

THE TREASURE MAP

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THE TREASURE MAP

JACQUELINE EIS

Brinnell, Nebraska—1957

Elizabeth heard a sound upstairs, the creaking of bedsprings perhaps, or the moan of the floor. For a moment, she thought it was Edwin lightly tapping his cane on the floor, his signal for her to come up and help him out of bed. How could that be? She set aside her ledger and listened. The sounds rapped again and she strained not to let herself believe Edwin had come back from the dead. She went to the front room and listened at the bottom of the stairway, a flue for sounds and voices where she had always been able to hear the truth of things going on upstairs—the children’s secret battles, Edwin’s labored breathing during yet another attack. But no, it was someone walking on the roof, then pounding on it with a hammer. Of course. Tommy was replacing shingles, sealing the leaks. The rust-brown stain on the second-story ceiling had been spreading for months. She knew she should feel grateful, but she didn’t. She would rather be haunted by Edwin’s ghost than to have his brother constantly shadowing her.

After Edwin’s death, Tommy had been impossible to send on his way. The day after the funeral, her children, Grace, Roger, and Edith, and the grandchildren went home to other parts of the state, leaving Elizabeth with dozens of towels and sheets to wash. Satisfied that Edwin had left her well enough off, his sisters, Nancy and Betty, returned to South Dakota. His local sisters, Carol and Leona, stopped bringing bread and casseroles, and she seldom heard from his brothers, Pete and Harlan. Frank, her youngest son, worked at the post office but avoided the house for fear of work. Only Tommy, who had never made a home to return to, stayed on with Pete all that spring and came by every day.

He called at the house too often, on the pretense of being helpful. Yes, he fixed a basement step that had creaked for years, shoveled coal into the bin long before cold weather was a possibility, and mowed the lawn every Saturday. “Ed would

have wanted me to,” he said after each task. She grudgingly fed him lunch for his trouble, and gave him some of Edwin’s tools and their mother’s mantle clock that he hinted he wanted, hoping that once he had them he would leave. She paid him what little she could, but her generosity only seemed to encourage him.

He often drove in at five. “Would you feed an old bum?” he would ask. She honored her family duty to feed his brother, as long as she didn’t have to watch him eat. He chewed with his mouth open and gobbled his food like an animal. “I ate a bite earlier,” she would say as she brought his plate to the table and turned away. She couldn’t help thinking of Edwin—how gracious he had been about his food. When she placed a bowl of rice before him—plain, unbuttered rice—he would smile in anticipation. She had always admired his capacity for pleasure, even during those years when he said he didn’t love her, and she had nearly believed him.

During the thirties, when the bedrooms were full of half-grown children, Tommy, the wanderer, showed up at their door, empty-handed, dirty and tick-ridden from hoboing and sleeping in open fields. She washed his clothes in lye and made him bathe in a tin tub in the barn before he was allowed an iron cot in the basement during the winter or on the back porch in the summer. He complained about her rules to Edwin, but she thought he was happy enough to be welcomed at all. He was Edwin’s obvious favorite, though they couldn’t have been more unlike.

During the last years of Edwin’s illness, she acted as nurse, kept the house, hosted the film salesmen, and managed the Cameo Theater five nights a week. The business was entirely her responsibility now, her only source of income, but on Mondays, the only night she didn’t show movies at the Cameo, Tommy often moseyed into the living room after dinner and sat in Edwin’s wingback chair, listening to the radio. She didn’t



encourage him with conversation because his voice sounded cottony, like Edwin's, and she was already losing her sense of how their voices differed. It irritated her that he eyed the stairway to the bedrooms as the hour grew late, and she made a point of ignoring him. At nine o'clock she said simply, "Time to leave, Tommy," and he went.

By mid-August he had worn out his welcome at Carol's and was sleeping in his car in Harlan's driveway. Finally, he came right out and said, "I'd work for room and board and pay you some extra if you'd let me sleep in one of the extra rooms upstairs this winter."

Elizabeth made her feelings clear. "You've been a good help to me, Tommy, and I appreciate all you've done, but I can't have you staying upstairs now that I'm here alone. Brinnell's a small town. I've got a business to run." She knew her fear of gossip was only an excuse. "You'll have to stay with one of your brothers or sisters like you've been doing," she told him, though she wasn't sure any of them would welcome Tommy for long.

He gave her that stubborn look she had always blamed for his not having a steady job, a business, a home, or a wife. Edwin once tried to recruit him as a projectionist, but he fussed over the splicer and had even managed to run a reel backwards. When he took off without warning that same week, Edwin was disappointed, "I swear he screws up on purpose," and they hired a reliable man.

