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Barnaby Goes Home

Barnaby was vibrating like a hardware-store paint mixer. The unused triceps on his upper arms flobbered about as he leaned into the handlebars, and the wind billowed his slack lips. The ancient BMW motorcycle rattled and throbbed in a deadening drone that had persisted for hours, sounding hollow going up-hill, poppy and buzzy going down.

The Vermont springtime landscape had morphed from patchy snow to unmitigated mud, the leading edge of summer, but Barnaby managed to stay on paved roads all the way from Brattleboro. Cars whizzed by whenever the curves and center line allowed, often with a taunting horn blast. Not much respect for 50-year-old 250 cc motorcycles, especially when they were driven by 70-something hippies.

The old saying about happy motorcyclists was true: Barnaby's perpetual gawk was decorated with more than a few smashed bugs among tiny glints of gold. Some had gone up his nose, too, blasted by the relentless 50 mph wind in his face.

Barnaby was oblivious to life's little annoyances, because he was on his way home. His heart was filled with the dull joy that comes when something that should have taken a few hours is finally finished after weeks of tedious labor. His mind reverberated with layers of falsified and enhanced images of a past no-one ever experienced. His eyes squinted into the roadway dust while tears coursed back across his temples in the wind.

Home wasn't his birthplace, or even where he had grown up. Home was a myth that had emerged in the darkened corners of Barnaby's dim brain-pan, growing like mold across the cranial interior. Home may have

once been more or less real, perhaps during his college years, but now it was much too late to confirm anything.

The blatting thump of the little BMW lowered in pitch, and he turned into a small run-down gas station just outside an anonymous 45-mph town. Barnaby rated Vermont towns by their maximum speed limit. Anything over 45 didn't qualify as a town at all.

The bike used to get about 75 miles per gallon, but now it burned oil and the mileage was way down. There was a crack in the tank near the filler cap, so Barnaby never filled it much above half.

He stopped the motorcycle alongside the gas pumps, stepped off, and heaved the ungainly contraption onto its center-stand. He blinked at the pumps, trying to find the credit-card slot. His stance was a little unsteady after so many hours rattling and thumping along winding country roads.

An old geezer sat in a cane chair by the open garage door, staring at him.

It appeared there wasn't a slot in the pump for credit cards.

Barnaby looked over at the geezer. "You take credit cards?" he asked.

"Dunno," said the geezer, not moving.

"You don't know?" Barnaby wrinkled his nose in surprise.

"Not my store," said the geezer.

"Oh. Is the owner around?"

"Dunno."

Barnaby pulled the ignition key from the bike and walked over to the office door. Its big spring played a sproingy tune as he swung it open.

The office was dark, with a big desk littered with papers and junk. Ancient vending machines stood like suits of armor in the shadows.

"Hello?" Barnaby said.

There was no answer, but he heard the distinctive clank of a wrench against concrete, and spied the grimy door into the shop. He pushed the door open and saw a rounded lump of overalls hunched near the floor at the back end of a rusted Cadillac. He walked over.

"You the owner?" Barnaby said.

The overalls unfolded and stood up. "Yup." The owner was impossibly old and fat, and his bib-front work clothes were almost black with grease and oil.

"You take credit cards?"

“Nope.”

“Cash?”

“Nope.”

“Nope?” Barnaby was taken aback. “How the hell do you sell any gas?”

“Don’t. Pumps been dry since ’95. Just fix-ups here.” The owner stuffed his hands deep into the overalls and planted his feet, as if preparing to remain standing for a very long time.

“No gas?”

“No gas.”

“Look,” Barnaby said, “I’m almost out. Where’s the nearest working gas pump?”

“Oh, these pumps work OK,” said the owner. “That ain’t the problem.”

“I don’t understand,” said Barnaby.

“Already told you. No gas. Dry since ’95.”

Barnaby looked around, but there was nobody to appreciate the conversation. “So where can I get some gas around here?”

“Sinclair. ’Bout two mile,” said the owner.

“Which way?” Barnaby gazed out into the bright sun, where the BMW perched like an elaborate steel toilet at the pumps.

