

The Gift of Oblivion

The Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library in Old Lyme, Connecticut was remodeled about ten years ago, and this fact still remains a sore spot among many of the elder generation in town. The three modest rooms of books and shelves, where a stone fireplace once grew out of the interior, and was often blazing in the middle of winter—all of this, of the original, primary design, has been replaced. There was a time the library provided refuge for the old folks, those who still got out, to gather and talk, sit or nap by the fire, read the morning copy of *The Day*, watch the snow fall. And as it fell, discuss other fires, other snowfalls, other years. All gone.

Today things are different. Today, the library is what all small towns and the traditionalists in them fear most. The place has become a Community Media Center, complete with waiting lists for the 15-minute and hour-long terminals, where the internet and 'Sign-Out-A-Movie' sections are busier than the Reference Department. There is a sense of shame to the place, and as a visitor one notices this even if he were too young to remember what things were like in the old days. Walking in, I looked at the computers and thought of them as smirking children, sitting in dubious awe of the grandfather clock, donated by the Noyes Family Trust, chiming the hours in the main atrium.

Four card catalogues gather mildew in the dank basement.

'No one seems to sign books out anymore,' you can hear the voices whisper, drowned out by the thousand bells and whistles of those darn internets. 'You'll never catch me on one of those things,' they say.

Toward the rear of the main room one finds a heavy, wooden door. This door leads to a smallish room compared to the others, and it is the only room that has survived the ravages of progress and modernity. It is a cloister of history. What surrounds is pure foolishness.

The library today boasts eight huge rooms, along with a circulation of over one hundred magazines, seventeen newspapers, and a children's annex complete with its own separate room for readings and gatherings. And in the middle of all of this, toward the rear of the main room, the heavy silence of the heavy wooden door remains, quiet as an old witness to an old crime. Outside this door, affixed to the wall, is a plaque. Inscribed on the plaque is a dedication to the room and the books that repose there. When this door is opened, one is brought into a space inspiring reverence and awe. This door leads to the Old Lyme repository of town archives and historical records.

The Historical Archives Room is the only vestige of the "old library." When I first saw the room, still framed in the original oak molding, and this giving the room an aged, sacred quality, I had the feeling I was entering a church, and

rightfully so. For inside the wooden frame rested an enormous table of such immense weight, and of the deepest mahogany, one could imagine the Knights Templar themselves gathering around its thick trunks to discuss secret ways of keeping their ways secret. It, too, had been a gift of the Noyes Trust.

Once owned by Governor Baldwin himself, and prior to him, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, it was hard to believe the table wasn't kept in a museum. But then, considering the nature of this forgotten room, I realized, for all intents and purposes, it was.

The books that strained to hold their bindings against the cruel inevitabilities of time and carbon dioxide lined the heavy oaken bookshelves on all four walls. The walls themselves were invisible. Or rather, hidden. The bookcases covered every available space the windows and zoning commission would allow. Only the thermostat, a fire alarm, and two light switches shared wall space with the bookshelves, the quiet and heavy resting place of the long-lost, long-forgotten tomes.

That Friday I found the Historical Archives Room empty and stale as, I imagined, it had been since the remodeling took place nearly a decade ago. The air inside the room was musty and flat. The entire space was cool. Outside, Japanese maples filtered afternoon sun through the windows in a red glaze. Late-summer light bathed the books in pink pastels, and all along the wooden shelves, and everywhere filled the space. Walking into the rosy light swimming around that room was like immersing oneself in a bowl of chamomile tea, or, more aptly, the ambient hue of some distant, forgotten dream.

Well-lit by the pink leaf-light, yet the room is cool. Muted and still, the air in the room lays suspended, hanging, and the space holds a feeling of permanence and immobility. Nothing stirs. Only the mysterious form of a woman moves past the open doorway, appearing only for an instant, and then she is gone.

This form turns out to be the Circulation Coordinator, an ancient librarian well into her ninth decade of spinsterhood, whose tenure has also survived the leap from the old library. Walking back and forth past the room, peeking in, she's crossed to and fro by the open door, and out the corner of my eye I would at first only catch a glimpse of her. But it wasn't her, initially, not the woman I was seeing at a sidelong glance. It was the space she'd vacated, the empty air still forming her shape in the wake of her sudden disappearances. The figure was there, and I would lift my head to see, and then the figure is gone. This went on as I perused the shelves in that cool room, and it happened so instantaneously, and with such a momentary distraction, I was not certain, at first, that it wasn't a trick of the light I was seeing. At last, when I did catch her eye, she stopped, then approached, slowly, and crossed through the open threshold of the doorway and into the ambient room.

