

# B\_U\_I\_L\_D\_E\_R\_S

{{Or .....}}

*maugham* IN SEPIA: BUILDERS,

..... *an urban fable*

By

*Charles Pinch*

NOTE: *This story was originally published by CHAPTER & VERSE in 2016.*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Guest Editor TYLER SWAIN writes...* In olden days this story would have been known as a 'conceit'—a literary braggadocio immodestly confected to showcase the writer's mastery of his craft and glittering talent. And while this true for 'Builders' it is much more than just a story written in the style of a now faded legend—an author I confess to not having read but who was a bestseller in his day—1920's to 40's—William Somerset Maugham. Pinch has taken from that author what he needs—mainly a period gentility of prose—and has added his own. ( I don't understand the appeal to deliberately write in the style of another author but I'm sure he had his reasons. ) I've read 'Builders' three times since being approached by Tom Ball to guest edit it. Okay, then. This is how I see it:

1. The title is both ironic and tragic. Mr. Winter and Brent are 'builders', each in their own way. And both fail in their respective quests. Why? Because as Brent explains... "perhaps it's not about just putting things up..." something Mr. Winter admits to not understanding. Brent's ambition to become an architect is an external expression of what he believes he needs in order to realize himself (this would be subconscious on his part, of course). Mr. Winter's desire to fill the void in his life as a childless widower represents an internal ambition. But their divergent polarities have doomed them from the start. They are 'particles' who represent each other's 'anti-particles'—something Brent later learns to understand while Mr. Winter doesn't.

2. Mr. Winter's name reflects the barren season where nothing grows. He and Brent first meet during the winter rather than the spring—with its regenerative force. So from that perspective their relationship is again doomed. This is underscored and foreshadowed by the first word in the story. 'Tragedy'.

3. The different elevations in his apartment building I see as different levels of Mr. Winter's mind. The lowest floor, where he first watches Brent through the window and feels the stirring ache for a son of his own, is like his id—the powerful unconscious that holds his deepest and most unexpressed longings. The top floor in which he has his bedroom only affords sleep through medication 'his crushed motion sickness pills'—ie: not a natural sleep. It represents his egoic mind clouded by his life concerns but out of touch with his subliminal desires.

4. 'Atlas' and its powerful symbolic resonances—I thought this a brilliant image . The figure of Atlas foreshadows Brent's inability to shoulder the burden (university) that has been thrust upon him. The statue, early on, melts and disappears into nothing, as do his dreams. The circle Brent carves is an image of an ideal perfection, a Platonic completion that neither he nor Mr. Winter attain. And interestingly, it is not presented physically in the story (unlike Atlas), but only through a photographic capture—a shadow within an insubstantial medium. In this sense it is beyond materiality. But we might suspect its near impossible apprehension in any case, since the circle is 'precariously balanced' on a small block of ice.

5. *The model of the Romanesque church stands as a symbol of what Brent will later become when his youthful 'Hellenism' is replaced by something 'solemnly Byzantine'. The Romanesque style, of course, post dates Hellenistic Greek architecture. But it is also an empty church, a space enclosing a void, just like Mr. Winter's apartment is 'as empty as a cathedral in a city of atheists'.*

6. *In the photo of Brent taken by his father in which he stands beside the ungraspable perfection of the ice circle, his toque is pulled down over his eyes—so it is a perfection he cannot see (at least in terms of imagery). It also prefigures his 'blindness' when it comes to navigating his future. Eyes seemed to be harbingers of potent symbolism. A number of times in the story eyes are covered or shaded from view or quixotic and confusing in their gaze such as when Mr. Winter couldn't 'read' Brent's expression.*

7. *The foreboding of ill luck is also present in the inverted '7' on the street number. It is no longer a lucky number but has transformed into something potentially dangerous: a 'hook'. A hook that will snag the fortunes of both characters before the story is over.*

8. *Mr. and Mrs. Allen represent opposite polarities and prefigure in this respect Brent's new found obsession with 'particle and anti-particle'. They also function in the capacity of a Greek chorus, supplementing and reinforcing the ongoing drama. It is Mrs. Allen who tells Mr. Winter that Brent is 'at the head of his class'. She also is the one who tells him (and the reader) that he is working with his father instead of attending university.*

*The 'painted metal flowers' she has on her porch—unlike the flowers under Mr. Winter's window, neither bloom nor die and suggest something unnatural, something that will not thrive and flourish. That, of course, references—in the wider world—the relationship between Brent and Mr. Winter.*

9. *John Raston is a symbol of the obstacle in Brent's and Mr. Winter's relationship. He is the intrusive element—the father Mr. Winter wants to be but can't get past. (Driving him to the point of imagining he is dead and assuming the paternal role himself.) He is usually too big for doorways and to Mr. Winter sometimes appears to be 'larger than he was'. All of which makes him a silent aggressor—when he opens the door the night Mr. Winter presents his proposal—'he was standing in shadow so that only his teeth showed.' He subsequently is the 'conscience' of the story when he tells Mr. Winter that he knew his plan was going to fail.*

10. *There are two constants in Builders which recur unobtrusively throughout the narrative. The 'Indian summer' which ushers in a season 'of tender regrets'. The only certainly in life is change (like the seasons)—because the only thing that never changes is change itself. Even when the world is 'upside down, sideways and across' the natural constant—the energy of the universe, still functions—it's the Buddhist's exhortation of things being 'just as they are, reality, just as it is'. And this is symbolized by the ash tree whose branches cast their shadows across the sidewalk, pointing us to a world that is 'the same but different.'*

11. Lastly, I want to say, that although Mr. Winter seems only to have Brent's best interest at heart, there is something sinister in his obsession with the boy. Brent's 'classically handsome' face for Mr. Winter is Hellenistic in its beauty and here we might be tempted—and forgiven—to speculate that the relationship that will develop between them will morph into something like the boy-man love, common in ancient Greece—the erastes and eromenos. Yet the story never goes 'physical'—the affection Mr. Winter demonstrates is solely platonic—or is it? Why should he burst into tears behind his door after Brent gives him a hug—'it was the best hug Mr. Winter ever had.' An expression of the void in his childless life or something deeper, a primal erotically charged craving for male physical affection? It's never made clear and it is this powerful use of subtext—something that runs from the beginning to the end of Builders—that so beguiles us.

The story? A childless widower becomes obsessed with a young architecture student. Plain but not so simple. Pinch writes the story in the style of an author nobody reads anymore and the result is dazzling. But for me, the most enthralling thing about Builders is the apparent effortless execution. Long to be able to write like this, long to be able to write like you're not even trying.

Five stars

#### **WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...**

Let's begin.

There is so much to unpack in Charles Pinch's, "Builders," that it behooves me to write erratically, emphatically, and to drink while I do so. I will always start with this disclaimer about his work: you're gonna hear me wax on about Russian winters, you're gonna know why you should read this work because he holds style, time, and craft by the balls, and that we work together – I am FOTD's fiction editor and he, along with Tom, are my bossmen. (They're better than me and I have no issues fighting any of you, probably losing physically, about the reasons why they are doing better things than you or others.)

I say that to say if any of their stories were garbage, I would let you know. You, dear reader, have nothing to worry about here: it's pure quality.

"MAUGHAM IN SEPIA: BUILDERS, AN URBAN FABLE," is one of the finest stories I've read by another human being I know. I like to say that all the classics are readable, but they only are for their own reasons. This is a contemporary story that knows how to hold the weight of a cigarette burning down onto your skin and leaving a scar – a welcoming slow burn.

