

Redhead by the
Side of the Road

ANNE TYLER

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I

YOU HAVE TO WONDER what goes through the mind of a man like Micah Mortimer. He lives alone; he keeps to himself; his routine is etched in stone. At seven fifteen every morning you see him set out on his run. Along about ten or ten thirty he slaps the magnetic TECH HERMIT sign onto the roof of his Kia. The times he leaves on his calls will vary, but not a day seems to go by without several clients requiring his services. Afternoons he can be spotted working around the apartment building; he moonlights as the super. He'll be sweeping the walk or shaking out the mat or conferring with a plumber. Monday nights, before trash day, he hauls the garbage bins to the alley; Wednesday nights, the recycling bins. At ten p.m. or so the three squinty windows behind the foundation plantings go dark. (His apartment is in the basement. It is probably not very cheery.)

He's a tall, bony man in his early forties with not-so-good posture—head lunging slightly forward, shoulders slightly hunched. Jet-black hair, but when he neglects to shave for a day his whiskers have started coming in gray. Blue eyes, heavy eyebrows, hollows in his cheeks. A clamped-looking mouth. Unvarying outfit of jeans and a T-shirt or a sweat-shirt, depending on the season, with a partially-erased-looking brown leather jacket when it's really cold. Scuffed brown round-toed shoes that seem humble, like a school-boy's shoes. Even his running shoes are plain old dirty-white sneakers—none of the fluorescent stripes and gel-filled soles and such that most runners favor—and his shorts are knee-length denim cutoffs.

He has a girlfriend, but they seem to lead fairly separate lives. You see her heading toward his back door now and then with a sack of takeout; you see them setting forth on a weekend morning in the Kia, minus the TECH HERMIT sign. He doesn't appear to have male friends. He is cordial to the tenants but no more than that. They call out a greeting when they meet up with him and he nods amiably and raises a hand, often not troubling to speak. Nobody knows if he has family.

The apartment building's in Govans—a small, three-story brick cube east of York Road in north Baltimore, with a lake-trout joint on the right and a used-clothing store on the left. Tiny parking lot out back. Tiny plot of grass in front. An incongruous front porch—just a concrete slab stoop, really—with a splintery wooden porch swing that nobody ever sits in, and a vertical row of doorbells next to the dingy white door.

Does he ever stop to consider his life? The meaning of it, the point? Does it trouble him to think that he will probably spend his next thirty or forty years this way? Nobody knows. And it's almost certain nobody's ever asked him.

On a Monday toward the end of October, he was still eating breakfast when his first call came in. Usually his morning went: a run, a shower, then breakfast, and then a little tidying up. He hated it when something interrupted the normal progression. He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the screen: EMILY PRESCOTT. An old lady; he had dealt with her often enough that her name was in his directory. Old ladies had the easiest problems to fix but the greatest number of fractious questions. They always wanted to know *why*. "How come this happened?" they would ask. "Last night when I went to bed my computer was just fine and this morning it's all kerblooey. But I didn't do a thing to it! I was sound asleep!"

"Yeah, well, never mind, now I've got it fixed," he would say.

"But why did it *need* fixing? What made it go wrong?"

"That's not the kind of question you want to ask about a computer."

"Why not?"

On the other hand, old ladies were his bread and butter, plus this one lived nearby in Homeland. He pressed Talk and said, "Tech Hermit."

"Mr. Mortimer?"

"Yo."

“It’s Emily Prescott; remember me? I have a dire emergency.”

“What’s up?”

“Why, I can’t seem to get my computer to go anywhere at all! It just completely refuses! Won’t go to any websites! And yet I still have a Wi-Fi signal!”

“Did you try rebooting?” he asked.

“What’s that?”

“Turning it off and then on again, like I showed you?”

“Oh, yes. ‘Sending it for a time-out,’ I like to call that.” She gave a flutter of a laugh. “I did try, yes. It didn’t help.”

“Okay,” he said. “How’s about I come by around eleven.”

“Eleven o’clock?”

