

Clay Palmer

Uncle Charlie died a month ago today. He was nine years older than Pop, but he lived twenty years longer. Pop was a nose-to-the-grindstone man; Uncle Charlie wasn't. I suppose that's the difference.

It's funny how something like this suddenly gets you thinking about your own life. I look back and I don't like what I see. I see me too busy to come for a visit, too busy to take time for frivolous things like fishing. I'm Pop all over again. I'm even starting to look like him.

I try to recall the last time I was truly happy. Happy enough to let go of a belly-shaking laugh like Uncle Charlie's. I can't remember a single one. I'm not unhappy I tell myself, but I'm beginning to wonder if not-unhappy is the same as happy. I don't think so.

I wasn't always like this. When I started working at the bank, I was young and full of great ideas. I figured I'd stay a year, maybe two, get some experience under my belt, and move on. It never happened. Thirty years I've been there. Day in, day out, the same routine, the same complaints, the same weary faces.

Summer before last Herb Kramer retired and I thought for sure I'd get the district manager spot, but I didn't. A kid thirty years younger than me got it. The president's nephew.

So why do I stay? That's what I've been asking myself. Unfortunately, I've got no answer. Something has to change, but I'll be damned if I know what that something is.

The Inheritance

Early on Louise Palmer came to the conclusion that life was somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle. First you envisioned the picture. Then you assembled the pieces. Louise began when she was eleven. She started with a brown shoebox, then added snippets from magazines—a square of blue sky, smoke rising from a chimney, lace curtains, a red door, a wedding gown, a gold ring, photographs with obscured faces—images of what she saw as a picture-perfect life. Night after night she pulled the shoebox from its hiding place and spread the contents across the floor, arranging and rearranging the dog-eared pieces until everything was as she imagined it should be. By the time she was sixteen, Louise knew exactly what her life would look like.

Through the years she painstakingly slid those pieces into place—a loving husband, a house with black shutters, an oak tree in the yard, a baby boy, and then a girl. Once the youngsters had grown into a son and daughter she could be proud of, the picture was perfect. Louise could now sit back and enjoy the completeness of a well-planned life. In her mind she simply had no reason to scramble the pieces and start over again. Her husband, Clay, didn't see it in quite the same way.

The long gray envelope from Horace P. Fredericks, Attorney at Law, arrived on the second Saturday in January, smack in the middle of an icy New Jersey winter. Had it been July or August, Clay might have approached things differently. But as fate would have it, that Saturday was the coldest day of the year. Icicles hung from the trees, six inches of frozen snow covered the yard, and a gusty wind that had howled throughout the

night rattled a metal garbage can down the middle of the street.



When they first read the letter, it seemed a stroke of good fortune. Not the part about Uncle Charlie dying, but the fact that Clay would inherit the entire estate—a house in Florida, all the furnishings, a bank account, and a car to boot. It was unexpected, to say the least, for Clay hadn't seen his uncle in fifteen years, maybe more. He called the old man on Christmas and wrote a note every so often, but one would hardly consider Clay a devoted nephew.

Louise craned her neck and peered over Clay's shoulder as he read the letter aloud for a second time.

“In accordance with the Last Will and Testament of the late Charles Palmer, you have been designated sole beneficiary and heir to his estate.” Clay paused for a moment and let out a long, low whistle, a bit out of character for the stoic man seldom given to any display of emotion.

“Estate,” Louise repeated. “Good gracious.”

“This estate consists of the single-family residence located at Seventeen Blossom Tree Trail, all furnishings, a Buick Century, and a First National Bank savings account in the amount of two thousand three hundred six dollars and thirty-nine cents.” Clay rambled past several other details then read the last line again, what Louise had been waiting to hear.

“Please advise if you plan to take physical possession of the property or would prefer that I make the necessary arrangements for liquidation to cash.”

For what seemed a rather long time, Clay stood there staring at the

piece of paper and fingering his chin. Finally he dropped the letter onto the table and turned to refill his coffee cup.

Several minutes passed, and when Louise could no longer stand the silence she said, “Well?”

“Well what?” Clay replied.

“Aren’t you going to say something?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Thinking about it?”

“Yes,” he answered and said nothing more.

Louise, a woman who openly shared the thoughts inside her head, had little patience for such secretive thinking. At times Clay could be downright miserly with his thoughts, hoarding them as if they were something too precious to part with. He claimed he simply wanted to save her from needless worry, but she suspected otherwise.

Years ago at the Somerset County Fair they each paid two dollars to have their fortune told by a gypsy. The woman looked into a crystal ball and saw Louise’s future clear as day, right down to predicting how one day there would be a blue-eyed granddaughter. But when it came Clay’s turn, the gypsy had to give back his money. She’d looked into her crystal ball and found it as blank as the expression on his face. Not even the gypsy could zero in on Clay’s thoughts, past, future, or present.

After she’d waited a few minutes longer, Louise gave an exasperated sigh. “With news like this it seems you’d be excited.”

