

# Vestavia Hills

Christian Perego



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### **Аннотация**

Robert Red is an aspiring writer. Cynical and disillusioned with life, he lives in Vestavia Hills, a small town in Alabama. Robert is writing the novel that will consecrate him to fame and we can imagine his shock when leafing through the novel of an unknown author, Imogen Fry, he discovers that the pages are identical to his. However, at the same time, what role has the character of the Protestant pastor Johnathan Abblepot, who lived 150 years before in Vestavia Hills? And Elisabeth, his wife? And won't the mystery that unfolds in the town and in the woods that surround it be too much for the young detective Abbot? Perhaps, in one way or another, only Imogen Fry will be able to provide an answer.

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VESTAVIA HILLS

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# VESTAVIA HILLS

I would like to make you understand who Johnathan Ablepot is, but I don't know where to start.

There are too many things to say about him. Too many to understand. Maybe you don't like mysteries, maybe you are a guy who loves to see things in the light of the sun, to define their outlines, because this way you always know what to do. Well, you'd be better stripping off of your certainties, because sometimes it doesn't happen the way you think.

It's Sunday morning, look around. Can you see the town waking up? Can you see the people who start leaving the house to go to Mass, dressed as best they can, without overdoing it. Do you see them?

There is nothing special about Vestavia Hills, it is a town like any other. Nothing more, nothing less.

If you look up, the colour of lead makes it clear that even this day could be similar to a thousand others that people here have already seen. A red streak, however unnatural, marks the sky; it's almost like a tear of blood, almost a wound that hurts. You can almost hear the thunder in the distance, even if this time they have gravity, a sound that makes you uncomfortable. Who knows what it is?

Look at the first small family who is not far from you. They too are heading towards the church. The man wears a distinct

black suit, a little creased. The wife is half a step behind him, she wears a wide skirt with folds, which does not make it clear if her legs are slender and toned or worn out by time; the woman is still quite young, she seems pretty. She holds a child by the hand, his hair combed neatly and with long socks on; he looks like the son worthy of his parents.

All three, now, turn to look at you, and you realize that the deepening of their eyes frightens you: in those dark orbits, you cannot distinguish a trace of feelings; no curiosity, no irreverence, much less cordiality. It is difficult even to recognize the eyes, because they look like small dark caves.

"Emma! Don't stare at people!" says the man, also shaking you off from that vision, which now it finally turns into a natural scene.

"Sorry, dear, I don't know what got into me," replies his wife, who has finally returned to being a person with eyes.

Then the woman adds to her son: "Joshua, don't stare at people, he's not polite."

The child still lingers a moment to look at her, but thank God now he too has nothing strange.

What's wrong with you?

Maybe you slept poorly.

Last night too?

It happens to you now and then.

Rub your eyes, look away, and try to regain a demeanor.

The red wound in the clouds has not yet disappeared.

The air gets heavy. You can breathe well, without gasping, but you realize that something is wrong; it feels like breathing in metal, metal with a little rust. The breath almost becomes flavored in the mouth; it is disgusting.

As you approach the church, the number of people on the street increases. Now it is as if no one can see you. Even your mere bodily presence does not seem evident. You are an impalpable being in a crowd that appears made up of ghosts. They are like machines that walk without consistency. The women, with their long skirts down to the ground, seem to float.

Here is the church.

The building is beautiful: it would convey ease and a sense of peace, on a day different from this.

Now it's overwhelming.

No, maybe it's not overwhelming, because it attracts you.

It is undoubtedly an attraction that you feel, partly because of the crowd now even more numerous, partly because of an irrational curiosity, which tells you that something will happen there.

The church certainly attracts you, but it also intimidates you, like when your father lifted his shirt to start pulling the belt out of his pants. It is subtle anxiety at the beginning because you always hope that something painful will not happen. Still, then, slowly, the concern grows, until it becomes terror, the terror of certainty.

A rumbling, almost like a thousand hornets, comes from inside the building.

Now you would like to know who I am.

Before entering, you need to know, you think.

Nothing will change for you.

I'm not the one who brought it here; you don't need a name to blame for what you're doing.

Maybe you slept poorly last night too, I repeat it. And that's why you are cranky.

Reverend Johnathan Ablepot is almost about to start the function. You'd better hurry.

Inside the church, everyone is seated graciously. It is an army of pious people, who will move in unison at the mere nod of their reverend. Slaughter souls blissfully waiting to be dissected and condemned by a few words.

Take a seat. It is not convenient to stand; here on the left.

You wanted to know who Johnathan Ablepot is, right?

How can I explain it to you? It is not easy to explain something to those who think they already know, to those who probably, deep down, already know.

Johnathan Ablepot is a name that someone knew well, a name that lost its consistency when that man was gone, to gain something else more... unique.

Johnathan Ablepot is the man who is about to speak now from the pulpit.

Johnathan Ablepot is the one who stands before you right now.

Reverend Ablepot observes the crowd in front of him with a

look of anger and inhumanity that makes you shiver.

Behind him, something starts to bleed. Almost everyone in the church begins to bleed out. Now Johnathan Ablepot's eyes are as red as blood.

The sound of hornets becomes so loud that it prevents you from hearing the words that man is saying.

However, now you realize that the priest is not speaking.

His mouth opened in a silent cry, a cry that even if you cannot hear, it is still frightening to see. His mouth opens wide with an unnatural movement and becomes more open and broader than any human mouth.

Lightning strikes inside the church.

Then a scream of pain, which is not in the air, but breaks out inside of you.

Johnathan Ablepot continues in his chilling cry with his frighteningly wide-open mouth.

I.F.

# THE STRANGE AFTERNOON OF ROBERT RED

## 1.

Vestavia Hills, 2008

Robert Red woke up startled. He gasped, panted, and sat on the bed. The naked torso beaded with sweat; the back completely damp; hair attached to the forehead.

He could not calm down completely and still had his eyes wide open.

He shivered with chills at the thought of the deformed face of the man on the pulpit, the undisputed protagonist of his last nightmares;

in the world he knew, there was nothing more terrifying than those eyes, and that scream.

This time Robert was further disturbed by the voice that guided him into that hallucinated world, expecting to give him orders and commenting on everything he thought or felt.

In some of the bad dreams tormenting him for some time now, he had already perceived a baritone and slightly silent voice that murmured something; but he had never heard the words as clearly as in this last nightmare.

It sounded like the off-screen voice of a horror film. In which all the horror that happened aimed at swallowing him up, Robert.

After slowly making a reason that he was in his room and not in a hellish church, and having become aware that he had not participated in any ritual officiated by a kind of demon with a cassock, he got up.

The contact of the bare feet on the cold floor always helped to relieve him, awakening him completely and ensuring solid touch with reality.

Robert glared at the sleep pills that the doctor had prescribed for him: "Fuck the pills and the damn doctor."

He had approached him almost immediately after having his first nightmares.

Robert Red was an apprehensive type who immediately became agitated by a problem and became nervous if he didn't find a solution just as quickly.

The doctor had ruled that there was nothing to worry about having a little restless sleep.

"People nowadays live, or decide to live, in a state of permanent stress. If we take into account some worries related to your job, it is not strange, Robert, that you sleep badly," so he had ruled. After that, he had prescribed the pills.

Not that at the beginning, they didn't work. But within a few weeks, not even the double dosage that Robert had ordered himself had banished the night's anxieties.

The young man had persevered with the therapy. But now, the time had come to convince himself that it was not adequate, and to curse pills and the doctor.

Robert went to the bathroom and looked sadly in the mirror at his face, which had a swollen and half-destroyed look; it could not even appear angry, so overwhelmed with tiredness as it was.

Might as well get ready to start the day, perhaps with a walk. The city wasn't too bad in the early morning.

Robert Red took a shower, with a final rinse almost frozen to activate the mind and muscles. He shaved. Then he went to the small kitchen of his two-room rented apartment. He slowly chewed some toast and sparingly drank black and unsweetened coffee from a large cup, then sat on the sofa for a few minutes.

"If you go on at this rate, old friend, you will become a plain and simple, lunatic," Robert said to himself, smiling through gritted teeth at what he had just predicted.

Robert Red was not about to turn into a lunatic, even if, even before the problems of insomnia affected him, this sentence had been given to him twice.

The first one was a very drunk girl, with whom he had tried to flirt at a party. Therefore, there wasn't much to pay attention about. The second time had been much more painful, because it came from his ex, Jenny, and established the definitive break between the two of them.

"This chick looks a little like Jenny," thought Robert in front of the image of a seller of cosmetic products on the TV he had just turned on.

Then he looked at a book he had on the table: a rather mediocre novel, by an author who was branded by many as

equally mediocre, but that he had wanted to buy anyway, to have something undemanding to distract himself with.

It was a hard-boiled story, but without the inventiveness and ease of writing that characterized the best of its kind. It was the story of a girl suspected of killing her first husband, she then remarried with the "typical" old man full of money, and avoid generating other suspicions of having murdered that one too for the common inheritance issue. But then: did the girl's friend know she had a lover or hadn't told her yet up until the chapter he read?

He couldn't remember.

But why puzzle over that nonsense? Ideas of a scribbler lacking ambition.

He took the book and flicked through a few pages; he went to the more crumpled ones, which he had read several times, because, even if lacking an exciting plot and characters, some phrases, some atmospheres had not seemed so wrong to him. Maybe they could give him some ideas.

Yes, because Robert Red was a writer. He wanted to be. He aimed to be one of those who fund a bank account with several zeros thanks to their talent as storytellers.

He wasn't too bad as a storyteller.

Or so he thought. However, his self-esteem improved thanks to some friends who encouraged him, and by a sort of literary critic's opinion, someone who his cousin Tod introduced him to, and who had decently evaluated his first job.

At that time, Robert had a career without shame nor praise, in the office of a medium-small company in Vestavia Hills, so he was drawn to that dream.

He spent an entire summer and even part of the fall of 2006 to find a publisher for his novel.

In short, it had not been what you call an easy task, but in the end, he had made it.

Then, making a little effort on himself and his pride and, following the advice of his then editor, he had corrected and rewritten some parts and, something decent had come out of his pages managed to sell some copies.

According to him, not bad, as a start.

In short, he had become a writer, he thought and had decided that was what he wanted to do.

To hell with family advice and the myth of a steady job that guarantees you a living.

Sure! That guarantees you a life that is always the same, a filthy apartment in an anonymous area of the center, and a series of days as nobody; opinion that you ended up thinking about yourself too.

It was not a guaranteed career that of a novelist, but Robert felt he wanted to try it with more energy than just a hobby.

Even now, of course, he was working on a novel: "something outstanding," he always said to those who asked him about it. Obviously, with insomnia and nightmares, it was not easy at all.

The time had come to get some fresh air. Robert dressed

without too much haste, still dazed by the startling awakening.

He put a cap on his head, closed the door of the apartment with so little care as not to correctly remember if he had done so, and went down the stairs. As soon as he stopped in the street for a moment, slightly dazzled by the light of the day, since he had not lifted the blinds when he got out of bed, to preserve the shade, which gave him the impression of being able to rest a bit more somehow.

The vision of a woman holding her son by the hand paralyzed him for a moment because it reminded him of the dream, the sunken orbits, and that black shadow instead of eyes. But luckily, this time, he wasn't in a nightmare. The woman stared at him in passing: she had a typical look. The boy didn't even notice him.

Robert didn't particularly like wandering, going from one shop to another just to look at the goods on display. But he tried to do it for at least an hour so that the metallic taste sensation he had in his mouth would be driven away by all the smells of the city.

Then it occurred to him that he could call Tricia, the person he was in contact with, and who was in charge of correcting and reviewing the material he sent for the publishing house.

It was only the first three chapters, but when Robert sent the first one, he was told by the selection manager, "Hey, this stuff is good! Really!" The man certainly was not Ken Follet in finding the words to express his thoughts, but, damn, that precisely was what Robert wanted to hear.

However, what could he have said in the phone call?

"Yes, good morning Miss Thompson, Tricia. I am Robert Red; I just wanted to inform you that I am a little ... well ...stuck. You know. Health problems. Insomnia. I can't work without a clear mind".

No, it would have been a very pathetic call.

"Yes, of course, I know you have a schedule. Don't worry, I'm doing a restorative therapy, and I'll be in shape shortly. You'll see!"

Even more pathetic.

He decided not to dial Tricia Thompson's number, even though he was already holding his mobile phone. He realized that it would be a phone call made solely to occupy those minutes, which he was letting go by like the first piss of the morning and, weighing on him like the bags of the food shopping, he never wanted to do.