“My hell pew,” she says to me. And I am perplexed for a second until I realize she’s said... “May I help you?”

...and I smiled. “CIRC” was pinned to her lavender lapel... Then she asked if “everything was alright, dear?”

...I thanked her. “Yes, ma’am. Yes, I’m fine. I’m looking for some information on my house, is all.”

And this was a mistake. For like the Historical Archives Room of the Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and the books lining its shelves, Elizabeth Tashjian, Circulation Coordinator, had apparently been waiting for years for someone to come by and open the door to her memory—another kind of disused, forgotten, and mildewed room. I found out she was also the unofficial town historian—a title she had bestowed upon herself.

And also that she was starved for attention.

When I told her I needed some information on the farmhouse, I made her day. Her eyes opened wide, she put on her reading glasses as a wry grin passed over the lines of her face, and then Elizabeth Tashjian, old softie one minute, old stuck-in-the-mud the next, sallied those old bones of hers right through that room and shook my hand. I might as well have asked her to tell me a little something about her grandchildren. And so it happened that I made my second friend in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

She said she was sure, “just *sure* we were going to have the grandest of times...searching for the books we’d need...to find out all we want to know, and more, about...now, where did you say you lived?”

I told her.

And then something happened. “Do you live in the—? The one with the root—? You don’t mean the one with the *rootcellar*, do you? Across from Jim Downs? Not the *McGoff* House?”

“Why yes!” I said. “As a matter of fact, yes, that’s right! And that’s interesting, because it was Jim Downs who—”

And then the old stuck-in-the-mud got stuck in the mud.

The woman rose up from her chair, crossed the room, and closed the heavy door. Returning, she sat down next to me, sidled up close, and looked around for spies. We sat alone in a space the size of a small dining room, with all doors and windows closed, and yet her shifty eyes made sure no one was hiding behind the fire extinguisher. No one just outside the window. She cased the joint. When she

was assured the room wasn't wiretapped, she motioned me closer, and leaned into my ear.

"I know who you are," she whispered.

"You do?"

She nodded at me conspiratorially. I shook my head.

"Who am I?"

"You're the one who bought the McGoff House. You're the one who's planning to convert the farmhouse and tear up the root cellar."

I was speechless. Oblivious. I was lost. And spied on by Old Lyme's gossiping minions. My comings and goings had been kept track of since the day I'd moved in. My story had been told by the locals for weeks, their eyes moving over me as the trucks and contractors came and went. Unknown others spying on me at the Town Hall applying for a demolition permit. Watching me at the coffee shop with my laptop writing, looking over architectural sketches composing the story of my house, landscape renderings, zoning permits. Living, listening watchers. Nameless, faceless others. Telling my story. Looking. Listening. Reading.

As for me, I could say nothing. Nothing at all. And so I sat. Still. Silent. And in the course of my speechlessness I was told—through an extravagant tour through time and memory— Elizabeth Tashjian's piece of the story.

"Mr. Stockwell, I know you've been asking questions about your new property. I know this because that old house has a long and storied history around here."

"I know. That's why I—"

"And that's why we'd best get a few things straight first.

"I don't know how much you know, Mr. Stockwell, or how much Jim Downs has been telling you about your farmhouse and the foundation beneath it. Or even this little town of ours for that matter..."

"Well, before I—well, that is...He told me—"

"...but there is a piece of information that even Jim Downs may not be aware of. The piece about that outbuilding you have. The one with the deep stone basement."

"Well, he told me—"

“If he told you anything, you must know by now never to disturb the stones.”

* * *

It was a place my first neighbor called a “rut cellar.”

Jim Downs looked like the guy you’d imagine tapping sap from the sugar maples deep in the Robert Frost woods. When you see him, the first thing you notice is that he’s wearing the clothes on page 41 of last Autumn’s L.L. Bean catalogue. The red and black plaid wool cap. The wool shirt frayed at the wrist. The overalls, the rubber boots. Suspenders hanging about his haunches. And all of this in the middle of summer. Old Jim was ninety-seven years old, and he was the darndest fool Old Lyme, Connecticut ever produced. A crotchety old crank, yet there was something soft and grandfatherly about Old Jim. He had the spry wink of Saint Nick, but somehow managed to keep quiet most of the time. Few words.

