

**Now Arriving**

The day before his missing brother came back, Rick left Haw Court for his dad's house in Raleigh. He thought the Wizard's barrier on as he approached the gates, an action by now as automatic as clicking his seatbelt. No pleaders, protesters, Aidan groupies or general crazies were lying in wait for him. They seemed to have learned, even the most stubborn, that the barrier would always keep them at bay. He honked as he drove through, in case Leslie was watching from the gatehouse.

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"Richard Grace Shew-Kingsley," say his files at the FBI, CIA, NSA, and other, darker agencies. Height, five-eight; weight 170. Hair, dark "copper" red; eyes blue. Clean-shaven, except after vacation when he lets the stubble grow, even though his girlfriend complains it scratches. Born November 10, 1987, to Linwood George Kingsley of Grantsville, N.C., and Beverly Zellman Shew of Upper Darby, PA. Graduate of Jordan High School in Durham, N.C. and North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Bachelor of English with minor in Education; Master's in English from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, N.C. Last job, "Customer Service Representative," Duke Energy, Durham office. They've got his work history, political affiliation (average Democrat), master's thesis ("The Butler Didn't Do It: Master / Servant Dynamics in Golden-Age British Mysteries"), e-mails and texts and porn sites visited (hetero, infrequently); even down to the name, origin and breed of his dog ("Baxter," Independent Animal Rescue, mutt). Yes, they have files on him: because of his dad's position and his mom's politics; because he's the Master of Haw Court;

KKK chapters more than doubled in 2015...Conservatives mock President for his tears...

because he has seen a Ghost Train with his own eyes; and because in frustration, they're obsessed with learning anything they can about anyone who might hold any clue to the mystery of Aidan Stephenson Kingsley.

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Women sometimes told him he was handsome. He'd accept the compliment gladly and follow up on it, hoping to steer the conversation bedward, with an average man's average success. When he looked in the mirror of a morning, though, he couldn't see the "handsome." He saw the hair, the freckles, pale skin that always burned when he wanted it to tan (along with the lighter-red bush and quite average set of man parts). He looked like the annoying kid sidekick in an old movie, the one who gets gunned down if it's a gangster picture or blown up in a war epic, so the star can have a big emotional scene over his death. "Oh my god, they killed Kenny! You bastards!!"

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His parents met during law school, he at UNC, she at Duke. Mom was, by her own admission, less self-confident, far from home, stretched almost to snapping by the pressures of school, and coming to terms with the growing certainty that she was lesbian. Dad was charismatic, sexually magnetic, persuasive, handsome enough that Mom's classmates were envious on seeing him with her. He was completely self-confident in his views on law, politics, society and religion; and on the way his girlfriends were supposed to behave. These views, nine times out of ten, were absolute matter-antimatter opposites of hers. Attempts to combine them did not go well. "When we weren't fucking, we were fighting," she once told Rick, when he was teenaged enough to be neither shocked nor grossed out by the information. On

**FBI: Bundy militia left "trench of human feces" in Native American burial ground...**

Graduation Eve, after one fight too many, she went to a party, drank a whole lot of wine, and took home a member of the Duke womens' lacrosse team. Dad caught them *in flagrante*, a possibility she had noted but decided to not give a fuck about. That ended the relationship. She graduated; returned to Philadelphia; and a month later, discovered herself pregnant.

Her family heritage included Quakers, Unitarians, refugees from Hitler, liberal-arts academics, and authentic Sixties hippies. Her sense of fair play, instilled by this heritage, made her call Linwood with the news that he'd be a father. Her self-confidence, strengthening in her family's loving support, made her state "I'm going to raise the kid myself. I know what you think about gay parents, but tough shit. And if you think about starting trouble, remember two things: what possession is nine-tenths of; and which one of us aced the Family Law exam." He conceded her the parenting; she conceded him visitations, and that the child would carry both surnames. The following November, Richard Grace Shew-Kingsley arrived.

