

Mr. Merrill's Extraordinary Driving Cap

Merrill found the cap in the store at closing time. The butter-soft, fine leather driving cap immediately reminded him of the British racing green MG classic he had seen parked a few times across the street. In fact, the leather looked a match for the upholstery of the MG. The cap rested between *The Atlantic* and *Audubon* in the periodical section of Merrill's *Used and 1/2 Price Books and Magazines*. It had been placed as carefully as if it, too, were merchandise displayed for sale.

Reviewing the customers of the day, Merrill recalled only a few regulars and semi-regulars. Some of the men wore hats: the teen-ager in a backward baseball cap, the postman, the artist who affected a beret, and the retired professor with a Tyrolean topper. The cap did not seem a match for any of them, but Merrill had not noticed the green MG in the neighborhood for a month or more.

Merrill turned the cap over in his hands, looking for markings. There was not even a manufacturer's label or size tag. He enjoyed the smell and feel of the leather and could not resist placing the cap on his head. He thought of *Walter Mitty* and pictured himself in tweed golf knickers. With another adjustment of the bill, he

imagined himself stepping into the British sports car. The fantasy passed, but Merrill wore the cap as he worked, planning to place it on a shelf behind the counter. Doubtless the owner would come looking for it.

As he dusted and straightened shelves, Merrill hummed; content among the books he loved, in the shop that had been his life for almost thirty years. Working his way to the front of the store, Merrill forgot the cap as it settled on his head, a better fit than the gray fedora he owned but rarely wore. He pulled on the jacket he had worn that morning and stepped into the last of the afternoon sunshine with the comfortable cap still on his head.

Merrill passed the dry cleaner and the shoe repair before he caught his unfamiliar reflection in the darkened window of the chiropractor's office. He ducked his head to pull off the cap and tuck it into the front of his jacket. What if the owner were someone from the neighborhood?

Merrill stopped at the bank and dropped an envelope into the night depository, then continued past familiar storefronts, cafés, houses and apartment buildings. He watched arguments and friendly conversations as though they took place in mime. Light evening traffic easily masked the voices, especially since Merrill was growing deaf.

Recent immigrants from various countries peopled many of the neighborhood homes and businesses. Even when Merrill could hear their conversations, he often could not understand them. At the corner grocery

where he stopped for oats, brown sugar, and cat food, Merrill had observed at least three generations of an Iranian family, maybe four, behind the counter in various combinations. While they waited for customers to make their selections, they argued in their native language or translated news for the grandmother from a portable TV.

When Merrill unzipped his jacket to take the shopping list from his shirt pocket, the driving cap fell out. He placed it on his head absently, reading over his small list of necessities. He filled a handbasket methodically from the familiar aisles of the store, and then approached the register. He was surprised to hear the grandmother say, "This one is a good man, but lonely I think." Years of working with customers helped Merrill mask any dismay at having his psyche probed so publicly. The son's reply, "Yes, but who isn't?" made the remark less personal and Merrill was able to check out without embarrassment.

On the street again, Merrill was glad for the warmth of the cap and the evening somehow changed. Wherever he looked, people's faces came into sharp focus and their conversations became audible in snatches as his gaze passed over them, rather like twisting a radio dial or flipping through the channels on TV. He heard construction workers and pedestrians on the opposite side of the street as well as children and shopkeepers with whom he shared the sidewalk.

"Going to quit now. Almost dark."

"...overtime last weekend and next, too."

“Can’t catch me, ha ha!”

“I’m gonna tell!”

“Goodnight, Sam. We’ll start inventory tomorrow.”

These routine exchanges seemed cacophonous to Merrill who usually heard only his own thoughts and the most intrusive noises on his daily walks. He noted again the peculiar quality of the evening atmosphere as he shifted his small burden of purchases and turned the corner onto Holland Street.

The neighborhood was old: an enclave of neat, tiny lawns and large trees, bordered by high-rises and offices in one direction and a gated addition on the other side. Merrill never tired of observing the seasons in the trees and shrubs and flowers of the neighborhood. Sadly, these beauties brought memories of Mrs. Merrill, gone for five years now.

After her death, Merrill remained two more years in the house they shared all their married life. Their son, Merrill Junior, came to help dispose of most of the furniture and his mother’s treasured things. He took a few books and some family pictures, but neither he nor his wife had any interest in the outdated furnishings and costume jewelry left by his mother. For himself, Merrill Senior kept his beloved books, in their glass-fronted shelves, and enough other furniture to fill the tiny rooms he took at the Mount Vernon apartments.

