# The Meeting

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Harry Vladek was too large a man for his Volkswagen, but he was too poor a man to trade it in, and as things were going he was going to stay that way a long time. He applied the brakes carefully («master cylinder’s leaking like a sieve, Mr. Vladek. What’s the use of just fixing up the linings?"—but the estimate was a hundred and twenty-eight dollars, and where was it going to come from?) and parked in the neatly graveled lot. He squeezed out of the door, the upsetting telephone call from Dr. Nicholson on his mind, locked the car up, and went into the school building.

The Parent-Teachers Association of the Bingham County School for Exceptional Children was holding its first meeting of the term. Of the twenty people already there, Vladek knew only Mrs. Adler, the principal, or headmistress, or owner of the school. She was the one he needed to talk to most, he thought. Would there be any chance to see her privately? Right now she sat across the room at her scuffed golden-oak desk in a posture chair, talking in low, rapid tones with a gray-haired woman in a tan suit. A teacher? She seemed too old to be a parent, although his wife had told him some of the kids seemed to be twenty or more.

It was 8:30 and the parents were still driving up to the school, a converted building that had once been a big country house-almost a mansion. The living room was full of elegant reminders of that. *Two* chandeliers. Intricate vineleaf molding on the plaster above the dropped ceiling. The pink-veined, white-marble fireplace, unfortunately prominent because of the unsuitable andirons, too cheap and too small, that now stood in it. Golden-oak, sliding double doors to the hall. And visible through them a grim, fireproof staircase of concrete and steel. They must, Vladek thought, have had to rip out a beautiful wooden thing to install the fireproof stairs for compliance with the state school laws.

People kept coming in, single men, single women, and occasionally a couple. He wondered how the couples managed their baby-sitting problem. The subtitle on the school’s letterhead was “an institution for emotionally disturbed and cerebrally damaged children capable of education.” Harry’s nine-year-old Thomas was one of the emotionally disturbed ones. With a taste of envy he wondered if cerebrally damaged children could be baby-sat by any reasonably competent grown-up. Thomas could not. The Vladeks had not had an evening out together since he was two, so that tonight Margaret was holding the fort at home, no doubt worrying herself sick about the call from Dr. Nicholson, while Harry was representing the family at the PTA.

As the room filled up, chairs were getting scarce. A young couple was standing at the end of the row near him, looking around for a pair of empty seats. “Here,” he said to them. “I’ll move over.” The woman smiled politely and the man said thanks. Emboldened by an ashtray on the empty seat in front of him, Harry pulled out his pack of cigarettes and offered it to them, but it turned out they were nonsmokers. Harry lit up anyway, listening to what was going on around him.

Everybody was talking. One woman asked another, “How’s the gall bladder? Are they going to take it out after all?” A heavy-balding man said to a short man with bushy sideburns, “Well, my accountant says the tuition’s medically deductible if the school is for psychosomatic, not just for psycho. That we’ve got to clear up.” The short man told him positively, “Right, but all you need is a doctor’s letter: he recommends the school, refers the child to the school.” And a very young woman said intensely, “Dr. Shields was very optimistic, Mrs. Clerman, He says without a doubt the thyroid will make Georgie accessible. And then—” A light-coffee-colored black man in an aloha shirt told a plump woman, “He really pulled a wingding over the weekend, two stitches in his face, busted my fishing pole in three places.” And the woman said, “They get so bored. My little girl has this thing about crayons, so that rules out coloring books altogether. You wonder what you can do.”

Harry finally said to the young man next to him, “My name’s Vladek. I’m Tommy’s father. He’s in the beginners group.”

“That’s where ours is,” said the young man. “He’s Vern, Six years old. Blond like me. Maybe you’ve seen him.”

Harry did not try very hard to remember. The two or three times he had picked Tommy up after class he had not been able to tell one child from another in the great bustle of departure. Coats, handkerchiefs, hats, one little girl who always hid in the supply closet and a little boy who never wanted to go home and hung onto the teacher. “Oh, yes,” he said politely.

The young man introduced himself and his wife; they were named Murray and Celia Logan. Harry leaned over the man to shake the wife’s hand, and she said, “Aren’t you new here?”

“Yes. Tommy’s been in the school a month. We moved in from Elmira to be near it.” He hesitated, then added, “Tommy’s nine, but the reason he’s in the beginners group is that Mrs. Adler thought it would make the adjustment easier.”

Logan pointed to a suntanned man in the first row. “See that fellow with the glasses? He moved here from *Texas*. Of course, he’s got money.”