"I've always given you fair value and more for your dollar."

She pursed her lips. This could not become an argument about money. Tommy knew how to work, but he started when he pleased, took plenty of smoking breaks on the job, and ate like a threshing crew. When he painted the front porch floor, his two-day job lasted a week. If she added up the food and beer, she was still getting a bit of a bargain, but not much, especially when she had to deal with his temper. He cursed at every board he painted and splattered gray paint on the white siding and window panes. He cleaned up the mess, but she had to find the turpentine for him, "Right there in the garage, Tommy, where it always is," and mix the soapy water for the windows. Always an ordeal.

When he came back a month later, asking again, she felt obliged to help. "It would only be for a few months, but if you're willing to clean up part of the old barn out back and make it livable, I'll give you that bedstead in the basement. You can stay until the weather turns cold, if you want

to." She meant to say "if you have to" and winced at her cowardice.

The idea clearly did not appeal. "I'll still need a place to wash up."

"You can use the bathroom in the basement. I'll leave the side door unlocked." She did not add that the door to the main floor would remain locked.

"Fair enough," Tommy said.

Elizabeth once thought she knew how to be a widow, but in her first months alone, she wasted much of her time and dissipated her energy. Each day she tackled a task she had long let slide, cleaned a cupboard or threw away receipts for things they no longer owned. *Mine*, she corrected herself, *not ours*, and mourned the loss of a pronoun she would never use again. She considered how many such tasks needed doing before she could be free and resolved not to pause over any item that might slow her with sentimental memories. A stack of unread novels still waited on the coffee table, but when she sat down, she found that fatigue simply overcame her, and she fell asleep on the couch, feverishly, rosary in hand, as if praying to recover from a long illness.

As Edwin's heart enlarged and, ironically, grew weaker, he needed longer rests during the day. She had kept the house quiet for him, but the silence was different now. It lacked expectation. She caught herself still tiptoeing but continued through the hallways softly, liking the thought that her house was hushed because she had not run riot.

Tommy intruded upon this silence and freedom. On the mornings when she had every reason to sleep late after working until midnight, she woke to hear Tommy opening the side door at 6:00 A.M., followed by noisy footsteps down the stairs and the sound of the basement toilet flushing.

One night, after closing, when she stayed to clean the sconces in the theater lobby, Tommy pounded on the door.

"I saw your car out front and thought something mighta happened."

He looked behind her. "You're here alone?" he asked.

"Of course I am."

Was he worried that she was with a man? Well, what if she had been? Did that give him the right to come making a fuss?

...she fell asleep on the couch, feverishly, rosary in hand...

"You'd better be gettin' home," he said, and picked up a rag to dry the fixture.

She supposed he meant well, so said nothing, but hoped her expression would show she was displeased with his snoopy protection.

In September, Elizabeth cleaned out Edwin's dresser. His intimate things held the mustiness of the aging mahogany chest-of-drawers his mother had given them when they married. A rotted rubber band broke as she unwrapped the bundle of Tommy's old letters she found in the top drawer. She sat on the edge of the bed, a third glass of sherry in her hand, reading one yellowed sheet of lined tablet paper after another, from envelopes postmarked Portland, Oregon, 1943, 1944, and 1945:

*Dear Pitcher Show Eddy,
Well, we got oure flat tops about finished we
built 50 of them and 30 Invasion Barges and
now we are going fore 30 transports and a
Drye dock so we will keep bizzy i have \$48
cash now and 35 fifty dollars Bonds gitting
ritch and if you have a chance to find out
about the old Jim Curtis place see what it is
worth and how manny akers and the tax on it
and if it can be bought i dont know just what
i will do yet after this is over i am going to do
something i think if i can keep old age down
long enought fore after this is over there wont
be annymore jobs fore old guyes like me....*

Tommy was eight years older than Edwin, fifty-seven when he wrote that letter, building warships and thinking himself an old man. The shipyard job during the war was the only steady work he'd ever had.

She and Edwin had laughed together over his letters. Edwin's laugh was one of affection, but hers was one of scorn at the coarsely penciled pages and the awful spelling. One envelope contained a scribbled map showing locations of buried coffee cans full of silver dollars outside a rooming house in Portland. "*Sum of them is emty, for decoys,*" he wrote. In the next letter, he told Edwin to throw away the map because he'd dug up his money and moved to a new address. About the Jim Curtis place, Edwin said, "I knew it was a waste of time. Tommy will always duck a trap."

