

The Bookseller's Tale

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ON THE THIRD SATURDAY IN MAY, ERIC GARFIELD DISAPPEARED somewhere between the Barnes & Noble off Union Square in Manhattan and his home, twenty-five miles outside the city. At the exact time of Eric's disappearance, his wife, Cynthia, sat where she always sat on a Saturday afternoon, perched on a stool beside the cash register in their small suburban bookshop. Her right hand held aloft a paperback mystery novel while her left hand walked its fingers idly over the register keys. Cynthia looked considerably younger than her forty-five years. Her blond hair, pulled back into a ponytail, concealed her few wayward strands of gray. Wire-rimmed glasses on her thin nose gave her face an attractive, scholarly precision while her plaid Bermudas showed off her slim thighs to great advantage.

At six o'clock, Cynthia locked the store and walked around the corner to a clapboard colonial with wildflowers bursting through a white picket fence. Eric's absence at this late hour was neither surprising nor disturbing, simply unexpected. Cynthia sliced an apple, brewed a cup of tea, and sat on the porch to watch the sun go down. At dusk, after leaving Eric a note, she walked around the block and waited beneath the curtain of a huge willow that stood on the edge of a vacant lot. A gray sedan pulled up, and Cynthia climbed in.

The sedan crossed the town and burrowed into an unlit corner of the municipal golf course parking lot. Cynthia and the driver sat in silence, listening to the clicks of the cooling engine. When Cynthia's eyes had adjusted to the dark, she removed her glasses and placed them on the dashboard. Only

then did the driver take her into his arms.

On Tuesday morning, the same gray sedan pulled up in front of the Garfield home. The driver, Detective Grant Wintersteen, unfolded himself from behind the wheel, rang the doorbell, and waited for the door to open.

“You called,” he said, self-consciously official.

“Eric went to Manhattan for a job interview,” said Cynthia. “He hasn’t come home.”

“Since when?”

“Since Saturday,” she said, and then, to explain the three-day delay, added, “I wanted to be sure.”

CYNTHIA AND ERIC MET while working in a mystery bookshop in Greenwich Village. The bookshop, in the basement of a brownstone, was Old World rich with thick carpeting, walnut bookcases, and wrought iron flourishes. Eric dreamed of opening his own bookstore one day, and Cynthia wedded herself to his dream. After months of squirreling away money and countless weekend scouting trips, first to the outer boroughs and then to the suburbs, they settled on a tiny Westchester hamlet with a single row of stores on a narrow, tree-lined lane that bent like a dogleg between the train station and the village green. Side streets intersected in alternating Ts, the storefronts giving way to clapboard colonials built on tiny plots divided by picket fences. Standing at the top of one of the Ts was an empty brick storefront with a late nineteenth-century cornerstone that became Garfield’s Reading Room.

Eric had a theory about literature that transcended genre, voice, and narrative distance. “A good book,” he often said, “should create a fictional world that the reader wants to crawl into and live inside.” Eric’s plan for their bookshop was to sell only that kind of book. He stocked the shelves with mid-list authors, the kind who garnered good reviews but never “broke out,” in the euphemistic language of a publishing industry too impatient to tolerate lousy

sales figures. The occasional best-seller found its way into the store, but only after Eric judged its literary merit by his own exacting standards.

“We will mold the tastes of our customers,” he said, “and we will painstakingly match books to those tastes. If we succeed, our customers will not let us fail.”

The plan worked. Garfield’s Reading Room became a success by catering to the town’s upper crust. Eric handsold every book, sometimes spending as much as an hour with a single customer. Meanwhile, Cynthia did what she did best, which was to make sense of the business and to keep the financial books straight.

The store allowed them to lead a comfortable, if not lavish, lifestyle. They bought a house, which Cynthia adorned with sprays of wildflowers. They were invited to parties in great mansions, where Eric held forth on authors he personally knew. They hired a darkly quiet college student name Melissa, who was trustworthy enough to allow them to take two weeks on Cape Cod during the summer.