He had plenty of cousins to play with, aunts and uncles and grandparents to help look after him. The uncles and Mom's man friends, straight and gay, provided plenty of male role models. "Daddy" was a strange man, from a distant realm called "North Carolina," whose visits were only slightly more frequent than the Tooth Fairy's. Neither of them knew quite what to make of the other. A snapshot in a family album shows "Daddy" holding up baby Rick like a football he's just caught, and grinning with the gleaming charisma he was already making good use of in Republican politics back home. Rick, aged eight months, is regarding him with perplexed concern – *Who is this person, and what is he planning to do with me?*

Southwest's summer fires, record-breaking heat wave left 4 dead, millions more

Mom, meanwhile, passed the Bar, worked in the Public Defender's Office, and dated. By the time Rick was nine, she and Annie were a settled couple. Anne Rodriguez had left the Navy in disgust over "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and returned to college for a biochem degree. Rick quoted her to fourth-grade classmates: "They can put that 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' where the sun don't shine." They were delighted, but a fifth-grader called him a Fag and had to be punched out. Mom gave him an earnest, muddled talk about nonviolence and words versus fists. Annie listened with a smile of quiet amusement. She took him aside later and said "Your mom's right. But sticking up for people is right too."

The year Rick turned fifteen, the Public Defender's Office got reorganized. Many of the colleagues Beverly Shew respected and worked well with were put down, while ones she didn't approve of – and who didn't seem to approve of her – were raised to power. Annie, now Ph.D'ed, was offered a job with a pharmaceutical firm near Durham, North Carolina. A law office in the same city, with good progressive credentials, agreed it could use an experienced former public defender. They moved down in early February.

The transplanting turned out to not be that bad. The bus system sucked compared to SEPTA, whose trains and trolleys he'd been navigating on his own since age eleven. On the other hand, spring came earlier, things cost less, the schoolwork wasn't as hard; and that fall, he lost his cherry to a classmate who thought his Philly "accent" was sexy. A rival for her favors, a boy who smoked unfiltered Marlboros and wore a Confederate-flag trucker cap, called him a Yankee Faggot and had to be punched out. (The grownups didn't learn of this incident, so Rick escaped more earnest lectures.) Duly punched, the boy turned out

under advisory; Arizona temperatures reached 118 degrees...GOP on Obama

to be of a forgiving and even friendly disposition. He admitted that his Uncle Bobby, who'd fought in Afghanistan, was gay; he invited Rick and the girl to a party at his house, where he served authentic North Carolina mountain moonshine. At one a.m., Mom and Annie came out seeking the source of certain strange noises, and found a very unsteady Rick projectile-vomiting into the camellia bush. They both shook with laughter when he managed to explain, and sent him to bed with Annie's custom-mixed hangover remedy.

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Dad had vetoed any publicity of Aidan's return, with Mr. Boulware and the State Bureau of Investigation in full agreement. It could be another false alarm, another cruel hoax, though the Bureau's experts were certain the handwriting – a short note on the back of another Polaroid – was Aidan's. (The photo itself, like all the others, showed nothing from which a location could be deduced. Aidan was seated on a wooden deck, sipping from a steaming mug held in both hands; bare trees in the background, their fallen leaves lightly dusted with snow.) If he did appear, they'd whisk him back to Raleigh, where SBI agents, and therapists who specialized in handling missing / exploited / abused children, awaited Dad's call. His return would be headline news, as much as, if not more, than his vanishing. Scores of kids might go missing every day...but not all of them left behind a controversial and damning video explaining why. And, not all of them had as their father a controversial Tea Party Republican, and possibly the next Lieutenant Governor; one of many races in the most fiercely argued election the country had ever seen; whose contests were all, from Dad all the way up to President, shadowed by the question of "The Wizard."

guidelines to accommodate transgender students: "The end of public education"...

The Wizard, whoever, or whatever, he was. He? – he, she, them, it; nobody knew. Frantic conspiracy theories throbbed like inflamed nerves through the Net’s synapses. Cyber-attacks by terrorists; a cyber-intelligence grown self-aware and rogue like in dystopian sci-fi. Evangelicals were sure he was the Antichrist, come to bring on the End Times, especially after what he’d done (or had he?) to Arlene Hooker. Progressives praised him; but even the most extreme leftists were wary of his powers. Was it him psychologically wrecking “bad guys” – terrorists, mass murderers, refugee traffickers, religious fanatics – all over the world? (Like Arlene Hooker; or TeShaun Williams, Mom’s death-row client, who was now a wretch so devastated by Wizard-struck remorse that the prison had put him on suicide watch...) If it was him, what were his criteria for who he would or wouldn’t take out? Anybody could be next.