Merrill shared the Mount Vernon with other widowers and widows, struggling students, starving artists, a young man dying of AIDS, and a recent parolee from the state prison. Most of the tenants were

quiet and solitary. Merrill knew a few of their names but did not count any of the residents as friends. Making friends had been Mrs. Merrill's department. Approaching the Mount Vernon, Merrill saw Mrs. Chadwick on the porch at her end of the building.

"Good evening, Mr. Merrill," she called. Merrill made a short wave in response and heard her add, "Surely he's lonely too." It was the second time that evening his comfort and isolation had been invaded by a mere acquaintance. Merrill did not show his agitation, but quickened his step.

"Yes,..well.... Good evening, Mrs. Chadwick," he managed to say. He hurried up the steps of his own covered porch.

Inside his comfortable lair, Merrill switched on the floor lamp beside his leather armchair. "Do I look so sad?" he wondered. Not a day passed that he did not miss Mrs. Merrill of course, but he bore his grief with stoicism, which could hardly be distinguished from any other of his emotional states. He did not feel any more sad or lonely or stressed than usual. He turned to the beveled mirror next to the door to see if his face portrayed some deep sorrow. The thought disappeared quickly when he saw the leather driving cap on his head. He chuckled and hung the cap with his jacket on the coat rack of the mirror frame so he would be sure to take it back to the shop in the morning.

After breakfast, Merrill gathered into a cloth tote bag some catalogs, tea bags, and mousetraps he needed to take to the shop. On top he placed the leather driving cap. He would have the cap available for its owner to

reclaim, but he had to admit it would not disappoint him if whoever had left it could not remember where to look for it.

After a suitable time, say a week or so, Merrill could feel free to appropriate the cap and wear it as his own. A shopkeeper often came by odd treasures in this manner. Over the years, quite an assortment of abandoned belongings had passed through Merrill's hands, including small amounts of money, a coin commemorating the first men to walk on the moon, and a ring with a ruby set which Mrs. Merrill loved to wear. But the leather driving cap caught Merrill's fancy as nothing else ever had. He laughed at his own enthusiasm and chided himself, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods!" He patted the cap inside his tote bag.

At the corner market, Merrill stopped to buy peanut butter for the mousetraps. It was early, and the grandmother who had remarked his loneliness the night before was alone behind the counter. Embarrassed again, Merrill tried to make small talk as he paid for the peanut butter. "Beautiful spring, isn't it? Always nice to see the trees budding out, even if it does play havoc with the allergies, eh?"

The grandmother looked at him stolidly, made his change and announced with a shrug, "No English."

"But I heard.... You said...." Merrill's usual composure abandoned him and he hurried out.

Merrill allowed himself a brief pout as he walked toward the shop, but had to abandon his self-pity before

arriving. One of his distributors' trucks had come early and the driver waited impatiently on the walk. Merrill hurried the last block of the way. He tossed his bag on the counter as soon as he unlocked the door. By the time he signed the bill of lading, customers were arriving and Merrill stashed the tote bag under the counter.

Traffic in the shop slowed in the early afternoon. Merrill set the mousetraps in the back room, placed the driving cap on a shelf behind the register, and began some quarterly bookkeeping duties. The postman arrived about two. He was the first to comment on the cap. "Fine hat on your shelf, Mr. Merrill. Are you stocking haberdashery now?"

Merrill chuckled and picked up the cap. "No. No, someone left this in the shop. I expect the owner will be looking for it." He turned the cap over in his hands, caressing the leather. He offered it for the postman's inspection with a tentative, jealous gesture. The two men bantered for a few minutes and Merrill modeled the cap. A woman entered the shop and stood quietly while they talked. Merrill turned his attention to her when the postman began to leaf through some new/used comics.

The woman was about Merrill's age, maybe a little older, with gray hair in a youthful style. She wore neat slacks and a light sweater and carried a plastic bag from the grocer's with a paper packet inside. There were laugh lines around her attractive eyes and mouth, though no smile softened her face today. "May I help you?" Merrill inquired.

“Do you buy books? From individuals?” she asked, holding her bundle like a cake to be entered in the county fair.

“Yes, ma’am, I do, depending on the value of the book and on whether my customers would be interested in it.” He paused. “There are a lot of variables involved.”

“Yes. Well, it’s valuable. I’m pretty sure it’s valuable.” She placed the blue plastic bag on the counter. As Merrill unwrapped the book inside, he heard her add, “Please, God. I don’t know what else to sell. If only Charlie weren’t so sick. He’d know where to take them.”

