

ROBERT'S CATHEDRAL

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By Adrian Spratt

Note: This is an alternative version of Raymond Carver's famous story, "Cathedral," written from Robert's point of view. Although I haven't quoted all of Carver's dialog, what is quoted is almost all verbatim. The characters' choreography is also kept intact. The only significant change I've made is to have Jan move from Connecticut to Seattle, which she does in reverse in Carver's original, because crucial parts of Robert's backstory in my version take place in Connecticut, with which I am much more familiar.

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I'd kept a special place in my heart for Jan, and now I was on my way to Seattle to see her after so many years.

I used to work for Social Services, a job I'd gotten through contacts at Central Connecticut College and the help of the Board of Ed, as we called Connecticut's Board of Education and Services for the Blind. I'd wanted something to do between college and grad school. It wasn't a job I wanted. Friends got positions that would help them advance in the future. One went to work for an insurance company. He'd been an economics major and had statistics under his belt. Me, I'd basically winged my way through the Psych Department's statistics course. My psych degree pretty much ruled out the jobs these friends were taking. That, and the laws that stop blind guys from driving.

Other friends did take mindless office jobs. I suppose I could have done something like that. There was new technology to aid blind receptionists, they told me. But I explained to my counselor I didn't have the legs. She didn't laugh.

So I went to work for Social Services and turned into a bureaucrat. I spent my days interviewing and thinking about the people we called “clients.” The word “client” was meant to dignify the people on both sides of the desk. I was a professional and they taxpayers (at least potentially) deserving professional consideration. But I never got over my feeling of being an amateur, not till Jan arrived, while their only reason for being there was to get money. One by one they presented their sad stories. The stream of people left me thinking of a cigarette near the end, with me trying to coax something out of the stubs. Yes, I smoke. Still, it was a job, and with it came routine and biweekly paychecks, and I stopped fretting that I’d become like my clients.

Because I always had clients lined up the moment the office opened for business, I had to do all my file review early in the morning or at the end of a long day. This was where my assistants came in. We’d take a look at the clients’ files before the interviews and go over them more thoroughly after. Sometimes I found details the clients hadn’t mentioned, but I’d already gotten the big picture. Big picture, that is, when it comes to destitute, despondent, sometimes degraded people.

That summer Jan, who had just graduated from a local college, took my assistant’s position. It was a decent-paying part-time job to supplement waitressing. She had been an accounting major. Spoiling my stereotype of an accountant, she liked people. Funny phrase that, “liked people,” as if some don’t like people. But many don’t. Many prefer dogs, especially as they get older. A lot of my clients preferred dogs. Me, I don’t even have a guide dog.

Jan went right to the details that mattered on the clients’ forms. After I’d taken notes, we’d talk about the clients, converting file codes into stories. She respected my intuition, the first time anyone respected me for my work at the agency. No wonder I’d been drifting through depression.

“I wonder what happened between those two jobs,” I said, after she’d read a file.

“A two-year gap.” She skimmed the form for clues.

“He had to help an uncle?”

“That’s what he wrote.”

“Do you think ‘uncle’ is some kind of euphemism?”

“You figure he’s gay and the ‘uncle’ is his sugar daddy?”

“Who knows, my dear,” I said, trying out a phrase a guy in a novel I was reading used with younger women. At the age we were, my being three years older than Jan mattered.

Other times when I asked Jan to find an answer in the file, she’d look up after a few moments and say, “Nothing.” Then we’d know I’d be hearing a story at the client interview about a mother dying, a trip across country or a psychiatric episode. We were always ferreting out the truth.

Sometimes she wanted to find out for herself what the client would say. Then she’d stick around after our morning reading session and sit in on interviews. Here were these applicants, my clients, about to spill out their guts. Not only did they have to face me, the complete stranger randomly assigned as their case officer, but also this young woman who had no right at all to get involved in their affairs. I told them she was my assistant, and there was nothing they could say except, “Pleased to meet you.”

One afternoon, Jan stayed behind, chatting more about herself than she’d done before. She was anxious about her future, didn’t know what she really wanted to do--the usual worries of a college grad. Back then, I felt trapped in my job, but no one wants to hear that and I kept my own counsel. I guess I’d gotten hard-nosed. Hard-nosed or not, I knew what matters to each of us is what feels real, and I respected her feelings.