He put the phone back in his pocket.

"Of course, I'm just wasting time like a drunkard on the sidewalks," thought Robert with a particular hatred towards himself. Now stop.

He had cooled his mind enough. He had had enough of wandering. He needed some more coffee; yes, that was for sure. Maybe a cigarette, and then, back home, once he turned on the computer, he would surely find some inspiration. Perhaps that idea he had the other day to continue the chapter ... Or maybe he could have double-checked something he had just written: there was always some detail to refine. And, how much he liked to

move a comma or change an adjective! He felt like a real creative genius.

At that moment, he was passing by a literary cafe's window, those newly designed cafes that combine the consumption of drinks with a library and reading areas.

He had the desire and the need for a coffee, and he was always eager to take a look at the latest publications.

So why not go in?

Robert greeted the girl at the counter politely and gave her more attention than he ever used to. He ordered his coffee, which was served to him in an instant, and then went to the display shelf.

It was all stuff of the big publishing houses, the titles that are picked up by readers on huge pyramids where many copies are displayed. The effect is very similar to that of tons of sweets in a candy store at Christmas: if one enters it, even if he does not intend to buy anything, he is overwhelmed by that mountain of stuff, and he cannot leave the shop without having in your pocket at least a small piece. Well, the mechanism for the great titles of mass literature was identical: they managed to place the title they wanted by confronting the poor reader with an avalanche of books put under his nose.

Maybe, someday this would happen to one of his books, thought Robert.

Since he already knew what was displayed in plain sight, he glanced at the table not far from the shelves. There seemed to be good edition books but with less famous titles and less glamorous

authors.

It was only for the time of a coffee. That time wasted lingering on something that Robert Red wasn't interested in doing.

He ran his eyes over the books on the coffee table.

He took one, but did nothing but turn it on the back cover, without even reading what was in it.

He moved another book with his finger, quickly reading the author and title.

Of the third book, instead, he limited himself to observing the drawing on the front.

Finally, he grabbed the last book, the one on the edge of the table, slightly apart from all the others.

And his mind registered something.

It was something undefined, impossible to be rationalized. But perfectly perceptible.

Perhaps Robert's mind was unable to make a precise hypothesis as to what had triggered him to gaze at that book.

It remained an indistinct perception.

He noticed a detail that he would indeed rethink later.

What Robert felt was a kind of deeper contact than what his fingers would feel against the glossy layer of coated paper.

It was as if Robert "felt" that book as if the pages vibrated as if his gesture hadn't just been holding a book. It happened as when we touch a part of our body, massaging it, trying to perceive it from the outside, to give it importance.

It was a sensation that could not rationalize, but something

physical, easy to feel.

Perhaps it had been the cover image, evidently skillfully chosen by the editor, sober yet almost magnetic.

Perhaps it had been the author's name, absolutely unknown in the scene of recent publications, at least for Robert.

Perhaps still, it was the title, which is the most captivating thing about a book: in that case, a dry, direct, easy to remember the title.

All of these things together could justify the attention Robert paid to observe that book, even if he only did it for a few seconds.

And what was the feeling that had gone through his body? What had his mind noted?

Robert, unable to give himself an answer, and not even want to look for one, shook himself off.

He went to the counter, paid for the coffee, and warmly greeted the waitress.

Then he headed home.

Instinctively, as soon as he was on the street, he pulled the phone out of his pocket and looked up Tricia Thompson's number in the phone book.

If he stopped to think about it, he would have realized he didn't know why intended to do it.

But before his brain could process that thought, the phone was already ringing.

One ring, two rings; on the third started the usual persuasive recorded voice surrounded by music that invited you not to hang

up.

A few moments later, the secretary answered: "Mug & Ball, good morning, how can I help you?"

"Ah ... yes, good morning. This is Robert Red, I wanted to speak to Miss Tricia, Tricia Thompson. "

"What is this regarding, sir?"

"Here, you see, she is editing my book, so ..."

Before Robert could say anything plausible, or implausible, the secretary went on: "Yes, sure, I understand. I see if I she is available. Would you kindly repeat your name? "

Robert did so and waited. At least he had gained a few moments to think about a reason why he had called and what he could say to the woman once she answered.

At least a couple of minutes passed. Then the voice on the other side of the line returned to replace the music: "I'm sorry, Mister ... Red, Miss Thompson is busy right now. If you can be kind enough to try again later ..."

Robert said something vaguely condescending, mumbling a little and, then ended the call. Better that way, it was just an intuitive gesture dictated by who knows what.

He would not have felt so relaxed about it if he had known that, at the publishing house, Tricia Thompson, was busy reading some drafts written so badly that she was racking her brains. So at the message that a certain Robert Red was looking for her, to talk about his book, she simply said she had never heard of him and, and not to break her balls.

Robert returned to his studio flat with a sense of inexplicable euphoria. If walking had that effect, he could consider doing it more often.

He sat at the kitchen table, after roughly having cleared it. He turned on the notebook, waited for the operating system to load, already foretasting the sound of his fingers on the keys.

He felt ready to write quite a few pages. The ideas would come to him; he was sure of it.

The literary café and the thought of one of his books showing off on shelves like them. The strange sensation he felt in there, which he could only interpret it as a kind of warning sign. The music of the Mug & Ball. The air of the city that had woken up.

Everything helped to give him the fibrillation he felt at the time.

The operating system had loaded; the background of his desktop, a Caribbean beach God knows where which winked at him like a beautiful girl just to make fun of him, was staring back at him with the usual monotony.

The pages written already were in files that Robert, for convenience, had not included in any particular folder and, therefore, dotted the sea and, the palm trees of the Caribbean with white documents.

He opened the most recent one.

... illusory as the last of his dreams, the metal sky above him. He was so small compared to so much immensity: how could he think he was worth something, that he was part of a larger design,

the gear that made the mechanism work at its best, a mechanism so complex that escaped even his highest understanding?

Robert reread the last words he had written down the previous evening, before going to bed. They did not satisfy him: they had a severity that did not suit the drier style he had used pages before.

He had to fix it.

The syntax ...

Or maybe it was the choice of words that could be improved?

Maybe it was more appropriate to rewrite everything.

He reread again

so complex that escaped even his highest understanding?

The words sounded strange to him.

The rhythm of the phrase, which Robert spelled several times, moved him inside.

And what he felt was very similar to the feeling he had in literary coffee.

Now he could have called it by the name all too abused of déjà-vu: he did not like to follow the words of everyone, but he could not find any other name for it than that.

He reread those words yet another time and, they changed in front of him: they twisted, pulsed, detached themselves from the page as if wanting to jump on him, and then they fell again. The syllables and letters spanned again, swirling like a spiral. Robert, initially confused by that hallucination, tried to rub his eyes; then, he kept them closed for a few moments. When he opened them again, the words seemed more stable, but now they were cloudy,

fuzzy, they got bigger and bigger, looking scary as if they were black bubbles about to explode.

Then it all ended, and the letters went back to being impalpable and monotonous signs on the computer screen.

# THERE AND BACK FOR JOHNATHAN ABLEPOT

## 2.

Vestavia Hills, 1858

Mrs. Evelyn Archer had just opened the door of her antique shop. She never arrived early in the morning: the hustle and bustle of people in Vestavia Hills only started around 9.30.

An elegant maple door carved no less than by her Bob, the husband who had left her a few years earlier, had been double locked. Ms. Archer put the key in and played with the lock a bit, as she only knew how to do it. The humidity probably swelled the wood so much that the lock no longer slid as easy as it did before.

And then she is in.

Just under the entrance porch, she put Rose on the ground, the cat that had kept her company for several years. Rose patiently waited for her owner to tinker with the door and then preceded her inside. It only meowed a little bit, but once inside the shop, it always made a noise, as if greeting the various knick-knacks present, its companions in the endless sleepy afternoons shut in there.

The interior of that shop seemed to be made especially for cats, and Rose might have thought: countless corners to explore, many shelves or objects to sleep on, such a mass of stuff that you

could lose yourself in it without the fear of being disturbed.

Evelyn Archer had accumulated all those things in almost forty years of activity. In the beginning, it was Bob who had traveled to nearby or larger towns in Alabama to retrieve old or recent items, to be repaired or still working, which they then resold in their shop.

After some time, she, too, had acquired the skill that was needed to find what was possible to sell by separating it from what no one would ever buy.

Over the years, as the objects in the shop had grown, so had and the arguments between them.

Sometimes Evelyn just couldn't stand Bob, and she was happy when some errands kept him away for a while. She couldn't stand the person Bob had become over the years. And that's certainly a big deal in a wedding. Then one day, just like that, he was dead.

A heart attack had taken him away.

As for Evelyn, she cried, of course. But her newfound freedom didn't take long to calm her sadness.

"Mrs. Archer! Good morning!"

An older man just entered the shop. He stood in the doorway for a moment, as if waiting for the owner's greeting as permission to enter.

Evelyn Archer had already figured out who he was and thought, "Stingy Bastard! Yet again today, you will come in and buy nothing. You have been walking by here for months without spending a penny. You could just stay outside then!"

Then, with a smile that seemed sincere, he said, "Mr. Gardner. Cheerful as always! "

The man replied: "Eh, at our age, it is better to be happy, right? You never know when the time to cry will come!" To end his sentence, Mr. Gardner let out a laugh that turned into a phlegmy cough fit. "Yeah, you are right," Evelyn said, expecting to see the man do what he always did.

As she predicted, Mr. Gardner looked around, as if he did not know, after all his weekly visits, where all the objects in the shop were.

Lifted the first vase he found next to him and contemplated it as if he was interested; then, he put it down, did a small turn on himself, a few random steps and, then turned to Evelyn for the farewell.

Everything as expected.

Instead, this time Mr. Gardner added: "How is your nephew?" with a very innocent look: "I have seen him lately. near Church Yard, I believe."

Mrs. Archer senses some malice, which probably wasn't there, in the old man's statement, and immediately changed her facial expression. However, in order not to show it too much, she pretended to have something to do on the counter and turned sideways: "I haven't seen him for a while; I mean that he is usually in a rush when he comes in the shop and has no time to chat. You know, sometimes young people spend a lot more time with strangers than with relatives. "

"He is a dear boy, so nice," added the man, "always greets everyone in town."

But Evelyn wanted to cut the conversation short: "He's a hard worker," she said. Then she began to overly organize the excessive mess of the shop as if to make the customer understand that she had a lot to do.

"Yeah, and it's a very much appreciated quality."

"You must excuse me, Mr. Gardner, but as you can see, I have not been tidying up for a long time, and now I am swamped with chaos!"

The man said kindly: "Of course, of course. I apologize. I don't want to waste your time. Have a nice day. Goodbye, Mrs. Archer. Maybe I'll drop by here next week, huh? "

"You are always welcome."

The man greeted politely and slowly closed the door. Evelyn let go of the stuff she had in her hands and stared at the entrance as if she could send through it some of her anger to that nuisance, who was also nosy.

What did he want to know about his nephew? People should mind their own business more often.

Shortly after the old Mr. Gardner was gone, the door of the shop creaked again. This time Evelyn didn't even need to look towards the door to figure out who had entered. The way the door opened was enough for her to figure it out.

He was his nephew. As always in a hurry.

The old woman began: "You know that Mr. Gardner came in

a little while ago and said he saw you ..."

But she could not complete the sentence, because the young man interrupted her: "We need to talk. I just had a thought. And she agrees too. I thought of Dothan, and then from there, we could go to Georgia ... "

"Dothan?" this time, it was Ms. Archer's turn to butt in "you don't think it's possible just to pick up and move there! Without starting any rumors, without people starting to search! We have already talked about it."

"I have contacts, and maybe you have some too. When the uncle was still alive, he used to go there. "

The young man was agitated, but Evelyn was becoming it even more: "I'm not talking about what's going to happen there. I'm talking about the situation that you will cause here! Martyn, how can you think of getting her and just taking her away with you? As if you were two spouses going on a trip. People will talk. Immediately. And they will react. "

"I want to live with her. I have decided."

"Martyn, it was just supposed to be just for fun. Something that was going to end soon after it started. I only agreed on these conditions. "

Evelyn Archer didn't look like a general store's old owner anymore, but a politician who was deciding the fate of the country: "I let this relationship carry on, even after what we had agreed. But only under the same conditions as before.

