

# Nineteen Stories

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## The People

They came only once in a great while, when it was bitter cold, and encamped in my grandmother's worn old living room, a band of ragamuffin gypsies, dressed in patchwork clothes, soiled with the clean earth over which they moved, their skin almost translucent from exposure to the elements, their knuckles gnarled like old tree trunks, their eyes peering out from under brows hoary with the rime of the cold world out of which they had sprung. their gaunt animals, dogs and cats, lying about on my grandmother's old carpet, glad to be inside while the rough wind howled outside the door.

Old bits of song came tumbling out of their lips, forgotten tunes from an almost forgotten past. Remembering events from long ago, they spoke in soft voices, almost in genteel terms, a music in their tones, conducting themselves with great dignity, in all their tattered splendor, deferring to the next speaker, their half-finished stories drifting off into the background of cheerful chatter and congenial bonhomie. I, a small boy curled up in the warmth of their company, wondered at the tall tales they spun. Even my parents surprised me, usually grumpy and complaining when awakened prematurely from their slumbers, but out they came in their pajamas, wrapped in their robes, exhibiting a cheerful demeanor, transformed by the gaiety of this unexpected group of visitors.

From time to time our guests reached into their bags and pockets, producing nuts and fruit which they passed around to the others, and my grandmother disappeared into the pantry to produce a cake which was cut into a hundred pieces by pocket knives and passed around to the congregation, a small miracle of loaves and fishes. I imagined what their lives must be like, moving across the plains and fields, in a world without houses, yet unfenced by the companies of industry and the conglomerates of wealth, a simpler world of toil and hard times, of hot sun and cool moonlight. I listened in awed wonder as they told of wolves in the night, wolves who came in silent groups, standing watching, stock still in the faint light of the flickering fire, then melting away into the surrounding darkness.

Somewhere in the small hours of the morning, I fell asleep. When I awoke in my own bed, I tiptoed across the cold floor and opened the door, anxious to catch another glimpse of our guests, but they had vanished like the wolves, out into the gray dawn. There was no record of their having been there, no rag or tatter left behind, and I wondered if it had all been a dream.

## The Gathering

I held on to my mother's hand, on the outskirts of the gathering. Our leader stood at the center, small, frail, not what you might expect a leader to look like, but you could almost feel his charisma from where I was, the immense popularity he summoned up in all our hearts. Now that my father was dead, *he* was my father also. He was a father to all of us, in his frailty, in the illness of his wounds.

We stood and drank the rough country wine together. It was passed around to all of us, the bottles passed over the heads of the people, everyone pouring a little into his cup, some even reaching us on the perimeter of the crowd. I tasted the roughness of it, the smoothness as well, the sweet-sourness of the grapes from the fields beyond carried up into the forest with us, stored in the hearts of trees until it reached its majority, its manhood, just as I was reaching my own majority, my own manhood. I knew that my mother was fearful of losing me, afraid that I would not much longer stand by her side, me, her last son of four, the first three already killed in this civil conflict. I could feel her fear in the grip of her hand.

Now the trees in the distance were burning, set afire by the soldiers in an attempt to drive us out, to drive *him* out, to capture him and put him to death, not knowing that he would never die. We could feel the hot tongue of the fire, soon to sweep into this glade where we gathered, the warm wind heralding its advance. We could feel the dryness of the air, hear the trees exploding with the intensity of the flames.

Soon we would be forced to flee, to escape the soldiers and the fire, into the depths of the wilderness that lay beyond the reach of the soldiers, beyond the reach of the taxes and enslavement of a government that ignored our needs. Some day we would return, strong and ready to replace this corrupt regime with our own democratic one. Until that day we would run and hide, fighting skirmishes here and there, choosing our battles on our own terms, whittling down the forces of the enemy, keeping him at bay.

Now the conference at the center was over. You could feel it being telegraphed through the crowd. The silence and solidarity of the gathering was now replaced by the undercurrent of many voices. The wine had been drunk, the empty bottles packed away for the storage of water, for the making of future wine. It was time for us to go. The soldiers would be here soon.

## The Killer Comes

From far to the North, the hot winds blow. This is the hot season, the still season, when insects hibernate, deep below the sands, and the snakes lie cool and twisted beneath the soil, content with the warmth in their deep burrows. I lie as well, sleepless but not discontent, listening to the dry rattle of the winds. My body is unmoving; only my thoughts stir, restless, hovering above the earth like shifting shadows, alighting here, there, for a moment, then moving on once more.

It is the time for another to seek me out again, another to come from afar to destroy me, coming in a vehicle across the sands, from the distant city where vast numbers of men and women congregate together, the huddle muddle, the mass mind, the civilized psyche, the blare and glare of movement and activity. I wait for him, the next one, to come to this solitary place, to find out where I am so that he may destroy me.

But I shall prevail, because I know from whom he comes. I know the one-eyed one who sends him, who reaches out from his den, deep in the sprawling metropolis where he lurks with his minions, stealing out with bold bravado to take and amass the gold which makes that one eye glitter. I alone know his purpose; his lies do not, as they once did, deceive me and turn me from my rightful ends. That is why he must destroy me, so that he can be at peace once more to continue the evil that is his nature. He cannot bear my knowledge, my condemnation of him. I await his emissary.

I listen. It is the sound of a faraway machine, yet coming closer. Little by little, it draws imperceptibly nearer, a distant whine that soon will be roaring across the dead land to where I am hiding, alone, waiting for him to find me, so that I may kill him. My advantage, my only edge is that I will recognize him first, because I know his kind, his mindset, sly words tumbling out from between lying lips, knowing eyes seeking that similar knowledge from mine, that clue that I am the one whom he seeks. But I shall know him first, just as I have known all his predecessors, and I shall destroy him, as I have them. I lie, listening.

He arrives in the dark day, under brooding clouds heavy with moisture that will never be released to the parched earth below. He arrives in the oven of the afternoon, when all is still, and not even the whispering winds break that morbid quiet, that pall of death which hangs like a curse above the lingering land. I hear the din of his machine approaching, as I lie in my chair, awaiting his arrival, the sudden cessation of valves and pistons, that sudden silence, punctuated by the solitary crunch of footsteps as he approaches my abode, the knock on my door.

Hello, he says, his gleaming eyes searching mine for that sign. He reaches out with his hand, pretending oneness with the confraternity of man. May I come in, may I sit, may I have a cup of cool water.

Yes, yes, I say. I do not ask what brought him, but attend to his words, his professed needs, watching his pretense, his friendly sham of inquiry. I watch him as he watches me, waiting for his move. I have come to find X, he says. Do you know X? I have heard he lives hereabouts. He smiles disarmingly, all charm.

No I do not know X, I tell him, nor Y, nor Z. I live alone and seek no other but myself. He nods, his sly lying eyes flitting about. He talks, expressing himself well with

his manicured hands. They flutter about like trained birds. He talks and smiles knowingly, a snake watching his prey, watching my eyes, waiting for his moment.

I cannot see the shape of the gun in his pocket, but I know that it is there, its cylinders of death waiting to tear into my flesh, to render me silent like the land which surrounds me, a fait accompli, memento mori. Then he can crunch back to his car, roaring back over the silent sands to the place from which he came, back to his master with the report of my demise.

I nod in silence, watching him sip the cool water, walking calmly behind him to the cupboard to fetch him further refreshment, while he sits and talks and smiles trustingly. I withdraw my pistol from its concealment and shoot him in the back, a momentary explosion. I see him grabbing blindly for his gun and I shoot him once again, then all is silent. I walk back to my chair, and stand and gaze into his glazed blind staring eyes, surprised by so sudden a death. I reach over and find the gun he meant to use to spell my doom, and it comes sliding out, its sleek blue-dyed barrel gleaming blindly like his now-dead eyes, teased out from its concealment like a snake from its lair.

I drag what used to be him out to the scorched earth beyond, and, with a pick, hack out a hard hole for him, spading up the loosened soil, toiling under the hot, relentless sun, laying him in the earth with all the others, with them now one. In the spring I shall plant a tree where he lies. An apple tree with crisp fruit for my table at breakfast. Another for my burgeoning orchard to grace this loveless land.

Out to the high cliffs far away I drive his vehicle, and stand and watch as it goes crashing down upon the pile of crushed metal in the dead river bottom below, another twisted machine at the base of the ravine, then, finally at last, weary my way back the many miles to my piece of property, plodding patiently across the clodded earth, savoring the sweat of exercise, the tired completion of my task, at one once more with the dead land around me.

## The Wrong Man

He placed a couple pesos on the counter as the hotel barman brought him his usual – a small demitasse of strong black coffee, and a double shot glass of tequila. He opened up the newspaper he had brought with him and looked again at the photograph of the man on the front page, Ernesto Gratias. The man had not changed appreciably in the many years since he had last seen him – the large, aquiline nose, the hair parted down the middle, the deep, penetrating eyes. ‘Wanted by the police,’ the caption under the photograph read. As he sat, sipping his tequila with an occasional libation of coffee, he thought about this man whose photograph was now on the front page, and he also thought about the past, and the small town they had both come from so many years ago.

“Would you like another, Senor Rauvista?” asked the barman.

“No, gracias,” he said. He lay a few smaller coins on the bar as a tip, then rose from the stool, folded up his newspaper and put it under his arm. It was getting dark as he walked out onto the street, the overcast day turning into a gloomy evening.

As he passed the Calle Simon Bolivar he saw policemen on the corner. They were out in numbers tonight, all presumably looking for Gratias. He hoped that they would not find him.

He suddenly became aware of the back of the tall man in front of him, striding along in the same direction he was headed. It couldn’t possibly be him, he thought, but there was no mistaking the thin, muscular body, the square shoulders. He quickened his steps to partially overtake the man, to catch a look at his face from the side. Yes, yes, he thought. It was him all right. The hair was longer, and the nose was larger, and the face looked older, but there was no doubt in his mind. It was Ernesto Gratias himself. He couldn’t believe it. What a fantastic coincidence, to have just been reading about him, and now to see him on the street. He slowed his gait, allowing the space between them to increase. He didn’t want to frighten the man. He continued to follow him at a discreet distance. They passed a couple more police, but they were involved in conversation and didn’t look up.

His energies were beginning to flag, and he was nearly out of breath. He was not as young as he once was, and all the cigarettes he had smoked over the years were taking their toll. The man he was following continued at his fast pace for three more streets, then suddenly disappeared around the corner of the next. Ronaldo hurried to the spot where he had last seen him, arriving just in time to see his quarry vanish into the doorway of a cheap hotel.

“Que quieres?” asked the bored man behind the desk, looking up from his newspaper.

“The gentleman who just walked in,” said Ronaldo, still out of breath. “He is an uncle of mine, but I couldn’t catch up with him. I would very much like to speak with him, since I haven’t seen him for many years. Is it possible for you to tell me the number of his room?” Ronaldo slipped a peso from his pocket and placed it casually on the desk.

“I believe he is in room one-oh-five,” said the desk man. “That is one flight up, the first door on the right at the top of the landing.”

“Gracias,” said Ronaldo. He hurried up the stairs in the direction the desk man had indicated. The hallway was dark, lit only by a single ceiling bulb at the end. Ronaldo knocked on the door. When there was no answer, he knocked again. Finally the door opened, and the face he remembered so well was looking out at him.

“Yes?”

“I wonder if I may speak with you for just a moment,” Ronaldo said in a subdued voice. “It is rather important. Do you mind if I come in?”

The door opened wider as the tall man stood back to let him enter. Ronaldo heard it shut quietly behind him as he walked into the room. A standing lamp burned dully in the corner, revealing a small room with a bed and a sofa. Ronaldo turned to face the other man.

"You will probably not remember me, but I also come from the province of Morales, and I knew you only slightly when I lived there, in the village of Dos Rios. My name is Ronaldo Rauvista. I am somewhat out of breath. Do you mind if I sit?"

The other man waved him to the sofa, sitting himself on a wooden chair, facing him.

"I am afraid you are mistaken, señor. I have never been to the province you speak of. You are undoubtedly confusing me with someone else. My name is Alfonso Nobina, and I have lived in this city all my life."

"Don't you remember me?" said Ronaldo. "I was the son of the school teacher, and you were two years ahead of me. You played goalie on the provincial team."

The other man shook his head. "No, you do not look familiar to me. I must again submit that I have never been to the province of Morales, and I have never played soccer. You mistake me for another."

"That is extremely unfortunate," said Ronaldo, "because this man who resembles you is someone I wish very much to say something to."

"And what is that, Señor Rauvista?"

"I wanted to tell this man that I have always admired him. All of my life I have always done what is the safe thing. I have never spoken out against authority. I have always done what was expected of me. I studied accounting, and came to this city many years ago to start my own small business. I made a go of it, and, although I never became rich, I managed, after many years, to buy my own house. And now I am retired. I never married or had a family, since I was always too busy to do such things."

"I do not understand what all this is leading to," said the other.

"I will get to the point," said Ronaldo. "I have always known in my heart that there were many things wrong with this country, but I have never said anything against it. But I have always been glad that there were certain people who were willing to come out against the government, who were willing to risk their lives to make life better for the rest of us. This man who resembles you - he is one of them."

"And that is all that you wished to do? To tell him that you admire him?"

"No. I also wanted to stress the dangers of living so openly here in the city, with the police looking for him, and I wanted to suggest to him that he stay at my house, where he would be safer." Ronaldo pulled out a fifty-peso note from one pocket and a pen from another. He scribbled something on the corner of the bill.

"Here," he said, attempting to hand the bill to the other man. "This is my address, but I have written the numerals in the reverse order in order to protect myself. Two-five-one-seven Calle Bonaventura."

"But I am not this man," said the one who called himself Alfonso Nobina, "and even if I were, I could hardly accept your charity. Now I must ask you to leave. I have been patient enough to listen to your story, but I am not the person you confuse me with."

"Yes," said Ronaldo, letting his hand fall to his side, still clutching the fifty-peso note. He stood, nodded to the other man, and walked to the door. To the left of it, he noticed the small table. As he stood aside to let the other man open the door for him, he surreptitiously dropped the note on the table behind him.

"Goodbye, Señor Rauvista," said the other man. "That was an interesting story you told me. I hope you find this man you were looking for."

"Goodbye, Señor Nobina," said Ronaldo. "I am sorry you were not him."

## The Professional

I spotted him first in the hotel cocktail lounge, talking animatedly with a young couple. I glanced in his direction a few times, and I think he noticed, because when I encountered him on the elevator later he just about jumped out of his suit.

