Looking for Mr. Green

Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.

Hard work? No, it wasn’t really so hard. He wasn’t used to walking and stair-climbing, but the physical difficulty of his new job was not what George Gebe felt most. He was delivering relief checks in the Negro district, and although he was a native Chicagoan this was not a part of the city he knew much about—It needed a depression to introduce him to it. No, it wasn’t literally hard work, not as reckoned in foot-pounds, but yet he was beginning to feel the strain of it, to grow aware of its peculiar difficulty. He could find the streets and numbers, but the clients were not where they were supposed to be, and he felt like a hunter inexperienced in the camouflage of his game. It was an unfavorable day, too—fall, and cold, dark weather, windy. But, anyway, instead of shells in his deep trenchcoat pocket he had the cardboard of checks, punctured for the spindles of the file, the holes reminding him of the holes in player-piano paper. And he didn’t look much like a hunter, either; his was a city figure entirely, belted up in this Irish conspirator’s coat. He was slender without being tall, stiff in the back, his legs looking shabby in a pair of old tweed pants gone through and fringy at the cuffs. With this

1. From Ecclesiastes 9:10, the verse continues, “for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whithers thou goest.”
2. Like those worn by members of the anti-British underground in Ireland.
stiffness, he kept his head forward, so that his face was red from the sharpness of the weather; and it was an indoors sort of face with gray eyes that persisted in some kind of thought and yet seemed to avoid definiteness of conclusion. He wore sideburns that surprised you somewhat by the tough curl of the blond hair and the effect of assertion in their length. He was not so mild as he looked, nor so youthful; and nevertheless there was no effort on his part to seem what he was not. He was an educated man; he was a bachelor; he was in some ways simple; without fusing, he liked a drink; his luck had not been good. Nothing was deliberately hidden.

He felt that his luck was better than usual today. When he had reported for work that morning he had expected to be shut up in the relief office at a clerk's job, for he had been hired downtown as a clerk, and he was glad to have, instead, the freedom of the streets and welcomed, at least at first, the vigor of the cold and even the blowing of the hard wind. But on the other hand he was not getting on with the distribution of the checks. It was true that it was a city job; nobody expected you to push too hard at a city job. His supervisor, that young Mr. Raynor, had practically told him that. Still, he wanted to do well at it. For one thing, when he knew how quickly he could deliver a batch of checks, he would know also how much time he could expect to clip for himself. And then, too, the clients would be waiting for their money. That was not the most important consideration, though it certainly mattered to him. No, but he wanted to do well, simply for doing-well's sake, to acquit himself decently of a job because he so rarely had a job to do that required just this sort of energy. Of this peculiar energy he now had a superabundance; once it had started to flow, it flowed all too heavily. And, for the time being anyway, he was balked. He could not find Mr. Green.

So he stood in his big-skirted trenchcoat with a large envelope in his hand and papers showing from his pocket, wondering why people should be so hard to locate who were too feeble or sick to come to the station to collect their own checks. But Raynor had told him that tracking them down was not easy at first and had offered him some advice on how to proceed. "If you can see the postman, he's your first man to ask, and your best bet. If you can't connect with him, try the stores and tradespeople around. Then the janitor and the neighbors. But you'll find the closer you come to your man the less people will tell you. They don't want to tell you anything."

"Because I'm a stranger."

"Because you're white. We ought to have a Negro doing this, but we don't at the moment, and of course you've got to eat, too, and this is public employment. Jobs have to be made. Oh, that holds for me too. Mind you, I'm not letting myself out. I've got three years of seniority on you, that's all. And a law degree. Otherwise, you might be back of the desk and I might be going out into the field this cold day. The same dough pays us both and for the same, exact, identical reason. What's my law degree got to do with it? But you have to pass out these checks, Mr. Grebe, and it'll help if you're stubborn, so I hope you are."

"Yes, I'm fairly stubborn."

Raynor sketched hard with an eraser in the old dirt of his desk, left-handed, and said, "Sure, what else can you answer to such a question. Anyhow, the trouble you're going to have is that they don't like to give information about anybody. They think you're a plain-clothes dick or an installment collector, or summons-server or something like that. Till you've been seen around the neighborhood for a few months and people know you're only from the relief."
It was dark, ground-freezing, pre-Thanksgiving weather; the wind played hob with the smoke, rushing it down, and Grebe missed his gloves, which he had left in Raynor's office. And no one would admit knowing Green. It was past three o'clock and the postman had made his last delivery. The nearest grocer, himself a Negro, had never heard the name Tulliver Green, or said he hadn't, Grebe was inclined to think that it was true, that he had in the end convinced the man that he wanted only to deliver a check. But he wasn't sure. He needed experience in interpreting looks and signs and, even more, the will not to be put off or denied and even the force to bully if need be. If the grocer did know, he had got rid of him easily. But since most of his trade was with reliefers, why should he prevent the delivery of a check? Maybe Green, or Mrs. Green, if there was a Mrs. Green, patronized another grocer. And was there a Mrs. Green? It was one of Grebe's great handicaps that he hadn't looked at any of the case records. Raynor should have let him read files for a few hours. But he apparently saw no need for that, probably considering the job unimportant. Why prepare systematically to deliver a few checks?