“Right.”

“But I wanted to get a present for my granddaughter’s birthday on Wednesday, and I need to order it early enough for the free two-day delivery.”

He stayed quiet.

“Well,” she said. She sighed. “All right: eleven. I’ll be waiting. You remember the address?”

“I remember.”

He hung up and took another bite of toast.

His place was bigger than you might expect, given that it was in the basement. A single long, open space for the living room and the kitchen combined, and then two small, separate bedrooms and a bathroom. The ceiling was a decent height, and the floor was paved with not-too-shabby composition tiles in a streaky ivory color. A beige scatter rug lay in front of the couch. The minimal windows up close to the ceiling didn’t allow much of a view, but he could always tell if the sun was shining—which it was, today—and now that

the trees had started to turn he could see a few dry leaves collecting around the roots of the azalea bushes. Later he might take a rake to those.

He finished the last of his coffee and then pushed back his chair and stood up and carried his dishes to the sink. He had a system: he set the dishes to soak while he wiped the table and countertop, put away the butter, ran his stick vacuum under his chair in case he'd dropped any crumbs. His actual vacuuming day was Friday, but he liked to keep on top of things betweentimes.

Monday was floor-mopping day—the kitchen floor and the bathroom. “Zee dreaded moppink,” he said as he ran hot water into a bucket. He often talked to himself as he worked, using one or another foreign accent. Right now it was German, or maybe Russian. “Zee moppink of zee floors.” He didn't bother vacuuming the bathroom first, because there was no need; the floor was still pristine from last week. It was Micah's personal theory that if you actually noticed the difference you made when you cleaned—the coffee table suddenly shiny, the rug suddenly lint-free—it meant you had waited too long to do it.

Micah prided himself on his housekeeping.

When he'd finished mopping he emptied his bucket down the sink in the laundry room. He propped his mop against the water heater. Then he went back into the apartment and tackled the living area, folding the afghan on the couch and tossing out a couple of beer cans and slapping the cushions into shape. His furnishings were sparse—just the couch and the coffee table and an ugly brown vinyl recliner chair. Everything had been here when he moved in; all he'd added was a metal utility shelf for his tech maga-

zines and his manuals. Any other reading he did—mostly mysteries and biographies—he got from the free-book place and gave back when he had finished. Otherwise he'd have had to buy more shelving.

By now the kitchen floor had dried, and he returned to wash the breakfast dishes and wipe them and put them away. (Some might leave them to air-dry, but Micah hated the cluttered appearance of dishes sitting out in a draining rack.) Then he put on his glasses—rimless distance glasses for driving—and grabbed the car topper and his carryall and left through the back door.

His back door was at the rear of the building, at the bottom of a flight of concrete steps that led up to the parking lot. He paused after he'd climbed the steps to assess the weather: warmer now than when he had taken his run, and the breeze had died. He'd been right not to bother with his jacket. He clamped the **TECH HERMIT** sign onto his car and then slid in, started the engine, and raised a hand to Ed Allen, who was plodding toward his pickup with his lunchbox.

When Micah was behind the wheel he liked to pretend he was being evaluated by an all-seeing surveillance system. Traffic God, he called it. Traffic God was operated by a fleet of men in shirtsleeves and green visors who frequently commented to one another on the perfection of Micah's driving. "Notice how he uses his turn signal even when no one's behind him," they would say. Micah always, always used his turn signal. He used it in his own parking lot, even. Accelerating, he dutifully pictured an egg beneath his gas pedal; braking, he glided to an almost undetectable stop. And whenever some other driver decided at the last minute

that he needed to switch to Micah's lane, you could count on Micah to slow down and turn his left palm upward in a courtly after-you gesture. "See that?" the guys at Traffic God would say to one another. "Fellow's manners are impeccable."

It eased the tedium some, at least.

