

WEALTH

“Every economic act, being the action of a human being, is necessarily also a moral act.”

—WILLIAM LETWIN,
THE ORIGINS OF SCIENTIFIC ECONOMICS (1964)

**FOR PUBLIC
RELEASE**

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ADAM RISING

The man arrived with the downpour. It was a distinctive Virginia thunderstorm, dark bulbous clouds rising and swirling in the early evening. Gusts of spring air tore at the patio umbrella and rain began to flow like a wide-open faucet, hitting the ground and splashing up the glass door to the deck. Rex, my eight-year-old collie, raced from room to room barking at thunder. I went upstairs to close windows, then heard a banging that sounded like a loose shutter. Through the glass I spied a dilapidated car resting at the curb. A figure huddled on my stoop, drawing on the butt of a cigarette. He rapped again impatiently—a knock that would turn my orderly and solitary life upside down, lead me on a barnstorming flight across America, and very nearly cost me my life.

None of this I suspected as I examined the silhouette on the front porch. I flipped a light switch and the figure material-

ized into an elderly man about six feet tall. Short white hair ringed the sides of his bald pate. He leaned into the inadequate shelter, glancing about awkwardly. I pulled Rex aside, and opened the door. The man sighed, showing large teeth.

“Dr. Burns? I came to see D—Dr. Richard Burns?” he stut-tered.

“I’m *Mr.* Burns,” I said, keeping the screen door latched.

The man tried to smile, but the lips turned into a frown. He spoke as if in a slumber. “Julia Brooks gave me your name. From church.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“She said you teach at the college.”

I nodded.

His brown eyes appraised me and could not contain their disappointment. “You’re so young...” He began to turn away, then apparently changed his mind. “Ahh. Maybe you can help. I need to talk to someone ... someone who knows an older economist.”

The man had a curious, old-world accent, muffled by the hammering rain. He raised his voice. “He’s not old, I mean—he’s from a long time ago. Some guy called ‘Adam Smith.’ You ever hear of him?”

My face flushed. “Some guy” called Adam Smith? Some guy? The rain bore down. Rex pawed the carpet behind me, which was odd. Normally he’d weasel past to greet any guest.

“Adam Smith—the ‘father’ of economics?” I asked.

“Yeah, that must be him.”

I hesitated a moment then opened the screen door. He shook off a spray of water and stepped inside. The living room lamp betrayed an older gentleman, his face flushed and heavily lined, bearing a prominent nose. A damp white mustache hung over his thin, pressed lips. The man melted into the couch and I perched at the other end. I glanced at my watch: Five minutes to my favorite television show.

“Been a rough couple of weeks,” the man said weakly. His black work boots oozed rainwater onto my rug.

I examined the man with a mixture of curiosity and impatience. Despite his disheveled appearance, there was an incongruous dignity to his bearing. Had it not been Julia who’d sent him, though, he probably wouldn’t have made it inside the door. But Julia had said, some time ago, that moral posturing without action was just talk. Whether the words were her own, or she’d quoted someone, didn’t matter. They stung, and busy as I was, I forced myself to show patience.

He cleared his throat. “Where to begin? Might as well go back to April, I guess, three or four weeks ago, when I started having strange dreams. I call them dreams because the voice started at night when I was asleep. But it went on after I woke up.” His voice cracked. “Scares me to death! Sounds like a sermon, ringing in my ears. Ahh!”

He dropped his head and his shoulders began to shake.

Rex whined under me. He wasn’t barking, and that was to the credit of my damp visitor. But he showed wariness, and I echoed that and reached down to give him a rub behind the ears.

“Been a rough couple weeks,” the man sobbed, wiping an eye. “This babbling in my mind, night and day, this voice going non-stop in my head.” He rummaged in his grease-stained jacket. “Mind if I smoke?” He changed his mind and stuffed the cigarettes back. “I think I’m going crazy.”

Where did Julia Brooks find these people? I went to the kitchen and brought out a saucer for an ashtray. He lit up, flicking the spark on a dented Zippo lighter. He drew deeply. “This voice ... it does not make sense, not to me anyhow. Something about ‘setting the world straight.’ What does that mean? Dr. Burns, I’m a truck mechanic, I fix diesel engines. What do I know about fixing the world? This voice keeps going on and on and on. That’s when I told myself, ‘Harold, get some help.’”

“Harold?”

“My name—Harold Timms.” He offered a hand. His accent sounded vaguely European, but his name gave no clues; I’m an economist, not a linguist.

“Where’re you from?” I asked.

“Romania, many years ago,” he replied, squeezing my hand.

At the end of my second year of teaching at Hearst College, in Fredericksburg, I was completely spent—exhausted by stacks of grading, drained by interminable faculty meetings, and frayed by an endless struggle to finish my doctoral thesis. My side table held a pile of unanswered Christmas cards. My laundry basket overflowed. The aroma of my microwave chicken dinner wafted in from the kitchen, and my stomach growled.

Harold Timms drew on the cigarette again and looked off into a corner at nothing. Apparently, there would be no short version to his story. Somehow he mistook me for a medical doctor, and letting him continue would be dishonest, not to mention take up time to no purpose. Julia or not, I made a decision.

“Interesting,” I said, rising to my feet. I used his clinging hand to help him up. “You know, there are good medicines for what ails you, Mr. Timms, all kinds of things these days.” I steered him to the front hall. “But I’m afraid there’s a big mistake; I’m not a doctor that could prescribe any of them for you.”

He looked stunned. “But you’ve got to help me!”

“I’m sure Julia can recommend a good physician. I’d be wasting your time.”

I opened the door and he lumbered out. He stood with his feet spread, round eyes gaping at me like an abandoned pet. Canned laughter emanated from the television set and rain blew in the entryway.

“Good luck!” I waved my hand and shut the door slowly.

Something nagged at me. I reopened the door. The forlorn figure hadn’t budged.

“What does this have to do with Adam Smith?” I asked.

“It’s *him*,” he said. “He’s taken over my mind! Wants the whole world to hear him out ... or *else!*”

Shaking my head, I closed the door on the madman.