But now it was time to look for the janitor, Grebe took in the building in the wind and gloom of the late November day—trampled, frost-hardened lots on one side; on the other, an automobile junk yard and then the infinite work of Elevated frames, weak-looking, gaping with rubbish fires; two sets of leaning brick porches three stories high and a flight of cement stairs to the cellar. Descending, he entered the underground passage, where he tried the doors until one opened and he found himself in the furnace room. There someone rose toward him and approached, scraping on the coal griz and bending under the canvas-jacketed pipes.

"Are you the janitor?"
"What do you want?"
"I'm looking for a man who's supposed to be living here. Green."
"What Green?"
"Oh, you maybe have more than one Green?" said Grebe with new, pleasant hope. "This is Tulliver Green."
"I don't think I c'n help you, mister. I don't know any."
"A crippled man."

The janitor stood bent before him. Could it be that he was crippled? Oh, God! What if he was. Grebe's gray eyes sought with excited difficulty to see. But no, he was only very short and stooped. A head awakened from meditation, a strong-haired beard, low, wide shoulders. A stanaleness of sweat and coal rose from his black shirt and the burlap sack he wore as an apron.

"Crippled how?"

Grebe thought and answered with the light voice of unmixed candor, "I don't know. I've never seen him. This was damaging, but his only other choice was to make a lying guess, and he was not up to it. I'm delivering checks for the relief to shut-in cases. If he weren't crippled he'd come to collect himself. That's why I said crippled. Bedridden, chair-ridden—is there anybody like that?"

This sort of frankness was one of Grebe's oldest talents, going back to childhood. But it gained him nothing here.

"No suh. I've got four buildin's same as this that I take care of. I don't know all the tenants, leave alone the tenants' tenants. The rooms turn over so fast, people movin' in and out every day. I can't tell you."

The janitor opened his grimy lips but Grebe did not hear him in the piping
of the valves and the consuming pull of air to flame in the body of the furnace. He knew, however, what he had said.

"Well, all the same, thanks. Sorry I bothered you. I'll prow around upstairs again and see if I can turn up someone who knows him."

Once more in the cold air and early darkness he made the short circle from the cellerway to the entrance crowded between the brickwork pillars and began to climb to the third floor. Pieces of plaster ground under his feet; strips of brass tape from which the carpeting had been torn away marked old boundaries at the sides. In the passage, the cold reached him worse than in the street; it touched him to the bone. The hall toilets ran like springs. He thought grimly as he heard the wind burning around the building with a sound like that of the furnace, that this was a great piece of constructed shelter. Then he struck a match in the gloom and searched for names and numbers among the writings and scribbles on the walls. He saw whoops- dooey go to Jesus, and zigzags, caricatures, sexual scrawls, and curses. So the sealed rooms of pyramids were also decorated, and the caves of human dawn.

The information on his card was, TULLIVER GREEN—APT 3D. There were no names, however, and no numbers. His shoulders drawn up, tears of cold in his eyes, breathing vapor, he went the length of the corridor and told himself that if he had been lucky enough to have the temperament for it he would hang on one of the doors and bawl out "Tulliver Green!" until he got results. But it wasn’t in him to make an uproar and he continued to burn matches, passing the light over the walls. At the rear, in a corner off the hall, he discovered a door he had not seen before and he thought it best to investigate. It sounded empty when he knocked, but a young Negress answered, hardly more than a girl. She opened only a bit, to guard the warmth of the room.

"Yes suh?"

"I'm from the district relief station on Prairie Avenue. I'm looking for a man named Tulliver Green to give him his check. Do you know him?"

No, she didn’t; but she thought she had not understood anything of what he had said. She had a dream-bound, dream-blind face, very soft and black, shut off. She wore a man’s jacket and pulled the ends together at her throat. Her hair was parted in three directions, at the sides and transversely, standing up at the front in a dull puff.

"Is there somebody around here who might know?"

"I just taken this room las’ week."

He observed that she shivered, but even her shiver was somnambulistic and there was no sharp consciousness of cold in the big smooth eyes of her handsome face.

"All right, miss, thank you. Thanks," he said, and went to try another place.

Here he was admitted. He was grateful, for the room was warm. It was full of people, and they were silent as he entered—ten people, or a dozen, perhaps more, sitting on benches like a parliament. There was no light, properly speaking, but a tempered darkness that the window gave, and everyone seemed to him enormous, the men padded out in heavy work clothes and winter coats, and the women huge, too, in their sweaters, hats, and old furs. And, besides, bed and bedding, a black cooking range, a piano piled towering to the ceiling with papers, a dining-room table of the old style of prosperous Chicago. Among these people Grebe, with his cold-heightened fresh color and his smaller stature, entered like a schoolboy. Even though he was met
with smiles and good will, he knew, before a single word was spoken, that
all the currents ran against him and that he would make no headway. Nev-

ertheless he began, "Does anybody here know how I can deliver a check to
Mr. Tulliver Green?"  

