

The Storytellers

By Wilmot B. Irvin

CHAPTER ONE

I stood under the portico of Bayliss Hall, leaning against one of its massive cement columns, as the December rain fell hard upon the granite steps below me. It was nearly dark. The slick paper fax I had received from my brother only an hour before lay crumpled in my left hand. I folded it gently, smoothing the creases that smeared its message, and slipped it into the pocket of my raincoat.

I had spent the afternoon at the home of my friend and mentor—my former and now fellow English master, actually—Perry Coleman, celebrating the conclusion of another semester at Weymouth Falls School. For that reason I was not available to answer the telephone when it so insistently summoned me earlier in the afternoon, first in my room and later in the headmaster’s office. Finally, out of desperation, Tompkins sent the fax after receiving assurances from Dr. Porcher’s secretary that I would either surface or be located before dinner. I had not yet picked up my last paycheck of the semester, she explained to my brother, as if that should dispel any lingering doubt.

Surmising Perry would know my whereabouts, old Mrs. Lucas telephoned him. When I got on the line she said only that I had an important message awaiting me. Perry drove me to the campus. He waited in the car as I mounted the granite steps, three at a stride, and hurried through the dark corridor to the stairwell leading to the third floor offices of the headmaster and his staff.

Of course I suspected bad news. Nevertheless Tompkins’ letter caught me naked and surprised by its terse, matter-of-fact delivery: “Our father has died. Come home immediately.” It was written in his important-looking script on his personal stationery. He closed with “Best regards” and his full signature, as if there may be some question as to authenticity.

Now, as I waited for the cab to arrive from town, I thought of that day almost thirty years ago when my father left me here on these granite steps in early September, a gangly, gap-toothed kid dressed in blue blazer and

khaki trousers and enormous brown oxfords. My mother kissed me and pulled me close to her breast for a moment, and then with a firm grip he shook my hand, his eyes steely-blue and piercing, and set my course. As he drove steadily away down the long, oak-lined avenue that leads from Bayliss Hall to the two-lane county road connecting the school to the little village of Weymouth Falls, Virginia, I fought courageously until the car was out of sight to hold back the hot, adolescent tears that burned like salt in my eyes.

It seemed like yesterday. That had been my auspicious initiation into adulthood, a clear and clean severance from this man who now had passed away from us, who had raised Tompkins, first, and then me, Bick—his younger son—to take life by the throat and subdue it. It seemed quite evident that Tompkins had mastered the lesson.

The headlights of the cab swung round the curve of the entranceway and shined directly into my face. I could see the orange Ford plunging toward me like a tugboat through the puddles, its wipers flailing away at the pounding raindrops, coming to take me home.

As a student I always loved the train rides home. I rode the Silver Meteor four or five times each school year, the actual number depending upon whether my father was available to drive me to Weymouth at the beginning of the term. After the first year it didn't matter to me whether I rode with him or took the train. Yet coming home on the train was the best. I was awarded full-fledged adult status by the porters and stewards, who answered my questions with "Yes, sir" or "No, sir" and always a smile. And each time that gigantic metal beast sped south along the clattering track I was set free— from what, I did not know.

On this the night of my father's death I took a seat by the window in one of the half-empty passenger cars. As the train rumbled out of the Charlottesville station my mind wandered to thoughts of my early years at Weymouth, and Perry Coleman. He taught me to love Shakespeare and, later, the Victorian poets and the great American novelists of the first half of the Twentieth Century, particularly his favorite of all times — William Faulkner. And in the give and take of the teaching and learning we bonded, this forty year-old master of literature and I. Unwittingly, Perry Coleman fulfilled the needs of a boy whose father had never taken him on his knee and loved him without cost or condition or imputation of guilt. But that was years ago, and many miles of track separated that bygone time from this one.

Tompkins could never understand why I would choose to take the train when airfare was as cheap and decidedly more expedient. I suppose the numerous liberating journeys between Charlottesville and Columbia during my formative years had imprinted that mode of transportation indelibly upon my tender psyche, and neither time nor money could unloose the binding. And so tonight Tompkins would be called upon to meet my arrival at the station just after two o'clock in the morning. Ridiculous, considering the flight would have touched down well before ten o'clock.

Jane died three years and a month ago. Time stopped then, or at least faltered, but afterwards it ran out again like milk spilt from an overturned bottle, in no particular direction and faster than desired. We had been given no children, only a marriage of fifteen years. Throughout it I had loved her with every ounce of my being, and when she died I had the sensation of being held underwater and running out of air.

And so when the funeral was over I left kith and kin and rode the trains. After nearly a month of whistle stops and Pullmans I came to rest in Weymouth Falls, at the home of Perry Coleman. He had just celebrated the attainment of his seventieth birthday. Following my completion of a not altogether strict but fairly lengthy regimen of kitchen therapy, Perry wheedled and cajoled Henry Porcher into offering me a position on the faculty for the upcoming term. Perry was able to persuade him my juris doctorate would add, if not weight, then color to his faculty's credentials.

And so in my second life I became an English master at Weymouth Falls School. My father was horrified. My brother was humiliated. I had walked away from a secure partnership slot in one of the city's major law firms and become instead a lit teacher at a secondary school in the middle of nowhere. No matter that my father, my brother and I were all graduates of the ivy-covered institution. I was going backward, not forward, and had plainly released my stranglehold from around the throat of life. Worse than that, it was widely rumored I had found God in the midst of my crisis, and no Averett before me had ever so openly admitted defeat. Neither my father nor my brother had condescended to ask me if it were true.

I pondered all these things as the black night flew past the window. I must have dozed off at some point midway through the journey, because I remember waking as the train braked to a stop around eleven o'clock. The car was nearly empty. The sleepy conductor shuffled down the dark aisle of the passenger compartment and asked my destination.

“Columbia,” I mumbled. “Where are we?”

He laughed quietly. “Greensboro. Go back to sleep.” Slowly he moved past me and down the passageway, his navy blue cap cocked to the side and back on his head, the counter in his hand.

I glanced at my watch. Tompkins would have put Mother to bed by now, and gone to Father’s study for a cognac. The estate would be on his mind. Before my reversal Father had named my brother and me co-executors and trustees under his Will. This had infuriated Tompkins at the time. It meant that Bick the lawyer would one day have a substantial say in the family business, which Tompkins operated alongside my father, until my mother’s death.

Now, even worse, unless the provision had been changed since Jane’s passing, Tompkins was stuck with an absentee schoolteacher and religious fanatic as a business partner. I had difficulty suppressing a smile as I pictured him, sipping his Remy Martin, plotting how to prevent me from developing a housing project for low income inner-city residents, or establishing a foundation to assist our church’s missions work in the Ukraine. Of course I had no intention of doing either, but Tompkins must anticipate the worst-case scenario and plan for it, as Father always did, in order to maintain his stranglehold on life.

I closed my eyes and drifted back to dreamland as the train jerked forward into the night fog and rolled out of the sleepy Greensboro yard, bound for Columbia. I would be fresh and rested for my encounter with Tompkins. Ah, the benefits of rail travel!

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