

THREE

The day after Caleb crashed his Ford, his brother Amos took an afternoon off from work and went with another volunteer for the city's Child Services Department and a dozen children to the aquarium on Sea Street. When their visit was over, they walked down the street to an ice cream vendor above whose two-wheeled cart was a striped, multi-colored umbrella. After each youngster got what he or she wanted, Amos and Ms. Pickering, whom worked with Children's Aid, steered the group through the whizzing terrors of Sea Street to a subway entrance, where they gave the children shiny Roosevelt dimes and watched them maneuver their way through the turnstile. The laughing, skipping, hopping, temporary clan attracted attention as they scampered down the stairs, so that Amos, tied hand and foot to the mores of respectable society, believed that he needed to compensate for their frivolity by acting as sober and steady as the most proper Botolph judge. Inwardly, however, he rocked with laughter and his sprits danced. When a train pulled up to the platform, Amos and Ms. Pickering and their charges got aboard. "Be quiet, everyone," Amos said, raising his voice, a finger to his lips, "we want the other people on the train to be glad we're here."

The train rumbled out of the night-like tunnel onto an elevated trestle that followed the twists and curves of Jefferson Boulevard. Looking eagerly down at the street, the children pointed out familiar sights, a playground or a shop where their mothers could buy candy and other good things. Amos shared their delight, forgetting what respectable society thought of such neighborhoods, with their dirt and grime and all-pervading inscrutability. A few of the children pressed against him and clutched the sleeve of his seersucker jacket. For a flickering moment, he felt as one of them and asked for no greater reward for his afternoon's efforts.

After leaving the train at the next to the last stop, they climbed down the dingy, paper- and bottle-strewn staircase to Jefferson Boulevard. While the children scampered away across a weedy, vacant lot to a square of high-rises, Amos and Sarah Pickering followed them, watching that they got to their buildings safely. His thoughts stirred with ideas for using the empty acre.

He decided to walk home through the crowded streets of South Cove that most people he knew would see as tumble-down. Earlier in the day, a colleague at the insurance company had teased him for spending time and money at pursuits that brought no tangible rewards. Amos said at the time that his friend had been either tired or dispirited, but now after he left the children, the sting of his reproach came back. He fought it off by saying that that his charitable hobbies brought him joy, surely a much better way to spend his free time than the frivolous amusements he looked for when he returned to Botolph after college and the army and built up a pile of sour memories.

Almost as soon as he reached his apartment in a brownstone on Farrington Street, the phone on the side-table began to ring. "Amos," said the voice of his lawyer. "I've been trying to reach you all day. We've just read old Albert Thackeray's will." Albert was a man with whom Amos had shared lodgings many years before, the one bright spot in the period of time he most wished to forget. "He's left you a half a million dollars."

"My word," Amos said as he sat down in an old chair that had come from his parents' house. "He often said he'd do something like that, but I'd completely forgotten about it. I hadn't seen him for years until just before he died. More complications."

"He must have been a great friend."

"He was once." Amos's voice died away to a whisper, while recollections of his days with Albert and Albert's entourage shone with

bright, unsettling colors. "He was too proud of his money. He must have scattered it all over the city."

"He made many bequests, yes."

"I'll find a use for it, though he might not have approved how I lead my life from now on."

"Your friends in South Cove, I suppose."

"I can't say for sure at this point." Foolish, wistful tears formed in Amos's eyes after he put down the receiver and combined with the joy of sudden freedom. He walked to the kitchen to take a casserole out of the refrigerator. "I must call Caleb," he said to himself. "And Stephen. And Mary, too. They've looked down their noses at me long enough."

Fifteen minutes after he arrived at his office the next morning, he went to see the vice president for whom he'd worked for many years. His small, Spartan office overlooked the aquarium, a new hotel, part of the Davenport Expressway, and the blue-gray high tide of Botolph Harbor. Mr. Cunningham loved his job; his quiet, stable enthusiasm made him a good man to work for, and Amos would miss him, for he was about to bring their association to an end.

He spoke without ceremony, ignoring the difference of rank between them, while Mr. Cunningham, whose mind frequently veered in the direction of a pending promotion, looked at him in astonishment. "When I first began to work," Amos said, "I resented having to get up in the morning and come to the office. I used to say that no human being deserved such a fate. I wished for enough money to deliver me from my torment."

"Doesn't everyone from time to time?" Mr. Cunningham asked as he glanced down at a column of figures.

"I think my case has been extreme," Amos said modestly. "I've tried to be a faithful employee, but the wish for freedom never died. I learned last night that an old friend left me a pile of money. That plus

my savings and my cut-down pension means I can leave the company. I've come to give my notice."

"Oh?" Cunningham set down his old-fashioned fountain pen. "You'll leave a big gap in the department."

"The higher-ups will be relieved, I suspect. They'll want to turn my duties over to a younger man they won't have to pay so much. It'll be good for everyone."

"I always thought you were happy here."

"We play our parts," Amos said in a quiet voice, a rustling whisper of resignation and subdued joyfulness. It was the beginning of his farewell to people whose mannerisms and patterns of speech he knew along with some facts about their lives, but whose souls – apart from dedication to work and its rewards – were mysteries to him.

"I suppose you'll be busy with your charitable work," Cunningham said.

"I'm fifty-four. I won't be able to do as much in that line as I might have thirty years ago. But I'll do something. I'll keep busy in my way."

"I hope you don't overdo it," Mr. Cunningham said, as warm fellow-feeling and the chill detachment of the marketplace vied with one another for dominion over the conversation. Amos wanted to prolong the moment, but lacked the courage to break the shackles of convention. He thanked his superior and returned to the desk that other people would soon be piling high with reasons to keep busy.

He left work a few minutes early that afternoon. Once home, he found plenty to keep him busy. As he mixed a salad in a wooden bowl that his sister Mary had sent him from Alaska, he wondered what sort of new beginning he wanted to make. He thought of the children he'd helped the day before and of Charles Graves's surly ingratitude. And then he imagined a trip around the world, which would be in keeping with Albert Thackeray's wishes. But just as he pictured a jet plane

taking off from Gibbs Field, he heard the telephone ring in the next room. “What now?” he said as he set down the salad fork and walked to the back room in slippered feet. “What news now? Hello? Hello?” His voice sang like that of an owl or a frog in an old pond that he remembered from childhood summers in Maine.

