

# Old Man

*Theresa Desmond*

ONCE, WHEN I WAS TWENTY-ONE AND FRETTING about my future, my aunt said, "Why, you have the world by the tail! You can have anything you want!"

Today I feel that I have the world by the tail. After weeks of cold and snow in January, it's sunny today, the snow is melting, and it's Friday. I take a lunch hour and get in my car with the radio turned up and look for a place to eat. I remember a bakery nearby and pull into a space right in front of the door. The smell inside is overwhelming—sweet and fresh and warm. The sun is shining through the large front windows on a boy and his mother at a table eating a muffin. As I decide among cookies, bread, or muffins (and realize I can get any of them, as I have plenty of money with me), the owner greets me heartily and cuts off a large, free slice of banana-nut bread. I get some cookies, too, and smile as the clerk who rings me up compliments me on my silk shirt.

I'm putting my change in my wallet when an elderly man enters the bakery. He is shorter than I am and seems to be sinking into the old, belted trench coat he's wearing. His shoes are old, too, and his polyester pants are in a 1970s shade of blue. He shuffles in, looking a bit bewildered, the effect heightened by a large purplish bruise that surrounds his left eye, partially hidden by his big glasses. He looks around timidly until the owner calls out a cheery, "Hello, sir!"

The old man says, shyly and confusedly, "Can you tell me where Deseret Industries is?"

The owner stops wiping the tables he's cleaning and looks up easily. "You know, I don't know," he says. He actually scratches his head. "Hey, does anyone know where Deseret Industries is?"

The clerk and I shake our heads, and the mother at the table says, "Uh-uh."

"You know, I thought the nearest DI was in Bountiful," the owner says. Then he brightens. "Well, we'll just have to look it up, won't we?" he asks the elderly man, leading him behind the counter to the phone book.

I haven't taken my eyes off the elderly man. I can't figure out if the bruise is some kind of skin condition or the temporary result of an accident. I think about how fragile he looks, sort of bent over in his trench coat, a shy, friendly look on his face. I wonder how old he is, and if there is someone in a car waiting for him.

I quickly leave the bakery. The scene is killing me. One of the first things I learned when I moved to Utah was that Deseret Industries is the Mormon equivalent of the Salvation Army thrift store. (I learned, too, that everyone calls it "DI" and that you pronounce the "t" in Deseret and lots of other facts you don't need outside of Utah.) So I understand that this man is on his way to shop, not to donate, and out of necessity, not out of a sense of retro funk.

I juggle my wallet, the bread, and the cookies as I try to open my car door and shield my eyes from the sun. I feel now that something else has *me* by the tail, or that the tail is wagging the dog, or that all these cliches have just jumped up and bitten me in the ass. I can barely stand myself, with my car and cookies and silk shirt and happy little moment.

As I curse the sun and feel the buttered side of the banana-nut bread flop onto the front of my shirt, the door to the bakery opens and the elderly man exits, smiling, pushing the door with one hand and bringing a free slab of bread to his mouth with the other.