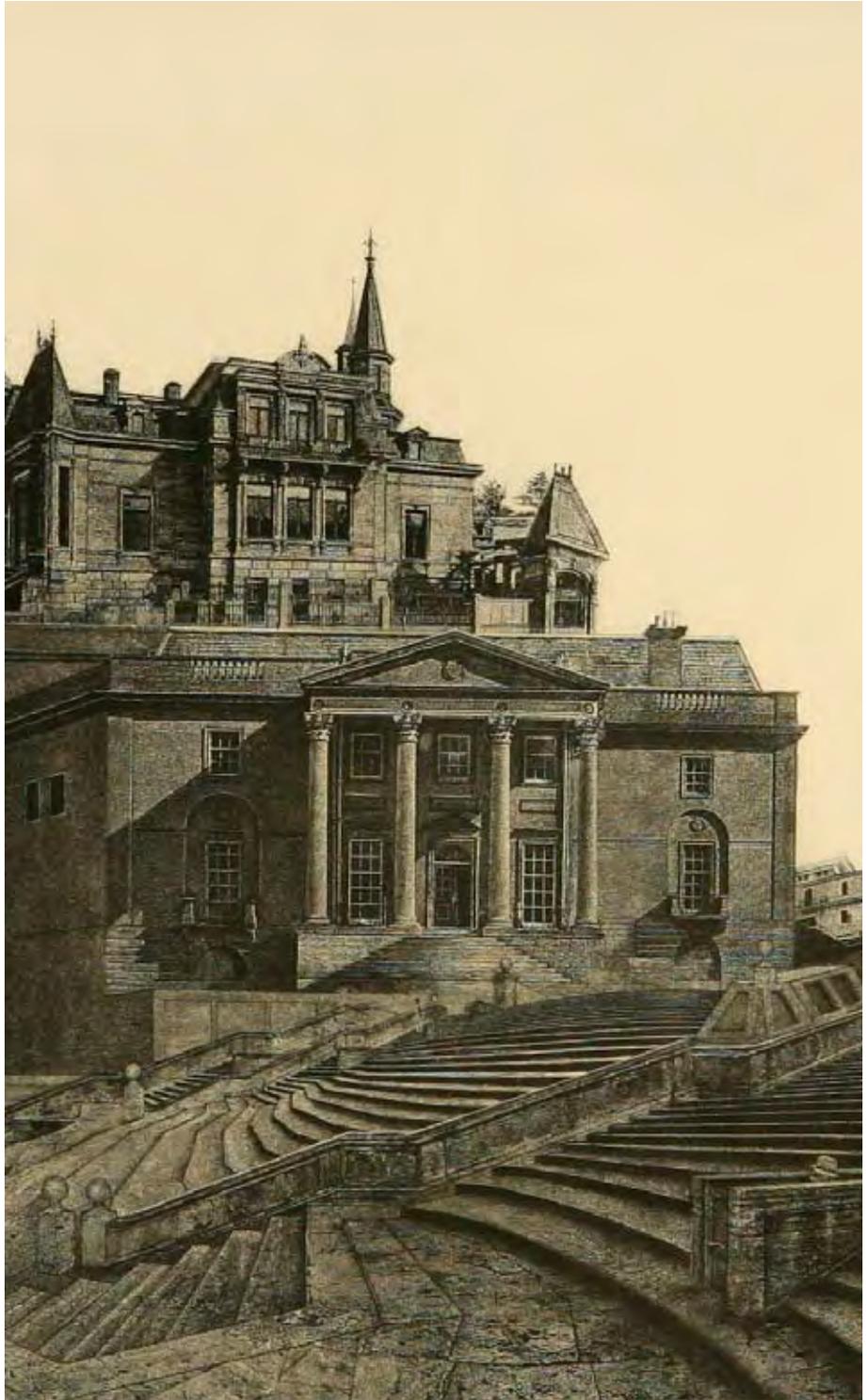


BOOK ONE | *Edgewood*



# I

Men are men, but Man is a woman.

— CHESTERTON

ON A CERTAIN DAY in June 19—, a young man was making his way on foot northward from the great City to a town or place called Edgewood, that he had been told of but had never visited. His name was Smoky Barnable, and he was going to Edgewood to get married; the fact that he walked and didn't ride was one of the conditions placed on his coming there at all.

*Somewhere to  
Elsewhere*

Though he had left his City room early in the morning it was nearly noon before he had crossed the huge bridge on a little-used walkway and come out into the named but boundaryless towns on the north side of the river. Through the afternoon he negotiated those Indian-named places, usually unable to take the straight route commanded by the imperious and constant flow of traffic; he went neighborhood by neighborhood, looking down alleys and into stores. He saw few walkers, even indigenous, though there were kids on bikes; he wondered about their lives in these places, which to him seemed gloomily peripheral, though the kids were cheerful enough.

The regular blocks of commercial avenues and residential streets began gradually to become disordered, thinning like the extremes of a great forest; began to be broken by weedy lots as though by glades; now and then a dusty undergrown wood or a scruffy meadow announced that it was available to be turned into an Industrial Park. Smoky turned that phrase over in his mind, since that seemed truly the place in the world where he was, the industrial park, between the desert and the sown.

He stopped at a bench where people could catch buses from Somewhere to Elsewhere. He sat, shrugged his small pack from his back, took from it a sandwich he had made himself — another condition —

and a confetti-colored gas-station road map. He wasn't sure if the map were forbidden by the conditions, but the directions he'd been given to get to Edgewood weren't explicit, and he opened it.

