

Twisted Stories

More Odds and Ends

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Schooling the Professor

In an age when most of an individual's personal information could be obtained with the click of a computer mouse, the Professor deliberately kept himself off the radar. He'd lived in apartment 2B of a converted brownstone on 22nd Street, Chicago, nearly a decade, but no one in the neighborhood could recall his actual name ever being mentioned.

Summer or winter, he ventured outdoors wearing a rumpled black trenchcoat, belt unfastened. A single-compartment backpack would be slung over his shoulder; a homburg augmented his limited height, also hiding grey hair cropped close in military style. His clothes consisted of a series of second-hand tweed suits, frayed shirts and bow ties. His black sneakers squeaked when he walked, sometimes the only way the leasing manager detected his presence; he made no other noise, night or day.

With shopkeepers and passersby, polite - albeit banal - exchanges occurred in his soft tenor, pale blue eyes always averted behind round wire-rimmed spectacles set precariously on his prominent nose. He rarely grinned, upper lip vanishing to reveal a gap between his front incisors. Oversized ears tilted, the lobes creating a natural line to his stern jowls and stubbly, jutting chin.

The designation "Professor" stemmed from his dignified, intelligent demeanor, leading the majority to believe his solid frame might've once occupied a podium in some university lecture hall.

Twin seventeen-year-olds, Jack and Jeanne Cravens, had grown up watching the Professor's comings and goings from 1C on the ground floor. Jack, especially, could tell when the backpack left empty and returned filled with parcels, or vice versa. Given the man never received any mail at this residence, they deduced he had secured a post office box.

Also odd: the Professor paid his rent in cash on January 1 each year, a hefty sum which included utilities. The siblings came to understand the building's owner preferred this arrangement, leaving him free not to claim the income on his annual taxes.

One Thursday evening over a dinner of mac and cheese - their mother working late in her capacity as event coordinator at The Drake Hotel - the teens ruminated once more about the women who visited their neighbor, entering and exiting through the structure's garden door.

"Never the same one twice," noted Jeanne, slender, sandy-maned and freckled.

Jack, dark and tall, ventured, "Maybe he runs experiments on them, and doesn't need them after that."

"Don't be stupid. They're whores."

"You think... he gets kinky with them, and scares them off?"

"They look normal enough when they leave in the morning."

"Maybe he pays them well."

"It'd be fun to find out."

Jack rose from the metal-legged kitchen table and rummaged in a green draw-string bag bearing an image of a lion, their high school mascot. He presented his sister with a tiny disk, fitted with an adhesive pad on the back.

"What's this?" queried Jeanne.

"A remote camera."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Scotty Horst was going to stick it in the girl's restroom, but the principal confiscated it. I found it in the attendance secretary's desk." He flashed a CD-ROM disk. "Along with this."

"You mean..."

Thus, the plan to spy on the Professor blossomed. Getting into the man's apartment wouldn't be that difficult, especially on the weekend when they had no school. They would bide their time until he left for his errands, easily jimmy the lock with a plastic library card, and plant the device in his bedroom.

They almost lost their nerve, however. That Saturday morning, they sat on the brownstone's front steps, enjoying the autumn coolness and trading sarcastic insults, when the Professor quietly opened the door and descended. Jeanne's hazel orbs and Jack's brown eyes widened when the older man settled between them, lips pursed in what might have been a smile.

"Good morning, kids," he greeted in little more than a whisper.

They nervously muttered a reply.

"I'm wondering if either - or both - of you would be willing to do me a small favor, for a fee, of course."

"Depends," Jack rumbled.

"I've a number of calls this morning, and don't think I can make it to the post office by noon. I'd be grateful if you would run down there and pick up my mail." He extracted a key on a macrame ring, and a \$10 bill, from his trenchcoat pocket.

"Sure," gushed Jeanne, accepting the key, but waving away the money.

The Professor hedged, "Are you certain?"

"What are friends for?"

“Thank you, so very much.”

After the Professor had shuffled down the block and around the corner, Jack glared at Jeanne. “What the hell...”

“Can you think of a better way to scope out what catalogs he orders from?”

He signaled his admiration for her quick reaction. “You’re good, Jeanne. Really good.”

“Let’s get upstairs, then we’ll do his favor.”

“Seems underhanded for us to want to spy on him, when he was so nice...”

“Nice, but strange,” Jeanne clarified. “And I don’t like how strange.”

“Me, neither.”

The Professor’s quarters mirrored their own space: cramped living room, tiny kitchen and dining area, two bedrooms, and a full bathroom. While the Cravens kept their apartment tidy, though, the Professor might have qualified as a hoarder. Empty boxes were strewn about the floors, dirty dishes and glasses cluttered the formica counter around the sink, and plastic bags coated with white powder residue were piled on every flat surface.

“You think he snorts coke?” Jack puzzled, visually examining the stacks.

Jeanne couldn’t repress a chuckle. “Wouldn’t surprise me, with his beak.”

Her brother joined in the laughter, before wading through detritus to the master bedroom, which contained no bed, only more junk overflowing a rectangular folding table.

“Why do you think he has all these mattresses stacked against the walls?”

“One of the guys from school has a garage band,” answered Jack. “They soundproofed the basement using old mattresses, so his parents wouldn’t complain.”

“Soundproof?”

The twins shivered in unison.

A carved maple, four-poster double bed adorned the guest room, a remnant of the home’s history. Jeanne remembered seeing it as a child being carried from the crumbling shed by a team of burly giants.

“Where should we mount this?” Jack speculated, the miniature camera a dot on his palm.

“We’ll need a good angle to see the action.” Jeanne scrutinized the chamber: not much to work with, except... “There!”

Jack followed her outstretched arm. The lintel above the door offered the best bet, and the least likely place to be noticed. Tall enough not to need a chair, the young man fastened the lens to the wood, and estimated what it might capture.

“Let’s go see what comes through on the computer,” he suggested.

“Make sure nothing looks like we’ve been here.”

Kicking a bag of cat litter, Jack chortled, “How could he tell?”

Ensuring the door to the corridor locked properly, the pair bounded down to their own apartment, where Jack’s laptop showed a perfectly focused view of the Professor’s bed. “Bingo!”

“Can you record with this thing?” wondered Jeanne.

“Sure. Just click the red button with the mouse...”

“Shut it down, for now.” She grabbed a reusable shopping tote from a kitchen bin. “You coming?”

“I was going to hang with the guys ‘til lunch.”

“I’ll let you know what mail he gets.” She might’ve been a chocoholic en route to a candy store, the excitement bubbled forth so uncontrollably. Five blocks north, in the modernized branch, she checked the key and located the matching number in the farthest corner, secluded from public view. “Figures,” she mumbled to herself. The largest of available sizes, she scooped three small packages from scientific supply companies into her bag, taking a notification about a fourth to the clerk. Carried from a holding shelf, this one weighed at least 20 pounds, the return address a discount store in Washington state.

Long before she reached the brownstone, Jeanne’s arms ached from their burden. “I ain’t taking these upstairs,” she swore, depositing the stack on the living room sofa.

Jack studied the assortment, selecting one box and jiggling it. The sound of glass clinking confirmed his assumption: “He may be making meth.”

“We’d smell the fumes,” Jeanne countered.

Loud knocking interrupted them, and Jack was stunned to see a pizza delivery man on the threshold. “We didn’t order...”

“Already paid for,” came the brusque retort.

Toppings of meat and extra cheese were most welcome, and the Cravens twins gorged themselves on the treat. Munching the last crusts, a light tapping preceded the door opening, and the Professor peered in with that singular grin.

“Ah, I’m glad you enjoyed it,” he declared.

“You bought this?”

“Repayment for your services. Besides, your mother won’t be home until late...” He crossed the worn shag carpet, hoisting the large parcel. “Would you be so kind, Jeanne, to bring the others?”

Swallowing, the girl complied with the request. She followed him up the warped stairs, intent on placing the stack by his door, but he directed her to pull a key from his trouser pocket and unlock the handle.

“Come in, come in,” he invited, leading the way. “I have something for you.”

“You... don’t need to...”

“I believe in returning kindness for kindness.” The new arrivals shoved on the credenza, he unzipped his backpack and pulled out a striped paper bag.

She presumed he’d bought her a candy bar.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the gift. Inside, no chocolate, but a blue velvet jeweler’s box, holding a delicate silver chain and rose pendant. “Oh, it’s beautiful! But, I can’t...”

“Nonsense.” Agile digits freed the necklace and draped it over her shoulders. “It’s an... early graduation present.”

“We just started our senior year...”

“Christmas, then. Halloween. Just for being so considerate of me, these many years.”

Jeanne stared at his hard countenance, uncertain.

“I’ve heard the rumors,” he admitted. “I’m the favorite topic of gossip in a three block radius.”

Sheepish, Jeanne bowed her sandy head.

“Your mother raised you and Jack to be respectful and courteous. That means a lot when the world is going to hell in a handbasket.”

