

BOOK PRAISE

"Funny, utterly guileless, and extremely well-written... original characters... A book meant simply to be enjoyed."

--Los Angeles Times

"A swift-flowing tale of low comedy and high jinks. Kiraly does an admirable job."

**--The New York Times
Book Review**

"Fannie Flagg meets W. P. Kinsella... whimsical, charming, and funny."

--Kirkus Reviews

"Engaging, quirky... good for a laugh and a pleasant afternoon."

--Publishers Weekly

FILM INFORMATION

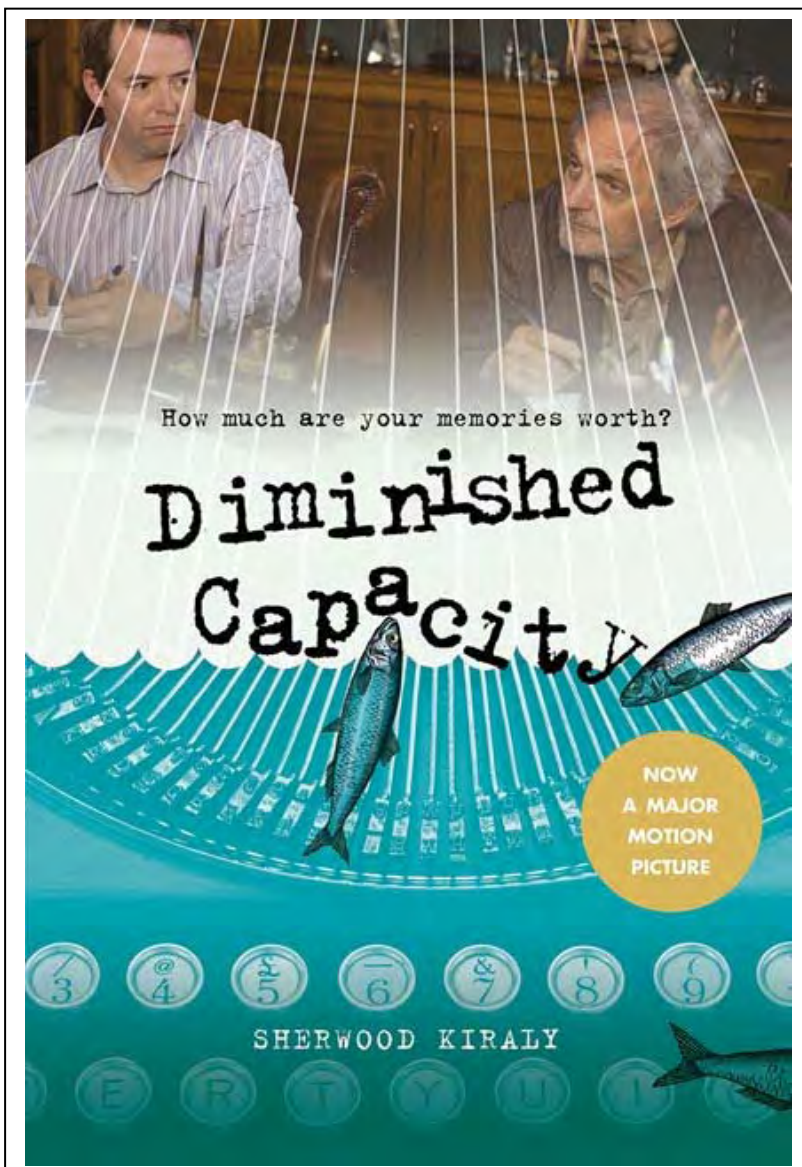
In Theaters July 4th

Starring:

Alan Alda ♦ Matthew Broderick
Virginia Madsen ♦ Tom Aldredge

National Print Advertising

Screened at 2008
Cannes Film Festival



Diminished Capacity by Sherwood Kiraly

Trade Paperback ♦ \$13.95/\$15.50 Can. ♦ 5½" x 8¼" ♦ 256 pages

Isbn (10): 0-312-38703-2 ♦ Isbn (13): 978-0-312-38703-7

Available wherever books are sold June 10th

St. Martin's Griffin



CHAPTER ONE

My uncle Roland Zerbs lives in LaPorte, Missouri, where I grew up. He's known locally as the Fish Man.