Now you talk to me about running away with her somewhere

else, and you haven't even decided where. You must have gone mad. "

"Yes, I am mad about her. And I'm here to tell you. "

"Ah, spare me this nonsense. Your pride speaks. Elizabeth is a woman you shouldn't have, and you want to prove to yourself that you can overcome this difficulty. Do you want to live your whole life without sleeping peacefully? Do you want the people of Vestavia Hills to talk behind my back and point their fingers at me every time I go out on the street? "

"It's something that only concerns me."

"No, you're wrong. It concerns us, I included. You will disappear if it will ever happen, but I don't want to leave my town, my shop, just for a crush. I won't let you. "

The nephew was silent. He tried to hold his aunt's look, but he had to look away first.

He had never realized how argumentative and fierce she was. There was something proud and ruthless about her look, a severity he never expected, which made his earlier certainties vacillate.

Rose, the cat, peeked out from behind a solid wood table cluttered with objects. Its attitude was nervous. It was taking a nap, and lazily opened its eyes when the tone between the aunt and nephew had risen.

The shouting did not at all annoy her, but it was clear that it was nervous.

As soon as it saw Martyn, it looked at him intently, frozen. At

first, the tail swayed slowly, and then it stopped too.

Evelyn, busy discussing with the boy, hadn't seen it; but as soon as the cat hissed, she couldn't help but notice it.

Rose clenched her mouth and hissed again, as the fur ruffled on her back. Then it arched its back and let out an aggressive meow.

"Be good, Rose. What's wrong?" said Evelyn.

Martyn was a little puzzled but did not give much importance to the animal.

As if its owner's calling had been an encouragement to attack instead of the opposite, the cat took a few steps forward: with an aggressive attitude, it hissed and meowed again.

"I don't understand. It has never done that before," said Evelyn.

"Forget it. That cat has never liked me. Just as clearly as its owner," Martyn replied.

"Ah, don't be pathetic now."

There was no way to continue the conversation, as there weren't other topics to discuss: the young man left the shop angrily, closing the door behind him without a word or a nod to the old aunt.

Mrs. Archer put her hands on her hips, standing in front of Rose, trying to have what she wanted to be a disapproving look. But in reality, the woman was somewhat concerned instead of annoyed by the animal's behaviour.

"What's wrong with you?" she said in a low voice.

Evelyn watched the cat for a few more moments and then turned to the door her nephew had just walked out from, feeling a squeeze in her stomach as when we eat something not so fresh.

"I won't let you make me Vestavia Hills outcast, Martyn.

To satisfy your desires, I have already compromised myself, and now you will not take away my good reputation with other whims."

Just then, the door of the store was about to open for the third time that morning.

A tall and distinguished man was coming forward from the paved road that crossed the main street along which Evelyn Archer's shop overlooked.

Evelyn stopped to observe him through the glass of the entrance door as he entered the porch: he was dressed in black, neatly as always; he made every movement without haste and had beautiful pleasantness painted on his face.

Then the bells on the door announced the newcomer.

"Good morning, Reverend Ablepot."

"Good morning to you, Evelyn."

Johnathan Ablepot's voice filled the room with its roundness, like the scent of a good blackberry pie.

"How was your trip?"

"Oh, it was tiring at times. I am not talking about the journey in the carriage; you know I like to drive it. However, all those days of attending meetings and talking, I must confess they stressed me out a bit. "

"I understand. Having to make decisions sometimes is more complicated than accepting them. "

"Look how philosophical our Evelyn Archer has become! Let me tell you then that it always depends on the type of decisions: there are the ones that benefit many, but not all, so they weigh on the shoulders of those who make them; and ones that bring discredit to most, so these weigh on those who have to accept them. Eh, what do you think? Did eight days of conferences turn me into a more educated priest? "

"You, Reverend, were intelligent even before. That's why people love you in Vestavia Hills. "

"That's why, Evelyn, I couldn't wait to come back."

The exchange of pleasantries carried on for a while. The priest was delighted to be able to meet his whole community, to hear their voices again, and see their looks again; Mrs. Archer found the reverend's affability seducing and pleasant, like a rich detail of the otherwise tasteless decor. However, this bothered her slightly.

Ablepot had just returned from a trip he was invited to exchange opinions about faith, and management of the congregation with other reverends of the county. He had spent five days with other churchmen and a couple of days travelling there and back.

He was tired but satisfied. He knew that many in town relied heavily on him, and he was happy to be a guide and comfort again for those who needed it.

Evelyn Archer was also happy with his return, although for different reasons than those of most of the congregation of Vestavia Hills.

Happy, but also apprehensive: when there is something that you have to hide from someone, you are never sure if that someone will find out in one way or another.

Especially if this doesn't just depend on you, but on a young man who is as enthusiastic as he is foolish.

Ablepot spoke again: "Listen, Evelyn, I would like to buy you something."

"You see, Reverend, you are certainly spoiled for choice here," said Mrs. Archer, in a tired tone without letting the reverend noticing.

"Yes, thank you, Evelyn. I know yours is a well-stocked shop. But I already have in mind what I want to buy. You know, before I left, Elizabeth and I were talking about a rocking chair; we already have one at home, but the one I told her I saw here has something special. I don't know why, but it looks more comfortable than many others. "

"I know the one you are referring to," said Mrs. Archer.

"Well done. Precisely. I'd like to pay for it right away. Could you have someone bringing it home to me? "

"Don't worry, Reverend Ablepot. You don't have to pay me now. You will have your chair tomorrow. I'll have my nephew bring it to you."

"He is a good boy and a hard worker. Elizabeth also likes him

very much."

Ms. Archer registered the information, and it was as if she had a small electric shock: "Say that again, please?"

"I said he's a hard worker. I made him fix the fence once, don't you remember? Then I invited him a few more times to get something chilled. "

"Ah, does your wife know him then too?" Evelyn said with excessive and ill-concealed interest.

"Of course, Evelyn. Where do you think Elizabeth was on those occasions? And she finds him very nice. Strange that he hasn't told you. Well. Look, now I have to go. I just came by for the rocking chair. I can't wait to freshen up and to hug Elizabeth and my house. See you later."

"See you later."

After the farewell, Mrs. Archer had a circle in her head: thoughts swarmed in her mind like people in the crowd of Christmas Mass. She stared, without looking at anything, at the back of Reverend Ablepot, who had gone out on the porch.

As soon as he was in the street, the priest waved hello to his right. Then he turned left and disappeared from the view of an increasingly concerned and irritated Evelyn Archer.

While heading towards the church and the vicarage, a few hundred meters away, the reverend distinguished the figure of a young man who came in his direction with quick and decisive steps.

Ablepot recognized in him, when he was closer, the grandson

of Mrs. Archer. As soon as the boy was within range, he nodded at him, smiling and touching the brim of his hat.

However, the young man, after looking at him, lowered his hat and his look, to avoid meeting that of the priest and pretending not to have seen him.

### 3.

The following day was a sleepy Sunday morning in Vestavia Hills, a lazy Alabama town, few souls, a lot of lands, and simple life. Hardly any noteworthy event had ever come to disrupt that place which seemed so from the mists of time; the events of surprise were given by the quarrels of unsuspected families or by some higher earnings from someone due to some useful trade or an excellent agricultural year. The area where Vestavia was, also had something of Edenic, primordial, peaceful.

It was how the elders in town had always remembered it, and everyone, or almost everyone, liked it to be.

People walked lazily towards the church.

The service would begin soon after that and nobody wanted to be late. You would have been stared at severely by everyone, and you would have felt as if you had failed.

So the men in their elegant blue or black suits led their wives arm in arm, dressed in the best that the wardrobe offered, but without overdoing it, so as not to attract attention. A little further on, or further back, the couple were their children: either older or younger, dignified, the last ones with a sort of dress identical to that of the father or mother but in a miniature version.

The church was at the end of the main street, just a couple of minutes' walk from the last house in town with an all year round shiny lawn. Like a Lord's gift for that lost town's small

temple, and the only ones who seemed to care about it were his inhabitants.

In the meadow, some well-kept trees, most claimed that it was there to represent the Lord's garden where the history of humanity had begun; others, however, said that it was planted for the pleasure of embellishing the lawn by the first shepherd of the community.

All around, there was a birch fence, white and with two series of sleepers, which gave the place an enchanting appearance.

Sometimes it was the shepherds themselves who took care to keep the church, the lawn, and the fence neat and beautiful. However, the devout citizens often gave a hand to look after the place most visited by everyone, at least once a week. Once they did, they felt as if they had helped a poor, properly educated their son, prayed intensely, or loaned money to a friend who would not fail to repay them.

The church entirely overlooked the community that approached it on the main road. Grumpily, with a watchful eye, the rose window above the entrance door looked at the brats who did not listen to their parents' requests, not to run or jump. It smiled benevolently at the couples of lovers who, each with their own family, who were careful not to look too much at their beloved one, imagining when they would enter the church to become husband and wife. It stood indifferent in front of all those who many, too many times, had come after years.

The building was simple. Skillfully built by those who knew

little else to do in life other than that, it consisted of a 30 meters long rectangle by just under ten wide, with white wooden planks. The slate-colored roof had a slightly accentuated slope.

The bell tower was at the rear, leaning against the building, with the same colors and materials, which lapped the slope of the roof. Three not very big dark wooden steps led to the entrance, above which stood a circular window with five rays also made of white wood and a central pin in the shape of a small donut.

The reverend's house was by the church, plainly built like all who previously lived in it.

The Vestavia Hills community was a right mix of Christians: some more irritable than others and some insipient; some were pious and devoted, perhaps beyond the due limit, some had recently converted; some were good fathers and family men, others who should have learnt that role.

In short, nothing exceptional, a standard sample of various humanity with sins and holiness.

Johnathan Ablepot was the reverend of this community. He was a man as simple as the congregation he led.

A beautiful and pretty wife was waiting for him at home, giving him a lot of serenity. The two had no children yet.

The reverend used to wait for the arrival of his congregation on the lawn. He always had a welcome smile for everyone, sincere handshakes, and a few kind words for the children.

Elizabeth, his wife, did not always participate in the welcoming ceremony of the congregation, but when she did, she

stood out for her courtesy, even more than her husband did. It was impossible not to like her and love her as pleasant and graceful as she was.

"Reverend Ablepot! What a pleasure to see you again among us! "

"Thanks, Jim. I, too, am happy to be back. Especially when there is someone like you who greets me so affectionately, the pleasure doubles."

"Did you see that I arrived on time, Reverend?"

"Well done, Stuart, I am pleased. Now you have to try to pay attention to the service too! "

While exchanging these pleasantries, the reverend saw, behind the last boy with whom he spoke, Evelyn Archer arrive, followed closely by her nephew. The two had an agitated pace and pouted air. They looked like they had just argued.

The reverend had always thought that Mrs. Archer was one of the kindest people in Vestavia, but there were times when a dark shadow covered her face. Ablepot would never have dared to say that she had an evil look, but when it darkened, Evelyn Archer's face gave a feeling of unease.

No one should enter the church angry with others, Ablepot thought. And a reverend had to do everything to bring his congregation on the right path. Therefore, he immediately went to meet the two.

Martyn had stopped at the edge of the fence, while the old aunt carried on walking towards the church entrance.

Ablepot greeted her: "Good morning, Evelyn," he said as kindly as he could "is everything all right?"

"Good morning, Reverend," replied the old woman seeming lost in thought. Then, with a sudden change of mood, she said, smiling: "It's a beautiful Sunday morning, isn't it?"

Ablepot was almost more troubled by that quick transition to friendliness than from the aggressive mask of just before. He was almost about to continue, trying to investigate the possible causes of Evelyn Archer's anger when a sparkle in the woman's eyes dissuaded him. He was not at all convinced that her excellent humor was sincere, even if it did not seem at all disguised, but this very fact left him speechless.

He felt as he was standing in front of a used-up actress, or even worse, in front of two different personalities trapped in the same person that manifested one after the other. This feeling disturbed him, not just a little, and the mysterious light at the bottom of Mrs. Archer's eyes almost knocked him back.

He moved away and let the old woman pass, who soon after disappeared into the church.

There was still the young Martyn, who continued to stand on the edge of the lawn.

Ablepot remembered the scene from the previous afternoon when, right near the church, he had met him while the boy had pretended not to see him. Could the two events be linked?

Martyn Trischer was stealthily looking towards the vicarage.

Ablepot raised his arm in greeting. This time the young man

replied, waving at him and did what he tried to be a smile. Then he lowered his eyes again, pushing his hat a little more down on his head.