“Thank you.” This pronouncement escalated Jeanne’s guilt at placing the camera in the Professor’s bedroom. Too late to expose the subterfuge, and disillusion him. “I... must get back.”

He clasped her hand, as if to shake it, raising it to his lips. “You’ve grown into quite a lovely young lady,” he concluded. “You’ll make someone a fine wife.”

Words failing, Jeanne scurried from the flat, ripping off the chain and chucking it among the dust bunnies which clung to the baseboards.

Down below, she managed a feeble, “Creepy.”

“The Professor?” prodded Jack.

She related the incident, and her brother strode to the door, opened it, and glared at the second floor landing. “He touches you again, and I’ll kill him.”

“That’s... a bit over the top, isn’t it?”

“Answer me this: when was the last time that guy spoke more than two syllables to us?”

Jeanne considered. “Years.”

“Right. Why would he suddenly start asking favors, and buying us pizza?”

“Haven’t the foggiest.” Then, she added, “Maybe he’s realized he’s lonely.”

“Bullshit.”

Jeanne cleared the tomato sauce-stained box off the table, jammed it into the recycling bin, and washed the plates and glasses. Rinsing the last soap bubble from the sink, she pondered the Professor’s actions, and remembered the computer.

“Jack...” she called.

Focused on the Northwestern football game, he didn’t hear her. She finally had to shake him.

“When are you going to start recording?”

“You do it. It’s fourth and goal on the three, with sixteen seconds left.”

She tramped into his bedroom and booted up the laptop. Once before, she’d begged their mother to move; where she and Jack had shared a bedroom as children, such accommodations no longer suited them. She and her mother in one room also raised privacy issues, though a Japanese folding partition blocked them partially from each other’s view.

“I can’t afford it,” had been the response, long before the promotion to her current post at the prestigious Chicago hotel.

Maybe the idea could be broached again this evening.

Except, Brenda Cravens usually arrived home exhausted and flustered, ready for a tall glass of white zinfandel and some inane reality show.

Jeanne reclined atop Jack’s NASCAR quilt, computer balanced on her thighs. The minuscule assembly contained a sensitive microphone, so she could hear the Professor talking prior to him moving into range of the high definition camera.

Instinctively, Jeanne clicked the “record” button, though she hadn’t the heart to watch what transpired. She saw only a well-endowed female in red leather bustier, garter belt and fishnet stockings, and the shirtless, hirsute Professor bearing some heavy shackles.

Whatever sex games amused him, Jeanne didn’t want to know.

An hour elapsed, the screen ignored, when the twins were drawn toward persistent moaning. Despite the faint bulb burning on the Professor’s night stand, sharp images of the woman - locked to the bedposts and gagged, accounting for the muffled sounds - and the tenant performing unspeakable acts drew gasps from the siblings.

“Another reason we never hear any noise,” Jack observed.

Jeanne turned away. “Shut it off.”

“Why? This could be our insurance if... he creeps out again.”

“She almost seems to be playing along. It’s pathetic.”

“She’s paid to play along.”

“If any man would treat me like that...”

“I’d kill him,” Jack volunteered.

“I’d do it myself.”

Their mother stumbled in moments later, her children’s welcome preempted by her pale cheeks and bloodshot brown eyes. That she might already be drunk would not be uncommon; Jeanne could tell when the woman had been crying.

“What’s happened?” inquired her daughter.

“Haven’t you heard?”

“No.”

“It was all over the news.”

“Jack was watching the game.”

Brenda Cravens flopped onto the battered, plaid sofa. “A bomb went off beneath the Jelly Bean in Millennium Park about an hour ago. Six people are dead, and dozens wounded.”

It didn’t take much imagination for Jack to predict how the Jelly Bean - a popular nickname for the park’s Cloud Gate sculpture - would explode into millions of metallic shards, resulting in horrendous damage.

“Do they know who’s responsible?” he wondered.

“Terrorists.”

Jeanne interjected, “A suicide bomber?”

“They don’t think so. The police discovered a remote control mechanism in a trash bin near Buckingham Fountain.”

“Fast work.”

“Careless, is how the broadcasters are labeling it,” Brenda sighed. “I’m a wreck. The force of the blast closed the Randolph Street train station, and led to hotel evacuations for eight blocks in either direction. The influx of displaced tourists about drove our staff nuts, since the managers decided to offer them free rooms for the rest of the weekend.”

Jack assisted his mother off the cushions. “You need some sleep.”

Still disoriented, Brenda wandered into her room, collapsing on the bed fully clothed.

“I’ll... sleep here tonight,” grunted Jeanne.

“You take my room. I’ll crash on the couch.”

“No. You need to finish recording what’s going on upstairs. Store the file someplace safe, just in case.”

“So, you believe the Professor might...”

“I’m severely tempted to skip school on Monday and get back in his room to see just what was in those packages.”

“Why?”

“You took chemistry last year. Can’t you guess?”

Jack’s brown eyes squinted in thought. “He’s got kitty litter, but no cat - that we saw. Test tubes and beakers...”

“I didn’t bother to look in the cabinets, but I bet there are electronic components and, somewhere, a healthy supply of fertilizer.”

“Fertilizer? The smell alone...”

“He’s smart. He’d neutralize it somehow.”

“You think he made the bomb?”

“I think he’s made a lot of bombs. An internet search of newspaper reports for the past ten years should provide clues if he’s supplying amateur terrorists - for a fee, of course. Then, we use the recording as leverage...”

“And end up dead?”

“Not if we’re careful.”

“You’re crazy, Sis.”

“He’s the crazy one, Jack. Crazy... and creepy.”

Neither Jeanne nor Jack slept much that night, though they heard their mother snoring through the closed door. Sunday morning, church wasn’t on the schedule, so the teens got some fresh air on the front stoop. The Professor seldom left the building on this day of rest.

That was fine with Jeanne.

She’d experienced a change of heart in the wee hours, preferring to submit the sex tape to Chicago’s police department, with pertinent details printed anonymously in block letters on a sheet of paper. Let them apprehend him for soliciting prostitutes. Whatever length his incarceration, the leasing manager would have cause to evict this tenant, hauling the numerous boxes and bags to the dumpster, thus eliminating any further threat.

If threat there be.

No proof existed the Professor had created the explosive which destroyed a Windy City landmark. He might simply be an eccentric misanthrope, or suffer from a minor mental illness.

Who could inflict pain on women of the street without the slightest twinge of conscience.

"I can't ignore this gut feeling," she confessed to Jack, catching a whiff of barbeque on the breeze.

Jack scolded, "You've been in trouble before for following your gut. Old lady Rafferty, remember?"

"That was different."

"How so?"

"She was a nuisance, to the neighborhood and to herself. She ended up in a nursing home with advanced Alzheimer's."

"And she almost skewered you with that fireplace poker, when she didn't recognize you breaking into her house."

"Is it my fault she'd triple locked the door, and wouldn't let anyone in?"

"You could've let the cops do it."

"They wouldn't, without a warrant, and they had no cause."

"You gave them cause."

She shrugged. "I promise you, if I find anything, I'll let you call the cops."

"You'd better."

"You *could* come along."

"No, thanks. I'm not pissing Mom off by skipping school."

Jeanne remained on the step as Jack retreated into the brownstone.

"Chicken," she grumbled.

When the Professor parked himself beside her five minutes later - in shirt sleeves, collar unbuttoned - she flinched at the extreme amount of dark body hair, visible at the base of his neck and on the back of his hands. The escalated creepiness of this pretense at unaccustomed casualness caused Jeanne goosebumps on her arms, as did the overpowering scent of mothballs.

Which could have obscured the odor of fertilizer...

Intense blue orbs scanned her Bon Jovi t-shirt and floral stretch leggings.

"Gorgeous day," he began.

She half-stammered, "Yes, it is."

"Would a stroll to Grant Park be in order?"

"That's a hell of a hike. Besides..." Her jaw closed abruptly.

"Besides?"

"Grant Park will be closed today, due to the bombing."

"Bombing?"

Jeanne nodded. "The news..."

“I don’t own a television. Waste of valuable resources, those ridiculous programs.”

“Jeanne! Mom’s on the phone!” Jack shouted from the foyer, door propped open.

She leapt from her perch. “Sorry, I’ve gotta go.”

The Professor didn’t seem concerned that she abandoned him so suddenly. Inside their apartment, Jack scowled at her.

“Why were you talking to him?” he demanded.

“He initiated the conversation. Wanted me to go for a walk with him.” Jeanne glanced at the phone in its cradle. “What about Mom?”

“I lied, to get you away from him.”

“Thanks.” She peeked between sheer yellow curtains. “Keep an eye on him. If he takes off, let me know.”

“What’ll you be doing?”

“Taking a shower. Something about the way he looked at me made me feel... violated.”

Jack withdrew into his bedroom, returning a moment later with an ivory handled switchblade. “I don’t want you leaving the apartment without this,” he instructed.

“Why?”

“Just in case.”