"Sorry," I said. "It's been a long time since I played the phantom of the opera. I'm not used to affecting people that way."

"I'm sorry myself," he said. "There's someone I'm trying to avoid. I thought for a second you were him."

"I'm glad I'm not. Does he look like me?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know what he looks like."

"How the heck can you avoid someone if you don't know what he looks like?" By this time, we had reached the fifteenth floor, and we both got out.

"Are you on this floor, too?" he asked.

"Room 1509," I said. "Sorry you don't have time to answer my question. I'm really intrigued. Next time we meet, remember I'm not him. Whoever he is." I started to turn to walk in the direction of 1509, hoping he would dissuade me.

"Hang on just a minute," he said. "Are you in a big hurry?"

"Not even a little one," I said. "I just got tired of sitting around an empty bar with nobody but the bottles to talk to."

"Then why don't you join me in my room? I've got a full fifth of Chivas Regal, if you like scotch."

"By some strange coincidence, that's just what I was drinking," I told him. "And you can tell me about this person you're trying to avoid, even though you don't know what he looks like."

"Okay," he said with a nervous laugh. "Here we are."

I spent a few minutes enjoying the view, while my host fetched the Chivas. Skyscrapers from another height are much more impressive, especially all lit up at night.

"I guess you've got the same view as I do," he said.

"Yeah, sure. I just never get enough of it."

"From out of town?"

"That I am." We talked about architecture briefly, as he led me to the large, U-shaped couch which faced the view. He spoke of Mies van der Rohe and I said something about Le Corbusier. He had the glasses, water pitcher, ice bucket and bottle all set up on the coffee table. "So when're you going to tell me about this mysterious individual you're trying to avoid?"

"I'd like to fill you in on the background first, let you know the context. Then it'd make a little more sense. Okay?"

"In other words," I said with a grin, "you want to tell me the story of your life first."

He laughed. "You understand me pretty well after only ten minutes."

"You don't exactly wear your heart on your sleeve," I said, "but I bet I could take you at poker."

"You probably could. I never was good at hiding my emotions."

"You must have been an overling, then," I said. "Underlings learn to keep their feelings to themselves."

"Right again! What the heck are you? A psychiatrist?"



“Only of the practical variety. So how far did you get in the corporate structure?”

“All the way to the top, friend. Hard work, patience, and determination. Twenty years molding a company into a corporation. Another ten building myself an empire. And then I grew tired of it.”

“Too much of a good thing.”

“Too much of the same thing, but I had no idea what to replace it with. So I translated my holdings into blue chip stocks and retired.”

“Sounds like a good move,” I said, replenishing my glass. My host had hardly touched his. He was too lost in reminiscing.

He went on. “I tried to replace it with hobbies and travel, but I quickly tired of all that. I had lost my sense of purpose. So I went all the way, and drowned myself in women and drugs and parties. Endless, empty, wall-to-wall parties. Eventually I collapsed, got myself some medical attention, went to a shrink, started taking anti-depressants, went to AA meetings.”

“Quite a cycle you went through,” I said. “The only phase you left out was becoming a born-again Christian.”

He smiled. “I was too much of an atheist for that. I would’ve rather died than make a fool of myself. In fact, that was exactly what I chose to do.”

“Really?” I said. “Doesn’t look like you’ve made it yet.”

“I tried half a dozen times to do myself in, but I never had the guts. So I took out a contract on myself.”

“That’s original,” I said.

“But the threat of death was just what I needed,” he said, starting to sound more and more like the born-again Christian he had said he wasn’t. “All of a sudden, life became a day-by-day affair instead of day-to-day. All of a sudden, each day became special, because I never knew whether it was going to be the last. I started noticing things I had scoffed at before – the dew on the grass and the bug crawling up the window pane, the beauty of dawn after a storm, the rainbow in an oil slick.” He stopped and looked at me intensely. “Have you ever had a peak experience?”

“You mean something like a religious conversion?”

“Like what a religious conversion is supposed to be but isn’t. More just a tremendous feeling of being alive, of being in touch with everything around you . . .” His statement petered off, but he continued it with his hands, expanding them to include the whole room, perhaps the universe.

“Like a drug high,” I offered.

“No, not like a drug high! Much more than drugs, much more than alcohol. I’ve been higher’n a kite and it’s nothing, nothing like what I’m talking about. I mean really being transported!”

“Sounds good. You package it and I’ll put up the money.” I filled my glass again, dropping an ice cube in with the tongs he had so thoughtfully provided.

“No, my friend,” he said, turning around to look earnestly into my eyes. “If it could be packaged, they’d’ve done it long ago. No. It’s something you have to earn, something that comes out of your character, out of the interaction between you and the world. Once you have experienced that state of grace, nothing is ever the same.”

“So what about this hit man you hired?” I asked, anxious to derail him from what was sounding more and more like a sermon.

“At first I just let things happen. Since I lived my days one at a time, it didn’t really seem to matter much. But, little by little, I began to look forward to the next dawn. I had already experienced ego death. I had had my transformation. I didn’t have to die.”

“So you went into hiding?”

“At first I tried to cancel the contract. But I couldn’t contact the people I had made it with.”

“Why not?”

“Because I never knew who they were. It was just a telephone number I had called, and a transfer of funds to a bank account. But the telephone number had been discontinued. I hired a private detective. I hired three private detectives. It was no use. So I’ve been on the run ever since.”

“So that’s the guy you’re afraid of running into,” I said.

“That’s the guy,” he admitted glumly. He looked at his nearly-full glass. “Gee, I’ve been talking so much I’ve hardly touched my drink.” Then he glanced at the nearly-empty bottle.

“Afraid I’ve been doing most of the drinking,” I said with a wry smile.

“Hey, no problem. Let me call up the desk and order another bottle.”

“I’ll have to turn you down on that,” I said. “I’ve got an early flight tomorrow.”

“Already concluded your business in town, eh?”

“Just about,” I said. “Out of curiosity, have you ever thought about what you might say if you ever ran into this guy you’re trying to avoid?”

“You think I haven’t?” he said with heartfelt emotion. “I’ve envisioned that conversation a thousand times. How I’d convince him that I was the one that took out the contract, that he didn’t have to fulfill it. I’ve thought of offering him money. God knows how much he’ll let me say when it really happens.”

“Well,” I said, rising regretfully from the couch, “I don’t know how much of what you said I was able to understand, but it has been a most enjoyable evening. No, no. Don’t get up. I can let myself out.” I drew the 25-caliber automatic from one pocket and the silencer from the other, fitting them together before the astonished eyes of my host. I pointed it at his forehead and pulled the trigger. The noise was minimal. I pulled the gun apart and put the pieces back in my pockets. Except for the little red dot in the middle of his forehead, one might have taken him for sleeping. I dumped the remains of my glass in his, and placed it in my pocket. Then I wiped my prints off the tongs with the napkin the glass had rested upon and walked briskly to the door, using the napkin to wipe the knob clean. There was nobody in the hallway outside. I pushed the door shut with my elbow and walked to the end of the hallway, then trotted down the staircase a few floors before boarding the elevator. The old man had almost swayed me, but a contract is a contract, and, if nothing else, I am a professional.

## The Pen

It was one of those dull Saturdays. It had been raining for about a week, and the skies had been gray for so long it was hard for her to remember when she had last seen the sun. Sheryll let Bobby stay in bed. He had earned it, working late most nights the week before. She had earned it herself, come to think of it, so, after puttering around the house for an hour, she crawled back in bed with him.

He was dreaming. She could tell by the way his eyelids fluttered. R.E.M., she remembered. Rapid Eye Movement. He stirred, reached out for her, then found her. His hand pulled her towards him. She helped him a little, scooting over in his direction. They snuggled a bit as he gradually woke up. She reached down and found that he had a partial erection. She grabbed him there and held him.

"Interesting dreams?" she asked, with a knowing tone in her voice.

"Mmmmm," He said. His voice wandered off.

"Come on," she said, "tell me."

"Just the usual weird stuff, Babe," he drawled. "You don't wanna know."

"Yes I do," she said, squeezing his erect member.

"Okay," he said, rubbing his face and ungluing his eyes. "You remember Ron and Betty?"

"Vaguely," she said. "I remember you telling me about them. You knew them before we met, right?"

"Yeah, they were those people I used to visit every Saturday night. Anyway, Betty and I were driving somewhere out in the countryside, no roads, just a dirt lane, and there was this . . ."

"You and Betty used to go for rides together?" she interrupted.

"Never. I only saw Betty at her house, when I went over to visit Ron. Betty never appealed to me, 'cuz she was too fat. Besides that, she was always nagging Ron, and I always held that against her. Anyway . . ."

"You were out on this drive together," she prompted.

"Yeah, and I ran over this felt tip pen. It was just lying there, on the ground."

"How exciting," said Sheryll.

"Come on. You know how dreams are," said Bobby. "Now quit interrupting or I'll forget the damn thing. So we keep on driving and I find another pen. Only this time I get out of the car and retrieve it."

"The pen," said Sheryll.

"Yeah, the pen. And then we drive on for a bit, and then we run into the people who had been dropping these pens along the way. So I told 'em about the pen I had run over, but I didn't mention the pen I had kept."

"This is really a boring dream," said Sheryll, "but you've got me interested in finding out how it ends."

"Well, so we turn the car around and go back the way we came. And then the car disappears, and instead of being out in the countryside, we're walking along this hospital corridor looking for the elevator, and I still got this pen I found. And I start feeling guilty about it, so I turn around and, just at that moment, here come these people we saw out in the country, walking after us. So I give 'em their pen back and apologize for keeping it."

"And?" said Sheryll. "What happened next?"

“Nothing,” said Bobby. “That’s where the dream ended.”

“How thrilling,” said Sheryll. “You know what I think?”

“You gonna analyze it now?” said Bobby.

“I think the pen represents a penis,” she said.

“Wow,” said Bobby. “And I just happened to find a penis lying out on a country lane.”

“Remember the first pen was broken.”

“Yeah. ‘Cuz I drove over it. What the hell is *that* supposed to represent?”

“The broken pen represents the fact that you couldn’t get it up with Betty.”

“Could be. I always told you she was too fat.”

“But you probably wanted to anyway. And then you found a pen that was intact. This time you didn’t run over it.”

“So why’d I return it?”

“That was because you felt guilty about wanting to do it with Betty.”

“Jesus. You sure can turn things around. So why’d the countryside turn into a hospital, Mrs. Sigmund Freud?”

“What do they have in hospitals?” she said.

“I don’t know. What do they have there?”

“Beds,” she said.

“Wow,” he said. “I get the hots for a lady, so I take her to the hospital to find a bed that isn’t being used. I have to admit you got a lot of imagination, Babe. Another thing that happened in this dream I didn’t tell you about was that everything in the dream was white. The sky out in the country, the hospital corridor, you name it. So what was the meaning of that?”

“Simple,” she said. “The sun hasn’t been shining for a whole week now.”

“Man,” he said, exasperated. “You really missed your calling, Babe.”

“You want to do something with this?” she asked, still holding on to his erect penis.

“Sure,” he said. “Betty ain’t around. I might as well put it to some good.”

## Oedipus Wrecked

He lay back on his pillow. His mother sat on the edge of his bed, tousling his hair.

"Aw, Mom, I wish you didn't do that. I'm not a little kid anymore."

"You'll always be my little boy," she said. "I remember when you were five. You had such beautiful blond hair, then. We let it grow long until you were six and started school. You remember back then?"

"No, Mom."

"So what're you going to do today?"

"I don't know."

"It's your first day of summer vacation. You start work at the video shop next Saturday, so you've got a whole week of freedom."

"Yeah, Mom, I know." He desperately wanted her to leave.

"I'm going to go down and fix us a nice big breakfast. You want French toast or pancakes?"

"French toast, I guess."

"You know that nice Ms. Molinari next door?"

"Yeah, I've met her. You oughta know. You insisted on introducing me to her."

"You made a big impression on her."

"Big deal," he said.

"Now I want you to be nice to her. I told her you'd fix her bedroom window. You've always been good at fixing things."

"Aw, Mom. I wish you weren't always so free with my time."

"It shouldn't take you long. I told her you'd go over right after breakfast. All right?"

"All right," he said. He waited until she was out of the room, then slowly got out of bed and over to the chair over which his clothes were unceremoniously draped. As he struggled into his shirt, he walked over to the window and pulled the drapes open. Another boring cold foggy day. He finished buttoning his shirt.

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"You're a pretty big boy for your age," Ms. Molinari said to him. "Practically a man."

He made no comment, lying on the hard polished floor underneath her bedroom window, reaching up to tighten a screw.

"You're what? Eighteen?"

"Nineteen," he said. "I'll be starting my junior year in the fall."

"San Francisco State, your mother told me."

"Right." He wished she wouldn't jabber so much. He grimaced as the screwdriver slipped. Then he got it back inside the grooves of the screw head and, with great effort, tightened the screw another revolution.

"There," he said with satisfaction. "That oughta do it. Now try and shut it."

She reached over the top of him, her robe falling open slightly to expose a portion of one large, bare breast as she reached for the window sash. He was immediately aroused, and it surprised him. He had thought of her as so ugly.

"That's great," she said, as the window closed firmly. "You're really good at this."

"I don't think I'd like to do it for a living," he said, as he awkwardly rose to his feet.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Just a little cramped," he said, reaching down to pick up the screwdriver.

"Well, I guess that's it."

"Wouldn't you like a cup of coffee or something before you leave? Or maybe a beer?"

"Yeah, but Mom wouldn't like it if she smelled it on my breath. Thanks anyway."

"I wish you'd let me offer you something."

He felt a little uncomfortable being in such close proximity to her body.

"No, it's okay," he said. "I guess I'd better be going."

She followed him down the stairs and let him out the front door.

"Don't be such a stranger," she called after him.

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It was a Thursday night, and there wasn't anything interesting on television. He could remember all the nights during the school semester when there had been all kinds of things on TV that he had wanted to watch but couldn't because of his homework. He wandered slowly around his room in the dark, not knowing what to do. On impulse, he picked up his binoculars and checked out a few of the lighted windows in the distance. Nothing going on. Once in a great while he got a great view of a woman undressing. He put the binoculars back down on top of his bookcase. If his mother were out, he could have watched one of his porno movies. Then he caught a flash through his drapes of a lighted window in the neighboring house. He walked over and drew the drapes aside, studying the window. It was that new neighbor, Ms. Molinari. He could just make her out, moving around in her bedroom. Now she was standing in front of the window, the window he had just fixed the Saturday before, and he realized she wasn't wearing much. He walked closer to his window and peered intently. Just a bra and panties, he decided. She didn't look quite so fat with her clothes off. Just then, she turned and appeared to look right at him. He froze, hoping against hope that she hadn't seen him. But what else could she be looking at? He withdrew slowly, inch by inch, until he was out of her sight. Then he turned and went down the stairs to the front room to join his mother. If she asked him what he was doing that night, he could say he had been watching television for the whole evening. He wondered if she really had seen him. It seemed inconceivable, since his room was dark. Still, she had been looking in his direction, and it was clear that she had been looking at *something*. He prayed it hadn't been him.

