

Nicholas C. King
The Old Man

The old man appeared at the end of our driveway one Sunday afternoon, a garbage bag slung over his shoulder. Darlene saw him first. Soon we were both huddled by the bay window, watching him come up the porch steps. He waved to us, sat in the old wicker chair, and dropped his bag on the ground.

Then he reached into that dirty garbage bag and pulled out a red scarf. Then a green one and a blue one. Darlene gave a little snort each time a new scarf came out. The old man folded each scarf carefully before putting it on the ground. Soon there was a good-size pile on our porch. Then he smacked his knees, stood up, and came right in the front door. He gave us a nod and headed upstairs to his room. We heard the door slam.

"I suppose he thinks that pile of scarves is going to pick itself up," said Darlene. I could tell she was sour so I brought the pile inside and set it on the couch.

He was up before dawn. We heard pots and pans banging around and someone humming downstairs. "Good Jesus," said Darlene, and rolled over.

We found him by the kitchen phone, a pencil in his hand and a yellow notepad on the table. I was working the back field that morning, and every time I came by on the tractor I could see his little bald head through the kitchen window, bobbing up and down, the phone pressed tight against it. Darlene was with the chickens. She told me that whenever she went inside to drop off some eggs he put his hand to the receiver and stared at her until she left. She said it was little things like that which really got on her nerves.

When I came in for lunch Darlene was sitting at the kitchen table by herself, reading a book.

"He's taking a nap," she said.

I opened the fridge and got out some bread and cheese and mayo and made myself a sandwich. I sat down next to Darlene, but she kept reading and so after a minute I stood up, rinsed my plate in the sink, and finished my sandwich on the way to the tractor.

We were in the middle of dinner when we heard him coming downstairs. He stood in the kitchen doorway and said, "Well, I'm back."

"It certainly seems that way," said Darlene.

He had showered and put on a suit. I thought he looked nice.

"Would you like some dinner?" said Darlene.

"No," he said. "Thank you."

"Jackie," he said, looking at me. "Can you spare her for the night?" He jangled my car keys.

"I don't think someone your age should be driving," said Darlene.

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"So, Jackie?" His eyes were still on me.

"Fine," I mumbled.

Darlene didn't say anything for the rest of dinner. I could tell she was stewing.

We were woken that night by the slam of the front door. I could hear footsteps, and the old man giggling, and someone whispering for him to be quiet. It sounded like Mrs. Danbury from down the road. Then the radio blasted on, and jumped between channels before landing on some slow jazz, which drifted up through the floorboards. I lay there in the music for a minute or two until Darlene, who had been lying very still, suddenly jumped out of bed and stormed into the hallway. I could hear Darlene clomping downstairs, and then some shouting and cursing, and then someone crying (Mrs. Danbury). I wiggled deeper into the warm bed.

Then I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. The door burst open and the lights flashed on. There towered Darlene, with the old man half-hidden behind her.

"Tell him what you said," said Darlene, looking at the old man. The old man looked sheepish and said nothing.

"Well," said Darlene, "He wanted to ask if he could borrow your car for a trip to ... where was it?"

"California," mumbled the old man.

"California!" roared Darlene, and threw back her head and laughed.

I think she expected me to laugh too, but I looked at the old man and he was still all sheepish, and then I noticed his velvet green suit and the waxed ends of his droopy mustache, and so I smiled and said that I thought it would be a wonderful trip, and would he mind sending a postcard. And would they mind turning off the light. They were both stunned, but then the old man let out a big "Yahoo!" and said, "Jackie, I could kiss you," and vanished down the hallway. Darlene stood there all silent. I heard the front door slam.

"Well," said Darlene, "I'm going for a walk." I heard the front door slam again, and I lay there with the lights on and the jazz still going, and I thought of the old man swerving through sleepy neighborhoods, one hand on the wheel and the other around Mrs. Danbury, heading for California.

I woke up as Darlene was slipping into bed beside me. It was dark and quiet.

"He'll be back," she said.

"Yes," I said.

Darlene rested her head on the crook of my shoulder. Her voice was soft. "Yes, he always comes back."

"Yes," I said. "And I'm not going anywhere."

I heard her breathing get all slow, and then I gave her a kiss on the head, and then we were both asleep.