She said she wasn't waitressing that evening. I said, "Let's go somewhere for dinner. I know an Italian place." Immediately I wished I hadn't. Working with her had become the thing I looked forward to through the week, and seeing her after-hours was putting it at risk.

Dinner was nothing fancy, nothing suggesting a date. The trouble was as we talked, I told her about my insecurities, which got her to talk to me about choices.

"With your talent for getting people to open up," she said, "there are a million things you could do. You could be a reporter. You could be one of those telemarketers who interrupts dinner and gets people to listen even though a new credit card is the last thing on their mind."

I laughed. "My dear, you may have something there, but ever notice how simple the answers are when we're talking about someone else?"

"Keep it in mind. I think you could do it."

At the end of the summer, her boyfriend and she decided to move to Seattle, a compromise, she said, between laid-back west coast and stuffy east coast. "They drink too much java to be laid back," she said.

She posted a job notice at her alma mater for her replacement and helped me sort through the responses. For me as a government employee, where hiring is one big administrative hassle, the most promising was from a woman named Beulah. She didn't have a great GPA, but she had stayed in one job for two years, which was more than I could say for her rivals. I scheduled the interview for ten in the morning so Jan could give me a second opinion.

"Interesting name – Beulah," I said, after the round of handshakes and we'd all three sat down. My approach was intended as a casual way of getting at this name that I didn't like. There are some names you just can't work with.

"My parents have old-fashioned tastes," she said, with no edge.

“No nickname?”

“What can you do with ‘Beulah’?”

I had answers for that, but had the sense to keep them to myself.

After she left, Jan echoed, “No nickname?” I realized how offensive I’d been. Jan saw and laughed.

We agreed Beulah, the candidate if not the name, was sweet.

The day Jan left, she hugged me and I rested my hand on the back of her head. Her hair was lush, and the woman she was became inescapable. She lifted her face away from my shoulder but didn’t shake off my hand. I ran my fingertips along the sides of her face, down her chin to her neck. The rest of the world vanished.

“Now you know,” she said.

We separated. I’d say I continued to “look” at her, but another sighted woman had made me feel dumb when I said I was looking at her. She’d said my eyes aren’t normal so there’s no way I could “look” at anyone. I know one of my eyes kind of wanders, though I try to keep my gaze fixed on the person I’m talking to. Jan didn’t turn away or look down when we talked. I could tell. So I’ll say it anyway: We looked at each other, a stare that goes beyond irises.

“I’ll miss you, Robert.” She held my hand. Then she kissed me on the cheek. I said her name, Jan. No “my dear” this time.

She wrote a poem about my touching her face and read it on a recording she sent me a year later, the one where she told me how unhappy she was with the life of part-time jobs she was leading alongside her husband, who worked for one of the armed forces—I forget which. I loved her remembering an experience we’d shared, but I didn’t like the poem. I felt, to be honest, ashamed. I’d read in one of the blind magazines that blind people don’t touch faces. I guess it’s

because of how we blind folks must sometimes push against the boundaries of intimacy to get answers anyone with sight can get from a tactful distance.

Beulah turned out to be more ambitious than I'd figured from her resume and interview. Once settled in, she talked about her schemes. She didn't have an evening job, and our conversations spilled over into dinner. She liked the idea of helping people, which was what she was doing for me and what together we were doing for my clients. But she also wanted financial security. She thought about telemarketing, but couldn't convince herself that what she'd be selling would help the people she was calling. Instead, she talked herself into Amway. She talked me into it, too. The things you sold through Amway were no better or worse than telemarketed merchandise, but the contact was one-on-one, and "Any time you connect, good things can happen." That's what Beulah said, and she convinced me.

The objective at Amway was to get other people to sell the company's products. Whenever they sold something, you got a cut. Any people they brought in passed along commissions both to them and you. So not only did you make more money, you were also motivating a chain of people to help themselves. Social Services was supposed to do that, but didn't come close.

Two things happened. I left Social Services to set up an Amway distributorship with Beulah. The other was we moved in together.