Now. This blue line was apparently the cracked macadam lined with untenanted brick factories he had been walking along. He turned the map so that this line ran parallel to his bench, as the road did (he wasn't much of a map reader) and found, far off to his left, the place he walked toward. The name Edgewood didn't appear, actually, but it was *here* somewhere, in this group of five towns marked with the legend's most insignificant bullets. So. There was a mighty double red line that went near there, proud with exits and entrances; he couldn't walk along that. A thick blue line (on the model of the vascular system, Smoky imagined all the traffic flowing south to the city on the blue lines, away on the red) ran somewhat nearer, extending corpuscular access to towns and townlets along the way. The much thinner sclerotic blue line he sat beside was tributary to this; probably commerce had moved there, Tool Town, Food City, Furniture World, Carpet Village. Well... But there was also, almost indistinguishable, a narrow black line he could take soon instead. He thought at first that it led nowhere, but no, it went on, faltering, seeming at first almost forgotten by the mapmaker in the ganglia, but then growing clearer in the northward emptiness, and coming very near a town Smoky knew to be near Edgewood.

That one, then. It seemed a walker's road.

After measuring with his thumb and finger the distance on the map he had come, and how far he had to go (much farther), he slung on his pack, tilted his hat against the sun, and went on.

*A long drink of water* She was not much in his mind as he walked, though for sure she hadn't been far from it often in the last nearly two years he had loved her; the room he had met her in was one he looked into with the mind's eye often, sometimes with the trepidation he had felt then, but often nowadays with a grateful happiness; looked in to see George Mouse showing him from afar a glass, a pipe, and his two tall cousins: she, and her shy sister behind her.

It was in the Mouse townhouse, last tenanted house on the block, in the library on the third floor, the one whose mullioned windows were patched with cardboard and whose dark rug was worn white in pathways between door, bar, and windows. It was that very room.

She was tall.

She was nearly six feet tall, which was several inches taller than Smoky; her sister, just turned fourteen, was as tall as he. Their party dresses were short, and glittered, hers red, her sister's white; their long, long stockings glistened. What was odd was that tall as they were they were shy, especially the younger, who smiled but wouldn't take Smoky's hand, only turned away further behind her sister.

Delicate giantesses. The older glanced toward George as he made debonair introductions. Her smile was tentative. Her hair was red-gold and curly-fine. Her name, George said, was Daily Alice.

He took her hand, looking up. "A long drink of water," he said, and she began to laugh. Her sister laughed too, and George Mouse bent down and slapped his knee. Smoky, not knowing why the old



chestnut should be so funny, looked from one to another with a seraphic idiot's grin, his hand unrelinquished.

It was the happiest moment of his life.

*Anonymity* It had not been, until he met Daily Alice Drinkwater in the library of the Mouse townhouse, a life particularly charged with happiness; but it happened to be a life suited just right for the courtship he then set out on. He was the only child of his father's second marriage, and was born when his father was nearly sixty. When his mother realized that the solid Barnable fortune had largely evanesced under his father's management, and that there had been therefore little reason to marry him and less to bear him a child, she left him in an access of bitterness. That was too bad for Smoky, because of all his relations she was the least anonymous; in fact she was the only one of any related to him by blood whose face he could instantly bring to memory in his old age, though he had been a boy when she left. Smoky himself mostly inherited the Barnable anonymity, and only a streak of his mother's concreteness: an actual streak it seemed to those who knew him, a streak of presence surrounded by a dim glow of absence.

They were a large family. His father had five sons and daughters by his first wife; they all lived in anonymous suburbs of cities in those states whose names begin with an I and which Smoky's City friends couldn't distinguish from one another. Smoky confused the catalogue himself at times. Since his father was supposed by them to have a lot of money and it was never clear what he intended to do with it, Dad was always welcome in their houses, and after his wife's departure he chose to sell the house Smoky was born in and travel from one to another with his young son, a succession of anonymous dogs, and seven custom-made chests containing his library. Barnable was an educated man, though his learning was of such a remote and rigid kind that it gave him no conversation and didn't reduce his natural anonymity at all. His older sons and daughters regarded the chests of books as an inconvenience, like having his socks confused in the wash with theirs.

(Later on, it was Smoky's habit to try to sort out his half-siblings and their houses and assign them to their proper cities and states while he sat on the toilet. Maybe that was because it was in their toilets that he had felt most anonymous, anonymous to the point of invisibility; anyway, he would pass the time there shuffling his brothers and sisters and their children like a pack of cards, trying to match faces to porches to lawns, until late in life he could deal out the whole of it. It gave him the same bleak satisfaction he got from solving crossword puzzles, and the same doubt – what if he had guessed words that crossed correctly, but weren't the words the maker had in mind? The next week's paper with the solution printed would never arrive.)

His wife's desertion didn't make Barnable less cheerful, only more anonymous; it seemed to his older children, as he coalesced in and then evaporated from their lives, that he existed less and less. It was only to Smoky that he gave the gift of his private solidity: his learning. Because the two of them moved so often, Smoky never did go to a regular school; and by the time one of the states that began with an I found out what had been done to Smoky by his father all those years, he was too old to be compelled to go to school any more. So, at sixteen, Smoky knew Latin, classical and medieval; Greek; some old-fashioned mathematics; and he could play the violin a little. He had smelled few books other than his father's leather-bound classics; he could recite two hundred lines of Virgil more or less accurately; and he wrote in a perfect Chancery hand.

