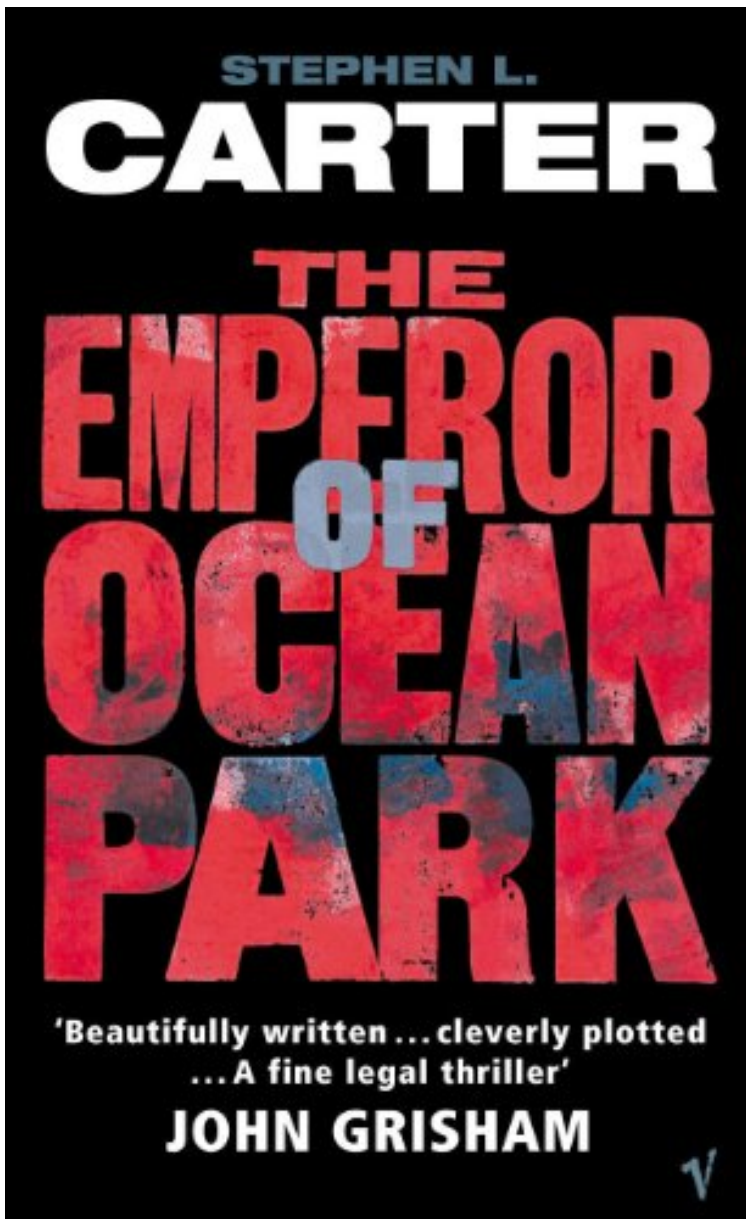


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The Emperor Of Ocean Park



*Par Stephen L Carter
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJudge Oliver Garland has just died in suspicious circumstances. Conservative and controversial, Garland had many enemies. Many years ago, he'd earned a judge's highest prize: a Supreme Court nomination. But in a scene of bitter humiliation in front of a televised audience and before the eyes of his family, he had to withdraw his nomination. It was a national scandal, and a private agony, one from which he never recovered. Now, year's later, The judge's death raises even more questions than his life did and seems to be leading to a second terrible scandal. Could he have been murdered? He has left a strange

message for his son Talcott, a professor at an elite Ivy League law school, entrusting him with 'the arrangements' - a mysterious puzzle that only Tal can unlock, and only by unearthing the ambiguities of his father's turbulent past. When another man is found dead, and then another, Talcott must risk life, marriage and reputation, following the clues his father left him..comA complex, smart mystery filled with intrigue, drama, and more than a little danger awaits in Stephen L. Carter's engaging debut novel, *The Emperor of Ocean Park*. After the funeral of his powerful father (a federal judge whose nomination to the U.S. Supreme

Court became a public scandal), Talcott Garland, an African American law professor at an Ivy League university, is left to unravel the meaning of a cryptic note and carry out "the arrangements" his father left behind. Armed with fortitude and familial devotion--though paranoid of his wife's fidelity--Talcott soon finds himself in an investigation that entangles him with a number of questionable Washington, D.C., denizens, including attorneys and government officials, law professors, the FBI, shady underworld figures, chess masters, and friends and family. All the while Talcott tries not to hurt his attorney wife's chance for a judicial nomination--and their fragile marriage--but the closer he comes to unraveling his father's dark secrets, the more dangerous things become. Clocking in at over 650 pages, the novel could easily have been streamlined; many of Talcott's thoughts are unnecessarily repeated. But Carter's storytelling skills are adept:

tension builds, surprises are genuine, clues are not handed out freely. The prose, while somewhat meandering, can be crisp and insightful, as demonstrated in Carter's description of the misguided paths of young attorneys who sacrifice all on the altar of career... at last arriving... at their cherished career goals, partnerships, professorships, judgeships, whatever kind of ships they dream of sailing, and then looking around at the angry, empty waters and realizing that they have arrived with nothing, absolutely nothing, and wondering what to do with the rest of their wretched lives. --Michael Ferch Extrait