LaPorte is small, under a thousand population—too small for Uncle Rollie, who is a sufficient character for a much larger town. He's old now and no longer runs the basement tavern on Front Street, but he pursues his great hobby or obsession with even more intensity than he did when I was a little boy, thirty years ago.

It's always been Uncle Rollie's goal to publish the poetry written by the fish that live in the Mississippi River, which runs past LaPorte. And the main impediment to his doing this is not, as you might think, getting the fish to write the poetry, but in getting anyone else to take their work seriously.

For many years now, Rollie Zerbs has been going to the end of the pier below his blufftop house every day and checking the paper in his old Royal type-

writer, which he leaves out whenever weather and river allow. What he's done is attach lines of differing length to each key on that typewriter and let them down into the water, hooked and baited. Periodically a fish will yank on one of those lines and depress a key on the typewriter. And gradually, over the course of weeks and months and years, the fish have wound up writing things.

Just about everybody in LaPorte has walked at one time or another out onto the pier and looked at what the fish were up to, and just about everybody has pointed out to Uncle Rollie that the stuff on the pages isn't any good. I've been out there several times and the only actual word I ever saw spelled out correctly was "wart." Most of it looks like the kind of thing your baby daughter does when she gets at the keys. I've seen no indication of any talent of any kind on the part of any of these fish.

It's not much use bringing that up to Uncle Rollie, however. It doesn't have any effect on him. He sits on his porch, on the small bluff overlooking the river, and pays more attention to the mosquitoes than he does to criticism. He's squatty and squish-faced, with thick spiky black hair and glasses and a stumpy cigar. He's ugly, but he's not alarming at all—he doesn't look crazy or dangerous. In fact if anything he looks kind of satisfied. Superior. And if, as I say, you mention your doubts as to the ability of his fish, he just points with his cigar out to the end of the pier and tells you this:

"You got to be patient with 'em is all. What in

the hell do you expect, accurate spelling? Jeee-sus Ka-RIST. They're underwater! The best they can do is *guess* which line goes to which key. That's where I come in. If after a few days I see what appears to be just drunken nonsense, something like 'fjeighexlskeh,' well, I look all through that to see if there's a word anywhere. Now, you see, there's one. 'Hex.' Well, all right then. I keep that word and throw out all the errors. And you keep all the words and put them together and you'll end up sometimes at the end of a few months with something so fine and mysterious that it haunts your dreams. You can't tell *me* those fish don't know what they're doin'. They're *deep*."

And then he'll haul out some of the poems. I remember one in particular he showed me. He'd "cleaned up all the mistakes," and it read like this:

*He ran not out from
But into under
The falling shards*

Uncle Rollie has enough of these to make up a small volume, and he's perpetually sending copies of it to publishers with a standing invitation for them to come out to LaPorte and see for themselves that he's telling the truth and the material is actually being written by freshwater fish, mostly perch. So far nobody's taken him up on it, but I know that he's on the square because I've been on the pier late at night when a couple of those keys have hammered on the page, and I'll testify it's an eerie experience.

Uncle Rollie's gotten to the point where he doesn't really expect his fish poetry to be recognized or acknowledged in his lifetime. "Most people," he says, "don't know gold when it's in the street; they only know it when it's in the store window." He's accustomed to being looked upon as a figure of fun. Once a year they send somebody over from the Quincy, Illinois, TV news, across the river, and do a feature about him, "On the Lighter Side." But he sees himself as basically a serious person with a calling, not like these people who swallow their noses on videotape to get on TV.

The consensus in LaPorte has always been that Rollie Zerbs is claiming for the fish of the Mississippi a talent they don't possess, and that he shouldn't make them work at a job they're not qualified for.

But no one's ever tried to stop him. He's always been allowed to pursue happiness in his own way—until now.

Now, it seems, Uncle Rollie is in danger of being closed down. He just called to tell me about it. He's looking my way for assistance—one Zerbs to another. He thinks we're a lot alike.

He wants me to come back to LaPorte and help him out. He says my mother is trying to put him away, and that I'm the only one he can count on.