His father died in that year, shriveled it seemed by the imparting of all that was thick in him to his son. Smoky continued their wanderings for a few more years. He had a hard time getting work because he had no Diploma; at last he learned to type in a shabby business school, in South Bend he later thought it must have been, and became a Clerk. He lived a lot in three different suburbs with the same name in three different cities, and in each his relatives called him by a different name – his own, his father's, and Smoky – which last so suited his evanescence that he kept it. When he was twenty-one, an unknown thrift of his father's threw down some belated

money on him, and he took a bus to the City, forgetting as soon as he was past the last one all the cities his relatives had lived in, and all his relatives too, so that long afterwards he had to reconstruct them face by lawn; and once arrived in the City, he dispersed utterly and gratefully in it like a raindrop fallen into the sea.

*Name and number* He had a room in a building that had once been the rectory of the very old church that stood revered and vandalized behind it. From his window he could see the churchyard where men with Dutch names turned comfortably in their old beds. In the morning he got up by the clock of sudden traffic – which he could never learn to sleep through as he had the long thunder of Midwestern trains – and went to work.

He worked in a wide, white room where the little sounds he and the others made would rise to the ceiling and descend again strangely altered; when someone coughed, it was as though the ceiling itself coughed, apologetically, with covered mouth. All day long there Smoky slid a magnifying bar down column after column after column of tiny print, scrutinizing each name and its attendant address and phone number, and marking red symbols next to those that were not the same as the name and address and phone number typed on each card of stack after stack of cards that were piled daily next to him.

At first the names he read were meaningless to him, as deeply anonymous as their phone numbers. The only distinction a name had was its accidental yet ineluctable place in the alphabetical order, and then whatever idiot errors the computer could dress it in, which Smoky was paid to discover. (That the computer could make as few errors as it did impressed Smoky less than its bizarre witlessness; it couldn't distinguish, for instance, when the abbreviation "St." meant "street" and when it meant "saint," and directed to expand these abbreviations, would without a smile produce the Seventh Saint Bar and Grill and the Church of All Streets.) As the weeks fell away, though, and Smoky filled up his aimless evenings walking block after block of the City (not knowing that most people stayed inside

after dark) and began to learn the neighborhoods and their boundaries and classes and bars and stoops, the names that looked up at him through the glass bar began to grow faces, ages, attitudes; the people he saw in buses and trains and candy stores, the people who shouted to each other across tenement shaftways and stood gaping at traffic accidents and argued with waiters and shopgirls, and the waiters and shopgirls too, began to mill through his flimsy pages; the Book began to seem like a great epic of the City's life, with all its comings and goings and tragedies and farces, changeful and full of drama. He found widowed ladies with ancient Dutch names who lived he knew in high-windowed buildings on great avenues, whose husbands, Estates of, they managed, and whose sons had names like Steele and Eric and were intr dcrtrs and lived in Bohemian neighborhoods; he read of a huge family with wild Greek-sounding names who lived in several buildings on a noisome block he had walked once, a family that grew and discarded members every time he passed them in the alphabet – Gypsies, he decided at last; he knew of men whose wives and teenage daughters had private phones (on which they cooed with their lovers) while their men made calls on the many phones of the financial firms that bore their names; he grew suspicious of men who used their first initials and middle names because he found them all to be bill collectors, or lawyers whose bsns had the same address as their rsdnce, or city marshals who also sold used furniture; he learned that almost everyone named Singleton and everyone named Singletary lived in the northern black city where the men had for first names the names of past presidents and the women had gemlike names, pearl and ruby and opal and jewel, with a proud Mrs. before it – he imagined them large and dark and glowing in small apartments, alone with many clean children. From the locksmith who used so many A's in his tiny shop's name that he came first to Archimedes Zzzzyandottie who came last (an old scholar who lived alone, reading Greek newspapers in a shabby apartment), he knew them all. Beneath his sliding bar a tiny name and number would rise up like flotsam borne up a beach by waves and tell its story; Smoky listened, looked at his card, found them the same, and

was turning down the card even as the distorting glass threw up the next tale. The reader next to him sighed tragically. The ceiling coughed. The ceiling laughed, loudly. Everyone looked up.

A young man who had just been hired had laughed.

“I’ve just found,” he said, “a listing here for the Noisy Bridge Rod and Gun Club.” He could barely finish it for laughing, and Smoky was amazed that the silence of every other proofreader there didn’t hush him. “Don’t you get it?” The young man appealed to Smoky. “It sure would be a noisy bridge.” Smoky suddenly laughed too, and their laughter rose to the ceiling and shook hands there.

His name was George Mouse; he wore wide suspenders to his wide pants, and when the day was done, he threw around himself a great woolen cloak whose collar trapped his long black hair, so that he must reach back and flip it out, like a girl. He had a hat like Svengali’s, and eyes like him too – dark-shadowed, compelling, and humorous. It wasn’t a week later that he was fired, to the relief of every pair of bifocals in the white room, but by then he and Smoky had become, as only Smoky in the whole world it seemed could any longer say with all seriousness, fast friends.

### *A City Mouse*

With George as his friend, Smoky began a course of mild debauchery, a little drink, a little drugs; George changed his clothes, and his patterns of speech, to a City tattersall, and introduced him to Girls. In not too long a while, Smoky’s anonymity became clothed, like the Invisible Man in his bandages; people stopped bumping into him on the street or sitting on his lap in buses without apology – which he had attributed to his being very vaguely present to most people.