Merrill cleared his throat nervously, uncomfortable with the woman’s display of emotion and hinted need. He wondered if the woman were some sort of con artist, trying to arouse his sympathy with her story. He half expected to find a cheap reprint of a McGuffey reader, or worse, a vanity press copy of the woman’s grandmother’s poems.

He discarded the final layer of paper. For a second Merrill lost the carefully constructed poker face a dealer in used merchandise must cultivate. A tiny “Oh” escaped his lips and his eyebrows arched ever so slightly. He touched the signature on the title page of Carl Sandburg’s *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*, Volume I. He turned a few pages, savoring the quality of the paper as lovers of books do, then turned back to check the date again. An autographed first edition if the ink could be believed. Merrill cleared his throat to steady his voice. “It’s lovely, but...” he began.

The woman interrupted. "There are more. I have to have a car payment this month. Volume II, and then four volumes of *The War Years*. I don't know what else to try to sell! The signature is authentic. The bank will wait on the house but.... If you can't help me, do you know who can?"

Merrill studied the woman's face as she spoke. It seemed two women were speaking at once. One monologue layered over the other. One he heard and one he felt, for lack of a better word. Perplexed, Merrill did not respond to the woman's question. She took his hesitancy for skepticism. "It's quite authentic and not stolen, I assure you. My husband worked for a member of the Sandburg family when he was in college. Oh, how long ago that was! He became a trusted and favored employee. Charlie has always known how to make himself indispensable. When the gentleman died, he left his money to his children but he left the books to Charlie, to my husband. We always thought they would be a legacy to our children, but there weren't any. So, what can you offer me for it?"

Merrill continued to hear two voices in the woman's speech. Nervously, he gestured to brush back his thinning hair and found the leather driving cap still on his head. Now he felt foolish as well as confused. He pulled off the cap muttering, "Sorry." He forced himself to the business at hand. Merrill had to consider, however fleetingly, that while the woman knew her offering was valuable, she had no idea how valuable. How much, or how little, might one offer that would be honorable while still leaving the largest margin for profit in the resale?

As he pondered this moral and retailing dilemma, Merrill asked the woman a few questions about the condition of the remaining volumes. She answered quietly, without the urgency of her previous replies. Merrill was relieved not to have to sift through the dual-natured responses she had given before, however her voice was now so soft he cocked his good ear toward her with the effort to hear. His conscience overrode any stirrings of greed and Merrill explained to the woman that she really needed someone who could arrange an auction for rare book dealers and collectors. He added, "However, I understand that with your husband's illness and your need for some ready cash..."

She interrupted, "Oh dear! Did I really say that? I was determined not to. I didn't want to appear either manipulative or too desperate." Merrill felt confused again. He was used to hearing less, not more, of what people said to him. Still, he knew what he had heard in their unusual conversation. He deferred the puzzle for a later time. Merrill wrote a note to a colleague who would arrange for the books to be auctioned and also make the woman a loan against their expected value. Merrill would receive a small percentage for the referral. The woman bound up her parcel and thanked him repeatedly on her way out.

Merrill sighed deeply, as if he had just completed some difficult bit of bookkeeping. He had forgotten anyone else was in the shop until the postman approached the counter again. "Wow! What a find, huh? Too bad you couldn't cash in on that one. By the way, how did you know her husband was sick and she needed money right away?"

“Well, I heard.... Sometimes you just.... Intuition?”
Merrill could not formulate an answer any more logical to himself than to the postman.

The shop remained quiet in the afternoon. Merrill had plenty of time to replay in his mind the “Sandburg Incident,” as he began to think of it. The curious conversation of the woman overshadowed the exhilaration of the valuable find. He mentally repeated the scene, every gesture, every look, every word, as carefully as he could, trying to discover what about the woman’s speech so puzzled him. No, only the first part of the conversation bothered him. Later, after removing the hat.... The hat. Of course! That explained several things about the past twenty-four hours.

At last Merrill made the connection of his improved “hearing” and the lovely leather driving cap found the previous afternoon. The sidewalk conversations overheard, the Iranian Grandmother’s comment, Mrs. Chadwick’s thoughts, and now the “Sandburg Incident,” were all owing to the cap. Merrill caressed the supple leather with new affection, eagerness, and a touch of awe. He chuckled and returned the cap to its comfortable place on his head, thinking no more about the unknown owner who might come to reclaim it.