"Green?" It was the man that had let him in who answered. He was in
short sleeves, in a checkered shirt, and had a queer, high head, profusely
overgrown and long as a shako; the veins entered it strongly, from his fore-
head. "I never heard mention of him. Is this where he live?"

"This is the address they gave me at the station. He's a sick man, and he'll
need his check. Can't anybody tell me where to find him?"

He stood his ground and waited for a reply, his crimson wool scarf wound
about his neck and drooping outside his trenchcoat; pockets weighted with
the bulk of checks and official forms. They must have realized that he was
not a college boy employed afternoons by a bill collector, trying feebly to pass
for a relief clerk, recognized that he was an older man who knew himself
what need was, who had had more than an average seasoning in hardships.
It was evident enough if you looked at the marks under his eyes and at the
sides of his mouth.

"Anybody know this sick man?"

"No suh." On all sides he saw heads shaken and smiles of denial. No one
knew. And maybe it was true, he considered, standing silent in the earthen
mucky human gloom of the place as the rumble continued. But he could
never really be sure.

"What's the matter with this man?" said shako-head.

"I've never seen him. All I can tell you is that he can't come in person for
his money. It's my first day in this district."

"Maybe they given you the wrong number?"

"I don't believe so. But where else can I ask about him?" He felt that this
persistence amused them deeply, and in a way he shared their amusement
that he should stand up so tenaciously to them. Though smaller, though
slight, he was his own man, he retracted nothing about himself, and he
looked back at them, gray-eyed, with amusement and also with a sort of
courage. On the bench some man spoke in his throat, the words impossible
to catch, and a woman answered with a wild, shrieking laugh, which was
quickly cut off.

"Well, so nobody will tell me?"

"Ain't nobody who knows."

"At least, if he lives here, he pays rent to someone. Who manages the
building?"

"Greatham Company. That's on Thirty-ninth Street."

Grebe wrote it in his pad. But, in the street again, a sheet of wind-driven
paper clinging to his leg while he deliberated what direction to take next, it
seemed a feeble lead to follow. Probably this Green didn't rent a flat, but a
room. Sometimes there were as many as twenty people in an apartment; the
real-estate agent would know only the lessee. And not even the agent could
tell you who the renters were. In some places the beds were even used in
shifts, watchmen or jitney drivers or short-order cooks in night joints turning
out after a day's sleep and surrendering their beds to a sister, a nephew, or
perhaps a stranger, just off the bus. There were large numbers of newcomers
in this terrific, blight-bitten portion of the city between Cottage Grove and

3. Stiff military headdress with a high crown and a plume.
Ashland, wandering from house to house and room to room. When you saw them, how could you know them? They didn't carry bundles on their backs or look picturesque. You only saw a man, a Negro, walking in the street or riding in the car, like everyone else, with his thumb closed on a transfer. And therefore how were you supposed to tell? Grebe thought the Greatham agent would only laugh at his question.

But how much it would have simplified the job to be able to say that Green was old, or blind, or consumptive. An hour in the files, taking a few notes, and he needn't have been at such a disadvantage. When Raynor gave him the block of checks he asked, "How much should I know about these people?" Then Raynor had looked as though he were preparing to accuse him of trying to make the job more important than it was. He smiled, because by then they were on fine terms, but nevertheless he had been getting ready to say something like that when the confusion began in the station over Stukka and her children.

Grebe had waited a long time for this job. It came to him through the pull of an old schoolmate in the Corporation Counsel's office, never a close friend, but suddenly sympathetic and interested—pleased to show, moreover, how well he had done, how strongly he was coming on even in these miserable times. Well, he was coming through strongly, along with the Democratic administration itself. Grebe had gone to see him in City Hall, and they had had a counter lunch or beers at least once a month for a year, and finally it had been possible to swing the job. He didn't mind being assigned the lowest clerical grade, nor even being a messenger, though Raynor thought he did.

This Raynor was an original sort of guy and Grebe had taken to him immediately. As was proper on the first day, Grebe had come early, but he waited long, for Raynor was late. At last he darted into his cubicle of an office as though he had just jumped from one of those hurtling huge red Indian Avenue cars. His thin, rough face was wind-stung and he was grinning and saying something breathlessly to himself. In his hat, a small fedora, and his coat, the velvet collar a neat fit about his neck, and his silk muffer that set off the nervous twist of his chin, he swayed and turned himself in his swivel chair, feet leaving the ground; so that he pranced a little as he sat. Meanwhile he took Grebe's measure out of his eyes, eyes of an unusual vertical length and slightly sardonic. So the two men sat for a while, saying nothing, while the supervisor raised his hat from his miscombed hair and put it in his lap. His cold-darkened hands were not clean. A steel beam passed through the little makeshift room, from which machine belts once had hung. The building was an old factory.

"I'm younger than you; I hope you won't find it hard taking orders from me," said Raynor. "But I don't make them up, either. You're how old, about?"