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All day Friday, the lady next door flitted in and out of his thoughts. Even his mother noticed his preoccupation.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said while they were eating lunch.

"They're not worth a penny," he said.

"I hope you're not getting to be like your father was."

It was her standard remark about his father, about how silent he had always been. Jerry could hardly remember him, since he had skipped out on them when Jerry was nine.

"I'm going shopping," she told him when she left at two. "You going to be around in case anyone calls?"

"Sure, Mom," he said. "I haven't got anything to do."

He wandered around the empty house, just as bored as he had been the night before. When the phone rang, he practically jumped out of his skin.

"Hi, Jerry," said the voice on the other end. It was her.

"Sorry," he said. "Mom's out right now."

"I wasn't calling your mother."

"Oh," he said.

"I wonder if you could drop over and see me," she said. "There's something I'd like to talk about with you."

"Sure," he said. "Right now?"

"Perhaps this evening might be better. Maybe after dinner. It would also be better if you didn't tell your mother where you were going."

"Okay," he said. He had a horrible presentiment about what she wanted to talk to him about. There was a moment of silence, during which he tried to think of something to say.

"You still there?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay." His hand felt clammy as he hung up the phone. He wiped it on his pants. He tried to think how she had sounded on the phone. Not angry, he thought. Serious? Grim? No, neither of those. He wondered what she was going to say. Just then his mother walked in.

"You okay?" she asked. She was carrying two bags of groceries and she handed one of them to him so she could shut the door.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "Why?"

"You looked as if you had just seen a ghost," she said.

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He walked up to her door and rang the bell. It was louder than he expected, and it almost made him jump. He remembered the last time he had been there, when he came over to fix her bedroom window.

The door opened and she stood there looking at him. With her hair down, she looked somehow younger.

"Come on in, Jerry." She opened the door a little wider, and he dutifully entered. He wondered if she were mad at him, but she didn't seem like it. He found himself breathing a little harder than usual. He guessed it was his nerves.

"Would you like to sit in the front room?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "I don't care." He followed after her, allowing himself to be directed towards the sofa. She sat down opposite him, in the large, overstuffed chair.

"I guess you wonder why I called you over here," she said. She didn't smile, but she didn't seem angry, either.

He nodded. His mouth was dry and he swallowed involuntarily.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. His voice sounded weak and ineffectual. "Sure," he said a little bit more loudly. He cleared his throat as she walked out of the room. He could hear the tinkle of glasses from the kitchen beyond, wondering what was in store for him.

She returned quickly, carrying a little tray with two glasses of what looked like beer. She set it down on the coffee table, then picked up one of the glasses and handed it to him. He took a quick swallow. It was beer, all right. He took another swallow.

"I guess you know that I saw you looking at me last night."

"Yeah. I mean yes." He wondered what she was leading up to.

"Did you like looking at me?"

He wasn't sure at first what she was saying, then it registered. "Yes," he said in a small voice, not knowing what else to say. If he said no, she might get angry. It was like one of those multiple-choice questions where all the answers looked wrong.

"Do you like looking at women?"

He nodded dumbly. It was probably another trick question. Then he found his voice. "I guess so," he said. "I'm not gay or anything."

She smiled. "I didn't think for a minute that you were, Jerry. I guess it's hard for young men growing up in our society. Have you ever made it with a woman?"

He thought for a minute about lying, then decided against it. He shook his head. "No," he said.

"I thought maybe that was the case," she said. "Have you ever thought about it?"

"Of course," he said with a little more authority. "Just because I haven't made it yet doesn't mean I don't think about it."

"Would you like to?" she asked.

Would I like to what? he thought, then realized what she was saying.

"Of course," he said, somewhat incredulously. Was she offering herself? He didn't know what to think. He took another swallow of beer, and noticed that the glass was practically empty.

"Would you like another?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," he said. His brain seemed fogged over as he heard her get up and go into the kitchen. He heard the refrigerator door open and close, and before he could collect his wits, here she was, handing him a full bottle and sitting next to him. His heart was pounding.

"I'll let you pour it for yourself," she said, "or maybe you'd rather drink it out of the bottle."

"Don't *you* want some more?" he asked, then noticed that her glass had hardly been touched.

"No," she said. "I'm okay right now. Do you feel nervous with me sitting next to you, Jerry?"

"No, I guess not," he said, his heart practically in his mouth. He started drinking from the bottle, then looked down and saw that there was still a little in his glass. She put her hand on his leg and his heart almost stopped for a second. They just sat there for a moment in silence, and he could hear his heart thumping. He took another swig from the bottle. It really tasted good.

"Do you like it when I touch you like this?" she asked, caressing his leg.

"Yeah," he said. "It feels all right." He couldn't believe what was happening. Was she seducing him?

"Would you like to kiss me?" she asked. He half turned to look at her and realized that her face was right next to his. He could see the faint fuzz of mustache on her upper



lip. Then, before he knew what was happening, her lips lightly brushed his, and then they were in an embrace.

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Afterwards, lying alone on his own bed, he thought of all the times he had imagined being with a woman, and how the actual experience had been so different from the imagining. He remembered being inside her, and it gave him an immediate arousal. Her large breasts hadn't bothered him at all when they had lain in the dark together; he hadn't had a single thought about what she looked like then, only about how he had felt, what she had felt like to him, the rough caress of her coarse pubic hair as he had dementedly kissed her body, rubbing his face against her flesh, his body against her body, drunk with the abandonment of lust, listening to her heavy breathing, her soft moans and sighs as she caressed him as well, constantly guiding him back into her, rocking her body softly against his, until all of his being was a pulsating, honey-sweet, ache of desire that grew into one cause, one purpose. And then he had exploded.

Afterwards it had been pleasant, just lying there with her in silence in the darkness on her large bed, feeling good about his nakedness for once, not minding hers. It was nice to have no purpose, no need for anything, washed up on a beach like a dead fish he had once seen, its still-opalescent scales the only testament to the life it had so recently lost.

Later, lying listening to the distant roar of the shower and the silence which followed, her bathroom door suddenly popping open, an unwelcome shaft of light intruding upon his comfortable darkness, exposing the twisted mass of sheets and the lower part of his body, squinting into the glare as the door opened wider and he saw the ungainly shape of her torso wrapped in a towel.

"Why don't you take a quick one yourself," she had said, meaning the shower. He had demurred, in no hurry to rouse himself from his luxurious lethargy.

"Go ahead," she had insisted. "You smell of sex. You want your mother to know?"

He had risen slowly, watching the flesh he had so recently desired now transformed back into the folds of fat that so repulsed him, avoiding her eyes, not wanting her to fish out his thoughts.

"Go," she said, and he had gone. Into her bathroom, stepping into the wet warm shower stall, standing there for a moment, turning the knob, waiting for the absolution of water that suddenly came bursting through the nozzle, a luke-warm spate of water that quickly became a hot flood, a slight twinge of soreness as the stream of water caught the head of his penis. He had soaped himself down quickly, turning and rinsing, washing off the evidence of her.

Afterwards he had rushed putting on his clothes, allowing her a brief embrace, plunging his face into the warm terry-cloth robe that now covered her body. Then out the front door. Out into the chill of early morning.

"Go now," she had said. "You'll be late."

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Now, lying in his bed, his clothes hastily tossed on top of the chair, his ironed sheets cool and immaculate after the sweaty bed he had just left, he mused over the strangeness of things, the way her fat body had been transformed into such an object of desire, the

sheer sweetness of being together with her in the darkness. He thought of the repulsion she had originally evoked in him, with her hairy legs, her pendulous breasts, the faint mustache on her upper lip, the large mole on her left cheek. He cringed at the idea of being together with her in any social setting. He could imagine the suppressed smiles and knowing leers of his friends. And yet, with all of that, he still desired her. All his porn movies, his girlie magazines, his imagined encounters with impossibly voluptuous women were nothing compared with his feelings for her. Somehow, despite all the distaste he felt towards her, he was magnetically drawn. In the course of these reflections, his tired body finally claimed hegemony over his mind, and he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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"Jerry, wake up. You'll be late," his mother called into his bedroom. He stirred, a weary corpse in the hot sun steaming in through the unshuttered windows. He had forgotten to draw the blinds when he had come in during the early morning hours. You'll be late. You'll be late. It sounded like an echo from the night before.

He clambered out of bed, reaching blindly for his clothes on the chair. He rose to his feet and stuck his left leg into his trousers, then transferred his weight to that leg as he stuck his other leg in. He pulled his pants up, then grabbed his shirt, maneuvering his arms into the sleeves, and buttoned it up, jamming the shirttails into his trousers. He did it all with a practiced motion, buckling his belt as he stuck his feet into the sandals at the foot of his bed. He felt no passion for life at the moment. This was all there was – taking his clothes off, putting them on, going to bed, getting out of bed. Now he was going to work.

"You came in pretty late last night," his mother said to him as he sat down to a quick breakfast. "Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere in particular. Out with the guys."

She put a plate in front of him. Two fried eggs, a slice of ham, two slices of buttered toast. "You're not going to the bars, are you?"

"You know I'm too young," he said. "We just drove around."

"I worry about you. Want some marmelade?"

"Sure," he said. "What time is it?"

"Eight thirty. You'd better hurry."

"Right." He broke one of the eggs with his fork and let the yolk pool up, then wiped it up with a slice of toast and wolfed it down with a piece of ham. He took a big swig of coffee and realized it was too hot, forcing him to swallow it before it burnt his mouth. He cringed as it went down his throat.

"Don't eat so fast," said his mother.

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The whole morning at the video store it was one demanding customer after another. Everything he had learned the summer before didn't seem to help as much as he had hoped. The new key entry consol he had to enter the purchases on was totally different from the cash register he had used before, and every sale had to be specially coded. And when he wasn't waiting on customers, he had to keep busy, putting price tags on new DVDs or restocking shelves. On top of it all, Roger, the manager, was constantly on his

back. It was hard to believe that Roger was only twenty three. He acted as if he were practically an adult. Jerry hoped he didn't act like such an asshole when he was Roger's age.

In between customers, Jerry thought about the night before. It bothered him how much older than him Rosalie was, practically as old as his mother. He knew his mother had been only eighteen when he was born, so that made her thirty seven, and he knew from something his mother had said that Rosalie was a couple years younger, so that made *her* at least thirty five. That seemed awfully old to him. She had told him that she had been married for ten years and that her husband had left her. Just like Mom, he thought. She had also been married for ten years when *his* father had taken off for greener pastures. Jerry wondered if he even *wanted* to see Rosalie again. He felt somehow obliged to see her, which made him *not* want to see her, but every time he thought about *not* seeing her, he realized that in some part of him, he still desired her. It was totally confusing. Every time he started thinking about it, he forgot what he was doing.

"Jerry!" Roger called to him. "There's a customer waiting."

"Yeah, sorry," Jerry said, dropping the task he was working on, and hurrying over to the counter.

When the end of the day came, Jerry wondered what he was going to do that evening. Maybe he'd drop in on some of his buddies, see what they were doing. Strangely enough, he didn't intend to say anything to them about how he had spent the previous evening. Ordinarily, if he had just been laid for the first time in his life, he'd *expect* to be bragging about it, but he thought about what his friends might say if he told them *who* he had spent it with. It might've been okay if it had just been some absolute dog who had picked him up, but the fact that it was the lady next door, a lady who was a friend of his mother – somehow *that* made a big difference. He could imagine the razzing he might be subjected to if his friends knew that.

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He walked all the way home. He could've taken the bus, but somehow he wanted to do some thinking. When he passed her house, his footsteps slowed and he glanced up at her windows, but it was still too bright outside for her to have any lights on. He continued on to his house.

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"You going out this evening?" his mother asked as he finished wiping the dishes.

"Yeah, I guess," he said.

"Anywhere in particular?"

"Oh, maybe I'll see what's going on with Jason. I haven't seen him in a while."

"You sure he's going to be in?"

"I don't know."

"You could call him. Save some shoeleather."

"Maybe one of these days I'll get a cell phone. I guess I'll take my chances. I feel like getting out, in any case."

"There's a good movie on at nine. A rerun of Mamet's 'The Winslow Boy.' I remember you liked that a lot."

“I don’t think so, Mom. I don’t have to work tomorrow, so I might be kinda late. Don’t wait up for me, okay?”

“Okay, dear. Be careful.”

“Good night, Mom.”

Outside, it was cool, but not cold. He could see a few stars in the sky. He wondered what he was going to do. As he started to pass the house next door, he saw that the front room lights were on. On an impulse, he went up the stairs and pushed the bell. After a moment, the door opened, and there she was.

“Hi,” she said. “I was hoping you might drop by.”

## Out

The morning had passed like after a bad sleep, when you wake up hot and sweaty and reach out for the woman next to you and find a hard wall instead, feeling the unrelenting mattress below, realizing she had only been a dream, and knowing you were back in prison serving twenty-to-life, and feeling that ache in your loins with no relief at hand except by that very hand, or maybe settle for some soft sissy for an old lady.

But there was no waking from this dream because it was real. It seemed almost surreal, with all the locked doors opening before him like the parting of the Red Sea. His efforts to keep his nose clean had somehow paid off. After ten years of seemingly pointless periodic visits, that old fart of an attorney, who had failed so miserably to keep him out in the first place, had actually gotten him a parole. He still couldn't believe it.

This way, Randall, and you can change in here, Mr. Randall, and putting on the pair of denims he had been arrested in, feeling the space between the beltline and his hard stomach, toughened up by all the situps in his cell, tucking in the shirt that was two sizes too large. Another man had worn these clothes. Another man in another world. He slung the strangely familiar sport coat over his shoulder, too hot to wear inside.

Follow the man, now in here, sign this, please. Tough-looking lady cop behind the desk, tough little titties poking out her stiff blouse. Through that door, Mr. Randall. The bus out front will take you to the courthouse.

Through the door and out into the sunlight. Randall held his hand up to shield his eyes from the glare. Pale, prison eyes, used to the darkness, emerging like a night creature blinded by the light.