He turned onto Tenleydale Road and parked alongside the curb. But just as he was reaching for his carryall, his cell phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and raised his glasses to his forehead so he could check the screen. CASSIA SLADE. That was unusual. Cass was his woman friend (he refused to call anyone in her late thirties a "girlfriend"), but they didn't usually speak at this hour. She should be at work now, knee-deep in fourth-graders. He punched Talk. "What's up?" he asked.

"I'm going to be evicted."

"What?"

"Evicted from my apartment." She had a low, steady voice that Micah approved of, but right now there was a telltale tightness to it.

"How can you be evicted?" he asked her. "It isn't even your place."

"No, but Nan came by this morning without telling me ahead," she said. Nan was the actual renter. She lived now with her fiancé in a condo down near the harbor, but she had never given up her claim on the apartment, which Micah could understand even if Cass could not. (You don't want to seal off all your exits.) "She just rang the doorbell, no warning," Cass said, "so I didn't have time to hide the cat."

"Oh. The cat," Micah said.

"I was hoping he wouldn't show himself. I was block-

ing her view as best I could and hoping she wouldn't want to come inside, but she said, 'I just need to pick up my—what is *that*?' and she was staring past me at Whiskers who was peeking out from the kitchen doorway big as life when ordinarily, *you* know Whiskers; he can't abide a stranger. I tried to tell her I hadn't *planned* on having a cat. I explained how I'd just found him in the window well out front. But Nan said, 'You're missing the point; you know I'm deathly allergic. One whiff of a room where a cat's merely passed through a month ago,' she said, 'one little *hair* of a cat, left behind on a rug, and I just—oh, Lord, I can already feel my throat closing up!' And then she backed out onto the landing and waved me off when I tried to follow. 'Wait!' I said, but 'I'll be in touch,' she told me, and you know what *that* means."

"No, I don't know any such thing," Micah said. "So, she'll call you up tonight and ream you out and you will apologize and that's that. Except you'll have to get rid of Whiskers, I guess."

"I can't get rid of Whiskers! He's just finally feeling at home here."

Micah thought of Cass as basically a no-nonsense woman, so this cat business always baffled him. "Look," he told her. "You're way ahead of yourself. All she's said so far is she will be in touch."

"And where would I move to?" Cass asked.

"Nobody's said a word about moving."

"Not *yet*," she told him.

"Well, wait till she does before you start packing, hear?"

"And it's not so easy to find a place that allows pets," Cass said, as if he hadn't spoken. "What if I end up homeless?"

“Cass. There are *hundreds* of people with pets, living all over Baltimore. You’ll find another place, trust me.”

There was a silence. He could make out the voices of children at the other end of the line, but they had a faraway sound. She must be out on the playground; it must be recess time.

“Cass?”

“Well, thanks for listening,” she said abruptly. She clicked off.

He stared at the screen a moment before he slid his glasses back down and tucked his phone away.

“Am I the very dumbest old biddy among all your clients?” Mrs. Prescott asked him.

“No, not at all,” he told her truthfully. “You’re not even in the top ten.”

Her wording amused him, because she did look a little bit henlike. She had a small, round head and a single pillowy mound of breasts-plus-belly atop her toothpick legs. Even here at home she wore little heels that gave her walk a certain jerky quality.

Micah was sitting on the floor beneath her desk, which was a massive antique rolltop with surprisingly limited work space. (People put their computers in the most outlandish locations. It was as if they didn’t quite grasp that they weren’t still writing with fountain pens.) He had unplugged two of the cords from the tangle attached to the surge protector—one cord labeled `MODEM` and the other labeled `ROUTER`, both in his own firm uppercase—and he was gazing at the second hand on his wristwatch. “Okay,” he said

finally. He reattached the modem cord and went back to studying his second hand.

“My friend Glynda? You don’t know her,” Mrs. Prescott said, “but I keep telling her she ought to get in touch with you. She is *scared* of her computer! She only uses it to email. She doesn’t want to give it any *information*, she says. I told her about your little book.”

“Mm-hmm,” Micah said. His book was called *First, Plug It In*. It was one of Woolcott Publishing’s better-selling titles, but Woolcott was strictly local and he didn’t have a hope the book would ever make him rich.