PROLOGUE
THE VINEYARD HOUSE
When my father finally died, he left the Redskins tickets to my brother, the house on Shepard Street to my sister, and the house on the Vineyard to me. The football tickets, of course, were the most valuable item in the estate, but then Addison was always the biggest favorite and the biggest fan, the only one of the children who came close to sharing my father's obsession, as well as the only one of us actually on speaking terms with my father the last time he drew his will. Addison is a gem, if you don't mind the religious nonsense, but Mariah and I have not been close in the years since I joined the enemy, as she puts it, which is why my father bequeathed us houses four hundred miles apart. I was glad to have the

Vineyard house, a tidy little Victorian on Ocean Park in the town of Oak Bluffs, with lots of frilly carpenter's Gothic along the sagging porch and a lovely morning view of the white band shell set amidst a vast sea of smooth green grass and outlined against a vaster sea of bright blue water. My parents liked to tell how they bought the house for a song back in the sixties, when Martha's Vineyard, and the black middle-class colony that summers there, were still smart and secret. Lately, in my father's oft-repeated view, the Vineyard had tumbled downhill, for it was crowded and noisy and, besides, they let everyone in now, by which he meant

black people less well off than we. There were too many new houses going up, he would moan, many of them despoiling the roads and woods near the best beaches. There were even condominiums, of all things, especially near Edgartown, which he could not understand, because the southern part of the island is what he always called Kennedy country, the land where rich white vacationers and their bratty children congregate, and a part-angry, part-jealous article of my father's faith held that white people allow the members of what he liked to call the darker nation to swarm and crowd while keeping the open spaces for themselves. And yet, amidst all the clamor, the Vineyard house is a small marvel. I loved it as a child and love it more now. Every room, every dark wooden stair, every window whispers its secret share of memories. As a child, I broke an

ankle and a wrist in a fall from the gabled roof outside the master bedroom; now, more than thirty years after, I no longer recall why I thought it would be fun to climb there. Two summers later, as I wandered the house in post-midnight darkness, searching for a drink of water, an odd mewling sound dropped me into a crouch on the landing, whence, a week or so shy of my tenth birthday, I peered through the balustrade and thus caught my first stimulating glimpse of the primal mystery of the adult world. I saw my brother,

Addison, four years older than I, tussling with our cousin Sally, a dark beauty of fifteen, on the threadbare burgundy sofa opposite the television down in the shadowy nook of the stairwell, neither of them quite fully dressed, although I was somehow unable to figure out precisely what articles of clothing were missing. My instinct was to flee. Instead, seized by a weirdly thrilling lethargy, I watched them roll about, their arms and legs intertwined in seemingly random postures--making out, we called it in those simpler days, a phrase pregnant with purposeful ambiguity, perhaps as a protection against the burden of specificity. My own teen years, like my adulthood dreary and overlong, brought no similar adventures, least of all on the Vineyard;