“Well,” said the owner, “just the way you’re pointin’.”

“Pointing?” Barnaby hadn’t been pointing.

“Your moped out there’s pointin’ ain’t it?”

“It’s a motorcycle, not a moped.”

“Pointin’ down the road, eh?”

“Well, yes.” Barnaby peered back into the gloom behind the owner. The interior of the garage was far too dark to get anything done. Even more so after looking out into the afternoon light.

“Two miles back you’d a druv past it.”

Barnaby frowned, realizing that indeed he would have seen it driving by. Life weirdly made sense sometimes.

“Right,” Barnaby admitted, under his breath.

“Then you be gettin’ on down the road, eh?”

Barnaby shrugged. “Yup. Thanks. See ya.”

He picked his way over tires and car parts into the daylight. The BMW was down to a splash, but easily good for another few miles.



There was a slight breeze in the town of East Glover, carrying the cheeps and twitters of hundreds of birds scattered through the woods and across the open fields. On the hillside a sizable flock of blackbirds picked in the grass. Closer to the road, blue-jays scavenged at the back of a plywood ice-cream shop, hopping over empty boxes and a pair of garbage drums. A massive old refrigeration unit hummed and buzzed. There was an occasional swoosh as a car sped past on the nearby pavement. East Glover was a 45-mph town.

A squirrel was foraging at the edge of the woods a few yards up-hill. It grabbed an acorn in its paws, froze, jerked erect, started to the right, froze, dashed half-way toward a picnic table, froze, jerked erect, spun around, leapt a few feet closer, darted to the left, took one quick step to the right, noticed something across the road, and then remained frozen for a long time, hoping to disappear gradually into the predator's optic fatigue. Then it dropped the acorn and ran all the way back into the woods with its huge tail flowing behind like smoke.

A faint thumping emerged in the distance. Metallic clanking mingled with the low staccato and the beat slowed, grew louder, and with a crunch of gravel Barnaby swung into the ice cream store's parking lot. He parked under the tree, picked some debris from his hair, and went to the serving window.

After a minute, an old woman appeared and thrust an alarmingly wrinkled scowl over the counter. "Watcha want?" said the ice cream vendor.

Barnaby looked up at the sign: "Ginger's Hut." *More like Baba-Yaga's*, he thought.

"Make up yer mind, sir," Ginger snapped. "We ain't waitin' all day."

Barnaby looked around. There was a family of four at one of the picnic tables, but the rest of the enterprise was deserted.

"OK, well, I guess," he said, "I'll have, uh, one of those orange freeze things."

"You mean an orange freeze?" said Ginger.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Size?" she said.

"Oh, uh, medium, I guess."

“Well, is that it, or you still guessing?”

Barnaby flinched and bounced a little on the balls of his feet. “Uh, yup, medium.”

“We don’t got medium,” said Ginger. After a suitable pause she added, brusquely, “You mean Regular.”

“I do?” said Barnaby, his mind having wandered.

“It’s the size between Kids and Tall,” she said.

“Oh,” said Barnaby. “OK.”

“One sixty-nine,” said Ginger.

“What?” said Barnaby. *That’s a really weird sequence of sizes: kids, regular, and tall; sounds like shirt sizes.*

“You gonna pay?” Ginger demanded. “Pay in advance.”

Barnaby fished out a pair of ones, and Ginger handed him his change, slammed the window shut, and set about concocting his orange freeze.

Barnaby selected an unoccupied picnic table beneath a tree, and sauntered over to it, his bell-bottoms flapping around his ankles. This place reminded him faintly of Home, although the witch wasn’t supposed to be part of it. *I must be getting into the vicinity*, he thought, and sat down.

Almost immediately the ice cream shop’s loudspeaker crackled, and the witch’s voice rasped out across the parking lot. “REGULAR ORANGE FREEZE!”

Barnaby leaned back, sorry to be standing up again so soon, and stretched.

“MAKE IT SNAPPY!” said the amplified witch.

Barnaby jumped up and hurried back to the order window. Ginger handed Barnaby his drink, and slammed the window before Barnaby could ask for a napkin. He watched for a moment as she stormed away into a maze of frozen-food equipment.