He called me up tonight and said, "Cooper, your mother says I've got diminished capacity."

"I don't see how that's possible, Uncle Rollie," I said.

This whole question of Rollie Zerbs's mind has been a reliable subject of conversation in LaPorte for years, like the weather or the Cardinals. But the idea of him deteriorating from his usual level has never come up.

"Your mother is comin' at me from every angle here," he told me.

My mom has never completely forgiven herself for marrying into the LaPorte Zerbses. My dad Loren, Uncle Rollie's little brother, was a failure by most standards, including his own. He left us when I was a kid, but he was so unsuccessful in his travels that he came back. Mom had to ask him to go away again. There has never been a Zerbs in LaPorte who excited much admiration.

Mom, on the other hand, is a Tyke, and the Tykes tend to do well and accomplish things. One of my cousins, Charlie Tyke, played shortstop for Chicago in the major leagues for several years. He's the most famous person to come out of LaPorte. Mom herself has artistic talent. She wrote and illustrated a history of northeast Missouri for the DAR.

People in town think the Tykes and Zerbses should never have merged. They've always viewed me as a kind of checkerboard on which the influences of the two families are canceling themselves out.

When I was growing up, it was suggested from time to time by other kids in town that I should be ashamed of myself for being a Zerbs. But Mom always encouraged me, and I tried extra hard to amount to something and get out of LaPorte. Even-

tually I ended up here in Chicago, where I've found a little niche for myself at the Neatly Chiseled Features newspaper syndicate.

But even when I was embarrassed about him and denying that we were blood relatives, I always liked my uncle. I won't say he was a role model. I never wanted to emulate Uncle Rollie. I got my role models from the TV and the sports pages. But I liked him anyway. He liked me, too. When I was little, he sat me up on the bar in his tavern and gave me pretzels. Later on he took me down to Busch Stadium twice a year to see the Cardinals.

I always wished, though, that he'd drop the fish thing.

It didn't surprise me to hear tonight that my mom is trying to get Uncle Rollie under supervision. She considers herself responsible for family, even old cracked ex-in-laws. During the big flood a couple years ago, when Uncle Rollie had to move to higher ground, he stayed in her backyard cottage on the upper bluff. It was then that her opinion of him solidified.

Nor was I surprised that Uncle Rollie called me up about it.

"I knew you'd understand how it feels," he said.

I've got a little of that myself, is what he meant. A little diminished capacity. I used to be noteworthy in the family for my quick, retentive mind, but I hit my head on a building in an incident here in Chicago last winter and ever since then I haven't been at full strength mentally. I have gaps. Sometimes my head

feels dense inside. It isn't painful but it's distracting.

At work, at Neatly Chiseled Features, I don't do as much as I used to. I mostly just read the comics now. I check to make sure the words in the balloons are spelled right and the arrows are pointing at the right characters. I log the features in and out. We have about forty different comic strips and panels, which we sell to newspapers all over the country. I also go through the submissions to see if any show promise. We get about a thousand submissions a year from cartoonists who want to be syndicated.

It's a position of some responsibility, but I don't kid myself. They don't consider me sharp enough anymore to proofread the daily text features. You can sit there and take your time with two weeks of *The Careful Avenger* or *Wacky Kat*, but you have to turn the political columns around in an hour. I just can't do that anymore. If there's any kind of deadline or intellectual pressure, I get that feeling of density in my head. Sometimes I can't retain the sense of what I'm reading from paragraph to paragraph. My doctor says I'm making progress, but it's been slow.

I saw a TV newsmagazine story once about a man who ate some bad shellfish and lost his short-term memory. He had to write down everything he did all day or he'd forget where he was going and where he was coming from. My impairment isn't nearly that extensive, but since I saw that story I've taken to keeping a record of things, as a safety measure. I try to write things down while they're fresh. My recollection isn't photographic, like it used to be.

Now it's more smeared, like an Impressionist painting. But by writing events down as I go along, if I get worse at least I'll be able to read my own memoirs and find out what I did.

I've retained most of what Uncle Rollie said to-night. His main concern is that Mom wants to have him put in a home.

"She's discovered a place out near Medina that costs thirty-eight dollars a day and doesn't take overflow from the mental hospital," he said. "How's that sound? Pretty good?"