She wanted a church marriage. I didn't see the point. There wouldn't be any family to celebrate with us. Her parents were both dead. Mine were divorced, and I'd given up trying to be conciliator. I wasn't going to start over at my own wedding. I also didn't see why we needed to formalize what we had. Still, it was what she wanted. She got a minister friend to do the honors, and he brought along his wife. Just the four of us. I rented a tux and Beulah dredged up a peasant

dress. I suspect we looked mismatched. One of her many talents wasn't fashion. It wasn't one of my few. We did the ceremony outdoors, low-key, in a corner of church lawn where there was some privacy. I came away thinking it had been beautiful.

Well, our hopes for Amway were way too high. I guess we kick-started a few people to the next stages of their lives, but most didn't have the energy and gave up. Some blamed the company. Kind of self-serving. Worse for us, we didn't make the money we'd counted on. My steady salary at Social Services, if you count the benefits, had been better. Still, we had some fun together, Beulah and I, and we made some friends out of the deal. I got to meet people and go into homes I'd never have set foot in but for Amway.

Without those friends I don't know what I'd have done when Beulah was diagnosed with cancer and went through the surgery and chemo. I don't care to say too much about that. I was able to do a few things for her, like cook some meals and bring her tea and water and pills when she needed them, but it got to me that our women friends were contributing more to her needs and comfort.

She entered that phase you hear about when the patient looks so great you kid yourself she'll pull through. Beulah didn't kid herself. She gave me a twenty peso coin she'd picked up somewhere and kept in her purse as a charm. She told me to have a locksmith cut it in two.

"Why?" I said.

"Just do it, Robert. Do it for me."

When she fell asleep, I went out to the locksmith. I figured the guy would take me for a crazy person, but he acted like it was the most normal thing in the world. Maybe people have their money carved up all the time. I took the two halves home and held them out to her in my open palm.

“I’ll keep this half,” she said, taking it, “and you keep that one.” Feebly, she closed my hand around it.

When we buried her, we put some belongings in the coffin to keep her company, like she was a female pharaoh. Among them was her half of the coin. Putting it and the other things in there just before they closed the lid got my waterworks going. Eyes that can’t see can still cry.

Beulah’s sister had moved out to Oregon. We’d told her about the wedding only after the fact, figuring we’d save her the expense of the trip. But she made it to the funeral, saying how she wished she’d been at our wedding. But the two sisters hadn’t been close; that was a fact of life. She shouldn’t have been sad about it. We’d wanted the wedding just the way it was.

She invited me to fly out to Portland and spend a week with her family. I said I would, all the while thinking how Portland is kind of near Seattle.

All along, Jan, in Seattle, and I had been exchanging cassette letters. From one tape, she’d said she’d tried suicide, in the bath, with lots of pills and a bottle of gin to wash them down. She told me with a shrug of the shoulders I heard over the tape hiss. That was two weeks after she got out of the hospital. She was lucky, she said, that she hadn’t been kept in longer, and I lip-synched my agreement, which she couldn’t know. Only I seemed to hear people’s gestures.

“I can’t believe it,” I said to Beulah at dinner. “Jan tried to kill herself.”

“Be careful, Robert.” Beulah didn’t admit she didn’t like my taped exchanges with Jan, but she refused when I offered to play them for her.

I never told Beulah about the tape on which Jan talked about what started out as a separation. She messed around for a while before hooking up with Chuck. I got a sense her new marriage worked less because she loved Chuck than because he made her feel settled. At the time I thought that might be like my marriage to Beulah. Now I didn’t care to analyze it.

If I'd been Jan, I'd have tried to express it on tape, but I could never give as much as she did talking into a microphone. You'd have thought I would have tried harder, considering how hard she worked to keep our communication going.

When I called her about my planned trip out west, it was the first time we'd spoken live in eight years. How cool it was taking turns saying things. I arranged to fly up to Seattle to stay two nights with her and this guy Bub she'd married.

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So, there I was at the airport. Jan met me and helped me with the luggage carousel, which made our reunion hectic and distracted. But as we drove to her home, neither of us could get our thoughts out fast enough before the other was interrupting, though interrupting with total understanding of what hadn't been said.

In no time, we turned into her short driveway. I was about to meet Bub. Despite the clients and the other workers back at Social Services, Jan and I had always had our own world. It was going to be strange admitting Bub into it. He must have been thinking something similar about me entering his and Jan's world.

I got out and reached into the back seat for my bag.

"Oh, let me take that," she said.