He reattached the router cord and began extricating himself from underneath the desk. “This here is the hardest part of my job,” he told Mrs. Prescott as he struggled to his knees. He grabbed on to the desk frame and rose to a standing position.

“Oh, pshaw, you’re too young to talk that way,” Mrs. Prescott said.

“Young! I’ll be forty-four on my next birthday.”

“Exactly,” Mrs. Prescott said. And then, “I did tell Glynda you sometimes give lessons, but she claimed she would forget it all two minutes after you left.”

“She’s right,” Micah said. “She ought to just buy my book.”

“But lessons are so much more—oh! Look at that!”

She was staring at her computer screen, both hands clasped beneath her chin. “Amazon!” she said in a thrilled tone.

“Yep. Now. Were you watching what I did?”

“Well, I . . . Not exactly, no.”

“I turned off your computer; I unplugged the modem cord; I unplugged the router cord. See there where they’re labeled?”

“Oh, Mr. Mortimer, I would never remember all that!”

“Suit yourself,” he said. He reached for his clipboard on the top of her desk and started making out her bill.

“I’m thinking of ordering my granddaughter an African-American baby doll,” Mrs. Prescott said. “What do you think of that?”

“Is your granddaughter African-American?”

“Why, no.”

“Then I think it would just look weird,” he said.

“Oh, Mr. Mortimer! I certainly hope not!”

He tore off the top copy of her bill and handed it to her. “I feel bad even charging you,” he told her, “what with the piddly amount of work I did.”

“Now, don’t you talk that way,” she said. “You saved my life! I ought to pay you triple.” And she went off to fetch her checkbook.

The fact was, he reflected as he was driving home, that even if she *had* paid him triple, this job barely supported him. On the other hand, it was work he liked, and at least he was his own boss. He wasn’t all that fond of people ordering him around.

Once upon a time, more had been expected of him. He’d been the first in his family to go to college; his father had pruned trees for Baltimore Gas and Electric and his mother had waited tables, as did all four of his sisters to this day. They’d viewed Micah as their shining star. Until he wasn’t anymore. For one thing, he’d had to take a number of odd

jobs to flesh out his partial scholarship, which had made keeping up with his studies kind of a struggle. More important, though: college just wasn't how he'd pictured it. He had thought it would be a place that would give him all the answers, that would provide a single succinct Theory of Everything to organize his world by, but instead it seemed an extension of high school: same teachers at the front of the room repeating things over and over, same students yawning and fidgeting and whispering among themselves throughout the lectures. He lost his enthusiasm. He floundered about; he changed majors twice; he ended up in computer science, which was at least something definite—something yes-or-no, black-or-white, as logical and orderly as a game of dominoes. Midway through his senior year (which had taken him five years to get to), he dropped out to start a software company with a classmate named Deuce Baldwin. Deuce provided the money and Micah provided the brainpower—specifically, a program of his own invention that sorted and archived emails. Now it would be a dinosaur, of course. The world had moved on. But at the time it had filled a real need, which made it even more unfortunate when Deuce had proved impossible to get along with. Rich guys! They were all the same. Forever throwing their weight around, acting so entitled. Things had gone from bad to worse, till cut to the chase and Micah walked out. He couldn't even take his program with him, because he hadn't had the foresight to nail down his rights to it.

He turned into his space on the lot and cut the engine. His watch read 11:47. "Flawless," Traffic God murmured. Micah had made the whole trip without a single misstep, a single fumble or correction.

Really, his life was good. He had no reason to feel unhappy.

A man needed the viruses stripped off his computer, and a mom-and-pop grocery store wanted to start billing its customers online. In between, Micah checked out a faulty wall switch in 1B. 1B was Yolanda Palma, a dramatic-looking woman in maybe her early fifties with a flaring mane of dark hair and a mournful, sagging face. “So what’s new in *your* life?” she asked as she watched him test the voltage. She always behaved as if they were old friends, which they weren’t. “Oh,” he said, “not much,” but he might as well not have spoken, because she was already saying, “Me, I’m at it again. Joined a whole new dating service and started over. Some folks never learn, I guess.”