“It must be a good place,” Harry said questioningly.

Logan grinned, his expression a little nervous.

“How’s your son?” Harry asked.

“That little rascal,” said Logan. “Last week I got him another copy of the *My Fair Lady* album, I guess he’s used up four or five of them, and he goes around singing luv-er-ly, luv-er-ly.’ But *look* at you? No.”

“Mine doesn’t talk,” said Harry.

Mrs. Logan said judiciously, “Ours talks. Not *to* anybody, though. It’s like a wall.”

“I know,” said Harry, and pressed. “Has, ah, has Vern shown much improvement with the school?”

Murray Logan pursed his lips. “I would say, yes. The bedwetting’s not too good, but life’s a great deal smoother in some ways. You know, you don’t hope for a dramatic breakthrough. But in little things, day by day, it goes smoother. Mostly smoother. Of course there are setbacks.”

Harry nodded, thinking of seven years of setbacks, and two years of growing worry and puzzlement before that. He said, “Mrs. Adler told me that, for instance, a special outbreak of destructiveness might mean something like a plateau in speech therapy. So the child fights it and breaks out in some other direction.”

“That too,” said Logan, “but what I meant—Oh, they’re starting.”

Vladek nodded, stubbing out his cigarette and absent-mindedly lighting another. His stomach was knotting up again. He wondered at these other parents, who seemed so safe and well, untouched. Wasn’t it the same with them as with Margaret and himself? And it had been a long time since either of them had felt the world comfortable around them, even without Dr. Nicholson pressing for a decision. He forced himself to lean back and look as tranquil as the others.

Mrs. Adler was tapping her desk with a ruler. “I think everybody who is coming is here,” she said. She leaned against the desk and waited for the room to quiet down. She was short, dark, plump, and surprisingly pretty. She did not look at all like a competent professional. She looked so unlike her role that, in fact, Harry’s heart had sunk three months ago when their correspondence about admitting Tommy had been climaxed by the long trip from Elmira for the interview. He had expected a steel-gray lady with rimless glasses, a Valkyrie in a white smock like the nurse who had held wriggling, screaming Tommy while waiting for the suppository to quiet him down for his first EEC, a disheveled old fraud, he didn’t know what. Anything except this pretty young woman. Another blind alley, he had thought in despair. Another, after a hundred too many already. First, “Wait for him to outgrow it.” He doesn’t. Then, “We must reconcile ourselves to God’s will.” But you don’t want to. Then give him the prescription three times a day for three months. And it doesn’t work. Then chase around for six months with the Child Guidance Clinic to find out it’s only letterheads and one circuit-riding doctor who doesn’t have time for anything. Then, after four dreary, weepy weeks of soul-searching, the State Training School, and find out it has an eight-year waiting list. Then the private custodial school, and find they’re fifty-five hundred dollars a year—without medical treatment!—and where do you get fifty-five hundred dollars a year? And all the time everybody warns you, as if you didn’t know it: “Hurry! Do something! Catch it early! This is the critical stage! Delay is fatal!” And then this soft-looking little woman; how could she do anything?

She had rapidly shown him how. She had questioned Margaret and Harry incisively, turned to Tommy, rampaging through the same room like a rogue bull, and turned his rampage into a game. In three minutes he was happily experimenting with an indestructible old windup cabinet Victrola, and Mrs. Adler was saying to the Vladeks, “Don’t count on a miracle cure. There isn’t any. But improvements, yes, and I think we can help Tommy.”

Perhaps she had, thought Vladek bleakly. Perhaps she was helping as much as anyone ever could.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Adler had quickly and pleasantly welcomed the parents, suggested they remain for coffee and get to know each other, and introduced the PTA president, a Mrs. Rose, tall, prematurely gray and very executive. “This being the first meeting of the term,” she said, “there are no minutes to be read, so we’ll get to the committee work reports. What about the transportation problem, Mr. Baer?”

The man who got up was old. More than sixty; Harry wondered what it was like to have your life crowned with a late retarded child. He wore all the trappings of success—a four hundred dollar suit, an electronic wristwatch, a large gold fraternal ring. In a slight German accent he said, “I was to the district school board and they are not cooperating. My lawyer looked it up and the trouble is all one word. What the law says, the school board may, that is the word, may, reimburse parents of handicapped children for transportation to private schools. Not shall, you understand, but may. They were very frank with me. They said they just didn’t want to spend the money. They have the impression we’re all rich people here.”

Slight sour laughter around the room.

