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## The Brass Ring

TURNING AND TURNING, IN PIECES of red, the lights were flashing across the street. He went to the front window. Some people had gathered along the sidewalk. It could be serious but they had done it before, called the ambulance in a panic. They were getting old. They were all getting old. Mr. Herger put down his newspaper and went across the street.

He walked to the side porch and knocked on the Buckingham's door but there was no answer. He peered through the glass, but there was nothing. Then hearing voices in the back rooms he knocked again, more loudly, slowly twisting the knob.

"Hello?"

Mrs. Patterson heard the knocking and came out and said this time Mrs. Buckingham had fallen. It could be another false alarm, she said, then broke off when she saw the attendants were pushing the stretcher into the front room.

Mr. Herger waited by the door.

He saw, beside the fence, the new couple looking on, wondering if everything was all right. They waved, and when Mr. Herger walked over and explained that the Buckingham's were an elderly couple the woman expressed her hope that it was nothing serious.

"I think there's a good chance it won't be anything too serious," he said.

He told them he had been in the neighbourhood thirty-five years now, that it was a nice place, and they should drop by sometime, for coffee, meet his wife. The woman then made the observation that "it's strange how sometimes it takes a tragedy like this to meet your neighbours."

Mr. Herger said in this day and age that seemed to be true, all-too-true.

When the stretcher struck the screen he went back to the side porch to hold open the door. The attendants took Mrs. Buckingham to the back

of their vehicle and quickly secured to the floor the stretcher bearing her injured body. Some moments later Mr. Buckingham came out, after fetching his wife's purse and coat for reasons he himself was not entirely sure of. The number of people gathered along the sidewalk had the effect of heightening his distress, and he seemed more confused by the flashing lights and the broken, indecipherable voices on the radios as he passed blindly toward the ambulance. Mrs. Patterson insisted she travel with him to the hospital, but the attendants refused.

She told Mr. Buckingham that she would meet him at emergency, with her car: he would need a ride back.

His mouth was open and he stared blankly into her face, as though her partial, bewildering words had flown away and escaped him—as though something had just been said, something important that he didn't understand. She would always say later that he was whispering to himself "She's okay, she's okay," as he got in the passenger side. He rode in the ambulance to the hospital and saw his wife for the last time as she went through the emergency doors and into a room. Five days later she was cremated.



His daughter came from Toronto for ten days to make arrangements and settle his affairs. She planned the service, took care of the cremation, and showed him how to pay bills and balance his accounts, something his wife had always done. He was "not very good with numbers" as he used to say, but he was able to manage. When she went back to Toronto he was left with a clean house, his cupboards full of food, and a three-page checklist of daily, weekly and monthly chores. A number of times he mentioned to his daughter what a shame it was the Balans couldn't attend the service. His wife had joined Mrs. Balan for an afternoon of shopping in New Westminster recently and had enjoyed it very much. She had been ill, not getting out like she used to, and he was glad that she had had that day. The two of them had long appreciated the courtesy of their neighbours, but the Balans especially seemed willing to go out of their way for them. When they returned from their summer vacation on the prairies the Balans were surprised and sorry to hear that she had died. That's when they began bringing him the suppers.

He was grateful for the meals and welcomed the children who brought them each evening to his doorstep. He looked forward to these little nightly visits. Mrs. Balan had bought a luncheon plate made of stainless steel and sent it over every night with each territory covered with food. Every morning after breakfast she would drop by to collect the plate herself.



The air is cold, and frosted breath issues from his cracked lips. He takes the block in his arms, his posture inclined backward by its weight, choosing his steps along the flagstone path that leads toward the dark outline of a shed paneled with two panes of moonlit glass. He opens the door, turns on the lights, then appears in the lit pane, his arms burdened with a block of wood. He sinks under the sashes, then rises slowly, arms unburdened. Disappearing from the window, he passes briefly through another, then returns to the front. The lights go off and the windows turn black. He closes the door in the still night air. Like a wavering shadow on the flagstone path, he goes toward his house.