the highlight, I suppose, came near the end of our last summer sojourn as a full family, when I was about thirteen, and Mariah, a rather pudgy fifteen and angry at me for some smart-mouthed crack about her weight, borrowed a box of kitchen matches, then stole a Topps Willie Mays baseball card that I treasured and climbed the dangerous pull-down ladder to the attic, eight rickety wooden slats, most of them loose. When I caught up with her, my sister burned the card before my eyes as I wept helplessly, falling to my knees in the wretched afternoon heat of the dusty, low-ceilinged loft--the two of us already set in our lifelong pattern of animosity. That same summer, my sister Abigail, in those days still known as the baby, even though just a bit more than a year younger than I, made the local paper, the Vineyard Gazette, when she won something like eight different prizes at the county fair on a muggy August night by throwing darts at balloons and baseballs at milk bottles, and so solidified her position as the family's only potential athlete--none of the rest of us dared try, for our parents always preached brains over brawn. Four Augusts later, Abby's boyish laughter was no longer heard along Ocean Park, or anywhere else, her joy in life, and ours in her, having vanished in a confused instant of rain-slicked asphalt and an inexperienced teenager's fruitless effort to evade an out-of-control sports car, something fancy, seen by several witnesses but never accurately described and therefore never found; for the driver who killed my baby sister a few blocks north of the Washington Cathedral in that first spring of Jimmy Carter's presidency left the scene long before the police arrived. That Abby had only a learner's permit, not a license, never became a matter of public knowledge; and the marijuana that was found in her borrowed car was never again mentioned, least of all by the police or even the press, because my father was who he was and had the connections that he did, and, besides, in those days it was not yet our national sport to ravage the reputations of the great. Abby was therefore able to die as innocently as we pretended that she had lived. Addison by that time was on the verge of finishing college and Mariah was about to begin her sophomore year, leaving me in the nervous role of what my mother kept calling her only child. And all that Oak Bluffs summer, as my father, tight-lipped, commuted to the federal courthouse in Washington and my mother shuffled aimlessly from one downstairs room to the next, I made it my task to hunt through the house for memories of Abby--at the bottom of a stack of books on the black metal cart underneath the television, her favorite game of Life; in the back of the glass-fronted cabinet over the sink, a white ceramic mug emblazoned with the legend BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL, purchased to annoy my father; and, hiding in a corner of the airless attic, a stuffed panda named George, after the martyred black militant George Jackson, won at the fair and now leaking from its joints some hideous pink substance--memories, I must confess in my perilous middle age, that have grown ever fainter with the passage of time. Ah, the Vineyard house! Addison was married in it, twice, once more or less successfully, and I smashed the leaded glass in the double front door, also twice, once more or less intentionally. Every summer of my youth we went there to live, because that is what one does with a summer home. Every winter my father griped about the upkeep and threatened to sell it, because that is what one does when happiness is a questionable investment. And when the cancer that pursued her for six years finally won, my mother died in it, in the smallest bedroom, with the nicest view of Nantucket Sound, because that is what one does if one can choose one's end. My father died at his desk. And, at first, only my sister and a few stoned callers to late-night radio shows believed he had been murdered. * * * * * THE WHITE KITCHEN(I)The news of the Judge's death reached us several times in the years before the event actually occurred. It is not that he was ill; he was, as a rule, so vigorous that one tended to forget his wavering health, which is why the heart attack that at last cut him down was, at first, so difficult to credit. It is simply that he led the sort of life that generated rumor. People disliked my father, intensely, and he returned the favor. They spread stories of his death because they prayed the stories were true. To his enemies--they were legion, a fact in which he gloried--my father was a plague, and rumors of a cure always raise hopes in those who suffer, or love those who do. And, in this case, some of those my father plagued were not people but causes, which, in America, can always count their lovers in the millions, unlike individual people, who die unloved every day. Not one of his enemies but hated my father, and not one but spread the stories. Self-styled friends would call. They were always whispering how sorry they were. They had heard, they would say, about my father's heart attack while promoting his latest book up in Boston. Or his stroke while taping a television interview out in Cincinnati. Except that there would not have been one: he would be alive and well in San Antonio, speaking to the convention of some conservative political action committee--the Rightpacs, Kimmer calls them. But, oh, the gleeful rumors of his demise! My mother hated the rumors, not for the heartache, she said, but for the humiliation--there were standards, after all. But not in the rumor mill. Waiting in the checkout line at the supermarket, just before my son Bentley was born, I was

astonished to read on the cover of one of the more imaginative tabloids, just beneath the weekly Whitney Houston story (TALKS CANDIDLY ABOUT HER HEARTBREAK) and just above the latest way to lose as much weight as you want without diet or exercise (A MIRACLE DOCTORS WON'T TELL YOU), the gladsome tidings that the Mafia had put out a contract on my father, because of his cooperation with federal prosecutors--although, when Kimmer made me go back to the store and buy it and I read the whole thing, all one hundred fifty words, I noticed a pointed lack of detail as to what my father could possibly have to cooperate with prosecutors about, or what he might know about the Mafia that would be so dangerous. I called Mrs. Rose, the Judge's long-suffering assistant, and finally caught up with him on the road in Seattle. He took the opportunity to warn me yet again on the insidiousness of his enemies. "They will do anything, Talcott, anything to destroy me," he announced in the oracular tone he tended to adopt when discussing those who disliked him. He repeated the word a third time, in case my hearing was off:

