Sacks
by Raymond Carver

IT'S October, a damp day. From my hotel window I can see too much of this Midwestern city. I can see lights coming on in some of the buildings, smoke from the tall stacks rising in a thick climb. I wish I didn't have to look.

I want to pass along to you a story my father told me when I stopped over in Sacramento last year. It concerns some events that involved him two years before that time, that time being before he and my mother were divorced.

I'm a book salesman. I represent a well-known organization. We put out textbooks, and the home base is Chicago. My territory is Illinois, parts of Iowa and Wisconsin. I had been attending the Western Book Publishers Association convention in Los Angeles when it occurred to me to visit a few hours with my father. I had not seen him since the divorce, you understand. So I got his address out of my wallet and sent him a wire. The next morning I sent my things on to Chicago and boarded a plane for Sacramento.

IT took me a minute to pick him out. He was standing where everyone else was—behind the gate, that is—white hair, glasses, brown Sta-Prest pants.

"Dad, how are you?" I said.

He said, "Les."

We shook hands and moved toward the terminal.

"How's Mary and the kids?" he said.

"Everyone's fine," I said, which was not the truth.

He opened a white confectionary sack. He said, "I picked up a little something you could maybe take back with you. Not much. Some Almond Roca for Mary, and some jellybeans for the kids."

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't forget this when you leave," he said.

We moved out of the way as some nuns came running for the boarding area.

"A drink or a cup of coffee?" I said.

“Anything you say,” he said. “But I don’t have a car,” he said.

We located the lounge, got drinks, lit cigarettes.

“Here we are,” I said.

“Well, yes,” he said.

I shrugged and said, “Yes.”

I leaned back in the seat and drew a long breath, inhaling from what I took to be the air of woe that circled his head.

He said, “I guess the Chicago airport would make four of this one.”

“More than that,” I said.

“Thought it was big,” he said.

“When did you start wearing glasses?” I said.

“A while ago,” he said.

He took a good swallow, and then he got right down to it.

“I liked to have died over it,” he said. He rested his heavy arms on either side of his glass. “You’re an educated man, Les. You’ll be the one to figure it out.”

I turned the ashtray on its edge to read what was on the bottom: HARRAH’S CLUB/RENO AND LAKE TAHOE/GOOD PLACES TO HAVE FUN.

“She was a Stanley Products woman. A little woman, small feet and hands and coal-black hair. She wasn’t the most beautiful thing in the world. But she had these nice ways about her. She was thirty and had kids. But she was a decent woman, whatever happened.

“Your mother was always buying from her, a broom, a mop, some kind of pie filling. You know your mother. It was a Saturday, and I was home. Your mother was gone someplace. I don’t know where she was. She wasn’t working. I was in the front room reading the paper and having a cup of coffee when there was this knock on the door and it was this little woman. Sally Wain. She said she had some things for Mrs. Palmer. ‘I’m Mr. Palmer,’ I says. ‘Mrs. Palmer is not here now,’ I says. I ask her just to step in, you know, and I’d pay her for the things. She didn’t know whether she should or not. Just stands there holding this little paper sack and the receipt with it.

“‘Here, I’ll take that,’ I says. ‘Why don’t you come in and sit down a minute till I see if I can find some money.’

“‘That’s all right,’ she says. ‘You can owe it. I have lots of people do that. It’s all right.’ She smiles to let me know it was all right, you see.

“‘No, no,’ I says. ‘I’ve got it. I’d sooner pay it now. Save you a trip back and save me owing. Come in,’ I said, and I hold the screen door open. It wasn’t polite to have her standing out there.”

He coughed and took one of my cigarettes. From down the bar a woman laughed. I looked at her and then I read from the ashtray again.

“She steps in, and I says. ‘Just a minute, please,’ and I go into the bedroom to look for my wallet. I look around on the dresser, but I can’t find it. I find some change and matches and my comb, but I can’t find my wallet. Your mother has gone through that morning cleaning up, you see. So I go back to the front room and says, ‘Well, I’ll turn up some money yet.’

“‘Please, don’t bother,’ she says.

“‘No bother,’ I says. ‘Have to find my wallet, anyway. Make yourself at home.’

“‘Oh, I’m fine,’ she says.

“‘Look here,’ I says. ‘You hear about that big holdup back East? I was just reading about it.’

“‘I saw it on the TV last night,’ she says.

“‘They got away clean,’ I says.

“‘Pretty slick,’ she says.

“‘The perfect crime,’ I says.

“‘Not many people get away with it,’ she says.

“I didn’t know what else to say. We were just standing there looking at each other. So I went on out to the porch and looked for my pants in the hamper, where I figured your mother had put them. I found the wallet in my back pocket and went back to the other room and asked how much I owed.

“It was three or four dollars, and I paid her. Then, I don’t know why, I asked her what she’d do with it if she had it, all the money those robbers got away with.

“She laughed and I saw her teeth.

“I don’t know what came over me then, Les. Fifty-five years old. Grown kids. I knew better than that. This woman was half my age with little kids in school. She did this Stanley job just the hours they were in school, just to give her something to keep busy. She didn’t have to work.

They had enough to get by on. Her husband, Larry, he was a driver for Consolidated Freight. Made good money. Teamster, you know."

He stopped and wiped his face.

"Anybody can make a mistake," I said.

He shook his head.

"She had these two boys, Hank and Freddy. About a year apart. She showed me some pictures. Anyway, she laughs when I say that about the money, says she guessed she'd quit selling Stanley Products and move to Dago and buy a house. She said she had relations in Dago."