"Thirty-five."

"And you thought you'd be inside doing paper work. But it so happens I have to send you out."

"I don't mind."

"And it's mostly a Negro kind we have in this district."

"So I thought it would be."

"Fine. You'll get along. C'est un bon boulot. Do you know French?"

"Some."

4. It's a good job (French slang).
"I thought you'd be a university man."
"Have you been in France?" said Grebe.
"No, that's the French of the Berlitz School. I've been at it for more than
a year, just as I'm sure people have been, all over the world, office boys in
China and braves in Tanganyika. In fact, I damn well know it. Such is the
attractive power of civilization. It's overrated, but what do you want? Que
voulez-vous? I get Le Rire and all the spicy papers, just like in Tanganyika.
It must be mystifying, out there. But my reason is that I'm aiming at the
diplomatic service. I have a cousin who's a courier, and the way he describes
it is awfully attractive. He rides in the wagon-lits* and reads books. While
we—What did you do before?"
"I sold."
"What?"
"Canned meat at Stop and Shop. In the basement."
"And before that?"
"Window shades, at Goldblatt's."
"Steady work?"
"No, Thursdays and Saturdays. I also sold shoes."
"You've been a shoe-dog too. Well. And prior to that? Here it is in your
folder." He opened the record. "Saint Olaf's College, instructor in classical
languages. Fellow, University of Chicago, 1926–27. I've had Latin, too. Let's
trade quotations—Dum spiro spero.*"
"Da dextrum miser.,"
"Alea iacta est." 
"Excelsior."

Raynor shouted with laughter, and other workers came to look at him over
the partition. Grebe also laughed, feeling pleased and easy. The luxury of
fun on a nervous morning.
When they were done and no one was watching or listening, Raynor said
rather seriously, "What made you study Latin in the first place? Was it for
the priesthood?"
"No."
"Just for the hell of it? For the culture? Oh, the things people think they
can pull!" He made his cry hilarious and tragic. "I ran my pants off so I could
study for the bar, and I've passed the bar, so I get twelve dollars a week more
than you as a bonus for having seen life straight and whole. I'll tell you, as
a man of culture, that even though nothing looks to be real, and everything
stands for something else, and that thing for another thing, and that thing
for a still further one—there ain't any comparison between twenty-five and
thirty-seven dollars a week, regardless of the last reality. Don't you think that
was clear to your Greeks? They were a thoughtful people, but they didn't
part with their slaves."
This was a great deal more than Grebe had looked for in his first interview
with his supervisor. He was too shy to show all the astonishment he felt. He
laughed a little, aroused, and brushed at the sunbeam that covered his head
with its dust. "Do you think my mistake was so terrible?"
"Damn right it was terrible, and you know it now that you've had the whip
of hard times laid on your back. You should have been preparing yourself for
trouble. Your people must have been well off to send you to the university.

5. What do you want? (French).
7. The Latin phrases are translated, in order, as
follows: "Where there's life there's hope" (literally, "while I breathe I hope"); "Give the right hand to the wretched"; "The die is cast"; "Highest"
Stop me, if I'm stepping on your toes. Did your mother pamper you? Did your father give in to you? Were you brought up tenderly, with permission to go and find out what were the last things that everything else stands for while everybody else labored in the fallen world of appearances?"

"Well, no. It wasn't exactly like that. Grebe smiled. The fallen world of appearances! No less. But now it was his turn to deliver a surprise. "We weren't rich. My father was the last genuine English butler in Chicago—"

"Are you kidding?"
"Why should I be?"
"In a livery?"
"In livery. Up on the Gold Coast."
"And he wanted you to be educated like a gentleman?"
"He did not. He sent me to the Armor Institute to study chemical engineering. But when he died I changed schools."

He stopped himself, and considered how quickly Raynor had reached him. In no time he had your valise on the table and all your stuff unpacked. And afterward, in the streets, he was still reviewing how far he might have gone, and how much he might have been led to tell if they had not been interrupted by Mrs. Stalka's great noise.

But just then a young woman, one of Raynor's workers, ran into the cubicle exclaiming, "Haven't you heard all the fuss?"
"We haven't heard anything."
"It's Stalka, giving out with all her might. The reporters are coming. She said she phoned the papers, and you know she did."
"But what is she up to?" said Raynor.

She brought her wash and she's ironing it here, with our current, because the relief won't pay her electric bill. She has her ironing board set up by the admitting desk, and her kids are with her, all six. They never are in school more than once a week. She's always dragging them around with her because of her reputation."

"I don't want to miss any of this," said Raynor, jumping up. Grebe, as he followed with the secretary, said, "Who is this Stalka?"

"They call her the 'Blood Mother of Federal Street.' She's a professional donor at the hospitals. I think they pay ten dollars a pint. Of course it's no joke, but she makes a very big thing out of it and she and the kids are in the papers all the time."

A small crowd, staff and clients divided by a plywood barrier, stood in the narrow space of the entrance, and Stalka was shouting in a gruff, mannish voice, plunging the iron on the board and slamming it on the metal rest.