Returning to his table, Barnaby sucked a mouthful of thick orange slush, savoring the way it infused hyper-orange into every nook and cranny of his awareness.

Time stopped, and Barnaby sat on the bench in a sugar-induced orange daze while birds twittered, squirrels scampered, a few cars swished past. The family of four was struggling to coordinate a return to their station wagon.

Eventually, his straw sucked air and the blazing stasis faded away.

Barnaby suddenly wanted to be back on the road. He stood up, slurping the final splatters of slush. "Gotta go," he said. He strode quickly to his motorcycle and heaved it off the center-stand.

The old bike coughed and wheezed, and then burped into life. Barnaby straddled the rattling and thumping machinery, kicked it into gear, and roared sluggishly out onto the road.

Up ahead, a sign on the right read, "Barre 12 Miles." He glanced over his shoulder as he pulled away. At the ice-cream store, a grey squirrel was engaged in staccato maneuvers across the parking lot.



The Sinclair station turned out to be farther than he thought, and the BMW was running on fumes when he pulled up at the pumps. He shut off the engine and it emitted one loud pop of protest and stopped dead, ticking and clinking as it cooled.

There was nobody in sight, but the station appeared to be open. A large green dinosaur sign presided over the empty yard and its lights were on.

"Yo!" Barnaby shouted. "Customer!" The office was closed, but he thought he could see movement inside. He hauled the bike onto its center stand and went to the door.

It was locked. Pressing his nose to the glass, Barnaby could see most of the little store, and there was no sign of life. He banged a few times, but there was no response.

He went to the big roll-up garage doors, stood on tiptoe, and tried to see into the darkness. He thought there might have been some movement behind the grease rack, but there was no response to his banging and yelling, so he gave up and returned to his bike.

He removed the cap from the gas tank, peered inside, and gave the bike a shake. The tank contained little more than vapor, but even a few ounces would get him the rest of the way into Barre. He glanced around, and then pulled the gas pump hose over and propped the nozzle in the filler hole. He slowly lifted the hose over his head, and an ounce or two dribbled into the tank.

After draining the hoses on the other two pumps, Barnaby figured he probably had enough, and he put the gas cap back on. He was adjusting his goggles when the State Police car pulled up.

A lanky officer got out and put his police hat on before turning to Barnaby. The hat was immaculate and brimmed with a perfectly flat disc of felt. Barnaby took off his goggles.

“Nice evening, eh?” the officer said, striding over.

“Sure is,” said Barnaby.

“Up for the foliage?” said the officer.

“Uh, no,” Barnaby replied. “Foliage in the spring?”

“Yep, we got foliage in the spring,” the cop replied. “Comes back every year.” He gestured at the dense green trees and grass stretching for miles all around the gas station. “I’d call that foliage,” he added.

“I thought you meant fall foliage,” Barnaby said.

“In the spring?”

“Well, I—” The cop was looking at him. “Um, never mind.”

“You got a lens for that thing?” the cop said.

“A lens?”

“Your taillight. It’s not red, you know. Supposed to be red.”

Barnaby looked at the light fixture over his license plate mount. Sure enough, the red plastic part had shattered again from the vibration, leaving a bare bulb. “Oh,” he said. “Sorry. I keep replacing it, but the vibration—”

The officer nodded. “Happens all the time,” he said. “You got some lipstick or nail polish on you?”

Barnaby frowned; he couldn’t think of an answer that didn’t sound like a wisecrack.

“You should paint that red,” said the cop. “In the dark I wouldn’t know if you’re coming or going.”

“OK, I’ll pick up some nail polish next time I see a store.”

“Good man. Where you headed?”

“Home,” said Barnaby.

“Near here? I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Barnaby began to fidget. “Well, it’s not exactly my actual home.”

“That’s interesting,” said the cop. “What is it, if it’s not your home?”

“I guess it’s where I feel like I’m at home.”

“Ah. This place is nearby?”

“Yes, exactly.”

The cop glanced at Barnaby’s Massachusetts plate. “You don’t live in Mass?”

“No, I do live in Mass. Cochituate.”