“He’s harmless... I hope.”

“You and I know different.”

Jeanne exhaled, “Yeah, you’re right.”

While she towed dry her sandy curls twenty minutes later, Jack cracked the bathroom door. “He just headed west and crossed the street.”

“Maybe he’s going for a soda.”

“Not from what I saw.”

“What’d you see?”

“A guy passed by - Arab, if I’m any judge - and signed to him. The Professor waited until he was out of sight before walking the same direction.”

“Shit!”

“Get into some clothes, and get upstairs. The sooner we figure out what’s going on, the better.”

“You’ll warn me if he comes back?”

“I’ll pound on the pipes.”

Throwing on purple sweats and sandals, Jeanne took the stairs by twos. No need to fiddle with the lock; the Professor hadn’t bothered to secure the door. As

she inspected packages, vials and sealed plastic containers, she wondered if he checked for fingerprints.

Too late.

In a cupboard above the grime-encrusted stove, she found fifteen brown lunch sacks stuffed with \$100 bills. More scratch than she had ever dreamed accessible, and what good it could do her family.

If she skimmed a few bills from each, would the shortage be detected?

Better still, if he was to be turned over to the police, why not confiscate the collection outright?

The temptation resisted, she proceeded to assess contents of the drawers and cabinets. Whatever he'd been doing with these scraps, it didn't bode well.

"Can you complete the equation?" came the tenor from inches behind her, pinning her between the linen closet doors, allowing for no escape.

Jeanne choked, "No, sir."

"It's basic algebra. A plus B equals... boom."

"I've... got to get down..."

"There's no rush. Jack won't be bailing you out this time."

"Bailing... what do you mean?" The young woman shuddered. "Did you kill him?"

A firm grip spun her toward him. "Why would I do that? He's... temporarily incapacitated, that's all. A nice enough kid, as are you, if you'd mind your own business."

"I... didn't..."

"I know you didn't." Sneering, he caressed her freckled cheek. "Teenagers are notoriously curious, wanting to learn about life, have a little adventure, break up the boring cycle of school and friends." His torso pressed her against the wood. "Whether you enjoy this adventure or not is entirely up to you."

The Professor ceremoniously removed his spectacles and laid them on the shelf behind her. Smothering her mouth with his lips, Jeanne had no difficulty guessing his intentions. She'd viewed enough of the previous night's recording to predict his next move. If only she'd grabbed Jack's knife off the bathroom counter... if only he would be able to click the record icon to capture what took place in that tiny bedroom...

The roughness with which the Professor treated her spoiled any memories of attention given her by boys her own age. They might shyly steal a kiss in the school stairwell, or the cafeteria line, but they never molested her like the Professor did. He didn't bother ripping off her clothes, merely moved them out of his way. He clamped shackles around her wrists and ankles, fastening them to the

bedposts. He skipped the gag, possibly anticipating her cries for mercy. Calloused hands ran over her skin, eliciting not pleasure but revulsion from his victim.

He paused in his assault to snatch the silver necklace off an exposed nail above the pillows. Clasp in place, he hissed, "You'll want this as a reminder that every foolish action has dire consequences."

She wished she had sufficient saliva to spit in those sinister eyes.

No clock within view, Jeanne lost track of how long the torture endured. His sadistic lust finally sated, the Professor dismounted, recovered his composure and straightened his attire, adding his glasses, the tweed jacket, tie, trenchcoat and homburg.

"Your inquisitiveness compels me to relinquish this, my sanctuary," he drawled. "Not a contingency for which I'd prepared. However, long before the police find you, I'll be safely out of the country."

"How, with no name, no passport?"

"My... business associates are very resourceful men."

"The terrorists?"

On the threshold, he flashed her a withering look, and she shivered anew. "Mind, were I to kill you this instant, it would add not a day to any prison sentence I might eventually serve. The authorities, being the idiots they are, would themselves die in any attempt to apprehend me." He displayed a complex array of wiring looped through his coat lining. "We would face judgment together, with many others in the vicinity."

"Why?" she croaked.

"The world is filled with weak fools and misguided dimwits. Only those who have achieved enlightenment deserve to remain alive."

In that moment, Jeanne grasped the possession of the sex tape gave them no advantage over this lunatic. She'd hoped to school the Professor, administer some well-deserved justice... Instead, he'd schooled her, and she'd never forget the lesson.

He strode out; she heard the door open, then an ominous gurgling and an ominous thump. Seconds later, Jack raced in, switchblade dripping blood in his gloved fist. He dropped the weapon and worked to free his sister from her bonds.

Once she'd adjusted her sweatsuit, they embraced. She glimpsed swelling on her brother's forehead, where the Professor had bashed him with a tire iron.

"Are you okay?" she queried, tossing the necklace amidst heaps of trash.

"You're the one who... God, Sis, I'm sorry."

"You're not to blame." Stumbling into the living room, she halted upon noticing the corpse still twitching on the stained carpet. "You..."

“I was ready to break down the door, when he opened it. He walked straight into the blade.”

“We need to call the police.”

“Let Mr. Holbrook. Give him the fifteen minutes of fame.”

“Wait!” Jeanne hurried into the kitchen and scooped the paper sacks from the cupboard. “No need for this to end up in some evidence room for corrupt cops to steal.”

Jack gaped at the sight. “There’s got to be half a mil.”

“Very likely.”

“How will we explain it to Mom?”

“Very gently. Or, better yet, we hide it and put it toward our college educations.”

“She’ll find out...”

“As much as she’s been drinking lately?”

Jack slung his arm around Jeanne’s shoulders. “Will we be able to forget this?”

“No way.”

The pair descended to their apartment, hailing the leasing manager - fresh from an open house - that someone had broken into the Professor’s apartment. From there, madness ensued, with the Cravens twins monitoring a stream of municipal employees from their doorway, content their actions may have saved a few lives.

The police chief’s press conference that Thursday afternoon - broadcast live on most Chicago television stations, and national cable news networks -linked Paul Keating, aka “The Professor”, to a minimum of 87 domestic and foreign bombings since he’d moved to the city. “An illegal transaction gone wrong,” summarized the man’s death, the official investigation closed.

Jack debated over the course of a month about deleting the sex tape. He viewed it late at night on a number of occasions, repeatedly horrified at the man’s bestiality. If nothing else, it reminded the youth how important to treat women with respect.

One restless pre-dawn, Jeanne shuffled into his room while the screen scrolled images, and pressed “Delete” before Jack could stop her. “Let it go,” she murmured. “One disaster shouldn’t color your future.”

He pecked her cheek before crawling beneath the covers, bundles of \$100 bills creating irritating lumps under his spine. “Thanks, Sis.”

Jeanne retired to the couch, afraid to sleep because of the recurring nightmare: the Professor’s despotic mien, the sensation of his fingers. Never could

she risk honest intimacy with a man after what that fiend had done. The very advice she'd given her brother, she would herself ignore, aging into a withered, cynical spinster who drank too much, like her mother.

Wishes

The normal cycle for Section 51 involved a long stretch of efficiently handling routine applications, then a crush of paperwork requiring considerable overtime. No one on staff could remember how long it had been since that flow had been disrupted.

They would remember this.

An abrupt influx of requests preceded the newcomer's arrival by two hours. When questioned about the situation, the supervisor merely smiled in her unique, enigmatic fashion. Thus, the rumors began.

"He's stuck in processing," whispered two of the junior clerks, and the tale morphed from there.

As a joke, they piled the extra forms on his blotter, believing he'd enjoy a good laugh. When he entered the chamber, all work ceased, waiting for the formal introduction but, moreso, because of his appearance.

Totally stunned, Margot, second administrative assistant, opened her mouth to greet him; no words formed on her tongue. Keith, a nonplused department veteran, bit clean through the cigar he chewed. Reactions from two dozen others ranged from entranced to befuddled.

He stood in the center aisle, hands folded below the waist, brown head slight bowed. His pale blue eyes, nonetheless, shown with ethereal light - his most captivating feature, surpassing the singular nose, prominent chin and limited stature.

"Ladies and gentlemen," declared Sophie, who'd been promoted to her present post for ensuring the highest levels of confidentiality. "Please welcome William." She escorted the man between rows, pausing to interact with each individual.

Those closest to the vacant desk cringed at their ill-timed mischief. While tempted to grab the papers to diminish the stacks, they sensed he'd already noticed the mess - as had Sophie.

No reprisals were forthcoming, however. An innocent prank always rated a chuckle, and when William erupted in a near roar, everyone joined in the merriment.

He settled on the swivel chair, Sophie accepting the matching seat Margot delivered. Together, the pair waded into the task at hand, while the remaining personnel resumed their duties.

"The first step is to sort these into categories," explained the ebony-tressed executive. "Trivial items such as 'I wish I would win the lottery,' or 'I wish so-

and-so would fall in love with me,' are discarded. Those who seek healing for themselves or relatives are forwarded to the health care section, and so forth.”