Tommy was seventy now, and it didn't look like he had any of his "ritchies" left. And Edwin, a lover of music, the mayor of Brinnell, was dead before his sixty-second birthday. She looked up into the dresser mirror. Fifty-seven now too, but

still pretty it told her and not completely run-down by work.

A small photo album in the same drawer held a picture that made her pause. She remembered taking it herself on a ferryboat ride during a trip to Oregon in 1935. Tommy was along that time, at Edwin's invitation. The picture had always been painful to her because Edwin glared at the camera, at her, angry that she'd let the boys get away with some mischief. They cowered next to Tommy, but she had never looked at his expression until now. Her cheeks flushed. His look, directly at the camera, smiling openly and unmistakably—though she shuddered at the thought—with something more than affection. Had Tommy once had feelings for her? How could she not have noticed?

She pitied him but love surely required more. She considered offering him the letters and photo, then decided not to. She didn't want to stir up old emotions. The letters belonged in her trunk of keepsakes with bundles of letters from Edwin on his trips—dutiful letters, but the nearest to love letters she had ever received from him. She would think of something else to give Tommy, if this feeling of goodwill lasted.

"There's no reason a man of your age couldn't clean up and look like a gentleman once in a while."

She handed Tommy two dress shirts from Edwin's closet. Purchased years ago when Edwin still had some weight on him, they were the only shirts that would accommodate Tommy's bull neck, his meaty girth.

He hung his head, all reluctance, yet attempted to please.

"Edwin was a finer sort of man." He paused, but Elizabeth would not deny such an obvious statement.

"Why don't ya give 'em to Frank?"

"They're not his size. His neck is a full inch smaller than his father's and his arms two inches longer. You're the only one who could wear these things."

"A reg'lar bean pole, that boy."

She held up a gray silk tie, but Tommy kept his hands in his pockets.

"I could use some work clothes, flannel shirts."

"Edwin's health didn't allow him hard labor, you know that."

"Used to be a farmer, I recall. Could use his old coveralls."

"Edwin gave you his coveralls twenty-five years ago when we sold the farm."

She had steeled herself to open Edwin's closet. His clothes hung loosely on him at the last—he had

grown so frail—but his hats and leather shoes still held the stronger form of him. It was ridiculous, she could see that now, to think that Tommy would wear Edwin's clothes. He lifted a pair of brown wing tips she handed him and stared at them. "I don't think I could use these either, Lizzy."

He rejected the silk pajamas and looked askance at the thin dress socks she offered.

"Don't see nothin' I could use."

"It wouldn't hurt you to dress up on occasion."

"When?" In a belligerent tone.

"You had to borrow clothes from Pete and Frank for Edwin's funeral."

"And Harlan borrowed me a pair of shoes."

He had stomped down the church aisle in the dress shoes, as if they'd been work boots, red-faced, his hair hacked unevenly, but at least washed and slicked down. After five minutes in the overheated church the priest noticed, and all the neighbors and relatives turned when Tommy grumbled aloud and stripped off the suit jacket, loosened his tie, and squirmed in the pew like a three-year-old.

"Too late to make a gentleman out of me, Sis," he said now.

"At the rate you're going you'll have to be buried in a borrowed suit." She thrust a handsome brown suit at him.

He took it from her but held it at a distance.

"No sense taking a good suit like this to the barn. Likely to get stolen out of my car. You hold onto it until..." He hesitated. "Until I need it."

"The idea was to clean out the closet, not plan the next funeral." But Tommy had already dropped the suit on the bed and was headed fast down the stairs. He kicked over a jar of buttons she'd left on the landing, and she heard them clatter down in a rolling cascade.

In mid-November, Tommy was still staying down in the barn. She didn't deny him a meal in the evenings, and now breakfast too, when he came up to the house in the morning and lingered near the furnace in the basement complaining of bowel trouble. She fed him hot oatmeal and said, "Eat some prunes," but her resolve was weakening. Why hadn't he gotten the itch to be on the road to Arizona or Texas as he had in other years? He often disappeared in winter without even saying goodbye. One of the brothers would receive a postcard from somewhere south in a few weeks, then he would appear in the spring just as suddenly, unless he had found work, herding sheep in Utah, or on a road crew.

She called his brother, though she hated to ask favors of the Fairfields. "Pete, he'll freeze to death out there. Please talk him into staying with you or Carol this winter."