“Then you’re heading in the wrong direction!” The officer looked unreasonably delighted with this observation.

“No, no,” said Barnaby. “I’m heading to where it *feels* like home, is what I meant. I’m not at home in Cochituate.”

“Cochichuate? Where is that, exactly,” said the cop.

“Cochituate. Outside Boston.”

“Co-TICH-u-ate?”

“Co-CHIH-chew-it. I-90, a little North of Framingham.”

“What’s wrong with Cochituate?”

“Well, it’s not Vermont, for one thing,” Barnaby said.

The officer nodded sagely.

Barnaby continued, “And like I said, it just doesn’t feel like home.”

“You feel more at home in Vermont?”

“Yeah. That’s what I meant.”

“Where, in Vermont?”

“Well, here. Hereabouts. Central Vermont. Barre, Montpelier, Winooski River, Green Mountains. You know.”

The officer removed his immaculate hat, dusted it off, and looked up and down the road.

“Gonna pay for that gas?” he said, putting his hat back on and settling the brim just so.

“Huh?” Barnaby glanced at the closed station. “I wanted a fill-up,” he said, “but they’re closed.”

“The gas in the hoses is still worth something, don’t you think?”

“Well, yeah, but it’s only a few ounces. Just a dribble. I mean—”

“Got some money on you?” the cop looked serious.

Barnaby fished around in his pants. “I’ve got a couple of fives, and some quarters, and—”

“Gimme four of those quarters,” the cop said, holding out his hand. He wore fine, skintight leather driving gloves.

Barnaby picked out a short stack of quarters and handed them gingerly to the cop, who immediately placed them on top of the nearest gas pump.

“That should cover it,” said the cop, turning back to his car. Before getting in, he called over the roof, “Enjoy your trip home. Come on back any time.” The cruiser’s rear tires spun out as he drove off to the South.

Barnaby wondered if the trooper meant home in Cochituate, or “home” in central Vermont. He eyed the quarters on the gas pump and resisted the urge to put them back in his pocket. For all he knew, the cop had already parked out of sight and was watching him through binoculars.

Then he kicked the start lever a few times and the old BMW thumped and rattled back to life. He licked the bug bits on his front teeth; his kidneys braced themselves for the next leg of the journey. Soon his tangled hair was blowing in the wind.



On the outskirts of town, Barre was still recognizable as the former ‘granite capitol of the world.’ Barnaby rattled past old stone-cutting shops, all shuttered and decaying, and battered granite-hauling flatbeds, their frames sagging from decades overloaded with stone. Despite the proliferation of defunct businesses, Barnaby was relieved to see the small city finally taking shape along the road.

Endless vibration and clatter all the way from Massachusetts had taken its toll. His ears rang, his vision was blurred, his body was sore, and his lower back felt like he’d been carrying his preposterous motorcycle for the last hundred miles. Up ahead, relief waited at the Barre Hotel. He would eat a light meal, get a full night’s sleep, and then head on up Route 14 to the North. Somewhere along Route 2 into Plainfield he would find his home.

A few minutes later, Barnaby jounced through a deep pothole filled with muddy water and pulled into the parking lot behind the Barre Hotel. He had stayed at this same hotel 40 years ago when he visited the nearby college for an interview. It was an old, classic downtown establishment, with a dingy wood-paneled lobby, a dark slow-motion dining room, and small dark bedrooms.

The pothole water splashed onto the BMW’s rattling exhaust pipe and muffler, and a cloud of steam rose into the air, lending a dimly apocalyptic aspect to Barnaby’s arrival. The bike was still hissing and ticking as he stomped up onto the hotel porch.

The main entrance was locked. Barnaby pressed his face against the window and squinted into the wood-paneled lobby. His nose left a large greasy clear-spot on the glass. This hotel was definitely out of business.

He gazed across the porch at the rest of downtown Barre. The city

still had a deteriorating look about it, just as he remembered. It seemed incredible that a city could be deteriorating for half a century and still exist at all. But in the distance, down certain streets, there were a few signs of urban renewal, and he imagined new hotels were being planned, and new buildings would arise, and artists would move in, and soon Barre would turn into the Portland Maine of Vermont.

