Stranger on the Gradient

Duncan Coffey felt a mild agitation. At first he marked the subtle change as curiosity and then, making small measurements, corrected the assessment. A retired rewrite man for *The Saxon Sentinel*, he was frightfully aware that his capacity for surprise had long fled him. Odd moments told him he might have another person sharing his skin. This was one of those odd contemplations now working on him. His old fishing pal Ed LeBlanc used to say he had bitten off more than he could chew in this life, dwelling too often on little things, getting hung up in details, losing the big picture. "Duncan," he offered a few times, "You could choke on a blade of grass and lose the whole thing." He'd never explained what the whole thing was, but Coffey got the meaning.

But now, this day, the agitation, the contemplation, had a shadow in tow.

As if wakened from a sweet dream by a raucous noise, he had seen again the new man in town, Theron Thredbalm, talking to a few of the neighborhood kids on the porch of the little red house down at the side of the river, down the gradient slim with incline, fat with memories For a week or more he had been looking downhill, *locking on*, as he might have put it. At the sight of the new man in town, the agitation had resurfaced with a sharp intensity, as though suddenly pulled from a scabbard. He was not sure where the image had come from, but it *was* shadowed. The cool edge of it had a flavor. And it could cut his tongue like a hard, foreign sausage or an imperfect sauce.

Dreamy Duncan, in a kind of serialized clarity, had been leaping from thought to image to thought swift as a kaleidoscope maneuver, when he'd caught himself once more riding down this same hill on a sled. And right on top of Thelma Burton's backside, three years older than he was, almost a woman, soft as a mattress. How often had that bed come back to him? Perhaps every day now, came the revelation that he had taken that soft bed to bed innumerable times.

The geography of his past was thick as an atlas, and he knew the pages often flew open in random breezes. In the specie of this memory he was twelve and she was fifteen and he believed, for a quick moment, he had never again felt anything quite as soft as Thelma Burton. Their mixed breaths had flowed downhill after them from mouths and nostrils during a dozen rides, and from other sledders as well, all as airy and light as a distant locomotive's smoke. In minute cloud rushes, fully ethereal, there came pronouncements of their steam, her perfume, and the undeniable entity of something brand new for him. Entirely brand new. Birthed. Coming out from deep within. Or going down into. Core deep.

He was never sure which it was. The newness almost had a taste to it. The later rides, he was convinced, were provoked by Thelma. Suggested. Dared. His horizon had expanded. And the stars, nailed home in place by The Illustrious Carpenter, had made a brilliant night more brilliant. There were times later on, life moving its sure traffic, the newness becoming old habit, that he thought he had bedded Thelma Burton. Many times over. The image of the night, with all its richness, had lasted more than half a century, still soft, still lit up.

He shared his imaginations with no one person, neither the memories, nor the shadow now dancing in his mind clamoring for more attention. The mix was always going on for an old man; it was what he had lately agreed to in a startling accord, *experience makes its way with a man, whether he knows it or not.*

Duncan Coffey, widowed going on eight years, just turned seventy, sat his favorite chair on the house-wide porch, looking downhill at the river. An old knee injury called out more alerts. He put aside a twitch in one instep, apparently the residue of a midnight cramp. Mid-morning coffee, no mere token for him, was at hand. Summer sat about him rich as pocket lint; the breeze's breath was honeyed, the sun stretched its long fingers through trees, the coffee grew pugnaciously thick, like camp coffee, the kind Ed LeBlanc used to make with egg shell components to keep the grounds in place.

Sounds of summer children hurried like ballpark noises up and down the hill. Now and then, he thought, it sounded like a distant parade, from a past Fourth of July or a somber Memorial Day. His only grandson Emmett waved occasionally from the riverbank where Duncan remembered the trout were once freely counted. At one point of the river the alders were a canopied umbrella where the cool of a day was notorious in summer's heat.

There was very little that Duncan knew about the new man, Theron Thredbalm, who, as it turned out, was a runner. And men run for a variety of reasons. Some run for competition, for exhilaration or health, some for atonement or a kick at depression. Some run out of fear or desperation.