“So my lawyer made an appointment, and we appeared before the full board and presented the case—we don’t care, reimbursement, a school bus, anything so we can relieve the transportation burden a little. The answer was no.” He shrugged and remained standing, looking at Mrs. Rose, who said:

“Thank you, Mr. Baer. Does anybody have any suggestions?”

A woman said angrily, “Put some heat on them. We’re all voters!”

A man said, “Publicity, that’s right. The principle is perfectly clear in the law, one taxpayer’s child is supposed to get the same service as another taxpayer’s child. We should write letters to the papers.”

Mr. Baer said, “Wait a minute. Letters, I don’t think mean anything, but I’ve got a public relations firm. I’ll tell them to take a little time off my food specialties and use it for the school. They can use their own know-how, how to do it. They’re the experts.”

This was moved, seconded, and passed, while Murray Logan whispered to Vladek, “He’s Marijane Garlic Mayonnaise. He had a twelve-year-old girl in very bad shape that Mrs. Adler helped in her old private class. He bought this building for her, along with a couple of other parents.”

Harry Vladek was musing over how it felt to be a parent who could buy a building for a school that would help your child, while the committee reports continued. Some time later, to Harry’s dismay, the business turned to financing, and there was a vote to hold a fund-raising theater party for which each couple with a child in the school would have to sell “at least” five pairs of orchestra seats at sixty dollars a pair. Let’s get this straightened out now, he thought, and put up his hand.

“My name is Harry Vladek,” he said when he was recognized, “and I’m brand new here. In the school and in the county. I work for a big insurance company, and I was lucky enough to get a transfer here so my boy can go to the school. But I just don’t know anybody yet that I can sell tickets to for sixty dollars. That’s an awful lot of money for my kind of people.”

Mrs. Rose said, “It’s an awful lot of money for most of us. You can get rid of your tickets, though. We’ve got to. It doesn’t matter if you try a hundred people and ninety-five say no just as long as the others say yes.”

He sat down, already calculating. Well, Mr. Crine at the office. He was a bachelor and he did go to the theater. Maybe work up an officer raffle for another pair. Or two pairs. Then there was, let’s see, the real estate dealer who had sold them the house, the lawyer they’d used for the closing...

Well. It had been explained to him that the tuition, while decidedly not nominal, eighteen hundred dollars a year in fact, did not cover the cost per child. Somebody had to pay for the speech therapist, the dance therapist, the full-time psychologist, and the part-time psychiatrist, and all the others, and it might as well be Mr. Crine at the office. And the lawyer.

And half an hour later Mrs. Rose looked at the agenda, checked off an item and said, “That seems to be all for tonight. Mr. and Mrs. Perry brought us some very nice cookies, and we all know that Mrs. Howe’s coffee is out of this world. They’re in the beginners room, and we hope you’ll all stay to get acquainted. The meeting is adjourned.”

Harry and the Logans joined the polite surge to the beginners room, where Tommy spent his mornings. “There’s Miss Hackett,” said Celia Logan. That was the beginners’ teacher. She saw them and came over, smiling. Harry had seen her only in a tentlike smock, her armor against chocolate milk, finger paints, and sudden jets from the “water play” corner of the room. Without it she was handsomely middle-aged in a green pants suit.

“I’m glad you parents have met,” she said. “I wanted to tell you that your little boys are getting along nicely. They’re forming a sort of conspiracy against the others in the class. Vern snipes their toys and gives them to Tommy.”

“He *does* ?” cried Logan.

“Yes, indeed. I think he’s beginning to relate. And, Mr. Vladek, Tommy’s taken his thumb out of his mouth for minutes at a time. At least half a dozen times this morning, without my saying a word.”

Harry said excitedly, “You know, I thought I noticed he was tapering off. I couldn’t be sure. You’re positive about that?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “And I bluffed him into drawing a face. He gave me that glare of his when the others were drawing, so I started to take the paper away. He grabbed it back and scribbled a kind of Picasso-ish face in one second flat. I wanted to save it for Mrs. Vladek and you, but Tommy got it and shredded it in that methodical way he has.”

“I wish I could have seen it,” said Vladek.

“There’ll be others. I can see the prospect of real improvement in your boys,” she said, including the Logans in her smile. “I have a private case afternoons that’s really tricky. A nine-year-old boy, like Tommy. He’s not bad except for one thing. He thinks Donald Duck is out to get him. His parents somehow managed to convince themselves for two years that he was kidding them, in spite of three broken TV picture tubes. Then they went to a psychiatrist and learned the score. Excuse me, I want to talk to Mrs. Adler.”