To the Mouse family – who lived in the last tenanted building of a block of buildings the first City Mouse had built and which they still mostly owned – he was at least present; and more than for his new hat and his new lingo he thanked George for that family of highly distinguishable and loudly loving folk. In the midst of their arguments, jokes, parties, walkings-out-in-bedroom-slippers, attempts at suicide, and noisy reconciliations, he sat unnoticed for hours; but

then Uncle Ray or Franz or Mom would look up startled and say, “Smoky’s here!” and he would smile.

“Do you have country cousins?” Smoky asked George once as they waited out a snowstorm over café-royale in George’s favorite old hotel bar. And indeed he did.

“They’re very religious,” George told him with a wink as he led him away from the giggly girls to introduce him to their parents, Dr. and Mrs. Drinkwater.

*At first sight*

“Not a practicing doctor,” said the Doctor, a wrinkled man with woolly hair and the unsmiling cheerfulness of a small animal. He was not as tall as his wife, whose generously-fringed and silken shawl trembled as she shook Smoky’s hand and asked him to call her Sophie; she in turn wasn’t as tall as her daughters. “All the Dales were tall,” she said, looking up and inward as though she could see them all somewhere above her. She had given her surname therefore to her two great daughters, Alice Dale and Sophie Dale Drinkwater; but Mother was the only one who ever used the names, except that as a child Alice Dale had been called by some other child Daily Alice and the name had stuck, so now it was Daily Alice and plain Sophie, and there was nothing for it, except that anyone looking at them could certainly see that they were Dales; and they all turned to look at them.

Whatever religion it was that they practiced didn’t prevent them from sharing a pipe with Franz Mouse, who sat at their feet since they two took up all of a small divan; or from taking the rum-punch Mom offered them; or from laughing behind their hands, more at what they whispered to each other than at anything silly Franz said; or showing, when they crossed their legs, long thighs beneath their spangled dresses.

Smoky went on looking. Even though George Mouse had taught him to be a City man and not afraid of women, a lifetime’s habit wasn’t so easily overcome, and only after a decent interval of being paralyzed with uncertainty did he force himself to walk the rug to



where they sat. Eager not to be a wet blanket – “Don’t be a wet blanket, for God’s sake,” George was always telling him – he sat down on the floor by them, a fixed smile on his face and a bearing that made him look (and he was, he was stunned to feel as Daily Alice turned to look at him, visible to her) oddly breakable. He had a habit of twiddling his glass between thumb and forefinger so that the ice trembled rapidly and chilled the drink. He did it now, and the ice rattled in the glass like a bell rung for attention. A silence fell.

“Do you come here often?” he said.

“No,” she said evenly. “Not to the City. Only once in a while, when Daddy has business, or . . . other things.”

“He’s a doctor.”

“Not really. Not anymore. He’s a writer.” She was smiling, and Sophie beside her was giggling again, and Daily Alice went on with the conversation as though the object were to see how long she could keep a straight face. “He writes animal stories, for children.”

“Oh.”

“He writes one a day.”

He looked up into her laughing eyes clear and brown as bottle glass. He had begun to feel very odd. “They must not be very long,” he said, swallowing.

What was happening? He was in love, of course, at first sight, but he had been in love before and it had always been at first sight and he had never felt like this – as though something were growing, inexorably, within him.

“He writes under the name of Saunders,” Daily Alice said.

He pretended to search his memory for this name, but in fact he was searching within for what it was that made him feel so funny. It had extended now outward to his hands; he examined them where they lay in his houndstooth lap, looking very weighty. He interlaced the ponderous fingers.

“Remarkable,” he said, and the two girls laughed, and Smoky laughed too. The feeling made him want to laugh. It couldn’t be the smoke; that always made him feel weightless and transparent. This was the opposite. The more he looked at her the stronger it grew,

the more she looked at him the more he felt...what? In a moment of silence they simply looked at each other, and understanding hummed, thundered within Smoky as he realized what had happened: not only had he fallen in love with her, and at first sight, but she at first sight had fallen in love with him, and the two circumstances had this effect: his anonymity was being cured. Not disguised, as George Mouse had tried to do, but cured, from the inside out. That was the feeling. It was as though she stirred him with cornstarch. He had begun to thicken.

He had gone down the narrow back stairs to the only john in the house that still worked, and stood looking into the wide, black-flecked mirror of that stone place.

Well. Who would have thought it. From the mirror a face looked out at him, not unfamiliar really, but still as though seen for the first time. A round and open face, a face that looked like the young Santa Claus as we might see him in early photographs: a little grave, dark-mustached, with a round nose and lines by the eyes already where little laughing birds had walked, though he wasn't yet twenty-three. All in all, a face of sunny disposition, with something in the eyes still blank and unresolved, pale and missing, that would, he supposed, never fill in. It was enough. In fact it was miraculous. He nodded, smiling, at his new acquaintance, and glanced at him again over his shoulder as he left.

As he was going up the back stairs, he met Daily Alice coming down, suddenly, at a turning. Now there was no idiot grin on his face; now she wasn't giggling. They slowed as they approached each other; when she had squeezed past him she didn't go on but turned to look back at him; Smoky was a step higher than she, so that their heads were in the relation dictated by movie kisses. His heart pounding with fear and elation, and his head humming with the fierce certainty of a sure thing, he kissed her. She responded as though for her too a certainty had proved out, and in the midst of her hair and lips and long arms encircling him, Smoky added a treasure of great price to the small store of his wisdom.