"Anything." Including, I noted while leafing through the pessimistic pages of *The Nation* a few years back, accuse him of paranoia. Or was it megalomania? Anyway, my father was sure they were out to get him, and my sister was sure they were right. When the Judge skipped Bentley's christening three years ago, worried the press might be there, Mariah defended him, pointing out that he had missed half the baptisms of her children--no difficult feat, given the numbers--but by then she and I were barely speaking anyway. Once a false story of my father's demise made the real papers--not the supermarket tabloids, but the *Washington Post*, which killed him on a wintry morning in a commuter plane crash in Virginia, one among a dozen victims, his apparent presence on board noted poignantly, but also coyly: **CONTROVERSIAL FORMER JUDGE FEARED DEAD IN CRASH** is what the headline said. The irony was plain to the most casual follower of current events, because what people feared was not my father dead but my father alive; and because of the unhappy turning his career took, which was also, my father liked to say, the fault of the *Post* and "its ilk." Left-wing muckrakers, my father called them in his well-remunerated speeches to the *Rightpacs*, who were pleased to hear this angry, articulate black lawyer blaming the media for his resignation from the federal bench not long after the collapse of his anticipated elevation to the Supreme Court, where, his conservative fans loved to remind his liberal critics, he had argued and won two key desegregation cases in the sixties. Oh, but he could be confounding! Which is why Mariah was certain that there were smiles of relief all along the Cambridge-Washington axis (where she picked up that hackneyed phrase I will never know, but I suspect it was from Addison, who could always stand her) when the early editions of the *Post* carried the crash story and a couple of the more careless news-radio stations repeated it. The plague, it seemed for a glorious instant, was at an end. But my wily father was not on board. Although his name was on the manifest and he had checked in, he had prudently chosen that occasion to argue via long distance with my mother, then busily dying at the Vineyard house, over the cost of some repairs to the gutters, and the discussion grew sufficiently extended that he missed the flight. The airline got its passenger list wrong, this being back in the days when it was still possible to do such a thing. "That's how much she loved me," the Judge told us in a drunken ramble the night of Claire Garland's funeral. He cried, too, which none of us had seen before--only Addison even claimed to have seen him take a drink since the bad period just after Abby died--and Mariah slapped my face when, the very next day, I pointed out to her that, in the six years of my mother's illness, my father spent as much time on the road as he did at her bedside. "So what?" my sister demanded as I groped for a suitable riposte to a palm across the cheek--a question, once I thought about it, that I was ill-prepared to answer. And perhaps I deserved the rebuke, for the Judge, despite his coldness toward most of the world, including, usually, his children, was never anything but tender and affectionate with our mother. Even when my father was a practicing lawyer, before the move to government service, he was constantly leaving meetings with clients to take calls from his Claire. Later, on the Securities and Exchange Commission and then on the bench, he would sometimes leave litigants waiting while he chatted with his wife, who seemed to take such treatment as her due. He smiled for her in a natural delight that told the world how grateful he was for the day Claire Morrow said yes; at least until Abby died, after which he did not do much smiling for a while. Once a semblance of family stability was re-established, my parents used to take evening walks along Shepard Street, holding hands. Of course, my father was on the road constantly. At the time of his death, he liked to call himself just another Washington lawyer, which meant that when he wanted to reach me he would have Mrs. Rose place the call, his own time being too precious, and, when I came on the line, he would invariably put me on the speakerphone, perhaps to leave his hands free for other work. Mrs. Rose told me once that I should not be upset: he put everybody on the speakerphone, treating it as though it had just been invented. Indeed, everything that he was doing was new

to him. He was, formally, of counsel to the law firm of Corcoran Klein--of counsel being a term of art covering a multitude of awkward relationships, from the retired partner who no longer does any lawyering to the out-of-work bureaucrat trying to bring in enough business to earn a full partnership to the go-go consultant looking for a respectable place to hang a shingle. In my father's case, the firm offered a veneer of gentility and a place to take his messages, but little more. He saw few clients. He practiced no law. He wrote books, went on nationwide speaking tours, and, when he needed a rest, showed up on Nightline and Crossfire and Imus to beguile the evil armies of the left. Indeed, he was the perfect talk-show guest: he was willing to say nearly anything about nearly anybody, and he would call anyone who argued with him the most erudite and puzzling names. (The censors would have a terrible time when he used words like wittol and pettifoggery, and he was once bleeped out on one of the radio talk shows for describing a particular candidate's shift to the right during the Republican presidential primaries as an act of ecdysis.) Oh, yes, people hated him, and he reveled in their enmity. Mariah, naturally, made more of all this than I did. I have always thought that the far left and far right need each other, desperately, for if either one were to vanish the other would lose its reason to exist, a conviction that has freshened in me from year to year, as each grows ever more vehement in its search for somebody to hate. Now and then, I even wondered aloud to Kimmer--I would say it to no one else--whether my father manufactured half his political views in order to keep his face on television, his enemies at his heels, and his speaking fees in the range of half a million dollars a year. But Mariah, having been in her time both philosophy major and investigative journalist, sees oppositions as real; the Judge and his enemies, she would say, were playing out the great ideological debates of the era. It was the culture war, she would insist, that brought him down. I thought this proposition quite silly, and came to think, after years of reading about it, that the scandal-mongers who drove him from the bench might have had a point; and I made the mistake of saying this, too, on the telephone to Mariah, not long after Bob Woodward published his best-selling book about the case. The book, I told her, was pretty convincing: the Judge was not a victim but a perjurer. * * * * *

