



THE HANDOVER

MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH

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Nobody moved much when he came into the bar. From the way Jack shut the door behind him—quietly, like the door of a cupboard containing old things seldom needed but neatly stored—we could tell he didn't have any news we'd be in a hurry to hear.

There were three guys sipping beer up at the counter. One of them glanced up, gave him a brief nod. That was it.

It was nine thirty by then. There were five other men in the place, each sitting at a different table, nobody talking. Some had books in front of them but I hadn't heard a page turn in a while. I was sitting near the fire and working steadily through a bowl of chili, mitigating it with plenty of crackers. I'd like to say Maggie's chili is the best in the West, but, to be frank, it really isn't. It's probably not even the best in town: even this town, even now. I wasn't hungry, merely eating for something to do. Only alternative would have been drinking, but just a couple will go to my head these days and I didn't want to be drunk. Being drunk has a tendency to make everything run into one long dirge, like being stoned, or living in Iowa. I haven't ever taken a drink on important days, on Thanksgiving, anniversaries or my birthday. Not a one. This evening wasn't any kind of celebration, not by a long chalk, but I didn't want to be drunk for it either.

Jack walked up to the bar, water dripping from his coat onto the floor. He wasn't moving fast, and he looked old and cold and worn through. It was bitter outside and the afternoon had brought a fresh fall of snow. Only a couple of inches, but it was beginning to mount up. Maggie poured a cup of coffee without being asked, set it in front of him. Her coffee isn't too bad, once you've grown accustomed to it. Jack methodically poured five spoons

of sugar into the brew, which is one of the ways of getting accustomed to it, and stirred it slowly. The skin on his hand looked delicate and thin, like blue-white tissue paper that had been scrunched into a ball and absently flattened out again. Sixty-eight isn't so old, not these days, not in the general scheme of things. But some nights it can seem ancient, if you're living inside it. Some nights it can feel as if you're still trying to run long after the race is finished. At sixty-four, and the second youngest in the place, I personally felt older than God.

Jack stood for a moment, looking around the room as if memorizing it. The counter itself was battered with generations of use, like everything else. The edges of chairs and tables were worn smooth, the pictures on the walls so varnished with smoke you'd had to have known them for forty years to guess what they showed. We all knew what they showed. The bulbs in the wall fixings were weak and dusty, giving the room a dark and gloomy cast. The sole area of brightness was in the corner, where the jukebox sat. Was a big thing when Pete, my old friend and Maggie's late husband, bought it. But only the lights work these days, and not all of them, and none of us are too bothered about it. Nobody comes into the bar who wouldn't rather sit in peace than hear someone else's choice of music, much too loud. I guess this comes with age, and anyway the 45s in the machine are too old to evoke much more than sadness. The floor was clean, and the bar only smelt slightly of old beer. You want it to smell that way, a little, otherwise it would be like drinking in a church.

Maggie waited until Jack had caught his breath, then asked. Someone had to, I guess, and it was always going to be her. She said: 'No change?'

Jack raised his head, looked at her. 'Course there's a change,' he muttered. 'No-one said she weren't going to change.'

He picked up his coffee and came to sit on the other side of my table. But he didn't catch my eye, so I let him be, and cleared up the rest of my food, rejecting the raw onion garnish in deference to my innards. They won't stand for that kind of thing any more. It wasn't going to be long before a cost-benefit analysis of the chili itself consigned it to history alongside them.

When I was done I pushed the bowl to one side, burped as quietly as I could, and lit up a Camel. I left the pack on the table so Jack could take one if he had a mind to. He would, sooner or later. The rest of the world may have decided that cigarettes are more dangerous than a nuclear war, but in

Eldorado, Montana, a man's still allowed to smoke after his meal if he wants to. What are they going to do: come bust us? The people who make the rules live a long ways from here, and the folk in this town have never been much for caring what State ordinances say.

One of the guys at the bar finished his beer, asked for another. Maggie gave him one, but didn't wait for money. Outside, the wind picked up a little and a door started banging, the sound like an unwelcome visitor knocking to be let out of the cellar. But it was a ways up the street, and you stopped noticing it after a while. It's not an uncommon sound in Eldorado.

Otherwise everyone just held their positions, and eventually Jack helped himself to a cigarette. I struck a match for him, as his fingers seemed numb and awkward. He still hadn't taken his coat off, though with the fire it was pretty warm in the room.

Once he was lit, and he'd stopped coughing, he nodded at me through the smoke. 'How's the chili?'

'Filthy,' I confirmed. 'But warm. Most of it.'