The structure of this story is from the 1910's and I mean that in the best way possible. Sherwood Anderson's ghost can suck it. Pinch has harnessed a style that is hard to make interesting. He relishes in the implication of the mundane and writes in a style that touches that delicate time in writing where the 1880's were dead and the First World

*War didn't necessarily exist yet. Cheever created the same effect walking through his neighbors' backyards 50 years later.*

*Charles references Maugham, a man whom I have not yet read. Of Human Bondage seems to be his claim to fame and, from what small, superficial research I've done, speaks about the emotional chains that hold us to our existence. Our emotional reaction to experience is not only maligned but consequential, had we been able to separate ourselves from emotional bondage then we would be free – evolved, philosophical (I've also never read Spinoza for those who've dug deeper than me), having the intellectual capacity to care for all (because a lot of people suck) yet strive for objective, progressive concepts of humanity.*

*Here is where I apologize, the story is long so the intro is going to be long too.*

*Strap in.*

*Fucking Russian winters.*

*Fucking Canadian winters.*

*Have you ever sat down in the cold, knowing the cold was only going to keep coming, that, if you just walked out, everything would slow to a stop for a moment? Did you not go outside because it was cold and you would die? Does the ever-lingering concept of mindlessly empty hibernation seem appealing?*

*Mr. Winter, our protagonist, walks on.*

*Enter the neighborhood boy.*

*Part of the brilliance of this story is its subtlety.*

*I think that there are people who have spent their entire lives thinking that they could write like this and still not create such a predicament.*

*Modern and contemporary writing are full of narratives that question and pinprick their bony fingers through the motives of the dotting old human fawning obsessively over the young human to the point where it is categorically a problem and extends into discomfort for contemporary readers – Lolita works as an example, at FOTD we've also discussed Mann's Death in Venice.*

*"Builders," knows you want answers but also knows they're already given and isn't taking any questions. The luminal space of sexuality represented in this story is up to more than me to decide, and, while it may be a part of the piece, is not the main point.*

*I lack a decent metaphor to give this piece enough praise: I would watch this story fly fish for five hours knowing that it was old and told shitty stories; if this story owed me 20\$ I would probably only ask for 10\$ back and expect a beer; if this story shed on the floor I would sell this story for a vacuum so I could suck up what little wisdom was left and keep selling its style to other people without as much style.*

*Pinch does something that most writers, myself included, can't get. The long con. Charles knows that narratives have always existed and will continue to exist. There is a fine line between building a story and a skyscraper, a craft and a hobby, a line and word, he has managed to encapsulate the snowscape – the lovely moment in chaos over time – and can sit out the storm.*

*Read this story, it will be one of the closest things you've ever touched to the beginnings of modernism and what the craft can do, has done, for you now.*

*Pinch crafts a fine line and I hope that is praise enough.*

*Five Stars.*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE** (*for the love of language...*)

On the first day of the new month, he was alone at last. The dwelling was as empty as a cathedral in a city of atheists and for this Mr. Winter gave thanks to God. Under the weighty silence, with only a flashlight to guide him (one of the riffraff had stolen all the light bulbs in the hallways), he trudged up the stairs to the topmost units and wandered around each empty apartment. He listened to the sound of his own hollow footsteps as he knocked about in the echoing space. It was like being inside a violin or a sound box. It was the sound of emptiness. Mr. Winter knew the only people who ever heard it were the people who had lost a loved one. It was the sound of alone.

He thanked him but then excused himself, complaining that he was not quite himself that day. Brent had noticed he looked a little piqued but wasn't sure if he should ask. They shook hands and then Brent gave Mr. Winter a hug. It was the best hug he remembered having in a long time. After he closed the door, he could not stem the tears.

MAUGHAM IN SEPIA: BUILDERS, AN  
URBAN FABLE

By Charles Pinch

*For Frances and Viveca, Pat and Susan*

Tragedy befell Mr. Winter when his wife died. After 35 years, he was suddenly alone. He arranged for a simple ceremony and after paying the \$2500 cremation fee, claimed her ashes. This was about the same price, when indexed to inflation, he had paid for the ring with which he had first claimed her. They had no children.

A week later he sold his big house in Toronto, transferred his money to a bank in a small town and bought a six-unit apartment building on a green street with tidy

and not so tidy post-war houses. The real estate agent told him the building had heritage potential. Mr. Winter liked that. It had all the original fixtures and fittings. There was wainscoting in the living rooms and the plate covers in the hallways were pressed glass with flower designs that stood out nicely at the flick of a switch. What she neglected to mention (and he neglected to see) was that the original fittings and fixtures had not been of the highest quality. The 'solid maple' kitchen cupboards appeared on closer inspection to be laminated plywood and the drains in the tubs and sinks gurgled and exhaled unpleasantly from their depths like old men. The linoleum in the kitchens was a common pattern in the 1960's.

Much worse, to Mr. Winter's thinking, were the tenants. A bedraggled assortment of squatters and shiftless ne'er-do-wells that left their garbage in the hallways and tossed the flattened butts of their cigarettes over the balconies. As soon as he took control, he kicked them out. It was a month of stomping footsteps up and down the linoleum stairs, curses and threats (always behind closed doors, never to his face), U-Hauls and rusted vans. The furniture that exited the building consisted of stained couches and tables with mended legs. The TV's though, were new and big.

On the first day of the new month, he was alone at last. The dwelling was as empty as a cathedral in a city of atheists and for this Mr. Winter gave thanks to God. Under the weighty silence, with only a flashlight to guide him (one of the riffraff had stolen all the light bulbs in the hallways), he trudged up the stairs to the topmost units and wandered around each empty apartment. He listened to the sound of his own hollow footsteps as he knocked about in the echoing space. It

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The neighbors on the green street were somewhat surprised when no one else moved in. But Mr. Winter did not advertise for tenants. He kept the whole building for himself.

In number six, on the top floor, he furnished with just an armchair and a television. Between seven and nine at night he watched his favorite programs. In number five he kept his books. He had amassed a sizeable collection but the subject matter was eclectic: it ranged from old *Argosy* magazines with articles on elk hunting and how best to care for a Swiss army knife to the poetry of William Wordsworth, a book his late wife had much loved but which he could not remember opening. On rainy afternoons he would spend an hour or two flipping through the pages and sniffing the yellowing old paper. This constituted the extent of his literary immersion and after standing before the window and watching the gray rain drizzle he would close the door of his 'library' and walk downstairs.

Number four presented a problem because a mouse or squirrel had died between the walls and it was several days before he could abide standing in the empty space without feeling his gorge rise. He decided this would be a good place to put his soiled laundry until he washed it. Number three became a deluxe storage facility. Everything not distributed among the other apartments ended up there. This included his late wife's ironing board, a few pieces of battered luggage from their trips abroad—mostly to England—and extra canned goods. These he lined



up on a couple of makeshift shelves beside a jumble of garden tools and snow shovels. The small bachelor—the only one in the building, the others were all two bedrooms—beside his own ground floor unit, he left empty. He couldn't think of what to put in there but he spent a good time wondering about it. He decided if he ever should get a cat or dog that's where it would end up.

His own living space—that would be number one—he had furnished with what he'd decided to keep from the old house. It was commercial quality stuff, but good commercial, from retailers like Ridpath's in Toronto and Gibbard from somewhere in the US. He took two Chinese lamps; his late wife's needlepoint pictures which he had not much liked when she was alive (she had a clumsy hand and her choice of colors left something to be desired) but could not now live without and a set of silver-plated flatware for six or eight. In the interest of investing his emotions in a forward-looking future he used a knife and a fork and a spoon each Sunday with his roast beef and potatoes but each Sunday it was a different knife and fork and spoon from the set. It took him two months to go through the whole service. Mr. Winter knew which utensils he had used because when he washed them after eating his beef and potatoes he placed a small snippet of masking tape on each handle. At the end of eight weeks when he was ready to start over again he took the tape off and chose his knife, fork and spoon at random. It gave him satisfaction to think he was not neglecting the things of his past.

He kept to himself. He made a point of avoiding his neighbors, though he was courteous enough to nod and say 'hello'. But he did not enter into or otherwise engage in conversation with them. He shopped and he drove his big, shiny car. It was the biggest and best car on the street and drew the envy and admiration of his less well off neighbors. Far from viewing him with contempt and suspicion, whenever the opportunity presented itself, they tried to ingratiate themselves with Mr. Winter.