(II) The first thing I notice about Uncle Jack is that he is ill. Jack Ziegler was never a very large man, but he always seemed a menacing one. I do not know how many people he has killed, although I often fear that it is more than the numbers hinted at in the press. I have not seen him in well over a decade and have not missed him. But the changes in the man! Now he is frail, the suit of fine gray wool and the dark blue scarf hanging loosely on his emaciated frame. The square, strong face I remember from my boyhood, when he would visit us on the Vineyard, armed with expensive gifts, wonderful brainteasers, and terrible jokes, is falling in on itself; the silver hair, still reasonably thick, lies matted on his head; and his pale pink lips tremble when he is not speaking, and sometimes when he is. He approaches in the company of a taller and broader and much younger man, who silently steadies him when he stumbles. A friend, I think, except that the Jack Ziegler of the world have no friends. A bodyguard, then. Or, given Uncle Jack's physical condition, perhaps a nurse. "Well, look who's here," Addison seethes. "Let me handle this," I insist with my usual stupidity. I discipline myself not to speculate about what Mariah suggested as we sat in the kitchen Friday night. "All yours." Before Jack Ziegler quite reaches us, I warn Kimmer to stay down by the car with Bentley, and, for once, she does as I ask without an argument, for no potential judge can be seen even chatting with such a man. Uncle Mal steps forward as though to run the same interference for me that he does for his clients as they leave the grand jury, but I motion him back and tell him I will be fine. Then I turn and hurry up the hill. Mariah, of course, is already gone, which is just as well, for this apparition might push her over the edge. Only Addison remains nearby, just far enough away to be polite, but close enough to be of help if . . . if what? "Hello, Uncle Jack," I say as Abby's godfather and I arrive, simultaneously, at the grave. Then I wait. He does not extend his hand and I do not offer mine. His bodyguard or whatever stands off to the side and a little bit behind, eyeing my brother uneasily. (I myself am evidently too unthreatening to excite his vigilance.) "I bring you my condolences, Talcott," Jack Ziegler murmurs in his peculiar accent, vaguely East European, vaguely Brooklyn, vaguely Harvard, which my father always insisted was manufactured, as phony as Eddie Dozier's East Texas drawl. As Uncle Jack speaks, his eyes are cast downward, toward the grave. "I am so sorry about the death of your father." "Thank you. I'm afraid we missed you at the church--" "I despise funerals." Spoken matter-of-factly, like a discussion of weather, or sports, or interstate flight to avoid prosecution. "I have no interest in the celebration of death. I have seen too many good men die." Some by your own hand, I am thinking, and I wonder if the other, rarely mentioned rumors are true, if I am talking to a man who murdered his own wife. Again Mariah's fears assail me. My sister's chronology possesses a certain mad logic--emphasis on the adjective: my father saw Jack Ziegler, my father called Mariah, my father died a few days later, then Jack Ziegler called Mariah, and now

Jack Ziegler is here. I finally shared Mariah's notion with Kimmer as we lay in bed last night. My wife, head on my shoulder, giggled and said that it sounds to her more like two old friends who see each other all the time. Having no basis, yet, to decide, I say only: "Thank you for coming. Now, if you will excuse me--

"Wait," says Jack Ziegler, and, for the first time, he turns his eyes up to meet mine. I take half a step back, for his face, close up, is a horror. His pale, papery skin is ravaged by nameless diseases that seem to me--whatever they are--an appropriate punishment for the life he has chosen to live. But it is his eyes that draw my attention. They are twin coals, hot and alive, burning with a dark, happy madness that should be visited on all murderers at some time before they die. "Uncle Jack, I'm s-sorry," I manage. Did I actually stammer? "I have--I have to get going--" "Talcott, I have traveled thousands of miles to see you. Surely you can spare me five of your valuable minutes." His voice has a terrible wheeze in it, and it occurs to me that I might be breathing whatever has made him this way. But I stand my ground. "I understand you've been looking for me," I say at last. "Yes." He seems childishly eager now, and he almost smiles, but thinks better of it. "Yes, that is so, I have been looking for you." "You knew where to find me." I was raised to be polite, but seeing Uncle Jack like this, after all these years, brings out in me an irresistible urge to be rude. "You could have called me at home." "That would not be--it was not possible. They know, you see, they would consider that, and I thought--I thought perhaps . . ." He trails off, the dark eyes all at once confused, and I realize that Uncle Jack is frightened of something. I hope it is the specter of prison or of his obviously approaching death that is scaring him, because anything else bad enough to scare Jack Ziegler is . . . well, something I do not want to meet. "Okay, okay. You found me." Perhaps this is forward, but I am not so frightened of him now; on the other hand, I am not very happy about spending time in his company either. I want to flee this sickly scarecrow and retreat to the warmth, such as it is, of my family. "Your father was a very fine man," says Uncle Jack, "and a very good friend. We did much together. Not much business, mostly pleasure." "I see." "The newspapers, you know, they wrote of our business dealings. There were no business dealings. It was nonsense. Trumped-up nonsense." "I know," I lie, for Uncle Jack's benefit, but he is not interested in my opinions. "That law clerk of his, perjuring himself that way." He makes a spitting noise but does not actually spit. "Scum." He shakes his head in feigned disbelief. "The papers, of course, they loved it. Left-wing bastards. Because they hated your father." Not having exchanged a word with Jack Ziegler since well before my father's hearings, I have never heard his opinions about what happened. Given the tenor of his comments, I doubt he would be interested in mine. I remain silent. "I hear the fool has never been able to get a job," says Uncle Jack, without a trace of humor, and I know who has been pulling at least a few of the strings. "I am not surprised." "He was doing what he thought was right." "He was lying in an effort to destroy a great man, and he is deserving of his fate." I cannot take much more of this. As Jack Ziegler continues to rant, Mariah's nutty speculations of Friday seem . . . not so nutty. "Uncle Jack . . ." "He was a great man, your father," Jack Ziegler interrupts. "A very great man, a very good friend. But now that he is dead, well . . ." He trails off and raises his hand, palm upmost, and tilts it one way, then the other. "Now I would very much like to be of assistance to you." "To me?" "Correct, Talcott. And to your family, naturally," he adds softly, rubbing his temples. The skin is so loose it seems to move under his fingers. I imagine it tearing away to leave only an unhappy skull. I glance over at the cars. Kimmer is impatient. So is Uncle Mal. I look down at my baby sister's godfather once more. His help is the very last thing I want. "Well, thank you, but I think we have everything under control." "But you will call? If you need anything, you will call? Especially if . . . an emergency should arise?" I shrug. "Okay." "With your wife, for instance," he continues. "I understand that she is going to become a judge. I think that is wonderful. I understand that she has always wanted this." "It isn't certain yet," I answer automatically, surprised that the secret has spread up into the Rocky Mountains, and also not wanting Jack Ziegler anywhere near her nomination. He has already spoiled one judicial career too many. "She isn't the only candidate." "I know this." The burning eyes are gleeful again. "I understand that a colleague of yours believes the job to be his for the taking. Some would call him the front-runner." I am thrown, once more, by the breadth of his knowledge; I choose not to wonder how he knows what he knows. I am glad that Kimmer is not within earshot. "I suppose so. But, look, I have to--" "Listen, Talcott. Are you listening?" He has drawn close to me again. "I do not think he has the staying power, this colleague of yours. It is my understanding that a fairly large skeleton is rattling around in his closet. And we all know what that means, eh?" He coughs violently. "Sooner or later, it is bound to tumble out." "What kind of skeleton?" I ask, sudden eagerness overwhelming my caution. "I would not concern myself with such things if I were you. I would not share them with your lovely wife. I would wait patiently for the wheel to turn." I am mystified, but not precisely unhappy. If there is information that would kill off Marc Hadley's chances, I can hardly wait

