

PAUL R. BOND

CERTAIN POOR SHEPHERDS

“WE’RE EXPECTING COMPANY,” Janey said to her husband.

Tom’s head was in the refrigerator. He was looking for some mustard or mayonnaise or something to put between the honeyed ham and the slices of heavy seed bread he had just purchased in town.

“Great, hon’...”

“To stay, Tom. For a while.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Wallace, Tom. You remember Wallace—from Ottawa?”

At once all the aromas of the room closed in around Tom: the still warm bread on the counter, the dry smell of the dusty afternoon from beyond the open window, the homey sourness of the refrigerator. Tom let the door drift shut behind him and noticed a bottle of blue cheese salad dressing in his hand.

“The letter came yesterday,” Janey said, waving a crumpled envelope. “He should be here tomorrow, maybe the day after.”

Janey gazed past the envelope and examined the floor between Tom’s feet. Tom’s eyes slipped from Janey’s face to the ingredient list on the back of the bottle. Their son, Jonah, sat at the table stroking a gray cat with his small hands, staring at the dry bread on his plate.

That night Tom could not sleep. When the house was quiet he passed through the kitchen into the garage. The previous owner had built a large workbench along the east wall. At various times Tom had considered tearing the bench out, making more room to park the cars among the boxes and bikes, but he liked the bench. He liked the look of it, and he liked to stand in front of it, placing his hands on the gauged and worn two by ten planks and breathing in the smell of sawdust and engine oil.

Tom began searching the boxes lining the back wall. He was looking for a burnt-out vacuum motor. The technician at a repair shop in Toronto

said that it could be easily fixed, but the job would cost an hour's labour plus parts. Tom purchased the parts and decided that he would do it himself.

He found the box labeled "Vacuum Cleaner Parts." Beside it lay Janey's things: a sagging cardboard wardrobe, an open crate of old dishes, and a stack of boxes with labels like "Travel Mementoes," "Picture Albums," and "School Notes."

The Clarkes shoebox predated their marriage, and even their acquaintance, as far as he knew. Janey would bring it out to retrieve an item, add a new one, or just look at the contents for a while, and then it would disappear again. The piece of tape that kept the box shut had been made useless by the dust. Tom picked up the box and took it to the workbench, thinking he must have a roll of masking tape or scotch tape or some sort of fixative in one of his crates.

He found none, so he opened the lid. Inside was a jumble of envelopes, campaign memorabilia, and pictures. He reached in and lifted a piece of folded paper. In the drawing she appears arched and supine. Long quick strokes of charcoal mark the lines of her hips as they become her midriff and torso. Her hair is a frantic tangle, drawn then smudged by the artist's moistened finger. The image was sketched on a leaf of heavy paper and then torn from an album and presented to her by a lover, Tom imagined. He looked at it again. Is she eighteen? nineteen? He refolded the drawing and placed it back in the box.

Then he picked up a snapshot taken at the campaign office. In this picture Janey is sitting at the feet of the candidate, pushing playfully toward the camera: lips forward, shoulders shrugged, breasts aimed at the lens. Wallace is there as well, sitting in a chair beside the candidate. His head is turned thirty degrees to profile, his ruddy-brown hair unevenly short and curly, his heavy, rimless glasses misaligned. Tom thought that perhaps the sweater Wallace wore that day did not fit him properly or that perhaps he suffered from some sort of malformation, as his shoulders seemed unnaturally set and one of his arms—the one attached to the hand that appeared through the trickery of photo optics to float and cradle Janey's head—seemed longer than the other.

Tom laid his fingers on the next picture but did not pick it up. It was taken maybe a year later at Janey's thirtieth birthday party. Janey's family is assembled on the dock at her parent's cottage on Marten Lake. Janey is very pregnant—an unborn Jonah lies in her lap—and each hand grips an armrest

of the deck chair. Her face is expressionless, as she seems to stare past the camera and hence the viewer.

Tom saw himself in the picture, or rather he saw his middle: one brown hand on Janey's shoulder, sunned forearms against a red shirt tucked into tan khakis with the zipper stuck, for posterity, three quarters of the way up. He thought he remembered this moment: the quiet of the water lapping against the underside of the dock, the never-been-washed feel of the cotton dress between his hand and Janey's shoulder, and the switching sound of the shutter as it cut into time—closing one instant as it opened another.

The pictures seemed to be of two different universes, as Janey was so changed when she arrived home from Ottawa. The campaign had not gone well; not everyone is cut out for the road. This is what Tom told himself at first, just eight months before the second picture was taken, as Janey could not speak to him, could not even exhale, without sobbing. Six weeks after her return Tom took her to see the doctor.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Heath," the doctor said. "A child is always a blessing."

Tom dusted off the box and placed it back among the others.

A cool breeze was now coming in the large open door. Tom was tired. He fixed himself a drink and went to bed.

When he awoke, Janey and Jonah were gone. He found cold scrambled eggs on the stove, a piece of dry toast on a plate, and a note that read "gone to town for groceries."

Tom sat on the front porch drinking gin and tonic and watching grasshoppers land on the railing, readjust their wings, and take flight again. The day had been hot, sunny, but was threatening to turn. Tom caught sight of ol' man Olaphson standing on his porch, the tails of his shirt flapping like flags over the standard of his cane.

Tom raised his sweaty plastic tumbler, negotiated the stairs, and took several steps down the long drive. He turned west toward the mountains. Heavy vertical strokes raked the char-gray sky and then curved and dissipated as they neared the ground. Jonah's cat bumped Tom's leg, whined, and disappeared under the stairs.

A man in brown slacks carrying a large plaid valise rose up out of the heat waves at the end of the drive. The man steadied his glasses, looked toward the sky, and crooked his head sideways then downward as he brought

the watch on his wrist up to his face. Squinting, he peered down the drive. He adjusted his glasses again, removed them, unfurled a kerchief from a bulging pocket, and wiped the lenses. He dabbed at his forehead, seized the handle of the valise, and managed to move it incrementally forward by pulling up and striking it with his instep.

Tom took a slow, tart sip, and he felt in that moment that he might actually set his drink down on a fence rail and walk the length of the drive to greet him, present his outstretched hand, and lend assistance.

Then Janey's Volvo appeared over the rise to the east. Tom watched as she pulled the nose of the car into the drive. Jonah was strapped into the passenger seat. Janey passed him something—a parcel. Tom watched as the boy took it, hugged it tightly to his chest, and smiled.

Janey got out of the car and walked over to Wallace. They spoke, Wallace leaning in against the wind, Janey nodding occasionally in Tom's direction.

Janey opened the trunk and shuffled the suitcase to the rear of the car while Wallace fussed beside her. She returned to her place behind the wheel and turned, saying something to Jonah.

Wallace stood for a moment and raised a hand to adjust his frames again. He did not look much different than in the picture, though his hair was longer and showed traces of gray. But as he stepped toward the car and the rising storm caught his shirt and trousers, he became merely a spectacle—a man at odds with the wind.