Down the long cement walkway, a sailor getting his land legs back, accustomed to the short steps that took him from one end of his cell to the other, the shuffling walk out in the yard, all those interminable years of watching the guards on the towers, longing to make a run for it but with no place to go. He lengthened his stride, enjoying his freedom of movement. He was really looking forward to jogging again. That was what they all did on the outside, now.

He stood with the others at the bus stop, waiting for everyone to collect. The county prison bus stood empty, waiting for the driver to open the doors. Now the guard flipped his cigarette onto the road, pulled out a clipboard and started calling out names. The men shuffled forward, little smiles, exchanged grins, anticipation in their eyes at the prospect of getting laid, getting drunk, getting stoned, getting out. Inside they had been enemies, exchanging few words. Now they were members of a tight fraternity, a secret order with secret nods and looks. They stepped up into the bus, having their names checked off, taking seats, counting off the minutes before they would be striding down a city street again, free as an ex-jailbird, flying high, looking up at a sky so blue you could get lost in it.

The minutes turned into a half hour, then forty five minutes before they took the off ramp and squeezed their way through the noon-hour traffic to the back of the courthouse. It seemed almost anticlimactic when they tramped down out of the bus into the parking lot, fanning out like returning sailors on leave.

Randall let his steps take him where they would. He had no agenda. Eventually he would have to find a cheap hotel, and tomorrow he would contact his parole officer. But right now he was on a high, and he wanted to savor every second of it. He wandered up

an alley. On one side were dumpsters piled high with junk, spilling out onto the pavement. Above him, the multiple lanes of a freeway spun off in every direction, its concrete pillars covered with the scrawls of street artists. But for just a moment, everything, the garbage and the graffiti and the grey cement beneath him, seemed beautiful. For just the length of time that he could hold his breath, and as far as his mind's eye could see, the traffic lights of his future were all green.

## Scenes from a Bathroom

Joyce tugged her skirt down to keep it from laddering. "I've got to lose a few more pounds or get a new wardrobe," she said to Anna, enviously eyeing the slim figure of the smaller woman.

It was a pretty little family of four that Joyce had recently been staying with. Her little Munchkin family, all blond-haired and blue-eyed with fair skin and perfect features. Carl, the father, at thirty eight, a successful architect. His two boys, Carl and David, both like young trees, straight and thin, Carl sixteen now in his senior year at high school and almost as tall as his father, David twelve and a foot shorter. Anna was intermediate in height, with a sensuous body and a face that could launch a thousand ships.

The two of them were making the most of the bathroom before the boys descended upon them.

"Shouldn't you be wearing a bit more when you're around your kids?" asked Joyce.

"When the children were young, we didn't wear anything at all," said Anna.

Joyce raised her eyebrows.

"Carl always believed in treating our children naturally," Anna continued, examining her face in the mirror.

"When we travel in Europe, we always go to the nude beaches," Carl Junior called in from the next room.

"Your sons certainly have acute hearing," said Joyce.

"The walls in this apartment are paper thin," said Anna, holding her head at an angle and vigorously brushing her hair. "We have no secrets in this family."

"We have to listen to all their fights," said Carl, standing in the doorway now, leaning against the door jamb, idly watching his mother dress.

"What do you two fight about?" asked Joyce.

"Lots of things."

"For example."

"His impotence and my frigidity," said Anna.

"Jesus," said Joyce. "How'd you manage to produce two boys?"

"It's just been the last few months," said Anna. "Up till then, we never had any problems with sex."

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The four of them made the small bathroom seem even smaller. David, the younger of Anna's two sons, squatted at the side of the bathtub, clad only in his underpants, scattering the water from the tap with his hand. Carl, the older, was standing at the sink shaving.

"How are you going to have enough hot water for a bath if you use it all up that way?" Joyce asked David.

"He doesn't like a cold tub," explained Carl, squinting at his face in the mirror, looking for errant hairs. Joyce pulled her robe around herself more tightly, uncomfortably aware of Carl's secret glances. He had taken a lot of admiring peeks during the week she had been staying with them.

"Aren't you a little young to be shaving?" Joyce asked.

"He's practicing for when he grows up," David said, turning off the hot water, apparently satisfied now with the temperature of the tub.

"You're never going to grow up," said Carl. "You're never going to get any taller and you'll have to marry a midget."

"And you're never going to stop growing," David retorted. "You'll just get taller and taller, and you'll bump your head on the ceiling all the time, and everybody will laugh at you, and you'll have to run away and join the circus."

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" Joyce asked Carl.

"Oh, maybe an architect like Dad, or maybe an engineer."

"Would you like to be an architect?"

"I seem to have the genes for it," he said.

"And how about you, David?" she asked.

"David's going to be a clothing designer," said Anna. "He already helps me buy all my clothes."

"I'm going to be the greatest," said David. "Better than Armani or Cardin or any of those guys."

"Finish your shaving, Carl," said Anna. "I need the mirror." She stood, brushing her hair, letting her dressing gown fall open, exposing her bare breasts and a skimpy pair of  
panties.

"Do you really have a beard?" Joyce asked, surreptitiously moving closer to Carl so she could block his view of his mother.

"Feel it yourself," he said, turning toward her, suddenly emboldened, the hint of a smile on his otherwise stoic face.

"I guess he does," Joyce said, keeping her distance but looking closely, not seeing much besides lather. "Pretty soon you'll be a man."

"Too soon," said Anna, flipping her hair back and pulling her robe together. "Now wash your face off and vamoose."

"If I wash my face off I won't have a face," said Carl.

"Very funny," said Anna. "You're my funny boy." She tried to push him away from the sink, but he pushed back.

"When are you guys going to leave so I can take my bath?" asked David.

"As soon as your brother gets through scraping his face," said Anna.

"Okay, okay," said Carl, setting down his father's razor and splashing water over his face.

Anna leaned down to run her fingers through her younger son's hair. "Seems like only yesterday he was two," she murmured, her eyes somewhere else.

"Aw, mom. That was a long time ago. I'm not a baby anymore," complained David, pulling his head away from her.

"We used to let his hair grow down to his shoulders," said Anna.

"That was back when he was a girl," said Carl, ducking as a bar of soap was hurled in his direction.

"Hey, you chaps," said Joyce. "You're going to get me all wet."

Carl finished his ablutions and towed off his face. Anna retrieved the bar of soap and replaced it in the soap dish. David started running the water for his bath, and Anna gently steered her older son away from the mirror and in the direction of the door. She nodded her head at Joyce.



"Let's let David take his bath. Otherwise I'll never get him off to school."

"He takes a bath before going to school?" asked Joyce incredulously.

"Why don't you ask me?" said David, still squatting next to the bathtub, frowning up at them. "I'm right here."

"He's got a big preoccupation about being clean," Anna went on, overriding her son's plea. "Come on, Joyce. Let's decide what we're going to wear."

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Here they were, back in the bathroom again, thought Joyce. She was sitting on the W.C. Anna was squatting on a stool, her right foot propped up on the rim of the bathtub, studiously painting her toenails.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Anna.

"I was just thinking about how much time I spend in your bathroom," said Joyce.

"It's the biggest room in this apartment," said Anna, exchanging her feet, sitting with the nail polish in one upraised hand, the applicator in the other, like a snake poised to strike. "This is the family center. Can you imagine the four of us in that tiny kitchen at one time?"

There was a pause. "How did you like Norton's?" said Anna, changing the subject.

"Not bad," said Joyce. "I've been there before, you know."

"When you were with F and H?"

"Right," said Joyce, slipping a piece of tissue paper between her legs to dry herself, then rising while she pressed the flush with her right hand. "F and H!" she exclaimed, suddenly recalling something.

"F and H?" asked Anna, looking up from her toenails.

"That's where I was working when I first saw Carl. You remember when I first met him I had the feeling I'd met him before?"

"Uh huh," said Anna.

"Well, I didn't actually meet him. I just noticed him. Across the room."

"Where?"

"At Norton's. I didn't pay much attention to him. I was mainly staring at the woman with him. Svelte, beautifully coiffed, tres chic."

"When was this?"

"Oh, a few weeks ago. But I'd seen her before, and the bloke with her could have been Carl the time before as well."

"Where?"

"The same place. I guess I'm a trouble maker."

Anna screwed the top back on the nail polish. "No, you're a friend. But you've put me in a funny predicament."

"What's that?" said Joyce.

"I'm dying to throw this in Carl's face, but I can't do it without getting you in trouble with him."

"Can't you say someone else told you?"

"How would this 'someone else' know Carl?"

"Are your social worlds that mutually exclusive?"

"Fraid so," said Anna. She walked behind Joyce and replaced the nail polish in the medicine cabinet.

"How do you know it isn't just an innocent lunch-time thing?" asked Joyce.

"Because I fix his lunch. He's probably been giving it away to some street person." She paused. "I wonder how they get together for their debaucheries."

"Jesus, Anna. Aren't you jumping to conclusions?"

"No! It all makes sense. He's been keeping something secret from me for months now. I just never knew what it was."

A loud hello issued from the next room, followed by the sound of the front door slamming. "I'm home!" David called out.

"We'd better not talk about it any more now," said Anna.

"Not talk about what, Mom?" asked David, sticking his head in the bathroom door.

"Not talk about your father having an affair with another woman," said Anna angrily.

"Jesus, Anna," said Joyce. "Now I'm really sorry I said anything."

The rest of David followed his head, as he walked slowly into the bathroom. He stood there awkwardly, looking up at her. "Sorry, Mom," he said. "We figured something was going on." He sat down on the edge of the bathtub.

"We?"

"Carl and me. Carl and I."

"You figured out he was having an affair?" Anna had moved closer to him.

"You guys have been fighting a lot lately, but he hasn't been fighting back," David explained.

Smart boy, thought Joyce to herself.

"Anything else?" said Anna.

David hunched his shoulders and rolled his head around. "Oh, I don't know," he said.

"I'll tickle you to death if you don't tell me," said Anna, advancing on him as if to carry out her threat.

David gave her a half smile. "It's just that Dad hasn't been with us much lately. I mean, he's there, but his mind is off somewhere else. I can't get him to talk to me at all. Whenever I ask him anything he tells me to look it up in my Funk and Wagnall's."

Anna threw up her hands dramatically at the ceiling, as if gesticulating to an unseen audience. "Why is the wife always the last one to know?" she cried.

"Last one to know what, Mom?" said Carl Junior as he strode in.

"Dad's having an affair," said David.

"Jesus," said Joyce.

"Christ," said Carl. He leaned against the sink. He turned around to look at Joyce. "Hi, Joyce," he said.

She gave him a weak smile in return.

A silence hung over the group, like a small, moisture-laden cloud. Joyce put the seat down on the toilet and sat on it. Anna lowered herself to the stool, burying her face in her hands. David maintained his precarious position on the rim of the bathtub. All of a sudden the front door banged open and the voice of Carl Senior boomed into the small apartment.

"I'm here, everybody. I'm here," he sang as he danced into the bathroom. He walked over to Anna, bent down and planted a big kiss on her astonished lips. He looked

around at his little family, a large grin on his face. He poked David gently in the stomach, walked over and shook hands with Carl Junior.

"Can you all guess what has transformed your papa? Can you guess what miracle has befallen him?"

"You got the new position," said David, looking up with interest.

"You got a raise," said Carl Junior.

"You got fired," said Anna.

"You see before you the new marketing director of Chase, Henley and Finch," he announced stentoriously, the silly grin still plastered on his face.

"Hello, Joyce," he said, noticing her, then turned back to the group.

"We will now all go out to a great restaurant and have a great time. You too, Joyce."

He looked more attentively at Anna. "I'm sorry, my love," he said to her. "I know I've been a big pain in the ass the last couple months. But I did it! I did it!" he raved. "I did everything the right way, sucked up to Harold Ennis on his new advertising campaign, kept my mouth shut about the boss's son, even took that idiotic secretary of his out to lunch a bunch of times to pump her for information."

"What idiotic secretary?" asked Anna.

"Oh, you know – that cold-hearted, bird-faced, vampiric Isis bitch-creature who haunts the upper offices on the eleventh floor? Dresses like a magazine ad?"

"Finch's secretary?"

"Right. God, what a ball-buster. Self-made woman type. Ugh! But let's talk about something far more interesting." He put his arm around Anna. "What fantastic restaurant shall we all go out to tonight?"

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"Hello," said Carl Senior in a loud whisper, poking his head in the bathroom. "Hope I'm not disturbing anyone."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Joyce, rising from the bathtub rim. "Anna and I were just talking . . ."

"No, no," said Carl. "Don't get up. You either, Anna. I just woke up and you weren't there . . ."

"Join us," said Anna, perched on the small white bathroom stool. "Only let's not wake the kids up. Even three can be a crowd in this bathroom, as you well know."

"Yes," said Carl, "and five is an even bigger crowd. I'll try to keep it down to a whisper. How're you, Joyce?"

"Great, Carl," said Joyce. "I had a really great time tonight. Anna and I were just talking about how much fun it was."

"I felt the same way," said Carl. "If it's okay with you two, I'm just going to put the seat down and sit on the toilet." He smiled at the two of them. "Do you think Emily Post would approve?"

"Probably not," said Anna, "but Joyce and I don't care. We do it all the time, don't we Joyce?"

"Right-o," said Joyce. "Screw Emily Post."

"I wonder if anyone ever did?" said Carl.

"She was probably a tiger in bed," said Anna.

“I haven’t had much of a chance to talk with you tonight, Anna. No, no. Stay where you are, Joyce. You’re a friend. We don’t have any secrets from you.”

Anna looked up apprehensively.

“It’s nothing serious, my sweet,” said Carl. “No need for a sad face. I just wanted to apologize again to you for my bad behavior the last two months. There was so much pressure at work. I was so afraid that damned Jenkins was going to get the job, and then I would’ve had to work under that idiot. I couldn’t say anything to the boss about it, and I couldn’t lay it on your shoulders either. . .”

“It’s okay, hon” said Anna, rising and going over to Carl and putting her arms around him. She waved to Joyce behind her back. Joyce gave her an understanding wink, then rose silently from the edge of the bathtub and tiptoed out.

## The Assignment

There we were, the same old bad cast, a different play, a different day, all of us a few years older. Wiser? I doubt it. Otherwise why were we all back here, like a group of tired alumni at a school reunion, graduates of an institution with no name, sitting around an unused classroom, listening to a teacher with no diploma. Was it the promise of money? Maybe. I was perhaps the only one of the bunch who had made out at all in that department. A couple hundred thou. Where was it now? Some of it in my ex-wife's bank account maybe. I didn't have any of it left. I guess you could have called it my salary. Nobody had really given it to me, since I had just taken it. Why was I back here again? Curiosity maybe. Maybe just the old excitement, the same old buzz in the blood, the chance of escape from the boredom of ordinary life, the promise of danger.