Without giving himself away, he took stock of those around him. On one side of his building lived a childless couple, like he and Mrs. Winter. Their house sat behind a row of misshapen spruce. A ramshackle brick terrace out front was already crumbling like ancient masonry. On the porch stood an unused stove, recycling bins and plastic urns planted with painted metal sunflowers. She was grossly obese and he was as thin as a dowel. She was garrulous and he made tiny whimpering sounds. He always saluted Mr. Winter from the soiled rim of his cap when Mr. Winter drove out of the driveway.

He paid hardly any attention to the people on the other side of his building. They were young, male, left for work early and came home late. He never saw them in anything but jeans.

If there were any people on this street who prodded Mr. Winter's interest in his neighbors, it was the family of four across from him. Their house stood in direct line with the living room window of the unit he was occupying. It was a modest dwelling with a sloping gable, the exterior painted gray, a driveway to one side

and a garden out front that appeared to consist mostly of weeds. There were small signs of neglect: some of the paint was peeling, there were shingles missing here and there on the roof and the number '7' in '27' had come loose and now hung beside the '2' like an angular 'J' or fishhook. But none of this seemed to matter very much. The feeling the house gave was one of 'domestic stability' and one was led to believe that these little neglects would be attended to soon enough.

As to the family itself, Mr. Winter had determined the following. The father was a big-boned man with a barrel-shaped chest whose voice carried throughout the neighborhood. He was an opinionated fellow, the type who had the final word on everything, be it astrophysics or the incompetence of the postal system. His wife was the nodding kind, agreeing with her husband's promulgations, but at the same time, not committing to them. He didn't know what she thought privately about anything. There were two boys. And this is where our story really begins. The younger looked like someone who had jumped out of a comic book. He also had a visible vein, just under the skin, that ran from his nose to his upper lip. Like his father, he was always talking. The older boy was sixteen or seventeen, tall and straight. He was a young man of classically handsome features and with his hair cropped closely against his head and cut straight across his brow, he looked like a late Roman youth. Mr. Winter was sure he had seen such a face in one of Mrs. Winter's books on ancient sculpture.

It was several weeks after moving in before he learned the boy's name. It was Brent. And this Brent was a model son as it turned out. He shoveled snow from the driveway after returning from school. He didn't even bother taking his backpack off but just picked up the shovel and went straight to work. He raked leaves in October and planted weeds in the garden during the first watery days of April. When the family did get around to fixing what was neglected, a fallen number '7' or peeling paint, it was Brent who attended to it.

This commendable devotion to duty was not acquired at the expense of being dull. The boy was full of high spirits and was the perfect partner for his younger brother when the two of them tossed a black and white soccer ball through a basketball hoop. They did this usually before dinner when the pink sun was setting behind their house and the branches of the ash tree out front cast long, trembling shadows across the sidewalk. Brent was a better player than his brother, aiming for the hoop from just the right distance and sending the ball up and through the net as though God Himself had placed the shot. But he often let his brother win.

It didn't surprise Mr. Winter to learn (and he learned this from his garrulous neighbor next door) that Brent was the top of his class in school. And sometimes, all this accumulated knowledge about Brent, as he stood gazing at him and his brother from his living room window, transformed itself into a certain degree of wistful regret. He lamented that he and his wife had never had any children and if he had to do it over again, he decided they would.

Life for Mr. and Mrs. Winter would have been perfect if they had had a son like Brent.

During the next few months he enjoyed himself. He stood in front of his living room window and watched the snow falling softly. It was especially beautiful in the evening after the streetlights turned on: the dark sky and swirling snowflakes reminded Mr. Winter of confetti. In the early mornings he listened to the sound of the neighborhood warming up their cars and vans before heading out to work in the sub zero dawn. Mr. Winter hunkered down in his bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. When he finally got up all the driveways were vacant. He took his bath in a different tub every day. He used the tub in number six on Mondays, five on Tuesdays and all the way down to Saturday when he used his own tub. It was the luxury of proprietorship. He was the lord of his castle.

He also learned more about Brent. He observed, for example, that he kept mostly to himself. He was a friendly, helpful, caring young man to be sure, but he was also something of a loner. He didn't pal around with the other young people on his street and they, in turn, left him to his own company. Many times Mr. Winter saw him returning home from school with a book under his nose. He was serious and studious and it was no surprise, really, that he was at the top of his class. Mr. Winter wondered what the boy wanted to do after graduation. Had he the ambition to be a lawyer or go into medicine? They seemed worthy enough pursuits. An airline pilot, perhaps? No, that was too ordinary—he changed it to astronaut. Brent was the sort of young man he imagined exploring new worlds.

Day after day he found himself watching the boy and his family. It was his daily 'television show'. He seldom went up to number six to watch TV anymore, only on Mondays when he had his tub. This was much more interesting. He enjoyed seeing them return from shopping and tried to guess what kind of groceries they had bought. He frequently observed celery leaves poking from the tops of bags; there were cases of bottled water and pop and once a month a large box of kitty litter. That meant they must own a cat though he'd never seen one. Brent and his brother would carry the bags inside. Sometimes they would have snowball fights and sometimes their father would join in. Mr. Winter, standing in front of his living room window, would laugh at their antics as he imagined the jokes and banter and good fellowship they shared.

The third or fourth week of January a snow squall set in, pulling itself out of the sky like a white tornado. Schools closed, most people were prevented from going into work, and the world, or at least the street, came to a standstill. It was white and quiet and clean. It was during this time, on a weekend, when he happened to glance out his window and see Brent and his brother carving something out of snow. The temperature had risen a few degrees that morning and now it was of good packing consistency. You could mould it into shape with your gloves or mittens. But what were they making? It wasn't the usual snowman but something else. Quite different from the look of it. A human shape, a form, but too rudimentary at this stage to tell. Brent apparently had a plan. He stood to one side

and referred to a piece of paper he was holding and directed his brother. The younger boy held something that looked like a garden trowel and scooped and gouged pursuant to his brother's instructions. But then Brent himself would get involved, pick up a tool or a long knife and set about energetically carving and sculpting the figure with a fury and single-mindedness Mr. Winter could not help but admire. He had never encountered a young person like this boy who possessed so many sterling qualities. Of course, there was nothing to say that if he and Mrs. Winter had had a son he would have turned out the way Brent did, but all the same he found himself regretting not having such a boy of his own.

Each day the carving came more to life. It appeared to Mr. Winter to depict a kneeling person but it was too early to tell if it was a man or a woman. And there was something curious on its head. A hat? Too big. A basket of some kind? Possibly, but then that would depend on what the figure represented. It was both amusing and thought provoking at the same time. He hoped the weather stayed cold. He'd be sorry indeed to see this work of art in the making washed out by an unseasonable rain.

Work on the sculpture continued sporadically. Brent didn't have time to work on it everyday once school re-opened. But one Saturday, he devoted the whole morning to it. By lunchtime, Mr. Winter was able to observe that the kneeling figure was a man and that he was clearly holding or balancing something not on his head but on his shoulders. Brent was getting down to serious business at this

point because he often stopped to consult his drawing or blueprint. Then he would start scraping off a bit of snow here and whittling an edge of carved ice there until he had it just right. Several times he stood back and examined his work with his hand on his chin. That brought a lump to Mr. Winter's throat. There was just so much to admire about this young man.

By the end of the following week it was more or less finished. The hulking figure stood a good five feet in height. He was bent over under the weight of the heavy load on his shoulders. There were indications of a beard and the brow and nose had been chiseled out with acuity. The only disappointing thing about it was that no one on the street, except himself, appeared to notice it. If they did, they kept their mouths shut.

There was something else about Brent. He was shy. Mr. Winter started making a point of waving to him whenever he drove out of the driveway but the boy would just cast his eyes to the ground or look away, as if the sun was too strong. It wasn't a rude rebuff. It was more like embarrassment or social unease. But in a way, that was to be expected. Young people these days were always uncomfortable around adults; there was no reason Brent should be any different. But he persevered. And one day he got a tentative wave back. The boy glanced briefly at him, smiled, then looked away. It made Mr. Winter positively ache for the son he never had.

A week later the temperature rose and stayed there. During the three-day downpour he stood in front of his living room window and watched the



magnificent sculpture gradually melt into a shapeless mass and then, finally, disappear into lumps of snow. Around them, the grass was visible.

