

III.

The Blue Door

Bethel, Connecticut, September, 1970

THE RUMORS ARRIVED BEFORE THE NEW TEACHER DID. That he was young, that he had gone to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship, that he wore cable knit turtleneck sweaters with bell-bottom jeans and square-toed leather boots with big brass buckles on the side. He wore his blond hair almost to his shoulders, like Illya Kuryakin in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* He planned to teach a special class, an experimental class for gifted students that he would hand pick. When the time came you, your brother and your mutual friends waited anxiously to learn which of you had been chosen.

The others made the cut. You didn't. You got stuck in Mrs. Schnabel's fifth-period English class, Mrs. Schnabel with her so-called "port wine stain," the purple birthmark on one side of her jaw that constantly changed shape, looking like a rooster's comb one moment, and like a giraffe or the state of Florida or one of the Great Lakes the next. During your first class with her, as Mrs. Schnabel droned on about subordinate and independent clauses, you gazed at her birthmark with horrified fascination, convinced that it would burst open at any moment, splattering you with a mixture of blood and pus.

You made up your mind then and there. Somehow you'd get into the new teacher's class. You were determined.

LATER THAT DAY, when the last bell rang, you ran down the hall to the new teacher's classroom and watched from a distance as a

group of his students, including your brother and your mutual friends, gathered to talk to him.

That's when you got your first good look at the new teacher. He was tall, but not as tall as you had expected. His hair was blond and long, but not down to his shoulders. He wore blue jeans – but they were new, clean, and neatly pressed. And he wore boots, too, but without brass buckles. He looked serious and even a bit concerned while listening to the students, nodding gravely every so often, then suddenly breaking into a smile. When it was time for him to speak he did so with theatrical gestures of his large hands.

While waiting for the others to leave, you tried to come up with something clever to say, something dry and clever and witty to set you apart and prove you worthy of membership in the new teacher's special class. Surely you were as worthy as the others. How could you not be worthy? That you hadn't been chosen – it had been a mistake, an oversight, an aberration. The moment he saw you the new teacher would realize his mistake. He'd take one look at you and say I'm so sorry, I must have made a mistake, an awful, terrible mistake. Can you forgive me?

The teacher's ears – the parts not hidden under his long hair – were long, so was his nose, long and curved, with deep notches hollowed out by the bridge of the round, gold-framed glasses that he wore. His voice was soft, high, and nasal. His lips were thin and hardly moved when he spoke, like a ventriloquist's lips.

But what impressed you most about the new teacher was the way he listened to the other students, his eyes blinking and curious under his round glasses, his head tilted toward whoever spoke to him, his hands propped on his thighs, his elbows relaxed. Everyone, you thought to yourself as you stood and watched from a dozen yards down the hallway, should be listened to like that.

As you kept watching you noticed the scar running down one side of the teacher's face – a thin, pale scar that went from the side of his nose to the bottom of his earlobe.

At last the students left, leaving the new teacher standing alone in his empty classroom. You took a step forward, but then

you stopped, realizing you had failed to come up with anything clever or witty to say. You stood there chewing your lip, not sure what to do next.

The new teacher put some papers and books into a battered briefcase, snapped it shut, and left the classroom carrying it. He locked the door and walked right past you and down the corridor. You followed him.

A CLOUDY SEPTEMBER day, the overcast sky the same gloomy gray as the sheets of stainless steel and aluminum your papa slathered with steel blue and scored for the saw, the drill press, the bending machine.

The new teacher walked quickly, his briefcase swinging with each stride, the thumb of his free hand hooked into a front pocket of his jeans. His long strides carried him past the library and Mullaney's store, across the train tracks, past the lumber yard and Vaghi woodworks and Dolan's hay barn and the fuel oil storage tanks and Stevenson's Sunoco station, with its inadvertent museum of recently wrecked cars. You followed the teacher as he continued down Greenwood Avenue, toward the Sycamore diner and the First National supermarket, past the Catholic Church, with its wicked witch's hat of a steeple.

This was Bethel, the town to which, in 1957, when you and your brother were six months old, with your father's eighty-year-old mother in tow, your parents moved from Bethesda, Maryland, your father having quit his high-paying job with what was then the National Bureau of Standards to try his luck as a freelance inventor. It was where you would spend the next seventeen years of your life.

Once, the towns of Bethel and neighboring Danbury were known for their hat factories. "Danbury Crowns Them All" claimed an elaborate sign mounted on the roof of a coal shed, where it greeted travelers arriving from parts north. The sign showed a derby in red neon hovering over a crown outlined with hundreds of incandescent light bulbs.

According to local legend, the man responsible for bringing

hat manufacturing to the area was a struggling fur trapper named Zadoc Benedict. One frosty winter morning, finding a hole in his boot, he plugged it with a scrap of rabbit fur. That night, after a long day of trapping, Benedict took off his boot to discover that the pressure and sweat from his foot had transformed the scrap into a stiff but malleable substance, one ideally suited – he would in time discover – for making men’s hats. Benedict spent the next few years experimenting with various techniques.

Zadoc Benedict, too, was an inventor.

Having perfected his hat-making procedure, Benedict opened his first hat factory. Within a generation a dozen more hat factories flourished in Bethel. At their peak just after the Civil War they pounded out over a million hats per year – including, it’s been said, the famous stovepipe worn by President Lincoln himself.

