

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 from a portable TV for the grandmother.

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.

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 distributor's 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.

Chronological Order

Carolina saw a dark shape moving through the curtain of snow at the same instant she felt her truck begin to slide on the black ice of the parking lot. The figure might have been reaching out to her, but she probably wouldn't have stopped, even if she hadn't been preoccupied with trying to stabilize the slide of the heavy pickup.

The mall day ended at nine and whoever closed the shop had to vacuum, straighten merchandise and tally the register. By planning ahead, it was possible to get away before nine-thirty. Whoever closed the shop had the additional duty of dropping the bank bag at the automatic teller on the edge of the mall parking lot. Carolina and her assistant manager, Lisa, learned to be alert to their surroundings and move quickly, but there hadn't been any problems with armed robbers at the mall for over five years. Or so the security agency said.

As manager of The Chain Chain, a small accessory shop in the mall, Carolina was using the fashion merchandising degree she'd earned at the community college back home. She enjoyed living in her efficiency apartment and saving money, for a house or maybe a nice wedding, if she met someone. She was glad to be out of tiny Seymour, even if Lubbock wasn't

as much city as Dallas or Houston. And she was really glad to be out of the dead-end relationship with Donald. Carolina thought she'd give a lot to undo the last two years. But, as her mother often said, "You don't get to go backward. Just pick yourself up and keep moving."

Staying late for inventory and laying out new merchandise was the part of her job Carolina liked least. It meant her departure from the store would be two to three hours later than usual. She could sleep late the next day, but she didn't like being the last employee out of the mall except for security guards.

Inventory night on January 31 was even worse. A north Texas blizzard came up and visibility was especially low. Headlights reflected from the thick veil of blowing snow instead of showing a path. Lines on the parking lot were obscured. Only stop signs marked the once-familiar terrain and exits onto city streets, but even the stop signs were difficult to see in blizzard conditions. When Carolina felt the soft bump near the back of the truck while recovering from a slide, she imagined she had grazed an unseen curb. She didn't want to think about the dark figure she might have seen as she pulled away from the bank kiosk.

At home, Carolina quickly washed her face and pulled on flannel pj's and warm socks before curling up under a down comforter where her cat, Noodle, was already snoozing.

Noodle meowing for breakfast woke Carolina. The clock radio declared 11:10, late for Noodle. Scarcely any light showed at the edges of the

window blinds, not enough for mid-morning, even in January. Carolina flipped open her cell phone, charging on the bedside table. It too showed 11:10. She stretched under the down comforter before emerging for a quick visit to the bathroom and a trip to the kitchen alcove to serve Noodle a tiny can of Feline Feast and some fresh water. The view from the window next to her compact dining table showed a courtyard worthy of a postcard photo with sparkling snow and ice-trimmed shrubs. No one had tromped through to the parking lot yet that morning. Carolina looked at the clock on the microwave – 11:10. Though the details didn't add up, she speculated a brief power outage in the previous night's storm.

During national morning talk shows, the TV scrolled local weather and news of schools and businesses that would open later or even be closed for the day. Carolina knew the mall would be "business as usual." When the New York announcer proclaimed seven-forty-five a.m., Carolina moved to reset the microwave to six-forty-five, Central Time. As soon as she pressed "Enter," the display showed 11:10. She shook her head and returned to the still-warm comforter. She reached for her clock radio and reset the time. Rolling over, she did not see it return to the insistent 11:10.

The next time Carolina awoke, pale winter light illumined the parchment blinds. When she stretched, her empty stomach pulled toward her backbone. She remembered she had not eaten since lunch the day before. She thought about

pancakes, or an omelet, and wondered if she still had time for a big breakfast and a couple of errands on the way to work. She turned to the radio and saw 11:10, again. She growled at the stubborn appliance, rousing Noodle from his nap on the neighboring pillow. Quick-dial to her assistant manager was number four on her phone.

"Lisa, what time is it anyway? All my clocks are screwed up. Maybe the storm or something."

"Hey, Carolina. Yeah, it's crazy out there. It took me forty-five minutes to get here this morning when it's usually a fifteen-minute drive. The streets are like ice, but at least the salt trucks have been out. The loop is actually less slick than the side streets."

"Yeah, but what time is it? I'm supposed to come in this afternoon and I don't know how much time I've got left here."

"Oh, you're fine. It's only ten-thirty. School kids are already starting to show up to cruise the mall, though. Any time they get a free day from school... Listen! The awfulest thing happened! When I finally got here this morning, there was an ambulance and some police cars in the south lot, near where we usually park. I had to go to the west lot. I asked one of the security guards about it when he walked by a few minutes ago."

While Lisa talked, Carolina stared, unfocused, at her clock radio, but as she listened, the display seemed to grow brighter and burn into her consciousness. She knew the significance of the numbers before Lisa finished her story.