for it to--what did he say?--tumble out. Even though Marc and I were once friends, I cannot resist a rising excitement. Perhaps America's obsession with the use of scandal to disqualify nominees for the bench is absurd, but this is my wife we are talking about. Still, what can Jack Ziegler possibly know about Marc Hadley that nobody else does?"Thank you, Uncle Jack," I say uncertainly. "I am always happy to be of assistance to any of Oliver's children." His voice has assumed a curiously formal tone. I am chilled once more. Is the skeleton something that he has somehow created? Is a criminal maneuvering to help my wife attain her longed-for seat on the bench? I have to say something, and it is not easy to decide what. "Uh, Uncle Jack, I . . . I'm grateful that you would think to help, but . . ." His disintegrating eyebrows slowly rise. Otherwise his expression does not change. He knows what I am trying to say but has no intention of making it easy. "Well, it's just that I think Kimmer . . . Kimberly . . . wants to have the selection go forward so that, um, the better candidate wins. On the merits. She wouldn't want anybody to . . . interfere." And I am suddenly sure, as I say the difficult words, that what I am telling him is true. My smart, ambitious wife never wants to be beholden to anybody, for anything. When we were students, she made a name for herself around the building with her outspoken opposition to affirmative action, which she saw as just another way for white liberals to place black people in their debt. Maybe she was right. Uncle Jack, meanwhile, has his answer ready: "Oh, Talcott, Talcott, please have no fear on that account. I am not proposing to . . . interfere." He chuckles lightly, then coughs. "I am only predicting what is to occur. I have information. I am not going to use it. Nor do you need to do so. Your colleague, your wife's rival, has many, many enemies. One of them is certain to unlock the door and allow the skeleton to tumble out. The service I am doing for you is simply to let you know. Nothing more." I nod. Standing up to Jack Ziegler has drained me. "And now it is your turn," he continues. "I think perhaps you, Talcott, might be of assistance to me." I close my eyes briefly. What did I expect? He did not travel all this way to tell me that Marc Hadley's candidacy is going to collapse, or to pay his last respects to my father. He came because he wants something. "Talcott, you must listen to me. Listen with care. I must ask you one question." "Go ahead." I want suddenly to be free of him. I want to share his odd news with Kimmer, even though he told me not to. I want her to kiss me happily, overjoyed that she seems to be on the verge of getting what she wants. "Others will ask this of you, some with good motives, some with ill," he explains unhelpfully in his mysterious accent. "Not all of them will be who they say they are, and not all of them will mean you well." I forgot Uncle Jack's eerie, unfathomable certainty that all the world is conspiring, but he evidently has changed little from the days when he used to drop by the Vineyard house with gifts from foreign ports and complaints about the machinations of the Kennedys, whose irresolution, he used to say, cost us Cuba. None of the children knew what he was talking about, but we loved the passion of his stories. "Okay," I say. "And so I must ask what they will ask," he continues, the mad eyes sparkling. "Well, fire away," I sigh. Over by the limousine, Kimmer is glancing at her watch and raising her hand, beckoning, to urge me to hurry. Maybe she has another telephone meeting coming up. Maybe she, too, is scared of Jack Ziegler, whom she has never quite met. Maybe I need to get this over with. "But I really only have a few minutes to . . ." "The arrangements, Talcott," he interrupts in that wheezy whisper. "I must know everything about the arrangements." * * * * * I stand for a long moment in the narrow front yard, the key dangling from limp fingers, remembering the glorious Martha's Vineyard summers of my childhood, when friends and family swirled constantly in and out of the double front doors with their tiny panes of glass, some rose, some azure, some clear, held fast in frames of involute leading; remembering the many sad and lonely visits to this house through those endless months when my mother sat dying, often alone, in the front bedroom on the first floor; and remembering, too, how easy it became to avoid coming back here once the Judge began his tumble toward megalomania. As Kimmer fusses with Bentley and I stare at the summer home of my youth, I find that I have difficulty recalling precisely why I was so filled with joy when I learned that the Judge left me this cramped and unhappy shell. With my parents both dead, the house should by rights be dead as well, quiet and neutral; instead, it seems almost a live thing, fiendishly sentient, brooding malevolently on the family's misfortunes as it awaits the new owners. Quite suddenly I am paralyzed with some emotion far more primal than terror, a clear and utterly persuasive knowledge, shivering through me from some unnatural source, that everything is about to go wretchedly wrong: I fear that my legs will not move me to the porch, or my hands will not work the key, or the key will break off in the lock. In that terrible moment, I want to reject this scary inheritance and all its ghosts, to grab my family and hurry back to the mainland. As usual, it is worldly Kimmer who restores me to my senses. "Can you hurry up and open the door?" she demands sweetly. "Sorry, but I have to piss in the worst way." "No need to be vulgar." "There is if nothing else will get you moving." She is correct, after a fashion, and I am being