"She told you that?" I asked him.

"Says I'm going to burn my house down. I guess I can burn down the goddamn house if I want to."

"Do you want to?"

"What are you doin', Cooper, testing to find out if I'm an idiot?"

Uncle Rollie doesn't want to leave his house because his "work" is there, down below on the pier. He evacuated during the flood when the water covered the kitchen floor, but he came back afterward, through the silt and the gumbo. He is impervious to advice and ridicule.

"People don't think that fish poetry of yours is very rational," I told him at one point tonight.

"Well, I'll tell ya," he said. "Your mother and her friends think in the year 2000 Jesus is gonna come down out of the sky on a horse."

"That's religion," I said.

"Well, who's to say Jesus ain't coachin' my fish?" he demanded. "Maybe they're harbingers of the Judg-

ment Day. Maybe they're gonna give us the Word from out of the rolling river."

"I suppose you talk like that around Mom."

There was a pause. When Uncle Rollie spoke again he was quieter and a little shaky.

"I wish you'd come on down here, Cooper," he said. "I got people comin' in here when I'm asleep."

I couldn't make anything of that.

"Who?" I asked.

"Cooper," he said, "it would *behoove* you to do me this favor."

I got that. That meant I owe him, because I let him down previously by not submitting his fish poetry to my boss. Uncle Rollie thinks a daily fish poem would be an attractive feature in the nation's newspapers. But I've never felt secure enough in my job to present the idea to my superiors.

So he said again, "It would *behoove* you. I can maybe ride this out if you'll just . . . come down here and do this one thing for me that I've got in mind." And then he added gruffly, "Please," and hung up on me.

Mom called up about a half hour later and told me Uncle Rollie has senile dementia.

"Your uncle has accelerated deterioration of the remainder of his mind," she said. "I'm going to need you to come down here and help me, we're going to have to get a conservatorship. There's nobody on your father's side of the family left in town, so we have to do it. There might have to be a hearing."

"Well, I just talked to him and he didn't sound so bad," I said.

"He's got enough adrenaline left to sound borderline, briefly," she said, "but that's all. What did he want? What did he say to you?"

"He wanted me to come down and visit," I said.

"Good," she said. "He likes you and he might listen to you. Come on and be a help. It's time you participated in the family."

I've got a week's vacation coming. I worry about being out of the office because I'm afraid my substitute will outshine me, but Casey has always said my job is secure, and he has no reason to lie to me. He could have fired me when I started making mistakes after I hit my head, but he didn't.

Here at home . . . well, I don't think the idea of a trip to Missouri will be popular. Irene's been there once before. She didn't like it.

We're still living together, but Irene's not real pleased with me. Seems like she's mad all the time. I don't like to live like that. I can't get my balance when I'm in the sitting room, wondering whether she's going to come in at me from the kitchen or the bedroom. She circles around the apartment and then darts in and grabs something of mine off an end table and takes it away and puts it somewhere else.

Off balance; that's it. That's the way I feel at home. About once a winter I take a big fall on the ice, usually when I'm coming up the walk with two bags of groceries. One heel slips and I try to recover with the other one and then *it* slips and I get to back-

pedaling and my arms go shooting up and the groceries sail up in the air as I land on my tailbone on the pavement. It's a satisfying sight to the passerby. Sometimes if I have time before I land I say, "Woo-woo-woo!"

That's how it is with Irene. Inside I'm always saying, "Woo-woo-woo."

She's asleep now. I guess I'll wait to tell her about this. She said something recently about us going to Lake Geneva on my vacation. LaPorte isn't really comparable.

Uncle Rollie seemed about the same except for that part about people sneaking up on him while he's asleep. That didn't sound like he was razor-sharp.

It never occurred to me that somebody like him could slow down. People talk about how sad it is to see the ruin of a noble mind, but it's sad, to me, to think of the ruin of Uncle Rollie's mind, too.

CHAPTER

TWO

It's late Tuesday night, the TV has signed off and I'm in Uncle Rollie's sitting room in LaPorte. I'm still a little rattled. My arrival was more eventful than I wanted it to be.