Then the economy changed. Chains invaded nearby towns, hurting the segment of the business Cynthia had cultivated beneath Eric’s notice – the mainstream trade that secretly kept the bookshop afloat. The landlord raised the rent. Cynthia let Melissa go. Eric couldn’t handsell books fast enough; there just weren’t that many hours in the day. Garfield’s Reading Room fell into liquidation, and Eric, sadly, began to look for a job.

EVENTS CONNECT, not as the equal and opposite reactions of Newtonian Law, but seamlessly, like a river folding in water from many tributaries. For Cynthia, Eric’s disappearance trailed back to a late winter’s morning three years earlier when Melissa unwedged a trade paperback from the shop’s mail slot. “Eric,” a note printed inside the front cover read, “I know you dislike mysteries. But give this one a try. You may find it interesting.”

Eric didn't simply dislike mysteries; he hated them. To him, a mystery novel was the literary equivalent of a potato chip, empty calories with no nutritional value. He looked back on his mystery- bookshop experience as valuable in only two ways: meeting Cynthia and learning the independent-bookstore business. Up to that moment, the Reading Room had stocked exactly one mystery novel, written by a female British author and therefore exhibiting a high literary quotient. Eric repeatedly rebuffed Cynthia's efforts to pander to popular taste by, for example, creating a "mystery corner" of mass market paperbacks or, for further example, running a "Buy three, get one free" promotion.

"People eat these up," she often told him.

"Then they can buy them at a candy stand," Eric would reply.

But Eric was intrigued by the note and by the novel's mode of delivery. He brought the volume into the shop's cluttered back room, cleared a space on his desk large enough for his teacup, and started reading. Two hours later, he emerged.

"Call our distributor," he told Cynthia. "Order twenty-four of these."

Eric never ordered twenty-four of anything. Drop shipments from the distributor were ontological recapitulations of the store's eclectic phylogeny. One of these, one of those, two of those, and, on rare occasions, three of these. But twenty-four?

"I can sell a lot of them," said Eric.

The novel was titled *Local Color*, and its charm was not so much the writing (which Eric considered a cut above journeyman) nor the plot (which Eric found predictable) nor the characters (to Eric, stock mystery personalities like the spunky septuagenarian, the venal politician, the sexy widow). No, the charm of the book was its setting, which was accurately and unabashedly their little town. Talk about crawling into a book and living inside it; they already had. The author was the obviously pseudonymous Connor O. Flannery, who,

according to the bio on the back flap, “once lived and may still live in the town depicted in this novel.”

“We can run a ‘guess the author’ contest,” said Cynthia.

Eric didn’t reply.

When *Local Color* arrived, Eric displayed one copy in the window, another facing out in its alphabetical spot in New Fiction, and a third propped beside the cash register. He used the same handsell pitch on each and every customer:

“James Joyce once said that if Dublin ever were destroyed, it could be rebuilt brick by brick from *Ulysses*. If our town ever were destroyed, it could be rebuilt from *Local Color*.”

Eric handsold twenty books that first week. At fifteen dollars a pop, and with the standard mark-up of thirty-five percent, the sales translated into a profit of one hundred and five. Not a bad take at the Reading Room’s level of commerce. But then, nothing.

“I thought more people would be interested in seeing their town through a fictional lens,” said Eric.

“We could run that ‘guess the author’ contest,” said Cynthia.

Eric scowled.

Two weeks later, the doorbell tinkled and Eric found himself face to face with a woman named Josie, a spunky septuagenarian who, to Eric’s mind, probably never had read a book in her life and certainly never had set foot in the store.

“I heard I’m in a book,” said Josie.

“Which one?” said Eric.

“Something about colors,” said Josie.

And so began the second wave. People who had heard that a character in *Local Color* closely resembled them flocked to the store. Eric couldn’t keep the books on the shelves. He sold forty-seven one week, thirty-five the next, forty-

three the week after that.

Connor O. Flannery followed *Local Color* with two other books, *Local Rules* and *Local Attractions*. Each publication became a literary event in town, people buzzing with opinions on which character corresponded to which real-life person. It was shortly after the publication of *Local Attractions*, which introduced the hulking detective named Springstead, that the real-life hulking detective named Grant Wintersteen walked into the shop.