He smiled. He rested his hands on the table, palms down, and looked at them for a while. Liver spots and the shadow of old veins, like a fading map of territories once more uncharted. 'She's getting worse,' he said. 'Going to be tonight. Maybe already.'

I'd guessed as much, but hearing it said still made me feel tired and sad. He hadn't spoken loudly, but everybody else heard too.

It got even quieter, and the tension settled deeper, like a dentist's waiting room where everyone's visiting for the first time in years and has their suspicions about what they're going to hear. Maybe 'tension' isn't the right word. That suggests someone might have felt there was something they could do, that some virile force was being held in abeyance, ready for the sign, the right time. There wasn't going to be any sign. This night had been a while in coming but it had come, like a phone call in the small hours. We knew there wasn't anything to be done.

Maggie potted around, put on a fresh jug of coffee. I started to stand, meaning to get me a cup, but Jack put his hand on my arm. I sat back, waited for him to speak.

'Wondered if you'd walk with me,' he said.

I looked at him, feeling a dull twinge of dread. 'Already?'

'Only really came back down here to fetch you, if you wanted to go.'

I realized in a kind of way that I was honored. I took my heavy coat from the back of the chair and put it on. A couple heads raised to watch us leave, but most people turned away. Every one of them knew where we were going, the job we were going to do. Maybe you'd expect something to be said, the occasion to be marked in some way: but in all my life, of the things I heard that were worth saying, none of them were actually said in words.

And what could anyone have said?

Outside it was even colder than I expected. I stuffed my hands deep in my pockets and pulled my neck down into my scarf like a turtle. The snow was six inches deep in the street, and I was glad I had my thick boots on. The moon was full above, snow clouds hidden away someplace around a corner, recuperating and getting ready for more. And there would be more, no doubt of that. The winters just keep getting colder and deeper around here, or so my body tells me. The winters are coming into their prime.

Jack started walking up the street, and I fell in beside him. Within seconds my long bones felt like they were slowly being twisted, and the skin on my face like it was made of lead. We walked past the old fronts, all of them dark now. The hardware store, the pharmacy, the tea rooms. Even in light of day the painted signs are too faded to read, and the boardwalk which used to run the length of the street has rotted away to nothing. It happened like a series of paintings. One year it looked fine; then another it was tatty; then finally it was broken down and there was no reason to put it back. Sometimes, when I'd walked up the street in recent years, I would catch myself recalling the way things had once been, working my memory like a tongue worrying the hole where a tooth had once sat. I could remember standing or sitting outside certain stores, the people who'd owned them, the faces of the people I'd spied from across the way. The times all tended to blend into one, and I could be the young boy running to the drug store on an errand for his mom, or the youth mooning over the younger of two sisters, or a man buying whiskey to blur the night away: switching back and forth in a blink, like one man looking out of three sets of eyes. It was like hearing a piece of music you grew up to, some tune you had in your head day after day until it was as much a part of your life as breathing. It was also a kind of time travel, and for a moment I'd feel as I

once had, young and empty of darkness, ready to learn and experience and do. Eager to be shown what the world had in store for me, to conquer and make mistakes.

To love, and lose, and love again. Amen.

Eldorado was founded in 1850 by two miners, Joseph and Ezekiel Clarke: boys who came all the way from New Hampshire with nothing but a pair of horses and a dream. Sounds funny now, calling it a dream, even corny. People don't think of money that way anymore. These days they think it's a right. They stay where they are and try to make it come to them, instead of going off to find it for themselves. The brothers came in search of gold, like so many others. They were late on the trail, and worked through the foothills, finding nothing, or stakes that had already been worked dry, gradually climbing higher and higher into the mountains. They panned the local river and found nothing once more, but then one afternoon came upon the seam—just as they were about to give up and move on, maybe head over to Oregon or California and see if it was paradise like everyone said.

It must have seemed like magic. They found gold. When we were young we all heard the story. A kind of Genesis tale. A little glade, hidden up amidst the mountains at over three thousand feet: and there for the taking, a seam of money, a pocket of dreams.

The brothers stayed, and built themselves a cabin out of the good wood that grew all around. But news travelled fast even in those days, and it wasn't long before they had company. A lot of company. The old mine workings have gone to ruin now but it was a big old construction, I can tell you that. Was a few years when Eldorado was home to over four thousand people, producing five million dollars a year in gold. The town had saloons and boarding houses, a post office and a fistful of gambling rooms, even a grand hotel. Almost all have fallen down now, though until ten years ago people still used the hotel to board their animals in, when it got real cold. Two walls are still more or less there, hidden amongst the trees, though I wouldn't want to stand underneath them for long. I once showed the site to a couple of tourists who came up all this way in a rental car, having noticed the old town sign down the road. They seemed a little disappointed to find there was still people living here, and were soon on their way again.