This vision didn't assuage the road fatigue, hunger, and sore muscles, so he trudged back to the side lot and restarted the motorcycle. His lower back and glutei maximi were not pleased to reassume Barnaby's hunched riding position, but finding someplace to rest and recover was paramount.

As he waited at the pothole for a pedestrian to pass, he asked for directions to the nearest hotel.

The pedestrian, an elderly lady dragging a heavily laden shopping cart, paused and looked him up and down. She squinted at the antique plumbing of his motorcycle and said, "Beemer?"

"Hotel Beemer?" Barnaby replied, puzzled.

"BMW," she said, pointing at the black and white emblem on Barnaby's gas tank. "I used to ride one of those."

"You did?"

"Why, you think I can't ride?" She was visibly perturbed.

"Sorry," Barnaby said. "I didn't realize you were referring to the bike."

"Well, it's obviously not a 750i," she retorted.

"It's an R-26," said Barnaby. "Do you know of another hotel around here?"

"Ain't no ho-tels around *here* anymore," she said. "Ain't no *ho*-tels pretty much *anywhere*, far as I know. Plenty damn strip malls and *mo*-tels outside of town, though. Far as the eye can see."

She started to walk away, and Barnaby said, "I know what you mean. I was hoping to avoid staying in a motel, actually. Are you sure there's nothing else?"

She stopped. "There's always Chez Marie," she said, over her shoulder. "Not a hotel exactly, but no damn strip *mo*-tel."

Barnaby remembered the old road-house up on Route 2 near campus. "You mean the old bar?"

"Only one Chez Marie," she said, walking away. "If you knew where it was, why'd you ask me?"

She had moved on too far to warrant a response, so Barnaby kicked into first gear and wobbled through the pothole onto the street.

Up Maple Ave. until it turns back into 14, Barnaby thought, watching the downtown area bounce past, jogging his memory. *Then right on Route 2 in East Montpelier*. The BMW popped and wheezed at each stop sign. *Still not many traffic lights*, Barnaby thought. *I'm almost home*.

Maple Avenue quickly blended back into a two-lane state road winding through nondescript Vermont countryside. The clattering BMW resumed its uncanny habit of finding every imperfection in the pavement. Barnaby's kidneys and vertebrae suffered the endless jouncing with less and less grace as the blown shocks on the R26's front swing-arm amplified every bump.

Back on the open road, the BMW crept back to maximum cruising speed, mercifully achieving the state speed limit. Bike and rider bobbed down the road as one, vibrating and flapping into a dull blur of pain and somnambulism.

Eventually, East Montpelier hove into view, another 45-mph town.

Route 2 branched off to the right, heading East along the filmy Winooski River. The countryside shifted toward the rural end of the civilization spectrum. A few tiny farms swept by, first on one side of the road, then on the other. A new hardware store, unconnected to any population center, went past on the left.

Then the road crossed the meandering Winooski and the old road-house-from-farm-house came into view, and Barnaby sighed with relief. The motorcycle sighed, too, and began to buck and snort as he pulled into Chez Marie's gravel parking area. When he reached for the key to shut off the engine, it ran out of gas and died.

Shit, thought Barnaby, but his attention turned to the prospect of sitting on something that didn't pound his flabby body into mush. He pried himself off the unforgiving saddle, which was probably designed by the Reich, and half waddled, half staggered up the wooden steps into the bar.

Chez Marie was red on the outside and red on the inside, but it was a lot dimmer inside. Squinting, Barnaby went straight to the nearest table and collapsed into a chair. The bar looked the same as it had 50 years ago, and it still smelled of stale beer and cigarettes, with a subtle fruity finish of vomit.

Two locals sat at the bar, hunched over their drinks, not talking. The bartender was a young woman, probably from the college, with a chunky

look and a distant demeanor. She steadfastly ignored Barnaby's presence until he waved repeatedly and started to get up.

"Ya want?" she called from the bar.

"Beer," Barnaby called back. The two drinkers at the bar turned slowly, gave him a brief country stink-eye, and returned to their drinks.

"Brand?" the bartender called.