All the weird shit of the past four years seemed to have begun when Aidan disappeared. The way he’d vanished so completely, and stayed vanished without a trace, except for the anonymous Polaroids. The extreme weather: round the time his first photo arrived, there’d been a vast tornado outbreak, from Oklahoma as far east as upstate New York (!), some of the biggest ever, two miles wide in places. Records were being broken everywhere. Hottest years in history, killing thousands in India and forcing Australia to add new colors to their weather maps. “Thousand-year” storms. Floods in Colorado, floods in West Virginia; California in critical drought. Wildfires in Yosemite, in Alberta, right now in North Carolina, burning the mountains between Boone and Asheville. (Even here, several hundred miles east and under a clear sky, Rick could smell smoke.) The Rainbow Gathering and Burning Man disasters, with their huge death tolls...and the Ghost

Communication Workers of America union says it faced “SWAT team armed with

Trains, which might, just might, have made those tolls inaccurate, if rumors were to be believed. Rumors of long-gone trains on long-gone railroad lines reappearing, passing by; even pausing sometimes at long-gone stations to rescue people in distress, then vanishing again. Heard, seen; even filmed, as at Ithaca. The rumors still hadn't emerged from the Internet's thickets to become a full-blooming news item, and even on the Net were often as not chaperoned by experts with doubtful looks and plausible explainings-away. *Yeah right*, Rick could've told them. *That wasn't a "rumor" outside my sleeper window. I know what I saw.*

Weird, crazy, scary shit. Human disasters, like the chemical spill in West Virginia that took out Charleston's water supply, and lead pipes poisoning everybody in Flint. Attack dogs loosed on Standing Rock resisters. White racists claiming they were "victimized" by Diversity. Refugees drowning by the hundreds off the coast of Italy. Brexit. (What the fuck – had some James Bond villain spiked all their tea?) The turbo weirdness of Donald Trump, that monstrous buffoon, running for President – and with armed supporters threatening civil war if he didn't win. (The election was three weeks off. All the polls and pundits predicted for Hillary, but the constantly growing number of TRUMP signs along Chatham County's back roads gave Rick a feeling of queasy dread.)

And, of course, there was Rick's own bizarre situation. None of the other runaways had an elder half-brother who, through no fault or doing of his own, and for reasons known only to a mysterious, reclusive and now dead guy, had been made "Master of Haw Court" and all that it entailed. He had no more wish than Dad to publicize this trip. He'd told Mom and Annie; his estate manager David; and Leslie. He'd gotten in the habit of telling her things. He'd often talk to her before he

automatic weapons" after uncovering "massive Verizon offshoring operation in the

talked to his “official” advisors, about ideas or ethical questions involving his inheritance; use her as a sounding board to help him think things out. (One thing they still didn’t talk about, though, was last summer’s swimming pool incident...)

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He’d left early enough to beat rush hour, but the drive was still stressful. To keep his temper down, he took care to not look at the big billboard by the 540 / Capitol Boulevard interchange: text in varying sizes, all seeming to tremble with indignation as they offered “**\$1,000,000 REWARD** FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE ARREST, TRIAL AND **EXECUTION** OF THE PERSON OR ENTITY KNOWN AS **THE WIZARD**, FOR **HIGH TREASON** AND” (redundantly) “**CRIMES AGAINST AMERICA;**” with a picture of a wizard looking like Ian McKellen as Gandalf – a good-guy wizard, ironically; if the Wizard was that evil shouldn’t it be Christopher Lee as Saruman? The sign had been put up by a rich, vicious arch-conservative, who’d caused a hellacious uproar some years earlier by mounting the exact same billboard except with Obama as the target. The furor had made national news. Letters, phone calls, e-mails and tweets had deluged everyone: the Governor, Dad, the billboard company, and the vicious arch-conservative, who’d refused to back down by so much as a font size. The sign had been regularly defaced, and just as regularly repaired. Two people were currently in jail, and three more facing steep fines and stringent probation, for trying to burn it down. Dad, pressed for comment, had finally pointed out that (a) it was the man’s own money,

