



This story was published in Oct of 2010. I am not sure when, but the website readshortfiction.com has stopped publishing and no longer exists. The above image is all that remains that this story ever was published.

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About 2,500 words

A Safe Deposit

Lena welcomes Barry home from the memorial service around two o'clock, his gray eyes moist and dulled behind the tortoise shell frames. He removes his jacket, loosens his tie, unbuttons his collar, and sits in the chair before the bay window where he scans the bookshelves, desk, and the fireplace mantel with a photograph of three men: Meier, Goldman, and himself. It's

a photograph that she would have preferred taking off the mantel years ago. Barry insisted, “No, leave it.”

She had not gone with him this morning, had decided not to. It had been years since she’d set foot on campus and it would have been too difficult, too many memories there. She’d been an active faculty wife in those years, contributing her share to the school’s fundraising and campus causes but had stopped after what happened, happened. She had stopped attending events related to the university after Barry had become persona non grata because by extension, she too had suffered the same.

Goldman’s death and today’s service might have been a special occasion, but she didn’t care to put up a front. Barry could. It was his choice and he could or would not stay away. He’d flown in from his consulting work in Florida to attend the service because it was his last chance to say goodbye to an old friend and mentor, pay his respects to someone he cared about and admired. He’d asked her to come along too, but she wouldn’t or couldn’t, and after she met his second request with a hard stare and a steady head shake, he didn’t ask again.

She joins him in the den now because she’s making a grocery list, and she wants his input. Setting her pad on the end table, she turns to him quickly. Her motions are rapid but fluid, elegant. She keeps her hair pulled back with a black scarf, exposing a high forehead, coppery skin, delicate features. Her body is petite and the limbs angular, attenuated like those of a ballerina. “May I bring you anything from the store?” she asks.

“No,” he says, staring absently at her pad and pencil. The back of her hand brushes a statue of Ganeshu that rests atop an arts and crafts writing table. The carved lava Ganeshu swings his trunk, holds a broken tusk in one hand and a stony sweet treat in the other. It isn’t an

antique but she likes quirky objects as much as she likes antiques, and this one didn't come cheap.

"Lena?" He asks, chin lowered into his chest, eyes ignoring Ganeshu but not her.

"Yes."

"Was there ever a letter?"

"A letter?"

"Yes, when I was at the service today, I saw Bobby Meier. He invited me to lunch at the club afterward, told me that Isaac had spoken to him about a year ago. He said Isaac had discussed getting in touch, sending me a letter. Bobby wanted to know if I ever got that letter."

She refuses to swallow, refuses to have an awkward motion in her throat betray any secrets. "No, I never saw any letters," she says.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sure."

She blinks once. The light behind him from the bay window is brilliant, snow on the ground, reflective and blinding. The valley roads might still be icy. She isn't sure. They have a heavy car so it's never a problem.

"Doesn't matter," Barry says. "Maybe he never got around to it."

She confirms that he has no requests from the store and picks up her pad and pen, retreating into the kitchen. But his question has shaken her and she takes a moment to stand at the counter, gaze out of the narrow window that frames their backyard. Snow melts and puddles on the cover of their pool, tiny glaciers erode and expose the white lines on their tennis court. Barry's tin-domed observatory drops ice cycles from its circular eave.

Should she have handed the letter over? Should she do it now? At least tell him that such a letter had come but she threw it away, because it had, showed up in the mail one day a year ago about this time. She'd held the envelope to the light, thought about steaming its seal open. How she had wanted to read the contents, and she expected that he would want to as well. For awhile its folded and glued paper geometry sat on the kitchen table, waiting for him to come home from Florida and his consulting work. But his being away had given her time to think. The house quiet, the children grown and gone with families of their own, and it was just Barry and her surrounded by antiques in the sprawling house with its telescoping wings, the back yard full of expensive toys that lay dormant. Barry could only find work in Florida now.

There had been other letters too, a shoebox full of them that he kept beneath his desk. Letters of reconciliation that Barry had been receiving in recent years, notes from those who despite all that had happened, admired him---former Hopkins colleagues, coworkers, leaders of utility companies, presidents of engineering firms, PhD students, people who felt that he had been singled out and given a bum deal. They'd written to tell him that they knew, he probably wasn't the only one to have acted dishonestly in those years. It had been the politicians really, and the climate of the time. Barry was not the only one to have ever taken a bribe, asked for one, or passed one up the ladder. "When you're in Atlanta, won't you come by?" one correspondent might say. "When you're in Cleveland, some see us?" said another. Even Bobby Meier, long ago retired from his teaching duties, he had a letter in the box.

But she knew. Barry would have traded the whole boxful for the one that had lain on the kitchen table that day, the one from Goldman, his friend, his mentor, the grand old man of Hopkins engineering, the man who had given him his first break when he came to Maryland and who used to come over and play tennis in a yellow polo shirt and white shorts, white socks, even

at age 75, all five foot three, one hundred and fifteen pounds of him. But when Goldman found out what Barry was involved with, he had turned his back, did not wish to associate. The tennis fun and private violin recitals had stopped because Goldman had a reputation to protect. Barry tried to talk with him, had hoped to have a conversation and explain his position, what it was like to actually be in government and not just a figurehead on a blue ribbon panel. But Goldman would not listen, and because he would not, neither would anyone else, at least not in the circles that mattered to Barry.

It had taken fifteen years for Goldman to come around, fifteen years for his letter to arrive in their mailbox. And after much deliberation, Lena decided, this one was not for Barry but for her. This letter would be her compensation for the treatment she'd endured from faculty wives, from neighbors and former friends. She kept it, and Goldman never wrote another, never called, and certainly never stopped by for a game of tennis. And now Goldman was dead.