That was near ten years ago, and no-one's come up to look since, though the sign's still there. It says 'Eldorado, 15 miles', and stands on a turn of the local road from Giles to Covent Fort, though lately I swear the

trees around it have been growing faster. Neither Giles nor Covent are much to brag about these days either, and the road between them isn't often used.

If it weren't for that town sign, there would be no way of knowing we were up here at all.

When the gold ran out there was zinc for a while, and a little copper. The gold fever died away but Eldorado continued to prosper for a time. There was a Masonic lodge built, and two banks, and a school house with a clock and a bell—the fanciest building in town, the symbol there was a community here, and that we were living well. I can't even remember where the lodge was now, the banks are gone, and the school closed in 1957. I went to that school, learned most of what I know. Everybody did. It was the place where you turned into a grown-up, one year at a time, back when a year was as long as anyone could imagine, when two seemed like infinity. Probably that was why, for a long time, folks would stop by the abandoned school every now and then, by themselves and on the quiet, and do a little patching up. Wasn't any sense in it, because it wasn't going to re-open, not least because there were no new children—but I know I did it, and Jack too, and Pete before he died. Had to be that others did as well, otherwise it would have fallen down a lot earlier than it did.

Now it's gone, and even on the brightest Spring day that patch of the mountain seems awful quiet. I guess you could say that no-one here has learned anything since then. Certainly what you see on television doesn't seem to have much application to us. I stopped watching a long time ago, and I know I'm not the only one. TVs don't last forever, and there ain't no-one around here knows how to fix them. And anyway they just showed a world that isn't ours, things that we can't buy and wouldn't want to, so what use was it anyway. We've got quite a few books, spread amongst us. That's good enough.

Eventually the copper ran out and though people looked hard and long, there wasn't anything else useful to be found. The gambling dens moved on, in search of people who still had riches to throw away. The boarding houses closed soon afterward, as those who hadn't made Eldorado their home went elsewhere. Plenty people stayed, for a while. My folks did, in the 1920s. Never got to the bottom of why. But anyhow they came, and they stayed, and I followed in their footsteps, I guess, by staying here too. So did some others.

But not enough. And nobody new.

Halfway to the end of Main, Jack and I turned off the road and made our way as best we could up what used to be Fourth Street. I guess it still is, but you'd be hard pressed to find the first three, or the other eight, unless you'd once walked them, and gone visiting on them, or grown up in a house that used to stand on one. Now they've gone to trees and grass, just a few piles of lumber dotted around, like forgotten games of giant pick-up-sticks. You'd think we might have made an effort to keep the houses standing, even after people stopped living in them. But it's not the kind of thing that occurs to you until it's far too late, and then there doesn't seem a great deal of point. Spilt milk, stable door, all of those.

The grade has always been kind of steep on Fourth, and Jack and I found the going hard. Jack had already made the trip once that night, and I let him go in front, following his footprints in the snow. There was another way of getting up to the house, a little less steep, but that involved going past the town's first cemetery, now overgrown, and the notion wasn't even discussed. Ahead of us, a single light shone in one of the upper windows of the Buckley house, which sits alone right at the end, a last stand against the oncoming trees. I felt sick to my stomach, remembering times I'd made the walk before, towards that grand old house hunkered beneath the wall of the mountain. Hundreds of times, but a handful of times in particular. My life often seems that way to me now. So much of it was just landscape I passed through, a long open plain with little to distinguish the miles, or like some indifferent movie that went on for a long, long time.

But then there's something inside me like a satchel, or a little box, where I keep the *real* things. A few smells, and sounds, touches like a faint summer breeze. Some evenings, a couple afternoons and a handful of dawns, when I woke up somewhere I was happy to be, cuddled warm with someone and protected from the bright light of day and tomorrow. It's nights I remember most. Some bad, some good. You fall in love at night, and that's also when people die. Even if their last breath is drawn in daylight, by the time you've truly understood what's happened, darkness has come to claim the event as its own. Nights last the longest, without doubt, both at the time and afterwards. They contain multitudes, and don't fade as easily as the sun.

They're there, in my bag, and I'll take them with me when I go.