*The young  
Santa Claus*

There was a noise then on the stair above them and they started. It was Sophie, and she stood above them eyes wide, biting her lip. “I have to pee-pee,” she said, and danced by them lightly.

“You’ll be leaving soon,” Smoky said.

“Tonight.”

“When will you come back?”

“I don’t know.”

He held her again; the second embrace was calm and sure.

“I was frightened,” she said.

“I know,” he said, exulting. God she was big. How was he to handle her when there was no stair to stand on?

*A sea island* As a man well might who had grown up anonymous, Smoky had always thought that women choose or do not choose men by criteria he knew nothing of, by caprice, like monarchs, by taste, like critics; he had always assumed that a woman’s choice of him or of another was foregone, ineluctable and instant. So he waited on them, like a courtier, waited to be noticed. Turns out, he thought, standing late that night on the Mouse stoop, turns out not so; they – she anyway – is flushed with the same heats and doubts, is like me shy and overcome by desire, and her heart raced like mine when the embrace was at hand, I know it did.

He stood for a long time on the stoop, turning over this jewel of knowledge, and sniffing the wind that had turned, as it infrequently does in the City, to blow in from the ocean. He could smell tide, and shore and sea detritus, sour and salt and bittersweet. And realized that the great City was after all a sea island, and a small one at that.

A sea island. And you could forget so basic a fact for years at a time if you lived here. But there it was, amazing but true. He stepped off the stoop and down the street, solid as a statue from breast to back, his footsteps ringing on the pavement.

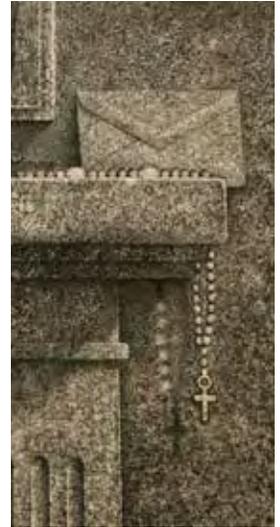
*Correspondence* Her address was “Edgewood, that’s all,” George Mouse said, and they had no phone; and so because he had no choice, Smoky sat down to make love through the mails with a thoroughness just about

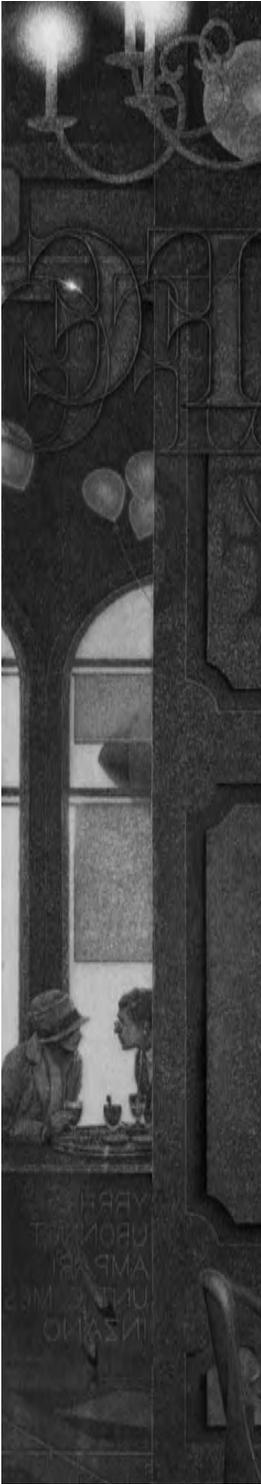
vanished from the world. His thick letters were consigned to this Edgewood place, and he waited for reply until he couldn't wait anymore and wrote another, and so their letters crossed in the mail as all true lovers' letters do; and she saved them and tied them with a lavender ribbon, and years later her grandchildren found them and read of those old people's improbable passion.

"I found a park," he wrote, in his black, spiky goblin's hand; "there's a plaque on the pillar where you enter it that says Mouse Drinkwater Stone 1900. Is that you all? It has a little pavilion of the Seasons, and statues, and all the walks curve so that you can't walk straight into the middle. You walk and walk and find yourself coming back out. Summer's very old there (you don't notice, in the City, except in parks), it's whiskery and dusty, and the park is little, too; but it all reminded me of you," as if everything did not.

"I found an old pile of newspapers," said her letter that crossed his (the two truckdrivers waving to each other from their tall blue cabs on the misty morning turnpike). "There were these comic strips about a boy who dreams. The comic strip is all his dream, his Dreamland. Dreamland is beautiful; palaces and processions are always folding up and shrinking away, or growing huge and out of hand, or when you look closely turn out to be something else – you know – just like real dreams, only always pretty. Great-aunt Cloud says she saved them because the man who drew them, his name was Stone, once was an architect in the City, with George's great-grandfather and mine! They were 'Beaux-Arts' architects. Dreamland is very 'Beaux-Arts'. Stone was a drunkard – that's the word Cloud uses. The boy in the dreams always looks sleepy and surprised at the same time. He reminds me of you."

After beginning thus timidly, their letters eventually became so face-to-face that when at last they met again, in the bar of the old hotel (outside whose leaded windows snow fell), they both wondered if there had been some mistake, if Somehow they had sent all those letters to the wrong person, this person, this unfocused and nervous stranger. That passed in an instant, but for a while they had to take turns speaking at some length, because it was the only way





they knew; the snow turned to blizzard, the café-royale turned cold; a phrase of hers fell in with one of his and one of his with one of hers and, as elated as if they were the first to discover the trick of it, they conversed.