That there were disagreements in the community was not new. How many times had the reverend been a peacemaker? Now there seemed to have been an argument, or at least some trouble between the young man and Evelyn: probably everything would be okay soon without the need for anyone's intervention. But Johnathan Ablepot was like that: he could not be entirely at peace if he could not do something to solve a problem.

Now, however, in that situation, he felt as if invisible tentacles forbade him to take a step forward. The reason for his concern was precisely that feeling of discomfort he felt with those two people, something that had never happened to him before.

He decided to take time, also because it was now time to get ready to start the Mass.

He turned and headed for the church. Elizabeth had appeared at the window of her home.

Ablepot did not want to worry her, so he tried to remove the concerned expression he probably had from his face.

He smiled and greeted her.

His wife did as well from behind the window.

When Johnathan Ablepot entered the rear of the church reserved for the reverend, he did not notice that his wife had remained at the window and that Martyn Trischer was still leaning against the fence.

The looks of the two had crossed.

## 4.

Vestavia Hills, 1859

Nicholas Abbot opened his eyes. It was Tuesday morning. The scent of wood filled the room up.

He lived in a not very large but well-kept house, which his wife appreciated for its quietness.

A slight sticky feeling bound his tongue to the palate. He didn't know what could have been the cause.

The night before, he had gone to bed early enough and slept with a dreamless, deep, but strangely restless sleep.

It must not have been that early, judging by the light that entered the room through the door, which his wife, who had already got up, had left open.

Nicholas staggered in the day room, searching for his wife with bleary eyes.

"Good morning to my dormouse!" Anna greeted him cheerfully.

"Good morning, what time is it?" Nicholas asked, his voice strangely clear and not pasty.

"It was time to wake up!"

Annabeth was particularly cheerful that morning, and that already set the right tone for the day. The disagreements between them a few months ago seemed to be going away gradually.

Nicholas loved her: he liked everything about her, mainly

how she tolerated him and how she knew how to be sweet and attentive. He was delighted with her cheerfulness, which was always ready on every occasion. Even though it had been tough for them the previous year, he never stopped experiencing these feelings.

They had been married for four years and had not been able to have children yet, but they didn't let it be an issue, even if it wasn't a comfortable situation.

Nicholas Abbot was a detective. He tried to give a name and an explanation to the tragedies that occurred daily in Vestavia Hills like in the county as in every part of Alabama.

Annabeth had never particularly loved her husband's career: Nick had to deal daily with violence and with people who were indeed not the cream of society. Nevertheless, over the years, she had become used to it: she had never intended to question the profession that her husband loved so much.

After all, nothing serious had ever happened to him in so many years. Not that Nick hadn't been in potentially dangerous situations, but he was cautious enough and very smart. Moreover, his colleagues had always given him a big hand.

"Honey, can we throw this newspaper away?" Anna said, picking up a newspaper that was on the kitchen table.

"What? Oh, no, wait, leave it there. "

"But it's two days old, what are you doing with it? Maybe it there was at least something interesting in it."

Nicholas did not reply. Instead, he asked for breakfast.

The newspaper reported the news of a child found dead not far from Church Yard. The misfortune had affected everyone in the community. The monster's hunting had already begun, but there were those who, as the article said, hypothesized an accidental death.

Reading that article, which in reality did not report anything other than the usual general journalistic information, Nick felt troubled and almost morbidly intrigued. That's why he hadn't thrown the newspaper away yet.

In the last few weeks, other tragedies like that happened, like a kind of god of violence had taken over the people of Vestavia Hills and the county. People seemed to have gotten wicked.

Perhaps, however, it was only his impression: in the months and years before, there had always been misfortunes, either related or not to violence.

However, Nick continued to feel stirred inside.

He picked up the newspaper again, and while drinking his cold milk and eating Anna's cake, he meticulously observed it again, as hypnotized by the page that reported the events of the tragedy.

In the afternoon, Nick greeted his wife with a kiss and began to leave the house; he had decided to go by the police headquarters, despite not being on duty.

"Be careful," she said, as she did every time, even if he had to go buy milk.

The dusty road reflected all the yellow of the sunlight: it didn't look like a day made for the bad news.

Once he arrived, Nick found the familiar smell of tobacco and the usual intense activity to welcome him.

"Abbot! What are you doing here?" said Philip Torrent, one of his roughest colleagues.

"I couldn't stand a day without seeing you, Phil!"

In response, Torrent let out a husky laugh and exposed his partially broken teeth.

His friend Jack said to him, "Since you've come by, Nick, I'll send you to the captain right away. He has been harassing me all morning by saying that he wants to talk to you. Even if you're not on duty. "

"Okay, Jack, thanks. I'll go straight away," said Nicholas.

Instead, he first went to check some files, which was why he had gone there.

He searched through the mess that was around and found what he was looking for: some information about the latest deaths reported by the county newspaper.

Was there something that tied everything? Nicholas thought so he could feel it.

He wanted to make sure he had read all the details that the command recovery officer had gathered and shown him not long ago.

Once he did that, he went to the boss's office.

Mr. Flitter was the worst you could wish for: quick-tempered and moody, and he also had heavy breath. However, he was a good cop.

"Abbot! Just looking for you. "

"Captain."

"Now, I want you to explain to me why you didn't tell me anything about the interrogations you did last week. I thought I was clear. "

Nicholas could have justified himself in some way, but he knew it would only make the situation worse. Therefore, he kept quiet and let the reprimand pass.

"All the information needs to go by me," Flitter yelled, "especially the ones about an investigation that I wanted."

Flitter stopped without speaking any more: with that tone, he had made things clearer than he would have done by spending more time talking.

Nick said, "Of course, sir. My mistake. I'll report back tomorrow when I'm back on duty. "Then he added hurriedly," I want to ask you to deal with a case. "

Flitter blinked as if he had been annoyed by a bug: "What?!"

"I want to investigate the boy found dead."

"Wolf is already working on that."

"And the latest alleged cases of violence in the county," Nick continued as if he had not heard Flitter's statement.

"I said Wolf is already working on that case."

Nick insisted: "I want to investigate, even privately. I promise you that I will not take time away from my other duties; you should reduce them a little. "He concluded like that with a smartass look on his face.

The two looked at each other for a few long seconds.

Then the captain said, "To hell with it. I know that even if I didn't permit you, you would do it anyway. Also, Wolf just let us know that he is not well and won't be for a few days, that bastard."

Getting some of the other idiots out there to do his job means wasting time." Finally, he added authoritatively: "But you will have to report everything to Wolf and me when he returns. Understand?"

"Understood," Nick said and then slipped out of the office. After all, Flitter was a good cop.

He decided to keep the half-day he had off and spend some time with Anna: before facing death and violence again, he needed something beautiful that would show him what else life can reserve.

The next morning he woke up early, even before his wife. He went out to scout the city.

He would begin to visit all the public businesses once again: the shopkeepers were good informants, even involuntary; thanks to all the people they met each day, and those they could notice walking up and down the street. Never underestimate the disconnected look of a butchery owner who observes what people, who walk past him, do and how they behave.

As soon as Nick found himself on the main road of Vestavia Hills, he felt it wasn't going to be a day like any other at all.

There was incredible fibrillation in the air, a palpable heaviness as if someone had spread a wet blanket over the

shoulders of the whole town.

It did not take him long to understand why people exchanged inquisitive looks and had a sort of interest that one noticed as soon as one set foot on the street.

Once around the corner of Hickory Road, Nicholas saw in the distance, towards Church Yard, a column of black smoke that had nothing reassuring.

He quickened his pace. Then he decided to let go of all restraint and started running.

Once there, he found several people still staring astonished at the burning rubble. Several small groups had formed throughout the Church Yard: people talked to each other to give themselves the courage and try to understand what had happened, but without raising their voices, as you do at a man's deathbed.

The burning building was the church. The fire must have developed very early in the morning, and the fact that the construction was slightly away from all the houses had perhaps contributed to delaying the alarm.

Then action was taken, probably with a human chain, to try to put out the flames using buckets of water.

Flames had burnt more than half of the church, and the embers were still hot and kept under control by a group of citizens. The vicarage wasn't too damaged, although the part closest to the church had the signs of the flames, similar to enormous dark fingers that stretched to grasp it.

Nicholas was surprised that he didn't realize something was

going on, but probably the wind blew in the opposite direction to his house, so neither the smoke nor the screams of fear had reached it. Also, his home was on the other side of Vestavia in respect to the church, and that agitation around it left no traces in his neighbourhood.

However, the first thing that occurred to him was to ask the first person within range, "Didn't the fire bell ring?" the sound of that would have reached his home as well.

"No," said the man, "I don't think they played it because a lot of people started running right away, and they started throwing water buckets."

Safety practice, however, should not have been ignored: ringing a fire bell was a matter of common sense.

"It was tampered with," said a man with a beard, who had inadvertently heard the conversation between Nicholas and the other man.

"How?" Nick said with an already challenging look.

"This is what I heard: they immediately took action to put out the fire, and someone went to ring the fire bell, but they were left with the rope between their hands and the bell off from the turret and chipped."

"Are you sure?"

"Hey, that's what I heard, I'm not a firefighter."

Nick was already lost in a thousand thoughts.

It made no sense to destroy the fire alarm, even for a criminal town.

The spreading of the flames would have damaged himself, his eventual home or those he could aim to rob; not to mention the cultivated fields that were located just outside the town, just behind and not far from the church, which was a source of sustenance for thieves and criminals as well. Maybe it could have been the act of a deranged man who doesn't even have any survival instinct. Or perhaps a firefighter himself, unstable or vindictive?

A thousand hypotheses could be made. But for a crime, you always need a motive, and who could have something against the Reverend? What did he hope to achieve? It had to be for revenge: what interests could a humble person like a shepherd have affected?

Nick didn't like to attend church very much and only sporadically had he been dragged to the service by Annabeth's persistence; however, he knew the Reverend, and he could not believe any revenge against him.

The obvious next thing to do now was to look for who had experienced the fire firsthand: the Reverend Johnatan Ablepot himself.

By the way: why hadn't he given the alarm immediately? Why wasn't he in the square gathering at least the signs of solidarity of his congregation? Was he dead trying to fight the fire himself?

Nicholas cursed himself for his curiosity of an unmarried woman who had fixed him to a thousand assumptions without having taken a step, and for wasting time with those men in the

square as if he was an ordinary passerby.

He made his way through the crowd, asking if they had seen the Reverend. But they all said no.

He continued to go further, and, as soon as he was near the fence that surrounded the lawn of the church, he could still feel the terrible heat that sprang from the damage of the fire even though it had been extinguished.

The planks of the fence were still white, and contrasted with the black remains, as if they were a crooked and mocking smile towards the tragedy that had happened.

"I'm police officer Nicholas Abbot, and I want to speak to Reverend Ablepot right away," Nick said to the first fire officer he met.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't know where he is," replied guiltily.

"He is not here?!" Nick yelled

"No, sir, I mean that the Reverend is not here. We couldn't find him in the vicarage. Nor in the surroundings. And believe me, I was one of the first ones to arrive. "

The news did not immediately breach, as it should have in Nicholas' mind, still affected by recent events.

But when he rationalized it, the news hit him like a punch.

He said in a calmer but still tense voice: "Are you telling me that Johnathan Ablepot was not at home last night and still hasn't shown up?"

The firefighter replied, emphasizing the words: "I cannot know, sir, if the Reverend was not at home last night. I'm just

saying that when we ran to the vicarage to wake him up, in case he slept through that hell nearby, he wasn't there. And even now in the surrounding area, no one has seen him. "Now, it was the man who was indisposed by Nick's attitude.

Nick understood that the information that the firefighter could give him would not go far beyond what he had already heard.

Nicholas managed to approach some other people, finding out that there was no sign of Reverend Ablepot.

"My son told me he saw him on the church lawn two days ago."

"I went to church to pray, but he wasn't there. I thought I saw his shadow in the window, but not him in person. "

"I even looked for him at his house. I knocked at the door three times: nobody answered. "

Everyone had their own story to tell, but in none of them, there was a hint of where the Reverend was. It seemed that they hadn't seen him for at least a couple of days.

Nick had to make a decision: to either carry on working on the boy's death case, or to continue investigating the mysterious church fire, and the disappearance of Johnathan Ablepot.

He knew he couldn't ignore what happened at Church Yard, and hoped he could reconcile the two. He had to find out more about the Reverend's disappearance, and what was behind the burning of his parish.

Once back home, there was no need for Nicholas to explain to Anna what had happened in town. The news went round fast.