Finding herself in front of the bedroom closet, Lena remembers that her intention was to shop at the grocery store. She removes a coat from her closet and returns to the living room. "I'm heading out now, Barry" she says to his still figure, frozen in the light by the bay window. "Sure you don't need anything?"

"No. I'm fine thank you." His voice is kindly as he stares down at the cover of a *National Review* on the table. She'd just finished it, cover to cover, pundits predicting the demise of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev experimenting with his Glasnost, George Bush taking over where Ronald Reagan left off.

"That's a pretty coat," Barry says, peeking above the tortoise shell bifocals.

"This?"

"Yes."

She extends a sleeve and turns it over to examine the underside, a white mink with vertical black striping, each black stripe on the front about a closed fist's width apart. "Don't know why I don't wear it more often," she says. "You gave it to me."

"I did? I suppose I should remember it then shouldn't I?"

"Oh, it was so many years ago. I'm sure you wouldn't remember."

"I wish I did."

"Oh Boo Boo." She moves closer and puts an arm around his shoulder as he remains seated, leans down and squeezes him to her bosom. "I'll wear it more often," she says, kissing the top of his head through thinning hair. "Then maybe you will remember."

He smiles at her and she leans over to kiss him a second goodbye. "It's good to have you home a few days early," she says, misty eyed and anxious for him not to see this mist.

She exits the house to the driveway and gets into her car, tucks her pocketbook with the shopping list beside her, bundles her coat to cover her gray turtleneck, and pushes up a leaver to heat the interior. It's early March and the snow doesn't seem to be letting up. The weather man says there will be more, nothing major, but more. She starts the engine and backs from the driveway, past the sign on the lamp post that reads "B. T. Feigl" on the top line, "Moot Point" on the bottom. Her idea, not his. Because what else is there to say?

She drives along a winding Green Spring Valley Road and past the old yellow painted mansions on the hills, one time horse farms and dairy farms behind dilapidated stone and iron fences, farms owned by old Baltimore when old Baltimore used to have a house in the valley and a house in the city. She stops at a light, and while her thoughts have resettled on grocery shopping, she sees the marquee for her bank. At the last minute, instead of turning right toward the grocery store, she pulls into the left lane, a lane that will lead her straight through the

intersection. The light turns and she crosses into a small strip mall, nudges the big car into one of the parking spaces. She pauses in her seat before getting out, checks her lipstick in the rearview mirror. Her hands are shaking, and she needs to slow her breathing.

The money, all of the money that Barry stashed away, \$72,000 by his own tallies, was kept in three safety deposit boxes in three separate banks, two in Baltimore, one in Washington D.C. Barry was too afraid to spend it. Extravagant purchases might have appeared suspicious, he later explained to the judge. The mink coat that she is wearing today, like so many of the things that seemed like luxuries to the reporters who'd staked out their home during the trials, and those neighbors bold enough to inquire, had not been purchased during his tenure as the Governor's Roads Chairman or later as the Vice President's Science Advisor, but instead had been acquired long before, when he had his own businesses. Other luxuries had been purchased by her, with the dividends earned off her family's investments.

She walks into the bank and it's not busy so a young female bank teller invites her up to the counter. Aside from her shopping list, her purse contains a small renter's key. The bank teller is friendly, but when Lena requests to see her safety deposit box, there are protocols and the woman asks for identification. Lena straightens her headscarf, grins, and removes a wallet from her pocketbook, producing a driver's license from among the plastic cards. "And how are you doing today, Mrs. Feigl?" the teller asks, raising her magenta eyelids to confirm the license photo.

"Fine, thank you."

The girl hands over a book to sign, then retrieves a key, directing Lena to follow her down an aisle to an opening at the end of the bank stalls. A small door leads her to the mouth of

the vault, and the woman uses a step ladder to reach the box, descends, and directs Lena to a paneled room with a door adjacent to the vault.

They enter the room and the teller uses her guard key to open one of the locks on the box, then she leaves the room. Lena unbuttons her coat and takes a seat in the stiff backed chair, inserting her corresponding renter's key to open the box. Inside, on top, a few pieces of jewelry, her mother's diamond ring, earrings, a cameo broach. She takes each item from the box and sets them on the table. Then she reaches to the bottom, extracting a deed to some property in Illinois left to her by her father, the birth certificates of her children, and another envelope beneath this. She removes the envelope, turns it over and reads the writing on the outside. It's addressed to her house, and Barry's name is on it.

She holds the letter to her nose and breaths in its pulpy fragrance. She has never opened it but she has an idea about what's in it. She runs her fingers along its edges, sharp but not sharp enough to cut, runs her fingers over Goldman's return address, the cancelation stamp over an illustration of a John Bull locomotive. Leave it to an engineer to use a stamp that honors engineering.

The envelope reassures her, calms and steadies her breathing. She was getting nervous about it not being there. How safe are banks really? Banks, like houses, can get robbed. But she thinks it's safer here. At times, like this afternoon, when she'd told Barry that the letter didn't exist, she'd almost frightened herself into believing that it didn't. Now she has reassurance, it does. And that's good. After a few more moments of study, she taps the letter on her purse, considering, but she's not ready yet.

She requires both hands to push the envelope once more into the bottom of the box, covering it over with the deed, the birth certificates, the diamonds, and the cameo broach. One

more glance at the packed contents and she drops the metal top closed, turns her key, and calls for the teller. The bank will close soon, lights out, vault locked, and her letter will be secure for a while longer. It is still her letter, not his, and she can do with it as she pleases. She buttons her coat, prepared to meet the cold, but with shopping to do and errands to run.

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