Mr. Buckingham began making side trips on his shopping days to the candy store on Royal Oak. Mrs. Balan had sensed he liked having visitors and allowed her children to remain awhile at his house, if they wished to.

Mr. Buckingham took great pleasure in the playoffs that spring, not because he found the games so interesting but because Michael and his friends would come to watch the games on his new coloured set. All through the playoffs Mr. Buckingham kept on hand bottles of pop and bags of chips. He used to look through the TV listings and was glad of all the hockey. On those nights he knew he wouldn't be alone.

One evening Brenda, holding his supper plate, stood on the front step. She tapped lightly against his door. The porch lamp erupted into illumination and slowly the door opened. His face appeared in the light. It was an old face, and the face was all there was—his body remained behind in the darkness of his home. He had the habit of leaving off all lights except those of the room he was in, and he would often spend his evenings in a darkness illumined only by the television standing in the corner, giving off light like a ghostly and faraway flare.

Brenda followed him to the kitchen and, when he turned on the lights, his clean counters and clean white table came into view. He rarely cooked anymore. He put his supper on the table and peeled the plastic wrap from the plate. On the dish lay a piece of chocolate cake, which he offered.

"It's yours," she said.

He put the cake on a dish and poured her a small glass of milk. Then they took their food and went to the living room to watch television.



It was a fine meal. Mr. Buckingham put the empty plate on the side table and made himself comfortable on the chesterfield. He fell into a state of deep relaxation and, as often happened in such a state, he began to reminisce. His thoughts of late were much concerned with the recent passing of his wife and he found this topic depressed his spirit. Frequently he had this feeling: and now once again he sensed that his real life had expired somewhere along the line. It had in some desolate hour already perished, and was still perishing. It was all coming to a close now. He hardly needed to be reminded of that. He was becoming a ghost, a ghost of what he had been, a ghost moving among objects and places that were becoming less and less familiar. Yes, that was the word for what he was becoming—ghost.

His emotions were expanding, moment by moment, and he looked at the girl, her slender shoulders trembling with laughter as she stared at the television. It occurred to him that it had been months since he had touched anyone. She had leaned back, still laughing, and he placed his hand along her shoulder, drawing her lightly towards him.

She was frightened. She broke from his embrace, told him that she had to go, and let herself out. When she got home she told her mother everything.

There were no authorities involved. Mrs. Balan didn't see any point in that. She just called by telephone and told him that all things considered, it might be best if he got someone else to look after his meals. Mr. Buckingham said he understood, but was so confused by the circumstance that he offered nothing in his defence. Her words had left him badly flustered. He thanked her for all she had done and tried to rescue the situation with an offer of more money but Mrs. Balan said that she was glad to have helped and would not accept any more. She didn't mention a word of it to anyone other than her husband.

Mr. Balan, who would "not take the attempted molesting of my children lying down," was finally persuaded by his wife from getting involved. He told his children under no circumstances were they ever to set foot in that house again.

The relationship deteriorated on all fronts. The old man now felt uncomfortable in the presence of his neighbours. The children, who had once been friendly, would now walk on the far side of the street to avoid meeting him. Mr. Balan, who had always exchanged a friendly greeting with him when they met by the fence or out on the sidewalk, would no longer speak with him. Only Mrs. Balan would still say hello and offer a friendly smile.



Sunlight filters through the glass, streaming over the ledge on which lies scattered a collection of screws, nails, rings. The shed is a clutter of tools and tables, smelling faintly of sawdust, or of lumber in the rain. He feels along the partially curved lines in silence, the wood dust drifting through bars of sunlight. The sun falls on his thin white hair as he leans over the block of wood standing in the centre of the floor. His face is old, a riven geography of thin gauge lines running around his mouth, his eyes. In the low slanting light the shadow of the block stretches across the floor as his own quivering shadow hovers around it. Light hammer knocks break the stillness, and woodshavings fall from his chisel silently to the floor.