“I’m looking for this book,” he said, a black and white reproduction of the cover in his huge mitts.

“Excellent,” said Eric, and launched into his *Ulysses* comparison as he led Wintersteen toward the back room.

Wintersteen caught Cynthia’s eye as he passed the cash register. Cynthia, aware that the handsell spiel was unnecessary, offered a smirk calculated to dissociate herself from her husband’s maunderings. The detective winked, and Cynthia felt something click.

THE *LOCAL SERIES*, as Connor O. Flannery’s books were called, drove the first wedge between Cynthia and Eric. Cynthia always had loved mystery novels – pulps, police procedurals, cozies, hard-boiled, *noir*. Her love for the genre had drawn her to the job in Greenwich Village, and, by some associative principle, to Eric. But as Eric’s inexplicable admiration for Connor O. Flannery’s work grew, Cynthia came to realize that she always had resented Eric’s supercilious literary tastes. And so, because Eric raved about the books, Cynthia refused to read them.

Grant Wintersteen’s visit to the Reading Room changed all that. Without admitting the truth, Cynthia found herself interested in how Connor O. Flannery portrayed the town and the people in it. Was the town really so economically stratified? Could the lane of shops fall prey to Starbucks, Gap, and Benetton? Was Springstead a lumbering incompetent with confectioner’s

sugar perpetually powdering his enormous belly? And, Cynthia wondered with a sudden slip as if the world had shifted, was there a character based on her?

One night, after Eric twisted himself into fetal position and stopped snoring, Cynthia switched on the tiny reading lamp on her side of the bed. Connor O. Flannery had delivered the second and third installments in the same intriguing way as the first, and Eric, naturally, had devoured them like so many potato chips. Cynthia opened the nightstand drawer, where she had hidden Eric's dog-eared copy of *Local Attractions*. Springstead appeared on page sixteen, after the murder victim's body surfaced in a golf course water hazard. He was described as "buzzcut" (true) with a "squiggle of a mustache" (not true) and "arms like boiled hot dogs" (possibly true).

Cynthia skimmed forward, searching for and finally locating what she hoped she would find.

The following Saturday evening, Cynthia told Eric she was going out for a walk. The walk, however, wasn't an aimless stroll but a purposeful march to the town's public beach. Connor O. Flannery's description of the area did not quite jibe with the actual topography. The fictional beach, like the real beach, curved between a small amusement park and a street that dead-ended at a concrete seawall. But on the other side of this street, where condominium townhouses now stood, Connor O. Flannery had situated a large saltwater pool and a boardwalk lined with seedy arcades and cheap seafood restaurants. These artistic inaccuracies heartened Cynthia. Springstead's "meat-hook hands" were nimble enough to tie off delicate fishing flies for weekends spent "hip deep in upstate trout streams." Cynthia wouldn't have known where to find a trout stream, but hoped that Connor O. Flannery's liberties with Grant Wintersteen's hobbies might mirror her liberties with the landscape.

Cynthia scrambled onto the seawall and hung her legs over the other side. The cement, still warm, prickled the backs of her thighs. Two boys stood on the concrete apron below her, casting lines toward wood pilings sticking

out of the water. Farther down, where a riot of tumbled-down boulders spilled out from the condos, Grant Wintersteen jiggled a fishing rod.

Cynthia's nerves chilled as she tried to dream up a casual way to approach him. In the end, she needn't have worried. One of the boys struck something with his line, and soon both were screaming and wrestling the rod. Wintersteen hurried over. He grabbed the rod and reeled until the catch writhed to the surface. Then, handing the rod back to the boys, he coached them into landing the four-foot eel.

"Hi," he said after the excited boys departed. His arms raged pink with sunburn.

"Hi," Cynthia said.

Wintersteen lifted her down, and she watched him fish until nightfall. They spoke little, and then only small talk, because she could see fishing was serious relaxation, if not serious business, to him.

"How about a walk on the beach?" he said.