Philippines”...Bill O’Reilly demands meeting with Pope to tell him what Jesus “really”

to spend as he chose (like for instance, on arch-conservative Republicans running for North Carolina office); and (b) while the sentiments of the sign were clearly offensive to many of the “liberal persuasion,” they were not illegal. Now if it had called for Mr. Hussein’s – beg pardon, Mr. *Obama’s*, assassination; well then, the man would’ve had some explaining to do to the Secret Service; but as it stood, it was merely his Opinion, and therefore sheltered beneath the First Amendment. The sign guy had gloated at all the “liberal tears” he’d caused. Even Dad had smirked a little for the cameras.

Legal or not, it was still *wrong*. It was deliberate, bullying hatefulness, the kind which assholes like that guy, and the whole right-wing FOX-News Tea-Party horse he’d rode in on, had been brutalizing “liberals” with for as long as Rick could remember – if by “liberals” you meant people who held that compassion, honesty, fairness, restraint and the scientific method were good and right. These ideals were like visceral imperatives for him; he couldn’t not want them any more than he could stop breathing. Bullying, deliberate cruelty, deliberate unreasonableness, made his temperature rise and his hands ball up into punching fists. Especially when it was done with arrogance, a sick delight in hurting people. Like, for instance, Lin Junior and the way he’d treated Aidan, to take it from the abstract to the specific. How could Dad and Eunice have watched Aidan’s video and not *seen*? Yeah, he was melodramatic and self-dramatizing; because he was thirteen years old. To a thirteen-year-old everything’s intense, because it’s happening for the first time; plus their hormones are firing them up like nature’s version of crystal meth. But Aidan had had some damn good reasons to be melodramatic. Scores of people all over the country agreed; Aidan was a hero to bullied kids coast to coast. Eunice seemed

thinks about immigrants...Right wing outraged by new hijab-wearing *Sesame Street*

to put a lot of energy into denial, sweeping unpleasantness under the rug and pretending she had the Traditional Christian American Family she thought she was supposed to have. But Dad – what did he feel? Was he too busy (as Aidan had accused in the video), or did he not care? Or, did he find Aidan contemptible and weak, and want him to “man up” i.e. become as hard and mean as Lin?

(Was forgiveness easier if you knew the person you were giving it to had had seared into the very core of his soul all the shock, terror, pain, heartbreak, despair and helpless rage he had caused, and was being forgiven for?)

*Where are you, Aidan?...I wish I'd said more than I did, stood up for you more than I did...The reasons I didn't are just lame excuses...Have you been riding the Ghost Trains?...*

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He was checked in by one set of security guards at the community entrance and another at the house. Eunice hugged him. She looked haggard. She'd always seemed painfully high-strung; and the years of worrying over Aidan had not been kind to her. Dad and Cal Boulware, his campaign manager and all-around factotum (stout, sleepy-eyed, sonorous-voiced, and that rarest of species, a black Republican), came in from a fundraiser dinner an hour later; and as soon as they'd changed, they all headed down I-40 to Grantsville. The dark-clouded sky grew even darker with the approach of autumn night. Every few miles, highway crews worked beneath bright lights, clearing away downed trees and debris left ten days earlier by Hurricane Matthew. Though officially downgraded to a “tropical storm” by the time it made landfall, everyone was still calling it a hurricane. It had flooded Lumberton and most of Robeson County, even closing

puppet character...Trump: Judge's Mexican descent means he can't be trusted to

Interstate 95; drowning several dozen people, and leaving hundreds more homeless. (Rick had sent a truckload of Haw Court produce down to the shelters.)

(Here too was the exit where Rick, years later, had turned off, gotten lost, and met the odd New-Age-y family, on their little farm that he never could find again. More strangeness...)

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How many times had he made this trip in the past fifteen years? Once they'd moved to North Carolina, every few months he'd spend a weekend with Dad in Grantsville, a rural county seat near Wilmington. Mom would hand him off on the neutral ground of fancy restaurants in shopping-sprawl wildernesses, where Dad was usually meeting either constituents, lobbyists or Republican lever-pullers. They were always men. They'd eat steak, hit on the waitress with a "good ol' boy" vibe, drink bourbon (though when they offered Dad some he'd decline, saying with a clumsy hand on Rick's shoulder, "I got me some important cargo today.") Rick would keep his profile low and say little. He'd think about secretly recording their conversations on his phone and slipping them to whoever Dad was running against that year, but never worked up the courage. Instead he'd take a picture of the sprawl, with maybe a left-behind huddle of sorry-looking anemic pine trees, and text it to friends back in Philly. "Welcm 2 fukin South."