One warm Sunday, pruning the cherry tree along the fence, he gained a view of the Balan's deserted yard, where two long tables covered with fluttering white cloths were set with glasses and plates. A group of men in baseball uniforms began to arrive and Mr. Balan, wearing a big red apron, took his place at the grill, searing steaks over the hot coals, sending up smoke that drifted over the fence and into the leaves of the cherry tree.

Mr. Buckingham came down his ladder and, when he reached the ground, his eyes met the gaze of Mr. Balan who was standing among his friends. When Mr. Buckingham saw Mr. Balan raise his hand toward him, he raised his hand to wave back, then let it fall awkwardly to his side when he saw that Mr. Balan was pointing at him. The voices that had been loud and boisterous had now collapsed into whispers, and Mr. Buckingham was being stared at by all the men around the barbecue. A feeling of shame flared up on his skin and burned in his face. He stood under their brutal inspection feeling awkward, alone, ashamed. He carried what tools he could to the shed, left the others in the yard and retreated into his house.

The family from the east across the street made arrangements with him to look after his meals.

"Thirty dollars a week. Do you think that's a good price?" the woman asked him. "After all, I have to cook for one more person now and that will cost more money and take up more of my time. I'm already very busy you know. But thirty dollars I think is only fair. Do you think it's fair?"

The old man agreed. After all, he thought, beggars cannot be choosers.

He found her meals didn't always agree with him but never sent anything back in order to avoid any confrontations. They were patronizing



him, he knew that. One evening he found bones and fat on his plate, and went without supper. He remembered how Mrs. Balan had refused the money and realized they had been carrying him for months. He had barely been covering their costs.

He looked forward to seeing the new children who brought his supper, since he liked children, and used to invite them in to watch the television. They began bringing friends, staying late into the evening. One night he returned from the washroom and found the brothers searching his cupboards for chocolates. When the old man showed them where they were kept the children took this as permission to look freely through his cupboards, which they did whenever they came over.

He made small offerings of money from time to time, but soon the children began asking for money. One evening their mother called Mr. Buckingham and told him that if he's going to give to one he must give to all, because there was fighting going on in her house and she would not have that.

When he heard the Balans were moving he was surprised because he had been thinking it was beginning to turn. Mr. Herger was the one who mentioned that they would be gone soon. They had been good neighbours, he said. They were moving out to Surrey. The old man had disappointment in his face and Mr. Herger was surprised that he didn't know. He asked if he spoke with them. The old man said he hadn't had the chance yet.

On the night they packed the last of their belongings into the truck the Balan family came to his house to say good-bye. There in the dimly lit doorway of his quiet home he wished them all the best, and even Mr. Balan let his cool exterior fall as he watched the old man act out his last kind gesture by withdrawing from his pocket a shabby leather wallet and with trembling hands giving the children each a ten-dollar bill. He walked them to the truck, and standing at the top of his driveway he waved at the children until the truck disappeared from the street.



His neighbours didn't see him much after that. He did receive one letter from the Balans. He was glad to have the letter from Mike because it made him think the boy still thought of him in the old way, and because it gave him a chance to tell the children he was making something for them, something he was sure they would like. The people across the street still brought his evening meals, but he didn't eat much anymore. The children still came, but he was sick much of the time now and told the woman it

might be best if they didn't come over so often, for their own sake. When he came down ill he noticed the woman sent him good food, sometimes his favourite meals, but he didn't have much of an appetite anymore. There was some talk from his daughter back east about putting him in a nursing home. He thought it might be for the best, and they agreed to make the arrangements when she came to town next month.

It was when the family across the street went on vacation that he finally felt himself slipping. He had been feeling a little stronger and the woman made his suppers for a week, froze them in casserole dishes, and left him instructions for heating them. She was concerned about his health and asked if he would like her to find someone to help while she was away. He said he would be fine.