"It's been so long, Jan, you forget I do some things myself."

She laughed, and I remembered how glad I'd been that we could make jokes about things like that.

Pinching my coat sleeve, she pulled me along and kept up a monologue to the front door. I would have gotten the hang of the driveway and steps from her voice, but she'd become

nervous all of a sudden, and I could tell she needed to control the situation. At the porch, she spoke ahead of us. “I want you to meet Robert. Robert, this is my husband. I’ve told you all about him.”

I dropped my suitcase and stuck out my hand. He clasped it. I squeezed hard. “I feel like we’ve already met,” I said, injecting heartiness into my words. Knowing all about him, I was saying, made me like him.

“Likewise,” he said. Poor guy. He didn’t know what to say. He went on. “Welcome. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I figured he was telling me that if I had the goods on him, so did he on me. Comical.

Inside, Jan made a big show of talking me to the sofa. “To your left here, Robert. That’s right. Now watch it, there’s a chair. That’s it. Sit down right here. This is the sofa. We just bought this sofa two weeks ago.”

I put the suitcase on the floor next to the sofa. Bub also took a seat on the sofa, while Jan perched on the armchair I’d brushed past.

Bub said, “Did you have a good plane ride? Which side of the plane did you sit on, by the way?”

Jan shrieked, “What a question, which side! What’s it matter which side?”

The poor man said, “I just asked.”

Here we were, the three of us feeling out how to talk to each other. When Beulah and I had gone as Amway reps into people’s homes, the cream rinses and nutrition supplements had given the jump start talk needed. Once people got going, we couldn’t get them to stop.

“Right side,” I said. I thought I knew what he was getting at. He was imagining me imagining what I was looking at outside the window. Or maybe he’d momentarily forgotten I

couldn't see. Either way, I liked him for asking what he would have asked another guest.

I kept going. "I hadn't been on a plane in nearly forty years. Not since I was a kid. With my folks. I'd nearly forgotten the sensation."

I turned to Jan. "I have winter in my beard now. So I've been told, anyway. Do I look distinguished, my dear?"

"You look distinguished, Robert. Robert -- Robert, it's just so good to see you." She leaned forward on the chair arm.

"Let me get you a drink," Bub said. Good, I thought. Break the ice. Literally and figuratively. "What's your pleasure?" he said. "We have a little of everything. It's one of our pastimes."

"Bub, I'm a Scotch man myself."

"Right. Sure you are, I knew it."

I wanted to cover my ears. Did he have to speak so loud?

Jan offered to take my suitcase up to the bedroom.

"No, that's fine. It can go up when I go up."

"A little water with your Scotch?" Bub said.

"Very little." I could tell Scotch with a little water was his drink.

"I knew it," he said.

"Just a tad. The Irish actor, Barry Fitzgerald? I'm like that fellow. When I drink water, Fitzgerald said, I drink water. When I drink whisky, I drink whisky."

They laughed, though with Jan it wasn't natural like in the car. I figured she associated alcohol with her suicide attempt. I toyed with my beard, which had gotten not only wintery, but long. I'd ask her some time whether to cut it short or let it grow some more.

Bub came back carrying a Scotch with a splash of soda, not water, for each of us. We had a drink while I talked a little about Portland, then about the flight. I smoked two cigarettes all the way down. Jan emptied the ashtray after the second. By the time she was ready to serve dinner, I was hungry. I hadn't had an appetite in a long time. I almost said so, but I didn't want to remind them about my wife dying and spoil the mood.

At the table Bub said, "Here's bread and butter for you," without asking if I wanted it. Having poured more Scotch and soda, he took a noisy gulp and said, "Now let us pray."

So Jan had found a man with religion. I knew something had to have pulled her through her trials. I understood. I'd learned about religion from Beulah. I lowered my head and silently said some words for my wife.

Bub said, "Pray the phone won't ring and the food doesn't get cold."

I had to smile.

My head was spinning from all the Scotch, so I troubled Jan to pour me some milk. Dinner was cube steak, scalloped potatoes and green beans. I sensed Bub studying me eat. I give him credit, though. He was an attentive host and got pretty funny during dinner. Of course, he kept piling stuff on my plate, and I had to tell him to stop. For dessert, we dug our way through half a strawberry pie, which got Jan to act like she was shocked. I wiped perspiration from my forehead. Was it only me sweating away?

