to demonstrate. When the client and he had both located the spot where they could feel the blood coursing through their veins, the agent leaned forward and whispered to his visitor, "Just imagine the day when this little drum beat will stop, and you or I will be nothing but slabs of meat on an undertaker's table to be dressed up for one last social gathering, one last meeting when we won't need to worry about making conversation." The agent leaned back and laughed, while the surprised client smiled, but then suddenly remembered that he was late for another appointment. Laughing hysterically, the agent shook his head to signal that he understood.

He brought the car to a stop in the vacant parking area, shut off the ignition, and pressed the emergency brake with his left foot. Stepping from the car, he was struck by how much colder it was there than in the town below. He reached into the back seat to retrieve his thick, black overcoat which he pulled on over his suit, and removed from his pockets his dark gloves and pushed his hands into them one at a time. He thought to himself that his clean, upscale automobile and executive-looking clothes gave him the appearance of a banker or corporate CEO, that no one would guess from his appearance that people and things around him had
ceased to make any sense to him, and that, like some kind of madman, he had fled from his work and normal life to this spot in search of some type of sign.

The door closing behind him suddenly sounded strange; he opened and shut it two more times, each time slowly squeezing the curved metal handle, first with his left hand and then his right, and then turning his ear to hear first the click of the button that released the latch and then the whine of the spring as the door turned on its hinges. When he gave the door a soft push to shut it, he was struck by the rich, thick thud which seemed so different than any previous time, as if he were hearing this sound for the first time in his life. And, then, he recognized the difference. It was the silence that surrounded him. He had always opened and shut the car door against the background of the noises of cars, trucks, buses, trains, airplanes, radios, televisions, and conversations, but here at Lookout Point, the silence engulfed and swallowed him like the warm water in a swimming pool.

He took several steps to move around the front of the car -- he felt the irregular surface of the stone surface and the heat that emanated from the hood of his car -- and walked to the spot where he had stood often with Margaret, Jennifer, and Andy. Margaret never allowed the children to get closer than two or three feet to the short, stone wall that sat on the edge of the overhang. If a person fell, she always said, "he'd fall for miles." After overhearing many times the comments of others around him -- "Wow," and "That's incredible!" or "Ooh," -- he had learned that it was best to survey the scene in silence, that all attempts to describe served only to diminish the experience. The clouds had nearly dissipated so that the sky hung above him like a blue canopy, while the sun, having nearly achieved its midday position, was suspended above his left shoulder. To his right, he followed the slope of the mountain upward to the point where it seemed to disappear into the blue sky. The mountain on his left was concealed by the glare of the sun, which in several hours, he thought, would pass to the other side of the mountain and cast the whole scene in a blue-green shadow. On both sides, the mountain was a blanket of trees made
up of clusters of evergreens amidst gray leafless skeletons of oaks and maples, all of which
seemed to merge with the horizon in a blue-gray haze. Below him, the mountain dropped away,
as Lookout Point sat on a ledge of rock that jutted out like a kind of natural balcony from which
the whole universe appeared as an array of yellow, blue, green, and gray, and completely devoid
of any discernible objects shaped by human hands.

Every time he stood at this site he remembered the story his great grandfather told often
about his own great grandmother, an indentured servant, who, climbing up to Lookout Point to
search for a lost sheep, found herself surrounded by a dozen or so rattlesnakes hissing and
slithering toward her from all directions, and that when they nearly reached her feet she jumped
off the mountain. Her long, wide skirt caught the wind like a parachute so that she floated for
ten or fifteen minutes before she reached the ground, all the while seeing the snakes, their rattlers
still rattling, speed past her falling to their deaths. She landed in a field being plowed by a young
man, who immediately asked her to marry him, and who was even willing to wait while she
finished her period of servanthood, and who called her his gift from heaven for the rest of their
lives. If he asked if the story was really true, his great grandfather always replied in the same
way, "If Grandma had been killed that day, how would you and me be here right now to talk
about it?"

As he breathed deeply and stared into the distance, he recalled why he had always liked
coming to this site. It was the one spot where he could silence the multitude of voices that
rumbled incessantly in his mind, voices that reminded him of something from the past left
unfinished or that thrust him toward plans for the future. Here, cleansing his mind, he immersed
himself wholly in the colors and shapes that surrounded him so that his only reality was the
never-ending present moment.

Then, directly in front of him in the vast distance, a speck of silver flashed in the blue
sky, and moving upward, began to carve a vertical, luminous, white line. For most people at
most times, it would have simply been a jet climbing in the sky leaving a trail of vapor behind it. But, for the agent at that moment, it became a slit opening in the sky, a rip in the veil that separates earth from heaven, this world from the next; at that moment it seemed to the agent that a door was opening and that all he had to do was to take one step forward to enter a new life, a new world where the meanings of words and thoughts and gestures were always plain.

His eyes fixed on the white line growing higher in the sky, he pressed his opened hands against the top of the stone wall, the roughness of the surface evident even through his thick gloves, lifted his right foot to the top of the wall, a place where he'd seen people sit but never stand, and pushing with both hands and raising his left foot to the top of the wall hoisted himself into an upright position. Breathing deeply, he noted his own chest rising and falling and remembered the births of Jennifer and Andy, and the way Margaret lay in the hospital bed for fourteen hours while a parade of nurses and doctors, wondering if she would ever have the baby, dug their hands between her spread legs to check her progress, until finally the doctor used forceps to yank the child from her mother, and how Jennifer, her face bearing the imprint of the forceps, never cried like new born babies in the movies, but stared at the masked doctor with an expression that suggested she could easily say hello and explain everything that was happening if she weren't so fascinated by all the new sights. Compared to his older sister, Andy was born with relative ease in a room with soft lights and music and furnishings that seemed like home, though with his first breath, Andy glared accusingly at the doctor and wailed with anger, his bottom lip quivering, until the doctor passed him to Margaret who, with tears streaming down her face, pressed her lips against his pink forehead.

As the agent continued to stare, the line began to separate and fold back like a curtain opening on a stage revealing a multitude of people, including his own mother and father, smiling and waving to him, and the agent knew that they would welcome him into their world just as he had greeted Jennifer and Andy. Remembering the story of his great, great grandmother, of how
her large skirt had enabled her to float to the ground when she jumped from this spot, the
insurance agent grasped both lapels of this thick overcoat and pulled it tightly around him.
Smiling, with his eyes fixed on heaven, he stepped forward.