Some men who run, experience tells you in strange ways, are chased.

Theron Thredbalm could turn his nose up at most anything. Yet men on the move do not always have that freedom. Above his nose the thick dark brows confirmed his face as one between rugged and questionable. His facial bones said rugged, the brows and expressions said questionable. The brows were mustache thick. His ears were fist-tight against his head and his chin sat pointed and, it too, questionable. A Van Dyke would have improved his looks. His eyes were too quick for the face, giving the promise of finding an object on either horizon, fore and aft. Then, too, one might swear Theron Thredbalm could see in the dark.

Duncan Coffey brought all he knew, all his experience, to bear on the antics of the new man in town. As a classic rewrite man for the paper, he had read a lot between the lines and had read more stories there than were found in the print. He had seen that the new man wore an old seaman's cap stained by salt and sweat and could somehow feel the pace of the arrival's trip working on him. Now and then, he assumed, Theron Thredbalm would try to hum an old ditty, but might not reach a tune.

Earlier by two weeks, Thredbalm's jam-packed van had come slowly down along the edge of the river road. Occasionally he seriously studied the geography spread out around his route, nodding approval halfheartedly at times. Some views brought a quick negative shake to his head that hastened him down the road in a minor frenzy. One might think he was a

realtor on a search for opportunities; a neighborhood's structure bothering him, a too level stretch of wet land looming impossible, an area where too much space lay between small houses spelling apathy.

He had tried to sing, *Hey, ditty ditty, we're far from the city*, but the words refused to come aloud.

Thredbalm was on the hard side of fifty. His hands were seemingly forged from labor. The fingers were long, a few of them arthritic in appearance, and calluses grated their palmed texture on the steering wheel cover. A slight cough made him uncomfortable. That too gave him measure. Near his feet a dog, a good-sized mongrel deep russet in color, slept without a stir. But every so often, like a metronome, his tail wagged with an engine beat. The toe of Thredbalm's right boot touched the dog when the van slowed down, a sense of connection in order.

For hours Theron Thredbalm had not smiled, the fingers of his left hand tapping endlessly on the steering wheel in a tempo a musician would find difficult to identify. For nearly three hundred miles his eyes had stretched, absorbed, covered. In essence he was a mobile prowler.

Just past noon two Saturdays earlier, he had come past the middle of Saxon, sitting on the river from a long run down an intermediate hill. A piece of road meandered down from near the summit of the hill and he could see dozens of houses on the route.

He had no idea that from a porch of one of the houses a retired newspaperman had seen his approach.

Thredbalm saw a wide path, somewhat parallel to the small road, slowly twisting itself downhill behind the houses. It could be a bike path, he thought, a blueberry picker's path, a place for sleds or toboggans in the winter. Itinerant or seasonal traffic might swell at times. Quick study showed near the river a rather small house with a barn at the back side. The house had a small porch, needed work, and promised minor solitude. The barn loomed bigger than the house. The house was barely a hundred feet from the river, and two rock walls perpendicular to the river partitioned the plot of land from other property. The grass was thick around the house, brush and weeds at their will, all as if unattended, and the barn, its old red paint faded almost to a hueless standard of New England barns, leaned from the onslaught of an earlier century.

For the first time of that journey Thredbalm had smiled. One angled eyebrow entered the occasion. "We might be home, dog," he said, his foot touching the animal again.

It was the grade of the hill that did it, and the way it ended at the river right near the empty house. Downhill has both mercy and promise in it, he believed.

Four days later he had moved into the house. The van was emptied of tools, a few chests, a canvas covered mattress and a rope bed among other things. Emptied, travel signs and road

residue washed out of it, the van took on a more sprightly appearance, began a general neatness about the place. Two days later the grass was cut, the brush and weeds laid low, and two stout beams, pushed at an angle against the barn, drove the barn toward the perpendicular. On the following day he fixed a boy's bicycle on the front porch. The boy said he lived in one of the houses on the hill and had ridden his bike down hill, only to have the chain come loose, and a wheel fall off. A pedal was discovered to be loose.