“How’s that working out?” he asked. The wall switch was dead as a doornail.

“Well, last night I met this guy for a drink at Swallow at the Hollow. A real-estate inspector. He claimed he was six foot one, but you know how *that* goes. And he could’ve stood to lose a few pounds, although who am I to talk, right? Anyhow, turns out that he’d been divorced for three and a half weeks. Three and a *half*, like he’d been counting the days, and not in a good way. Like his divorce had been a personal tragedy. And sure enough, straight off he has to tell how his ex-wife was so gorgeous she could have been a model. How she wore a size two dress. How she didn’t own a single pair of shoes that weren’t stilettos and therefore the tendons in her heels or something had shortened so her toes were permanently pointed. If she walked barefoot to the bathroom

at night she had to walk tippy-toe. He made it sound like that was an attractive quality, but all I could picture was a woman with sort of *hooves*, know what I mean?"

"I'm going to have to pick up a new switch before I can fix this," Micah told her.

She was lighting a cigarette now and had to exhale before she spoke. "Okay," she said offhandedly, dropping her lighter back into her pocket. "So we have one drink and then I say I'd better be getting home. 'Home!' he says. Says, 'I was thinking we might go to my place.' And he reaches over and clamps a hand on my knee and gazes meaningfully into my eyes. I look back at him. I freeze. I don't say a word. Finally he takes his hand away and says, 'Well, or else not, I guess.'"

"Ha," Micah said.

He was replacing the switch plate now. Yolanda watched thoughtfully, batting her smoke away with one hand each time she exhaled. "Tonight it's a dentist," she said.

"You're trying *again*?"

"This one's never been married. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

Micah bent to put his screwdriver back in his tool bucket. "Might be another day or two before I get to the hardware store," he told her.

"I'm around," she said.

She was always around, it seemed to him. He didn't know what she did for a living.

As she was seeing him out, she asked, "What do you think?" and flashed him a sudden fierce grimace, showing all her teeth which were large and extremely straight-edged, like a double row of piano keys.

He said, "About what?"

“Would a dentist approve, do you think?”

“Sure,” he said.

Although he suspected a dentist might have something to say about her smoking.

“He sounded really nice when he texted me,” she said.

And all at once she brightened, so that her features no longer looked saggy.

On Monday evenings, he and Cass didn't usually get together. But his last call of the day came from a podiatry office out past the Beltway, and as he was driving home afterward he happened to notice the scribbly red-and-white sign on his left for his favorite barbecue place. On impulse, he turned into the parking lot and sent a text to Cass. *How about I bring some Andy Nelson over for supper?* he asked. She answered right away, which meant she must be home from work already. *Good idea!* she said. So he cut the engine and went in to place an order.

By then it was after five, and he had to wait in a milling crowd of workmen in baggy coveralls, and young couples draped all over each other, and harried-looking women ringed by clamoring children. The smells of smoke and vinegar made him hungry; all he'd had for lunch was a peanut-butter-and-raisin sandwich. He ended up ordering about twice as much as he should have: not only ribs but collard greens and potato wedges and cornbread besides, enough to fill two plastic bags. Then for his entire trip down the expressway he was tormented by the smells drifting from the backseat.

Rush hour was in full swing and the car radio warned of

delays, but Micah disengaged his mind and let his hands rest loosely on the wheel. The hills in the distance seemed to be oxidizing, he noticed. Overnight, the trees had turned a hazy orange color.

Cass lived off Harford Road in what could be mistaken for a one-family house, graying white clapboard with a small front porch, but just inside the foyer a flight of stairs on the right led to her second-floor apartment. At the top of the stairs Micah shifted one of his bags in order to knock on the door. “That smells heavenly,” Cass said when she let him in. She took a bag from him and turned to lead the way to the kitchen.