It was Mr. Winter who finally took the initiative. The next day he saw Brent whacking the last lumps with a shovel, breaking them up and spreading them over the lawn. He supposed he was taking out his frustration as an artist. After setting his garbage on the curbside for pickup the next morning, he crossed the street.

He said, "I've been watching you at work on your sculpture. I must say I was very impressed." He extended his hand and the boy looked uncertainly at it. Then he removed his wet glove and shook Mr. Winter's hand. He smiled shyly and looked down at the ground.

"Thanks."

"My name's Richard."

"I'm Brent."

"Well, Brent, it's nice to meet you."

He was so bashful that Mr. Winter felt a twinge of guilt for putting him in this awkward position.

"I was curious what it represented," he continued. "Who was the figure?"

Still looking down at the ground, the boy pawed the grass with his foot. "Atlas." He seemed even more embarrassed after saying it.

Mr. Winter was thunderstruck. "Atlas? The Greek hero who bore the world on his shoulders? That's remarkable. Did you learn about him in school?" Mr. Winter asked this because he was certain they did not teach classics these days.

“No. I saw a picture of him in a book.”

“It’s too bad the rain washed it away.”

“It does every year,” Brent told him. “But this year it was early.” It sounded more like an apology than an explanation.

“You mean you make something like that every winter?”

Brent nodded. He glanced down at his feet again then raised his head when a car turned into the street. It gave Mr. Winter a chance to admire his noble features. He did indeed appear to him as some Late Roman youth, one of aristocratic lineage. He would not have looked out of place in the streets of Pompeii or the marketplace of some ancient Etruscan village. But he could see he was putting the boy on the spot and it was enough just to say hello.

“It was very nice to meet you, Brent. You are a talented young man.”

He was eager to ask him more questions, dozens of questions. What do you want to be? What are your plans for the future? Have you always been interested in sculpture? What other things do you like? What are your favorite subjects in school?

Instead, after shaking his hand again, he walked back to his building. But a door had been opened.

Now, whenever he drove out of the driveway and waved at the boy, Brent waved back. And sometimes he smiled.

He did not have the opportunity to speak with him again until the warm weather arrived. By then it was May. The flowers under his living room window had

begun to sprout and bloom; the temperature climbed steadily but the nights were still chilly. With rain, the grass changed magically from winter brown to lush green. The first dandelions poked through the lawn. One Saturday, he saw Brent cross the street, enter the garage of the couple beside him, haul out an ancient lawnmower, and start cutting their grass. The motor was so loud it almost shook the building. The boy's arms vibrated with the motion. While he worked he wore a pair of headphones.

The garrulous Mrs. Allen came out of the house and stood watching him for a moment. She was drying a plate and holding a dish towel. Through his living room window Mr. Winter heard her shout, "That lawnmower sounds like a plane about to crash!"

Mr. Allen, tall and skeletal, emerged from the house and stood beside her. Because he had no teeth and wasn't wearing his dentures, his cheeks were sunken and he looked like a dried fig. He pointed to something, pointed to something else, then returned inside. Brent continued to vibrate along with the lawnmower until he had cut the whole front yard. Mrs. Allen paid him with a bill that was warm from being tucked in her bosom and after putting it in his pocket he returned home. He was tired from wrestling with the broken down contraption and was sweating through his T-shirt.

It gave Mr. Winter an idea.

The next day he drove his big, shiny car out of the driveway and half an hour later returned with a brand new lawnmower. It was a state of the art machine.

Then he crossed the street and knocked on the door of Brent's house. His father answered it.

"Hello. I'm Richard Winter."

"Hello, Richard. I'm John Raston. Is it too late to say welcome to the neighborhood?"

"No, it isn't. Thank you!"

The very big Mr. Raston wore a loose-fitting football shirt and a pair of striped nylon shorts that hung around his knees. His legs were white and the bald skin was shiny. He hadn't shaved that morning because it was Saturday. He gave the odd impression of looking more intelligent than he probably was. It was unlikely that he worked entirely with his brain. He had thick calloused hands that Mr. Winter surmised spent most of each week fixing or running machinery.

"Now that you're here, I might as well ask you. Everybody in the neighborhood is curious. When are you going to rent that building? It must be tough finding good tenants. But five empty apartments...?"

"I don't want to rent them. I like living there by myself."

"Oh." John hoped he sounded less surprised than he was. Then he said, "It's a pretty swell building."

"The grass needs to be cut," Mr. Winter complained. "Actually, that's why I came over. I was going to hire a gardening service to do it but then I saw your son next door. Would he be interested in cutting my lawn too? I'll pay him whatever you want? Or rather, he wants."

"Brenda Allen pays him fifteen dollars. He does a good job, though."

“I thought so too.”

“Myself, I think it’s a little cheap. Especially with their old lawnmower. Would twenty dollars be okay?”

“Why not twenty-five? My property is bigger.”

“He could use the money. I used to give the boys a small allowance each week but things have been tight at the plant, lately. I’ve had to cut corners. I feel badly.”

He turned and called into the house, “Brent...?”

The classical youth appeared when summoned and smiled at Mr. Winter who took the opportunity to reach out and shake his hand.

“Nice to see you again, Brent.”

“Nice to see you, too, sir.”

“Rich has a business proposition for you, son. Would you like to cut the grass over there?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll pay twenty-five dollars.”

Brent grinned. “I’ll do it!”

After he returned inside, Mr. Winter said, “I saw the snow sculpture he carved this winter. You know you’ve got a talented young son.”

“Isn’t he, though?”

He was very pleased that Brent’s father shared his view.

Mr. Winter arranged for him to start at nine the next morning and he showed up on the dot. They lugged the new lawnmower out of the shed and wheeled it to the

front of the property. Before beginning, he observed the young man walking back and forth, up and down the lawn, the whole time looking down at his feet.

“Did you lose something?”

“No. I’m checking the lawn for stones. If one gets caught in the blades it could ruin the machine.”

“That’s good thinking.” He placed his hands proudly on the lawnmower. “Do you think this will do the job?”

“She’ll do the job. She’s a beauty.”

It took less than an hour. Brent swept the mower over the green grass in long even rows like a farmer plowing a field. He wore his earphones and a kerchief around his head to absorb the sweat. Mr. Winter came out of his apartment a couple of times and stood watching with his arms folded across his chest. Mr. Allen looked over once or twice from the porch of his house where he was stacking cords of firewood. The Allen’s yellow dog Goldie sat on its haunches and watched the lawnmower with curiosity.

Brent did not consider the job finished until he had taken a pair of small garden shears and clipped around the perimeter. Then he stood up and rubbed the small of his back.

“It looks pretty good, doesn’t it?”

“You did an excellent job,” Mr. Winter told him. He handed Brent an envelope. The boy folded it once and tucked it into his pocket.

“Thank you.”

“How’s school going?”

“Pretty good. I’ll be finished in a month.”

“Well, you can cut the grass all summer if you like. What are your plans after school?”

“How do you mean?”

“Are you thinking of going to college...?”

The skin over his beautifully chiseled face was sprinkled with freckles. Mr. Winter hadn’t noticed that before. It must have been the sun. Brent’s eyes were narrowed against the glare as they spoke.

“I’ve applied to the University of Toronto. It would be a dream come true for me.”

“What are you hoping to study there?” Mr. Winter was recalling the ice sculpture when he asked the question.

“Architecture.”

“Oh? I figured you for the fine arts. I still remember your Atlas.”

Brent glanced down at his feet as if the memory caused him embarrassment. Then he said, “Oh, *that*. I couldn’t get the face right. I must have carved it five or six times. Everybody was sorry when it melted except me. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Do you get lonely living in this big building all by yourself?”

“Sometimes. But I’d rather that than five strangers living next to me. I miss my late wife, though.”

“How long were you married?”

“Thirty-five years.”

Brent’s blue eyes widened. “That’s almost twice as long as I’ve been alive!”

Mr. Winter suppressed a sigh. “Not long enough for me.”

“No, I guess not. Well, I’d better go.”