"I have all the tools in the world in my barn," Thredbalm told the young cyclist, Emmett Coffey. "I can fix anything, or make anything." His smile was as broad as his jaw, as heavy as his brows. "When a man works on a small boat he has to be able to fix a lot of things."

He smiled and patted Emmett on the head. "I make all kinds of models, too. Boats and ships are my favorites. I was a lobsterman for a long time. Now I can't fish anymore or haul lobster." He showed one arm with a long scar from wrist to elbow. As he smiled at his new acquaintance, a distance sat in his eyes, and the hint of a shadow.

It might have been the same shadow Duncan Coffey had seen.

Thredbalm attached the loosened chain, patched a slow leak, tightened the pedal, tousled the boy's head and sent him on his way. The boy came back a day later with a friend. The newcomer, on his porch, fixed the friend's bike. Late that afternoon Thredbalm, under the alder canopy, took four decent sized fish from the river and cooked them for lunch. Two days later three boys shared the fishing spot. On another day he fixed a boy's bicycle that had been useless for months.

Incessant traffic came down hill in the good days that followed. In the winter, Thredbalm knew, sledding and tobogganing would bring more traffic past his door. He had run himself into good ground at the foot of the hill.

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"Did he say where he's from?" Duncan Coffey asked his grandson. Full of curiosity though not a reporter, he had worked for *The Saxon Sentinel* as a rewrite man for most of his later years. "Seems he come out of nowhere. McCallister said he just put his money down and leased the house on an option basis, what there is of a house. Though he does seem to get to things that need it." He nodded and added, "Did a decent job on the house and grounds, and I've seen him jack those new barn supports a bit each day, getting it back to the straight side up." The compliments flowed without bias.

Emmett replied, "Told me he was a fisherman who hurt his arm and his leg and can't do it any more," knowing the curious glint in his grandfather's eyes was his usual glint. "Said he was from way up Maine someplace, but mostly from boats. Fishermen who don't own their boats usually don't live no regular place, he says. Move around like a school of fish, loose as the wind, way he puts it."

Emmett was holding his bike beside the porch of his house where his father sat an unpainted Adirondack chair. “He fixed this like nothing, Gramp.” He leaned heavily on the handlebars now secure in place. “And he fixed Mickey’s bike wasn’t working for almost a year, just getting rusty. Put oil over everything. Runs like heck now. Showed Mickey the big scar on his leg, too. Mick says it’s red as a fire engine. Says he’s going to make Mickey a mechanic who can fix anything.”

Duncan Coffey was far from mechanical and was always concerned the way things presented themselves. With some careful measure, he said to his grandson, “Well, let’s do this as an assignment of sorts. You keep me posted on what Mr. Thredbalm does and I’ll keep a good account of it. When they come to vote for Neighbor of the Year, I might have enough ammunition for him. But don’t you give it away. Now that’s a promise on both parts.”

He put his arm around his grandson and added, “Kind of makes you a leg man or a stringer for the voting.” He smiled a rather serious smile at the air.

A week later Emmet told his grandfather that Brinny Driscoll had also been made an apprentice to Mr. Thredbalm. “Imagine that, Gramp; he’s a ten-year old apprentice of toolery. That’s what he says he is, an apprentice of toolery. Isn’t that something! Just like Mickey. Goes in to do some work each morning on the way to school. Says he can handle a dozen of Mr. Thredbalm’s tools, even some of the electric ones.” He shook his head in a testament of wonder. “Spends some time there after school, too. Even skipped one of our ball games. Said he had work to do. Showed us a leather pouch he carries on his belt with some tools in it. Everything you need for a bike. Just like maybe a Sears catalog would show.” He rolled his eyes again, and sent off the same head shake of wonder.

His grandfather raised his eyebrows anew. “You just keep the tabs on that tool man, Emmett. We might get him nominated as the man of the year. Yes sir, Man of the Year hereabouts in good old Saxon, and *The Sentinel* might just put his picture on the front page.”