Dennis looked around at the lot of us, the same upper class sneer on his face, the same dent in his forehead that always drew my gaze, the same mocking sarcasm in his eyes.

"You'll wonder why I called all of you here today," he started out, "why I brought all of you together again. You did well as a group. I got a promotion out of it. You got a little glory, the chance to do something for your country."

He was always good in the flattery category. Maybe that was one of the things that drew us to him. I looked around. Over there was Roger, tall, thin, much grayer now than when I had last seen him. Standing next to him was Sam, also older, running a little to paunch, probably the effects of good eating, good living, bad drinking. Little Lolita, standing next to Sam, still pretty, her hair still jet black, her eyes still piercing. Her husband Max hadn't made it. I had seen him buy it, a bullet in the brain in the middle of the five o'clock rush. Next to her were Boris and Beidelman, the two I had always referred to in my mind as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Beidelman. I had never known his first name. He still wore the same old suit and tired tie. I wondered if they really were the same clothes. Maybe he just kept on going back to the same men's wear store. Did they never go out of business? Not if they had customers like him.

They were the only ones standing. The others half sat, half hunkered down on the students' desks. My roving glance attracted a momentary flash of recognition in their eyes. A little nod here and there. A friendly twinkle or a bored stare.

Dennis dashed off a few cryptic phrases on the blackboard. The squeak of chalk caused us all to turn our heads once more in his direction, our eyes assembling the block letters into a coherent meaning.

"This is what you need to know," he said. "Here is where you go when you complete your assignments and need new ones." He underlined a couple of the words he had written. BART – CIVIC CENTER, DALY CITY PLATFORM. "The rest of it you know. Wait for the guy in the green baseball cap. He's your contact. If he doesn't show before closing time, return the next morning."

He wrote down a string of ciphers. "Here is the number we call when we need help." Area code 415 was followed by seven digits. He underlined it as well.

"Memorize it. You might need it. Any questions?"

Nobody raised his voice. No hands were raised. There were no questions. We had all done our homework.

Dennis gave us a nod of dismissal as he erased what he had written. “Study your assignments,” he said as we rose to file out. “This will be our last meeting as a group until the job is done.”

## The Cat

"I just don't understand why the goddam cat has to be watching us all the time," he said, rolling over in bed and facing her.

"Afraid he'll pick up some of your technique?" she asked, standing at the mirror, smiling impudently down at him, running a brush through her hair.

"How could he?" he said. "The goddam cat is fixed."

"Altered," she said. "And why is it always the 'goddam' cat? 'Fritz' is his name."

"Actually, the word for it is 'neutered,'" he said. "And my father's name is 'Fritz.' I'm not gonna call some goddam cat by my father's name." He rose from the bed and walked over to the chair over which his clothes were unceremoniously draped.

"You ever call your father 'Fritz?'" she asked.

"Of course not," he said. "I called him 'Father,' if I called him anything." He stood on his left leg and thrust his right leg into his trousers.

"So there's no confusion, then," she said archly, raising her eyebrow to enunciate her point.

"Between my father and your goddam cat?" he said, tightening his belt and sitting on the bed while he put on his shoes. "Not much. At least my father doesn't lie around watching us make love."

"Maybe he'd like to," she said. "You should ask him."

"You're really weird," he said. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

"All my lovers," she said. "Only they say 'kinky.'"

"Jesus," he said, swiping his comb through his hair and inspecting himself in the mirror.

"Him too," she said.

"When I picked you up at the bar last night," he said, "I had no idea I was going to be subjected to so much brilliant repartee."

"It's pronounced 'repartée'," she said, "with an 'ay' sound on the end, not 'ee'. And it was me that picked you up, honey, in case you don't remember. Any time you get bored with my conversation, you know where the door is."

"You weren't talkin' like this last night, Babe, when you were moanin' an' groanin'. You weren't showin' me to the door then."

"That was last night," she said, "and this is now. And last night, if I remember correctly, you weren't talking like this, either. You always so cheery in the morning?"

"It's that goddam cat that set me off," he said. "I couldn't see him last night because it was dark. Now every time I look around, there he is, starin' at me."

"So don't look at him."

"The problem is, *he's* always lookin' at *me*."

"A cat can look at a king," she said, opening up the nail polish and giving herself a quick touch-up.

"I never understood what the hell that meant," he said.

"It meant that nobody could look at the king. Looking at him straight in the eye was considered an act of aggression. They always had to keep their eyes lowered. They made an exception for the cat, since they couldn't teach him that the king was more important than him."

"Bet I could teach him pretty fast."

"But you aren't going to, are you? Like I said before, lover. There's the door. The cat's guaranteed a place here. You aren't."

"Okay, okay," he said. "I'll stop grousin' about the goddam cat. When're you gonna be ready?"

"Just as soon as you are, Henry. I've got to go wee-wee first. Give me a second."

"Wee-wee?" he said, arching his eyebrows.

"You know what it means." She walked into the bathroom and sat down, leaving the door open. He could hear the tinkle-tinkle as she relieved herself.

"I just meant - I haven't heard that word since I was a kid," he called in to her.

"I can't imagine you as a kid," she called out. He heard the rush of the toilet, and suddenly she was back in the kitchen again, pulling her dress down.

"Okay," she said. "I'm ready. I just have to put my coat on. Oh, and I better feed the cat before we go."

"He gonna starve to death? We're only gonna be gone an hour or two."

"He likes his breakfast, same as you, don't you Fritz?" She ruffled the cat's fur as he wound himself around her legs.

"We're gonna be late," he said. "It's already ten thirty. Remember we were gonna meet Al and Donna at the restaurant."

"You think *they're* going to be on time? Look – my cat's more important than Al and Donna."

"Your cat's more important than anyone," he said.

"Look, honey. Why don't *you* go to breakfast with Al and Donna? I can just stay here with Fritz. At least he doesn't argue with me all the time."

"Okay by me, Babe. I'm gettin' tired of competin' with the goddam cat all the time. You gonna come, or are you gonna stay and feed the cat?"

"I think I'll stay," she said. "Remember to shut the door on your way out."



## The Corporation

After an early retirement several years ago, I finally found myself in that enviable position of having a true sufficiency of time on my hands, time to do what I wanted, time to do whatever it occurred to me to do, time to do those things that I didn't have time to do before. However, my hobbies and interests were no longer enough to keep me fully occupied, and I found myself looking for other activities to fill my occasionally empty hours.

In the past, I had only been able to drive when other working people were on the road, which meant that I was always driving in traffic. Still, there was something I liked about being behind the wheel of a car. It kept that busy part of my mind occupied so that the rest of it could go tumbling off into the vagaries and daydreams that had so long been denied me during my imprisonment in the daily job. So, on early weekday afternoons when there was less traffic, I got into the habit of taking leisurely drives away from the city, out into the suburbs and forested farmlands.

There was one particular road that appealed to me, for no special reason except that it meandered off into a kind of never-never land. Few houses, lots of brambly woods, a little bit of nowhere. I found it restful, and, every so often, in my escape from everyday reality, I discovered to my mild surprise that I had once more accidentally gotten myself onto that road. I tried to find it on the map, but it seemed not to exist, and there were no signs to help me out.

But I had learned how to get onto it, and I consciously sought it out whenever I found myself more desperate than usual to get away from civilization. I always drove the twisting twenty-seven miles to the end, where a dusty cul-de-sac served as a parking lot for a dozen cars, mostly Porches, BMWs and Mercedes. Not what you'd expect for such a humble setting.

Through a gap in the trees, a section of chain-link fence was visible, and, behind that, a huddle of large garish concrete buildings. A small sign read "Santomas Corporation," and next to it was an open gate.

I wondered what kind of corporation would choose such an isolated location for its operations. Perhaps the real estate was cheaper. It was the only consideration that came to mind, and I didn't see any reason to question it further. Nevertheless, my curiosity grew, and the day finally came when I strolled through that gate. There were no keep-out signs, no signs of any kind except for the one at the entrance. A concrete path lead through the gate to an open door in the nearest building. I took a chance and walked in.

Inside, it seemed like any other new, upscale business concern. A long, spacious corridor with a string of open doors, a small number of employees coming and going, out one door and into another, men in short-sleeved shirts and ties, no coats, women in nondescript business suits. There was an atmosphere of everyday, ordinary business. I glanced through the first couple doors as I passed. A few people intent on their jobs, looking through file folders or talking quietly on telephones. Nobody paid any attention to me. I came to a room which was devoid of people and entered it.

Shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling. They were filled, end to end, with rows of binders. I glanced at the backs of the binders. The titles seemed unenlightening. They seemed to deal with technical material of some undetermined sort. As I was

standing there, a man walked in. He gave me a pleasant nod, and seemed about to continue his task, whatever it was.

"Okay if I browse through some of these?" I asked him.

"Of course not, sir," he said. "Nothing here is classified. Please, take a seat." He nodded at the table next to me, so I chose a binder at random, laid it on the table, pulled out the nearest chair, and sat down. The man went on with whatever he was doing, then laid something on a desk and left.

I opened the binder, which had a kind of metallic cover, but otherwise just a three-holed affair, filled, as I expected, with technical reports. They were printed up like company flyers, all in date order. I glanced through the binder, randomly opening it to different places, scanning the articles. I didn't really understand much. Even though I am technically oriented, with a math-science background, and having been for several decades a computer programmer for a large chemical company, I found it hard to get the gist of what the articles were about. They seemed to have to do with an extremely complicated physical-chemical titration process. But that was the most I could glean from them. To me they were unhelpful in the way they were written, because they yielded up no insights as to the purpose of their content, filled mainly with figures and statistical reports. They were clearly written for someone who knew what the purpose was, and that purpose was never stated. No matter how much I read, I seemed to get no closer to the mysterious process that was only vaguely alluded to.

This project became an intermittent habit of mine. Although my life continued as before, with my hobbies and interests, as well as my general excursions into the countryside, every once in a while that strange compulsion came over me, and I found myself driving up that road to nowhere, ending up at the Santomas Corporation, where I walked in, chose another binder at random, and sat down to see what I could further learn about the mysterious process.

I never developed a relationship with anyone who worked there. Except that they were of both sexes, and some wore glasses while others didn't, they almost looked alike. They seemed anonymous, ciphers without personality, clones in a factory of the future. Other than a noncommittal nod now and then, they never greeted me. I never learned anyone by name, and I doubted that they knew mine either.

I sometimes indulged myself in the fantasy of being a spy, looking for secrets to pass on to an unnamed enemy of which I was the agent. But I failed to uncover any secrets. I couldn't get to the basis of what they were doing, and my curiosity remained unfulfilled. At home, I researched the mysterious corporation on the internet. I also made several trips to various libraries, both public and private. But I found no references to it, or to any projects which bore even the remotest relationship to what seemed to be described in the reports. The mystery of its purpose remained unresolved.

Although I was in no hurry, I felt vaguely apprehensive, as though I were an intruder. But why did I have that feeling? It was illogical, but I couldn't talk myself out of it on the grounds that the situation was weird. I had actually been invited to sit down and look through the binders. Nobody had questioned my presence, and the few employees who came and went always gave me a pleasant glance as they passed.

I had been doing this for about three months, perhaps every other week, driving to the end of that same road, ending up in that same large room with all the binders on the wall. One day, as I sat there, poring over a report, a man strode in. He seemed very

angry, and, to my surprise, his anger seemed directed at me. He grabbed at the top of the page of the article I was reading, and clumsily tore off the corner, crumpling it up in a fury.

"Get the hell out of here," he raged at me. I quietly acquiesced, getting up and going towards the door, but, as soon as I got into the corridor, he seized hold of me from behind, forcibly turning me in the other direction, towards an adjacent corridor, ordering me to exit in that direction. I was too surprised by his anger to object that I wanted to go out the way I had come in. I walked down this new corridor, looking for an exit, but saw no way out. Finally I stepped into the nearest office and got the attention of the clerk behind the first desk I came to. I began to explain my dilemma to him, and, as I spoke to him, I saw that he, also, was angry. Not only that, he seemed by his look to know who I was, although I had not told him my name.

"Why is someone with an advanced math degree interested in what we're doing here?" he asked in an accusatorial fashion. I realized in a flash that these people had been quietly checking up on me, that they must have figured out which car in their parking lot didn't belong to one of their employees, and discovered my identity through the license number.

"I asked if it was okay to look at your reports," I faltered. "Why didn't someone ask me who I was then? You didn't have to check up on me secretly."

"Please just leave," the man hissed at me with a glare, rising to his feet. "Get out of here before I punch you out." His voice almost sounded out of control. I turned and left quickly, wondering why everyone was so angry with me. What had I done?

## Genesis

The seven young eager faces looked up at me with mild surprise. Sean and Mike and Rick and Thomas, Steve and Ricardo and Manuel. We were sitting around the redwood table in the rear of the back yard of the next-door neighbor, who happened to be on vacation. Tall hollyhocks with big yellow flowers grew thickly against the fence, beyond which only the corner of the tall white house we had just left in such a secret hurry could be seen. It was a bright, sunny day, and we could still hear the muted sound of a rock group playing an old favorite, the only reminder of the party we had just left behind.

"Won't they wonder where we've gone?" said Steve.

"Why are we sneaking off like this?" asked Ricardo.

The others were raising similar questions. I raised my hands in gentle reproof. "If you'll just listen I'll tell you what you need to know," I said. "We've only got a small window of time before they come looking for us, and I've got to jam in as much explanation as I can."

I waited patiently for their buzz of curiosity to subside. "I know that all of you have wanted for some time to become members of the organization," I told them. "This is your big chance, and you don't have any time to make up your minds about it. It's now or never, unfortunately. You must know that the majority of them back there are all Homeland Security. They've been infiltrating our little group for at least a year now, and you're all on their computers, from your Mother's maiden name to the last time you took a crap. There's nothing they don't know about you, and they've been waiting patiently for us to make our move. It's got to be now, when they're least expecting it. In another five minutes they'll be out looking for us, every one of them with a cell phone plastered to his ear, wondering where the hell we went."

"And where will we be?" asked Thomas, his blue eyes searching my face.

"If we're lucky," I said, "we'll be a good half mile from here, in the back of a van." As I spoke, I held a tiny cell phone to my own ear.