“You don’t get – well – bored up there, all alone all the time?” Smoky asked, when they had practiced a while.

“Bored?” She was surprised. It seemed like an idea that hadn’t before occurred to her. “No. And we’re not alone.”

“Well, I didn’t mean... What sort of people are they?”

“What people?”

“The people... you’re not alone with.”

“Oh. Well. There used to be a lot of farmers. It was Scotch immigrants at first there. MacDonald, MacGregor, Brown. There aren’t so many farms now. But some. A lot of people up there now are our relatives, too, sort of. You know how it is.”

He didn’t, exactly. A silence fell, and rose as they both started to speak at once, and fell again. Smoky said: “It’s a big house?”

She smiled. “Enormous.” Her brown eyes were deliquescent in the lamplight. “You’ll like it. Everybody does. Even George, but he says he doesn’t.”

“Why?”

“He’s always getting lost there.”

Smoky smiled to think of George, the pathfinder, the waymaker through sinister night streets, baffled in an ordinary house. He tried to remember if in a letter he’d used the joke about city mice and country mice. She said: “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.” His heart beat fast, with no reason to.

“I knew you, when we met.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I recognized you.” She lowered her red-gold lashes, then stole a quick look at him, then looked around the somnolent bar as though someone might overhear her. “I’d been told about you.”

“By George.”

“No, no. A long time ago. When I was a kid.”

“About me?”

“Well not about you exactly. Or about you exactly but I didn’t know that till I met you.” On the plaid tablecloth, she cupped her elbows in her hands, and leaned forward. “I was nine; or ten. It had been raining for a long time. Then there was a morning when I was walking Spark in the Park –”

“What?”

“Spark was a dog we had. The Park is, you know, the grounds around. There was a breeze blowing, and it felt like the rain was going to end. We were all wet. Then I looked west: there was a rainbow. I remembered what my mother said: morning rainbow in the west, then the weather will be best.”

He imagined her very vividly, in a yellow slicker and high wide-mouthed boots, and her hair finer even and curlier than now; and wondered how she knew which way west was, a problem he still sometimes stumbled over.

“It was a rainbow, but bright, and it looked like it came down just – there, you know, not far; I could see the grass, all sparkling and stained every color there. The sky had got big, you know, the way it does when it clears at last after a long rainy time, and everything looked near; the place the rainbow came down was near; and I wanted more than anything to go stand in it – and look up – and be covered with colors.”

Smoky laughed. “That’s hard,” he said.

She laughed too, dipping her head and raising the back of her hand to her mouth in a way that already seemed heartstirringly familiar to him. “It sure is,” she said. “It seemed to take *forever*.”

“You mean you –”

“Every time you thought you were coming close, it would be just as far off, in a different place; and if you came to that place, it would be in the place you came from; and my throat was sore with running, and not getting any closer. But you know what you do then –”

“Walk away from it,” he said, surprised at his own voice but Somehow sure this was the answer.

“Sure. That isn’t as easy as it sounds, but –”

“No, I don’t suppose.” He had stopped laughing.





“ – but if you do it right – ”

“No, wait,” he said.

“ – just right, then... ”

“They don’t really come down, now,” Smoky said. “They don’t, not really.”

“They don’t *here*,” she said. “Now listen. I followed Spark; I let him choose, because he didn’t care, and I did. It took just one step, and turn around, and guess what.”

“I can’t guess. You were covered in colors.”

“No. It’s not like that. Outside, you see colors inside it; so, inside it – ”

“You see colors outside it.”

“Yes. The whole world colored, as though it were made of candy – no, like it was made of a rainbow. A whole colored world as soft as light all around as far as you can see. You want to run and explore it. But you don’t dare take a step, because it might be the wrong step – so you only look, and look. And you think: Here I am at last.” She had fallen into thought. “At last,” she said again softly.

“How,” he said, and swallowed, and began again. “How did I come into it? You said someone told you... ”

“Spark,” she said. “Or someone like him.”

She looked closely at him, and he tried to compose his features into a semblance of pleasant attention. “Spark is the dog,” he said.

“Yes.” She had become reluctant, it seemed, to go on. She picked up her spoon and studied herself, tiny and upside down, in its concavity, and put it down. “Or someone like him. Well. It’s not important.”

“Wait,” he said.

“It only lasted a minute. While we stood there, I *thought* – ” guardedly, and not looking at him “ – I thought Spark said... ” She looked up at him. “Is this hard to believe?”

“Well, yes. It is. Hard to believe.”

“I didn’t think it would be. Not for you.”

“Why not for me?”

“Because,” she said, and cradled her cheek in her hand, her face sad, disappointed even, which silenced him utterly, “because you were the one Spark talked about.”

It was probably only because he had nothing at all left to say, that in that moment – or rather in the moment after that moment – a difficult question or delicate proposition which Smoky had been mulling over all day tumbled out of his mouth in a far from finished form.

“Yes,” she said, not raising her cheek from her hand but with a new smile lighting her face like a morning rainbow in the west.

And so when the false dawn of the City’s lights showed them the snow piled deep and crisp and even on their window-ledge, they lay with the deep crisp bedclothes up around their necks and talked. They hadn’t yet slept.

“What,” he said, “are you talking about?”

She laughed and curled her toes against him. He felt strange, giddy, in a certain way he hadn’t felt since before puberty, which was odd, but there it was: that feeling of being filled up so full that the tips of his fingers and the top of his head tingled: shone, maybe, if he were to look at them. Anything was possible. “It’s make-believe, isn’t it,” he said, and she turned over smiling and fitted their bodies together like a double s.