When we got to the house we stomped the snow off our boots on the porch, and let ourselves in. Over the last few weeks of visiting I had gotten

used to the dust, how it overlaid the way the house had used to be. She'd kept it up as well as she could over the years, but now you could almost hear it running down, like the wind dropping after a storm. The downstairs was empty but for Naomi's cat, who was sitting in the middle of the hall, looking at the wall. It glanced up at us as we started on the stairs, then walked slowly away into the darkness of the kitchen.

I knew then that it was already over.

When we reached the upper landing we hesitated outside the doorway to the bedroom, as if feeling we had to be invited in. The interior was lit by candles, an old kerosene lamp by the window. The Doc was sitting on a blanket box at the end of the bed, elbows on his knees. He looked like an old man, tired, waiting for a train to take him home. Not like someone who'd once been the second-fastest runner in town, after me, a boy who could move like the wind. He'd gone away, many years ago. Left town, got trained, spent some years out there in the other places. Half the books in town were his, brought back with him when he returned to Eldorado.

He looked up, beckoned us in with an upward nod of the head. We approached like a pair of children, with short steps and hands down by our sides. I kept my eyes straight ahead, knowing there'd be a time to look after the words had been said.

Jack rested a hand on the Doc's shoulder. 'She wake at all?'

He shook his head. 'Just died. That's all she did.'

'So that's it,' I said.

The three of us sighed then, all together. Letting out what had once been inside.

The Doc started to speak, faltered. Then tried again. 'Maybe it's not going to happen,' he said, trying for a considered tone, but coming out querulous and afraid. 'After all, how do we know?'

Jack and I shook our heads. Wasn't any use in this line of thought. Nobody knew how we knew. But we knew. We'd known since the children stopped coming.

We walked around on separate sides of the bed, and looked down.

I don't know what Jack was looking at, but I can tell you what I saw. An old woman, face lined, though less so than when I'd seen her in the afternoon of the previous day. Death had levelled the foothills of her suffering, filled in the dried stream beds of age. The coverlet was pulled up to just under her chin, so she looked tucked up nice and warm. The shape

beneath the blankets was so thin it barely seemed to be there at all: it could have been just a wrinkle in the sheets, covering nothing more than cooling air.

Most of all she looked still, like a mountain range seen from the sky.

Wasn't the first time I'd seen someone dead, not nearly. I saw my own parents laid out, inexplicably cold and quiet, and my wife, and many of my friends. There's been a lot of dying hereabouts over the last few years, every passing marked and mourned.

But Naomi looked different.

It's funny how, when you first know someone, it will be the face you notice most of all. The eyes, the mouth, the way they have their hair. Everybody has the same number of limbs, but their face is all their own. Then, over the years, it's as if this part of them leaves their body and goes into your head, crystallizes there. You hardly notice what the years are doing, the way people's actual faces thicken and dim and change. Every now and then something brings you up short, and makes you see the way things have become. Then you lose it again, as quick as it came, and you just see the continuity, the essence behind the face. The person as they were.

I saw Naomi as she and her sister had once been, the two brightest sparks in Eldorado, the girls most likely to make you lose your stride and catch your breath—whether you were fifteen, like them, or so old that your balls barely still had their wits about them. I saw her as the little lady who could shout loudest in the playground, who could give you a Chinese burn you'd remember for days. I saw her as I had when Pete and I used to hike up Fourth with flowers in our hands and our hearts in our throats, when Pete was cautiously dating Naomi, and I was going with her sister Sarah, who was two years younger and much prettier, or so I thought back then.

It's that year that many of the nights I keep in my bag came from, the ones that bring faint memories of music to my head. Sarah and I came to a parting of the ways before Thanksgiving, and she eventually married Jack, had no children but generally seemed content, and died in 1984. Pete and Naomi lasted a couple more months than we had, and then Pete met Maggie and things changed. Five years later, both on rebounds from different people altogether, gloriously grouchy and full of cheap liquor, Naomi and I spent a night walking together through the woods which used to stop on the edge of town. We looked for the stream where the Clarkes first panned, and maybe even found it, and we didn't do anything more than kiss, but that

was exciting enough. Then the morning came, and brought its light, and everything was burned away. We'd never have been right for each other anyhow, that was clear, and it wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Of course a decade or two later, when I first started to look back upon my life and read it properly, like a book I should have paid more attention to the first time, I realized that this might have been wrong. When I thought back, it was always Naomi's face that was clearest in my mind, though she'd been Pete's and I'd been Sarah's, and anyhow both of those futures were long in the past and dead and buried half a lifetime ago. By then Naomi was married, and when we met we were polite. Almost as if that current which can pass between any two people, the spark of possibility, however small, had been used up all in that night in the woods, under-used and thrown away, and now we could be nothing but friends. Naomi never had children either, nor Maggie. None of us did.