"We're ready," I spoke into it. I slipped it back into my shirt pocket.

"What are we ready for?" said Mike.

"To get the hell out of here," I said. "You've all got about thirty seconds to make up your minds. Those of you who decide to throw in your lots with the rest of us will just have to leave your present lives behind you, and you won't have a chance to bring anything with you besides the shirts on your backs."

"What about Greg?" asked Sean. "I know for sure he'd want to go with us. And Willy. How about him?"

"They were both stuck in a heavy conversation with Peterson," I told him. "We'll just have to spirit them away on another occasion. The fact that they didn't come with us should keep them safe till then."

"You represent the organization, then," said Manuel.

"I do," I said. "We've screened you as thoroughly as all those undercover cops sitting up there pretending to be on our side, who have been tapping your phones and computers and listening in on you since you first joined. We know everything we need to know about you except whether you're going to join us or not. And there's no time left now." I glanced quickly at my watch. "It's zero hour," I told them.

“I’ve got my back pack up at the house,” complained Rick.

“Mine too,” said Sean. A chorus of similar objections piped up from the rest of them.

“Sorry,” I said. “You’ll have to leave your lives behind you. Your old identities won’t be worth much anyway. We’ll furnish you with new ones.”

There was the sound of voices calling to us from the next yard. They had already discovered our disappearance. Then I heard a quick beep from the other side of the fence behind us. “Those of you who are coming, let’s go,” I said, half turning to leave, nodding my head in the direction of the gate, glancing around at their astonished indecision.

They looked at each other as they rose from the table and hurriedly followed me, single file, out the gate to the open doors of the waiting van, concerned about their jackets and small possessions back at the house, wondering about their daily lives they were leaving behind, shocked at the sudden decision being thrust upon them.

## The Job

It was his last day of work. He wandered the hallways of the large building where he had wasted over ten thousand days of his life. As he strode along, he marveled at the sheer magnitude of the number. He had spent quite a few stolen minutes at his desk the last couple weeks, hunkered over his computer, with nobody around to watch him, arriving at that figure. It had necessitated looking up his work record with the company, a record that wasn't supposed to be available to him, but he had learned long ago how to access most of the databases in the system. There had been a number of occasions over the years when he had taken time out from something relatively important to amuse himself with a minor personal project. They wouldn't have approved. Fuck 'em, he said to himself. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. He almost had a right. He had given his life to the company. Literally.

The employee database didn't actually keep track of his days, per se. He had had to consider the years at the beginning when his vacation was only two weeks a year – not the six weeks he got now at the end of his career, and he had even taken into consideration his many days of sick leave, days when he hadn't actually been sick, but who could ever have proved it? He remembered all the times he hadn't felt like coming in to the daily grind, inventing credible lies about what he was ailing from, preferring instead to stay in bed, inventing fun stories of a life he never led. He never exceeded the days which were allotted him, but he always made sure they didn't cheat him out of even a few hours of sick leave. Sick leave he had earned. If he hadn't taken it, he would have lost it. Why should they have benefited at his expense?

He had begun calculating his days with the company just two weeks ago, right after he had opted for his early retirement. It was a private endeavor, a fitting final tribute to his many years of bilking the bastards out of a little time here and there for himself. He had even given his project a name, one he could confidently ascribe the actual working hours to. If they ever asked him what he had been doing during that time, he could almost give them an honest answer.

His little project would have been impossible in his early years with the company, when all such information was recorded on paper, locked up in steel file cabinets he could never have gotten access to. But somewhere back in the eighties they had computerized all the files, and all the paper files had been hauled away to a remote storage facility, where, after a certain period of time, they would be destroyed. His old performance evaluations from the pre-computer era were now safe from prying eyes. Only the most assiduous of investigators would go to the trouble of locating the dusty boxes those records were buried in, provided they still existed.

Nor could he have even considered carrying out such a project in those early days, when he had real managers breathing down his neck. But, over the years, as he slowly managed to improve his position in the company, he had disentangled himself, bit by bit, from any careful scrutiny from his string of bosses. He had kept a careful lookout for just the right immediate supervisors – the ones who didn't spend much time actually overseeing their staff, and, by shining up to them, pampering their petty egos, massaging their undue sense of self-importance, managed to ingratiate himself with them sufficiently to wangle a transfer to their departments.

The bosses he had left had always been glad to see him go. The fitness reports they had initially filed on him showed that. But he had spent many hours accessing those reports, subtly altering their contents, carefully removing deleterious comments, slyly inserting some faint praise here and there. Nobody had ever noticed. Nobody had ever considered the possibility of one of the rank and file ferreting out the secret passwords that guarded the sacred realm of company management. His policy was simplicity itself. He only altered old records, ones which were seldom looked at, composed by prior supervisors who had no reason to refresh their memories, or who, if they did, had little likelihood of remembering their original comments, so as to notice his alterations. After his transfers, he had gone in and changed the rest. He had almost chuckled over the damning phrases he had edited out – “late to work, no initiative, doesn’t finish projects.” The negative reports had been endless. Thank goodness the earliest paper reports of his transgressions had been hauled away, reducing his hours of labor in amending his work history with the company.

In the end, nobody knew much about what he did, let alone how well or ill he did it, nor did they bother. To everybody he was a nobody, too much a nobody to waste any gossip on, and gossip is, as everybody knows, the way one’s reputation is ultimately established. People were affable towards him, just as he was towards them. “Hello, Barney,” they said to him as he passed their offices on his daily rounds, returning his nod with a quick smile which vanished just as quickly as it appeared. He was known by everyone, a face they all knew but quickly dismissed in the hurry-scurry of the workaday world.

He always walked the hallways with a purposeful stride and a look of studied preoccupation, as if he were concentrating on something of momentous importance to the business of the company. Nobody had the least inkling that he wasn’t going anywhere, or that he hadn’t the least thought in his head. They clearly assumed he was performing an important errand of some sort, and since he had no real confidants or cohorts at the office, let alone actual friends, his secret was safe. The moment anyone showed any interest in him, he found ways to discourage that interest. He never antagonized anyone. His way was to bore people to death. Find a subject they disliked and run it into the ground. Although it sometimes bored him as well, he had, over the years, developed this process into an art form, and he took a keen delight in the subtler aspects of driving others to the brink of mindlessness. He had even developed his own private term for this stratagem, which he had taken care never to divulge to anyone else – blankmanship.

He had had to pay for his cushy little job. No real promotions, no important tasks, no recognition from anyone. A dead-end position, one that nobody else wanted. It had taken real art to find it. The limitations of his modest retirement package did not cost him any loss of sleep. His salary over the years had been more than adequate, and he had salted it away in blue chip accounts. The seeds he had carefully nurtured in the dark closet of self-denial and personal sacrifice would now be allowed to blossom into the fulfillment of a long-awaited bright tomorrow. When he retired it would be in class. Cruise ships to exotic foreign ports. Nothing but the best hotels. Room service when it suited him. He almost drooled over his prospects.

But he had paid for them. He had always stayed home during his vacations, preferring to invest his money in his future. Any funds he squandered now would rob him of a lot more bucks a few years down the road. He had lied to others about what he

had done for his many vacations, having learned long ago never to divulge the truth to anyone. He told everyone who bothered to ask that he spent his vacations at a lodge in Moosejaw, having carefully selected that site in order to explain the lack of a tan he would have acquired in a sunnier clime like Florida or Hawaii. On the few occasions he had accidentally encountered anyone in town when he was supposed to be off in the wilds of Canada, he had simply told them he had been obliged to cancel his vacation on account of illness.

So today was his final day. His incarceration in this vast building through whose endless corridors he had spent so many years wandering would soon come to an end. Just a month ago he had unearthed from one of the top secret files a memo to the effect that the building was scheduled to be torn down, a fact that had stimulated his choice of early retirement. He would be leaving just in the nick of time. Everybody who wanted to keep his job would be transferred to Fresno. Everybody but him.

He liked the idea that the building would cease to exist. It would be the last record of the eighty thousand plus hours he had wasted in it. After his retirement, his employment records would be purged from the management database, written off on magnetic tape and sent to archives, where, after three years, they would be erased and recycled. His victory would then be complete.



## The Gang's All Here (or There)

So there we were, seven of us jammed into Albert's big old Mercedes, all going home from the same party. The only question remaining was – with whom? Leslie was the star. She was the star of any evening. She could have had it with any one of us. Me, Albert, Tom, Walter, even Sylvia, despite the fact that Sylvia was about as heterosexual as they came. Leslie just had that ability to seem fascinating to anyone. Of the group, only Jane, plain old Walter's Jane, wouldn't have been interested. And Albert. He was Sylvia's, to have and to hold forever. Dull Albert, a fine, pleasant person. I never understood quite what Sylvia *saw* in him. I only knew that Sylvia wanted to live with Albert, she *liked* living with Albert, living with his small fortune, manipulating him into doing whatever she wanted to do at whatever moment. And she knew that Albert was there for her forever, good old staunch dependable Albert, but she couldn't cheat on him in front of his very eyes, although she had come close to it with me one night. I had made it so many times with Sylvia, so many stolen moments here and there, when Albert hadn't been around. I knew she wanted me, but I knew it had to be surreptitious with her, a fling once in a while, when she wasn't cheating on Albert with somebody else.

But Leslie was something else. Leslie could charm the wool off a sheep. I wanted Leslie, but it all depended on whether Leslie wanted *me* that evening. And if I couldn't have Leslie, I would gladly have settled for Sylvia. I had even made it with Jane once, but I couldn't consider it with Walter right there. And, of course, Walter, charmed as he was with Leslie, couldn't consider making it with her with his wife Jane right there at his side.

Tom was the fly in the ointment. Tom was primarily gay, but he also had a predilection for women who were willing to pet and pamper him. It was clear that Leslie wanted to make it with Tom that evening, but Tom was interested in Steve, who wasn't there with us, but who was staying with Walter and Jane for a week while he was on the set of a movie he was making nearby, and Tom probably had it in his mind to ask Walter and Jane if he couldn't overnight it with *them*, with the prospects therefore of making it with Steve.

But Leslie knew about Steve, and she didn't like him one bit, so she didn't want Tom seeing Steve. Perhaps that was some of the motivation behind her wanting Tom to stay with *her* that evening. Leslie had some strange motivations. I was hoping that Tom would ask to stay with Walter and Jane, so I could end up with Leslie. My car was parked at Walter and Jane's, so I could offer to give Leslie a ride, and then maybe talk her into going home with *me*.

But Tom had been sort of invited already to stay with Leslie, so if he didn't pursue his overtures with Walter and Jane to stay with them, Leslie would probably ask me to give Tom and her a ride to her place. In that case, I was considering saying I was too tipsy to drive, and ask Albert and Sylvia to sleep at *their* place, in hopes that Albert might drop off to sleep early, leaving Sylvia alone to come sneaking into *my* borrowed bed. If I did that, Leslie would probably ask me to loan her *my* car when we got to Walter and Jane's, so *Tom* could drive her home.

But then Leslie went into one of her diatribes about Steve, about what a whore he was, and why Tom shouldn't even *consider* making it with Steve, which made it impossible for Tom to push Walter and Jane into letting him stay with them, because

Walter and Jane were far too prim and proper to allow Tom to stay at their place just so he could make overtures to Steve, who was their guest, so Tom ended up opting to stay with Leslie, which made it impossible for me to do so, and by that time Albert had talked about wanting to stay up for a while when he got home so he could watch the football game he had been taping while he was at the party, so I knew I couldn't hope for him to retire early enough for me to make it with Sylvia, so there wasn't any point in my asking Albert and Sylvia to stay with them, so when we got to Walter and Jane's, Albert dropped Tom and Leslie off with me so I could drive *them* home, which left me odd man out. It was a real bummer.

## The Lions

The city has been abandoned by all those in authority, and a state of general lawlessness prevails, with widespread looting, pillaging, and the ransacking of stores and food depots. Into this void the lions have entered, padding imperiously through the streets, chasing and eating all those who run from them. We hide from the beasts, seeking the attics and garrets furthest removed from the lower levels, but they have no trouble in finding us. They are not always menacing, seeming on occasion to want nothing but our company and admiration.

For some reason, the lions respect my mother, perhaps because she treats them with kindness and dignity. She admits to me that she distrusts and fears them as much as anyone, but she has discovered that by maintaining a calm in their presence, stroking them and reproving them mildly when they take too great an interest in those of our group who avoid their gaze, they seem to accede to her entreaties, and do not threaten us.

So we run and hide, breaking into the upper stories of the largest and tallest houses, seeking food and sanctuary. My mother is no more desirous than the rest of us in keeping company with the big cats, but they seem to seek her out, as if for her counsel and advice, following her scent as she moves from one place to another with the rest of us. She cautions me to still my fear of them and conceal my anxieties, but I cannot overcome my cowardice, and rush in panic at the least sign of their presence, seeking, like the others, the security of places beyond the range of their claws and teeth.

We encounter other groups who have found temporary refuge in the houses and apartments of absent owners, living off the meager stores of food and provisions left behind. There is no distrust between the groups on the move and those who have discovered safe haven from the roving lions, food and shelter being shared with generosity and good will.

But the lions are ubiquitous and omnipresent, appearing suddenly out of nowhere, ferreting out our secret places, sending us in mad scrambles for higher ground.

There seems to be no end to this chaos and fear. The lions have no cause to leave. They have taken over.

## The Old Man

He all of a sudden just appeared one day, in the doorway of the shop below, Suey Kee's Chinese Kitchen. Jerry spotted him when he got to the bottom of the stairs on his way to breakfast at Jacob's Cafe. The old man was just standing there, looking vaguely in front of him, not paying much attention to the passersby, holding his cap out for spare change, not seeming to care much whether anyone dropped any coins into it. It was one of those Scottish caps, the sort with a narrow brim, made out of suit material, mottled gray in color. The word 'tam o' shanter' came to Jerry's mind, but he wasn't sure. He dimly reminded Jerry of his father, *his* old man, who had shuffled off this mortal coil a year before on January, but it was only a passing resemblance. Jerry didn't pay the old man any attention. He was just another spare-changer, and the streets were full of them nowadays. Jerry hurried on to his morning meal.

In the days that followed, Jerry saw the old man fairly often, always standing in front of Suey Kee's. After the restaurant opened at ten, the old man relocated to the street curb, apparently not wanting to block the entrance when it was open for business. Jerry found that satisfactory. He didn't particularly like street people, and he never gave any money to them, but as long as they didn't get in the way, he didn't much care what they did. He even got into the habit of nodding at the old man as he passed him each morning. Actually, he *did* sort of remind Jerry of his father, except that he wasn't as grim-looking.