“Thanks again for a job well done.”

“You’re welcome,” Brent said.

Mr. Winter watched him amble down the sloping lawn. He had large feet for a young man and they looked even larger in the bulky white running shoes he wore. But he stepped confidently in a way that suggested he knew where he wanted to go in life; that the future was just more steps forward and each step ended with the satisfying weight of his body pressing down on the ground.

When he reached the bottom of the small incline, he turned before crossing the street.

“I’m sorry about your wife,” he said.

That summer Mr. Winter put in air conditioning in three of the units where he spent the most time. He subscribed to an Internet book club and passed afternoons reading his newly acquired novels. He worked sporadically in his garden. He learned that Brent had obtained a job for the summer months working in the same plant as his father. Sometimes in the early morning, on the way from the bathroom to his warm bed, he’d chance to glance out the window and catch them opening the doors of the van. John Raston would climb into the driver’s seat and Brent would hop into the passenger side. Mr. Winter wasn’t sure what kind of



work they did except that it was dirty and involved some kind of heavy labour. Father and son returned home for supper covered with dust and wiping the sweat from their brows. Often the family would sit outside on green and white plastic lawn chairs and Brent and his father would stretch their legs out in front of them and let the day roll off their tired, knotted bodies. On such evenings there was usually a barbecue. Hotdogs and steakette burgers. Their smell wafted through Mr. Winter's open windows (when the air conditioner wasn't running) along with the odor of smoke and lighter fluid.

Brent's new project, when he wasn't working with his father, was the construction, to scale, of a wooden model of a church. It appeared to be a famous example, or so Mr. Winter assumed, although he couldn't quite place it. Outside, Brent hammered and sawed and pounded with controlled fury. The model was about four feet long and three feet high. He watched the boy dexterously gluing the parts together. Mr. Winter wandered over one Sunday and inquired about it. As Brent talked, he walked around the model several times. It stood on a piece of plywood supported by two sawhorses. It was in the Romanesque style. There were rounded arches running along the clerestory and massive pillars at either side of the entrance. The doors had been expertly carved with wonderful detail and actually swung open on small brass hinges. Mrs. Allen came over once to have a look and a young mother at the end of the street slowed the baby carriage she was pushing whenever she passed by.

In mid September Mr. Winter turned the heat on for the first time: an unforeseen frost in advance of the Indian summer. It seemed curious and was probably none of his business, of course, but he continued to see Brent leave each morning in the van with his father. He wondered when classes started. It was Mrs. Allen who set him straight.

“I expected Brent to be in university by now,” Mr. Winter said. “Did he not get accepted?”

“He’s working with his Dad now,” she said.

“But he told me he was attending college this fall.”

“He was accepted and everything according to Valerie. The truth is they can’t afford it. They’ve cut John’s hours again. I don’t know if the boy applied for a scholarship.”

“You can’t *mean* it!” Mr. Winter cried. “A bright boy like that!”

“He’s clever, alright. The top of his class.”

Still, he thought Mrs. Allen none too concerned about it. She had set a laundry basket out on the porch and stood folding towels and T-shirts in the sunshine. Goldie was asleep on a plastic chair.

“It don’t matter. He’d be lucky all the same to land a job where his Dad works.”

“I suppose...” conceded Mr. Winter, who supposed nothing of the sort.

One evening in October, during the Indian summer the neighborhood had longed for, he crossed the street and knocked on the Raston’s door. John answered it. He

stood backlit by the living room light and his face was in shadow. Mr. Winter saw only his teeth clearly when he opened his mouth to speak.

“Rich! What brings you over? Nice weather we’re having!”

“Can I talk to you and Valerie? It’s about Brent. Something I heard.”

John frowned. “He’s not in some kind of trouble, is he?”

“Oh, no! Nothing like that! And I mean to include Brent, too.”

“In that case, come on in!” He stood aside and sucked his tummy in to allow Mr. Winter to squeeze past. There was no hallway between the front door and the living room. The room itself was over-furnished. That, or there was too much furniture in such a small space. There were books and computer monitors and dozens of china ornaments. Valerie appeared from out of the kitchen. John pointed to the chair he always sat in and said, “Please. Make yourself comfortable. Brent? Mr. Winter’s here to see you!”

He had pondered for several days how best to word his proposal. It was a matter of some delicacy because there was John’s pride to consider. All the same, he was sure they would welcome the opportunity and share his vision of the future: a shining beacon, a brilliant light reflecting off the highest pinnacle that shone down directly on Brent.

The next moment Brent clomped downstairs. He shook hands with Mr. Winter and took a seat across from his father. Whatever they were going to talk about must have been important because John Raston had switched off the television. He told his younger son, Cory, to come and sit beside him.

“Let me begin by saying I hope you don’t feel I’m interfering. I mind my own business like anybody else. Anyway, I understand, Brent, that you are working with your father?”

“That’s right.” It was John who answered for his son.

“Again, it’s none of my business, but I understood you were going to U of T this fall. To study architecture.”

“Oh, that’s it!” John exclaimed and sounded relieved.

“He was going to but we just can’t afford it,” Valerie explained.

Brent frowned with renewed disappointment. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want to go.”

“I know, son.”

“I got him a Joe-job at the plant with me to help out with expenses. Everything’s so costly now. Our mortgage comes up in February. I just know they’re going to hit us with another percent.”

“We don’t know that yet,” Valerie insisted quietly. From the way she said it Mr. Winter suspected it was a certainty.

“As you both know, I’ve observed Brent for some time, and I think, like I suppose everyone in the neighborhood thinks, he’s a very special young person. He has real talent and something to offer the world. Very different from most others his age.”

“What are you driving at, Richard?”

“I’d like to put your son through school.”

John and Valerie exchanged dumbfounded looks.

Mr. Winter added, "If you'll let me."

Young Cory whistled through his teeth. "Man, you must be rich!"

Mr. Winter laughed. "Not rich, just comfortable."

Brent appeared frozen in his chair. He was staring with unblinking eyes at the neighbor across from him. His hands trembled.

"I don't know what to say," John returned finally.

"We couldn't allow it," Valerie protested.

"Yes, you could, Mom!" her son pleaded, sitting up in his chair.

"It's very generous of you," John said. "I mean, *very*'s not the right word. Incredibly generous!"

"Shall we consider it done, then?"

"But how will we repay you? I don't see how we would manage it..." Brent's mother was small-boned and youthful and from a short distance could pass for the boys' older sister. Her pale hair gathered in limp tresses about her shoulders. Mr. Winter thought that after asking that question she was going to cry.

"Seeing Brent get his fair chance to prove himself is all the payment I require. He simply must have the opportunity to realize his great potential."

"I wouldn't let you down, Richard," Brent said, moving to the edge of his chair. Mr. Winter nodded.

John Raston leaned forward. "Richard, this is all so sudden. I'm just overwhelmed. I don't know what to say."

Valerie had taken hold of her elder son's hand. She was rubbing it back and forth as if to restore warmth to frostbitten fingers.

“Can we conference it? As a family? Can we think about it?”

“Certainly. Of course. And if you decide you’d rather not I’ll not be offended. I want you to feel comfortable with what you decide, either way. But it would be a shame for a bright young man like this to end up working where he is.”

John looked steadily across at him.

“That’s not how I meant to put it!” Mr. Winter apologized. “John, there’s nothing wrong with your job. It’s honest work. It’s just—“

“Say no more! Say no more! Do you think I’m happy he’s working there? There’s nothing I’d want more for Brent than to attend university. His old man is good enough for the plant but you always want to do better for your kids.”

Valerie Raston had tears in her eyes.

“Well, think it over. But don’t leave it too long. If you decide to go ahead I have to make some financial arrangements in Toronto. It’ll take a bit of time.”

“I understand,” John said with a nod.

“I’ll be on my way, then.” Mr. Winter stood. Both boys rose along with him.

“Not without a cup of coffee,” Valerie insisted.

Mr. Winter consulted his watch. “It’s eight o’clock,” he announced. “I never drink coffee after six.”

