A Place Not on the Map

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Abstract

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Journalism, Sr.

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Cal watched the sky across the creek, and out further across the fields, as the evening came, as it had already come to his side of the creek. Then he turned and slowly climbed the bank, and slid into his car for the drive back into the city. Passing between the cement pillars of the underpass, he pulled onto the highway.

The trip back had become familiar to Calvin Morton. It was strange, he thought, how it wouldn’t really have mattered if he drove along the same streets each time he returned from the creek. He could have taken the street two blocks north, or five south, and have stayed on the same street. He pulled into the lot behind the high-rise brick apartments. Maybe, he hoped, she had already left. He went in the back entrance and climbed the six flights leading to apartment 613. “Home,” he thought with a slight twist of his usually straight lips.

“Calvin Morton, where have you been?” The woman waiting inside when he opened the door seemed to tower above Calvin’s frail frame, though she was no taller than he. “Calvin, you know that Tuesday is my bridge night and you’re supposed to be here to watch after Tina”

Yes, I know, Calvin thought. Damned dog. “But I told you I had to work late, Victoria, and. . . .”

“Calvin, I know you weren’t at the office because I called Mr. Roper over an hour ago and he said you had done what had to be done and left.”

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"But there was a lot of traffic when I. . . ."

"I'm not going to bother arguing about it, Calvin, because I have to get ready. The girls will be here by eight to pick me up."

Thank God, Calvin almost said aloud. He barely heard his wife's warning as she huffed off to the bedroom—"But remember this, Calvin. Be here tomorrow night or you won't hear the last of it! There's a new exhibit I just couldn't miss."

"Yes, Victoria," he replied without conscious effort.

He sat near the window, staring out at the lights that lined the street six stories below, when his wife came out of the bedroom. "Victoria, I've been thinking," he said, picking up the paper lying beside his chair.

"What kind of ignorant scheme is it this time?" Victoria demanded, straightening her hat with the huge orange blossoms. Calvin hated the hat; it made her head look like it was in bloom, he thought. She knew he hated it; that was why she wore it.

Cal realized he shouldn't bring up the subject on his mind, but he continued. "In tonight's paper, here in the ad section. . . ." He hesitated. "There's a fellow in Liberty Center who wants an experienced accountant and I thought maybe I'd drive over to. . . ."

"Liberty Center!" his wife shouted. "Where is Liberty Center?"

"I was looking on the map. Here it is," Cal said, holding the map for his wife to see and pointing to a tiny dot. "It's about a hundred and twenty or so miles south and maybe Sunday we could. . . ."

"Calvin Morton, you must be out of your mind if you ever expect me to. . . . Why, in a burg like that I would go completely. . . . Calvin, just because you came from some hick town that isn't even on the map doesn't mean I did!"

"But dear, it wouldn't hurt to look. You yourself say I'm not getting anywhere under Mr. Roper." He huddled back in his chair as Victoria stomped across the carpet and placed her broad frame directly in front of him.

"Calvin," she said, dropping her voice to its softest tone, "if you want to think about Liberty Center it's all right with me." Then, as Cal expected, as she always did, she erupted.
"But you're not going there! Honestly," she continued, "it's barely on the map!" She shook an accusing finger at Calvin.

"Well," he asked, "what's wrong with a place not on the map?"

"Calvin, are you talking ba— . . . ?" The doorbell rang and the red-faced woman turned to answer it. "I don't even want to discuss it, Calvin." She pulled on her coat and went out. Calvin could hear the women as they waited for the elevator. "Liberty Center?" he heard a muffled voice shriek, followed by laughter, and finally silence.

Calvin sat quietly, fingering the map he still held and staring at the dot. Suddenly he rose and flung the map onto the floor. He stared at it for a moment more, then slipped quietly into the bedroom.

Calvin did not hear his wife when she returned, and he was unaware of her presence until he heard her voice in the morning. "Calvin, get up. The lock is broken. I could barely get in last night and I want you to fix it before you go to work. Now get up." She shoved him and he rolled to his feet, dressed and stumbled out of the room.

The dim glow from the street lamps below was the only light in the apartment. Cal felt his way into the kitchen and switched on the light. He looked at the clock hanging above the stove. "5:30." He put two sandwiches into a paper bag and started to make coffee, but shut off the light, took his coat and left, ignoring the sticking lock.