Annabeth knew Reverend Ablepot.

Religion was a serious matter to her: she had talked to the Reverend several times, and she liked him.

"My God, Nick. Something bad has surely happened to him. But who could have wanted such a thing?! Destroy the church!"

Her husband replied as if he were already writing notes for the investigation: "It is certain that the two events are connected. But we don't know what did happen, or didn't, to Reverend Ablepot."

"Do you mean he could have set the church on fire!"

"I'm not saying that, how can you think that? However, for now Ablepot is a missing man. There seems to be no evidence that anyone has hurt him or made him disappear. To tell the truth there doesn't seem to be any proof of anything, not even that there is someone behind this incident. "

"If no one is responsible, what else could have happened? Did the church catch on fire due to terrible bad luck, and the fire bell fell from the column by itself? Did the Reverend, frightened by a possible accusation, want to escape? Which of these theories seems credible to you?! "

"Calm down, Anna, you're taking this too personally. I also believe that the recent disappearances and deaths around here are related to what happened last night. I have already spoken to the station: we will deal with this matter. I will deal with this. "

Anna clutched a tea towel in her hands and gathered thoughts by rocking her head slightly.

She said, "Nick, there is something strange about this. There

is something wrong; I would never want something like that happening here in Vestavia, in our town. "

Nick looked at her full of kindness, but he could not remain silent about his frustration: "Anna, bad and wicked things happen in every city of America."

"I feel there is something different in this case. I think something disturbing. I don't know ... don't ask me why, but it's like that. "

Nick preferred not to insist further, given his wife's nerves. Annabeth was particularly shaken by the incident, even if he didn't know why.

She needed to feel him close.

He went to her and hugged her. Then he kissed her on the forehead and went outside.

He had work to do.

He walked high and low all the main roads in town, asking questions to many people; in some cases, he asked the same people twice a short time later, the ones who didn't convince him, to catch possible contradictions.

He looked at the site of the fire for a long time.

He filled several sheets with all the notes, the hypotheses, the thoughts that rioted inside him.

Yet even after all this intense activity, the sunset came without Nicholas Abbot being any closer to a lead.

He stopped for a drink before going back home, to gather his thoughts, or perhaps calm them down. He needed something

strong.

Upon entering the bar, he noticed that a person was watching him. Then, when he had taken a more decisive step towards the front door, she withdrew, as if she wanted to approach him but not at that moment.

His tense nerves most likely made him see more oddities than there were. Therefore, he decided to silence the nerves and not give too much weight to the last impressions of a very long day.

When he went out into the street, without having shaken off that feeling of having made some mistakes, the figure waiting for him was still there, she had just changed place, but not the intention of approaching him, it seemed.

Nick became self-defensive, subtly tensing his muscles, ready to sprint. However, he soon realized that there would be no reason for it.

The person in front of him, now he saw her well, was an older woman, submissive, who certainly could not have caused him any concern.

"Inspector Abbot," said the woman.

Nick looked carefully at the figure before him. A crooked smile formed on his face.

"It's me, detective, Evelyn Archer."

The lampposts on the main street were already emanating their amber light, which seemed to wrap everything up. It was as if all Vestavia Hills was sinking into see-through molasses: people and buildings could still be seen, but everything had a

sticky slowness on it. People seemed to move in slow motion. Things showed as a slowed downtime, not at their usual pace.

The town's colours seemed to merge, one moment they look like was chalk on a blackboard, the next moment they were exchanging places in strange combinations. A woman passing by had the skin the same colour as the moon and the hair like the nearby bush. A passing horse, on the other hand, was tinged with the bluish colour of the furthest areas of the street, where the street lamp's lights did not reach; while the buggy that the animal was pulling and the man who drove it had the colours of the blood of the pieces of meat exposed by the butcher.

Even the dimensions of objects and the world were assuming unstable and indefinite states. The outlines of things were fraying as if they came out wrong on a painting. Roundness and edges exchanged places: moreover, they first got bigger and then smaller, without any logic.

Yes, logic: every perception had lost its own, and it did not seem possible to determine which the right one for the world was.

The music spread everywhere from far away but contaminated by a background sound that seemed to contain many overlapping voices. This cacophony had something disturbing about it, as much as fascinating the mystery of its origin was. It appeared to be underwater, and those sounds had the touching indefinability of the wind when it whistles in the mountains.

Nicholas Abbot was a dot in that washed-out design of the world, firm in his position similar to a statue poorly made. Yet,

with his head anxiously trying to interpret what he thought he was feeling, and throbbed slightly, perhaps for the drink he just had, probably for the unreality of what he deciphered.

An instant.

Maybe much more.

The blink of an eye. Or the prolongation of a moment, as it can only happen in eternity.

Then Nick recovered from that strange daydream, without knowing how long it lasted.

In front of him, there was still that modest and innocent figure, this time in its natural contours and colors, of Evelyn Archer.

"How can I help you?" Nick seemed to have regained his full presence of spirit, so he was able to resume the thread of the conversation.

Evelyn said to him, "I know you can investigate the church fire and the disappearance of Reverend Ablepot."

Nicholas didn't reply, but his demeanor made the woman understand that he was interested in letting her go on, so she continued: "I knew Johnathan Ablepot, like everyone else. But in so many ways, more than any person you can contact."

The way Evelyn Archer spoke was convincing, not dragged, but sure and severe, Nick thought; it was the tone of someone who is not making anything up, and who is risking something in revealing what she is saying.

"If you want to know what happened to him, let me tell you, I do too. I need to know. And maybe I have something to say to

you that will help both of us. "

This time the blink of an eye was real, and it was Nicholas': it was the time it took him to make the decision.

"Okay," he said, "I'll listen to you."

# **YET ANOTHER AFTERNOON FOR ROBERT RED**

## **5.**

He was sipping orange juice. He thought that the taste had a rancid aftertaste and that perhaps he had left it in the refrigerator a little too long.

He didn't want to put up with another nuisance: as if he needed a stomach ache from spoiled food. He threw the juice into the sink.

Robert was leaning against the kitchen cabinet with the dazed look of one who is following his thoughts, the one who makes the person with glazed eyes seem so ridiculous, almost as if they were those of a stuffed animal. Yet he was not thinking of anything specific.

More than anything else, he tried to follow his emotions, which were made mostly of anger inside his now quite physically tested body. Insomnia gave him no break, and this gave him other problems such as lack of appetite and headaches. Concern for his nightmares, which had also been joined by daytime hallucinations, was beginning to grow. Finally, for the past two days, a fever had arrived from who knows where, which gave him a dullness, a further numbness feeling.

In short, he felt like crap. And, although he did not know

who to blame, and perhaps for this very reason, his anger was growing.

He would never have thought of doing it; it was something he could not understand and had always avoided because considered it a disease, he went to look for the number of a psychologist.

When he heard someone talking about it, he always looked with pity on the subject in question. How could it be possible that someone needed a person who told him how to feel, who coaxed him with pleasant or even provocative sentences, who gave him a shoulder to cry on and feel sorry for himself while getting paid for it?

What kind of person was someone who couldn't even control what he thought?

But now, gripped by the monster of insomnia, which forced him to spend whole days in a daze, and was no longer sure of what he saw or did, perhaps he too could give it a go. Those strange feelings, such as the experience of the previous day or the one in the literary café, convinced him that his psycho-physical health could be in question. He had already followed the doctor's orders: but the pills didn't work, and he had no intention of taking stronger medications.

The hallucinations were what worried him the most: if he were no longer able to distinguish the real from the unreal, well, that would have been a big problem.

With all those hours of lost sleep and that heaviness on his eyelids and in his brain, all those afternoons spent dozing

off without really resting, and he was no longer sure he could distinguish what he did from what was only a dream.

Dr. Thomas Trevor.

To Robert, it seemed somewhat popular, judging from the website. Well, however, for Robert, one was worth the other, not having high esteem of psychologists.

Yet another twinge of headache convinced him that he should try.

So he dialed the number and spoke with a kind secretary, who told him that the doctor would be free the next day.

Tomorrow was perfect: Robert hoped that this could, had to be, a solution to the heaviness that felt inside his head as if he had a massive bowling ball stuck in it.

Robert noted down the information, said goodbye, and ended the call.

He already felt uncomfortable, and he couldn't quite figure out if it was because he was going to a psychologist for the first time in his life or for that strange feeling that had been crowding him for the past few days.

The next morning he reached Dr. Trevor's office according to the appointed time.

It was a somewhat nondescript building in Miller Hill Way, one of the newly built ones, where concrete and glass rules.

Robert still felt entangled in that uncomfortable feeling he felt the day before when he phoned the doctor.

He looked up to observe the window, which in his hypothesis

could have been the psychologist's as if he were facing the challenge with an enemy who he needed to look straight in the eye.

The sun was scorching that day. The reflection of the light in the glass almost hurt the eyes. Robert coped with it as part of that challenge he imagined to face.

He coped with it at least until the building wall and windows seemed to turn into liquid.

The building no longer seemed to support itself on the foundations, and the more the minutes went by, the more it looked like a block of liquid cement and superheated glass pudding.

Robert looked away, convinced it was just caused by the sun's heat. But he did not have time to think of anything that he found himself catapulted into another city.

Or rather, what was around him was still Vestavia Hills, he was convinced. Something in the atmosphere made him think that. However, although he was able to recognize his town in some of the details, he felt cast out. He was like a spectator at the cinema, who can see the places he knows, but who can in no way intervene in that scene to correct the details that seem out of place.

Robert saw Vestavia Hills, but he also noticed that there was something wrong, out of place, in front of him, and he could not change it.

A boy about 7 or 8 years old, dressed in an adult style suit and looking very composed, walked a few steps away from him,

he looked at him as if he was an urban fixture that should not have been there, with a mixture of severity and indifference in the eyes. Robert also looked at him sideways, as if to intimidate him, but the boy was gone. He had dissolved to make way for a beautiful girl who was going in the opposite direction, towards Robert.

He observed the provocativeness hidden under a very abundant outfit, but the girl gave him an evil look; evil and satisfied at the same time as if she was observing her prey. Robert wanted to get out of there, but he couldn't move. A much older man came up behind him and brushed up against him to get past. At that contact, Robert turned abruptly: he saw the man's face, or what was left: the older man looked very similar to a painting where part of the front had been intentionally rubbed off.

This hallucination he was stuck in, struck him so deeply that his consciousness woke up, and he told himself with the conviction that what he was seeing was only part of his nightmares. It was another lousy daydream, the result of insomnia and his nerves, as he would tell the psychologist shortly after that.

But this thought was not enough to bring him out of that impaired vision: just as it happens in nightmares, the pinch that someone gives himself inside a dream never helps waking up.

Robert turned to his left: from afar, an older woman walked with tired steps.

Even though he still did not see her features precisely, Red

knew that the woman was looking at him.

She was looking for him. She wanted him.

Robert was afraid to look her in the face and was worried that she would be a person without a face like a man before. Instead, contrary to his anguish, the woman seemed to have a friendly look. She inspired confidence and tenderness, and she didn't have the contrite, wrinkled, and depressed expression of many older women.

She wasn't talking, but Robert sensed some of her words: or rather, he heard sounds coming from the woman's face, even if he could not understand what she was saying. It was more like a set of voices very close together, just as if more than one person was speaking at the same time, what he felt was a faint buzzing behind which few words emerged.

"Fire, devil ... .. disappeared ... fear ..."

In short, something not very reassuring and angry.

Then suddenly, the old woman's face looked like someone violently punched in the stomach. Slowly that outraged look turned into a strange grimace: the face deformed, looked cruel, the mouth began to widen and emit a guttural and hollow sound. The eyes grew embers.

Robert looked away and ran away.

Then he realized he was still in front of the same building: he hadn't moved then, but the old demonic lady was gone.

So, as if he were on a treadmill, he started to move towards the entrance of the building.

On the outside, it still looked like a modern building, but inside there was a moldy scent mixed with the smell of something that had just burnt down.

It was a kind of sacred building: it could have been a church since Robert was staring at a wooden cross. It was very dark, only a faint light filtrated in there, coming from who knows where. Despite this, Robert saw everything with clarity, with exaggerated precision, as if an extraordinary faculty was born inside him as if someone or something wanted him not to miss any detail.