“C’mon,” John laughed. He put his big arm around Mr. Winter’s shoulder.

“Break a habit.”

The family conferenced for one day. It was the day they went grocery shopping together. Mr. Winter suspected they would mull over their decision in the car

since a lot of issues were resolved in cars. They returned with canned goods and celery poking from the tops of plastic bags and a heavy box of kitty litter that Cory took by the corners and dragged across the driveway into the house.

The four of them showed up on his doorstep later that evening. John told him they had accepted his offer. Valerie presented him with a pineapple upside down cake she had made, covered with aluminum foil.

He invited them in but they politely declined knowing that what Mr. Winter valued and prized more than anything was his time to himself. Brent handed him a brown envelope and explained shyly, “I made this the winter before you moved here. This is the one I’m really proud of. I was sorry when it melted. My Dad took some pictures. I’d like you to have them.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Mr. Winter said.

“Will you keep them?” Brent asked.

“Yes. I’ll keep them.”

He opened the envelope before retiring. There were six high-resolution photographs inside. They depicted an ice circle, freestanding, that rose half way up to the height of the house. It was about two feet thick, Mr. Winter estimated. It was an accomplished example of engineering but what intrigued him more was why Brent had chosen a circle. A perfect circle that balanced miraculously on a tiny square pedestal, also carved from ice. John Raston was to be commended for photographing it. There was one photograph of the ‘builder’ standing proudly

beside his creation. Brent had pulled his woolen toque so far down that Mr. Winter could barely see his eyes.

The day before he left for college Brent came over and presented Mr. Winter with the small-scale wooden model of the Romanesque church he had duplicated in a larger size on the front lawn. It was mounted in a glass box and was constructed from wood of a light blonde color, such that Mr. Winter at first mistook it for ivory. He thanked him but then excused himself, complaining that he was not quite himself that day. Brent had noticed he looked a little piqued but wasn't sure if he should ask. They shook hands and then Brent gave Mr. Winter a hug. It was the best hug he remembered having in a long time. After he closed the door, he could not stem the tears.

Sometimes the past creeps up on you when you're least expecting it and that's what had happened the previous night to Mr. Winter. He had taken his bath in number 5 and as he was toweling himself off he was struck by the memory—suddenly—of his wife in the hospital. She looked well enough—considering what she had gone through—but fragile. But when he looked into her eyes that day he knew something was wrong. Not only wrong, but that something had changed inside her. He had brought flowers and after laying them in her lap he pulled a chair up beside the bed and sat on it gunslinger style. He waited for her to speak but Mrs. Winter said nothing. All she did was look at him with those eyes that now both worried and frightened him. After a prolonged silence, he said, “We can try again. The doctor told me there's a good chance next time.”



“No,” Mrs. Winter said.

“Do you not want a son or a daughter, Alice? Do we go to our graves unmourned because there are no children to grieve for their loving parents?”

“Don’t torture me like this, Richard. It is hard for me, as it is for you. But this is the second time the Lord has taken our baby before its time and I have no wish nor heart to go through it again. We have each other. We must make the best of it.”

And that was it. That was the rest of their lives, their childless future, in a few well-chosen words. She picked the roses up, as if seeing them for the first time, and raised them to her nose. “Thank you,” she said.

Mr. Winter sighed. “We are none the worse for having tried, are we?” he told her.

“No,” she said. “None the worse.”

It took him longer than usual to get to sleep that night. He decided to use the bed in number 4. But he returned downstairs to his ground floor unit after an hour or so of fitful tossing and made himself a mug of hot milk with a spoonful of sugar and a crushed motion sickness tablet that finally induced drowsiness.

Brent was the only person he might have told, though the boy didn’t ask.

Sometimes Mr. Winter imagined him asking.

“Did you and your wife have any kids?”

“No. But we very much wanted children.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir.”

“I’m glad I met you, Brent. Sometimes you feel like the son I never had.”

“That’s very kind of you. My grandfather died a few years ago and I really miss him. Would it be okay if I sometimes thought of you as my new grandfather?”

“Sure,” Mr. Winter said. “That would be okay.”

The Rastons threw a party the weekend before Brent was to leave for Toronto. To no one’s surprise, Mr. Winter was the guest of honor. The whole neighborhood joined in and sang ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’. Mr. Winter raised his glass of Coke and proposed a toast. He turned and addressed Brent, who for the first time since they had met was dressed that night in a shirt and tie. Mr. Winter looked proudly at him, like the loving grandfather who doted on his grandson.

“To the future!” he exclaimed.

Everyone raised their cups and bottles and glasses and repeated after him.

“To the future!”

Brent sat at the center of the cheering congregation and wiped a tear from his eye.

During his first semester Brent ascended to the top of his class. Several of his instructors singled him out as a young man to watch. During the second semester he came in line for a scholarship. He returned home to work in the plant with his father for the summer after passing his exams with the highest honors. Every

other Saturday he crossed the street and cut Mr. Winter's lawn with the expensive mower.

The next term, his family visited him once a month in Toronto. Mr. Winter usually accompanied them (if he wasn't feeling under the weather) and when he did, he took them out for lunch. Brent never stopped talking throughout the meals. There were a million things he was bursting to tell them. There were a billion new ideas inside his head. He was meeting people, making friends. In particular, he had made the acquaintance of a small number of elite architecture students whose works, he confessed, made his own projects look puny and amateurish. Everyone disagreed. But Brent raised his hand. It was his ambition, he told them, to be like them: as brilliant, and radical and dedicated as that small elite group. Was that not something he should aspire to? Everyone at the table agreed he should.

One time, when he was getting ready to join them for the next visit, John arrived at his door and explained he would be unable to make it. Something had come up at work, an emergency, he hinted, though Mr. Winter never heard him say the word, and even though it was Saturday, he had to go in.

"Why don't you go in my place?"

"By myself...?"

"Sure. Why not? You're part of the family now. Brent thinks of you like a grandfather or his favorite uncle."

And of course, Mr. Winter agreed.

“Favorite uncle,” Mr. Winter muttered during the drive. He would have preferred for Brent to think of him more as a second father. Or perhaps, dare he think it, as his ‘real’ father. There were times when he thought of John Raston not so much as a parent but some shadowy figure in the background, who of course belonged in the picture, but Mr. Winter was not sure where. He began to think of him as Brent’s cousin, once removed. An older cousin who had fallen on hard times and had come to live with them. Sometimes older male cousins can assume paternal roles under such circumstances but that does not mean they are really fathers. The real father is the one a son looks up to. The man a son can count on, who helps and supports him. The man who, for example, puts him through school and asks nothing in return except that he make a fine future for himself. That he fulfill his dreams. Favorite uncle, indeed! And he thought, *what a father I would have made!*

It was a fine lunch. Brent talked incessantly about Mies Van Der Rohe and Phillip Johnson and Michael Greaves. He used his fork and knife to draw imaginary architectural structures.

Then, “This isn’t exactly about architecture but it sort of applies in a way,” he said, introducing something new. “Did you know that every material particle has an anti-particle?”

“As in physics? Is that what you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I remember reading something about it in the Reader’s Digest. It was written for the average person but I still don’t think I understood it.”

Brent smiled. “The implications are extraordinary, really.”

“In what way?” Mr. Winter asked.

“Well, every particle has the potential to collide with its anti-particle. When they do, they annihilate each other.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s like when you build a bridge, say, or a house. It doesn’t really exist in the way we think. You can touch it and it occupies a measurable amount of space but there’s the anti-house or anti-bridge out there on another level that stands as its nemesis.” He sat back, pausing thoughtfully to himself as though he wished to be alone to think the problem through. “Anyway, that’s what we’ve been talking about in the barracks into the wee hours.”

“The barracks?”

“The dorm.”

Mr. Winter took a spoonful of his strawberry ice cream. Brent, who always enjoyed his in the past, left it untouched. When they rose from the table it had melted into a pink puddle.

“You’ve been working too hard,” Mr. Winter told him. “That’s good, of course, but you also have to make time for other things. It clears the mind.”