“Weird,” muttered William, glancing at the verbiage on sheet after sheet. “Most of these mention my name.”

“That should be no surprise. Your fame preceded you.”

“But, I can’t fulfill all these...”

“Of course not. Our usual allotment is a single wish - a very worthy one - per shift. Your special circumstances, though, allow you select three.”

“How will I decide?” William groaned.

“I’ll play devil’s advocate, for now.” Sophie edged closer. “Let me see that bunch.”

As they waded through thousands of petitions, the recycling bin overflowed. The trainee found some statements humorous, others outright ludicrous. Perhaps he’d rightly earned a bit of notoriety for his philanthropy in his previous occupation, but he puzzled how people could waste their sole opportunity to improve their lot seeking such inconsequential results.

Narrowing the choices to ten finalists, Sophie excused herself. “I’ll be back after my meeting to check on you.”

“I’ll be here.”

William continued his deliberations, initially unaware his female coworkers had gravitated to that corner of the room, conversing in hushed tones.

Then, Margot approached, stifling a giggle.

“Hi, William,” she managed. “I... ah... we’d...”

He glanced at the group and flashed a tired smile. “Yes?”

“There’s a coffee shop where we meet after work...”

He waited.

“We’d like if you’d join us...”

“Sure.”

A collective sigh echoed between the walls, and William couldn’t repress a chuckle. Sophie’s reappearance scattered the women to their stations, some flushed with guilt at the breach of decorum.

“What was that all about?” wondered the supervisor.

“An invitation for coffee.”

Sophie’s hazel orbs rolled. “Star-struck kids.”

Embarking on his first set of field assignments, William carried the Section 51 Handbook in his pocket. He’d given it a cursory read, and understood most of the rules and restrictions. Still, a nervousness unlike any previously experienced knotted his stomach.

He managed well, according to Sophie's review at shift's end. He'd provided a domestic violence shelter with a generous resource for food and clothing, spread a little joy at a foster children's home by stalling a petting zoo convoy nearby, and aided teams working to extinguish a wildfire in northern California.

"Enjoy your coffee," said the supervisor as she tucked a group of files into her bottom desk drawer.

William countered, "Aren't you coming?"

"I... don't..."

He detected her pinched expression. "Oh, it's one of those management taboos?"

"No, I just... don't..."

"Fine. I'll walk you home."

"There's no need..."

William never made it to the coffee shop. He and Sophie found they shared many of the same interests, drawn to this chosen profession by an inherently selfless nature. It didn't take long for them to become an item on the office gossip chain, though neither cared.

Sometimes, heaven is finding your soul mate entirely by chance. A few find their soul mate, by chance, in heaven - their own wish granted while doing likewise for others.

Strange Harmonics

Standing at the railing, Anne felt the ocean spray dampening her cheeks, wind rustling her sandy hair. Beside her, Dennis extended his right hand. She clasped it firmly with her left, their sign of togetherness in spirit over 35 years.

The catamaran-style ferry bounced on the waves toward Catalina Island, where the couple would appear with their band at the old casino. The excursion provided Anne with yet another opportunity to reflect on her life, a frequent occurrence these days.

She recalled that Saturday evening, so long ago, when she lugged her father's guitar, nestled in a hand-made - and weighty - wooden case, home after playing for Mass with the folk choir. Syncopated jazz strains drifted to her ears from a park two blocks ahead. She'd wondered if an outdoor concert had been scheduled and gravitated in that direction.

Not an orchestra, just one young man poised on the corner, blowing mean licks on a harmonica. He'd sported a dirty red beret on his crown, allowing brown strands of wavy hair to peek out over his high forehead. His long-sleeved, multi-colored t-shirt struck her as unique as his face.

He didn't notice her, rapt in his music. Most pedestrians breezed past, ignoring the plastic bucket near his green-shod feet. Anne, glad for a break in her trek, set the guitar case on its end, resting her chin on the top, feeling herself smile.

Twilight cast shadows on the scene, so she didn't appreciate the full effect of his intense blue eyes when he glanced up once the last note reverberated off nearby buildings. She did catch the playful grin, his upper lip vanishing above a slight gap in his front incisors.

"You play?" he asked in a delightful tenor.

She stammered, "At church."

"Catholic?"

She nodded.

"Let's see what we can do."

Another five minutes of convincing preceded her breaking out the vintage instrument. She strummed a few chords, and he began improvising around the key of A.

Quite a crowd gathered as they continued their impromptu jam session. Anne relished the memory of that singular high, lasting two hours until a seasonal chill numbed her fingers.

Settling on a stained bench, the pair introduced themselves. Dennis Rainn insisted Anne take half the donations which had overflowed the bucket. "I... don't need it," she explained.

"Not that I'm homeless," he remarked. "I do this to buy food on campus."

"You studying music at U.S.F.?"

"No, accounting."

"God, why?"

"A steady career, so my father says."

Anne grasped Dennis' dilemma. Her own parents has pushed her toward nursing, though the mere sight of needles made her queasy.

"Would you like to grab a bite to eat?" queried her companion.

"Sure."

Rising, he commandeered her burden. "They don't make 'em like this any more."

"For good reason, I think," she chuckled.

His harmonica tucked in a baggy trouser pocket, he held out his right hand, palm up. She'd stared at it for an instant, then gripped it, similar to when actors take their curtain calls as a group.

From there...

They'd formed a band, with Anne's brother Mike on bass, his buddy Lou on keyboards, and a series of drummers, often too far gone on acid to stay more than a few weeks. They won various competitions, and booked paying gigs for proms and parties along the coast. They restored an old Ford Econoline van, complete with a custom paint job - huge musical notes superimposed on a vibrant sunset.

Dennis left the university six credits shy of his degree. Anne defied her mother's wishes, attending community college for a year. A county judge officiated at their wedding, his wife and a sheriff's deputy serving as witnesses.

Their married life unconventional, they had no complains about lack of comfort. Anne created a pediatric cancer music therapy program at the local hospital, and Dennis steadily advanced into management at a public relations firm. Augmented by their cut of the band's earnings, they enjoyed themselves.

A blast of cold air off the bow jarred Anne from this reverie. She glanced at Dennis, leaning forward, watching a school of porpoises frolic in the tide.

How she loved him! There'd been tough patches on the road - one of the erstwhile drummers had interested him in cocaine, leading to a stint in rehab. Alcohol also presented a problem but, overall, her husband's creative genius and musical gifts remained intact.

He'd thanked her for that, on many occasions, sometimes publicly. Kind of embarrassing, when it happened on stage, but it always drew a round of applause.

Her sole regret: no children. Even specialists couldn't determine the cause of the couple's infertility, and neither approved the concept of artificially conceiving.

Anne considered many of the youngsters she'd helped survive cancer as substitute offspring. Some, now parents themselves, remained in contact through social media and Christmas cards.

Another regret, perhaps, this last gig. As the ferry docked at Avalon, a six-seat golf cart waited to transport them, an electric-powered flatbed available to load their equipment.

Mike and Lou handled that aspect of the arrangements, while Dennis and Anne scanned the bustling streets.

"Nothing like going out in style," muttered the greying figure.

The words pierced Anne's heart. They wouldn't be here, except the band had performed at this annual environmental benefit for two decades. The previous month, Dennis had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. He'd opted to forego radiation and chemotherapy, and the oncologist had given him less than a year.

Anne had vowed, upon hearing the news, to stay strong. In the shower, some mornings, she broke down weeping, assured Dennis couldn't hear her sobs. Now mustering a brave expression, she slid onto the naugahyde seat, gripping the panic bar when the vehicle jolted forward.

They rocked the joint that night, to the cheers of affluent patrons. Later, they strolled much quieter lanes, finally climbing a steep hill to their hotel.

Anne lay awake, listening to Dennis' steady breathing. Even here, his right hand grasped her left.

Oh, to freeze this moment forever! she lamented silently. Reality, however harsh, intruded via a truck rattling along outside the window.

As she had every night since that fateful office visit, Anne envisioned her last seconds with Dennis. They'd already decided against a funeral; his ashes would be scattered in the park where they'd first met.

"Then, we'll always be together," he'd reasoned.

Her co-workers, in whom she'd confided, rationalized that she'd have their shared music - recorded at certain venues - to console her. Though they dealt with death almost daily, these health care professionals didn't comprehend how two souls could become inseparable through the years.

Dennis had joked about her marrying Lou, a confirmed old bachelor. Anne made light of the notion in keeping with his mood.

Closing her eyes, she yearned for the sunrise, and another day with her husband, serenading her on his harmonica, an enduring breakfast tradition.

On the Bay

“Talk about a blow job!”

Two waiters, clad in black and white uniforms, tittered on the threshold of the deck overlooking San Francisco Bay.

Their boss sidled up behind them. “How many times have I warned you: private conversations are restricted to the break room.”

The blond surreptitiously pointed to a couple at a table near the wrought iron railing, snickering. “We were discussing them!”