At that point, when the wooden cross drew his eyes, it seemed to come alive: it bent slightly on itself and, even if no Redeemer was hanging as in other crucifixes, it appeared, in a bizarre way, to be staring back at Robert. Then it expanded as if something was boiling under the surface of the wood. Finally, the cross, just as the young man stared at it more intensely, completely lost in what it was a real nightmare, exploded: a black stream burst from its center, a tongue of darkness seemed to crawl towards Robert, who backed away a few steps. The cross continued to spew darkness, spreading across the floor and between the benches. Then a figure appeared from the left behind a room that led somewhere: it was a human figure, indeed a man, who was walking solemnly. There was something unstoppable and frightening in his presence.

Robert could not see the face of who was coming. A new thrill of anguish had caught him, the fear of that black stream that

continued to leak out the crucifix.

Then, finally, his need to escape had the upper hand. So he ran away.

He found himself by the building where that vision had begun, the psychologist's office, which now seemed to Robert like a piece of land in miles and miles of ocean. He had been catapulted there by a sort of teleportation. The impact of that "journey" was so strong that Robert staggered for a moment.

He looked furtively around, and it was more to make sure that there were no other diabolical beings and that he had returned to what must have been the reality, rather than for fear of being caught out.

He walked in with a knot in his stomach, a mixture of anxiety and desire to drink something very strong.

Even the brass plate that indicated Dr. Trevor's office seemed unreal: but it was only Robert's extreme desire to enter it that made it so. Red stared at it almost to challenge it to turn into something else.

Fortunately, at least this time, nothing happened.

After he rang and someone opened the door, he was welcomed into the waiting room, once the bright living room of a tasteful apartment, by the doctor himself.

It was a man in his forties, sporty and very accommodating: Trevor wore dark jeans and a dark brown jacket worn over a turtleneck sweater that gave him a truly professional look. Over his nose, he had a pair of trendy eyeglasses, framing a smile that

looked like a part of his outfit.

"Nice to meet you, Robert," said the doctor. "Excuse me just a few minutes, I'll be right back" he then pointed at the sofa to sit on and also invited the patient to help himself to the gummy candies that were on a table.

Robert sat down where Trevor indicated but left the colored candy. Although he had calmed down slightly compared to the cold sweats of the nightmare just before, he inhaled deeply and exhaled loudly. He felt like he was on his first date.

He would have liked a glass in his hands, at least to give himself a demeanor. He had to settle for an anonymous magazine, which didn't interest him at all.

After a few minutes, as promised, Dr. Thomas Trevor came back: "Here I am. This way, please."

Robert was invited to enter a much smaller and more intimate sitting room than the waiting room.

Everything specially arranged and designed to instill calm, Robert thought. "Who knows if these things work," he said to himself, "we'll soon find out. I bloody need some calm."

A carpet softened the steps by muffling them. The patient chair was so puffy and soft that even if a rusty scrap metal robot had sat on it, it would have made nothing but a faint "puff" noise. On the table was a salt lamp with orange and pink tones, while a floor lamp in the corner of the room emanated some more light, just as soft and discreet. The walls were pastel-colored, also in pink and orange tones from what you could make out with the

lighting of the room: no paintings hung on the walls.

The doctor took a seat on a more straightforward chair.

The psychologist didn't waste any time: "So, Robert, tell me: why did you decide to come here?" His tone was friendly, but that put Robert on the defensive.

He took a few seconds before replying. Then said, just as straight to the point: "I don't sleep anymore. I have been suffering from insomnia for a long time. "

After speaking, Robert observed Trevor trying to see any reaction. He only saw the face of a sympathetic person interested in what he was saying.

"This thing is killing me," continued Red, "I wander around the town and among the others like a zombie."

Again he glanced at the doctor, who had the same expression as before.

Well, who knows what and how many cases of troubled people he had heard. He certainly could not be impressed by yet another neurotic who said he slept too little.

Robert went on, not so much because he trusted the reassuring and benevolent face of Dr. Trevor, as because he wanted to empty the sack immediately, or at least a large part of its content, convinced that the "therapy," that's what is called right? Could already be that, and could heal him, at least in part, right away.

So he added: "I think, related to my insomnia, there is also the other problem I have ... hallucinations. I see ... things ... unreal things. "He paused and looked again at the psychologist. Then he

concluded: "Unreal and frightening."

It seemed to him that he had made a great effort, maybe because he felt very embarrassed.

Dr. Trevor asked him, "How long haven't you been sleeping well? How long have you had these visions? "

So it was there, in that quiet and relaxing cosy room of psychologist Thomas Trevor, that for the first time in his life, Robert Red said something about himself, beyond the futility of his conversations with whom he called friend, beyond the grouchiness he sometimes had with others.

Robert told of the hellish landscapes he was facing. He spoke about the people in his visions who turned into demons. Talked about the reverend, the fiery eyes, the devouring mouth, and the religious setting, which were the underlying cause for many of his dreams.

While sitting on that soft chair, he spoke about this, how he felt, reliving himself almost entirely.

Contrary to what he had thought, he did not feel judged at all. Nor did he hear advice or instructions. However, this did not ultimately help to soften his doubts.

Or at least this seemed to the psychologist, who told him: "You are very defensive, Robert. No, don't take it as a criticism. I'm just telling you what I feel. But it is not an unpleasant fact in itself.

You should ask yourself this week until our next meeting, why you keep this attitude. Just try asking yourself this question. "

Even Trevor got there in the end, Robert thought with

disappointment: he too had that arrogance that characterized practically all the doctors he had known.

That's what annoyed him. But in his heart, for the moment, he was not thinking of giving up therapy just yet.

He wasn't sure what to say, what to do, whether to ask the doctor if the session was over, whether to get the wallet out to pay him his fee, whether to make a circumstantial smile that at least simulated a little friendship and courtesy.

Trevor did everything: he said that the session was over; he then said that the first time there was no need to pay anything, and finally, he showed off his smile of circumstance and the firm handshake you give to a friend.

"You know, Robert," added the doctor, "what you told me is unique. And it's fascinating." He now had a very professional approach. "Once a patient of mine told me something similar, in her dreams, she had also given a name to the city they were set ... "

The doctor smiled and gave no importance to what was only parting chatter to him.

Robert registered what the psychologist had just told him with a kind of pungent curiosity. He wondered if the doctor could ever tell him who that patient was. Probably not.

# AN UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY FOR JOHNATHAN APPLEBOT

## 6.

Vestavia Hills, 1858

Reverend Ablepot went back home as he did many times before, like those who love their home, who know it perfectly and who, inside it, feel comfortable and sheltered from the world.

Many times he went out to carry out his task as a shepherd among his congregation: he used to give a word of comfort, or for the job far from easy to visit sick or even worse dying people; or went to visit a particular parishioner who hadn't been to church for a while; or finally, he used to take a walk, and in the meantime exchange small talk with those who saw him as a point of reference in town.

Every time Johnathan Ablepot went back to the vicarage, he had that satisfied feeling like someone who had just done his duty.

He was also going back to a secure family home, orderly and straightforward, looked after by a kind and devoted wife, who didn't deprive the man of the house of anything. That afternoon, however, something seemed to have changed.

It wasn't the appearance of the house, which was always the same, with that scent of fresh flowers that Elizabeth liked to have

around for him from time to time. Not the atmosphere, which remained quiet, calm, secluded, as the Reverend was used to finding.

Perhaps what had changed was in himself, confined to the depths of his heart, in a recess that was trying to talk to him, even if he still hadn't trained his ear to hear well.

As he took off his jacket, to place it on the usual armchair in the living room, Ablepot thought of Martyn Trischer, Evelyn's, the shopkeeper, nephew.

It had already happened to him before that someone didn't respond to his greeting, but it had never bothered him.

How he was feeling now, though, Ablepot began to think, was different.

Martyn Trischer had no special relationship with him: he was a parishioner like others, a good boy, with the peregrine ideas of young people, but who had always kept himself busy, even in the vicarage. The young man was not particularly close to the reverend.

Yet the rushed greeting that the boy had given him and that note of concern in his look (had there really been? Ablepot was almost sure of it) had left the reverend a strange feeling, like when you eat something gone off, that releases its real taste only after we swallowed it. That, therefore, annoys us even more, because now we can't do anything about it.

Elizabeth came up to him from the adjoining room: "John! Welcome back," the joy of her voice had the sparkle it had every

other day, "how did it go in town?"

Elizabeth was adorable in every gesture she made. Even in the most trivial questions, she managed to have an attitude that would put even the grumpiest of men at ease. She had always been this way. Their years of marriage hadn't changed her at all; they only made her a more mature and flawless lady of the house.

"All right," replied Ablepot.

But it was not difficult for Elizabeth to sense something elusive in Johnathan's voice: "You look worried. Did something happen? "

Ablepot did not want to get caught out; also, because he would not have known what to say and how to explain.

So he remained evasive: "No, nothing, why would you say that?

I feel, well... a little tired. Although I didn't do anything in particular," and then Ablepot tried to have a more lively tone, "I am feeling a bit weak." I think I am coming down with something."

Elizabeth showed concern: "Shall I make you a hot cup of tea, huh? As mom said, it's suitable for any occasion! "

"No, don't bother," replied the man, "I am going to sit on the armchair for a while and relax. Old age hey!" he hinted a laugh to give more credibility to his apparent desire to joke about it.

Elizabeth understood perfectly well that her husband, taken by who knows what thoughts, had little desire to talk.

Sooner or later, Johnathan would always tell her what worried

him. However, the young woman felt that this time her husband would not do as he ever did before.

And perhaps, on this occasion, she didn't want him to do it. She said: "Then I will sit here with you to read a book."

The reverend smiled at her as if he was lost in thought and then said that he would do the same. He took the Bible and sat down on the armchair.

"Because you can bandage a wound and mend an injury, but those who have revealed secrets have no more hope. Whoever winks with the eye plots evil, and nobody can deflect it. With you, his speech is sweet; he admires your words, but behind your back, his speech will change, and he will twist your words." So read Johnathan Ablepot in the book of Sirach, which was one of the last meditations he was using to prepare his next sermon.

He looked up as if to follow one idea or to have another, but his mind didn't take notice of the biblical verses. In front of him was the window of the small bay window that overlooked the lawn. From where he was sitting, he could see part of the fence.

And then he remembered that image of Martyn Trischer leaning against the fence, just before the beginning of the last function.

Again him, again Martyn Trischer.

At that point, Johnathan Ablepot's mind registered a small piece of information, which did not immediately lead to anything: his look went on a little book with a fine binding, which was carelessly resting on the table in front of the window.

Ablepot went back to reading the Bible. Or at least try to do it. His wife, Elizabeth, did not look away from her book.

Shortly after, the reverend got up to get some water, under the look of his wife. He looked at the table again, without any conscious attention.

When he returned, his wife seemed to have got up and sat back down again.

The next hour passed without any distraction. Ablepot seemed to regain concentration to mentally compose notes and arrangements that would have been useful for next Sunday's sermon. Elizabeth read a few more pages of the book in her hands, then began to tidy up some other rooms.

The reverend did a few household chores and went to the church.

Dinner time came quickly enough. Elizabeth had prepared some stew and mashed potatoes: they consumed it cheerfully and with a good conversation. The reverend's so-called tiredness seemed to have overcome; the girl was pleasant as usual.

It was then, at the end of the dinner, that a shadow reappeared in Ablepot's mind and face.

His brain had brought the detail of that book back in his mind. Like a wounded animal that hides in the ravines until it has regained sufficient strength, so that thought, strengthened with the passing of the hours, had come back to the reverend's mind.

It was a momentary flash, but that left a clear trace. Now that he had remembered, Ablepot knew that the book was not part

of his library. The spine, the cover, its colour, and the size: he was practically sure that he had never bought anything like it, and no one had ever given him a book.

So, where could it come from?

By now, his brain had started: and a series of details surfaced.

When he got up to get a glass of water, the book was on the edge of the living room table near the bay window, he was sure of it, he could almost still see it in front of him. Just as he knew that, once he returned to the living room, almost without realizing it, he still had a look at the table, and the book was gone. The missing book now seemed as evident as the groove of a disappeared building left on the grass.

Ablepot tried to dismiss this thought as absolutely insignificant. But a prod, similar to something physical, pressed his chest and warned him to clear up any doubts.

When Elizabeth said she was going to bed, Ablepot stalled a bit so he could go in the living room again.

As soon as his wife went up to her room, he rushed to the study, searching for that book. As he already knew, there was nothing like it in his library. He also looked in the library, the shared one, where his wife also provided herself with readings; and again, as he imagined, he found no trace of what he was looking for.

Either he had had a hallucination, or that little book was on the living room table and Elizabeth herself, who else? She must have taken it away from there. Obviously, to make sure he didn't see it.