Even now, when the forest has started to march its way right up Main Street, I can remember that night with her as if I'm still wearing the same clothes and haven't had time to change. Remember also the way the sisters always seemed to glow, all their lives, as if they were running on more powerful batteries than the rest of us, as if whoever stirred their bodies into being had been more practiced at the art.

I loved my wife a great deal, and we had many good years together, but as I get older it's like those middle times were a long game we all played, a long and complex game of indeterminate rules. Those seasons fade, and we return to the playground like tired ghosts coming home after a long walk, and it's how we were then that seems most important. I can't remember much of what happened last year, but I can still picture those girls when we were young. On the boardwalk, in the big old house their father built, around the soda fountain when they were still little and we were all sparkling and young and blessed, a crop of new flowers bursting into life in a field which would always be there.

Almost all of those people are dead now. Distributed amongst the two cemeteries, biding their time, like broken panes in the windows of an old building. A few of the windows are still intact, like me and Jack and Maggie and all, but you have to wonder why. There's nothing to see through us now.

When Jack and I had looked down on Naomi a while, and nothing had changed, we turned from the bed. The Doc had quietly gotten his things together, but didn't look ready to leave just yet.

'There's something me and Bill have to do,' Jack said. 'Only stopped by for the truck. And, well, you know.'

The Doc nodded, not looking at us. He knew what we were going to do. 'I'll stay a while,' he said. Back in '72 there'd been something going on between him and Naomi. He probably didn't realize that we knew. But everybody did. Then after her husband died in '85, oftentimes the Doc had taken his evening meal at the Buckley table. I'd always wondered if it might be me who did that. Didn't work out that way.

'What are we going to do about her cat?' I asked.

'What can anyone do about a cat?' the Doc said, with the ghost of a smile. 'Reckon it'll do pretty much what it wants. I'll feed it, though.'

We shook his hand, not really knowing why, and left the house.

Jack's truck was parked around the side. It wasn't going to be a picnic getting down the hill, but it was too far to walk. We got it started after only a couple of tries, and Jack nosed her carefully out into the ruts of the street.

Fate was kind to us, and we got down to Main without much more than a spot of grief. Turned right, away from the bar, away from what's left of the town.

When we drew level with the other cemetery, Jack slowed to a halt and turned the engine off. We sat with the windows down for a while, smoking and listening. It was mighty cold. Wasn't anything to hear apart from wind up in the mountains, and the rustle of trees bending our way. Beyond the fence, the stones and wooden crosses marched away in ranks into the night. Friends, parents, lovers, children, in their hundreds. A field full of the way things might have been, or had been once, and could never be again. Folks are dead for an awfully long time. The numbers mount up.

Jack turned, looked at me. 'We're sure, aren't we?'

'Yes,' I said. 'We've been outnumbered for a long, long while. After Naomi, there's only fifteen of us left.'

It felt funny, Jack turning to me, wanting to be reassured. I still remembered him as one of the big kids, someone I hoped I might be like one day. And I did grow up to be like him, then older'n he'd once been, and then just old, like him. Everything seemed so different back then, everyone so distinct from one another. Just your haircut can make you a different

color, when everyone's only got ten years of experience to count on. Then you get older, and everyone seems the same. Everybody gets whittled away at about the same rate. Like the 1950s, and '60s, and '70s and '80s, times that once seemed so different to each other, but are now just stuff that happened to us once and then went away; like good weather or a stomach ache.

Jack stared straight out the windshield for a while. 'I don't hear anything.'

'May not happen for hours,' I said. 'No way of telling. May not even happen tonight.'

He laughed quietly. 'You don't think so?'

'No,' I admitted. 'It'll happen tonight. It's time.'

I thought then that I might have heard something, out there in the darkness, the first stirring beyond the fence. But if I did, it was quiet, and nothing came of it right then. It was only midnight. There was plenty of darkness left.

Jack nodded slowly. 'Then I guess we might as well get it over with.'

We smiled at each other, briefly, like two boys passing in the school yard. Boys who grew to like each other, but who could never have realized that they'd be sharing such a task, on a far-away night such as this.

Later we'd drive back up into town, park outside Maggie's bar, and sit inside with the others and wait. She was staying open for good that night.

But first we went down the hill, down a rough track to an old road hardly anyone drove any more. We got out of the truck and stood a while, looking down the mountain, at a land as big as Heaven.

And then together we took down the town sign.