“I am,” Clay answered.

“Oh, really?”

Clay ignored the whisper of sarcasm and shook his head sadly as a washboard of ridges settled on his brow. “I’m pleased about the inheritance,” he finally said, “but I feel bad about losing Uncle Charlie.”

“Well, of course you do,” Louise replied sympathetically. She hesitated a moment then gave a sigh, sloping the corners of her mouth and shaking

her head in synchronization with Clay. Even though one could hardly expect her to bemoan the fate of a man she had never laid eyes on, she felt certain her performance appeared adequately mournful.

“At least Uncle Charlie had sense enough to enjoy the last twenty years of his life,” Clay said. “He knew how to live. He didn’t keep working until the day he died like Pop did.”

Clay’s father, like Clay, had been a quiet person, a banker who kept his thoughts private as he carted himself off to work each day and trudged home again in the evening. That was until the day he keeled over dead at his desk. A robust sort of man, barely fifty-six years old, swooshed off the face of the earth by a heart attack that came without a whisker of warning.

Louise waited for Clay to continue, waited for him to get back to their discussion of the estate he’d inherited. Instead, he began reminiscing about the time Uncle Charlie won a truckload of watermelons in a radio contest. For several minutes she tried to look interested, but when Clay segued into the story of a monster catfish Uncle Charlie once caught, Louise found it impossible to keep looking interested. When he paused between words she jumped in.

“This house of your uncle’s,” she said. “How much do you think it’s worth?”

“No idea.” Clay cradled his chin in the valley between his thumb and forefinger as if deep in thought.

Louise naturally assumed he was working up an estimate. All that property had to be worth something—maybe enough for a European vacation, a new car or a backyard pool. *Maybe even...* As she pictured a new bedroom set and burgundy-colored carpeting Clay announced, “The value of the house doesn’t matter, because I’m not going to sell it.”

“Not going to sell?” she echoed. “But why?”

“Well, I’m almost fifty-four years old and before long we’ll want a place...” His voice trailed off.

“Want a place? Why? What would we do with a house in Florida when we’ve already got—” Suddenly the reality of what he was thinking smacked Louise in the face and left her so faint she had to steady herself against the table.

“You can’t possibly mean what I think you mean—?” she gasped. “It’s impossible!” Not waiting for—or perhaps not wanting—his answer, she peeled off a paper towel and began mopping a droplet of coffee that had spilled on the table. *How*, she wondered, *could he even think of living in some other house?* This was where they belonged, where they’d raised their children. Why, she’d planned to live the rest of her life in this house. She’d even imagined herself dying in the upstairs bedroom.

She finished wiping the table, then continued across the counter over an already-spotless chrome faucet and along the edge of the sink. Wadding the paper towel into a tight little ball, she dropped it into the garbage can and turned back to Clay. “In my opinion,” she said, “it would be downright foolish not to sell the house and take the money like the lawyer recommended.”

“Mister Fredericks didn’t recommend anything,” Clay replied. “He simply indicated what our options are.”

“Well, it’s obvious. Taking the money *is* the best option,” Louise reiterated. “We have a lovely home right here. We don’t need a house way down in Florida.”

“Actually, Florida’s the perfect place for people like us,” Clay said. “I’ve been thinking of retiring, and I’d like to do it now while I’m still young and healthy enough to enjoy life.”

“Retire?” Louise’s face fell. “Why, you’re barely fifty-four years old!”

“Fifty-five, end of next month.”

“So what?” she argued. “Fifty-five is still too young to retire.”

“Not really,” Clay said. “Since the merger the bank has cut back on

personnel. Now we've got fewer people but the same amount of work. There are days when I can barely see over the pile of papers on my desk." He picked up his cup and turned toward the living room. "This job is a thankless thing. It feels like I'm banging my head against a cement wall, day after day after day. Why should I settle for a life like this?"

Louise followed a step behind. "Why? Because it's your job. It's how we pay the mortgage, gas and electricity, buy food, clothing—"

Clay stopped her mid-sentence. "Hold on a minute. All I'm saying is if we moved to Florida and lived in that nice little house of Uncle Charlie's, I wouldn't have to keep working. We wouldn't have a mortgage. We wouldn't have all these bills and expenses. I could take it easy and start enjoying life."

"Instead of moving, why don't we just cut back on spending?"

"It's never going to happen. Our expenses are what they are. What would we cut back on? Going to the movies? An occasional dinner out?"

"I'm sure there's more than—"

"Louise, it's not just the expenses. It's this job. It's killing me. If I continue working the way I have been, one of these days they're gonna find me slumped over my desk just like Pop."

"Oh," she gasped, taken aback by the thought. "You've never mentioned anything—"

"I'm not saying it'll happen, but I am saying it's a possibility." Clay wove a thread of weariness through his words. "With all the pressure I'm under..." He left the remainder of that thought hanging in the air like an ominous threat.

"I had no idea you felt this way," Louise replied, her voice sad.

"I didn't want to worry you."