For the first time Brent had circles under his eyes. Mr. Winter also thought he had lost weight. If his youthful face appeared slightly older it was because of a stubble of five o’clock shadow that darkened his features.

“You forgot to shave,” Mr. Winter reminded him.

“I forgot on purpose,” Brent said. “I’m growing a beard.”

Brent returned home for a week during spring break. He spent a lot of time studying but he also started to watch a lot of television, something he never did much before. His dark shape, slumped in a recliner chair, was visible through Mr. Winter’s living room window. On Wednesday, sometime in the afternoon, when Mr. Winter dragged out his single garbage can and one plastic recycle bin for pick up the next day, he heard shouting from the Raston’s house. John and his elder son were at loggerheads in an argument. Later in the day, he watched Brent and his brother shooting basketballs. When he saw Mr. Winter he waved. His beard had grown in fully now: it was even, thick and as dark as his dark, young hair. It looked fine on his handsome face but Mr. Winter thought not so fine as the classically chiseled jaw and chin beneath it.

Once he was back in school, the visits continued. Most times Mr. Winter went by himself. Brent seemed to enjoy that, perhaps more than if his family had joined them. He never failed to present Mr. Winter with his essays (these were mostly on the history of architecture or engineering theory) and point to the A’s written in red ink and the laudatory comments from his professors. At these times, Brent would lean back in his chair after finishing his strawberry ice cream with a surfeit of self-satisfaction. Mr. Winter took pride in Brent’s pride.

It was three weeks before Mr. Winter drove to Toronto again. As soon as he saw Brent he knew something was different. A look in his eyes, a manner of bearing, that oddly reminded him of his wife that day in the hospital many years ago. The lunch did not go well, in fact, it proceeded sullenly. Brent picked at his grilled chicken and throughout the meal stabbed his salad with a fork. Mr. Winter ordered strawberry ice cream. They waited in silence for the dessert to arrive.

Brent pushed his plate away and folded his hands on the table. "I failed structure and mechanics," he said in a low voice.

Mr. Winter's spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

"Why, Brent. I'm shocked to hear you say that! What happened?"

"It's difficult," the young man complained. He added, in a defensive tone, "I can't be good at *everything*."

"You managed to build a perfect free-standing circle from ice," Mr. Winter reminded him. "I don't understand how structure and mechanics is beyond your abilities."

But beyond that, he did not wish to pursue the matter. The mood at the table was already gloomy and Mr. Winter knew he would worry about the lunch all the way home. Brent said no more about it, either.

As he was finishing his ice cream Mr. Winter said, "You've lost weight. More since the last time I saw you."

Brent glared down at his untouched dessert. For the first time Mr. Winter noticed up close the boy's long eyelashes. They were delicately curled at the ends and the color of dark chocolate.

“It’s the food,” he complained. “It sucks. I can’t eat this shit.”

Brent was in the habit of telephoning Mr. Winter once a week. It was his way of thanking the man who was making his future possible. They talked about much the same things they talked about at the lunches. But in late March, he stopped calling.

Mr. Winter missed the calls but told himself that Brent needed all his time at the moment to study for his finals. He could not afford even the smallest distraction.

March proved a windy month that year. It rattled the tree branches outside Mr. Winter’s building and flung birds through the air like missiles. Each of his six units presented a different light at different times of the day and Mr. Winter enjoyed running up and down the stairs between nine in the morning and three in the afternoon to observe it. A pair of goldfinches built a nest outside the window of number six. From the bedroom in four he watched two squirrels engage in courtship. Daffodils sprouted beneath the window of his ground floor unit. But the season that heralds love can just as easily remind of loves lost and for Mr. Winter that is what happened. Many small regrets, many bittersweet memories. There were times he was sure he could smell the roses from the bouquet he had laid on Mrs. Winter’s lap. And he was certain he smelled the dusty fragrance of the old house they shared in Toronto when he opened his downstairs closet one-day. Men live to believe they will die before their women. But it is a heavy burden, a burden such as Atlas shouldered, when the truth proves otherwise. There were many



times, during March, when Mr. Winter simply sat in one of his many armchairs and stared remorsefully into space. It was a good thing he had this new life and his neighbors and the Rastons across the street. The spring winds brought flu and colds along with crocuses and violets. Each afternoon the twilight doddled a little longer.

Mr. Winter fell ill on Thursday while vacuuming in number two. He took to the bed in unit four, away from the downstairs draughts and nursed himself back to health with drinks of powdered aspirin and sour gulps of orange juice. He called John at the last minute and apologized for not being able to make it down this month. He hoped to feel better in a few more days.

And that is why it was John who stumbled upon his son, slumped onto his dormitory bed at one o'clock in the afternoon when he should have been attending 'Structure and Mechanics'. He wasn't exactly slumped, either; he lay half on, half off, as if he had fallen onto the bed while drunk. On one foot he wore a sock; the other was bare.

"What's going on?" John Raston asked. "Have you not seen the time?"

Brent sat up groggily and blinked several times. "You're early."

"You told me you had a class. I was prepared to wait."

John looked around the room. He did not like what he saw. Books and papers were strewn across the floor. Coffee had spilled some time ago across Brent's desk and what was once liquid had now dried and cracked. His son's clothes were piled in a heap in the corner.

“Early but apparently not early enough. This room is a pigsty! I suppose you have an explanation?”

“Anti-room, Dad,” was all Brent said.

“What...? Anti what?”

“Skip it. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“What is the point of anything when annihilation is inevitable?”

John furrowed his brow. “You’re not making sense.”

“Particle. Anti-particle. Bridge. Anti-bridge. Room. Anti-room.”

Mr. Winter learned that Brent had failed yet another subject. This caused him to return to his armchair in number three and think things through. When he finally pulled himself up he felt very disheartened, indeed.

Brent returned home unexpectedly the following weekend. That evening there was a knock on Mr. Winter’s door. The large barrel-chested man and his bearded son stood before him.

“Brent has something to say to you,” John announced.

“What about?”

“I...I...” The young man raised his fine gifted hands to his face and burst into tears. He could not look his ‘favorite uncle’ in the face. “I’m sorry,” he said. “ So sorry.” Then he turned and fled. Both men stood watching him.

John grasped Mr. Winter's hand. "Richard, I don't know what to say. I'm ashamed and embarrassed. Both for myself and for you. But mostly for you."

Mr. Winter stood with his mouth open. He wanted to speak but could not find words of any kind.

"I don't know what's gotten into him. It's not like the old Brent. I was told he spends his nights partying and drinking when he should be studying. In the past, you wouldn't have to tell him this. He would buckle down on his own initiative."

John looked down at his feet.

Mr. Winter was aghast at what he had just heard but put on a brave face.

"I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry."

"Everything was new and different for him," John tried to explain. "He's never lived away from home. The world outside is a different place from our small, friendly neighborhood. There are pressures and adjustments."

"It must have been very difficult for him," Mr. Winter sympathized. But John could hear the disappointment, the profound disappointment in his voice.

"If he fails his final exams I don't know how we will repay you."

"I told you not to worry about that."

"Easy for you to say. But I won't be able to look you in the face. And Richard, I don't want that!"

"I'm sure it's just something he's going through. If he works hard between now and his finals he will come out on top."

"I hope so." But John sounded doubtful.

He and John talked over the next few days. They shared a concern for someone they saw as heading for a fall. Brent failed his finals and returned home with a string of D's and F's. Instead of going to apologize to Mr. Winter, he squirreled himself away in his room upstairs and socialized with no one and spoke only when he came down to eat with his family. He grunted and complained and frowned throughout the meals then returned upstairs like a monk to his cell.

Mr. Winter often stood watching John and Valerie and Cory returning from their shopping trips. John waved whenever he saw him looking through his living room window but Mr. Winter had the disquieting sense that his waves these days weren't as hearty as they used to be. He wondered if Brent was ever going to show up at his door. The spring rains had coaxed the grass out and in a week or so the lawn would need to be cut.

It was a Monday evening when the knock finally came. Mr. Winter was up in number six watching a television program when he glanced out the window. Brent stood on the porch under the light, shivering in the chilly air. He wore a thin jacket and a pair of ripped jeans.