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On the way home from visiting a pal in the nursing home, evening full of a new meadow’s cut, an early star winking hello out over the river, the old rewrite man stopped in to Clarrigan’s Pub for a cool beer. Ban Driscoll was at the bar. He was industrious at beer and peanuts, and his lunchbox sat on the bar top. Duncan had always liked Ban who never worried what neighbors talked about, who they talked about, what they said. Ban and he had been taught by the same teachers on their way through Saxon schools, though they graduated years apart. Ban, from the day of graduation, had worked at Trenholm Lumber at the edge of town. One look at his hands could tell you that, or the leathered look of his face and the extreme V-cut tan on his chest. His life was a gift to labor.

“’Lo, Ban,” Duncan said, tapping the broad back of Ban Driscoll. “How’s the slivers been doing?” He turned to Colum Clarrigan, “Give us two more, Colum, for the good of the thirst.” He reached over to shake hands with Clarrigan.

The stout barkeep offered a hand that could smash a keg, and a wide smile. “Jazus, Dunc, ain’t seen you a bit. Thought maybe you had swore off since the picnic.” Their laughter filled the small pub. “Wasn’t going to tell you, Dunc, but I seen her lookin’ at you in church out of the corner of her eyes and more than once. They ain’t no more offense there.” They laughed again.

Ban and Duncan sipped at their beers, nibbled at a fresh bowl of pop corn Clarrigan had plopped in front of them.

Duncan said, “How’s the boy doing, Ban, that young one, Brinny? I guess he must be set to grow like a weed. Like Arthur did. He still on the same ship? Never thought him once to become a sailor.”

Ban Driscoll sipped, popped a piece of corn. “Never forgive me for naming him Arthur, that boy. But he likes the ship. More than a thousand men aboard from what he says and he’ll know them all before he changes ships, as he puts it.”

He sipped again. “Brinny’s another matter too. I think he’s going to be a mechanical genius. Nothing like me or his brother. Kid can fix anything.”

Ban Driscoll nodded, looked off, sipped again. Duncan thought that if Ban had a scale in his hand he couldn’t have measured anything clearer. “He going to summer school still? He get that part squared away?”

“When he’s a mind to," Ban said. “I swear he could do it in his sleep, but don’t care. New interests just get hold of him. Maybe it’s variety working its way. Don’t know with kids, like I never knew Arthur plain hated his name. Never had one idea about that at all. Brinny carries a small tool pouch on his belt, got it from that new guy who fixes bikes. Says he’ll be able to do it all himself pretty soon, getting taught some tricks of the trade. I got home one night he had put a new pair of hinges on the bulkhead doors like a carpenter did it. Said he wanted to surprise me.”

He sipped his beer. “Sure as hell did. Megan been wanting them doors fixed for a year or more.”

Duncan sipped, chewed some popcorn, and said, “He’s changing some, then? Maybe like Arthur, coming on his own.”

Duncan Coffey saw the shadow in Ban Driscoll’s eyes when he said, “Never know from kids, one day to the next.”

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From his porch, Duncan kept watch. He thought he was in some kind of laboratory or perhaps at the helm of a human telescope. The little house, and its inveterate traffic, was, daylight to dusk, continually in his view. Pretending it was a journal of sorts, he began to take notes. He sounded it out clearly in his mind: *Proposing a man's picture to be on the front page of The Sentinel would need backup, would need facts.* He saw Thredbalm fix bikes on the porch, on the rear steps, now and then take them into the barn. On several occasions, early and late, he saw Brinny Driscoll enter the barn, stay a while, depart on his bike. Emmett spent much of his time at the ball fields down the river. Maybe he wouldn't become a good man with the tools, but it wouldn't be the end of the world. *Duncan Coffey,* he announced to himself, *has never palmed a hammer with any kind of love or skill.*

He kept his journal up-to-date, saw a schedule develop, and could predict goings and comings. As if by rote, Theron Thredbalm and his dog often went off on Sunday afternoon and came back early on Monday morning.