After a few mornings of nodding at the old man, the old man started nodding back, and once in a while Jerry even said hello to him. The lackluster eyes of the old street beggar seemed to come to life when Jerry greeted him. They had a friendly look to them, the look of somebody who passed no judgments on the world, but only wanted to get along, to make it from one day to the next. Jerry wished his father had had only a tiny bit of this old man's friendliness. His father had been a real pill, with never a kind word for Jerry, never a word of greeting in the mornings when they had sat down for their usual breakfast of oatmeal and boiled eggs. Never anything more than a peremptory grunt when he had sat down opposite Jerry. They had never seen eye to eye on anything. Jerry was glad his father was dead and gone.

One day Jerry got into a conversation with the old spare-changer. It wasn't much of a conversation, but Jerry didn't really care. After Jerry had given him a nod and continued on down the street, he couldn't even remember what they had talked about. Still, it modified the daily routine somewhat, and, after that, he and the old man exchanged a few words each morning when Jerry emerged onto the street below. It was just another random link forged in the chain of events that made up Jerry's day.

There had been a time when Jerry had had a job. That had been before his father had passed away and left him the building. The rent from Suey Kee's restaurant paid the taxes on the building and gave Jerry enough income to retire from his job and go out to restaurants for meals instead of fixing them upstairs in his tiny kitchen. Friends, of which Jerry had few, told him how lucky he had been to inherit the building from his father.

Jerry held his tongue at such moments, inwardly irritated at the fact that his sister, Jeannie, had gotten all the stocks and bonds that their mother had so carefully invested in over the years from both her position as office manager and from her husband's job managing an auto repair shop. Jerry was also irritated that it had been him who had been

given the task of looking after his father for so many years after his mother died of cancer, him who had put up with all the rudeness and ill-will that his father had borne him, him who had kept his hatred of his father under wraps all those years, taking his father to the doctor for checkups, to the clinic for tests, looking after the old fart during his last ten years of life, listening patiently to all the instructions his sister had given him every week over the phone relating to his care.

Jeannie had seldom visited, preferring to spend her weekends with her husband, the wealthy owner of a car dealership in Santa Rosa. She had had no need of the cool million in investment accounts she had inherited, and she had never done anything to merit them. It had been Jerry who had had to stick it out with the irascible old man, who had criticized him about everything he did, from how he prepared the oatmeal to how he dressed for work every morning.

"Look, Mike," he had so often said to his father, "nobody gives a shit about how I dress. I never deal with the public. I'm chained to a stupid desk all day long, and all I do is answer the goddam phone. If my boss starts to complain, maybe then I'll update my goddam wardrobe."

Jerry had always called his father by his first name, every since he could remember. He had no idea why this had been so. It just was. He had called his mother 'mom,' but his father had always been 'Mike.' Jerry figured he couldn't have made this choice on his own. Probably his father didn't like being called 'father' or 'dad,' because he had never felt like one. Even his sister Jeannie had had to put up with their father's coldness and lack of love. All her life she had struggled to win his affection, but it had been like squeezing blood from a turnip. Maybe that was why she had married so early, just to get away from a loveless father.

Their mother, on the other hand, had always tried to make up for her husband's cold heart. "He's just an old bear," she would say. "He doesn't like all that lovey-dovey stuff, but underneath he really cares a lot." She had tried on so many occasions to alter her children's cool assessment of their father, but it had never worked.

One day Jerry asked the old street mendicant why he so patiently stood there collecting coins in his cap when he could be living on welfare.

"I *am* on welfare," said the spare-changer. "S.S.I. But I got tired of sitting around in my room all day with nothing to do."

"*This* is doing something?" asked Jerry."

"Well," said the old man, "at least I get to meet people. Except they never talk to me. Except for you, that is. And I get a little extra money to make it on every month."

"You get much, just standing here?" said Jerry.

"More than you might think," said the old man.

"Like?" asked Jerry.

"Oh, like maybe twenty dollars on a good day. That may not sound like much, but when you're living on nine hundred dollars a month . . ."

Jerry did some rapid calculations in his head. "That's another six hundred a month, isn't it?"

"It's not twenty dollars every day. Yesterday I only got five. The day before that it was only three."

"But you get to meet people," Jerry said with a slight smile.

"So far," said the old man, "you're the only one who actually talks to me."

"That bad, huh?"

"It's still better than sitting around in that rooming house down on Bryant. Ninth Avenue's more interesting. Things are happening here. Folks who pass by seem to have some kind of purpose. Where I live, nobody has a purpose. It's pretty grim."

"Maybe you got a point," said Jerry. "Well, I gotta be shoving on. Good talking to you."

A few days later they had another conversation.

"Doesn't it get kinda boring," asked Jerry, "just watching people go by? Isn't there a television set where you live? Maybe in some kind of common room?"

"There is," admitted the old man. "But the other folks there always have it turned to something boring. I'd rather watch people passing by than stupid quiz shows and movies interrupted by ads every five minutes."

"I get cable," said Jerry. "You wanna come up and watch it with me some time?"

The old man's face suddenly looked animated. "You mean it?" he asked.

"Sure," said Jerry. "I got nothing else to do myself, a lotta days. I wouldn't mind a little company now and then."

"Just let me know when it might be all right," said the old man.

"What's your name, by the way?" said Jerry.

"Mike," said the old man.

"No shit," said Jerry. "My father's name was Mike. Small world. Look, I'm on my way to breakfast, but I'll be back in about an hour. You still gonna still be around then?"

"I'm not going anywhere," said the old man.

"See you in an hour, then," said Jerry.

"Okay," said Mike.

So that was how this new old Mike started coming up to watch movies every morning with Jerry. He seemed to like the films that Jerry watched on cablevision, and he didn't talk much, which Jerry greatly appreciated. The previous old Mike, Jerry's now-deceased father, had constantly interrupted the movies they watched with snide comments on how stupid they were, and how lousy the actors were, and Jerry had gotten really fed up with it, because it broke his concentration. Now, every morning after breakfast, Jerry would give this new Mike a nod when he returned home, and the old man would troop up the stairs after him, and sit and watch movies with him. Then, when the time came for Jerry to go out for lunch, the old man would return to the street, and the process would be repeated all over again the following morning. It got to be a regular ritual.

Then, one day, while they were waiting for the next movie to start, Jerry asked the old man how much rent he paid in the rooming house where he lived.

"Three hundred dollars a month," said Mike.

"I got a spare room," said Jerry. "I could let you have it for a hundred."

"Really?" said Mike. "That'd be great."

"Then you wouldn't have to spare-change all the time," said Jerry.

"I wouldn't have to spare-change at all," said Mike. "You sure it wouldn't be a problem?"

"No problem," said Jerry. "You can have the small bedroom. It used to be my father's, before he died."

"That's extremely generous of you," said Mike.

“Not really,” said Jerry. “You’re easy to have around, and I could use a little company.”

So that was how Mike came to live with Jerry. He brought a suitcase with him on the day he moved in. He didn’t have much in the way of belongings. He hung his few clothes up in the closet next to a couple of old suits that had belonged to Jerry’s father, and Jerry told him he could wear the suits if they fit. Jerry even stopped going out for breakfast every morning. He had mainly gone out because it was so boring being at home alone all the time. He started fixing oatmeal and boiled eggs again, just as he had when his father had been alive. The new Mike seemed extremely happy with his new circumstances, and told Jerry so.

“No skin off my face,” said Jerry. “Actually, I’m saving quite a bit of dough, now that I’m not going out to Jacob’s every morning.”

“I wish you’d let me pay for my half of breakfast,” said Mike. “It doesn’t seem quite fair.”

“Forget it,” said Jerry.

So Mike forgot it. Jerry began sharing his dinners with the old man, as well. The new Mike was much more appreciative of Jerry’s cooking than the old Mike had been. He paid Jerry a lot of compliments on his culinary concoctions. Jerry enjoyed the pleasantness of everyday life with Mike a lot more than the years his father had so grimly dominated Jerry’s life.

“I hope I’m not getting in the way of your bringing women home,” Mike said one night at dinner.

“I’ve never been much of a lady’s man,” Jerry responded. “My old man – my father, that is – always complained whenever I had a guest overnight. Now I’m too old to go out looking for pick-ups all the time. If I wanted a regular woman, I’d have to marry her or something, and I wouldn’t want some goddam woman around all the time bossing me and running my life. I lived my whole life with my folks and they bossed me plenty as it was, and now it’s a little late to change things. I bring a lady home from the bar now and then, but it’s usually late at night and she’s usually gone the next morning.”

“Just let me know whenever you want me to disappear for a few hours,” said Mike.

“Okay,” said Jerry. “We’ll just play it by ear.”

Once in a while, Jerry *did* bring a woman home, and then he usually treated her to breakfast at the local cafe the next morning. At those times, Mike would wait until Jerry and his lady friend had left before he emerged from his room, and then he would fix oatmeal and boiled eggs by himself,. Things worked out smoothly.

Jerry started giving the new Mike a lot of the clothes and things that had used to belong to the old Mike. The fit wasn’t perfect, but the new Mike didn’t complain. It gave Jerry a laugh to see him wearing a hat or an old coat that had used to belong to his father, but he kept the laugh to himself. It gave Jerry considerable amusement to imagine how his father would scowl if he could sit around in some ghostly kind of way seeing his chair being sat on or his bed being slept on or his television being watched by a total stranger. For Jerry, it was a way of getting even with the old asshole, a kind of retribution. He thought of all those years of having to sit and listen to his father griping about this or that. The bad memories weren’t going to be wiped away in a day, a week, a year, maybe not ever, but, in the meantime, Jerry was going to do his level best to make a start.

"I think it's time for me to get hold of some cheap cleaning lady to come in here and straighten things up a little" he told the new Mike. "Get rid of all the old ghosts and cobwebs. What I'd *really* like to do," said Jerry, "would be to give this whole goddam place a new paint job. Trouble is, I can't afford it."

"Forgive me for asking," said Mike, "but don't you own this building free and clear?"

"Well, not exactly," said Jerry. "There's still a sizeable mortgage on it."

"How come?" said Mike.

"Well, my folks didn't wanna pay it off, because it always gave 'em a good tax writeoff. So they put all their earnings into their investment accounts, instead."

"I see," said Mike.

"But then," continued Jerry, "my sister got all the money. An' I got the house. So there it is."

"Couldn't you raise the rent on the restaurant?"

"Suey Kee couldn't afford it. He just makes ends meet as it is. Suey Kee's a good guy. He's had the restaurant downstairs for twenty years now, an' he's always paid his rent on time. If I forced him out, I'd be puttin' his whole family out of work, an' if he hadda move somewhere else, it'd take him quite a while before he built up his business again. On top of all that, if I put the place up for rent, It'd take time to find somebody new, because they'd hafta bring the restaurant up to code. Since I live off the rent, that'd be kinda tough on me."

"I could help you paint this place," said Mike.

"Yeah?" said Jerry.

"I was a painter for years," said Mike. "Till I fell off a ladder. Also, I can't lift my arm over my head anymore."

"How come you didn't get disability?"

"I was drunk at the time. And it wasn't a regular job. I was getting paid under the table. Which is where I ended up after I fell off the ladder."

"I see," said Jerry, not getting Mike's little joke.

"But *you* could get all the high places," said Mike. "Nowadays with a roller you can knock off ceilings in no time. I could take care of all the detail work. I'm kind of slow, but who's in a hurry? What color were you thinking of?"

"Maybe two-tone," said Jerry. "I kinda favor white with blue trim."

"I'd be really handy there," said Mike. "I'm still a steady hand with trim. It takes a lot of experience to paint a straight line, and if you don't keep your lines straight it can look pretty awful."

Mike said he'd get in touch with some wholesale paint dealers he knew who were still in the business, dealers the man-in-street couldn't buy from.

"Won't they know you're not workin' any more?" asked Jerry.

"They won't care," said Mike. "They're old friends of mine. I'll just have 'em put in my old contractor's license number on their computer. Nobody'll check on it. The state might notice that it's lapsed, but it's too much trouble for them to do anything about it. It might be better to pay in cash, though. Is that a problem?"

"No problem at all," said Jerry.

Jerry didn't have a car, so he borrowed a truck from a guy he knew, and they went down and picked up the paint. They got acrylic, because, as Mike pointed out, it was a



lot easier to clean up afterwards. They also got some trisodium phosphate, which Mike said was the best thing for getting all the old grease and grime off first. The entire bill came to only \$250, including brushes.

It took them a month to repaint the old flat, but, as Mike pointed out, “who’s in a hurry? We’ll just do one room at a time. Move what we can out of the room into the next room, put a drop cloth over what’s left behind, wash down the walls and ceilings, do the painting, then move the furniture back in when we’re through. We can leave the kitchen till last.”

Jerry was pleased with the way the old man took charge. He really knew what he was doing. He told Jerry what had to be done, and Jerry did it, Mike helping where he could. After clearing out the room and cleaning the entire surface with the trisodium phosphate, Jerry started with the ceiling and worked his way down. It was the most physical work Jerry had done in years, but, following Mike’s suggestion, they didn’t bother hurrying. They did the same thing with the painting. When they got tired, they put the brushes in some water, stuck the lids back on the paint cans, took off their paint clothes, washed the paint off their hands and arms, then went into the front room and watched TV for an hour or two. They only thing they took care to do was to finish whatever wall they were working on.

When they finally got around to doing the kitchen, Jerry treated the two of them to breakfast at Jacob’s Cafe for two mornings.

At last the job was done, and the two of them wandered around the flat, surveying their work with approval.

“The only problem is,” said Jerry, “now the furniture looks awful grungy.”

But Mike also knew something about wholesale furniture dealers, and a couple weeks later a big truck arrived with a new sofa and chair for the front room, a queen-size bed for Jerry, a single for Mike, and a new table with four chairs for the kitchen, all for only \$795, including delivery. They hired some starving students with a truck to haul the old stuff to the dump, which cost another \$65.

The renovated flat looked stunning. They rented a floor polisher, and Mike got the name of an illegal contractor who was willing for a low price to put new linoleum in the kitchen and bathroom. That cost another \$400.

“This place looks pretty empty now,” said Jerry. “Maybe I oughta put some bullfighting posters on the walls. What d’you think?”

“That’s outside the area of my expertise,” said Mike. “You’ll need to find somebody else to advise you about that.”

“I’m not too particular,” said Jerry. “I’ll ask around.”

The next overnight guest that Jerry brought home turned out to be quite enchanted with the results of his redecorating efforts.