By the time you and your parents moved there, all but two or three of the hat factories had been abandoned or burned down or otherwise come to ruin. Over time the rest of them burned down, too. Your papa would take you and your brother to watch them burn. It was cheaper than going to the movies.

IN 1760, A year after the town was established, Captain Benjamin Hickok built his home at the southwest corner of Chestnut Street and Greenwood Avenue. The Hickok house doubled as a tavern and served as a command post for General Israel Putnam during the Revolutionary War. To its rear stood a carriage house that, two hundred and ten years later, its owners converted into a rental property. They painted the front door blue and laid a path of fieldstones leading up to it.

From the sidewalk across the street you watched the teacher walk down the fieldstone path. He entered the cottage and shut the blue door behind him. For a while you stood there, on the sidewalk, staring at the blue door, not sure what to do next. It was just like you: all initiative, no follow-through.

You heard a rumble of thunder. You had no umbrella. It started raining. You stood there with water dripping down your face.

You were about to give up and go home when suddenly the blue door opened and the teacher stuck his head out.

Care to come in? he said.

A CAST IRON stove. A bed in the corner covered by a rainbow-shaded serape. Improvised shelves packed with all kinds of books. An unvarnished slab of wood mounted on some bricks in the center of the room served as a table, with various-sized cushions scattered around it for sitting. Everything neat, tidy, clean.

The teacher hung your wet jacket. He had you take off your wet sneakers and put them on the tiled apron in front of the stove. He offered you a cup of Chinese tea. The tea tasted and smelled like smoke from a burning hat factory. You asked for sugar. The teacher gave you honey. Seated on a cushion at the Japanese-style table, you took tentative sips from a pottery cup with a fish design and no handle.

The teacher wore sweatpants and a gray sweatshirt with the word OXFORD in blue across the chest. He sat across from you, speaking in a soft voice, asking you questions about your family, your mother and father. He was especially interested to learn about your father, having heard that he was an inventor.

What sort of things does your father invent? he asked.

You told him about the Color Coder, the Mercury Switch, the Shoe Sole Machine, the Optical Differential Thickness Measuring Instrument, the Induced Quadrature Field Motor, the Null Type Comparison Reflectometer, the Neutralized Cathode-Ray Deflection Tube. The teacher smiled.

He has his laboratory at the bottom of our driveway, you explained, in a converted barn. We call it the Building. The floors are all rotten. It's full of mice and spiders and snakes. He doesn't mind. In fact, my father sort of likes it. (You were careful not to say "my papa.")

Sounds like a most interesting man.

He's an anglophile. He was born in Italy, but he talks with an English accent.

Speaks, said the teacher. He *speaks* with an English accent.

You did your best to describe your mother, explaining that she was Italian, too, but that unlike your father, who spoke English better than Walter Cronkite, she had a heavy accent and coined her own distorted versions of common idiomatic expressions, turning “when worse comes to worst” into “bad that it goes,” and “don’t stand on ceremony” into “no make compliment,” and “I don’t give a damn” into “I no give a goop.” Some people find it charming, you said.

The teacher laughed and so did you.

You told the teacher about your grandmother, Nonnie, who had her own little room in a corner of the house (decorated with Japanese fans, smelling of lilac and mothballs), and the family dog, Pa’al (the apostrophe had been your idea), and how poorly behaved she was, how – to the amusement and horror of dinner guests – she’d climb on the dining room table after, and sometimes even during, the dessert course.

The teacher asked you about your brother. He wondered how you and George got along. You confessed that you fought a lot, you weren’t sure why, maybe because people were always comparing you or lumping you together – the Selgin Twins; the Selgin Boys – as if you were one and the same.

Which we aren’t, you said.

Of course you’re not, said the teacher.

You went on talking, with the teacher mostly asking questions and you answering them. Meanwhile the rain kept falling, pattering against the carriage house roof, dripping down from its eaves. There was a fancy wooden chessboard at the center of the table, its checkerboard pattern formed by alternating veneers of different woods. Seeing you admire it the teacher asked if you cared to play. You’d never played chess before.

It’s not hard, the teacher said. I’ll show you.

He showed you how to move the pieces. At first it seemed impossibly complicated, all those different pieces and so many ways to move them.

Take your time, the teacher instructed. This is one game that gets played *between* the moves.

By the third or fourth game it got easier, though it still took the teacher less than a dozen moves to checkmate your king. You played until it started to get dark outside and the rain fell less hard. It was time to go. The teacher let you borrow his umbrella.

As you stood ready to leave by the door, he said, I enjoyed our visit.

Me too, you said.

I'll see what I can do about getting you into my class.

You hadn't even asked.

THAT'S ALL YOU'D remember, that and the smell of the stove and candle smoke and smoky tea, and of all the books filling the teacher's shelves—a musty, vanilla-and-mushroom smell. And the sound of rain falling as you played chess.

You'd remember too how, as you walked home that day, things were different. The houses, the church steeple, the gasoline pumps at the Sunoco station, the cars splashing through puddles, the streams of smoke rising from people's chimneys—they all looked the same. The town was the same town you'd spent most of your life in, where you rode your bike and waited for the school bus and watched the hat factories burn down one by one. Nothing had changed, really. Yet nothing would ever be quite the same.