Emmett came from the ballparks and a cluster of games each day. He smiled at his grandfather, told him about games and his turns at bat, generally smiled his way through a conversation. "I hit a grassburner, Gramp. Went by the third baseman like it was on fire. Coach says he ain't seen that ball yet."

The old rewrite man believed not even Thelma Burton could make him feel warmer. And Brinny Driscoll, on his bike newly painted a bright red, rode past the house. He waved at the pair on the porch, flew downhill, ducked behind the little red house.

Duncan Coffey knew it was up to him, or that other person sharing his skin.

Early Monday morning, darkness still about the land, the mountaintop yet settled with clouds, he slipped into the barn beside the red house. In his chest the heartbeat was metronomic but at a high speed; he could feel the pulse beating at his neck and wondered about the carotid telegraph he had heard about, had even written about in more than quasi-ignorance. Once again he was reading between the lines. He knew he made a difference in everything he had ever written, had put himself into. Now the darkness wrapped him. There was nothing else to go on. There were no preliminaries. No clues. No first paragraph to sink his teeth into. No leg man's first concrete impression to absorb. Nothing but his own extensions.

And the shadow.

He flashed his light and saw the layout of tools on one whole wall as neat as a grandmother's pantry. A vise at the end of a work bench loomed as a rocky outcrop in the dark landscape. The frame of a bicycle hung on a chain from an overhead beam. The smell of new paint flooded the interior of the barn. Another bike frame and odd parts of handlebars, sprockets, fenders and reflectors rested in one corner as insignificant as a junk pile at Hooligan's Hideout, the used car lot on the edge of town. But the absolute neatness

of the tool arrangements kept hitting his eyes. And all teeth, all blade edges, all gripping or working surfaces, were as clean as new, or newly sharpened.

Neatness did not infiltrate the shadow or provide definition.

Duncan Coffey hid himself behind the remnant of an old inner wall.

For two hours he waited, and heard the van coming down the hill. The door of the house slammed and then Thredbalm's voice came to him. "Here, dog. Here's breakfast." A metallic clunk echoed from the porch.

Another voice said, "Good morning, Mr. Thredbalm. We got a lesson in some new tools today?" It was Brinny Driscoll's voice.

"Come inside the barn, Brinny. I have to talk about those new tools supposed to come yesterday." The two entered the barn.

The shadow evolved again, twisted on itself, spiraled.

"They didn't come yet, Brinny. Good thing, too. That old leg wound of mine's really bothering me some."

"Think you should go to the hospital now?" Brinny said. "Does it still hurt like the other day?" There was a pain in Brinny's voice.

In the semi-light of morning he was a small boy standing at the foot of his history.

"Sure does, son. Hurts like hell. If you rub it like last time, it just might go away. Here, give it a try."

Duncan saw Theron Thredbalm drop his jeans. "Right there on that there scar, son. You just rub in that magic like you did last time and we'll get some new lessons going soon."

"That's good," Thredbalm said, "now rub this over here where it hurts too, but gentle with that good doctor touch you have, Brinny, just like a good mechanic at work."

The old rewrite man Duncan Coffey, a pitchfork in his hands, his left knee screaming profanities up through his thigh, his mind like shells going off on a dark terrain of a foreign war, the carotid messages loose as curses on the sides of his head, through his temples, leaped from behind the wall.

"You son of a bitch, Thredbalm! You got some other kind of fire coming your way!"

The tines of the pitchfork were raised to a highly legitimate threat. The shine from a bench light glinted on them. The door was ajar. Morning light crept in on tender feet. The high, dark corners of the barn evolved and were known.

Long shadows began leaping with light.

Grandfather Duncan Coffey turned to Brinny Driscoll, not begging, not pleading, but demanding. “Go get the cops, Brinny!” he yelled. “This rotten son of a bitch is not going to touch another kid in Saxon. Run, boy, run! Run before I kill him! Run! Run!”

Brinny Driscoll only got to the path where two teen-age neighbors, in running shorts and running shoes, were loping by. They rushed into the barn.

Theron Thredbalm, after all, did get his picture in the paper, on the front page of *The Saxon Sentinel.*