foolish. I smile at her and she almost smiles back before she catches herself. I heft the heavy suitcase in my left hand and bounce the key in my right. Then I stride boldly up the steps, heedless of the demons who caper in the shadows of memory. Drawing a breath, I dismiss them like a veteran exorcist and rattle the key into the lock. Only as the lock begins to turn do I notice that one of the tiny panes of colored glass is missing--not broken, just not there, so that through the space defined by the narrow gray leading I can see into the darkness of the house. I frown, pushing the door wide open, and, standing frozen on the threshold of the house I have loved for thirty years, I realize that the goblins have not all retreated. I try to swallow but cannot seem to gather any moisture in my throat. My limbs refuse to move me forward. Through a slowly descending curtain of the deepest angry red, I see my handsome wife brushing past me with a whispered, "Sorry, but I gotta go," and I feel her transferring Bentley's hand to mine. Kimmer is three steps into the house before she, too, stops and stands perfectly still. "Oh, no," she whispers. "Oh Misha oh no." The house is a disaster. Furniture is upended, books are strewn over the floor, cabinet doors broken, rugs sliced to ribbons. My father's papers are everywhere, the breeze from the open front door ruffling their edges. I peek into the kitchen. A few of the dishes are smashed on the floor, but the mess is not as bad, and most of the plates are simply stacked on the counter. While Kimmer waits in the front room with Bentley, I force myself to go upstairs. I discover that the four bedrooms are barely disturbed. As though there was no need to bother, I am thinking as I stand in the window of the master suite, telephone in hand, talking to the police dispatcher. As I explain what has happened, I look down at the BMW, parked illegally along the split-rail fence that guards the south side of Ocean Avenue, doors still open, baggage not yet unloaded. Something isn't right. They did not wreck the second floor. The thought keeps swirling through my mind. They left the second floor alone. As though ransacking the first floor was enough. As though--as though--As though they found what they were looking for. Now more puzzled than frightened, I go back downstairs to join my wife and son, who, wide-eyed, are hugging each other in the living room. The police, arriving in minutes from their quaint headquarters a block away, quickly pronounce the destruction the work of local vandals, teenagers who, unfortunately, spend much of the winter trashing the homes of the summer people. Not all the Vineyard's teenagers are vandals, or even very many: just enough to annoy. The very kind officers apologize to us on behalf of the Island and assure us that they will do their best, but they also warn us not to expect to catch the people who did it: vandalisms are nearly impossible to solve. Vandals. Kimmer eagerly accepts this explanation, and I am quite sure the insurance company will too. And, more important, the White House. Kimmer promises to make plenty of trouble for the alarm company, and I have no doubt she will keep her word. Vandals, my wife and I agree over pizza and root beer at a nearby restaurant a couple of hours later, after the man who looks after the house in the off-season has dropped by to inspect the damage. "I'll make some calls," he told us when he finished tut-tutting his way around the place. Vandals. Of course they were vandals. The kind of vandals who destroy one floor of the house and ignore the other. The kind of vandals who steal neither stereo nor television. The kind of vandals who know how to circumvent my late paranoid father's state-of-the-art alarm system. And the kind of vandals who are in direct contact with the spirits of the departed. For I do not tell either my wife or the friendly police officers about the note I found upstairs while waiting, sealed in a plain white envelope left on top of the dresser in the master bedroom, my correct title and full name typed neatly on the outside, the perplexing message on the inside written in the crabbed, spiky hand I remember from my childhood, when we would proudly leave copies of our school essays on the Judge's desk and wait for him to return them, a day or so later, with his comments inked redly in the margins, demonstrating what idiots our teachers were to award us A's. The note on the dresser is from my father. * * * Ordinarily, on the third afternoon of a Vineyard sojourn, I would be at the Flying Horses with my son. But our sojourns are usually in the summer. Now it is autumn, and the carousel is closed for the season. Fortunately, the Island offers other diversions. Yesterday, as a hastily assembled clean-up crew tried to put Vineyard Howse back in some kind of order, the three of us journeyed up-Island--that is, to the westernmost end--and spent a marvelous afternoon walking the breathtaking ancient cliffs at Gay Head in the chilly November air, picnicking in our down parkas at the perfect pebbly beach in the fishing village of Menemsha, and driving the wooded back roads of Chilmark, near the sprawling property once owned by Jacqueline Onassis, pretending not to be on the lookout for the rich and famous. We had dinner at a fancy restaurant on the water in Edgartown, where Bentley charmed the waitresses with his patter. How many demons we exorcised I am not sure, but I saw no sign of the roller woman, who might be a phantom after all, and Kimmer did not mention the judgeship once and talked on her cell phone only twice. And she kissed me quite carefully this morning when Bentley and I dropped her at the airport for her flight