"How can it not worry me? I love you, Clay. Nothing is more important than your health. If you feel that job is too much, I don't want you to stay. I'll understand and support whatever decision you make." A sly

smile tugged at the corners of Clay's mouth. "Okay," he answered. "Then it's settled."

"Settled?" Louise noticed his expression of weariness had departed as suddenly as it had come. "What do you mean settled?"

"Well, since you're willing to support my decision, I'll write this Fredericks fellow and let him know we're gonna keep Uncle Charlie's place."

Louise felt her stomach lurch the way it did on those carnival rides that turn everything upside down. "That's not what I meant." Suddenly she had the terrible feeling that this would turn into one of those occasions when her words carried her off to a place she had no intention of going. She should have said flat out that the idea of moving to Florida was crazy, that it wasn't something she would expect from a reasonably sane person. Irresponsible wanderers like her father might yank up his family and cart them off to some place they didn't want to go, but not a banker. And certainly not Clay! She wanted to say his settled-down way was the very thing she loved. But it somehow seemed as if she had already said too much. So Louise stood there with her mouth hanging open and all the things she should have said drifting into nothingness.

They stood an arm's length apart, but a canyon of silence separated them. Louise knew that a stalemate such as this could be the forerunner of everything in years to come. To speak first was to surrender, but to be trapped in silence could be infinitely more painful. She was wondering what to do when her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Yoo's tail thumping against the chair.

The large black dog, always hungry and bumping into things, provided a welcome intrusion. It gave Louise a few moments to reorganize herself, to get back the thoughts that she'd allowed to slip away. "Go lie down," she said wagging her finger toward the kitchen.

The memories always nudged her off track, the fleeting recollections of

other times and places. Long after she should have forgotten, they still stayed. Memories that belonged to the past. Memories with no relevance to the here and now. *Not this time*, she told herself. She squared her shoulders and turned back to the conversation.

“Clay,” she said trying to give crispness to the sound of his name. “I’m okay with the decision to quit your job, but I’m not okay with the thought of moving. We have some money saved, and we can cut back on expenses. But I want to stay here. We’re comfortable in this house. Our children and all our friends are here. There’s nothing for us in Florida.” A whoosh of air rattled from her chest as she repeated, “Nothing.”

Without turning to look at her, Clay answered. “Not right now maybe, but we’ll start over again, the way Uncle Charlie did. Think about it,” he said. “A new life, new outlook, new friends, and adventures.”

Louise did think about it and answered with a sigh. It seemed that Clay, of all people, should understand. Given her nature, moving from one side of the street to the other would have been traumatic. Yet here he was, asking her to uproot her entire life. Asking her to leave everything she knew and loved to live in a place thousands of miles away, an obscure finger of land poking out into the ocean. As it was she had no love for the South. Not that she’d ever been to Florida, specifically, but she only had bad memories from Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. She thought back on the run-down rooming houses, the dusty back roads, and the daddy who didn’t care a twit about his daughter. The memories churned inside of her with the sourness of curdled milk.

“Think about it,” Clay repeated, oblivious to the way Louise’s lower lip had begun to quiver. “An opportunity such as this coming along precisely when I’m burnt out and worn to the nub. Our moving to Florida was meant to be. It’s destiny.”

Louise tried to focus on what he said, but she’d already slipped away

to remembering how it felt to sit in the back of her daddy's shiny black Packard and watch the only home she'd ever known get smaller and smaller until it disappeared from the rearview mirror. She could still feel the sting of salty tears rolling down her cheeks.

“What about Amanda?” she finally asked. “What's a five-year-old supposed to think when her grandparents pick up and move thousands of miles away?”

“It's only twelve hundred miles,” Clay said. “A two hour plane ride. The kids will come to visit.”

“Visit?” Louise replied flatly. “Visit like out-of-town strangers? Our son? Our only granddaughter?” The thought of it caused her heart to pound hard against her chest. He'd obviously not given one ounce of consideration to her volunteer work at the library or her quilting club, the women who'd been her friends since the children were babies. Louise knew she had to change his mind. She started to explain how picture perfect their life already was, but when she opened her mouth a flurry of angry words jumped out. “I'm not moving!” she said. “Not to Florida, not anywhere!”

She'd expected him to argue, to come right back at her, but instead he just stood there staring out the window with a bluish-gray glare of snow reflected in his glasses. Louise reeled in her anger and softened her tone. “I don't care if you quit your job,” she said. “That's fine. Take an early retirement if you want to. I know it's less money, but we'll manage. At least we'll spend the rest of our years here in our own house.”

“Ah, Louise,” he sighed. “That might be fine for you, but what kind of a life would it be for me? Squirreled away in the house all winter long, the weather too cold to do much of anything except maybe shovel snow. Why, that's worse than working.”

Louise felt herself losing ground. “You don't even know if you'd like living in Florida,” she argued. “You might get down there and hate it. What if the heat's unbearable and the place is loaded with mosquitoes? Okay,