Make-believe. When he was a kid, when he and others found some buried thing – neck of a brown bottle, tarnished spoon, a stone even that bore half an ancient spike-hole – they could convince themselves it was of great age. It had been there when George Washington was alive. Earlier. It was venerable, and immensely valuable. They convinced themselves of this by a collective act of will, which at the same time they concealed from each other: like make-believe, but different.

“So see?” she said. “It was all meant to be. And I knew it.”

“But why?” he said, delighted, in torment; “why are you so sure?”

“Because it’s a Tale. And Tales work out.”

“But I don’t know it’s a tale.”

“People in tales *don’t* know, always. But there they are.”

One winter night when he was a boy, boarding then with a half-brother who was half-heartedly religious, he first saw a ring around the moon. He stared up at it, immense, icy, half as wide as the night sky, and grew certain that it could only mean the End of the World. He waited thrilled in that suburban yard for the still night to break

apart in apocalypse, all the while knowing in his heart that it would not: that there is nothing in this world not proper to it and that it contains no such surprises. That night he dreamt of Heaven: Heaven was a dark amusement park, small and joyless, just an iron Ferris wheel turning in eternity and a glum arcade to amuse the faithful. He awoke relieved, and never after believed his prayers, though he had said them for his brother without rancor. He would say hers, if she asked him to, and gladly; but she said none, that he knew of; she asked instead assent to something, something so odd, so unencompassable by the common world he had always lived in, so — he laughed, amazed. “A fairy tale,” he said.

“I guess,” she said sleepily. She reached behind her for his hand, and drew it around her. “I guess, if you want.”

He knew he would have to believe in order to go where she had been; knew that, if he believed, he could go there even if it didn't exist, if it was make-believe. He moved the hand she had drawn around her down her long flesh, and with a little sound she pressed herself against him. He searched himself for that old will, long in disuse. If she went there, ever, he didn't want to be left behind; wanted never to be farther from her than this.

*Life is short, or long*

In May at Edgewood Daily Alice in the dark of the woods sat on a shining rock that jutted out over a deep pool, a pool made by the fall of water down a cleft in high rock walls. The stream that hurtled ceaselessly through the cleft to plunge into the pool made a speech as it did so, a speech repetitive yet always full of interest; Daily Alice listened, though she had heard it all before. She looked a lot like the girl on the soda bottle, though not so delicate and lacking wings.

“Grandfather Trout,” she said to the pool, and again: “Grandfather Trout.” She waited then, and when nothing came of this, took up two small stones and plunged them into the water (cold and silky as only falling water held in stone pools seems to be) and knocked them together, which within the water made a sound like distant guns and hung longer than sounds hang in air. Then there swam out from somewhere in the weed-bearded hidey-holes along the bank

a great white trout, an albino without speckle or belt, his pink eye solemn and large. The repeated ripples caused by the waterfall made him seem to shudder, his great eye to wink or maybe tremble with tears (can fish cry? she wondered, not for the first time).

When she thought she had his attention, she began to tell him how she had gone to the City in the fall and met this man in George Mouse's house, and how she had known instantly (or at least decided very quickly) that he would be the one that it had been promised she would "find or make up," as Spark had long ago put it to her. "While you slept through the winter," she said shyly, tracing the quartz muscle of the rock she sat on, smiling but not looking at him (because she spoke of whom she loved), "we, well we met again, and made promises – you know –" She saw him flick his ghostly tail; she knew this to be a painful subject. She stretched out her great length on the cool rock and, chin in hands and eyes alight, told him about Smoky in terms glowing and vague, which didn't seem to move the fish to enthusiasm. She took no notice. It *must* be Smoky that had been meant, it could be no other. "Don't you think so? Don't you agree?" More cautiously then: "Will they be satisfied?"

"No telling," Grandfather Trout said gloomily. "Who's to say what's in their minds?"

"But you said..."

"I bring their messages, daughter. Don't expect any more from *me*."

"Well," she said, put out, "I won't wait forever. I love him. Life is short."

"Life," said Grandfather Trout as though his throat were thick with tears, "is long. Too long." He turned his fins carefully and with a motion of his tail slid backwards into his hiding place.

"Tell them I came, anyway," she shouted after him, her voice small against the waterfall's. "Tell them I did my part."

But he was gone.

She wrote to Smoky: "I'm going to get married," and his heart turned cold where he stood by the letter-box, until he realized she meant to him. "Great-aunt Cloud has read the cards very carefully,



once for each part, it's to be Midsummer Day and this is what you have to do. Please *please* follow all these instructions *very carefully* or I don't know what might happen."

Which is how Smoky came to be walking not riding to Edgewood, with a wedding-suit in his pack old not new, and food made not bought; and why he had begun to look around himself for a place to spend the night, that he must beg or find but not pay for.

*Trumps turned  
at Edgewood*

He had not known how suddenly the industrial park would quit and the country begin. It was late afternoon and he had turned westerly, and the road had become edgeworn, and patched like an old shoe in many shades of tar. On either side the fields and farms came down to meet the road; he walked beneath guardian trees neither farm nor road that cast manifold shadows now and then over him. The gregarious weeds that frequent roadsides, dusty, thick, and blowsy, friends to man and traffic, nodded from fence and ditch by the way. Less and less often he would hear the hum of a car; the hum would grow intermittently, as the car went up and down hills, and then suddenly it would be on him very loud and roar past surprised, potent, fast, leaving the weeds blown and chuckling furiously for a moment; then the roar would just as quickly subside to a far hum again, and then gone, and the only sounds the insect orchestra and his own feet striking.