Logan shook his head and said, “I guess we could be worse off, Vladek. Vern giving something to another boy! How do you like that?”

“I like it,” his wife said radiantly.

“And did you hear about that other boy? Poor kid. When I hear about something like that... And then there was the Baer girl. I always think it’s worse when it’s a little girl because, you know, you worry with little girls that somebody will take advantage, but our boys’ll make out, Vladek. You heard what Miss Hackett said.”

Harry was suddenly impatient to get home to his wife. “I don’t think I’ll stay for coffee, or do they expect you to?”

“No, no, leave when you like.”

“I have a half-hour drive,” he said apologetically and went through the golden-oak doors, past the ugly but fireproof staircase, out onto the graveled parking lot. His real reason was that he wanted very much to get home before Margaret fell asleep so he could tell her about the thumb-sucking. Things were happening, definite things, after only a month. And Tommy drew a face. And Miss Hackett said...

He stopped in the middle of the lot. He had remembered about Dr. Nicholson, and besides, what was it, exactly, that Miss Hackett had said? Anything about a normal life? Not anything about a cure? “Real improvement,” she said, but improvement how far?

He lit a cigarette, turned, and plowed his way back through the parents to Mrs. Adler. “Mrs. Adler,” he said, “may I see you just for a moment?”

She came with him immediately out of earshot of the others. “Did you enjoy the meeting, Mr. Vladek?”

“Oh, sure. What I wanted to see you about is that I have to make a decision. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know who to go to. It would help a lot if you could tell me, well, what are Tommy’s chances?”

She waited a moment before she responded. “Are you considering committing him, Mr. Vladek?” she demanded.

“No; it’s not exactly that. It’s—well, what can you tell me, Mrs. Adler? I know a month isn’t much. But is he ever going to be like everybody else?”

He could see from her face that she had done this before and had hated it. She said patiently, “ ‘Everybody else,’ Mr. Vladek, includes some terrible people who just don’t happen, technically, to be handicapped. Our objective isn’t to make Tommy like ‘everybody else.’ It’s just to help him to become the best and most rewarding Tommy Vladek he can.”

“Yes, but what’s going to happen later on? I mean, if Margaret and I—if anything happens to us?”

She was suffering. “There is simply no way to know, Mr. Vladek,” she said gently. “I wouldn’t give up hope. But I can’t tell you to expect miracles.”

Margaret wasn’t asleep; she was waiting up for him, in the small living room of the small new house. “How was he?” Vladek asked, as each of them had asked the other on returning home for seven years.

She looked as though she had been crying, but she was calm enough. “Not too bad. I had to lie down with him to get him to go to bed. He took his gland gunk well, though. He licked the spoon.”

“That’s good,” he said and told her about the drawing of the face, about the conspiracy with little Vern Logan, about the thumb-sucking. He could see how pleased she was, but she only said, “Dr. Nicholson called again.”

“I told him not to bother you!”

“He didn’t bother me, Harry. He was very nice. I promised him you’d call him back.”

“It’s eleven o’clock, Margaret. I’ll call him in the morning.”

“No, I said tonight, no matter what time. He’s waiting, and he said to be sure and reverse the charges.”

“I wish I’d never answered the son of a bitch’s letter,” he burst out and then, apologetically, “Is there any coffee? I didn’t stay for it at the school.”

She had put the water on to boil when she heard the car whine into the driveway, and the instant coffee was already in the cup. She poured it and said, “You have to talk to him, Harry. He has to know tonight.”

“Know tonight! Know tonight,” he mimicked savagely. He scalded his lips on the coffee cup and said, “What do you want me to do, Margaret? How do I make a decision like this? Today I picked up the phone and called the company psychologist, and when his secretary answered, I said I had the wrong number. I didn’t know what to say to him.”

“I’m not trying to pressure you, Harry. But he has to know.”

Vladek put down the cup and lit his fiftieth cigarette of the day. The little dining room—it wasn’t that, it was a half breakfast alcove off the tiny kitchen, but they called it a dining room even to each other—was full of Tommy. The new paint on the wall where Tommy had peeled off the cups-and-spoons wallpaper. The Tommy-proof latch on the stove. The one odd aqua seat that didn’t match the others on the kitchen chairs, where Tommy had methodically gouged it with the handle of his spoon. He said, “I know what my mother would tell me, talk to the priest. Maybe I should. But we’ve never even been to Mass here.”