Pete came for him that afternoon. Tommy went with him, leaving his old Pontiac beside the barn when it wouldn't start. He came back with a new battery a week later, drove away, but did not stop at the house. At Christmas, he came to call with Pete and Leona, who brought her blackberry brandy and a fruitcake. Tommy brought her a bag of walnuts tied with a frayed ribbon. Elizabeth gave each of them a box of chocolates. Tommy said nothing the entire hour he sat in her parlor, staring at the floor. This behavior was so like him. His letters had always been full of gabby detail about missing his brothers and sisters, chiding them to write more often, but in person he was often sullen, uncomfortable with conversation.

In February, she made her way down to the barn through brittle, frost-encrusted weeds. Snow was beginning to blow across the yard, snow that would cover her footprints. Tommy stopped by the barn often, but he wouldn't leave the warmth of Leona's kitchen to come to town in a storm. He had always been a fair-weather traveler.

He had padlocked the main door, so she went in through the other end of the barn, through the double doors secured only by a hasp but no lock, to the stall where they had once kept a milk cow. She pushed open the shutter separating the stalls from the storage room that had once been a chicken coop. The opening was still lined with heavy chicken wire and she couldn't step through as she had planned, but she could feel and smell his presence. It was like looking into the cage of a wild animal.

The barn still held the smell of decayed wood and long-rotted hay and manure, but now it held Tommy's stink too. Even when he was clean, Tommy smelled of gasoline, an odor that made her feel nauseous and light-headed. "Best cleaner in the world," he would say. He reeked of it for at least a week when he first arrived and made a show-off's effort to rid himself of ticks. "You suffocate the little bastards with the fumes and they back right out of your skin," he once told her and demonstrated on his leg with a gassy rag from his back pocket. An ugly leg, she remembered, scarred and bestial.

Elizabeth associated the smell with his life on the road, with his booby-trapped old Pontiac where Edwin said he hid his money. She shuddered when her grandchildren told her they'd

been riding with Tommy in his car. Lulu told her, “Grandma, you know what? Uncle Tommy went through every stop sign. I told him to stop, but he said, ‘Stop signs are for bad drivers.’”

Tommy’s iron bedstead was snugged close to the wall. The mattress was bare, a wool blanket slung carelessly over the footrail. His mother’s mantle clock, covered with dust, stood perilously at the edge of a bare stud above the bed. A shovel leaned against one wall. Had he been burying money again? She had long forgotten the heavy wooden stand she once used to kill chickens, would have said she no longer owned it, but there it was near the door, still scabbed with dirty feathers. A Big Chief tablet lay in the middle of it, and two stubby pencils stuck point first out of an empty bean can. She told herself she was not curious to know what he might have written there. A dirty work shirt hung from one of several tenpenny nails he had pounded into the bare studs. It was as well that she couldn’t reach it. She would have washed it for him and left it folded on the table, but he wouldn’t like her being there, judging him.

A mouse skittered across the floor, timid, shivering. This was the way Tommy had always lived, alone among wild creatures, happy, she’d always supposed, with little more than a bedroll and the clothes on his back. She allowed her mind to alight for a moment on a vision of Tommy upstairs in her house, deluding himself that he’d be happy there, like his dream of farming the Curtis place, sleeping in Edwin’s bed, her bed, and raised her hand to physically

brush the thought away. She stamped her foot at the mouse—“Shoo!”—and turned away from the scene with the sudden knowledge that she had caged Tommy by allowing him only this hovel. She closed the door and hurried back to the house in snow that was beginning to drift.

In early April, Carol telephoned, gossiping, working her way to something. Elizabeth answered vaguely, waiting without curiosity for Carol to circle around to her real message. She looked out the west window towards the barn and recognized a pregnant cat sitting at the corner of the herb garden, sniffing the wild catnip. A feral cat, a pretty calico, had somehow survived the hawks and dogs, and found enough mice to feed her litter for three years. Elizabeth did not put out milk for her. It would be wrong somehow, insulting.

“Tommy talked about going to Oregon all winter,” Carol said.

“He always does.”

“Then in February he and Pete got in an argument. Tommy up and left without saying goodbye.”

“That sounds like him.”

The cat lowered into her hunter’s stance, her belly nearly dragging on the ground. She pounced at something in the weeds, then stood over it, her tail swaying excitedly.

“I don’t know where he went, but he’s back already, and when Pete told him he wasn’t much help around here anymore, he said he would go live in your barn again this summer.”

There it was. Elizabeth groaned.

“I thought so. I’ll tell him you don’t want him there.”

“No, don’t. Not after all he’s done.”

“He’s been moping around here ever since Edwin’s funeral.”

“I know.”

“Well, it’s time he got over it like the rest of us.”