As soon as he could, Merrill hurried out a lingering customer and turned over the Open/Closed placard in the window of the shop. He could hardly wait to get back out on the sidewalk to test his theory. He felt like humming as he walked. Instead, he held his breath, turning his head slightly from side to side, like a mobile radar unit. He marveled at the range and diversity of the

conversations he could pick up just by focusing on the faces of the speakers.

Merrill detoured from his usual route a few blocks to take in an oriental market. He wanted to test another aspect of the augmented “hearing” afforded by the cap. He was pleased, but not now surprised, to be able to understand everyone he overheard in the store. When he realized he was wandering up and down the aisles grinning foolishly, not behaving at all like a shopper, he chose a cellophane bag of dried mushrooms and some salted plums. He walked around a few more minutes, enjoying the sense of being an invisible observer. There was an unexpected rush of power in knowing that the Chinese and Korean customers could not guess he understood their comments about the price of pork.

Merrill hoped Mrs. Chadwick would be on the porch of the Mount Vernon again tonight. He imagined all sorts of things she might be thinking about him, and finally blushed, having succeeded in embarrassing himself. He resolved to analyze later whether or not he would want Mrs. Chadwick to think such things about him. When he turned the corner onto Holland Street, the porches of the Mount Vernon were empty of people. Merrill shrugged and laughed at himself.

Preoccupied with thoughts about the cap, Merrill moved more slowly than usual, heating supper for himself and putting out food for the big gray cat that shared his rooms. He sat in his leather chair with a mug of vegetable soup and contemplated the cap hanging near the door. He imagined applications for the unique properties of the driving cap. In some scenarios, he

emerged a sort of superhero who was able to save the day because of his extraordinary gift! From pride, he moved to greed, imagining how he might make a killing on the stock market by hanging out in espresso bars near the investment houses to catch trading tips by wearing the wonderful hat.

Merrill became quite excited and decided to get a pencil and pad to jot down some of his better ideas. As he searched the desk drawer, someone knocked. Frowning at the intrusion on his daydreams, Merrill opened the door to find Mrs. Chadwick.

“Good evening, Mr. Merrill. I baked some cookies today. They’re really too many for just me. I thought I’d share them with the neighbors.” Mrs. Chadwick proffered a plate swathed in plastic wrap. Still thinking about the driving cap, Merrill wondered what he might be hearing from Mrs. Chadwick if he had it on. He regarded her quizzically.

She took his silence for irritation. “Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. You’ve hardly had your supper and here I am intruding.”

Mrs. Chadwick’s discomfort roused the gentleman in Merrill. “No, no. It’s no bother. Please come in.” Merrill positioned a chair to face his own. “Please sit down, Mrs. Chadwick. I’m about to make tea. Will you join me? We’ll have some of those cookies.”

“Please call me Ruth. Well, I suppose I could stay for just a minute.” Mrs. Chadwick’s self-satisfied blush did not escape Merrill’s notice, and he smiled to himself as he made the tea. The two neighbors spent a long

hour making tentative acquaintance and found they had several things in common. Mrs. Chadwick, Ruth, admired Merrill's books and made fast friends with the gray tomcat.

Merrill was genuinely sorry to see Ruth make her gracious exit. "Thank you so much, Ruth, for the cookies. I don't usually have sweets, but they were a treat. Come again sometime, anytime, I mean soon." He felt himself babbling and tried to end on a more controlled note. "I'll see if I can find that gardening book I mentioned, in the shop tomorrow."

Merrill did not sleep well. His mind raced with possibilities for the powers of the driving cap, and when he dozed, he dreamed of walking along a creek bank in the tulips with Mrs. Chadwick, Ruth. Unrested, he roused himself with difficulty to his morning routine. He did not take coffee on the veranda. He put on his jacket and stuffed the driving cap into his tote bag.

Merrill walked to the shop by a different route than usual. He took his time, letting the chill morning clear his head. He stopped in the courtyard of a church and sat on a stone bench near a large Celtic cross. He took the driving cap out of his bag and sighed, crushing the soft leather to his chest. He placed the cap on his head hopefully, but it did not seem to make such a perfect fit as it had before. Finally, he got up. Stepping over some ivy, he climbed a small pedestal and hung the cap from one arm of the cross. It seemed neither incongruous nor irreverent perched there. Merrill regarded the cap for a minute before leaving the courtyard. His step was

lighter walking to the shop, but his head was cold and bare.

By the time he reached the shop, a full ten minutes later than usual, Merrill had formulated a plan of action. He began a list of things to do for the day: 1) appointment with audiologist – hearing aids? 2) gardening book – Ruth 3) leather goods catalog – cap.