...That August, standing in the Historical Archives Room, I will learn it was a big deal he came through the fence that day at all. Turns out he hadn’t socialized in years.

“He tended to keep to himself, since Eleanor died,” Elizabeth Tashjian will tell me. “At his age, it really does him good to have someone across the way.”

And it is then, on that Friday morning, while being instructed by Elizabeth Tashjian, that I will find myself alone with the truth. I will have come to the end of the story, the final piece settling into place, with Jim Downs’s prologue still fresh in mind. And then, too, I will recall the first day I met him...

“It’s a *rut* cellar!” he said over the falling fence that day. And for a moment, watching that lanky, shrivel-faced New Englander leaning precariously on the rotted posts, barely held together somehow, I thought he was going to say: “Good fences make good neighbors.”

“Come again?”

Old Jim Downs was a schist of slate thrust up from the angry frost-heaves of a half-dozen decades of cold. A frozen stone, deep in the grooves of his face one could trace the empire of a thousand Nor’ Easters. Old blood. A rugged man, yet he moved in a jangling way, as though no hinge or joint—no knee, wrist, ankle or neck bone—were fastened quite tight enough. He jerked and jabbed around his steps, and made his way, piece by piece, across his lawn, to talk to his new neighbor.

“I say it’s a *rut* cellar, I said.”

I came to find my house was built on a foundation unlike any other, this side of the Four Mile River. Mine was the only house built on the remains of a root cellar. And it turns out a root cellar is something which is of great interest among the townsfolk.

A root cellar is where the first inhabitants of the area had found the need to bury things, save things.

What they needed buried, saved, and stored went beyond preserves and seeds. It turns out there was a lot of history to the farmhouse I had moved into.

People in those days, in this place, built musket holes into the foundations of their cellars. Fear of the savage it was, and later, fear of the British. But always fear of God. Not unlike bomb shelters Americans would build in the 1950's and 1960's, these panic rooms could hold rations for weeks, even months. The basements were constructed so that the natural insulation of the earth kept the dried striper fresh, and the oats dry and cool. Some say a young woman in trouble would have used these subterranean cellars to dispose of the products of conception, burying them in a dark corner.

But none of this I knew at this point. Only waited to learn, as the old man parceled his way across my back yard, bringing with him his pieces of the story, just like this old woman now bringing along her own notions, as well.

* * *

“Never disturb the stones’? The stones of the cellar? Elizabeth, what do you mean?”

...Mrs. Tashjian had become “Elizabeth” when it was discovered her youngest grandchild and I share the same first name...

“David, the McGoff House has been a part of the history of this town for over three hundred years. It was built for Simon McGoff—Jim Downs’s ancestor—by King Charles the First, in 1649. Now Jim Downs’s great-great-great—(she pauses to collect his parentage)—great-*great*-grandfather—I think that’s right. Now, he was a sentry. A sentry in the Wars. The *Indian Wars*, now. And *his* name was *James* McGoff. Son of Simon. And he was a one. A one not like any before.

“Now, in 1667 James McGoff joined the ranks of His Majesty’s Guard at seventeen years of age and left, left the estate—which originally included the house you now live in, David. Nine years later, he come back from the Wars with an Indian child. A mixed-breed boy name of James —James number Two—and also some other things.

“By 1676, at the age of twenty-six, James McGoff—well, James McGoff had already seen more blood than any of us ought to. It wasn’t...wasn’t natural, you see. And by then he was alone. His parents were dead, and he’d had a heathen union with a Pequot squaw, and now when he did return the folks, neighbors and the like—well, they scattered. Just stopped. Stopped coming around. Seems the young man had taken some things back with him from those Wars, along with the child, his half-Pequot son. And as the legend goes, some of those things weren’t natural. People around here believe—”

And now the old gossip hears a call for assistance at the Reference Desk. She turns to go. “I’ll check up. Check up on you later,” she says. “But first. Well, here...let me give you this...”

And Elizabeth rises again into the ambient room and moves to a corner bookcase. She removes a volume, leathered and cracking, and places it on the table in front of me. “Here,” she says. “Read about Fidelia Field, and her story about Papoose Ledge.” She taps the book with a gnarled finger, and the dust rises in motes and falls...