"My father and mother came in a steerage, and I was born in our house, Robey by Huron. I'm no dirty immigrant. I'm a U.S. citizen. My husband is a gassed veteran from France with lungs weaker'n paper, that hardly can he go to the toilet by himself. These six children of mine, I have to buy the shoes for their feet with my own blood. Even a lousy little white Communion necktie, that's a couple drops of blood; a little piece of mosquito veil for my Vadja so she won't be ashamed in church for the other girls, they take my blood for it by Goldblatt. That's how I keep goin'. A fine thing if I had to depend on the relief. And there's plenty of people on the rolls—fakes! There's nothin' they can't get, that can go and wrap bacon at Swift and Armour any time. They're lookin' for them by the Yards. They never have to be out of work. Only they rather lay in their lousy beds and eat the public's money."
She was not afraid, in a predominantly Negro station, to shout this way about Negroes.

Grebe and Raynor worked themselves forward to get a closer view of the woman. She was flaming with anger and with pleasure at herself, broad and huge, a golden-headed woman who wore a cotton cap laced with pink ribbon. She was barelegged and had on black gym shoes, her Hoover apron8 was open and her great breasts, not much restrained by a man’s undershirt, hampered her arms as she worked at the kid’s dress on the iron board. And the children, silent and white, with a kind of locked obstinacy, in sheepskins and lumberjackets, stood behind her. She had captured the station, and the pleasure this gave her was enormous. Yet her grievances were true grievances. She was telling the truth. But she behaved like a liar. The look of her small eyes was hidden, and while she raged she also seemed to be spinning and planning.

“They send me out college case workers in silk pants to talk me out of what I got comin’. Are they better’n me? Who told them? Fire them. Let ‘em go and get married, and then you won’t have to cut electric from people’s budget.”

The chief supervisor, Mr. Ewing, couldn’t silence her and he stood with folded arms at the head of his staff, bald, bald-headed, saying to his subordinates like the ex-school principal he was, “Pretty soon she’ll be tired and go.”

“No she won’t,” said Raynor to Grebe. “She’ll get what she wants. She knows more about the relief even than Ewing. She’s been on the rolls for years, and she always gets what she wants because she puts on a noisy show. Ewing knows it. He’ll give in soon. He’s only saving face. If he gets bad publicity, the Commissioner’ll have him on the carpet, downtown. She’s got him submerged; she’ll submerge everybody in time, and that includes nations and governments.”

Grebe replied with his characteristic smile, disagreeing completely. Who would take Stalika’s orders, and what changes could her yelling ever bring about?

No, what Grebe saw in her, the power that made people listen, was that her cry expressed the war of flesh and blood, perhaps turned a little crazy and certainly ugly, on this place and this condition. And at first, when he went out, the spirit of Stalika somehow presided over the whole district for him, and it took color from her; he saw her color, in the spotty curb fires, and the fires under the El, the straight alley of flamy gloom. Later, too, when he went into a tavern for a shot of rye, the sweat of beer, association with West Side Polish streets, made him think of her again.

He wiped the corners of his mouth with his muffler, his handkerchief being inconvenient to reach for, and went out again to get on with the delivery of his checks. The air bit cold and hard and a few flakes of snow formed near him. A train struck by and left a quiver in the frames and a bristling icy hiss over the rails.

Crossing the street, he descended a flight of broad steps into a basement grocery, setting off a little bell. It was a dark, long store and it caught you with its stinks of smoked meat, soap, dried peaches, and fish. There was a fire wrinkling and flapping in the little stove, and the proprietor was waiting,
an Italian with a long, hollow face and stubbord bristles. He kept his hands warm under his apron.

No, he didn't know Green. You knew people but not names. The same man might not have the same name twice. The police didn't know, either, and mostly didn't care. When somebody was shot or knifed they took the body away and didn't look for the murderer. In the first place, nobody would tell them anything. So they made up a name for the coroner and called it quits. And in the second place, they didn't give a goddamn anyhow. But they couldn't get to the bottom of a thing even if they wanted to. Nobody would get to know even a tenth of what went on among these people. They stabbed and stole, they did every crime and abomination you ever heard of, men and men, women and women, parents and children, worse than the animals. They carried on their own way, and the horrors passed off like a smoke.

There was never anything like it in the history of the whole world.

It was a long speech, deepening with every word in its fantasy and passion and becoming increasingly senseless and terrible: a swarm amassay by suggestion and invention, a huge, hugging, despairing knot, a human wheel of heads, legs, bellies, arms, rolling through his shop.

Grebe felt that he must interrupt him. He said sharply, "What are you talking about! All I asked was whether you knew this man."

"That isn't even the half of it. I been here six years. You probably don't want to believe this. But suppose it's true?"

"All the same," said Grebe, "there must be a way to find a person."

The Italian's close-spaced eyes had been queerly concentrated, as were his muscles, while he leaned across the counter trying to convince Grebe. Now he gave up the effort and sat down on his stool. "Oh—I suppose. Once in a while. But I've been telling you, even the cops don't get anywhere."