I didn't have any problem yesterday, getting permission to come down here. At work, Casey just said, "Take all the time you need." He didn't even ask me why I had to go.

He may have been preoccupied, thinking about the Cubs. They're even with the Dodgers in the National League playoffs, two wins apiece. Casey lives a major portion of his life through them. He keeps an old Billy Williams bat in his office, and when his schedule allows, he watches the Cubs on a small black-and-white TV, standing with the bat and adjusting his stance to mimic each Chicago hitter. He swings when they swing and takes when they take.

That's what he was doing when I went in to see

him. He wished me luck and told me not to worry about anything. Then he grounded into a double play, and I went home to face Irene.

She's still mad. There's a problem between us that we can't get over. Irene's disappointed in me because I'm not as dynamic as I originally seemed. I misled her at the beginning of our relationship by doing something heroic.

It was one of those unlikely, pivotal incidents. I think everybody has a few. The kind you look back on and say, "Well, if I hadn't gone out drinking the night they tore down the Berlin Wall, I wouldn't have met Vonetta and Russell Jr. would never have been born."

What happened was this: About seven months ago when we were still just acquaintances, I raced out into the night to try and protect her from her big angry drunken estranged boyfriend Stan. And although I didn't afford much protection—in fact I got my head trauma—Irene got it into *her* head that I was exciting and fiery. While the truth is I like it quiet. Especially since that incident.

Now we've been together for a few months, and she's seen me watching RKO Classic Movie Theater on TV. She knows the truth.

It's fashionable these days to look down on people who stay at home, to say they should get a life. But if we were all running around outside there'd be nothing but collisions. I believe some of us were meant to be noisy and kinetic, and others of us were meant to be more contemplative and inert.

Of course, I'd like a woman beside me with similar views. When I lived in LaPorte I had a girlfriend named Charlotte Prine who would be just right for me as I am now. But back then, I wanted so badly to get out of town and succeed at something that I didn't pay enough attention to her. Next thing I knew she'd gone and married Lloyd Wiemeier and it just ate me alive. I still see her in my dreams.

Irene likes to go out. I can see why she's frustrated with me. If I'd been in my right mind when we first got together I would have warned her, but I was suffering from the effects of that blow to the head and I apparently acted more interesting than I am.

The fun's pretty much over now, though. She's impatient with my memory lapses, and our sex life is suffering. I'm usually too embarrassed to talk about sex except during it, but in this case I should mention it to complete the picture. We're just not clawing our way to ecstasy like she tells me we used to.

It turned out to be simple to work out the vacation situation tonight. She didn't even mention Lake Geneva. I told her I was thinking of going to Missouri and she said, "Fine. You should go. In fact, you should stay."

She went on a little more; I can't recall it all, so I've condensed her response. She finished by saying, "If you don't wake up pretty soon you can forget about me."

The truth is that the way my head feels lately, I probably *can* forget about her.

* * *

One of the disadvantages to LaPorte in my youth was that you could only get two stations on TV. ABC didn't have an affiliate. There was CBS and NBC and sitting on the porch. They've still only got two stations locally. The more well-to-do people have cable, but Uncle Rollie is not one of those people.

There are compensations. The air is fresh here. There's a spacious feeling; everybody's got a yard. I like that now. I've been in Chicago long enough to lose my fascination with great clusters of people.

It's comforting to think that with all the overpopulation and crowding everywhere, with people jamming themselves into suburbs and even into places like Montana and Wyoming, that nobody is trying to get into LaPorte. It's safe from being exploited because there's no economy.

The Farm Barn outlet moved to Quincy and the Fairfax Gypsum plant closed down. There's farmland and a little ballpark on the edge of town, a school, a couple gas stations, three taverns, the bank, a 7-Eleven, and a market. That's about it.

River people used to dock at the pier in front of Thorpe's Boathouse to gas up and get a beer and a burger, but after Thorpe passed away the boathouse got flooded out and just fell apart. There's no place to dock in LaPorte these days.

The population was 1100 when I was a boy and it's 937 now.

I got into town around 7:30, and stopped at the 7-Eleven on Front Street to pick up some soda pop in case Mom didn't have any up at the house. And of

course the first person I saw was Charlotte. She was shopping with her son.