What other explanation was possible?

Ablepot bit his lip because he realized that he had made a wrong thought about his wife, that he had accused her of deception. Practically never, in his life with Elizabeth, had he doubted her honesty.

But now, that thought, made, forgotten and remembered again within a day, was so evident that it seemed impossible that it was on a hallucination. He was sure of what he remembered seeing, as he did not doubt that the Bible was on the pulpit of the church.

Although regretting doing such a thing, an offense to the good faith with which Elizabeth was undoubtedly full, he began to rummage in frenzy wherever it was possible to hide a book.

Finding nothing was more of a relief than a concern.

After a few minutes spent looking in the living room, Ablepot sat on the armchair, almost persuaded, with a sudden change of opinion, that he had imagined what was not there. He was now looking forward to the next morning when he could innocently question Elizabeth about that matter.

While pondering over these things, the reverend looked at the cabinet where they kept the trays and dishes. Even in the dim light of the only lamp the reverend left on, his attentive look, or sharpened by the situation, did not miss the fact that a tray was out of place, not well aligned with the order that his wife usually kept.

He got up with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension and opened the cabinet.

He was satisfied about completing his research and amazed at such a secret act by Elizabeth; he saw a book behind a tray.

It was that book: the book with the fine binding and the purple color he had seen on the bay window table.

He did not immediately read the title, stopping instead to ask himself once more why his wife had to hide that book from him.

Then he looked at the cover: they were poems and love letters from the English poet John Keats.

The following morning Ablepot was unable to wake up as early as usual. The whirlwind of thoughts that had accompanied him to bed did not allow him to go to sleep immediately. Also, when he finally fell asleep, he was restless and not at all relaxing sleep.

He decided to immediately deal with the matter of the book with Elizabeth and listen to what she had to say about it.

He found his wife in the room adjacent to the living room.

"Good morning, dear," she said with sincere friendliness.

"Good morning to you."

Ablepot, although annoyed by the event, had no intention of getting too angry. The night he had advised that it was not a good thing to let oneself get angry: not very evangelical, and probably not useful.

He went on to ask his wife what time it was.

"It's not too late, don't worry. I saw that you were still sleeping soundly, so I decided not to disturb you. I hope you don't mind."

"No, not at all. Thank you," said Ablepot. "I didn't get much

sleep tonight. "

"Worries?"

"Yes. A few."

Elizabeth invited her husband to sit down to have some breakfast. Then he offered to get him a cup of coffee.

"Do you mind if I sit in the living room?" said the reverend.

"Of course not. I'll be right there," Elizabeth replied.

When she came back, she found Johnathan seated in his armchair; he wasn't sitting back in a relaxed manner, but he was slightly leaning forward, with both feet resting on the ground, knees flexed, and wrists resting on them. He looked at her with sleepy eyes, he had the stiffness of statues, but the restlessness of those who are ready to make a move.

Not far away was the table, and Johnathan's left hand was a few centimeters from a book, which the young woman recognized immediately. He had specially put it there before going to bed.

Before Elizabeth even asked him why that attitude, Ablepot said, "Did someone lend you this?"

But in reality, that was far from a question. Elizabeth felt a heart skip a beat. She held the cup firmly in her hands, yet her stiffening must have been as apparent as if she was a puppet whose puppeteer had pulled all the strings at the same time.

Ablepot pressed on, but without altering his voice. Not that this mattered to Elizabeth, who was already feeling uncomfortable.

He said, "It's not mine. And nobody lent or gave it to me, and

you know how well I know my books."

Although she felt flustered, Elizabeth regained her calm: "Sure... Keats' poems. They are lovely, do you know them? Hanna had always told me about it, do you remember her? Until in the end, she decided to lend the book to me. I have almost finished it, but the last ones I read are not so beautiful. I think it's time to return it; it's been a while. Hanna will be wondering if I might be trying to keep it!"

But Ablepot continued: "I found it by chance" he allowed himself this little lie "he was in that cabinet" and pointed to it.

Elizabeth put the coffee on the table and pretended to be interested in the book, which she had read and reread passionately until the day before. Then she said, "Ah, what a fool! I must have accidentally put it in there!"

Johnathan, this time was unable to hide his disappointment over his wife's blatant lie.

She continued: "I think I had it in my hand when I opened the cabinet's door. Who knows what I was looking for. Then I must have placed it inside without thinking. I was a little careless, sorry, John. I know you don't like untidiness, and finding a book among the dishes must have been a bad surprise!"

Elizabeth might have guessed how true that was, but not for the reasons she thought.

In reality, that was a nasty surprise for both of them, and both of them realized it.

The young woman laughed with apparent nonchalance.

The reverend said, "Don't worry. It can happen."

"Thanks for finding it, let's just leave at that," and Elizabeth laughed again "you know, it must have been at least a couple of days since I picked it up, and I didn't even bother to wonder where it was."

But this sentence brought back to Johnathan's mind the clear image of the book resting on the bay window table the previous afternoon. Now he was beginning to find it unbearable that his wife could lie to him like that. Unbearable and distressing, because he wondered what was behind that series of lies.

He handed the book to Elizabeth, looking at her as you do with a child who has misbehaved, but he did not get back the remorseful look he expected.

The young woman said, "Thanks, John. I'll try to give it back to Hanna today." And she found an excuse to excuse herself from the heavy air of that room.

Ablepot stared at an indistinct point outside the window. In reality, he saw nothing in front of him, if not the image of his wife Elizabeth, now alongside John Keats' book of poems and love letters, and another man.

He didn't know who this man was and what he looked like, but it seemed to him that there was no other explanation.

That wasn't the only thing that bothered him. If there had been nothing else, he would have dealt with the matter with elegance.

He would have approached the man making him understand the impropriety of his acts and inviting him, first of all, not to

disrupt their family peace anymore, and secondly to confess his sin before the Lord.

But there was more.

Elizabeth didn't say anything about it.

She didn't even get rid of that inappropriate gift.

Lastly, Elizabeth had tried to hide it from him, because perhaps she did not intend, at least in the short term, to get rid of it: she wanted to continue reading it. Or maybe keep it.

Of course, his wife's could be just curiosity. And, given the probable inconvenience of the content and the very existence of that book in their home, she didn't want to upset him too much.

What if it did come from a friend of Elizabeth and she, young and conservative, had let herself go to a little bawdy curiosity?

Perhaps even, Elizabeth may have found that book by chance, and now she was just a bit curious.

Johnathan continued to review these last possibilities in his mind, hoping to find one of them plausible: but none left him with the serenity he would have liked.

He prayed to God that he would regain the trust he always had in his wife. However, he didn't pay much attention to church things for the next days to come.

Then he was bothered by anger and suspicion, which he felt growing to stay within him, like clouds that announce the storm that won't get away until they thunder.

Then he asked God for forgiveness for those feelings that he had condemned so many times in his sermons and that now he

could not let go.

What he finally decided to do was miles away from the Johnathan Ablepot people knew.

The reverend decided to fake a trip: basically to secretly spy on his wife.

He let a couple of weeks go by, pretending he had forgotten entirely about that matter. So he forced himself to assume the most natural and usual manners with Elizabeth, being calm and focused on something else, so that she would reassure herself and would not suspect that her husband was still brooding.

Johnathan felt like dying, because of the coldness he was planning to trick Elizabeth with and because of the way he was able to deceive her.

But the pain he felt inside for what had happened was more reliable than those feelings. So he carried on.

When it seemed to him that enough time had passed not to arouse suspicion, Ablepot told his wife that he would be gone a few days: he had to go to Dothan to speak with the reverend of that community; the reason would have been too complicated to explain.

Johnathan Ablepot prepared a piece of unnecessary luggage, and one early morning when Elizabeth was still sleeping, he left the house.

He hid in an area of the church which he only had access to; from there, and he could easily reach the attic: no one would have suspected he was hiding in there.

A couple of days wouldn't take long to pass by: from up there, he could easily see the possible visits that his wife would receive and the trips she would make.

He didn't have to wait long.

That same morning, at rather late hours, Elizabeth walked briskly out of the vicarage, dressed in one of her older dresses, a handkerchief around her neck, and a hat in her hand. Ablepot watched her mesmerized for a few moments, then decided, as he had already contemplated doing that morning, that he would follow her.

Although it was not that cold, the reverend put a handkerchief and a hat on that covered most of his face.

He felt like when he was a boy and was playing hide and seek with his older brothers, but at the same time, he felt the guilt of what was not a game at all. Everything around him had the consistency of the dream, and he perceived his actions as if being performed by someone else.

He struggled to keep up with Elizabeth. For a moment, he thought he had lost her when she reappeared not that far away. Ablepot was not now from Evelyn Archer's shop: Elizabeth went in.

Johnathan waited for the few minutes it took his wife to get things done in the shop. When she came out, however, she didn't seem to have bought anything.

Amazed, Johnathan saw his wife take a tour around the building; he moved to be able to see where she was going.

The woman stopped in the back yard and leaned against the wooden wall.

She seemed worried and edgy. She tilted her head as if she was taking a deep breath. She often looked around; perhaps she was waiting for someone.

Ablepot was worried about getting discovered, but Elizabeth never looked over his side.

It wasn't long before Martyn Trischer joined her in the clearing.

Johnathan remembered several images of the young man hanging out around the church and vicarage, but he tried to remain focused on the scene he saw.

Trischer and Elizabeth spoke animatedly, her more worried, him with more silent pauses. Ablepot saw him put his hand on his head a few times, scratching it slightly; then, he saw him approaching his wife as someone who wanted to reassure the other person.

The last part of that scene, which must have revealed a lot to him by now, was a silent glance between the two young people, who were now holding hands. Finally, they parted.

Elizabeth waited a few more moments, again with her head tilted against the wall; then, she set off, probably to go home.

Ablepot did not follow her.

What he had seen paralyzed him.

It seemed definite: the book of love poems came from Martyn Trischer, he was almost sure of it; it was even more confident

that his wife wasn't indifferent to the flirting the young man must have done with her.

Ablepot clenched his fists in the pockets of his overcoat until they almost hurt; he did not know why but the thought and image of his church, benches, altar, and crucifix, crossed his mind.

He quickly returned to the vicarage, lost in his thoughts, and confused as he had never felt before in his life.

He spent most of the afternoon wandering about the questions he would ask Elizabeth without even worrying that would also have to explain to her how he had come to that conclusion. It seemed to him that he was meters underwater, where the sound of the world was muffled, where even what you see loses its consistency.

He went back to reality later that afternoon.

It was almost dark when he heard someone marching quickly towards the house. He looked out of a skylight: he saw a shameless Martyn Trischer crossing the lawn.

The boy knocked on the door, and a confused Elizabeth greeted him: the two argued a bit, Elizabeth did not seem willing to let him in. But in the end, she gave up and let him in.

Ablepot without too many precautions left his hiding place and, helped by the fact that it was almost dark, he went down to the lawn to secretly go round his house. He looked through a couple of windows before seeing his wife and Trischer: the lights on in the house allowed him to see the scene perfectly.

They were in one of the sitting rooms at the back: Johnathan

could not grasp their words, if not just an indistinct buzz or something a bit clearer when they raised their voices, but it was apparent what they were talking about.

Elizabeth was holding Keats' book and showing it to Trischer. He was sitting in one of the armchairs like a back stabbing throne usurper.

What they were saying was worth little now, thought Johnathan Ablepot, all taken up by the morbid obsession to watch what was going to happen.

Every movement the two made, every incomprehensible word they said, flared more in his mind. In a moment of clarity, Ablepot realized that he was still clenching his fingers into his fists until they hurt.

Then Trischer put his head down as if he was overwhelmed with thoughts: Elizabeth went up to him and put her hand on his hair.

The boy got better, touched Elizabeth's arm, before looking at her and standing up.

Finally, he kissed her.

Ablepot continued to watch as if he wasn't him doing it; he felt like a stranger watching a forbidden scene of lust.

They passionately continued kissing until it turned into the ultimate betrayal.

Trischer began to run his hands over Elizabeth's body, while she, equally voluptuous, took off his shirt.

The clothes fell almost entirely.

Martyn Trischer and Elizabeth Abblepot made love before the annihilated eyes of Johnathan. He stared at all his certainties and his whole determination of man crumbling like salt statues hit by the storm.

## 7.

Johnathan Ablepot opened his eyes. It was Tuesday morning.

Only one night had passed, but the impression he had was that he had crossed unimaginable distances and geological eras to get to that moment.