"They're always after somebody. It's not the same thing."

"Well, keep trying if you want. I can't help you."

But he didn't keep trying. He had no more time to spend on Green. He slipped Green's check to the back of the block. The next name on the list was field, winston.

He found the back-yard bungalow without the least trouble; it shared a lot with another house, a few feet of yard between. Grebe knew these two-shack arrangements. They had been built in vast numbers in the days before the swamps were filled and the streets raised, and they were all the same—a board-wall along the fence, well under street level, three or four ball-headed posts for clotheslines, greening wood, dead shingles, and a long, long flight of stairs to the rear door.

A twelve-year-old boy let him into the kitchen, and there the old man was, sitting by the table in a wheel chair.

"Oh, it's d' Government man," he said to the boy when Grebe drew out his checks. "Go bring me my box of papers." He cleared a space on the table.

"Oh, you don't have to go to all that trouble," said Grebe. But Field laid out his papers: Social Security card, relief certification, letters from the state hospital in Manteno, and a naval discharge dated San Diego, 1920.

"That's plenty," Grebe said, "just sign."

"You got to know who I am," the old man said, "you're from the Government. It's not your check, it's a Government check and you got no business to hand it over till everything is proved."

He loved the ceremony of it, and Grebe made no more objections. Field emptied his box and finished out the circle of cards and letters.
"There's everything I done and been. Just the death certificate and they can close book on me." He said this with a certain happy pride and magnificence. Still he did not sign; he merely held the little pen upright on the golden-green corduroy of his thigh. Grebe did not hurry him. He felt the old man's hunger for conversation.

"I got to get better coal," he said, "I send my little gran'son to the yard with my order and they fill his wagon with screening. The stove ain't made for it. It fall through the grate. The order says Franklin County egg-size coal."

"I'll report it and see what can be done."

"Nothing can be done, I expect. You know and I know. There ain't no little ways to make things better, and the only big thing is money. That's the only sunbeams, money. Nothing is black where it shines, and the only place you see black is where it ain't shining. What we colored have to have is our own rich. There ain't no other way."

Grebe sat, his reddened forehead bridged levelly by his close-cut hair and his cheeks lowered in the wings of his collar—the caked fire shone hard within the isinglass-and-iron frames but the room was not comfortable—sat and listened while the old man unfolded his scheme. This was to create one Negro millionaire a month by subscription. One clever, good-hearted young fellow elected every month would sign a contract to use the money to start a business employing Negroes. This would be advertised by chain letters and word of mouth, and every Negro wage earner would contribute a dollar a month. Within five years there would be sixty millionaires.

"That'll fetch respect," he said with a throat-stopped sound that came out like a foreign syllable. "You got to take and organize all the money that gets thrown away on the policy wheel and horse race. As long as they can take it away from you, they got no respect for you. Money, that's de' sun of human kind!" Field was a Negro of mixed blood, perhaps Cherokee, or Natchez; his skin was reddish. And he sounded, speaking about a golden sun in this dark room, and looked, shaggy and slab-headed, with the mingled blood of his face and broad lips, the little pen still upright in his hand, like one of the underground kings of mythology, old judge Minos himself.

And now he accepted the check and signed. Not to soil the slip, he held it down with his knuckles. The table budged and creaked, the center of the gloomy, heathen midden of the kitchen covered with bread, meat, and cans, and the scramble of papers.

"Don't you think my scheme'd work?"

"It's worth thinking about. Something ought to be done, I agree."

"It'll work if people will do it. That's all. That's the only thing, any time. When they understand it in the same way, all of them."

"That's true," said Grebe, rising. His glance met the old man's.

"I know you got to go," he said. "Well, God bless you, boy, you ain't been sly with me. I can tell in a minute."

He went back through the burled yard. Someone nursed a candle in a shed, where a man unloaded kindling wood from a sprawl-wheeled baby buggy and two voices carried on a high conversation. As he came up the sheltered passage he heard the hard boost of the wind in the branches and against the house fronts, and then, reaching the sidewalk, he saw the needle-eved red of cable towers in the open icy height hundreds of feet above the river and the factories—those keen points. From here, his view was obstructed all the way to the South Branch and its timber banks, and the
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cranes beside the water. Rebuilt after the Great Fire, this part of the city was, not fifty years later, in ruins again, factories boarded up, buildings deserted or fallen, gaps of prairie between. But it wasn't desolation that this made you feel, but rather a faltering of organization that set free a huge energy, an escaped, unattached, unregulated power from the giant raw place. Not only must people feel it but, it seemed to Grebe, they were compelled to match it. In their very bodies. He no less than others, he realized. Say that his parents had been servants in their time, whereas he was not supposed to be one. He thought that they had never done any service like this, which no one visible asked for, and probably flesh and blood could not even perform. Nor could anyone show why it should be performed; or see where the performance would lead. That did not mean that he wanted to be released from it, he realized with a grimly pensive face. On the contrary. He had something to do. To be compelled to feel this energy and yet have no task to do—that was horrible; that was suffering; he knew what that was. It was now quitting time. Six o'clock. He could go home if he liked, to his room, that is, to wash in hot water, to pour a drink, lie down on his quilt, read the paper, eat some liver paste on crackers before going out to dinner. But to think of this actually made him feel a little sick as though he had swallowed hard air. He had six checks left, and he was determined to deliver at least one of these: Mr. Green's check.