Sonny Carlisle glanced toward the customers. “Oh, shit!” Biting his tongue, he snarled to the young men, “Get back to work,” before weaving between the tourists.

Distinctive, this pair - to say the least. His longish white mane looked amply wind-blown, matching the white suit offset by a green tie. Holding his hand across the board, the woman wore a multi-colored satin caftan which seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. Ebony tresses flowed to her waist.

Both smiled beatifically, ignoring their surroundings.

Sonny recognized them from previous visits. He wasn't sure if they lived in the vicinity, or traveled from distant climes. All he knew: once each year, they patronized his establishment - and stiffed him on the check.

He wouldn't let that tradition continue.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted in his most solicitous tenor. “Would you like a drink before you order?”

“Cara mia?” drawled the man.

She replied, “Water is sufficient for now, dearest.”

“I'll return after you've had a chance to look at the menu,” announced Sonny.

“No need,” corrected the man. “We'll both have the garden salad with vinaigrette dressing, cream of broccoli soup, and a loaf of your famous sourdough bread.”

Lacking a notepad, Sonny smirked. “Right away, sir.” He withdrew, angered further. Vegetarians. They could've had the same at any of a dozen nearby restaurants, yet they chose his internationally acclaimed steakhouse?

“Anything wrong?” squealed the rotund chef when Sonny marched into the kitchen, punching selections into the computer.

The owner inhaled deeply and forced himself to relax. “What day is it?”

“September 21, the autumnal equinox.”

A laugh erupted from Sonny's lips.

“Why the devil is that important?”

“Because, tourist season is pretty much over, the days are getting shorter, and Sunday our hours change.”

A harsh reminder that layoffs were in order, come Saturday, but most of the college students had left weeks earlier to return to their studies, so only two or three might be dismissed.

Culling his memory, Sonny realized the couple always appeared on the equinox - appear being the key word. He checked with the maitre d' at the podium near the front door to verify his suspicion: they hadn't entered from Fisherman's Wharf. And, in previous incidents, they seemingly vanished into thin air without paying for the food.

Which they didn't touch.

If his schedule warranted, he would've sequestered himself in his office, researching old suicides in the city, or other strange occurrences which might spark a haunting of this sort. Instead, he would discover the truth, first hand.

“You got my salads ready, Brock?” he called to the prep cook.

“In two shakes!”

Slicing the bread on a cutting board, Sonny filled a napkin-lined wicker basket and placed it on a serving tray. With the bowls of fresh greens, he wove through traffic to the deck, where it seemed the pair hadn't moved, content gazing into each other's eyes.

Sonny managed to brush the woman's arm - flesh and blood, for all accounts. He doubted his initial hunch, but would observe them closely until they made to depart.

Which taxed his patience. Numerous groups came and went in the hours before the sun descended, yet these two remained immobile. Their soup cold, the bread stale, lettuce wilted, they whispered tender sentiments to each other, fingers entwined.

That's when Sonny figured out how they escaped undetected. The last glimmer of daylight distracted those nearest and, once darkness fell, their absence went unnoticed.

“Not today,” he swore. Crossing to the bar, he ordered champagne in an ice bucket, with three crystal flutes.

“Compliments of the management,” he proclaimed, setting the bucket on the white linen cloth. Uncorking the bottle, he filled the glasses and sank on a chair borrowed from an adjacent table. “I'm Sonny Carlisle, the owner. I wish to add my felicitations on the occasion of this annual celebration.”

Smoldering dark orbs glared at him, but he didn't flinch. He sipped the carbonated liquid and smiled; their expressions did not soften.

He leaned forward, speaking in a whisper. "I know you'd rather be alone to relish these last few moments together, and I'll make myself scarce as soon as you answer a couple questions."

They didn't encourage him to continue.

Sonny pressed, "I don't mind you taking off without paying all these years. If it happened more frequently, I'd raise a royal stink. I don't mind that you order, but don't eat a bite. I can see you're deeply in love, and that can spoil the appetite. What really bugs me is how you get in and out without being seen, like ghosts, or something." He straightened. "If you care to explain..."

With a sigh, the man mumbled, "Cara mia?"

"If you wish, my dear."

He swiveled on the cushion toward Sonny. "In millennia past, Mr. Carlisle, various civilizations considered us deities or angels. We are mostly ignored, these days, except by certain scientists and those who care for the environment."

"Meaning..."

"I am Mother Earth, and this is Father Time," stated the woman.

Thinking himself suddenly insane, minutes elapsed before Sonny digested this revelation. He stared at each in turn, recalling stories from his childhood. "I'm... pleased to meet you," he finally stammered.

"We appreciate your tolerance and hospitality," said Time. "Our existence only permits this single meeting in tangible form each autumnal equinox, to revel in each other's company. We have found your restaurant to be a congenial rendezvous..."

"We are honored to have you," confirmed Sonny. "Just one more question, if I may?"

Mother Earth nodded her diminutive chin.

"Why?"

"Aeons ago, when this planet had yet to see the devastation of wars, bombs and strip mining, we dwelt in harmony," explained Time. "Now... we do what we can - what we must - to preserve the future, which keeps us very, very busy."

A tremor beneath them widened Sonny's eyes, while his companions remained calm.

"See?" prompted Earth. "You are guilty, yourself, of placing people at risk, building this establishment so near a fault line. No matter how we try to convince human beings of the truth, they persist in flaunting natural law."

Shades of pink and orange painted the sky as the sun illumined the Golden Gate Bridge with a magnificent glow. The two clasped hands, rose and embraced, kissing gently, as Sonny watched.

“Thank you, Mr. Carlisle,” came the disembodied voice as both grew translucent, then dissipated entirely.

Sonny drained his glass and poured himself another. He remained at the table until closing, mourning the world’s piteous condition.

He as one individual could do little. “Bus tub!” he hollered, clearing the dishes and linens himself.

Ethics Breached

Lucy had spent three months sequestered in the windowless office, door closed, with only a desk, chair, computer and phone. Not so much a personal choice, this; she disturbed her co-workers by playing loud rock 'n roll, wearing earbuds, but singing along nonetheless.

The internal auditor also erupted in streams of expletives every time she found problems in the accounts.

That Tuesday, Eric knocked and turned the knob before she responded. Through the crack, the administrative assistant - whose sat in direct view - saw Lucy glance up from the screen and snarl, "Oh, shit!"

Running aggravated fingers through his close-cropped, greying mop, the director of operations crossed the threshold and shut the door. "What's wrong?"

"How did I know you'd wear that damned black turtleneck today?" grunted the woman. "You know it's... a distraction."

Eric smirked, an expression almost hidden by his neatly-trimmed beard. He propped himself on the desk edge, in the absence of a second chair. "Why?"

"You know fucking well why."

He decided to change the subject. "How's it going? Mark is getting anxious."

"It's going rippingly!" Lucy stated with obvious sarcasm. "If I was an IRS agent, I'd be calculating the penalties and interest in the tens of thousands."

Sobering, Eric glanced at the spreadsheet displayed. "That bad?"

"Worse than bad. The worst I've seen in since my college internship." The pencil she'd been twirling between her fingers snapped in half. "What was Anne thinking? Buying saddles for the kids' horses, clothes, televisions, on the company's dime?"

"What can be done?"

"Mark's going to have to take the hit and pay taxes on it as income."

"How much?"

"I'm back two years, and the total exceeds \$100,000." She reached for her coffee mug - empty. "Anyone else would file embezzlement charges."

Eric's solid frame stiffened. "We're not looking for a scandal."

"Especially involving the owner's wife."

"Not that. But it has caused a lot of friction between them, making Mark's life at home really miserable."

“Too damned bad,” spat Lucy. “He shouldn’t have trusted her with the books. That’s the first rule of any business: if you don’t know about accounting, hire someone who does.”

“Mark and I are meeting at 2:00. I’ll give him a progress report, and see what he says.” He patted her shoulder. “Keep working, but calm down. Not like it’s your money.”

“It’s the ethics. Even a family-owned business needs integrity.”

“True.”

Slipping out, Eric shrugged at the employees blatantly staring at him. So far, it had been possible to conceal Fallon Landscaping’s financial dilemma from them. If word leaked to the press, or the authorities, everyone would be out of a job.

Eric had been brought aboard by his cousin, Mark Fallon, to put the house in order after his wife’s alcoholism affected her health. Mark discovered that Anne and her secretary, Jean, hadn’t been paying bills on time, or recording checks, payables and receivables. The owner hadn’t a clue of the damage’s extent. Eric stole Lucy from a CPA in town, having heard how she unraveled sticky problems with the utmost discretion.

“She actually mentioned the IRS?” stormed Mark in his office overlooking the river that afternoon.

Eric nodded, supplying a recap of misused funds found to date.

“Son of a bitch!”

“She uses stronger language than that. If push comes to shove and the prosecutor initiates an investigation, I don’t know that you’d be guaranteed immunity by testifying you had no knowledge of the credit card Anne used...”

Mark deliberated quietly for a few moments. “Shut her down.”