"Tap," said Barnaby. "Whatever."

A minute later the bartender plunked a thick glass mug of beer on the table and held out her hand. "No tabs," she said.

Barnaby fished out a few dollars and she took them without offering change.

What the hell, he thought, addressing the beer. It was cold and watery and did a good job clearing the dust and bugs from his mouth and throat. Half-way through the mug, he rested his head on the table, just for a second, and began snoring.



"Hey, buddy," Ernie said. He towered over the squashed elderly hippie sleeping on table 6. Ernie's perfectly bald head gleamed with sweat and kitchen grease, and big stringy muscles rippled beneath his sleeveless undershirt. His skin was covered with tattoos and leathery wrinkles, devoid of even a single cell of fat.

The hippie mumbled and settled deeper into the vinyl tablecloth.

"Buddy," Ernie said, louder. "Time to move on. We're closing. Get up, son."

Barnaby roused and looked around at the dim, bleary interior of Chez Marie. A seven-foot giant stood over him, gently shaking Barnaby's shoulder. His cheek felt sticky where it had lain on the table in a puddle of beer-drool. Ernie continued shaking him.

"OK, man," said Barnaby. "What's going on?"

"You passed out," said Ernie. "Time to pack it in. Let's go outside."

"What time is it?"

"Ten. We're closing. You got a ride?"

Barnaby scratched his head. "Yeah, I'm on a bike."

"You got a headlight?"

"It's a motorcycle."

“Can you stand up?”

That seemed like a good question, so Barnaby stood up. Though still half asleep, he felt a whole lot better. “Yeah, I’m OK.”

Ernie took his arm and eased him firmly toward the door. Barnaby sensed that Ernie’s grip could have been much firmer if it needed to be.

Ernie! This really was Ernie the cook. Barnaby twisted around to look at the cook’s face. *My god, Ernie must be 100 years old!* Ernie was the cook when Chez Marie first opened in 1966, already wizened and wiry, surely at least in his forties back then.

“Ernie?” he said, as they squeezed awkwardly through the front door. “Zat really you?”

Ernie stabilized Barnaby on the porch and stared at him with new interest. “I know you?”

“Sort of. I was at the college. Came here a lot in the sixties. I can’t believe you’re still here.”

“Why the hell not? It’s a good job.”

“But you must be—” he paused. Maybe Ernie didn’t like being thought of as elderly. Couldn’t blame him for that.

Ernie looked down at Barnaby’s big cloud of frizzy hair and smiled. “I’m 84 years old, if that’s what you’re worrying about.”

“Well, no, I wasn’t worried. Just surprised to see you after all these years. Seems like old times.”

Ernie guided Barnaby down the wooden steps. “Not to me,” he said. “Where’s your bike?”

Barnaby pointed at the BMW, the only motorcycle anywhere in sight. It was slumped over precariously on the side stand.

“I’m not drunk,” said Barnaby, trying to pull away from Ernie’s grip. “I’m just tired. Been riding all day.”

“That’s nice,” said Ernie, releasing Barnaby’s arm.

There was a crash behind them, around the corner of the bar. Ernie looked over his shoulder. Another crash, and a stocky blond-haired man staggered out of the gloom into the parking lot floodlights. He wore a torn plaid shirt and jeans, and there was a big bruise under one eye.

“You sunnuva bitch!” he slurred, and continued staggering toward Ernie, who straightened up and turned to face him.

“Dave, I’ve told you before, we don’t tolerate no drunks. Now get on

home and see how Eleanor's doing." He turned back to Barnaby. "Have a nice night," he said, and headed back to the bar.

Dave, undaunted, or perhaps inspired, by Ernie's extraordinary stature, had picked up a large scrap of wood and was poking at Ernie erratically, like a dim-witted sword-fighter. Ernie ignored him and mounted the steps.

Uttering a guttural wheeze, Dave wound up and swung the two-by-four with all his might against Ernie's broad back. The wood splintered, and Ernie staggered to his knees with a grunt.

"You ain't, ain't, fuckin' bastard, alla time, g'dammit," cried Dave. His curses faded as he lost track of the specifics.