Once on the freeway, Dad would pull out his own phone and start working it, talking a mile a minute about political or business stuff in a don't-piss-me-off tone. "You tell him from me, he's not the only one who can [yadda-yadda-something-or-other] for us. He knows that. I swear, his hogs've got more sense than him." He'd speak to Rick only briefly, referencing someplace they were passing: Spivey's Corner and

handle Trump University lawsuit impartially...Georgia GOP senator quotes Bible

its “Hollerin’ Contest,” or Bentonville Battlefield, where some Kingsley ancestor had gotten a field promotion for doing some warlike thing or other.

The two-lane road into town didn’t change much through the years. Pines and hardwoods; 1930s cottages, shabby trailers and ramshackle barns; and metal buildings housing either repair shops or, with only the addition of an aluminum steeple perched on top, Fundamentalist churches. The few people they would see were black, walking slowly along the road with heads bowed by summer heat or slouched, elderly and immobile, in chairs on deep porches. Dad would wave at the porch sitters and stop to say hello to the walkers. The houses grew closer together, smaller, more ramshackle, then gave way to farm-supply lots and a closed peanut mill. A broad space of grass, weeds, gravel and a few randomly parked cars, with a dusty brick train station facing a single rusted track. A neo-colonial courthouse with a clock-tower cupola on a square of old storefronts, mostly empty. The First Methodist Church on Caswell Street, looking all superior in brick and stone and stained glass. Dad’s house was a sprawling brick ranch fronted by an immaculate emerald-green lawn and framed by huge magnolia trees. Their leaves and blossoms looked shiny, as if made of plastic. The house was always dim and cool inside, with a faint scent of cleaning products. In the living room, the first time he saw it, every sittable piece of furniture wore a clear plastic slipcover.

Eunice had been an archetype he’d never encountered before: a small-town Southern Lady. Pigeon-toed walk on small feet, delicate fussy gestures, bouffant-ish hairdos. (Hair salon day was the highlight of her week: “my Girl Time,” she’d titter.) Conservatively dressed: frilly blouses, knee-length skirts with matching jackets. She wore

to pray for Obama's death...Woman groped while protesting “pussy-grabber” Trump

reading glasses on a gold chain. She'd patted his hand. "So you're Rick. I've *so* wanted to meet you." Her lamblike voice was more Southern than Dad's. She looked vaguely over her shoulder and called. "Addelie? When you have a moment can you get their things?"

An elderly African-American woman, short and hunched over, wearing a plain gray dress with white collar and cuffs, emerged from further down the hall. "This is Addelie, our housekeeper. She'll take good care of you."

The slipcovered living room had merely been freaky, but this was astounding. OMFG, a *black maid*?! – like Hattie McDaniel? In 2001! He'd tried to be friendly to her, asking if she liked her job. She'd given him side-eye and croaked "I just blessed to be workin'." Many years later after she'd passed away, he'd learned from her grandson that she hadn't "approved" of him, because he was born Out Of Wedlock.

His bedroom had been equally pristine, though not slipcovered. He texted more pictures to his Philadelphia friends: *if i wantd 2 beat off theyd mak me use condom rubber gloves & biohaz bin*. There was never anything worth reading in the house. Dad's den had books on law, history and political strategy, and works by conservative celebrities, many personally autographed. There were childrens' books in Lin Junior's and Aidan's bedrooms; in the family room a selection of Christian self-help manuals and a movie almanac, and in the living room a large ornate Bible in pride of place.