Tap, tap.

...and rises again.

“That’s where the story starts.”

I picked up the book. *Reports of the American Museum of Natural History, 1909, Volume III*. It was heavy for its size—roughly heavy as a pair of bricks—and cornered with brass cornerkeepers. It had been lined and bound with brass rivets by the hand of some ancient booksmith. It could have been the log from a slave ship, or a court reporter’s journal, or even a lost Folio of the Bard’s. And an odd thought fills the air in the room for the first time. And blends with the pastel light and rising dust. This dusty book holds a piece of the story, too.

“Jim Downs’s great-grand-mother is mentioned here. And I want you to read about her before we go on. Now I’ll be right back to check on you. Here. Page 218.” And with that the librarian, now turn-of-the-century schoolteacher, crosses the one-room schoolhouse she’s conjured. And then she is out the door.

I opened the book (“Reserve Only”) and got started. The dust was everywhere.

* * *

“A root cellar, huh?” I returned over the fence, through which my first neighbor was already negotiating his jumbled old bones.

“Ay-yuh. A *rut* cellar,” he said. “It is.”

Jim Downs made his way across the stringy lawn and shook my hand. Standing there in the back yard near the place I planned for a garden, we looked at my house. Our eyes moved over the dried paint, the bird’s nest and rot along the roof line; we looked at the rusty gutters, the leaning gables, the deck *pulling* from the south side, and somehow with him there the damage on the house looked worse. I switched our attention back to the stone steps leading down to the cellar. I pointed at them, and Jim Downs squinted in the sun.

He’d been curious to meet the new owner of the house, a house he said had once been in his family, albeit long, long before he was born...

“She survived the hurr’cane of thirty-eight. She’ll make it through worse.”

...but for Jim Downs, his real interest was in that basement of mine. The root cellar.

He decided to come with me. And let me tell you, Jim Downs, my first neighbor in Old Lyme, at ninety-seven years old could make his way down a rock stairwell without a problem. The guy was *ninety-seven*, yet he was sure-footed as I. I went first, into the darkness, but old Jim Downs was right behind me. And as the line of daylight was crossed, the shadows swallowed us both as equals. And down we went.

* * *

The heavy book lay on the table in front of me. Page 218 contained a transcription from Gladys Tantaquidgeon, a Mohegan medicine woman, who, at one hundred and six, recalled a story told to her by Fidelia Field, her “spiritual grandmother.” It read:

There was a Mohegan who went across Long Island and took a wife from one of the tribes there. After some time, he tired of her and came home. Soon after she had a child. She said to herself, ‘My child’s father has left me to take care of him. I cannot do it alone.’ So she made ready for a journey and set out for Mohegan country across the Sound to look for her husband.

“She found him at Mohegan and said to him, ‘You must take care of me and the child.’ But he paid no attention to her. Then she went down to where there was a steep sloping rock not far from the river. Standing on the top of this slope, she took her child in one hand and grasped its head with the other. Then she twisted the head and it came off, blood flowing down the rocks.

“The woman cast the head down, and the body she threw farther out. Where the head fell there remained a splotch of blood, and where the body struck, there was left an imprint stained upon the rock in the shape of a child. That is the story.

The blood is there yet and it tells of her deed when she is gone.

The phantom came through the door.

“But it isn’t true. The Reports of the *AMNH* are a white man’s version, an alteration of the original Fidelia Field transcription, intended to reveal the savagery of the Indian, and all that. *Some* of the story is true. Not the part about the father being Mohegan. Certainly not the part about him being a white man, a soldier no less. And definitely not the part about the killing of the baby. The baby lived. My guess is you already know who he is.”

“James McGoff the Second? The Indian boy?”

“That’s right. James, he called him. He was a mixed-breed Pequot, or maybe Mohegan, and his mother had returned to Long Island to raise him among her people. But when the child was old enough to travel she brought him right back to the source. Back to his white blood. Across the Sound.

“You know, it’s always been this way. Bodies have a way of returning from whence they came. And blood will answer blood.”

* * *

The rocks the foundation was built with were big. Very big. They had to be. The weather along the southern New England coast is bitter and deadly in wintertime, and these farmhouses were constructed to withstand a lot. We looked at the rocks lining the walls of the stairwell.