It hit me a solid blow, seeing her. Some girls from high school, you see them years later and kind of thank your stars you missed out. But Charlotte's still fit. Her face is a bit fuller but that doesn't hurt her any in my estimation. I don't care so much for the angular faces with the skin stretched over the bone like a drumhead, anymore.

Her boy Dillon is nine years old now. He's named after the old James Arness character on "Gunsmoke."

She acted pleased to see me. She told Dillon my name and he shook hands with me.

"You carried my mom home when she broke her leg at Dyer's farm," Dillon told me solemnly.

"Well . . ." I said.

It's true. I was six and Charlotte was four. She broke it on the swingset in the Dyers' backyard.

"Dillon knows all the family history," Charlotte said.

"And the bone didn't set right and that's why you walk like you do," he added tactlessly to his mother. Charlotte has a slightly exaggerated amble when she walks.

"No," she said, giving him a shove. "Not anymore, anyway. Somebody said it was sexy and now I do it on purpose."

Dillon went off to look at the cereals, and Charlotte said, "I hear you edit 'Tell It to Jeanne.'"

"Who told you that?"

“Your mom.”

“Well . . . I don’t anymore. I mostly read comic strips now.”

“Still, there you are, up in Chicago like you wanted.”

“What’s Lloyd up to?” I asked.

“Who cares?” she said, and laughed.

Charlotte’s an oil painter now. She’s done portraits of people in Quincy, across the river. She’s got an appointment in Chicago in a couple days to submit one of her landscapes to a new restaurant chain that’s going to feature genetically toughened vegetables. If they like her painting they’re going to hang a print in every franchise.

She asked if I’d brought Irene down with me and I said no. Before we split up she asked, “Do you really know Roger Ebert?”

“I’ve met him,” I said modestly.

“Can’t beat that,” she said, and rolled on with her cart.

I got a pleasant, melancholy feeling, driving up the big hill to Mom’s house.

She lives in the Tyke family home, on the Upper Bluff overlooking town and the river, in a yard full of walnut trees. Grampa Tyke made sure the house was maintained while he was alive so Mom would have a place to stay no matter what Dad failed at.

At one time or another Dad was a salesman, a trucker, and a manager of a hardware store in West Quincy, but he always struck me as a frustrated per-

former. He probably should have gone into show business. His passion was comedy.

I remember once when I was a boy, he drove Mom and me down to Hannibal to Mark Twain's Cave. That's the big tourist attraction in Northeast Missouri, you know. It's a labyrinth stuck in the hills south of town. In *Tom Sawyer*, Tom and Becky Thatcher got lost in it and Injun Joe died in it. It's got a nice little gift shop attached to it now, with guided tours through the main passage all day.

The guides always do pretty much the same thing, follow the same route and give the same speech, about Tom and Becky and the bats. About halfway through, when you're deep inside the cave, they turn out all the lights for ten seconds or so, so you can see how dark it is. And it *is* dark; it's black.

The time we went, Dad, Mom, and I were in the rear of the group when the lights went out. And when they came back on, Dad had disappeared. It's fairly easy to do; there are all kinds of tributaries off the main tunnel. You just take a few steps down one and you're gone.

I'm not sure what he expected Mom to do. Raise the alarm, I suppose. And then he'd reappear and tell some story about a clutching hand or falling in a hole or something.

But Mom didn't raise the alarm. She looked around, took a deep breath through her nose, and hauled me on with the rest of the group. We came out in the gift shop. I was very worried about Dad, I remember. Mom bought me a wooden gun that shot

rubber bands and then drove us home in the Oldsmobile.

Dad stayed in the cave for a while, living a kind of a comedian's nightmare, I imagine: you make your joke and then stand alone in pitch-black silence. He eventually merged into the back of the next tour group, making one kid scream, and went on through. He had to hitch back to LaPorte. He was mad when he got home.

I can see both sides. Mom was justified in rejecting Dad's humor as too heavy, but it was tough on him, too; it's hard when your best stuff isn't going over. I've seen how these cartoonists suffer watching me read their comic submissions. Like Mom, I rarely laugh. I think it's because we've both seen so *many* jokes.