Leaving the plates behind, as Jan ordered us to, we returned to the living room. She said she was beat. She joined me on the sofa, while Bub took the big chair. We had more rounds of drinks while she and I filled in more gaps in our taped exchanges. I told her about the ham radio hobby I'd picked up. I'd become pretty proficient, I told her. One day I thought I might visit the friends I'd made over the air in Guam, the Philippines, Alaska and Tahiti.

I turned to Bub and asked how long he'd been in his present position.

"Three years."

"Do you like your work?"

"No, I don't."

"Are you going to stay with it?"

"What options do I have?"

I tugged at my beard. He got up and turned on the TV.

Jan turned to me and said, "Robert, do you have a TV?" She sounded annoyed with her husband, just when I thought she'd gotten over worrying about how he'd be with me.

"My dear, I have two TVs. I have a color set and an old black-and-white thing, an old relic." There were still black-and-white TVs in those days. I wanted her to believe me, so I went on. "It's funny, but if I turn the TV on, and I'm always turning it on, I turn on the color set. It's funny, don't you think? This is a color TV. Don't ask me how, but I can tell."

Bub tuned into the news as he said, "We traded up a while ago."

Pleased with his confirmation, I took a sip of my drink, lit up a cigarette, stretched out and crossed my ankles.

Jan yawned. "I think I'll go upstairs and put on my robe. Robert, you make yourself comfortable."

I pointed the tip of my cigarette at my crossed feet, like I'd heard detectives did in movies. "I'm comfortable."

She persisted. "I want you to feel comfortable in this house."

"I am comfortable."

She was gone a long time while Bub and I listened to the weather and then the sports roundup. Abruptly, he sat up, as if he'd had an inspiration, and asked if I wanted another drink.

“Sure.”

Then he asked if I'd like to share some dope. He said he'd just rolled a number, which amused me. His voice had betrayed none of the concentration of someone engaged in a task.

Marijuana wasn't something the Amway crowd did. Not the Amway crowd I knew. Cheap wine and smokes was about it. It had bypassed me in college, like so much else. Even so, or who knows, maybe for that reason, I said, “I'll try some with you.”

“Damn right,” Bub said. “That's the stuff.” He disappeared into the kitchen and came back out with drinks. Sitting next to me on the sofa, he lit a match. “Here goes.”

I held out my hand, like he was giving me a cigarette. He put the joint between my first and second fingers, which told me what I needed to know. I placed the joint between my lips and kept my fingers on that cool spot. I inhaled like I would a cigarette, but nothing happened. So I took the plunge and inhaled deep and slow. When it reached my lungs, I managed to control the burning and keep from hacking.

“Hold it as long as you can,” he said. He'd been watching me closely, of course.

Jan came downstairs. “What do I smell?”

“We thought we'd have us some cannabis,” Bub said.

“Robert, I didn't know you smoked.”

“I do now, my dear.” I hoped I had what old-time novelists call a twinkle in my decent-looking eye. “There's a first time for everything. But I don't feel anything yet.”

My new ally, Bub, said, “This stuff is pretty mellow. This stuff is mild. It's dope you can reason with. It doesn't mess you up.”

“Not much it doesn’t, Bub.” If I wasn’t feeling it, why did I talk like I did? Sometimes my mouth perplexes me.

Jan took the joint from her husband. “I shouldn’t be smoking this. I can hardly keep my eyes open as it is. That dinner did me in. I shouldn’t have eaten so much.”

“It was the strawberry pie,” I said. “That’s what did it.”

So she asked if I wanted more pie, and I replied, “Maybe in a little while.” We watched more TV.

She said, “Your bed is made up when you feel like going to bed, Robert.” She yawned again. “I know you must have had a long day. When you’re ready to go to bed, say so.” She pulled at my arm.

My legs stretched out before me, I smiled up at her and said, “I’ve had a real nice time. This beats tapes, doesn’t it?”

Bub said, “Coming at you,” and handed me another joint.

I rose to inhale. “Thanks, Bub, but I think this is all for me. I think I’m beginning to feel it.” I held out the joint to Jan.