Though the streets in the early morning were nearly deserted, Cal drove slowly. Near the edge of the city he turned onto the gravel road that led to the creek, slowing as he neared the underpass. It was, to him, deadly looking. "A person'd get killed if he hit those pillars," he said to himself.

Calvin crossed the rise beyond the underpass and, a mile further, pulled off the road. Night insects were still sounding as he walked to the bank of the creek. "Two hours till work." He looked at his watch with satisfaction. Ahead of him, across the creek, the trees were still dark shadows on the horizon, but behind him, and on the other side of the city, there was light, or promise of light.

"Two hours." He sat on the mossy bank, satisfied in his early escape from Victoria and the city. The creek was a
different world. Calvin watched as the new light crept over the top of the city behind him and filtered through the trees that lied the banks. The day came like a cat, stretching, opening its eyes slowly and leaving pools of shadow in the hollows. It was the best time of the day, Calvin thought—it and evening, when he could be there to see, coming and going, each day that never was before. The growing light stretched the horizon farther away, and he thought of other times. “Wind, clouds, and the delicate curve of the world, stretching so far away, and the wind moving as far as the eye can reach.” He remembered the words from his college literature class, and he told them to the creek.

The day came, and when Calvin looked at his watch again it said he had to return to the city. He stood up and looked at the grassy fields across the creek, then forced himself to his car.

The streets, crowded with traffic, slowed him, and he heard the eight o'clock whistle as he drove into the office parking lot.

“Good morning, Morton,” Cal’s boss greeted him as he hurried into the office. “Nice to see you almost made it on time today.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Roper, I got caught in traffic.”

“Well, it’s your paycheck that suffers, not mine.” Mr. Roper turned to leave. “Morton, you’re assigned to work on the Goodwell file today, so young Ashbaugh will supervise instead of Stoffman.” Cal cringed visibly.

“Yes sir, I’ll check with him right away.”

“Damned incompetent drop-outs,” he heard his boss mutter as he walked away. Cal remembered what Mr. Roper had told him when he had applied for a promotion a month earlier. “Morton,” he had said, “we need men with talent—workers, college men. We can use you where you’re at but that’s all.” Cal had been angered, and hurt. He had had almost three years of college before joining the Navy in the war. When he discussed it with his wife she laughed at him. “Roper knows his business,” she said. “He gives you just what you deserve.” Roper, that damn tyrant! And he himself with not even his last years of high school.

Cal ate his sack lunch at noon and continued to add figures. As the five o’clock whistle at the factory down the
street sounded, he finished and hurried from the office. Rain was falling—that luminous rain that catches the light and builds cities of illusion.

Traffic was even heavier than in the morning, and it was nearly six when Cal reached the turn-off leading to the creek. He passed between the concrete pillars, drove the straight mile of gravel and pulled his car off the road. The rain—it was more a mist—was still falling, but he trudged to the bank and took shelter under the canopy of a huge oak. “Today,” he thought, “there’s not even any sun here.”

The hours melted away in the rivulets that ran down the bank and into the creek. Cal sat in the spreading darkness, staring at the grassy fields on the other side shifting freely as the wind danced across them, until they were hidden by night. He thought of his wife’s reaction to his suggestion the night before, and of Mr. Roper, and of the day—eternal, monotonous day.

“Between her and him there’s no way to escape. No way at. . . .” Cal rose slowly from beneath the oak, remembering the thoughts he had each time he passed beneath the tracks—between those concrete pillars. He climbed the bank, ignoring the mud that splashed at his legs and clung to his shoes. He ground the car to a start and slipped it into gear. Escape—there all the time, only a mile away.

Gripping the wheel, Cal nudged the accelerator. Through the mist he could see the rise and he eased the car toward the right ditch, until it was slashing the weeds on the shoulder. He went into the rise, and the speedometer said 85. Almost enough! When he reached the peak, his foot was to the floor. For once Victoria would not decide his fate. The headlights cut through the mist to the pillars an eighth of a mile away. He swung the car further toward the shoulder and the wheels plowed across the weeds. Now a hundred feet, fifty. . . .

Calvin shuddered and jerked the wheel to the left. The car skidded into the center of the road and between the pillars. A rear fender struck the concrete a glancing blow and the car slid to a stop beyond the underpass.

Calvin shook uncontrollably. “Oh God,” he sobbed, “they wouldn’t even let me do that.” He started the damaged machine and drove toward the city, slowly, to face the wrath of Victoria.