“What?” his relative bristled. “You’ve come too far...”

“Eric, I’ve been in business for four decades. My customers trust me, some are among my closest friends. There’s been not the slightest whiff of impropriety...”

“Even after your affair with what’s-her-name?”

“I paid her off, and she left town.”

“This is different, Mark. This involves state and federal taxes. You’re lucky you haven’t been tapped for a formal audit yet.”

“That’s because things were always pretty cut and dried. Now...”

“Let Lucy finish what she’s doing. Amended tax returns can be filed, and the extra amounts paid without any fanfare.”

“Are you sure?”

“Lucy understands the importance of confidentiality,” affirmed Eric.

Mark’s tanned countenance darkened. “I want you to be certain.”

“What do you mean?”

“Get the goods on her, so if she opts to rat us out, we can stop her.”

Eric rose. “You’re talking blackmail.”

“Precisely.”

“I won’t do it.”

“You’re in this hip deep, yourself. You probably wouldn’t be able to get another job if she...”

“What kind of information do you want?”

“Not information, per se, just photos of some indiscretion” - abruptly, Mark beamed with an idea - “or a sex tape.”

Eric guffawed. “Sex tape? Lucy’s wound so tight, I doubt she’s ever been with a man.”

“You could get her drunk, and set her up...”

“Me?”

“Invite her to the pool hall after work, and see what happens.”

“No.” Eric crossed to the door.

“Fine. Then we’ll all go down with the ship.”

Pacing his own office for an hour, Eric debated the pros and cons of his cousin’s tactics. The cons, at any rate - there were no pros, beyond salvaging the company’s reputation. He would hate himself if he obliged Mark, but his wife and kids wouldn’t be happy if he traveled back to California as an unemployable engineer, or landed in jail.

“Twice in one day?” Lucy greeted when he descended to ground level, entering her *sancto sanctorum* unannounced.

“You busy tonight?”

“No.”

“A few of us are going next door to shoot some pool. I wondered...” He’d heard stories of how her father taught her to play the game, the precision appealing to her logical brain.

“Great. I’d love to.”

Her technique confounded him as the night wore on: she removed her spectacles - though severely near-sighted - and squinted at the balls, sinking five and six in a row at points. The more whiskey she drank, the better she got.

Until the last game. She slipped on spilt beer and blew a shot, leaving Eric to run the table.

“It’s late,” he remarked, replacing the cues in their rack. “You’re going to need a ride home.”

“Not at all. I know I’m not that drunk, because I haven’t tried to kiss you.”

Eric recoiled, stunned. “I still think I should drive you...”

They lived in the same apartment complex on the city’s north side, so it wasn’t really an inconvenience. Rather than drop her at her building, though, Eric parked near his townhouse and ushered the groggy passenger inside.

Or, seemingly groggy. Once she realized where she was, and the implications of the situation, she sobered instantly.

“I’ve dreamed about this on many lonely nights,” she admitted.

“About what?”

“You, me, together.”

Eric repressed a snicker. She’d joked about him wearing the black turtleneck, and here they were...

She nearly tore it off his body, as they embraced and kissed. Their amorous adventures moved into the bedroom, where Mark had installed a camera with remote recording controls.

Eric delivered the equipment to his cousin the following morning with the announcement, “I quit.”

“Fine with me,” muttered the owner. “I’ve got what I need, and Lucy can go about her business without being a threat.”

Suddenly, Eric felt protective of the auditor. He couldn’t let Mark bully her into submission...

“Two weeks, and I’m gone,” he amended his prior statement.

“Whatever.”

Those fourteen days, Eric kept to himself from 8 to 5. He would meet Lucy at the time clock each evening and drive her home. Their affair continued, simply because he didn’t want her to believe she’d been used and discarded.

The last night, with many of his boxes packed to be shipped west, Eric confessed over a candle-lit dinner. Lucy smiled and chuckled.

“I’ve known about it for awhile,” she countered.

“How?”

“I see all the bills, remember? An invoice in my box covered rental fees for a tripod and digital camera. The dates coincided with our little...”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because, I wanted to hack into Mark’s computer and erase the files.”

Eric’s pale blue eyes widened. “Did you?”

“Sure. I’ve had access to his shit for months. I found it wasn’t Anne making those purchases. It was Mark, himself. And, both the IRS and the D.A. have already received copies of the evidence against him.”

Her companion gulped audibly. “My God! We’re all done.”

“Pretty much.”

“Why...”

“Because, I won’t be treated like a pawn in a game of ‘hide the truth’. And, as an accountant, it’s my obligation.” She sipped from the champagne flute. “If it had been a fluke, an innocent mistake, I would have made the general ledger entries and forgot about it. But, this has been going on since Y2K, unchecked. Mark thinks of the business as his own personal treasure trove. He needs a wake-up call.”

Eric fumbled with his fork. “How soon...”

“First of the month.” Lucy extracted a flash drive from her broom skirt pocket. “By the way, your wife will be very interested in this.”

Horror claimed Eric’s features.

“I sent her a copy this morning, Express Mail.”

“But...”

“In my line of work, I’ve come to value ethics above everything else.” She tossed her napkin atop the china plate. “Besides, I don’t like to be fucked with.” Making a dignified exit, she slammed the door.

Robin and the Gang of Hoods

The kitchen door opened, letting in a blast of cold air. Marian Zobrosky shivered as she sliced cucumbers on the counter. Her husband crossed the threshold, an almost tangible joy giving his entire body a distinct buoyancy.

“Good news, sweetheart,” he beamed, brown hair charged with static electricity when he removed his blue knit cap. “The church will be ready for Christmas. I’m planning a grand party for the high school boys. They’ve done phenomenal work.”

The woman hated the idea of ruining his mood, but keeping him grounded had been an integral facet of their 20 year marriage. “It may be the only party we throw.”

Inhaling aromatic spices wafting from a steaming pot on the stove, the Episcopalian minister squinted Adriatic Sea-blue eyes at his wife. “Not enough donations for the Secret Santa gift drive?”

“Not nearly enough, and too many families needing assistance.”

Robin Zobrosky kissed her cheek. “There’s another week. We’ve seen quite a few miracles...”

Miracles, indeed. Since frayed wiring shorted at St. James the Less the previous June, sparking a blaze which decimated the church’s interior, many people had stepped up to facilitate the restoration. The department head at Lincoln High School had collaborated with local union offices to have carpentry and electrical students put in three hours per day on site, earning not just grades toward their final projects, but positions as apprentices after graduation.

Factory seconds from the home improvement store, and the trunk of an ancient oak downed in a lightning storm were used by artists to create original stained glass windows, pews, an altar and ambo - all free of charge. The community college donated a piano, in lieu of an organ.

Members of the congregation, however, had sought their spiritual comfort elsewhere during these six months and, given the response to the annual holiday appeal, it looked as if they would not be returning.

Marian laid aside her knife, a tear dampening her nose. Robin slipped his arm around her waist. “It’ll be okay, dear,” he soothed. “If nothing else...”

She glared at his solemn features. “Oh, no...”

He’d raided their scant savings account on numerous occasions to cover deficits in parish finances, or aid someone whose utilities were threatened with disconnection.

“I promised you last year I wouldn’t touch our own money,” he affirmed. “There may be another way.”

His tone raised goosebumps on her flesh.

“Let me wash up, and I’ll set the table for dinner.”

Sounding so innocent, Marian knew he’d concocted a hair-brained scheme, and he wouldn’t provide any details until the results manifested.

He’d been like that from the early days of their courtship. His roommate at Illinois State had admitted Robin often absented himself from the dorm, or classes, to scrounge resources for those dealing with crises. Somehow, he always escaped censure - or failing grades - by the seat of his pants.

One reason she loved him so deeply. She didn’t have that kind of creative mind. She’d studied chemistry, relinquishing aspirations of a career in medical research when they married and he applied to the seminary.

They ate their salads, beef stew and biscuits in silence, Marian concealing her grin as she observed the gears of Robin’s fertile brain grinding away. He excused himself before dessert to answer the doorbell; she’d suspected while he was “washing up” he’d actually been making phone calls from the bedroom. Besides, he’d swiped the list of names off her desk in the corner, thinking she hadn’t noticed.

With a chuckle, she placed his plate of pumpkin pie in the refrigerator and cleared the table. She didn’t have to see the stream of people filing into his office - what would have been the nursery, had they been able to start a family - she could hear enthused voices through the walls.

The meeting lasted an unusually long time, and she retired before the guests departed. She’d been tempted to knock, offering refreshments, but Robin could have poked his shaggy head out and yelled, if he’d wanted such a disruption.

The LED clock flashed 1:09 AM when he crawled beneath the quilt. Marian always appreciated his warmth; whereas she struggled with cold, he proved to be a natural generator. They snuggled together, sleeping peacefully until the alarm roused them.

She opted to hit the snooze button, thinking to cuddle her husband another few minutes. When she rolled over, she found him en route to the shower.