She said, “Same here. Ditto. Me, too.” But she took the roach from me anyway. “I may just sit here for a while between you two guys with my eyes closed. But don’t let me bother you, okay? Either one of you. If it bothers you, say so. Otherwise I may just sit here with my eyes closed until you’re ready to go to bed. Your bed’s made up, Robert, when you’re ready. It’s right next to our room at the top of the stairs. We’ll show you up when you’re ready. You wake me up now, you guys, if I fall asleep.”

When the news ended, the regularity of her breathing told me she’d fallen asleep. Her velvet robe touched the back of my hand. I pushed away awareness of her female warmth.

Bub got up and changed the channel, then returned to the sofa. Those were also the days before remotes came with every TV. “You say when you want some strawberry pie.”

Would it ever end with that strawberry pie?

“Are you tired?” he said. “Do you want me to take you up to your bed?”

Take me up to my bed? I didn’t think so. Maybe he could show me my room, when the time came. “Not yet. No, I’ll stay up with you, Bub. If that’s all right. I’ll stay up until you’re ready to turn in.”

Reaching for my old standbys, a cigarette and the lighter on the coffee table, I said, “We haven’t had a chance to talk. Know what I mean? I feel like me and her monopolized the evening.”

“That’s all right.” He added, “I’m glad for the company.”

Some show about the Church and the Middle Ages was on the TV. He got up and flipped channels. Returning to the church thing, he apologized.

“Bub, it’s all right. It’s fine with me. Whatever you want to watch is okay. I’m always learning something. It won’t hurt me to learn something tonight.” But I figured he was apologizing not so much for the show as for having the TV on at all. TVs have sound as well as the screen, so I reminded him, “I got ears.”

When I’m tired, my eyelids droop and keep opening, and when I try to think things through, I tug at my beard. I was both tired and trying to think. I was also leaning forward, another distracting habit of mine, I’m told. I guess I wasn’t all that comfortable. I faced him but kept an ear on the TV. That was how his attention was divided, so I needed to be attentive to both.

The English narrator was talking about how some procession takes place every year in

Spain. Bub explained the people were wearing cowls. Some were dressed up as skeletons and others as devils.

“Skeletons,” I said, “I know about skeletons.” Boy, was I struggling to find something in common between him and me.

When the narrator went silent for a stretch, Bub filled in. “They’re showing the outside of the cathedral now. Gargoyles. Little statues carved to look like monsters. Now I guess they’re in Italy. Yeah, they’re in Italy. There’s paintings on the wall of this one church.”

To make conversation, I said, “Are those fresco paintings, Bub?” I sipped from the icy remnant of my drink.

“You’re asking me, are those frescoes? That’s a good question. I don’t know.” Then he said, “Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? Do you follow me? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion what they’re talking about? Do you know the difference between that and a Baptist church, say?”

And people say I talked too much.

Jan must have told him I’d never seen. Someone who had would know what a cathedral looked like, though maybe not this one.

I puffed on my cigarette and pushed my hand inside my pocket to touch my half of Beulah’s twenty-peso coin.

I said, “I know they took hundreds of workers fifty or a hundred years to build. I just heard the man say that, of course. I know generations of the same families worked on a cathedral. I heard him say that, too. The men who began their life’s work on them, they never lived to see the completion of their work. In that wise, Bub, they’re no different from the rest of us, right?”

I laughed. Nerves again. I returned my attention to the TV. The narrator was talking about a German cathedral. Yeah, I knew what cathedrals were, or maybe I didn't. Maybe it would help Bub and me along if I asked him to give me a better idea. So I said, "Cathedrals. If you want the truth, Bub, that's about all I know. What I just said. What I heard him say. But maybe you could describe one to me? I'd like that."

"To begin with," Bub said, "they're very tall. They reach way up. Up and up. Toward the sky. They're so big, some of them, they have to have these supports. To help hold them up, so to speak. These supports are called buttresses. They remind me of viaducts, for some reason. But maybe you don't know viaducts, either? Sometimes the cathedrals have devils and such carved into the front. Sometimes lords and ladies. Don't ask me why this is."

I nodded. This was awkward between us, but I was getting interested.

Bub said, "I'm not doing so good, am I?"

I leaned forward and nodded again for him to go on.

"They're really big. They're massive. They're built of stone. Marble too, sometimes. In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be close to God. In those olden days God was an important part of everyone's life. You could tell this from their cathedral-building."