The sand was blue and, like the seawall, still held the heat of the day. In the distance, the Ferris wheel turned red and green against the sky. The Dragon Coaster rumbled on its tracks.

"Is truth stranger than fiction or is fiction stranger than truth?" said Wintersteen.

"I don't know," said Cynthia.

"We're supposed to have an affair. How do you feel about that?"

Cynthia turned to face him.

"Wrap those boiled hot dogs around me," she said.

FIVE DAYS AFTER ERIC'S DISAPPEARANCE, Wintersteen broached the subject of a press conference. Cynthia resisted at first. To her, there was a cheapness in publicly begging for help. She did not want to come across as hysterical, or worse, as a person clinging to false hope when everyone on the other side of

the TV screen knew hope was gone. But Wintersteen had convinced her.

“Someone knows where he is,” he said.

They stood on her front porch, in the soft yellow haze of a bug light. He placed his hand comfortingly on her shoulder. She took his wrist and nuzzled his open palm.

“I’ll do it,” she whispered.

The next morning, Cynthia and Wintersteen stood behind a podium in the lobby of the police station. The press conference attracted a camera crew from the county’s all-news cable channel, three reporters from different local newspapers, and four public interest bloggers.

“This is totally out of character for Eric to disappear,” Cynthia said as she squinted against the glare of the camera lights.

“Could he have been despondent about the bookstore going under?” asked a reporter.

Before Cynthia could answer, Wintersteen leaned toward the microphone.

“Mrs. Garfield is not here to be grilled,” he said. “She’s here to ask for the public’s help in finding her husband. You are the means to that end.”

Wintersteen went on to describe his efforts to distribute Eric’s photograph to shopkeepers along Madison Avenue and in Grand Central Terminal and to conductors on Metro-North’s New Haven line. He told of visiting several Manhattan hospitals, as well as the city morgue.

“Of course,” he said, “sometimes a person doesn’t want to be found.”

ON THE LAST DAY OF MAY, with Eric still missing, Cynthia locked the Reading Room for the final time. Liquidation was complete. What inventory the various publishers refused to accept as returns, she sold to a wholesale jobber. What inventory the jobber rejected, she donated to a hospital. She was sipping tea at her kitchen table when Wintersteen knocked at the front door.

“We have something,” he said.

“Eric?”

Wintersteen shrugged.

“I don’t know how we missed this,” Wintersteen confessed as he sped through traffic to Bellevue, in Manhattan. “A man was admitted through the ER that same Saturday night. No identification on him, but he generally matches the description. He’s still comatose.”

At the hospital, Wintersteen told Cynthia he would wait in the corridor.

Cynthia took one step inside. A curtain hid most of the bed, but she could see a hand, the fingers bent like claws, dangling over the edge. She backed out immediately.

“What if he’s Eric?” she said.

“Then he’s Eric,” said Wintersteen. He gripped her shoulder.

“What if he’s not?”

“Then we keep looking.”

Cynthia took a deep breath, walked all the way into the room, and stepped around the curtain. The man lay on his side, one leg drawn up, the other extended as if running. Cynthia lowered herself into a nearby chair. The man had thin hair and the shrunken, loose-fleshed look of someone who had suddenly lost weight. Red welts mottled his forehead. Oxygen hissed in his nostrils. She angled her head to align it with his. The man’s eyes were closed, but one eyelid fluttered and a sudden twinkle of light from within chased Cynthia out of the room.

“He’s not Eric,” she told Wintersteen.

FOR SEVERAL WEEKS after the Reading Room officially closed, people treated Cynthia like a widow. Neighborhood women organized a food chain, dropping off complete dinners for thirty consecutive nights. The paper boy refused to collect for the newspapers. A gardener mowed the

front lawn and removed the dead stalks from the wildflower garden *gratis*. One day, Cynthia returned from a walk to find Josie scrubbing the front porch. But by the end of July, when the golf course trysts ended and Wintersteen began his nightly, though discreet, visits to her bed, these random acts of kindness trailed off.