Unusual, since he wasn’t a morning person, and often had to be dragged off the mattress. She used to let their Cocker Spaniel - gone now to animal heaven - jump up and lick his face, because *that* he couldn’t ignore.

Being a pastor’s wife had its advantages, and trials. Marian’s visit to the florist shop on Main Street after grocery shopping fell into the former category.

Unlike some churches, who went overboard with poinsettias, trees and garland during the holidays, St. James the Less had emphasized the latter descriptive word. Two pots of the bright red flowers would adorn the sanctuary, on either side of the creche. The store owner happily made her a gift of the largest pair on the display floor.

Popping into the pharmacy, in keeping with Robin's standing pledge to support local merchants, she selected vitamins, aspirin and other necessities from the shelves. In the check-out line, she noticed the daily newspaper, with a headline, "Rash of Thefts at Area Malls Confounds Police." Sad, she mused, distracted by a greeting from one of their neighbors.

Marian thought no more about the incident. She took Robin his lunch at the church, hailed by the teens present as "Mrs. Reverend." Privately, she'd dubbed them "Robin's gang of hoods." She liked their sarcastic banter; it reminded her of growing up with four older brothers. Good boys, mostly, though academic underachievers. She understood how they preferred hands-on learning to sitting with books.

On parting, she asked her husband, "Did you leave the Christmas list in your office?"

"Don't worry. We've got it covered."

Her sandy eyebrows arched as she contemplated his playful smile. He possessed an awkward kind of handsomeness, a strong, solid frame despite his lack of height. He hadn't broadened out too much since his days on the college wrestling and diving teams, and she still found him attractive. Even on nights she sensed he'd passed exhaustion, their love making satisfied them both.

She trusted him, too, a real blessing when so many women came to her with their tales of spousal deception and unfaithfulness.

Robin Zobrosky tried to take at least one day off each week, but never a Sunday. Since the fire, he'd been lucky to have one day a month free. His dedication to the people he served transcended family, being summoned at odd hours to the hospital or performing weddings on weekends.

In the waning days of that December, he absented himself from home more than ever. Marian didn't let her curiosity interfere with what often involved matters of a confidential nature; she'd learned over two decades to mind her own business. Besides, she didn't like gossip, and wouldn't contribute to any scandals which periodically reached her ears.

The latest being that some of the boys who labored on the church were somehow involved with the continuing robberies in town. Video surveillance footage showed figures clad in black ski masks, jackets, pants and work boots

raiding toy stores and filching turkeys from a meat market. Marian couldn't believe it. They had no need...

Christmas Eve day, Marian felt quite alone decorating the arch-ceilinged chamber smelling of fresh paint and varnish. Everything looked so beautiful, she wanted to cry. She muttered a prayer of thanks for the thousands of hours skilled hands had spent in this effort.

She hoped the next morning's liturgies would be celebrated by capacity crowds.

Down the basement, the sound of laughter and music penetrated the polished wood floor. Robin had acquired some pizza, doughnuts and soda for the party. Though on holiday break from school, every one of the boys attended.

Marian joined them briefly, knowing guys behaved differently in the presence of women. She didn't want to "cramp their style." They felt so comfortable with Robin, who fit right in with their teenaged mentality at times...

"You going to save room for dinner?" she asked, grabbing her coat from those piled on a table.

In reply, Robin belched, drawing a communal guffaw from the others. Her lips brushed his cheek. "Don't be too late."

"The Secret Santas must make their rounds..." he hinted.

The implications of this statement didn't strike Marian until she was warming a bowl of chicken noodle soup in the microwave later. Previous years had the families on the Secret Santa list picking up their items on December 23. Her husband had made it sound like the boys would be delivering their loads...

And, where had these donations been stored? Usually, their doorbell rang more early in the month than on any Halloween night. She'd seen nothing...

A cadre of pick-up trucks, cars and even snowmobiles converged on the church around 7:00 PM. She could see their lights from the attic window of their house. Shadowy figures moved to and from the building, then the vehicles vanished into the night.

Robin, drained but jubilant, fell into bed at 9:30. "Busy day ahead," he drawled, caressing Marian's shoulder.

She flinched. "You've been pretty busy today."

"Wrapping things up."

"What happens when the police come to arrest you?"

"Police?"

"Haven't you read the papers, or seen the news on TV?" she challenged.

"Not since... hell, I don't know."

"Where'd all those gifts come from, Rob?"

“The boys and their parents donated them.”

She turned toward him. “Stole them, you mean. Damned gang of hoods.”

“What? Marian, how can you accuse...” He switched on the night stand lamp, sitting upright.

“And, why the late deliveries?”

“That was my idea. I thought it’d be cool for the families to get the real Santa effect, presents left under the tree and all.”

“They won’t be happy when their Christmas is ruined because the gifts are confiscated as evidence.”

“Marian, please explain why...”

“It’s only a matter of time before the serial numbers on the electronics are traced back to the stores where the thefts occurred...”

“There are no serial numbers on stuffed animals, blankets, clothes or bags of groceries.”

“Whatever. I won’t see my Robin become a jailbird.”

He lowered his head, dejected. “They’re good boys, Marian. You must be mistaken.”

“I’d normally say, ‘Wait and see,’ but the knots in my stomach tell me we’ll know all too soon.”

“You’re wrong.”

Both miffed, they lay back to back on the mattress, neither closing an eye through the night.

Three services Christmas morning were, indeed, packed by old friends and those grateful for the generosity of the Secret Santas. Robin gave inspired sermons about hope, joy and kindness, Marian prominent in the front row. Returning his vestments to the sacristy closet well past noon, she joined him there, scowling.

“No police,” he noted.

“Yet.”

“Would you see if I left my gloves in the cupboard?”

Obligingly, she crossed to the row of doors above the sink. Opening the first, she discovered a stack of receipts. She suddenly felt quite the fool.

“Where’d you get the money?” she stammered.

“Like I said: the boys and their parents. They’re grateful for the opportunity to work here, and repaid the favor.”

“God, I’m sorry, Rob.” She fell into his embrace, sobbing.

He drew a small jeweler’s box from his shirt pocket. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

She placed his hand atop her abdomen. “Next Christmas will be even merrier.”

The Fagin Racket

Contrary to popular myth, money can buy practically anything. It can score a lonely person love or, at least, a woman for the night. A house in an influential neighborhood can bring with it prestige and popularity. The list is endless, the point irrefutable.

That included drugs of every imaginable - and illegal - sort. To distribute them, Rusty Maxwell employed an odd assortment of couriers, ranging in age from nine to fifteen.

His bribes bought information on foster parents who only cared about receiving a monthly check from the State of California. Maxwell would send his trusted minions to contact the children in their schools, where they qualified mostly as underachievers. He would offer them a better life than the abuse or grinding poverty they'd experienced.

Reports issued by the authorities on these missing children were rarely generated. In the overburdened system, social workers' obligatory quarterly checks on youngsters assigned to foster homes might occur twice a year. Even then, the temporary parents could explain their charge's absence as attendance at a school function or summer camp.

Their payments continued, paperwork falsified.

For his part, the red-haired, periodic junkie had purchased an abandoned church in a less reputable San Francisco district, outfitting the worship space with used beds, sofas and assorted furniture. A "privilege" room - the former pastor's office - held gaming, television and computer equipment, for those who excelled at their tasks.

Meaning, they regularly made their connections, collected the cash, and avoided the cops.

He'd given the kids code names, drawn from random sources, "Rainbow," "Steve McQueen," and "Dodger" among them. So, when Jazzman returned from his designated rounds that June Saturday afternoon, a wiry lad in tow, Maxwell sized him up with critical, bloodshot blue eyes.

"Who's this, then?" he demanded.

"He's been outdoors for a couple nights, and needs some food," replied the Asian teen. "Thought you might..."

"Did I *tell* you to pick him up?"

"No, but..."

When Maxwell's amply tattooed arm wrapped around the narrow shoulders, two dozen stretched out in the arched-ceiling chamber paid attention. "You know the rules. Only those specially selected..."

"The dude's hungry, Max. Can't we spare a little grub, then send him on his way?"

"Hungry, dirty and homeless," scoffed the man. "Where you from, boy?"

A high-pitched voice squeaked, "Chicago."

The sound reminded Maxwell of a 70s sit-com character. "Okay, Mork, how'd you get so far from home?"

"My step-father put me on a plane. My grandparents were supposed to meet me at the airport. They didn't show, and I got tired of sitting in the pilot's lounge waiting for the flight attendants to call them."

Meaning, to Maxwell's mind, no one would be looking for him. "What's your name?"

"Jeff Dennehy."

"How old?"

"Twelve."

"Wait here."

A vague recollection prompted this motley crew's leader to vanish in his private apartment and search the computer for recent headlines. An elderly couple, driving to San Francisco International the previous Wednesday, had been hit on the 101 by a semi-driver who'd fallen asleep at the wheel. Their name: Dennehy.