“Big rocks,” the sure-footed farmer asserted. “Cold.”

I touched one. They’re all cold, I thought.

And down we go. To the bottom it’s about twenty-four or twenty-five steps from the bulkhead, a slow, angled pitch that slides through the earth like a lazy brook, and at about fifteen steps down we stop. At fifteen steps it is pitch black down here, the rocks feel like blocks of ice, and I want to make sure Jim Downs is all right.

“Jiffy,” he says.

We continue. We have to feel with the soles of our feet to touch the ridge of the next stone. It is slow going, and I wonder with every moment if this is a good idea. Should something happen to this old man in my cellar, I may never be able to explain what the hell he was doing down here in the first place. Continuing, I hear his slow, laborious breathing with every step and am reassured to feel his gnarled hand find my shoulder. For a moment I think he wants to return, but then in the darkness he says, "Here we are." And my foot touches, for once, something wooden, a pallet, and I know as we step into the pitch-black we are at the foot—the deepest stone set into the earth nearly three hundred and fifty years ago.

"Yes, this. This is it," he breathes. And yes, we have reached the blackest point of the stairwell, and set on the landing, where I have to reach around the stone wall in the dark. Through spider webs and what my imagination can conjure I reach along the cold, stacked stones to find the light switch on the wall. And then I find it and...

Light!

The place is an interior stone cube. Aside from patches in the floor where stones have been disturbed, exposing a loose, sandy soil, and the ceiling's overhead beams, all other surfaces are made of stacked rock. The stone lines the walls and one can only imagine the back-breaking labor that went into their construction.

Jim Downs sits on the bottom step—a grey, rectangular rock—and can go no farther. Barely, the light from the bulb illuminates his heaving chest. The air is thick and moist down here. He'd moved steadily down to the bottom step, but he tells me his back gets painful when stretched, so only I crouch down under the heavy beam to discover the foundation of my house.

"Tell me. Tell me what. What you see."

* * *

"'Blood'? 'Bodies will return from—'?"

"From whence they came. And blood will answer blood. David, the same goes for the story of James McGoff the Second. It is a story that ends where it begins. James the First, his father, the sentry in the Indian Wars, he came home in 1676, with this mixed-breed boy. He was just a baby, but he already had no future. No future, just isolation. Isolation and pain ahead of him. Poor child. He had no. No chance.

"He grew up an outcast. He spent day after day alone, and every night down in that root cellar of yours.

“It is a fact of history that for the folks in the area—or the Church of England, mind you—for the folks in the area to *officially* recognize him as his father’s son. It was unheard of. UnChristian and all that, you know. But James McGoff the First always did things his own way, and so as part a gesture of humanity and part one of rebellion, he gave the boy his name; he fed the boy, clothed him, allowed him to walk the property, and sleep down in the root cellar. Wrapped in an old hide for warmth, it is said, a tarpaulin stained with paint and age. But that was all.” The Circulation Coordinator pauses. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for the boy. Little James McGoff the Second.” She takes a deep breath, looks out the window, and starts up again.

* * *

“It’s like a rock room down here,” I tell him.

This place may be how you’d picture a coal mine, or an underground vault, but for me, it looks more like catacombs. Montessoro’s subterranean crypt. At first I thought I’d have to crawl my way through the cellar. But after passing under the doorjamb, I find myself standing up, and with some headroom under the wooden ceiling. The place is larger than I thought.

* * *

“According to the story, the boy took to saving things. Like he was collecting pieces of things down in that root cellar. Or, even, that he was...assembling something. But all of this is speculation and rumor. But it is based in fact to some degree. There are a number of documented sightings from respectable witnesses: those locals who’d pass the McGoff House would catch sight of the child now and again, and the word that’s come down to today is that the boy was sometimes seen carrying tin ration cans, one after another, down into the root cellar. Up and down, up and down he would go and come, like he was storing up for a long winter. Hording. Or building something down there. Who knows if this happened the dozen or so times it’s said to have happened, or maybe just once. Or not at all. After all, three hundred and fifty years is a long way to keep a story from going crooked.”

* * *

To the immediate left the boards of what could have been a workbench lay piled against a wall. In every nook and crevice cob webs glean bits of light from the one, bare bulb.