“Blue, blue,” crooned his latest lady for the night, as she made a quick tour of Jerry’s flat. “My favorite color,” she said approvingly. “Blue and white. But your walls are so bare, and you need some plants to bring some freshness into this place.”

Jerry’s guest was herself a breath of freshness. She was short and plump, but she was also full of energy. Jerry was quite taken with her. He liked her vivacity and spirit, although he was more interested at the moment in testing those qualities in the context of his new, queen-sized bed.

The next morning, his guest refused the offer of breakfast at a local restaurant.

"Why eat out when you've got plenty right here," she said as she glanced over his kitchen shelves. She opened his refrigerator and surveyed its contents.

"Tomatoes, cheese, eggs, bacon. What more do you need? Restaurants use too much grease anyway. Let me fix breakfast. I really like to cook. Sit," she said to Jerry, and started pulling things out of the refrigerator.

"I think I'll go down and see if the newspaper guy has delivered the paper," he said. Mike heard Jerry's departing footsteps, followed by the slam of the front door, and assumed that Jerry and his guest had left, so he emerged from his room only to discover a new cook in the kitchen. When Jerry returned with his newspaper, he found his new lady friend having an amicable discussion with Mike, while she broke eggs into a pan and grated some old cheddar on top of them.

"Mike and I seem to have a lot in common," she told Jerry as he joined the two of them.

"Oh?" said Jerry.

"Mike used to be in the painting business and I'm an interior decorator," she said.

"You are?" said Jerry.

"Letitia says she's going to decorate the place for us," said Mike.

"Great," said Jerry.

Over the ensuing weeks, his new conquest went from being a temporary guest to a regular ornament, not only in his bed but in the daily routine she quickly established. Rapidly, his flat went from being the recluse of two bachelors to the semblance of a real home. The morning ritual of oatmeal and boiled eggs was expanded to include Belgian waffles and crab omelets, the nightly regimen of hamburgers and fried potatoes supplanted by home-made lentil soups, shrimp salads, curried vegetables, and poached salmon. Jerry had never eaten so well, nor so healthfully. Even Mike lost some of the gauntness in his frame, and his face took on a rosier hue. The walls of their apartment now included white-framed prints of Van Gogh's *Café de la Nuit*, Picasso's *Poor People on the Seashore*, Gaughin's *Two Tahitian Women*, and a seascape by Frederic Judd Waugh, their blue hues blending beautifully with the blue-and-white motif that Jerry had established. There was even a Manolete bullfight poster on the inside of the bedroom door to assuage Jerry's manly proclivities. The green tones of indoor plants provided a counterpoint to the otherwise ubiquitous blue.

It was no surprise that after three months of his new-found happiness, Jerry decided to make the new routine a permanent one, and the Sunday arrived when Letitia's belongings made their way from her small apartment at Third and Hugo to Jerry's flat. A blue teddy bear now graced their connubial bed, and blue pillows adorned the blue sofa.

The following summer, Letitia and Jerry got married in an outdoor ceremony at the Shakespeare Grove in Golden Gate Park. Mike served as Jerry's best man, and all of Suey Kee's seven children were in attendance. The guests at the reception which took place afterwards in Suey Kee's restaurant included many of Jerry's bar friends, as well as Jerry's sister Jeannie and her husband Ralph from Santa Rosa.

"Who're the old geezer and the fat lady?" Jeannie whispered to Ralph when they arrived late at the Grove, but her question was soon answered in the ceremony which followed. They left the reception early, Jeannie not caring much for Chinese food. Jerry was not too unhappy at witnessing their hasty departure.

“Who just left?” asked the happy bride of her new husband, turning around just in time to see the door close.

“Nobody important,” said Jerry. “Let me try another of those crab won tons.”

## The Performance

A man buys a ticket to a performance, where guards stand at the entrance and a warning is posted for absolute silence within. He enters, and, as soon as he is seated, notices that everyone around him is paying rapt attention, but to what? Absolute silence reigns. Whenever he looks urgently around to ask what it is all about, there is an usher gesticulating at him in sign language to hold his tongue. Eventually he is forcibly ejected by two guards and an usher.

Outside, he lurks in a doorway not far from the theater, waiting for the end of the performance and the patrons to leave, so that he may attempt to ask them what the point of it was. In his idle minutes, he wonders about his state of mind, puzzled as to why he really cares so much about a mere performance. At the same time, he is becoming more and more overwhelmed by his curiosity about it. He is almost willing to go back and purchase a second ticket, but he realizes the futility of it, the likelihood of being recognized and refused readmittance, or worse yet, getting past the ticket seller and *then* being recognized and ejected even more forcefully, all the while under the contemptuous gaze of the irritated audience. He wonders more and more what the performance could possibly have been about, and why everyone was willing to sit in such a strange, self-enforced silence, listening to what seemed like nothing.

He keeps an eye on his watch, estimating when the performance is likely to be over. Finally the front doors are flung open and the crowd starts to spill out. The patrons appear to be in a hurry to leave, and, when he tries to catch their eyes, avoid him, his futile attempts to engage them in conversation being met with complete failure. They seem to regard him as a psycho, or as a street beggar looking for a handout. He becomes more and more agitated.

Suddenly, a police car pulls over to the curb and two policemen get out quickly, walking over to the doorway in which he is standing. They tell him he is becoming a public nuisance and ask him to move along. He argues with them, trying to explain why it is important for him to find out what the performance was about, but they appear not to listen. They tell him to leave, and, when he continues to persist, they handcuff him, put him into the back of the police car, and take him off to jail.

While he is being processed at the city jail, the desk sergeant refuses to listen to him, and a phone call to an attorney is not permitted. He is placed in a stone cell by himself on a hard, narrow, uncomfortable bed. At first he tosses and turns and cannot sleep. Finally, he falls into a strange dream, in which he imagines himself as going to a fantastic performance, at the entrance to which there are warnings posted for everyone to be silent. He buys a ticket and enters.

## A Day at a Time

"Mr. Arnold, why don't you go in and join the others?"

The old man just nodded at her. "Negro," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Arnold. I'm a negro. Only nowadays we say African American. Can you say that? African American?"

He nodded at her again. A faint breeze came through the half-open window. It felt good to him. He sat back in the chair, feeling the breeze and watching the woman making the bed. His bed, he thought. It was his bed.

"Why don't you go join the others?" she asked again. He nodded his head, making it bob up and down. Then he moved it sideways. The woman looked at him suspiciously.

"Mr. Arnold, if you don't behave yourself," she said, "I'm going to have to tell your brother."

"Brother," he said slowly back at her, savoring the syllables. "Brother," he said again.

"Your brother is real good to you, Mr. Arnold. Comes to see you once every week."

He got up slowly from his chair. He felt like doing something, but he didn't know what.

"That's good, Mr. Arnold. Why don't you go join the others?" she said.

He turned and walked slowly down the hallway. He could hear the sound of voices singing. The sound grew louder as he neared the room beyond. He could see them standing, a few sitting, some holding onto walkers. They were all singing. The man on the small stage in front was playing a guitar and singing into a microphone.

"The bells are ringing. For me and my gal," the man sang. "Come on folks, let's all join in. The bells are ringing . . ."

He walked slowly around the group, heading toward the corridor, but not too fast. He vaguely remembered having gotten as far as this before, but then they had taken him back to his room. He kept on going, and somehow this time nobody stopped him. He heard the voices becoming dimmer as he kept walking.

There was a door at the end, and it was open. He continued on through it, out into the sunlight. There was more of a breeze out here and it felt good on his face. He kept moving, heading down the driveway toward the parked cars beyond. A couple men wearing orange jumpsuits were working on some kind of equipment. Nobody seemed to pay any attention to him, so he just kept on walking. It felt good to walk.

He didn't know how long he had been moving down the sidewalk, but he was getting tired and needed to rest. He thought maybe he should go back to his room, but he couldn't remember where it was. He looked at the houses as he passed them, thinking that they all looked so familiar. He wondered if he had ever been in any of them, but he couldn't remember. Maybe one of these houses belonged to him. He looked carefully at them as he passed, but he couldn't be sure. Perhaps he should go into one of them, see what it was like inside, see if it looked like his house. He really wanted to lie down for a while. He was getting tired.

The house was white and stucco, and there was a sign in the front yard. He tried to read it, but he couldn't make any sense out of it. He went to the front door and tried to open it, but it was locked. He tried to find a key in his pocket, a key that might open the front door, but his pocket was empty except for a penny. He walked around the side of the house, thinking there might be another door.

The backyard brought back a flood of memories. He imagined his little sister playing on the swing, back and forth, back and forth. He could almost see her face. But the swing was empty. Tears welled up in the corners of his eyes.

The basement was empty, but a flight of stairs took him up to the kitchen. This door was open as well, and he stepped into the dim room. He could make out the shapes of the stove and the kitchen table. It was beginning to get dark, and he continued on through the house, looking for his bed.

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When he awoke, the light outside was gray, and he had to feel his way through the house to find the toilet. He sat down rather than stood. Nurse would be angry with him if he tried to pee while he was standing. He listened to the tinkle of his peeing in the empty house. He was shivering by the time he got back to his bed. He wondered why there weren't any blankets on top of it.

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The next time he woke up, it was bright morning. He rose from the empty mattress and stepped over to the window. There were no curtains over it and he could see the houses across the street. A man was out in front of one of them, washing his car. It looked like a nice day. He wondered what he should do, where he should go. Just as long as nurse didn't find him. She would make him go and sit with the others in the common room and watch TV. He didn't like TV, because he couldn't understand what it was all about. And he had to be quiet, because the other people always wanted to listen to it.

He finally got tired of waiting for nurse to come in and tell him he could go to breakfast, so he made his way through the empty rooms, looking for the kitchen. He wondered why the place was so empty, just a bed and a kitchen table. He listened to the squeak of the cupboards as he opened them, one by one, searching for something that might be good to eat. Dusty cups and saucers sat in stacks. A few faded boxes stood in the corners. He tried to read their titles, but he couldn't make them out. He grabbed one, and tore open the plastic bag inside, but it was filled with hard little lumps of encrusted cereal shapes. He dropped the box on the sink counter in disgust. He went back to his bedroom and lay down again, hoping that something would come to him.

He grew tired of lying on the mattress, looking out at the bright day, and feeling more and more hungry. He thought several times of calling for the nurse, but he held himself back. Every time he thought about the nurse, he got angry all over again. He looked down at himself. He had taken all his clothes off except for his underclothes and socks. Why weren't there any blankets on his bed? He decided to look for his clothes, but he had forgotten what they looked like.

He found some clothes hanging in the back of one of the closets. The pants were too big around the middle for him, but there was a belt in them, and he was able to pull it

tightly around his waist. He also remembered to zip his fly. He didn't want to take a chance on nurse getting mad at him. The shirt was too big, but he just tucked it into his pants. It took a long time to manage all the buttons, and he had to lie on the bed and rest in between, but he finally got them all through the holes. He kept forgetting why he was trying to button all those buttons, but he also kept remembering that he was hungry, and he went out to the kitchen a few more times, but there wasn't any food there, so he decided to go out to a store and buy something to eat.

"I'm going to the store and get something to eat," he said to himself as he pounded down the pavement. "I'm going to the store and get something," he said. He liked the feel of the bedroom slippers. They were much more comfortable than his regular slippers. He kept glancing around as he marched, keeping an eye out for a . . . A what? "A food store," he remembered proudly. "A food store where I can buy some food."

A group of children were playing at the corner. They were laughing and squealing at each other. They looked up briefly as he approached.

"A food store," he said to them with an empty smile. "Do you know where I can buy a food store?"

The children were silent now. They just stared at him. He looked away from them, frowning momentarily, then continued his way down the street. "A food store," he said to himself, striding along. "Where I can buy some . . . food." He was feeling somewhat light-headed now, almost in a cheerful state.

The huge store with the big S on top of it rose up in front of him. Cars honked at him as he stood there in the middle of the crowded parking lot, looking curiously around. Why was he here?

"Get out of the way, you creep!" one of the drivers yelled at him. He looked at the driver in surprise, not understanding what he was saying. Then he realized he was blocking traffic, but he wasn't sure which direction to move in. He decided to walk towards the store. The doors swung open when he reached them, and suddenly he was inside.

"I'm hungry," he said to himself. "It's lucky I'm in the right place." But the piles of food around him seemed strangely unappetizing as he wandered vaguely through aisle after aisle, the other customers streaming around him. He saw stacks and stacks of cans and boxes, but the more he saw, the more anxious he felt. He needed to come to a decision, but his feet kept carrying him along.

Finally he saw something he wanted. A pile of candy bars stood neatly stacked at the end of one of the many counters that separated the aisles. The name would not come to him but he recognized the familiar blue-and-brown wrapper, and he grabbed one as he passed. It was a relief to find something he really craved, and he wanted to leave as soon as possible. He envisioned how wonderful the candy bar would taste.

The lineup of shopping carts made him feel nervous. He felt strange, standing between people with carts. He wondered if he should have a cart. He gripped his candy bar in his hand, imagining it lying all by itself in the middle of a cart.

"Yes sir?" said the cashier, looking at him. He realized suddenly that the line in front of him had disappeared. He brandished the candy bar at her, hoping she would understand that it was his purchase. He wondered again if he should have a cart.

“You’ll have to give it to me, sir,” she said, “so I can ring it up. He relinquished it fearfully, not trusting her to return it to him. He watched her as she rang it up and put it in a bag, all by itself.

“That’ll be sixty five cents, sir.”

He reached frantically through his pockets, but they were empty. He remembered that his penny should be in his right pocket, but there was no penny. He wondered how much a penny was worth.

“I’ll just keep it here for you, sir, and you can come back and get it whenever you like,” she told him. He looked worriedly at her. She wasn’t going to give him back his candy bar.

“I’ll bring my penny tomorrow,” he told her suddenly, and grabbed the bag from her before she could say anything. He was pleased with himself how fast he had done it, but she was starting to look at him the way nurse always did when she was mad at him, so he turned and ran, bumping into other customers, trying to find the way out. He finally spied the exit, down at the other end, and he panted his way to it, hearing with relief the sound of the automatic doors shutting behind him. It was quieter outside.

As he hurried through the parking lot, he shot a glance behind him, but nobody was running after him. Nobody. He slowed his pace to a normal walk, still breathing hard. When he finally caught his breath, he ripped open the candy bar and began devouring it. God, it tasted great. He stuffed the empty wrapper into his pocket, and licked his fingers. He wondered why he was so out of breath.