back to the mainland in one of the little turboprops that serve the Island. Bentley and I are staying on because . . . well, because we need to. Kimmer has work to do, I have a week or so of leave left, and Bentley needs some rest and recreation. And there is another reason as well. In Oak Bluffs, unlike Elm Harbor, I will never be tempted for a moment to let my precious son out of my sight. Right now my son and I are preparing to go to the playground; or, more precisely, Bentley is ready, waiting for me. I am less ready. I am sitting at the table in our newly cleaned kitchen (full of plastic plates and cups from one of the Island's two APs), the note from my father flattened on the surface, willing its secrets to reveal themselves. In the next room, Bentley is watching the Disney Channel and occasionally waddling to the door of the kitchen and calling, "Dada, paygrown now. You say paygrown!" in the plaintive, self-righteous tone that makes busy parents writhe with guilt. To which I respond with the familiar "Yes, okay, just a minute, sweetheart," which every busy parent uses with equal embarrassment. Last night, as my family slept uneasily, Kimmer curled protectively around our son, I wandered Vinerd Howse from the foyer to the attic crawl space, searching for something, but I do not know what. I need to know what is going on. I need a clue. Unfortunately, the most obvious clue, my father's note, remains gibberish: My son, There is so much I wish I could share with you. Alas, at the present moment, I cannot. I have asked a good friend to deliver this note should anything befall me; if you are reading my words, one must assume that something has. I apologize for the complexity of this method of contact, but there are others who would also like to know that which is for your eyes only. So, know this much: Angela's boyfriend, despite his deteriorating condition, is in possession of that which I want you to know. You are in no danger, neither you nor your family, but you have little time. You are unlikely to be the only one who is searching for the arrangements that Angela's boyfriend alone can reveal. And you may not be the only one who knows who Angela's boyfriend is. Excelsior, my son! Excelsior! It begins! Sincerely, Your Father The handwriting is unmistakably the Judge's, as is the flowery, overwrought, self-important prose, even the formality of the signature. Quite unexpectedly, my fury at my father threatens suddenly to overwhelm me. If you want to tell me, tell me! I rage against him in my tortured mind, a tone I would never have selected in life. But don't play these games! Jack Ziegler in the cemetery demanded to know about the arrangements. Now, at last, I know for certain that my father actually made some. But I do not know what they are, and this hint, this clue, this post-mortem letter from my paranoid father, whatever it is supposed to be, lends me no assistance at all. Excelsior? Angela's boyfriend, despite his deteriorating condition? What is all this? One point is clear: Not-McDermott's mission in Elm Harbor was neither to apologize nor to reassure but, as I suspected, to see whether I know an Angela or not--which means that he and, presumably, Foreman are somehow privy to the contents of this letter. I wonder if the letter was the reason for the destruction of the first floor, except that I cannot quite fathom why they would break into the house, find the letter, and then leave it behind. Or, for that matter, how the letter got here in the first place. Presumably McDermott, if he was even here, would not have dropped it off. The Judge wrote that he asked a good friend to deliver it should anything befall him. But what good friend would break into Vinerd Howse to drop it off? Why not mail it to my house or bring it by my office? Why not deliver it to to the soup kitchen? Can the pawn be connected to the letter? Did my father arrange that delivery as well? I try to remember whether I ever mentioned to my father that I volunteer at the soup kitchen, but my mind offers every answer I could want: yes, I told him; no, I did not tell him; yes, I hinted at it; no, I kept it secret. I shake my head in rich red anger. If he wanted me to have the pawn, wouldn't he have delivered pawn and letter together? Not that it matters. For my father's note is actually no help at all. I have a terrible memory for names, but it is good enough for me to be sure that I do not know an Angela, and I have no idea who her boyfriend could possibly be. From the Hardcover edition.