In two of the four corners, centuries of detritus have been swept into triangular piles. In one of these corners paint cans are stacked. I try to read what they say, but the dust and shadows coating them cover their labels. In the other a blanket

or tarpaulin is bunched in a messy stash. The remaining two corners have been swept relatively clear. In one a sump pump has been installed by the set tub, and the other is where the stone steps converge onto the landing. This last corner, only inches from where Jim Downs sits, chest heaving, serves as the lair for what must be an enormous black widow. I've seen these spider nests before. A milky tunnel lures prey down into the widow's waiting appetite. This is roughly where Jim Downs sits, straining his vision into the dark square. Because of the angle of the entrance, no daylight comes close to reaching the cellar. Only the light bulb does its best to present a picture of all that stone.

* * *

"So, Elizabeth, I'm not sure I'm following you. I don't mean to sound...stupid,...but what does this story have to do with me? Are we talking about some haunted Indian burial ground? Some an attachment the town has to the house or the McGoff's? Should my farmhouse be designated a historic site? I guess I just don't—"

The woman looked through the window at the Japanese maples. "The boy was alone, you see. He was left to roam the property never having a place or a people, just what he collected and brought down underground in those old cans. They were ration cans the sentries were given in His Majesty's Guard. James McGoff brought them back from King Philip's War. Some say they were full of pieces."

"Pieces?"

"Pieces."

"Pieces of what?"

"Not what. Who."

* * *

And the rocks are stacked in such precise detail. It's amazing to think all of this was done with bare hands and brute strength. Most of the individual stones forming the walls of the cellar are between one and two foot square; the largest rocks are so big they wouldn't fit through my front door. They must weigh three hundred pounds or more.

And as I walk around this cold space, I pass my hands over the surface of the rocks. They have been cut and fit snugly together; an expert eye must have been needed to know which stones would go where. And so many stones were used, my mind reeled at the planning that went on as they were chosen, and set into place. The walls are just over fifteen feet high, and the space forms the

footprint of the farmhouse; it's more or less thirty feet long by forty-five feet wide. There are hundreds of rocks I notice as I roam around in the semi-dark.

* * *

“Pieces’? You mean like pieces of a person?”

“David, three hundred and fifty years is a long way to keep a story from going crooked, but the Wampanoag Indian chief Metacom—the English called him King Philip—he was caught and killed in 1674. He was beheaded, then quartered. His impaled head was kept on display in Hartford, then in Plymouth, Massachusetts for the next twenty-five years.”

“David, there is a story that pieces of Chief Metacom were parceled out to the sentries of King Philip’s War as...well, as rewards, souvenirs. They placed the pieces of the great sachem in their ration cans. And brought them home like trophies from battle. I’ve always thought it strange...”

“Strange’?”

“Strange that this half-White, half-Indian boy—who history tells us had been twisted into pieces by his mother on Papoose Ledge—strange that he could’ve been the one who...who had been putting together the pieces of another man’s story.”

* * *

But now the darkness thickens and the bulb dims; a series of shadows smear the uneven ground as this happens, and a kind of writhing darkness passes everywhere. Soon I have the unwelcome sensation that this place has disallowed me. Something very bad once happened down here. It is a place I am not supposed to be. And now comes an intense nausea. And everything swirls together.

“Elizabeth, you mentioned the boy, James McGoff the Second was thought to be... ‘assembling’ something down in my root cellar? You don’t think that—”

The paint cans in one corner become the pile of rotten wood along the wall. This blends with the spider’s web, as the light bulb frames the shape of an old man sitting at the stairwell, his chest heaving under a frayed woolen sweater. I feel sick, spun around; I need air, and light. I need to go, and go now.

“David, what do you see?”

The Japanese maples blend with the dusty air, and the silence among the books ribbons its way around the shadows. The voice of the old woman, CIRC,

merges with the other speaking to me--and in the land of the dead, the old man and the nameless, faceless others watching. These eyes swim over the walls and the shelves, reading these pages and their words and the rose bushes by the fence fall apart into the pieces of the old man and my story, barely held together somehow.

Focusing on Jim Downs beneath the beam, I move toward him. For a moment I'm gaining composure. The swirling subsides. Breathing easier, regaining balance.

After a few steps he stops me.

"What's that. In the corner?" he calls to me.

"Looks like cans—paint cans or something."

"No. There. I mean. In *that* corner."