Dad left home not long after that. Mom has always said she was relieved. I don't think there is any subconscious contradiction beneath the statement. She and I moved in with Grampa Tyke. Dad came back now and then for brief visits before he passed away in 1979 from liver death. Mom inherited money from Grampa when *he* died in '89, so she's secure.

She wasn't home when I got up the hill, so I sat on the porch while the lightning bugs came out. I'd just heard an item on the radio about them. You know times are hard locally when they do a story about a company down in St. Louis buying lightning bugs at a penny apiece for some research purpose, and then they repeat the story because the station switch-

board's been flooded with calls asking where to send them.

I thought maybe Mom had told me to meet her someplace and I'd forgotten. I decided to drive down the hill and up the road to Uncle Rollie's place.

He lives on the Lower Bluff, in a clapboard house beside a crushed gravel road that runs parallel to the river. He's on the left, up at the end of the road, after you go by the big grain silo, in a small cleared patch under the trees.

His lights were on and Mom's car was parked in the yard when I drove up. I parked behind her and got out.

There's only one other dwelling there, just this side of Uncle Rollie's. It's a mobile home. Wendell Kendall lives in it.

Parking as I did, behind Mom's car, I was between the two buildings, so it wasn't clear who I was visiting. And I neglected to call out to Wendell to let him know it was me.

Wendell is about Uncle Rollie's age—upper seventies. He's a short, skinny old man of the type you seem to find mostly in the country, with sunken cheeks and thick glasses and an old Cardinal cap on every minute of the day. He's walked slowly since I was a boy. Now he's getting frail. He's still dangerous, though.

Wendell's the nicest guy in the state if he sees you coming. He'll talk your head sore about his workshop and where he purchased his circular saw. There's not the least bit of harm in him if he knows you.

But he's been living alone for years, with no near neighbors except Uncle Rollie and the grain silo. That and guilt have been eating away at his reason.

When he was young, Wendell worked briefly at the Fairfax Gypsum plant on the other side of town. As I understand it, he stole a tool from them. Embezzled it, you might say. I don't know what it was. Maybe a hammer. He may have done it in retaliation for getting laid off, or he may have just been unable to resist it. Wendell loves tools.

Anyway, nothing happened; nobody caught him. He eventually went to work somewhere else.

Not much of a story, except that over the course of the ensuing fifty-five years, Wendell has allowed it to grow and overcome him. He believes now that he's on a list for retaliation. He believes that one of these nights some old-time strikebreaker types from the plant are going to drive down to the end of the gravel road and call him out. His crime has earned interest in his head. It's become one of those for which there is no statute of limitations. It doesn't matter to Wendell that the Fairfax Gypsum plant has been closed now for years. As far as he's concerned that's just a stratagem.

Uncle Rollie is tolerant of Wendell's obsession, living, as you might say, next door, in a glass house. But it has made him uneasy in recent years because it seems to have gotten more intense and because Wendell has always said he'll shoot it out with them when they come. Wendell is well armed, like many Missourians. You go out to a swap meet in the country-

side and you'll find enough rifles on sale to repel any neighboring state.

Uncle Rollie doesn't approve of fixed ideas that make a person sit up at night by the window with a shotgun in his lap. I've heard him yell across his yard, "One of these days they're gonna come, Wendell, only they ain't gonna be from the Fairfax plant."

Well, sure enough, I got about four steps away from the car and there was a flash and a "BOOM" and a crash and I swear, I thought I'd disintegrated. I thought I'd somehow blown up, it was that loud and unexpected. On the way to the ground I thought of lightning; we get some frightening storms in La-Porte in the summer. But no, the night was clear; it was Wendell shooting my car.

It's a brown Dodge Colt Premier. I bought it used. He'd never seen it before. As my senses returned to me I realized that I had been at fault, and from my position facedown in the grass I screamed, "It's Cooper!"

Uncle Rollie's door opened ahead of me and the light from the kitchen shone into the yard. I raised my head and started to crawl toward the door. Mom came out. Uncle Rollie stood in the doorway in his pj's.

Mom did the initial talking. She is a Tyke and prefers to act dignified, but she can make herself heard over the crickets all right. She's gotten kind of stocky as she's gotten older. You can't miss her.