He felt utterly dizzy as if he had an iron circle around his forehead of a much smaller size than his head. The pain barely left him the chance to focus on the first awakening operations.

He rinsed his face with cold water, as abundantly as possible. He quickly dressed, casually choosing clothes. And of course, he avoided Elizabeth.

Then he went to church.

Sometimes he did not like the sense of emptiness that was perceived in there when there was nobody: the light that came in through the windows was too much; he seemed to call someone at a party who did not want to introduce himself and therefore gave a feeling of abandonment.

Automatically, he took his place on the first bench in front of the altar, knelt and rested his forehead on the knuckles of the clasped hands.

It was still Reverend Johnathan Ablepot after all, and that was always his church. With his God.

The previous evening he had let Martyn Trischer leave.

After the disgusting scene he had witnessed, Ablepot had

run to hide in the trees that were immediately beyond the fence, also to recover from the extreme sense of nausea he felt. He was astounded: with all the anger he felt in his body, would have loved to rush into the house, but a physical sickness had caught him, almost taking his breath away, and he just run away.

Once recovered, he waited a bit more time, daydreaming.

He saw the shape of Martyn Trischer going towards the city. So he decided to go into the house to let out all his resentment and hurt.

Elizabeth was shocked to hear someone knocking on the door. It was as if the whole house collapsed on her head when, once she opened the door, she found her husband's gloomy and flushed face in front of her.

The few moments after that were so confusing that it almost seemed as they never happened. Elizabeth wondered why her husband came back early, without luggage, and if he had by any chance seen Martyn leaving their house. Johnathan spent a few minutes undecided on what to do, begging himself to remain calm, but at the same time eager to throw on his wife all the suffering he felt.

In the end, they said each other everything, or at least what was left to say.

After that terrible event, Johnathan had earned the right to not justify himself for his lie and for spying on his wife: he told her the whole truth about his plan. Elizabeth listened indignantly but, submerged as she was by the weight of her guilt, she said

almost nothing.

While Ablepot made his legitimate outburst, asking his wife the reasons for her action, as if this could have soothed his pain, Elizabeth confessed her love for young Martyn Trischer and the circumstances in which it was born.

Ablepot left his wife without saying a word, and he went up the stairs as if he was carrying excessive weight on his back. Elizabeth burst into tears: she fell on the sofa and only after many hours, overcome by exhaustion, she finally closed her eyes.

She didn't know or cared what her husband was doing upstairs, nor did he worry about his wife anymore.

Johnathan Ablepot thought about all these things, while with his head down, he tried to concentrate on prayer.

He looked up at the crucifix. A question echoed in his head, but he did not dare ask it out loud, for he knew that "you should not tempt the Lord."

"Anyway, He can read inside us," he thought immediately after, with resentment.

However, he refrained from speaking. He stared with greater determination at the wooden cross above the altar, and tears rose to his eyes. He felt prey to intense depression, yet a constant tingling ran through his limbs; he clasped his hands tightly together.

Then he got up, determined to go back to the house.

Once in the living room, he called, "Elizabeth", in a low tone. He knew he would find her in there.

She was sitting in the armchair, looking out the window, as if she had been still for who knows how long, just waiting for him to appear somewhere. She didn't turn around, but Ablepot understood that she had heard him calling and was paying attention to him.

The reverend said, "We didn't talk like decent spouses last night."

The girl replied, "And how can we be, John?"

"What I mean is that I was only able to speak by throwing at you all my frustration. And it can't be the only way to deal with this. "

Her husband's calm and apparent complacency almost annoyed her. Elizabeth said nothing.

Ablepot continued: "Please look at me."

So she did. Her eyes were sad.

"John," her voice almost turns into a sigh. New tears came to her eyes as if the previous evening ones hadn't been enough.

"Do you love that boy?" Johnathan's voice was firm.

"I do not know anymore. When it all started, I was almost convinced. Now I don't know anymore."

"Elizabeth, I would like to ask you the reasons. I would like to know why it happened ... but I will not ask you. I thought about it, and I don't think it would help me."

"John," she said again.

"Please let me finish. If this has happened, there must be many reasons. But we all make mistakes. Who knows how many times

I did. I cannot tell you how long it will take me to regain the trust that used to bind us, but I am convinced that it is possible. If you want to, if you don't love Martyn Trischer so much that you'll want to sacrifice our relationship for him, maybe we can start again. In a different way, but together."

Elizabeth couldn't understand the emotions stirring inside her; she didn't know what to say.

"Elizabeth, I'm telling you that I want to try to move forward beyond this affair. I prayed: last night and this morning. I prayed for answers. Well, unfortunately, I didn't get any. But I decided to follow what I felt during all of last night's sleepless hours."

The young woman was silent.

Then she said, "John, I don't know what to say right now, honestly.

When we decided to live together, I wouldn't have ever imagined that something like this could happen. Now, something else is happening that I hadn't thought about last night while I was awake. I need some time."

Her husband looked at her, almost impassive. Elizabeth continued: "I just want the storm that I feel inside to calm down. And I promise you we'll talk. Only, not now. Please."

Johnathan Ablepot agreed to his wife's request. He left the room and went for a walk, letting her wife know as thoughtfully as he could.

The days had passed, almost usually. Johnathan and Elizabeth seemed to have somehow managed to go beyond what had

happened to leave it behind.

Of course, when they fell asleep together, they no longer did so by holding their hands as they used to. At times, when they were in the same room, a feeling of coldness and tension crept into the walls of the house.

Yet they had managed to move forward: Johnathan by being as thoughtful as he could, and by never mentioning to her the new feelings that indeed started growing inside of him; Elizabeth by letting things take a strange turn, somewhat unnatural, but more than decent.

In reality, the young woman felt the weight of that situation very much. Even if before she felt guilty for her actions and lies towards her husband, she was in a stronger position. She was the only one aware of the truth, and a young, attractive boy loved her.

Now, however, the strong position was her husband's, who had forgiven her, still accepted at home, to whom she owed everything, the food, the accommodation, and the excellent reputation that people always credited her.

Then, it occurred to her, amazed that she had forgotten about it, that she, her husband, and Martyn were not the only ones aware of the scandal that had happened in the vicarage.

The slim figure, slightly curved, and the ambiguous look of Evelyn Archer came to mind.

She had a precise role in the matter. She was the first one to talk to Elizabeth about her nephew, and Elizabeth had met him for the first time right in that shop.

Evelyn Archer had gone even further. More than once, she invited the reverend's wife to the shop at a specific time, the same time when Martyn would also come by; as she was organizing their meetings intentionally.

Until one day, despite every sense of decency, Mrs. Archer had dared to propose to Elizabeth Ablepot to go to a house she owned, on the outskirts of Vestavia Hills, and had promptly handed over the keys.

Elizabeth had equally promptly indulged her.

Straight after, she felt those keys almost like burning her fingers, keys that she should have indignantly rejected. Instead, like a little girl who had just received an unexpected gift, she played with them in her hands, and couldn't wait to get to that house, where she knew, very well, who she would find.

The young woman shook herself off from these memories and decided to go to Mrs. Archer. She was avoiding the shop for weeks, and when she saw her from afar, she did not bother to look at her.

On the way to the shop, Elizabeth felt her legs tingling as if loads of insects were clinging on them. When she opened the shop door, Evelyn Archer was as usual in her spot, near the counter, busy with the pointless activity of moving and repositioning trinkets of all kinds, from one position to another. She seemed surprised to see Elizabeth come in, but her amazement had something unclear, not at all embarrassed.

"What can I do for you, dear?" Archer said, trying to be distant

but failing.

"Mrs. Evelyn, I'm not sure why I came here."

"Maybe for the usual reason. To see Martyn, or to find out where he is." The older woman seemed annoyed.

"Maybe ..." and Elizabeth wanted to carry on, but she didn't let her.

"If your husband saw you here! If he saw you now, I mean, after what happened! It is careless. On the other hand, those who are overwhelmed by passion pay no attention to these things" now her tone was almost mocking.

"Anyway, "she went on, "I should see Martyn by the afternoon, I will tell him that you are looking for him ... but if you came to ask me not to tell anyone about your affair, maybe it's a little late now, isn't it? I could have done before, you should have come earlier. But it would be best for our family as well if this didn't come out, don't you think?"

If my nephew's name will be linked to the shop when I'm gone, it's far better if no one finds out."

Elizabeth did not know why she sensed that anger in Mrs. Archer's voice and behaviour, but she didn't question her about it.

She said: "What has happened is terrible. It's my fault. Our fault. Your nephew's and mine. When John found out, I asked Martyn to come round mine so I could tell him that the situation was getting too much for me and that I wasn't sure I wanted to carry on."

Mrs. Archer went back to take care of her odds and ends, then

Elizabeth cut it short: "Anyway, I don't need to talk to you about what I said or want to say to Martyn."

Elizabeth Ablepot was like to an overgrown child who believes that by trying her favourite habit one last time, she will get rid of it once and for all, and it does not understand, however, that the more one seeks a vice the more it will take over. Her naivety would have been sweet if she had been a child.

Martyn Trischer went to her aunt's shop shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon.

He did not know that he was being observed by Reverend Ablepot, who looked at him, daydreaming, from across the street. He entered the shop almost as if he was a thief, very slowly and with the desire to leave as soon as possible. He felt almost a sense of guilt towards the old aunt and an embarrassment that months ago, he would never even have dreamed of.

Evelyn was in her usual spot and looked at the boy with a disapproving look.

When Martyn had gone to see her, still out of breath and in full distress, to report that the reverend had discovered everything, she was speechless at first. Then, irritated by the boy's ineptitude, she insulted him and blamed him for everything. As if she had no part in what had happened!

They had argued intensely, of course.

Evelyn Archer said coldly: "This affair must end. I've already cursed myself for indulging you as you do with a spoiled child. But I can't take it anymore. You will go to her and tell her to

end this."

Martyn replied: "It's none of your business if Elizabeth and I are still looking for each other. It means that we love each other, no matter what."

For what her age allowed, Evelyn let out a loud laugh, an evil laugh, though.

Then she said, "Still this nonsense! Martyn, listen to me: it is already a blessing that the reverend has not repudiated his wife and has not involved you and me. If you want this shop and you want a quiet life, I advise you to put aside your idiocies, forget that girl, and hope that sooner or later, she and her husband will move somewhere else."

Martyn was seething with anger. It now seemed to him that it was a matter of pride. If he truly loved Elizabeth, and if she was willing to sacrifice everything for him, these were secondary thoughts.

He told his aunt, raising his voice: "It will just mean that Elizabeth and I will get out of the way! So we will no longer bother you or this damned town!"

Evelyn did not give up: "Stop it! I told you that you would continue to work here and around the town, you will give up that no-good girl, and you will think more about what is worthwhile in life, instead of dreaming about pointless things."

However, there was an accent of anguish in her words.

In a fit of anger he felt growing inside and that he couldn't imagine unleashing, Martyn Trischer threw on the ground the

first objects he found on the counter and faced the old woman bluntly: "I'm tired of being told what to do!" he snarled at her "the fact that you have sinned yourself, of your own will, does not give you the right to give me orders!"

Mrs. Archer was a little frightened: "Martyn ..." she tried to say.

But the young man pressed her with an evil look: "Enough! Don't say anything. Shut up as you've always done until now. And tell me where I can find her."

Martyn Trischer met Elizabeth near the post office.

The two were somewhat embarrassed at first, soon enough, though, they discovered that there was still intimacy between them.

Their eyes were full of worry, but they still enjoyed the pleasure of being in front of each other. After they had made love at her house last time, their life seemed to have taken the same turn as before: but, perhaps for somewhat different reasons, both were aware that this was not true at all.

In the torment of seeing each other again without being able to pretend that the next time would be without consequences, they did not know what decision to make, or rather, what decision to propose to each other.

Perhaps they both knew that the only possible option was never to see each other again.

Meanwhile, in the shade of a porch on that sunny afternoon, a man was hearing a jumble of incomprehensible words

whispering in his head.

He felt a sense of dizziness as if he was about to lose consciousness.

He could hear the gnashing of teeth and grating of nails.

Before his eyes, the outlines faded into indistinct lines.

And the feeling of someone leaning heavily on his shoulders increased the fatigue of his conscience.

He was leaning against a pillar; it was only a few meters away. The eyes fixed on the scene of the two youngs speaking while looking at each other.

The man who was hurting his hands, clenching them into fists until his nails imprinted in the flesh, was the Reverend Johnathan Ablepot.

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