She was not over it, but couldn’t tell Carol. She hung up, made the sign of the cross and whispered, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” then felt like a fool. She had once planned to become a nun after Edwin’s death, but whatever grace she thought she’d amassed had somehow evaporated. Tommy was proof of that. She could not help him without resenting him. Who was she kidding?

Tommy hadn’t been back in the barn for more than a week when he climbed the porch stairs one day, knocked on the door and sat down in one of the metal lawn chairs. She went out to hear what he wanted, but could read that restless itch to travel in his manner, his big shoes splayed wide, tapping the floor, hands clasped and leaning forward in a male posture of sincerity. His car was in the driveway, and he told her he’d said his goodbyes to his brothers and sisters.

“You’re leaving so soon?”

“I’ve been thinking about heading to Wyoming, just for now.”

He always made his farewells apologetically, as if everyone would be terribly disappointed at his leaving. He hesitated with something more to say, and she sat down across from him. She hoped it was nothing momentous, nothing that would require a commitment. She met his glance and saw a look that reminded her of the Oregon photo.

“I feel close to Ed here.”

He missed Edwin. That’s probably all it was. He’d always been that simple. She let her heart go slightly softer toward him.

She could not help him without resenting him. Who was she kidding?

“I’ve got something I’d like you to keep for me.”
Like the funeral suit.

He reached into the top pocket of his coveralls and brought out a sheet of paper from his Big Chief tablet, roughly folded. He pulled his chair closer to hers and showed her a map he’d drawn.

“Some bills and silver dollars buried down in that sliver of weeds between the fence and the barn. Don’t show Frank, or he’ll have it all dug up.”

The map was a mass of scrawled lines drawn in thick pencil, X’s and wobbly circles overlapping each other. Arrows pointed in directions that seemed to contradict one another. Tommy pointed at a rectangle that she understood to be her house. She paid close attention. His fingernail was hard and dirty, his finger arthritic, but it steadily marked out the path. He counted the steps, whispering, and showed her where to turn, setting a course that seemed extremely roundabout. He showed her the final X drawn larger than the others, then his finger brushed past it with a flourish toward the crude rectangle labeled “Barn,” as if he’d opened a door and let himself go free.

“You’ve never trusted me with these maps before.”

“Well, the damned banks ain’t no good.”

“You write to me if you need it.”

He shook his head as if needing it was not a possibility. “I’d want you to have it.”

He stood, and she could see he’d lost weight over the winter. It occurred to her that he would die soon down the road, ditch-side, or alone in a fleabag hotel, a thought that brought an unexpected tear to the edge of her eyelid.

He noticed, looked straight at her and said, “You’re a good woman, Lizzy.”

She wished it was true, wished she’d made him some sandwiches for the road.

He was already headed down the steps. She followed and stood beside the car, her hand atop the rolled-down window. Edwin never let him leave feeling unwelcome, so she heard herself say, “I suppose you could stay in the basement next time. It’s warm by the furnace.”

He gave her the oddest look. A sweat broke out on his forehead, he leaned toward her over the steering wheel, his hand so near she could have touched it. “Lizzy, I’m nothing but a worry to you. Now don’t you fret about me. I ain’t worth it.”

Her hand grasped the window so hard it wobbled in the door frame. “Oh, Tommy,” she said, but no other acceptable words would come. She wished she could point out to him that this too was a kind of love, his own, their own, peculiar and long-suffering way of

showing it, but he wouldn’t know what to do with that either.

He fiddled with the gearshift, couldn’t get the car in reverse, tried to force it and ground the gears. “Aw, hell,” he said in frustration. “Now the clutch. Story of my damned life.”

The car rolled slowly forward. She let go the window and stepped away, certain he’d get the gears to work any moment now and back out of the driveway. Instead, the car inched forward toward the gap between the house and the garage, and it looked like he’d decided that if he couldn’t go back, he’d gun it forward, his face red with anger and panic.

“Watch out!” she called, but the spirea bush he’d trimmed two days before shuddered and cracked. Metal screeched as the car scraped the corner of the garage and groaned forward down the length of the wooden planks beside the clothesline. It rattled down the uneven backyard, and the tires left a soft track through the weeds. She heard a thud, possibly his mother’s clock in the trunk. He made a sharp right turn and threaded his way between the barn and the trash cans before he disappeared down the alley. Soon she could hear the fading roar of his old Pontiac accelerating away fast on the highway heading west. She missed Edwin so intensely at that moment, their talk, the way they would have shaken their heads, pained, but trying to laugh too, about what was possibly Tommy’s final exit. She could almost hear him say, “Isn’t that just like him.” ●