Merrill straightened up from his list on the counter. Through the shop window he caught a glimpse of a British racing green MG classic pulling away from the stoplight at the corner. He smiled, thinking about the leather driving cap in the courtyard. He wondered who would find it.

The End

Flight of the Wickerplane

I saw the little wicker biplane in an import shop and had to have it. My wife thought I was crazy. I'd never told her the story. It's not something you expect people to believe. We didn't have much money at the time, so \$19.95 was a major expense.

Here's the deal: when I was a kid, I saw a late-night movie about this primitive tribe—from Africa, Indonesia, I don't remember--fascinated by a small plane they saw in their sky from time to time. Since they had no contact with the outside world, the plane became a mythic entity to them. First the children started trying to make imitations of the plane as toys, then the shaman created a model out of twigs and it became an object of veneration for the tribe. They told stories about the flying god whose eyes glowed in the dusk, who sometimes waved his giant arms at them, and who, by the claim of one tribal elder, could swallow up a man and take him away into the sky.

I told Marla about the movie, but that wasn't why I had to have the little wicker plane, or wickerplane, all one word, as I thought of it. It's time to get the story down.

I was pretty much a geek in high school. The Coke-bottle lenses in my glasses were an effective curtain between me and other people. Nobody seemed to be able to see in to who I really was and I couldn't see them all that well either. I could see to read and that's what mattered to me. My one claim to fame was winning a contest my senior year when the Tuesday Ladies' Study Club offered a prize for the best essay titled "Reading Opens Doors." I think they expected some cute girl in a plaid skirt to win, but they were nice enough when it turned out to be me who came to read and accept the twenty-five dollar check. After that, I started thinking maybe I could be a writer, as well as a reader.

I was lucky my folks could handle tuition for two years at the community college. I did a little yard work and dog sitting to earn money for books. What with reading and mowing grass and picking up dog poop, I spent a lot of time looking down.

My dad was okay. I mean I loved him. We didn't talk much and neither of us was the kind to throw a ball around. It kind of surprised me that his dying left such a huge hole. I had just gotten a grant and a little scholarship money to finish my degree at the University when he died, but Mom said to go on. Grandma was moving in with her and it would be easier for them to get settled.

My apartment was about eight blocks from campus. A few decades earlier, it probably commanded a high rent because of its proximity to the university, but by the time I got there it was rundown enough I could afford it. The tenants included some students, a parolee from the state pen, an AIDS patient on hospice care, a couple of single moms and their kids, a woman I thought was a hooker, maybe an ex-hooker, and Deems.

Deems was a step up from a street person. Obviously he had a place to live, but he always had a three-day growth of whiskers. I never saw him either clean-shaven or with a full beard. When I thought about that later, it made me laugh--another of many mysteries about Deems. He wore an assortment of long-sleeved plaid shirts, winter and summer. His faded jeans always looked the same, so I don't know if there was more than one pair. Sometimes he wore a greasy ball cap, sometimes not. The boots were the most striking feature of Deems' wardrobe. Not cowboy boots but smooth, black engineer boots, always clean and buffed to a soft sheen, nice as glove leather. I saw later that the soles were thin.

Deems seemed to be always outside, sitting in a folding chair in his open doorway or pattering with the accumulation of junk that started outside his door and reached around the end of the building. His was the last apartment in the row. He'd been there a long time.

Deems had a habit of talking to himself out loud, like some street people do. When you pass by, you're never sure whether they're talking to you or not. You want to be polite, partly for the sake of good manners and partly because you're just a little afraid ignoring them will be taken as an insult and set off a tirade. On the other hand, you don't want to encourage them too much and get drawn into some surreal discussion based on their paranoia. Or make too much eye contact and have them ask you for money.

Anyway, going to and from class, I always spoke to Deems. At first, he just waved and bobbed his head. After a few weeks, he began to comment on the weather or the previous night's late partyers. I kept walking and made responsive noises that he could interpret however he wished. Finally, somehow, we exchanged names.

One of Deems' piles of junk was covered with a tarp and it seemed gradually to grow bigger under there. Once in a while, I'd see him pulling up the cover as I was leaving for an early class, as if he'd been working for a while and was just finishing up. Once I caught a glimpse of a wooden framework under the tarp and said something like, "Quite an undertaking." Deems muttered about his "project."

By the spring of what was supposed to be the final semester of my M.A. in literature, I had a few acquaintances, other grad school geeks who