“I was out in Cockeysville and my car just sort of veered into the parking lot,” he told her. “I think I might have ordered too much, though.” He set his bag on the counter and gave her a quick kiss.

She was still in her teacher outfit—skirt of some kind, sweater of some kind, something muted and unexceptional which he approved of without really noticing. He approved of her appearance in general, really. She was a tall, slow-moving woman with substantial breasts and wide hips, sturdy calves rising from her matronly black pumps. In fact she was matronly altogether, which Micah found kind of a turn-on. He seemed to have outgrown any interest in the slip-of-a-girl type. Her face was broad and calm, and her eyes were a deep gray-green, and her wheat-colored hair hung straight almost to her shoulders, casually parted and indifferently styled. He considered her restful to look at.

She had already set the kitchen table and placed a roll of paper towels at the center, because mere napkins were inadequate when you were eating barbecued ribs. While she

was opening the bags and putting out the food, Micah took two cans of beer from the fridge. He gave one to her and sat down across from her with the other.

“How was your day?” she asked him.

“It was okay. How was yours?”

“Well, other than Nan finding out about Whiskers . . .”

“Oh. Right,” he said. He’d forgotten.

“When I got home from work she’d left a message on my phone asking me to call her.”

Micah waited. Cass served herself some collard greens and passed him the container.

“So what did she have to say?” he asked finally.

“I don’t know yet.”

“You didn’t call?”

Cass selected three ribs from their Styrofoam box, firming her lips in a way that struck Micah as obstinate. He had a sudden inkling as to what she might have looked like as a child.

“There’s no sense putting it off,” he told her. “You’re only prolonging things.”

“I’ll get to it,” she said shortly.

He decided not to pursue the subject. He chomped down on a rib.

Every waking moment that Cass spent in her apartment, she seemed to have some sort of music or news or *something* filling the airwaves. In the mornings it was NPR; in the evenings the TV was on whether or not she was watching; and during meals an endless stream of easy-listening tunes flowed mellifluously from the kitchen radio. Micah, who appreciated silence, would shut all this out for a while but then gradually grow aware of a vague sense of unfocused

irritability, and that was when he would notice what he was hearing. Now he said, "Could we turn that down a notch?" Cass sent him a resigned look and reached over to lower the volume. He would have preferred for her to shut it off completely, but he supposed that was asking too much.

He and Cass had been together for three years or so, and they had reached the stage where things had more or less solidified: compromises arrived at, incompatibilities adjusted to, minor quirks overlooked. They had it down to a system, you could say.

Not till they were halfway through the meal did Cass return to the subject of Nan. "I mean, look at what *she's* got," she said. Micah wasn't sure at first what she was talking about, but then she said, "An enormous golden retriever! Well, okay, it's her fiancé's dog, but still. You would think she could understand why I can't get rid of Whiskers."

It had always struck Micah as unlike Cass to give her cat such a cutesy name. Why not something more dignified? Why not Herman? Or George? But of course he never mentioned this. "Where is Whiskers?" he thought to ask now. He glanced around the kitchen, but there was no sign of him.

"That's the irony," Cass said. "You know how he disappears whenever I have company. It's only by pure blind chance that he happened to poke his nose out while Nan was at the door."

"Well, more to the point," he said, "when is Nan going to give this place up and let you take over the lease? She's been engaged to that guy for longer than I've known you."

"Good question," Cass said. "Other people meet, they fall in love, they move in together, they marry. But Nan didn't get the memo, it seems."

Micah let a brief pause develop and then he asked what Deemolay had been up to—her most troubled, most disruptive student. Deemolay caused chaos the instant he entered the classroom, but he lived in a car with his grandmother and Micah knew Cass had a soft spot in her heart for him.

Deemolay had poked a plastic ruler into Jennaya's back at lunchtime and told her it was a switchblade. *That* was an interesting topic.