He paused before saying, "I'm sorry, but it looks like that's the best I can do for you. I'm just no good at it."

But I thought we were getting somewhere. "That's all right, Bub," I said. "Hey listen, I hope you don't mind. Let me ask you a simple question, yes or no. I'm just curious, and there's no offense. You're my host. But let me ask if you are in any way religious? You don't mind my asking?"

"I guess I don't believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it's hard. You know what I'm

saying?”

“Sure, I do.”

Still sleeping between us, Jan sighed.

Bub said, “You’ll have to forgive me. But I can’t tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn’t in me to do it. I can’t do any more than I’ve done.”

I wanted to encourage him, but I couldn’t think how.

He went on. “The truth is, cathedrals don’t mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They’re something to look at on late-night TV, that’s all they are.”

I coughed into my handkerchief. More nerves? “I get it, Bub. It’s okay. It happens. Don’t worry about it.”

Then finally an idea came to me. “Hey, listen to me. Will you do me a favor? I got an idea. Why don’t you find us some heavy paper? And a pen. We’ll do something. We’ll draw one together. Get us a pen and some heavy paper. Go on, Bub, get us the stuff.”

He just sat there, and I worried I’d only made things more difficult between us. But suddenly he leapt up and took the stairs to the bedrooms. Then he bounded down to the kitchen, and I heard the rustling of bags. Back in the living room, he kneeled on the floor by the coffee table and spread a bag out before us. I got down beside him and checked out the paper, the sides, the corners to get an idea of how much space he had to draw. Lots, it turned out.

I said, “All right. All right, let’s do her.”

Was it all the dope-laced alcohol sloshing around my brain and in my stomach? Was it the way the three of us were, nervous me with this nervous man and, most nervous of all, retreating, sleeping Jan? I found Bub’s hand and closed it over the pen. “Go ahead, Bub, draw. Draw. You’ll see. I’ll follow along with you. It’ll be okay. Just begin now like I’m telling you.

You'll see. Draw."

He drew a box and, at each end, a tower. "Spires," he mumbled.

"Swell. Terrific. You're doing fine. Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, Bub?" I hadn't, that was for sure. "Well, it's a strange life, we all know that. Go on now. Keep it up."

He announced the details as he drew them: Windows, doors, arches, those flying buttresses he'd told me about. He was into it now. The TV station went off the air, leaving us alone with our cathedral.

He flung down the pen and I released his hand. I ran my fingers over the paper. "Doing fine," I said.

He took up the pen again and I found his hand. He resumed drawing.

The sofa creaked and Jan said, "What are you doing? Tell me, I want to know."

Bub was intent on our project, so I replied. "We're drawing a cathedral. Me and him are working on it. Press hard. That's right. That's good. Sure. You got it, Bub. I can tell. You didn't think you could. But you can, can't you? You're cooking with gas now. You know what I'm saying?"

I felt on the edge of laughter. Unsure how they'd take that, I stopped myself by keeping up the talk. "We're going to really have us something here in a minute. How's the old arm? Put some people in there now. What's a cathedral without people?"

Jan repeated, "What's going on? Robert, what are you doing? What's going on?"

I couldn't think about her now, her and her velvet robe. Not with Bub there and this smoky cocktail of scotch and marijuana marinating my brain; not with half of Beulah's coin in my pocket.

“It’s all right,” I told her. I turned my attention back to Bub. “Close your eyes now.” His hand responded. “Are they closed? Don’t fudge.”

“They’re closed.”

“Keep them that way. Don’t stop now. Draw.”

We kept going in silence. Even Jan gave up persisting in demanding an answer. It was like a spell had come over us.

At last I said, “I think that’s it. I think you got it. Take a look. What do you think? Well? Are you looking?”

“It’s really something,” he said.

I knew the “something” had to be a mess, like a Rorschach test, only unlike the real Rorschach tests that I couldn’t take, this one was tactile. It was all I could do to contain my laughter. Not hard laughter. But I figured even a smile would seem like I was mocking him.

I mouthed a prayer, the kind God is only meant to listen in on because I wasn’t directing it to him. I told Beulah I was wondering what she thought of all this. I tilted my head and listened. Yes, I mouthed, me, too.

THE END