I lit another cigarette. I looked at my watch. The bartender raised his eyebrows and I raised my glass.

"So she's sitting down on the sofa now and she asks me do I have a cigarette. Said she'd left hers in her other purse, and how she hadn't had a smoke since she left home. Says she hated to buy from a machine when she had a carton at home. I gave her a cigarette and I hold a match for her. But I can tell you, Les, my fingers were shaking."

He stopped and studied the bottles for a minute. The woman who'd done the laughing had her arms locked through the arms of the men on either side of her.

"IT'S fuzzy after that. I remember I asked her if she wanted coffee. Said I'd just made a fresh pot. She said she had to be going. She said maybe she had time for one cup. I went out to the kitchen and waited for the coffee to heat. I tell you, Les, I'll swear before God, I never once stepped out on your mother the whole time we were man and wife. Not once. There were times when I felt like it and had the chance. I tell you, you don't know your mother like I do."

I said, "You don't have to say anything in that direction."

"I took her her coffee, and she's taken off her coat by now. I sit down on the other end of the sofa from her and we get to talking more personal. She says she's got two kids in Roosevelt grade school, and Larry, he was a driver and was sometimes gone for a week or two. Up to Seattle, or down to L.A., or maybe to Phoenix. Always someplace. She says she met Larry when they were going to high school. Said she was proud of the fact she'd gone all the way through. Well, pretty soon she gives a little laugh at something I'd said. It was a thing that could maybe be taken two ways. Then she asks if I'd heard the one about the traveling shoe-salesman who called on the widow woman. We laughed over that one, and then I told her one a little worse. So then she laughs hard at that and smokes another cigarette. One thing's leading to another, is what's happening, don't you see.

"Well, I kissed her then. I put her head back on the sofa and I kissed her, and I can feel her tongue out there rushing to get in my mouth. You see what I'm saying? A man can go along obeying all the rules and then it don't matter a damn anymore. His luck just goes, you know?

“But it was all over in no time at all. And afterwards she says, ‘You must think I’m a whore or something,’ and then she just goes.

“I was so excited, you know? I fixed up the sofa and turned over the cushions. I folded all the newspapers and even washed the cups we’d used. I cleaned out the coffee pot. All the time what I was thinking about was how I was going to have to face your mother. I was scared.

“Well, that’s how it started. Your mother and I went along the same as usual. But I took to seeing that woman regular.”

The woman down the bar got off her stool. She took some steps toward the center of the floor and commenced to dance. She tossed her head from side to side and snapped her fingers. The bartender stopped doing drinks. The woman raised her arms above her head and moved in a small circle in the middle of the floor. But then she stopped doing it and the bartender went back to work.

“Did you see that?” my father said.

But I didn’t say anything at all.

“SO that’s the way it went,” he said. “Larry has this schedule, and I’d be over there every time I had the chance. I’d tell your mother I was going here or going there.”

He took off his glasses and shut his eyes. “I haven’t told this to nobody.”

There was nothing to say to that. I looked out at the field and then at my watch.

“Listen,” he said. “What time does your plane leave? Can you take a different plane? Let me buy us another drink, Les. Order us two more. I’ll speed it up. I’ll be through with this in a minute. Listen,” he said.

“She kept his picture in the bedroom by the bed. First it bothered me, seeing his picture there and all. But after a while I got used to it. You see how a man gets used to things?” He shook his head. “Hard to believe. Well, it all come to a bad end. You know that. You know all about that.”

“I only know what you tell me,” I said.

“I’ll tell you, Les. I’ll tell you what’s the most important thing involved here. You see, there are things. More important things than your mother leaving me. Now, you listen to this. We were in bed one time. It must have been around lunchtime. We were just laying there talking. I was dozing maybe. It’s that funny kind of dreaming dozing, you know. But at the same time, I’m telling myself I better remember that pretty soon I got to get up and go. So it’s like this when this car pulls into the driveway and somebody gets out and slams the door.

“‘My God,’ she screams. ‘It’s Larry!’

“I must have gone crazy. I seem to remember thinking that if I run out the back door he’s going to pin me up against this big fence in the yard and maybe kill me. Sally is making a funny kind of sound. Like she couldn’t get her breath. She has her robe on, but it’s not closed up, and she’s standing in the kitchen shaking her head. All this is happening all at once, you understand. So there I am, almost naked with my clothes in my hand, and Larry is opening the front door. Well, I jump. I just jump right into their picture window, right in there through the glass.”

“You got away?” I said. “He didn’t come after you?”

My father looked at me as if I were crazy. He stared at his empty glass. I looked at my watch, stretched. I had a small headache behind my eyes.

I said, “I guess I better be getting out there soon.” I ran my hand over my chin and straightened my collar. “She still in Redding, that woman?”

“You don’t know anything, do you?” my father said. “You don’t know anything at all. You don’t know anything except how to sell books.”

It was almost time to go.

“Ah, God, I’m sorry,” he said. “The man went all to pieces, is what. He got down on the floor and cried. She stayed out in the kitchen. She did her crying out there. She got down on her knees and she prayed to God, good and loud so the man would hear.”

My father started to say something more. But instead he shook his head. Maybe he wanted me to say something.

But then he said, “No, you got to catch a plane.”

I helped him into his coat and we started out, my hand guiding him by the elbow.

“I’ll put you in a cab,” I said.

He said, “I’ll see you off.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “Next time maybe.”

We shook hands. That was the last I’ve seen of him. On the way to Chicago, I remembered how I’d left his sack of gifts on the bar. Just as well. Mary didn’t need candy, Almond Roca or anything else.

That was last year. She needs it now even less.