Margaret sat down and helped herself to one of his cigarettes. She was still a good-looking woman. She hadn’t gained a pound since Tommy was born, although she usually looked tired. She said, carefully and straightforwardly, “We agreed, Harry. You said you would talk to Mrs. Adler, and you’ve done that. We said if she didn’t think Tommy would ever straighten out we’d talk to Dr. Nicholson. I know it’s hard on you, and I know I’m not much help. But I don’t know what to do, and I have to let you decide.”

Harry looked at his wife, lovingly and hopelessly, and at that moment the phone rang. It was, of course, Dr. Nicholson.

“I haven’t made a decision,” said Harry Vladek at once. “You’re rushing me, Dr. Nicholson.”

The distant voice was calm and assured. “No, Mr. Vladek, it’s not me that’s rushing you. The other boy’s heart gave out an hour ago. That’s what’s rushing you.”

“You mean he’s dead?” cried Vladek.

“He’s on the heart-lung machine, Mr. Vladek. We can hold him for at least eighteen hours, maybe twenty-four. The brain is all right. We’re getting very good waves on the oscilloscope. The tissue match with your boy is satisfactory. Better than satisfactory. There’s a flight out of JFK at six fifteen in the morning, and I’ve reserved space for yourself, your wife, and Tommy. You’ll be met at the airport. You can be here by noon, so we have time. Only just time, Mr. Vladek. It’s up to you now.”

Vladek said furiously, “I can’t decide that! Don’t you understand? I don’t know how.”

“I do understand, Mr. Vladek,” said the distant voice and, strangely, Vladek thought, it seemed he did. “I have a suggestion. Would you like to come down anyhow? I think it might help you to see the other boy, and you can talk to his parents. They feel they owe you something even for going this far, and they want to thank you.”

“Oh, no!” cried Vladek.

The doctor went on, “All they want is for their boy to have a life. They don’t expect anything but that. They’ll give you custody of the child—your child, yours and theirs. He’s a very fine little boy, Mr. Vladek. Eight years old. Reads beautifully. Makes model airplanes. They let him ride his bike because he was sensible and reliable, and the accident wasn’t his fault. The truck came right up on the sidewalk and hit him.”

Harry was trembling. “That’s like giving me a bribe,” he said harshly. “That’s telling me I can trade Tommy in for somebody smarter and nicer.”

“I didn’t mean it that way, Mr. Vladek. I only wanted you to know the kind of a boy you can save.”

“You don’t even know the operation’s going to work!”

“No,” agreed the doctor. “Not positively. I can tell you that we’ve transplanted animals, including primates, and human cadavers, and one pair of terminal cases, but you’re right, we’ve never had a transplant into a well body. I’ve shown you all the records, Mr. Vladek. We went over them with your own doctor when we first talked about this possibility, five months ago. This is the first case since then when the match was close and there was a real hope for success, but you’re right, it’s still unproved.

Unless you help us prove it. For what it’s worth, I think it will work. But no one can be sure.”

Margaret had left the kitchen, but Vladek knew where she was from the scratchy click in the earpiece: in the bedroom, listening on the extension phone. He said at last, “I can’t say now, Dr. Nicholson. I’ll call you back in—in half an hour. I can’t do any more than that right now.”

“That’s a great deal, Mr. Vladek. I’ll be waiting right here for your call.”

Harry sat down and drank the rest of his coffee. You had to be an expert in a lot of things to get along, he was thinking. What did he know about brain transplants? In one way, a lot. He knew that the surgery part was supposed to be straightforward, but the tissue rejection was the problem, but Dr. Nicholson thought he had that licked. He knew that every doctor he had talked to, and he had now talked to seven of them, had agreed that medically it was probably sound enough, and that every one of them had carefully clammed up when he got the conversation around to whether it was right. It was his decision, not theirs, they all said, sometimes just by their silence. But who was he to decide?

Margaret appeared in the doorway. “Harry. Let’s go upstairs and look at Tommy.”

He said harshly, “Is that supposed to make it easier for me to murder my son?”

She said, “We talked that out, Harry, and we agreed it isn’t murder. Whatever it is. I only think that Tommy ought to be with us when we decide, even if he doesn’t know what we’re deciding.”

The two of them stood next to the outsize crib that held their son, looking in the night light at the long fair lashes against the chubby cheeks and the pouted lips around the thumb. Reading. Model airplanes. Riding a bike. Against a quick sketch of a face and the occasional, cherished, tempestuous, bruising flurry of kisses.

Vladek stayed there the full half hour and then, as he had promised, went back to the kitchen, picked up the phone and began to dial.