So he started again. He had four or five dark blocks to go, past open lots, condemned houses, old foundations, closed schools, black churches, mounds, and he reflected that there must be many people alive who had once seen the neighborhood rebuilt and new. Now there was a second layer of ruins; centuries of history accomplished through human massing. Numbers had given the place forced growth; enormous numbers had also broken it down. Objects once so new, so concrete that it could have occurred to anyone they stood for other things, had crumbled. Therefore, reflected Grebe, the secret of them was out. It was that they stood for themselves by agreement, and were natural and not unnatural by agreement, and when the things themselves collapsed the agreement became visible. What was it, otherwise, that kept cities from looking peculiar? Rome, that was almost permanent, did not give rise to thoughts like these. And was it abidingly real? But in Chicago, where the cycles were so fast and the familiar died out, and again rose changed, and died again in thirty years, you saw the common agreement or covenant, and you were forced to think about appearances and realities. (He remembered Raynor and he smiled. Raynor was a clever boy.) Once you had grasped this, a great many things became intelligible. For instance, why Mr. Field should conceive such a scheme. Of course, if people were to agree to create a millionaire, a real millionaire would come into existence. And if you wanted to know how Mr. Field was inspired to think of this, why, he had within sight of his kitchen window the chart, the very bones of a successful scheme—the E with its blue and green confetti of signals. People consented to pay dimes and ride the crash-box cars, and so it was a success. Yet how absurd it looked; how little reality there was to start with. And yet Yerkes, the great financier who built it, had known that he could get people to agree to do it. Viewed as itself, what a scheme of a scheme if seemed, how close to an appearance. Then why wonder at Mr. Field's idea?

He had grasped the principle. And then Grebe remembered, too, that Mr. Yerkes had established the Yerkes Observatory and endowed it with millions. Now how did the notion come to him in his New York museum of a palace or his Aegean-bound yacht to give money to astronomers? Was he awed by the success of his bizarre enterprise and therefore ready to spend money to find out where in the universe being and seeming were identical? Yes, he wanted to know what abides; and whether flesh is Bible grass; and he offered money to be burned in the fire of suns. Okay, then, Grebe thought further, these things exist because people consent to exist with them—we have got so far—and also there is a reality which doesn't depend on consent but within which consent is a game. But what about need, the need that keeps so many vast thousands in position? You tell me that, you private little gentleman and decent soul—he used these words against himself scornfully. Why is the consent given to misery? And why so painfully ugly? Because there is something that is dismal and permanently ugly? Here he sighed and gave it up, and thought it was enough for the present moment that he had a real check in his pocket for a Mr. Green who must be real beyond question. If only his neighbors didn't think they had to conceal him.

This time he stopped at the second floor. He struck a match and found a door. Presently a man answered his knock and Grebe had the check ready and showed it even before he began. "Does Tulliver Green live here? I'm from the relief."

The man narrowed the opening and spoke to someone at his back.
"Does he live here?"
"Uh-uh. No."
"Or anywhere in this building? He's a sick man and he can't come for his dough." He exhibited the check in the light, which was smoky—the air smelled of charred lard—and the man held off the brim of his cap to study it.
"Uh-uh. Never seen the name."
"There's nobody around here that uses crutches?"
He seemed to think, but it was Grebe's impression that he was simply waiting for a decent interval to pass.
"No, suh. Nobody I ever see."
"I've been looking for this man all afternoon"—Grebe spoke out with sudden force—and I'm going to have to carry this check back to the station. It seems strange not to be able to find a person to give him something when you're looking for him for a good reason. I suppose if I had bad news for him I'd find him quick enough."
There was a responsive motion in the other man's face. "That's right, I reckon."
"It almost doesn't do any good to have a name if you can't be found by it. It doesn't stand for anything. He might as well not have any," he went on, smiling. It was as much of a concession as he could make to his desire to laugh.
"Well, now, there's a little old knot-back man I see once in a while. He might be the one you lookin' for. Downstairs."
"Where? Right side or left? Which door?"
"I don't know which. Thin-face little knot-back with a stick."
But no one answered at any of the doors on the first floor. He went to the end of the corridor, searching by matchlight, and found only a stairless exit to the yard, a drop of about six feet. But there was a bungalow near the alley,
an old house like Mr. Field's. To jump was unsafe. He ran from the front
door, through the underground passage and into the yard. The place was
occupied. There was a light through the curtains, upstairs. The name on the
ticket under the broken, scoop-shaped mailbox was Green! He exultantly
rang the bell and pressed against the locked door. Then the lock clicked
faintly and a long staircase opened before him. Someone was slowly coming
down—a woman. She had the impression in the weak light that she was
shaping her hair as she came, making herself presentable, for he saw her
arms raised. But it was for support that they were raised; she was feeling her
way downward, down the wall, stumbling. Next he wondered about the pres-
sure of her feet on the treads; she did not seem to be wearing shoes. And it
was a freezing stairway. His ring had got her out of bed, perhaps, and she
had forgotten to put them on. And then he saw that she was not only shoeless
but naked; she was entirely naked, climbing down while she talked to herself,
a heavy woman, naked and drunk. She blundered into him. The contact of
her breasts, though they touched only his coat, made him go back against
the door with a blind shock. See what he had tracked down, in his hunting
game!