Ernie stood up and walked slowly back down the porch steps, apparently unfazed by the two-by-four. "You shouldn't do that kind of thing," he said, in a low calm voice. Dave danced around with some difficulty, waving his fists like a cartoon pugilist, and spluttered incoherent threat fragments.

Ernie walked swiftly up to Dave and put his huge hand on Dave's head. His fingers wrapped around the skull like the thing from *Alien*. Dave's eyes went wide. He started to yell another string of besotted cursing, but went silent when Ernie picked him up off the ground, palming his head like a basketball, and effortlessly flung him through the air onto a nearby car.

Dave flopped to the ground and lay still for a minute. Then his remaining faculties rebooted and he got up and lurched away into the shadows, muttering and coughing.

Barnaby stared at Ernie in awe. Ernie turned when he reached the front door and gave a kind of helpless shrug. "Kids," he said.

Barnaby kicked frantically at the starter lever for a while, and then remembered the motorcycle was out of gas. He considered going back inside to bum a cupful from someone, but Ernie might not want to see him again just yet. Perhaps after another 50 years.

So Barnaby set off on foot to the college. It was not far, and the summer night was clear and less humid than usual. The Winooski was alive with chirping, chugging, and harrumphing frogs, and the fields buzzed with crickets and katydids.

Away from the glare of Chez Marie, fireflies floated a few feet above the grass. The sky was moonless and the Milky Way arched overhead. It was good to be walking, and good to be almost home.



The official entrance to campus was off Route 2 on 214, but Barnaby remembered a shortcut through the trees that led up onto a manicured hillside below the Manor House. As he clambered through the underbrush, he could hear faint voices ahead. When he eventually broke out of the bushes onto the wide front lawn, he could just make out a dark huddle of people, faintly illuminated by starlight.

Four or five students were sitting in the grass, laughing and giggling. There were a few wine bottles and beer cans, and one of them was passing a joint. When they saw Barnaby, a voice said, “Shit! Cool it! It’s a nark.”

“No it’s not,” said a girl. “There aren’t any narks around here.”

“Especially in the middle of the night,” said another.

“You wanna toke?”

Barnaby was wide awake again, and welcomed the invitation. He drew the hot smoke deep into his lungs, and felt it burn his throat. The pungent smell of pot triggered his rhinoccephalon, and his brain flooded with rich 50-year-old memories of losing consciousness elaborately, from a variety of causes, mostly chemical.

“This is some seriously good shit,” he said, by way of thanks.

“Bet your ass,” someone replied.

The pot was much stronger than Barnaby remembered. Perhaps the botanical prowess of local growers had improved. “This,” he said.

The Milky Way had turned blue, and he lay back on the grass to admire it. The kids continued chattering in a language Barnaby knew instinctively was English, but the phonemes no longer worked. “If,” he said.

Someone farted and someone else laughed. The grass prickled on his neck. His brain floated in dark soft swells.

“You got a place?” said a voice.

Barnaby squinted into the darkness.

“You can crash up here,” someone said.

“Wow,” said Barnaby.

A couple of the kids led him through the darkness into a building. The lights were all off, but they found him a couch, and he stretched out on it gratefully, luxuriating in extraordinarily soft supple upholstery. The building was silent, so the exterior symphony of bugs and amphibians filled his ears with endless variations.



“Sir?” A woman’s voice, sounding very concerned.

“Eh?” said Barnaby, scrunching deeper into the couch.

“Sir?” she repeated. “Sir, you can’t sleep here.”

“Huh?”

“The meeting’s about to start. Are you in the conference?”

Barnaby sat up. He was surrounded by folding chairs. His couch was at the front of a large living room, across from a big stone fireplace with fancy woodwork. A painting of an English country scene hung above the wide mantel. A lectern had been placed on the hearth, facing him.

A nicely dressed woman stood over him, her face wrinkled with worry. She tugged at his sleeve. “We have to get the room ready,” she said. “You’re not a speaker, are you? We have to move the couch.”

Gradually Barnaby comprehended what was going on, and let the woman guide him out of the big room into a kind of library or office. It seemed familiar. This might have been the room where he had his first admissions interview.