The floor was wet, and when he stood up he felt dizzy, weak. He lay down on the chesterfield to rest. He didn't know if he should call someone. His daughter was in Toronto. He didn't want the hospital. He thought of Mrs. Balan, but he realized it wouldn't have been appropriate.



Turning and turning in the warm summer air the painted horses flash their colours under the lights of the carousels. The music of the wurlitzer becomes louder, the horses pitched further and further into the spinning night. He is happy to be like this, the wind tearing through his hair, the clamour in the wings of the shifting boards, the smell of diesel from the running engines. In the ring of faces he sees his mother and waves as she vanishes from his sight. He tries to catch the brass ring but misses, and as the riders in rhythm glide along this wild spinning axis he breaks into laughter, wild rippling laughter, and waves to Sandra and Michael and Brenda, again and again and again. The music becomes louder now and the horses are spinning faster and faster in the warm summer air. Turning and turning under the lights of the carousels, the wild horses swerving flash their colours into the dark.



Mr. Herger went to the side porch and knocked on the door. The rain had been coming down hard for three days and he saw in the old man's backyard the shed door was still open. There was no answer. He went out to the shed and pushed the door creaking all the way and looked inside. There in the shavings and sawdust at the centre of the floor rose a chrome



stand on which balanced a beautiful painted pony, white and gold, soaring wildly through the air with outstretched legs, the wind lifting its golden mane, its body suspended in the perfect lightness of its riderless journey. He called out the old man's name. Nothing. He went back to the house and knocked again, but there was no answer. The door was unlocked. He called out his name, into the quiet of the old man's house, but again received no answer, and so he stepped quietly into the kitchen.

When he had first moved to this neighbourhood thirty-five years before he and his wife had spent many evenings with the Buckinghams in this same room, listening to the radio late into the summer nights, drinking wine, eating fried chicken, playing bridge. It smelled dry and musty now, and he tried to remember if it had always smelled that way. Still there was no answer. An expectation of the worst came upon him and was quickly balanced by the thought that he could easily be overstating the case. But his heart kept beating nearly twice as fast as the clock on the wall. He voiced his name like a question—Buck? Are you there?... Buck?—but no voice answered, and the clock ticked slowly on.

The body was on the chesterfield, the hand fallen to his side touching the floor. He was dead. Mr. Herger walked back to the kitchen, then lowered himself into a chair. So the old man was dead. He would need to call the ambulance now. That was the thing to do in this situation, call the ambulance. Again he became aware of the dry musty smell, and was sure it had not always been that way. He called from the phone on the breakfast table, and on the wall next to the table was a board covered with old notes and slips of paper. He looked at a yellowing paper chart that said "Numbers," and saw in a little box his own name, written out neatly many years ago, and next to it crossed out years later, *Hemlock 15152*. It occurred to him that these things would be useless now. That there would be no one who would remember those old numbers anymore, no one who would know the neighbours they had seen come and go, no one to whom these things, these numbers, these papers would mean anything again. It had all become meaningless now. His world had closed out, sealed itself, and was gone. The old man was dead. He would wait outside and direct the ambulance. It would be better that way, they would be here shortly. As he went back toward the door he had left open he sketched out the sentences in his mind by which he would break the news to his wife. It was sad, but not unexpected. They had talked about his poor health only days earlier.

As he was passing through the kitchen there was something he thought he had seen, an aspect of a pattern, a certain piece of colour, that reminded him of something a long time ago. He looked slowly over the



room and finally his eyes came to rest on something. He moved toward the table. His throat tightened as he looked into a small box of Kentucky Fried Chicken lightly stained with oil. From only one piece had the skin been torn back. Some crumbs lay scattered on a white dish crossed with a fork. A cup of water stood on the counter. He stared into the box, his eyes slowly becoming glassy, picturing how the old man would have walked all the way up to Royal Oak in the rain. Next to the box lay a coloured drawing of a pony, and on the drawing lay a brass ring. He went on staring at the brass ring, as though he were staring at a point somewhere just off in the distance.