After supper they cleared the table, stacking the dishes on the counter because Cass didn't share Micah's belief that they should clean up before they left the kitchen. Cass's dishes were actual china, and her cutlery came in a set, and she owned numerous nonessentials like a lettuce dryer and a knife rack. Not only that, but the furniture in her living room was substantial and deeply cushioned, and all her linens matched each other, and houseplants and ceramic doodads dotted her many small tables. Micah found this a bit claustrophobic, but at the same time he was impressed. He sometimes felt that his own place didn't look quite grown-up.

They relocated to the living room to watch the evening news, sitting together on the couch on either side of the cat, who had finally deigned to make an appearance. He was a skinny black adolescent with, yes, noticeably long white whiskers, and he hunched between them purring with his eyes closed. The TV had to compete with the music still playing from the kitchen, until Micah finally rose and went to switch off the radio. He didn't know how Cass endured that constant flow of sound. It made his brain feel fractured.

If it were up to him, he would have done without the news as well. Micah had about given up on this country, to tell the truth. It seemed to be going to hell these days, and

he didn't have the sense he could do anything about it. But Cass was very conscientious, and she insisted on absorbing every depressing detail. She sat erect in the darkened living room and watched intently, the light from the TV gilding her profile and the curve of her throat. Micah loved the curve of her throat. He leaned closer and set his lips to the pulse just below her jaw, and she tilted her head to rest it on his, briefly, but kept her eyes on the screen. "Every day's worth of harm we do the planet will take a decade to reverse," she told him. "And some of it we can *never* reverse."

"Why don't I spend the night tonight," Micah murmured in her ear.

"You know tomorrow's a school day," she said, patting his hand.

"Just this once," he told her, "and I promise I'll wake up early and clear out of here."

But she said, "Micah?"

Her questioning tone implied that he was being unreasonable; he had no idea why. Almost always she agreed to let him stay. But she drew away from him and said, "Besides, I thought this was your night to set the garbage bins out."

"I can do it first thing in the morning," he said.

"And I haven't finished my grading!" she told him.

He knew when he was defeated. He sighed and said, "Okay, okay." And when the next commercial came on, he rose to leave.

"Don't you want your leftovers?" she asked as she followed him to the door.

He said, "You can keep them."

"Well, thank you."

"Hey!" he said. He turned to face her. "Maybe tomorrow

I could fix my world-famous chili. And you could come for supper and bring the rest of the cornbread.”

“Oh, I don’t know . . .”

“Chili on top of cornbread! Yum!” he said enticingly.

“Well,” she said, “I guess. If we make it early.” And she opened the door and gave him a real kiss, finally, and stood back to let him go.

Driving home, he had the streets almost to himself, but he stayed under the speed limit anyway. He didn’t hold with the theory that the law allowed a tad bit of wiggle room. If thirty-five miles per hour really meant thirty-eight, they ought to go ahead and say thirty-eight.

“The man talks sense,” Traffic God commented approvingly.

Micah headed west on Northern Parkway. He turned left on York—signaling first, of course, even though he was in the left-turn-only lane. At the back of his mind, he felt a prickly little burr of unease. It seemed to him that Cass had acted less affectionate than usual. Since when had she cared if it was his night to set the garbage bins out? But she wasn’t the type to go into those mysterious sulks the way some women did, so he shook the feeling off. He started whistling “Moonlight in Vermont,” which was the last tune her kitchen radio had been playing.

Farther down York Road the little stores and cafés grew more familiar. Most of the stores were closed by now, their neon signs unlighted and barely visible in the dusk. He took a left onto Roscoe Street and then a right just before the used-clothing store, heading toward the parking lot.

When he got out of the car he retrieved his carryall from the passenger seat and plucked his TECH HERMIT sign off the roof and set them both at the top of his steps. Then he started wheeling the garbage bins to the alley. 2B's bin—Mr. Lane's—had a long cardboard mailing tube slanting out from under the lid. Recycling, on a garbage day! “Ooh-la-la, monsieur,” he said reproachfully. “You are un pee-saw,” which was how he thought the French might pronounce “pissant.” And he shook his head as he parked the bin next to 2A's.

Some people; they just didn't have a clue.