On a hot, sticky night in the middle of August, Cynthia awoke to what she thought was a sound downstairs. Wintersteen lay beside her, thickly asleep in boxer shorts. A patch of moonlight rippled across them.

The sound occurred again.

“Grant,” she whispered. She poked his shoulder, but raised only a mumble in response.

Cynthia cinched her bathrobe around her waist and stood at the top of the stairs, listening. Another sound came, the distinctive tick of silverware as a kitchen drawer slid closed. She descended the stairs and passed through the dining room, curiously unafraid of whomever she might find. The table, chairs, sideboard, chandelier, everything had a silver patina from streetlight filtering in through the front window. She stopped at the kitchen door. A dark figure stood at the sink. The tiny beam of a penlight danced across shelves lined with knick-knacks.

Cynthia switched on the overhead light. The figure whirled: Melissa, dressed in black jeans, black sweatshirt, and black woolen cap.

“Hi, Cynthia,” she said. “I expected you would be the one to come down.”

“Who else?”

““Who else?”” Melissa mimicked. “Think I don’t know the golf course routine ended. He parks his car behind the house, walks down the alley, comes in through the back door. He’s a torpid sleeper, isn’t he?”

“What do you want?” said Cynthia.

“Eric’s pipe. He finally feels well enough to smoke.”

“He never smoked.”

“Well, he thinks he did,” said Melissa. She yanked open another drawer.

Cynthia swiftly crossed the kitchen and, elbowing Melissa aside, sifted through the take-out menus, matchbooks, and arcane cooking utensils. The pipe, still in its yellow box, was buried under the junk. She had purchased it as a gag gift on their first anniversary and still remembered the words she had written on a tiny card taped to the box. *To complete the image of the pure intellectual.* A nub of the tape remained.

Melissa reached for the box, but Cynthia pulled it back.

“You owe me something first,” she said.

“Right,” said Melissa. “I was with him that day,” she began, going on to describe how she had accompanied Eric to the Barnes & Noble interview for moral support, never thinking he would accept the job as community relations director. On the walk back to Grand Central, she harangued him about giving up his dream.

“Maybe I was too harsh,” she said.

Eric agreed to reconsider over a drink. He nursed an ale, she knocked back a whiskey. It was decided; they would return to Barnes & Noble, and Eric would turn down the job. The seizure hit him a block from the pub. EMS arrived quickly, but not before she surreptitiously pulled his wallet and melted into the crowd.

“Why?” said Cynthia.

“Eric wasn’t the only one in crisis that day. After *Local Attractions* I hadn’t written a word and was petrified that I’d never write again. I needed a new idea, he needed a new bookstore. It just seemed like the solution to both our problems.”

The next book in the *Local* series involved a missing bookseller, she continued. The advance was the seed money for Eric’s new bookshop in a

small upstate town near the Massachusetts border. A lawyer was drawing up the papers. Cynthia, she trusted, wouldn't contest the divorce.

"How do you know?" said Cynthia.

"That you'll sign?"

"Yes. No. I mean how do you know everything you put in those books?"

"Sometimes we imagine things and hope they are real," said Melissa. "Sometimes we imagine things because they are real."

Cynthia picked at the nub of tape with her thumbnail. Then she handed over the box.

"Thanks," said Melissa. "Eric will appreciate this."

Cynthia watched Melissa let herself out of the house, then slowly climbed the stairs. At the top, she looked out the window. A car idled at the curb, and Melissa peeled off her woolen cap and shook out her hair before opening the driver's door. In the wash of the dome light, Eric sleepily nodded his head.

Cynthia crawled into bed beside Wintersteen.

"We can stop now," he said sleepily.

"Stop what?"

"This looking for Eric."

Down below, the car door slammed shut.

"Wait till the morning." Cynthia held her breath until the sputtering engine dissolved into the chirps of distant crickets. "We'll talk about it in the morning."

She rolled over, and Wintersteen's hand settled in the dip at her waist. As he began to snore, she imagined herself flying out over the treetops and hovering above the intersection where the Reading Room stood empty and Melissa helped a doddering Eric, pipe in hand, plant a good-bye kiss on the soapy glass.