The woman was saying to herself, furious with insult. "So I can't——k,
huh? I'll show that son-of-a-bitch kin I, can't I."

What should he do now? Grebe asked himself. Why, he should go. He
should turn away and go. He couldn't talk to this woman. He couldn't keep
her standing naked in the cold. But when he tried he found himself unable
to turn away.

He said, "Is this where Mr. Green lives?"
But she was still talking to herself and did not hear him.
"Is this Mr. Green's house?"
At last she turned her furious drunken glance on him. "What do you want?"
Again her eyes wandered from him; there was a dot of blood in their
enraged brilliance. He wondered why she didn't feel the cold.
"I'm from the relief."
"Awright, what?"
"I've got a check for Tulliver Green."
This time she heard him and put out her hand.
"No, no, for Mr. Green. He's got to sign," he said. How was he going to
get Green's signature tonight?
"I'll take it. He can't."
He desperately shook his head, thinking of Mr. Field's precautions about
identification. "I can't let you have it. It's for him. Are you Mrs. Green?"
"Maybe I is, and maybe I ain't. Who want to know?"
"Is he upstairs?"
"Awright. Take it up yourself, you goddamn fool."
Sure, he was a goddamn fool. Of course he could not go up because Green
would probably be drunk and naked, too. And perhaps he would appear on
the landing soon. He looked eagerly upward. Under the light was a high
narrow brown wall. Empty! It remained empty!
"Hell with you, then!" he heard her cry. To deliver a check for coal and
clothes, he was keeping her in the cold. She did not feel it, but his face was
burning with frost and self-ridicule. He backed away from her.
"I'll come tomorrow, tell him."
"Ah, hell with you. Don' never come. What you doin' here in the nighttime?
Don' come back." She yelled so that he saw the breadth of her tongue. She
stood a stride in the long cold box of the hall and held on to the banister and the wall. The bungalow itself was shaped something like a box, a clumsy high box pointing into the freezing air with its sharp, wintry lights.

"If you are Mrs. Green, I'll give you the check," he said, changing his mind.

"Give here, then." She took it, took the pen offered with it in her left hand, and tried to sign the receipt on the wall. He looked around, almost as though to see whether his madness was being observed, and came near believing that someone was standing on a mountain of used tires in the auto-junking shop next door.

"But are you Mrs. Green?" he now thought to ask. But she was already climbing the stairs with the check, and it was too late, if he had made an error, if he was now in trouble, to undo the thing. But he wasn't going to worry about it. Though she might not be Mrs. Green, he was convinced that Mr. Green was upstairs. Whoever she was, the woman stood for Green, whom he was not to see this time. Well, you silly bastard, he said to himself, so you think you found him. So what? Maybe you really did find him—what of it? But it was important that there was a real Mr. Green whom they could not keep him from reaching because he seemed to come as an emissary from hostile appearances. And though the self-ridicule was slow to diminish, and his face still blazed with it, he had, nevertheless, a feeling of elation, too. "For after all," he said, "he could be found!"

1951, 1968

For much modern American drama the family is the central subject, as the anthology selections show. In Long Day's Journey into Night, O'Neill studied his own family through the Tyrones; in Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire the Kowalskis are one family, which Blanche invades, while Blanche and Stella, as sisters, are another. Most of Arthur Miller's plays, as well, concentrate on the family and exposition of ideal worlds, perhaps, an enlarged family. Often the protagonist's sense of family draws him into conflict with—and eventual doom in—the outside world. Yet, Miller recognizes that an ideal is sometimes a rationalization. Joe Keller persists in All My Sons (1947) that he shipped damaged airplane parts during the war to support his family, but a desire for commercial success was part of his motive. Eddie Carbone in A View from the Bridge (1955) accepts death because of his sense of responsibility to his niece, but married man though he is, he may also be in love with that same niece. In Death of a Salesman (1949), Willy Loman's delusions and self-deceptions derive from, and return to, his image of himself as family provider, an image he cannot live up to; driven by his desire to be "well liked," a successful social personality, he fails to connect with either of his sons and respects his wife. Thus Miller's treatment of the family leads to a treatment both of personal ideals and of the society within which families have to operate.

Miller was born on October 17, 1915, into a German-Jewish family in Manhattan; his father was a well-to-do but almost illiterate clothing manufacturer, his mother an avid reader. When his father's business collapsed after the stock market crash in 1929,