Mr. Winter ran downstairs and opened the door.

Brent looked unflinchingly into his face and Mr. Winter was not sure how to 'read' his expression. His eyes were clouded with emotion.

"I guess my Dad told you," he said.

"Yes. He did."

"It was very difficult," he explained. "Harder than I'd imagined."

“I don’t doubt,” Mr. Winter returned without a trace of sarcasm.

“But it was more than that...”

“More...? I don’t understand.”

“Why am I beholden to you?” he demanded suddenly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“What’s in it for you?”

“Only that I want the best for you.”

Brent’s eyes narrowed. He was choosing his words carefully. He did not wish to offend but he did want to make his point. “My life...is my *own* life. My life isn’t yours.”

“I was trying to help you, Brent. You have so much to offer.”

“Offer who?”

“The world.”

“I don’t want to offer anything. Do you understand? And why is the world demanding this of me?”

“Because you are talented.”

“Yes. Well, that’s what you say. It’s not your life, Richard.”

“No, Brent,” he agreed without quite understanding. “It’s not.”

They stood in uncomfortable silence, on opposite sides of the threshold, in a doorway blocked in both directions. He thought to himself, *what a terrible mistake I have made! How could I think I could ever hope to have what was denied me in the past? What a fool I have been! It serves me right to be shamed like this.*

It was at such moments that the memory of Mrs. Winter returned most strongly. It was at such moments, as never before, that he longed to hold her in his arms once again.

Brent broke the silence. "It's not always just about building. Putting things up. There are other possibilities. Maybe the creative spirit means something different, demands something different. You think positive and negative are opposites but in the end they aren't. It doesn't mean a thing. That's what you don't understand."

Mr. Winter stood bug-eyed at this explanation.

"No," he admitted at last. "I don't."

"No," Brent agreed. He shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned to leave. In the porch light his face was thinner, longer, more angular, Mr. Winter thought. The classical proportions were disappearing with age and perhaps, too, with experience. With his large circular eyes and straight, unsmiling mouth, the youthful Hellenism had vanished to be replaced by something solemnly Byzantine. And it was this Brent who was about to march into the future.

"Don't worry. We will pay you back."

"I made it clear that wasn't necessary."

"My father wants to," he said, turning with a shrug and unceremoniously clomping down the steps. His boots made flat sounds against the pavement.

Mr. Winter stood watching him with one hand on the open door.

Later that night, when Mr. Winter was preparing for bed—he'd already turned down his sheets and set his drink of warmed milk and powdered motion sickness

pills on his night table in number four—there was a knock on the front door. He glanced out his window and saw Brent’s father standing under the porch light. Perhaps it was a trick of the eye but for a second he looked to Mr. Winter larger than life. He knotted the belt of his dressing gown and hurried downstairs.

It was apparent John had been uncapping his fair share of beer bottles. He was not exactly drunk but the smell of beer was on his clothing and when he spoke his voice was louder than usual. He apologized, rambled, digressed, apologized again. Mr. Winter stood nodding his head, not sure what else to do. Suddenly, John raised his hands to his face and wept. He reached out and grabbed Mr. Winter’s arms and hugged him to his large, powerful body. Though shocked, Mr. Winter sensibly consoled him with, ‘There, there. Everything will be alright.’ He was rather at odds with himself because he had never comforted a grown man like John in his arms before.

“You know the worst part?”

“No, John, what?”

“He’ll end up just like his old man. One more factory worker.” He drew himself up and wiped his eyes. “I meant what I said about paying you back.”

“I told you to forget about that. I will be offended if you feel you have to make amends.”

“We shouldn’t have agreed to this in the first place. It was wrong. I knew something like this would happen.”

“You did?”

But John did not explain. In fact, he changed the subject. “We can still be friends, can’t we?”

“We *are* friends, John,” Mr. Winter assured him. “Nothing has changed. Not when it comes to our friendship.”

He invited John to join him in a glass of brandy to show him he meant what he said but his big neighbor declined. But he said ‘No’ and ‘Thank you’ and once more gave Mr. Winter a crushing hug before turning and walking back across the street. Mr. Winter stood watching him at the door. Just before he went inside, John turned and waved.

It was a gradual disengagement. So subtle and imperceptible that Mr. Winter could not say precisely on what day the situation changed. John still waved but each time with less vigor. The last couple of times it was as if he was waving to a stranger. Brent had gone from waving to nodding and smiling and then only to nodding. Well, there was much to consider. It was possible John was experiencing a change of heart. It was fine and noble and generous of course to offer Brent a chance for something better, but what did that say about his present life? The only way it made sense was to assume that John’s life was not quite worthy. That anyone would want to do better than John. But what business had a person, a man they really knew very little about who liked living alone in a rambling six unit apartment building, what business was it of his to make such a judgment call? Who was he to criticize their life? And as this rancor settled into John’s thinking it drew for strength upon his good grace until there was very little left. And that



was the day John decided he would no longer wave to Mr. Winter. The next day he decided he would no longer speak to him, either.

Mr. Winter, in his turn, found himself making an effort to avoid them. He waited with putting his garbage out if they happened to be outside. He no longer watched through his living room window when they came home from shopping, toting plastic bags with celery poking out the tops or dragging boxes of kitty litter into the house. He weeded his garden only after Brent and his father left for work. He pretended not to see Valerie when they nearly collided into one another at the mall. And though he never allowed himself to think of it, somewhere inside him he deeply resented being cheated out of his money.

All summer long the expensive lawnmower sat in the shed. Mr. Winter did not cut the grass at all nor did he hire a young fellow to do it for him. Brent did not cross the street and offer to cut it for him. With October came Indian summer. It was golden and poignant and briefly sweet. It was a season that summoned memories of tender regrets. It was a season 'too deep for tears'.

There are failings on both sides.

There are evenings when Mr. Winter sits weeping beneath his living room window.

There are evenings when Brent sits sullenly in front of the television. The family is watching a comedy but he is not laughing.

It appears to both, in their separate solitudes, that the world is upside down. It is not the world it was and what made sense in the past no longer makes sense

today. It is the same world but different. As if gravity is now a parallel force that causes apples to fall not only down but sideways.

Even so, many good things remain.

There are many things to be thankful for.

Mr. Winter still owns his apartment building and has a choice of six bathtubs.

Brent has a dull but steady job with his father. When the snow falls next year he may carve another Atlas or a freestanding circle.

Look around you, Mr. Winter.

Go outside, Brent.

The world is up and down and sideways and across.

But the sun still sets behind the house and the clouds stretch across the sky in pink and blue stripes and when the wind stirs the branches, the ash tree out front casts its long tremulous shadows across the sidewalk.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This story was written after a hiatus of five years away from writing of any kind, when my life was moving in a different, fast and exciting direction. An accident left me immobile for a period of weeks and to pass the time I started reading fiction again. An ancient relative (God—or some deity—bless her soul) presented me with a boxed set of Somerset Maugham's stories. They turned out to be completely unlike any fiction I had read up until that time. There was an idea for a story floating around in my head (that's what comes from having too much time on your hands) but I was apprehensive about writing it because it seemed inordinately complicated and I could see myself getting bogged down. Besides, I was out of practice. Maugham's style—simple, graceful—and his linearity of narrative, came to the rescue. This was the perfect vehicle to get the rust out of my writing 'joints' and so I sat down and wrote the story. The original title was *The Making of an Architect* but I changed it *Builders* because it focuses on both main characters instead of just one. The manuscript went through two drafts. I sent it to Archie de Cruz, the editor of the now sadly defunct e-zine out of Canada called *Chapter & Verse*. He published it in 2016. I want to thank Tyler Swain for his incredibly insightful critique—I am always

amazed by what people see in my stories that I don't. And of course, our Joey's take no prisoners 'Why I Like It'.

**AUTHOR BIO:** Charles Pinch cofounded FOTD with Tom Ball in December 2019. He is also a senior editor at the site. He holds degrees in both art history and philosophy. His favourite T shirt is emblazoned with *Kublai Kahn but Immanuel Kant*.

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