Although the pot had mostly worn off, the thought of spending the night conked out in the middle of the Manor House was unsettling. He looked down at his wrinkly, grass-stained clothes. He could smell a little pot, some gasoline, and a lively streak of old sweat. If he could smell it himself, others would probably be overwhelmed.

The woman had rushed out of the room, but he could hear several other people rushing around as well. He poked his head out of the library, and another woman hurrying down the hall almost crashed into him with a cartload of teacups.

“Oh my god!” she exclaimed. “I’m so, so sorry. We’re late for the last session. They’ll all be arriving any minute now.”

“No problem,” said Barnaby, shrinking back and holding his arms tightly to his sides.

The woman wheeled on down the hall. “Oh my goodness,” she said, to no-one in particular.

True enough, within only a minute or two people began appearing in the hallway, chatting and laughing on their way to the last session, whatever that was. Barnaby kept well back from the door and watched a parade of well-dressed women go by, mostly in their forties and fifties, and

a few men, a few people who seemed quite old, but all dressed like they were going to church. Except that in Plainfield, church, if any, usually meant little more than clean overalls.

The commotion lasted ten or fifteen minutes, during which Barnaby worried about being discovered, being asked to leave, or being smelled.

Another unfamiliar woman darted into the library. "Are you coming? We're about to start."

Barnaby looked down at his disheveled clothing and shrugged. "I'm not really—"

"Do you need to freshen up? There's a lavatory just through there," she said.

"Oh. Yes. I could use that. My car broke down—"

"I could probably find you a shirt."

"Could you? That would be terrific. I'll make it quick." The woman ran out before he finished speaking. A constant chatter came from the living room. The last session was about to start.

Barnaby cleaned up as best he could, executing a classic sponge bath in record time. He was brushing the grass from his hair and pants when the woman knocked on the door and handed him a bright red Vermont shirt. It was too big, but most shirts were too small, so Barnaby was relieved. He deposited his own shirt in the wastebasket.

He was about half-way down the hall away from the living room when yet another busy, friendly woman encountered him. "Oh, no, it's this way," she said, trying to turn him around.

"No, you see—" he began, but she shushed him and leaned very close as if to tell him a secret.

"We can't talk. It's starting."

"But—"

Barnaby gave up and allowed himself to be propelled back down the hall to the living room, which was now filled to capacity with conference goers. A woman wearing a flower hat was at the podium.

"Ah, yes!" she said. "And here he is now."

The crowd turned and stared as Barnaby lurched into the room with his attendant. They didn't seem to react to his wrinkly grass-stained bluejeans and ill-fitting plaid shirt, but Barnaby felt painfully out of place. *Who the hell do they think I am?*

He stood dumbly staring at the crowd until the woman at the lectern began waving at him. “Come on,” she called. “Don’t be shy!” She emitted a gay little twitter and the crowd chuckled.

He started to explain that he wasn’t the person they thought, but the crowd was applauding now, and his mumbled protest went unheard. His handler was pushing him again, down the narrow aisle between row after row of folding chairs filled with nicely dressed audience members.

Suddenly he was standing behind the lectern, looking out at a sea of smiling faces. Some people were holding smart phones to take snapshots or videos. Cameras and camcorders stood on tripods at the back of the room. The women in the front row were gazing at him in what looked a lot like fawning bedazzlement.

What in god’s name am I supposed to say?

The woman in the flower hat said, “So now, without further ado, allow me to present Mr. Mortimer. Mr. Barnaby Mortimer!”

Barnaby drew back, a look of shock splayed across his puffy face; beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. Shakily, he pulled the goose-neck microphone closer and stepped up against the lectern.

“Hello,” he said, uncertainly.

The crowd muttered “hello” in response.

“Well,” he said.

The crowd hushed.

“Um—”

They waited.

He leaned closer to the mic. “A funny thing happened on the way here today.”

The crowd erupted in gales of appreciative laughter that went on and on.

In the parking lot at Chez Marie, the side-stand of an old BMW sank deeper into the loose gravel, and the ancient motorcycle slowly toppled over onto the ground.