There'd be Saturday lunch with Dad in the café across from the courthouse, where Rick encountered Southern foods like Brunswick stew (thick and rich), turnip greens (painfully bitter), and grits (tasteless unless slathered in butter). Dad would be getting up every ten minutes

...Trump-inspired Tennessee Congressional candidate erects "Make America White

to greet some new local who'd walked in the glass front door with its tingling bell. He was a different person in public: jovial, joking, self-deprecating, "country;" talking about "them folks up in Raleigh" who "hadn't got the sense the Lord gave a squirrel." Summer Saturdays could include a trip to the beach, an hour away on rural roads, and nothing compared to Atlantic City or Wildwood: no boardwalk, stores or amusement parks, just huge houses on stilts, perilously close to the sea. Sunday was First Methodist, all in their very best clothes. Dad continued to be Mister Gladhand in public, frowning and don't-waste-my-time impatient in private. Eunice chattered Grantsville gossip concerning who was sick with what, or nervous-Nellied over immigrants or Muslims or whatever new nastiness Obama might be up to; and nowadays, over the Wizard's horrid sins. They both introduced Rick to more people than he could ever possibly keep track of, and told him random stories about family history, mentioning relatives he had met, could meet, might meet, or would never meet due to their being long-deceased. He was glad when his bus brought the Durham skyline back in view, the SunTrust Tower and the ballpark and cranes building the new courthouse: Reality, once again. As they pulled into the terminal he might see Muslim cabdrivers bowing towards Mecca on prayer rugs behind their vans, Mecca seeming to lie in the same general direction as the Teasers' Palace Gentlemens' Club across the tracks. "It's another planet," he'd say, when Mom and Annie asked about his visit.

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Eunice woke them all at six. She was wearing the same clothes, and looked as if she'd slept in them, if in fact she'd slept at all. Rick hadn't gotten much sleep himself, for a horrendous, deafening, blinding

Again" billboard; says he wants to "restore American demographic prevalent in mid-

thunderstorm had hovered over the house for what seemed like hours, and he'd lain awake wondering when, not if, the tornado sirens would start howling. The Grantsville house, like many in east Carolina, had no basement, only a crawl space, so they all would've had to pile into the little powder room off the hall and hope for the best. The morning light's slow and grudging increase revealed a thick mist, of penetrating clamminess and a faint briny aroma from the ocean twenty-some miles away. Dew soaked every surface, and sounds had a muffled sub-aqueous quality, as if Grant County was already submerged beneath global warming's risen seas.

Cousin Mason soon joined them. He was compact but solid and square as a concrete pillar, with silver hair swept back from his forehead and the profile of a cigar store Indian. (Like many East Carolinians, he suspected some Lumbee in his bloodline.) He was usually in jeans and an old U.S. MARINES t-shirt, usually pitted out from working on some outdoor repair. His father and Eunice's were half-brothers. His family had taken her in at age five after her parents' death in a car wreck, which had happened as they were on their way to see a lawyer about the divorce everybody in the family had been saying they should get almost from the day they were married. (Eunice had been the main, if not only, reason the marriage had been necessary in the first place.) Cousin Mason had done eight years in the Marines followed by ten on the Wilmington police force, and now ran a home-security company. He and his husband Danny, a corrections officer at the New Hanover County jail, lived on the Bates family farm southwest of Grantsville. Eunice revered him; but even though they lived openly, albeit quietly, as husbands, she, not unlike the proverbial trio of monkeys, could not seem to see, hear or speak the word "homosexual."

1960s" ...Sean Hannity offers to send Obamas to Kenya: "You can't come back"...

(It was a very Southern situation, Rick told friends.)

Aidan's note had read "I'll be at the Grantsville train station after 7 am, October 18." They were there by 6:45, gathered on the weedy gravel where the tracks once had been. Sheriff Laney was there at Dad's request, with a patrol car and a couple of deputies. The mist was still thick. The only sound was the distant grumble of trucks on Route 117 downshifting as they reached the town limits. Lin Junior (Dad and Eunice's elder son, a pre-law student at East Carolina) had brought a thermos of coffee. "Little fuck better not keep us waiting," he muttered. "Don't tell Mama I said that."

They heard the courthouse clock strike the hour, a mournful damp *clong, clong, clong, clong*, trailing off into thick silence. Nobody spoke, listening, waiting. Then suddenly, as if it had appeared in a split second while they were looking elsewhere, a figure was standing on the loading dock at the depot's far end.

Some business elites, libertarians openly admit capitalism inherently antagonistic...