"Cooper!" she barked, walking up to me. "Have you lost your *mind*? Can't you sing *out*?"

Off to my left, Wendell, looking skinnier and flimsier than ever, opened his trailer door. He had trouble getting down the steps and out his door with the shotgun. He got the bill of his cap turned in the door frame and involuntarily pointed the gun at Mom.

"Don't you point that thing at me," she said. She strode up to him and began wrestling him for it. "I'll turn it on you, Wendell, I swear. You let . . . go."

He did, and she stood there, panting at him, holding the shotgun backward and down at her right side.

"I didn't know the car," Wendell said finally.

"So you shot it," said Mom.

"Who is it? Cooper?" said Uncle Rollie, out in the yard now. He walked up to me in his pj's. They were big on him; he's lost the big belly he used to have. He looked happy to see me, but confused and old without his glasses. His hair was sticking out at the sides like he'd had an electric shock.

I stood up and shook hands with him.

"Nobody is coming for you," Mom was saying emphatically to Wendell, jabbing the butt of his shotgun at him. "Nobody knows you're alive except us."

Uncle Rollie said, "What'd he do, shoot at Cooper?"

"Yes, he shot at Cooper," said Mom. "He thinks everybody who drives down this road is from the Fairfax Gypsum plant."

Uncle Rollie peered toward Wendell and said, "Goddamn it, Wendell, you're goin' nuts."

Wendell said, "I was only doin' what you told me."

Uncle Rollie blinked and snapped his head back as though he'd received a short jab. This is his customary reaction to astounding news.

Then he looked at me and said, "What are *you* doin' here?"

Wendell's back in his trailer, Mom's gone home up the hill, and Uncle Rollie's in bed. He's tired out.

After we went in the house he and Mom got into an argument about whether he'd forgotten I was coming. Uncle Rollie denied it, but Mom outlasted him and spent some time describing his symptoms to me while he sat with us in the kitchen.

"He leaves the oven on," she said. "He puts a piece of meat in there and walks away and forgets about it. Look at the oven door. *Look* at it."

"I see it."

"I don't understand why he's still alive. The meat's rotten to begin with. I came over here with Maisie Dupree to clean out his refrigerator and we were here two days. The man is a derelict."

"BULLshit!" barked Uncle Rollie. Mom sailed on.

"We took a cheese out of there that was given to him Christmas before last. He's watching us. He says, 'I forgot about *that*,' and takes a *fork* to it. In front of Maisie. I thought I'd die. I thought *he'd* die. I don't know why the three of us didn't just expire on the spot."

Uncle Rollie sat on a kitchen chair and stared at

the table. He seemed dazed.

"He's not drinking," said Mom, "but then, the way he is now, he doesn't have to."

Uncle Rollie used to drink, to an extent that's considered excessive nowadays. I remember him telling me once about the merits of "sippin' gin." He also loved Stag and Falstaff, two beers you don't hear much about anymore.

"He sleeps eighteen hours a day. All he does—here's what he does. He gets up, he goes down to that rickety old pier and looks at that—*crap* in the typewriter, and then he drives into Quincy to see Callie."

"He drives over there every day?"

"In low. He leaves the car in low the whole way. I'm surprised the *car* is still alive. His license has expired, his insurance is canceled, and he has *no* chance of passing the driver's test. He won't pay his bills anymore. He says they don't add up right and he'll figure them out tomorrow."

"They *don't* add up right," said Uncle Rollie.

"How come he's got lights?"

"He's got lights because *I* went over and paid Nancy Asher personally at the GE collections office. And don't think she's not telling the world."

Mom got up, looking a little tired herself. I always think of her as young; her hair is still the same auburn it always was. But her face is getting lined and leathery.

"I'm going home," she said. "You should stay here, Cooper."

Diminished Capacity ---

"I intended to," I said, and looked at Uncle Rol-
lie. "Okay with you?" I asked. He looked up at me
and smiled vaguely.

"Good," said Mom. "You can see what I'm talk-
ing about." She bent over toward him and said dis-
tinctly, "I'm leaving, Roland."

"I'll get over it," he said.

Copyright 1995 by Sherwood Kiraly. All rights reserved.