For a long time he had been walking somewhat uphill, but now the incline crested, and he looked out over a broad sweep of midsummer country. The road he stood on went on down through it, past meadows and through pastures and around wooded hills; it disappeared in a valley near a little town whose steeple just showed above the bursting green, and then appeared again, a tiny grey band curling into blue mountains in whose cleft the sun was setting amid roly-poly clouds.

And just then a woman on a porch at Edgewood far away turned a trump called the Journey. There was the Traveler, pack on his back and stout stick in his hand, and the long and winding road before him to traverse; and the Sun too, though whether setting or rising

she had never decided. Beside the cards' unfolding pattern, a brown cigarette smoldered in a saucer. She moved the saucer and put the Journey in its place in the pattern, and then turned another card. It was the Host.

When Smoky reached the bottom of the first of the rolling hills the road stitched up, he was in a trough of shadow, and the sun had set.

On the whole he preferred finding a place to sleep to asking for one; he had brought two blankets. He had even thought of finding a hay-barn to sleep in, as travelers do in books (his books), but the real hay-barns he passed seemed not only Private Property but also highly functional and crowded with large animals. He began to feel, in fact, somewhat lonely as the twilight deepened and the fields grew vague, and when he came on a bungalow at the bottom of the hill he went up to its picket fence and wondered how he might phrase what he thought must be an odd request.

*Junipers*

It was a white bungalow snuggled within bushy evergreens. Roses just blown grew up trellises beside the green Dutch door. White-painted stones marked the path from the door; on the darkling lawn a young deer looked up at him immobile in surprise, and dwarves sat cross-legged on toadstools or snuck away holding treasure. On the gate was a rustic board with a legend burned on it: The Junipers. Smoky unlatched the gate and opened it, and a small bell tinkled in the silence. The top of the Dutch door opened, and yellow lamplight streamed out. A woman's voice said "Friend or foe?" and laughed.

"Friend," he said, and walked toward the door. The air smelled unmistakably of gin. The woman leaning on the door's bottom half was one of those with a long middle age; Smoky couldn't tell where along it she stood. Her thin hair might have been grey or brown, she wore cat's-eye glasses and smiled a false-toothed smile; her arms folded on the door were comfortable and freckled. "Well, I don't know *you*," she said.

"I was wondering," Smoky said, "am I on the right road for a town called Edgewood?"

“I couldn’t tell you,” she said. “Jeff? Can you tell this young man the way to Edgewood?” She awaited an answer from within he couldn’t hear, and then opened the door. “Come in,” she said. “We’ll see.”

The house was tiny and tidy and stuffed with stuff. An old, old dog of the dust-mop kind sniffed at his feet, laughing breathlessly; Smoky bumped into a bamboo telephone table, shouldered a knick-knack shelf, stepped on a sliding scatter rug and stumbled through a narrow archway into a parlor that smelled of roses, bay rum, and last winter’s fires. Jeff put down his newspaper and lifted his slippered feet from their hassock. “Edgewood?” he asked around his pipe.

“Edgewood. I was given directions, sort of.”

“You hitching?” Jeff’s lean mouth opened like a fish’s to puff as he perused Smoky doubtfully.

“No, walking actually.” Above the fireplace was a sampler. It said:

I will Live in a House  
By the side of the Road  
& Be a Friend to Man.  
Margaret Juniper 1927

“I’m going there to get married.”

Ahhh, they seemed to say.

“Well.” Jeff stood. “Marge, get the map.”

It was a county map or something, much more detailed than Smoky’s; he found the constellation of towns he knew of, neatly outlined, but nothing for Edgewood. “It should be somewhere around these.” Jeff found the stub of a pencil, and with a “Hmmm” and a “Let’s see,” connected the centers of the five towns with a five-pointed star. The pentagon enclosed by the lines of the star he tapped with the pencil, and raised his sandy eyebrows at Smoky. An old map-reader’s trick, Smoky surmised. He discerned the shadow of a road crossing the pentagon, joining the road he walked, which

stopped for good here at Meadowbrook. “Hmmm,” he said.

“That’s about all I can tell you,” Jeff said, re-rolling the map.

“You going to walk all night?” Marge asked.

“Well, I’ve got a bedroll.”

Marge pursed her lips at the comfortless blankets strapped to the top of his pack. “And I suppose you haven’t eaten all day.”

“Oh, I’ve got, you know, sandwiches, and an apple . . .”

The kitchen was papered with baskets of impossibly luscious fruit, blue grapes and russet apples and cleft peaches that protruded like bottoms from the harvest. Marge moved dish after steaming dish from stove to oilcloth, and when it was all consumed, Jeff poured out banana liqueur into tiny ruby glasses. That did it; all his polite remonstrance with their hospitality vanished, and Marge “did up the davenport” and Smoky was put to bed wrapped in an earth-brown Indian blanket.

For a moment after the Junipers had left him, he lay awake looking around the room. It was lit only by a night-light that plugged right into the outlet, a night-light in the shape of a tiny, rose-covered cottage. By its light he saw Jeff’s maple chair, the kind whose orange paddle arms had always looked tasty to him, like glossy hard candy. He saw the ruffled curtains move in the rose-odorous breeze. He listened to the dust-mop dog sigh in his dreams. He found another sampler. This one said, he thought but could not be sure:

The Things that Make us Happy  
Make us Wise.

He slept.