He emerged, smiling with feigned kindness. "Okay, Mork, you can camp out here for the time being. Cause any trouble, though, and you're out."

Jazzman grinned ear to ear. "Thanks, Max."

"Take him down to the kitchen," instructed Maxwell, glaring down his prominent nose at the recruit. "Don't stuff yourself. Take it slow, or it'll just come back up on you."

"Yes, sir," chirped the newly christened Mork.

"Come, see me later, and we'll talk."

That meeting proved a challenge for the lad. Maxwell had snorted a line of cocaine, his brain suddenly on overdrive. Mork didn't catch much of the explanation about the operation, only that he'd be delivering packages to designated addresses around the city, ensuring the payments were safely placed in the bank.

"Which bank?" he managed to ask.

“The First National Bank of Maxwell.” Reaching nicotine-stained fingers left of the La-Z-Boy recliner, he tapped a heavy iron trunk, two padlocks secured in hasps.

“You said something about my share?”

“Five percent, if everything tallies.”

“I’m real good at math, so I’ll be sure...”

“Glad to hear it. Now, scram.” Maxwell bolted from his seat, making a frantic circuit of the gloomy space, as if searching for something. The last thing Mork heard as he closed the door: “I know you’re here, you bastards.”

“That’s just his paranoia,” remarked Jazzman, who’d made a bed for his discovery beneath what had once served as a choir loft. “Did you see any white powder on the desk?”

“A bag of sugar.”

“Not sugar, dude, and don’t ever put any of it on your cereal.”

“If you say so.”

At 10:00 Sunday morning, the kids were summoned to Maxwell’s rooms, where parcels neatly wrapped in brown paper were stacked on a table. One by one, they claimed their allotments, some stuffing them in backpacks, others in plastic grocery sacks. Mork gawked at his pile of six.

“You don’t know the city yet, so Jazzman will show you the ropes,” stated the older man. “You’re still to be back here no later than six.”

“Plenty of time,” Jazzman quipped.

The pair departed, Mork uneasy. “What is this stuff?”

“Drugs. Anything from heroin to crack cocaine, marijuana to acid.”

The youth halted. “What?”

Jazzman grabbed his t-shirt sleeve and jerked him forward. “Hey, it’s what we do.”

“Why?”

“Because, otherwise, our lives would be hell.” They mounted a steep hill, Mork panting from the exertion. “Max treats us okay. He’s greedy, but he doesn’t cheat us. He doesn’t care what we do with our cut, as long as we don’t bring the cops down on him.”

“Where does he get the stuff?”

“That’s his best kept secret. I tried to follow him one night. He’s got eyes in the back of his head. That’s as close as I’ve ever come to him... getting angry.”

“And, he deals around the city?”

“Oakland, Berkeley, across the bridge in Marin... that’s the really lucrative route. Rich folk like their blow.”

The 6:00 call resembled a line on payday at any bank branch in the country, Mork thought. Except, each surrendered the contents of his pockets, rather than withdrawing funds. Maxwell typed amounts in a spreadsheet on his laptop, easily distracted, however.

“He’s high,” whispered Jazzman, behind Mork in the queue.

That instant, Maxwell pointed at the twelve-year-old and bellowed, “Get over here, boy!”

Thinking himself in trouble, he approached with brown head low. “Yes, sir?”

“You said you’re good at math?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Take over this mess.”

To the chagrin of those with seniority, Mork parked himself at Maxwell’s desk. He gaped at numbers already input in the columns, formulae calculating each person’s share, and the mounting total. When Maxwell bolted the door after the last kid exited, Mork stared at \$35,000 stacked on the blotter.

“That’s chicken feed, compared to some days,” guffawed the man. He tossed Mork a key ring. “Load it in the bank.”

Lifting the trunk’s heavy lid, the lad marveled at what must’ve been half a million dollars inside. “I’ve... never seen... so much...”

“Play your cards right, and a good chunk of it will be yours.”

Mork considered the older man, who wore a sly smirk. “How?”

All friendliness gone from Maxwell’s baritone, the words bit hard. “Your part of the reward for ratting me out, you little fink.”

The lid slammed shut. “Huh?”

“I pay people all over this burg to feed me dirt. One sent me a photo of the Policemen’s Little League championship team, from last summer. You were the star pitcher.”

“I... don’t know...”

“Your dad send you in undercover?” Maxwell snapped. “You wired? Or got a button rigged out as a miniature camera?”

“Max, really. I’m from Chicago...”

“You wanted to see the set-up, so here it is. But your daddy won’t ever find out what you know.”

Really scared, Mork shivered in his worn sneakers. “Please, Max. Don’t do anything until...”

A switchblade prodded fleshy tissue beneath the boy’s chin. “Until?”

“Until... you come off this high.”

“Me being high doesn’t change squat. I know what I know...”

“You’re paranoid... Jazzman told me how you... how you...”

The sharpened point lodged in the paneling behind Mork’s head. “You can die now, or later. No matter to me. Your daddy can find you floating in the bay, or pay a fat ransom for your corpse.”

Pure adrenaline propelled Mork to fumble with the deadbolt, then flee at a full sprint. Jazzman gave chase and, slumped against the doorjamb, Maxwell signaled a cadre of experienced teens to follow.

They cornered the newcomer in a dead-end alley. Jazzman babbled about protecting him; Mork believed the others planned a deliberate beat-down.

Instead, they dragged him back to the church, his jeans ripped at the knees from struggling to escape, the beginning of a black eye swelling. No more had they knocked at the concealed door off a weed-infested parking lot, than the screeching of sirens reverberated between nearby buildings.

Youngsters within scrambled in myriad directions, down stairs and through windows. Of the total, only six were apprehended. Maxwell had taken precautions long since, anticipating such a raid: he slipped through a false wall, descended a ladder and crawled through a storm drain to a hinged grate eight blocks north.

A frantic San Francisco SWAT lieutenant rushed up to embrace Mork, squinting at his injuries. “Son, are you all right?”

“He knew, Dad. He knew. If I hadn’t been able to text you while I was running, he would’ve killed me.”

“How could he have known?”

“Money, Dad. Lots of it.”

Holding the boy close, his father grunted to a subordinate, “This isn’t the end. Internal Affairs will have a field day with this.”

Indeed, they did. Within weeks, seventeen patrolmen were charged with corruption, implicating many others in city government. No one fingered Rusty Maxwell, however. He’d seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth.

All the better to rebuild his empire across the bay, laughing as each report was broadcast about his drug network disintegrating.

They didn’t know the half.

“Jazzman,” he hailed from a Tiburon balcony, champagne glass in hand. “Here’s a list of names...”

Genius Diffused

“A spark of madness has ignited.”

It might've been a news flash about a world-wide epidemic, so solemn the broadcaster's contralto. The pronouncement served its purpose, however, capturing listeners' attention.

“In the months since our tragic loss of the phenomenal Roger Munro, monumental expressions of global creativity have erupted in volcanic proportions, unlike at any time since the development of radio, television and the internet. This reporter has personally compiled thousands of references to articles and videos showing painters, sculptors, writers, poets, musicians and others expressing themselves in the wake of his death. Talents range from professional to amateur, but the fact remains: the trend is extremely unique.

“The question must be posed to those with spiritual and scientific expertise: is this not proof of existence after our mortal shell ceases to function? It may not justify belief in heaven or hell, but does it not indicate *something* viable? Why not a stream of universal consciousness, into which the deceased's distinctive energy merges, subsequently diffused to every atom of the cosmos?

“If it can be adequately stated that millions have fallen victim to the spark of madness so evident in Munro's work, I may claim to be among them. A novel I outlined as a high school junior, then shoved in a drawer due to other commitments, rose from my memory like a glorious spring flower, the characters vivid, plot intricately developed, dialogue a waterfall of eloquence. Two weeks of nearly 24 hour days - to the exclusion of all but basic functions - I pounded on the computer keyboard, the first draft ripped from my soul. Once the last word had been typed, I collapsed in total exhaustion, much as Munro would exit the stage drenched in sweat.

“The emotional rush and mental high of the experience far surpassed effects of any illegal drug, more closely related, I suppose, to a climax during passionate sex, only prolonged exponentially until the manuscript's completion.”

The narrative continued, “I must concede, if not for him, this piece never would have been set on paper. He became the protagonist, with his penetrating blue eyes, unique facial features and solid, hairy physique. Every page reeked of his inspiration; my skin tingled and I feared my brain close to exploding as facets of mystery, romance, comedy and the mundane blended into a near masterpiece.

“Coupled with unparalleled manifestations of artistic achievement, there can be no denial Roger Munro's spirit remains active in our world. For me, it confirms how much he himself valued creativity, encouraging fledgling

performers and youth seeking their life's purpose. His kindness to those in every strata of society made him a well-rounded, respected and loved example for each of us.

“I, personally, am eternally grateful for this opportunity to share a tiny fraction of his beautiful gift. I mourn his loss, to be sure - as have so many populating this planet. For certain, Roger Munro will never be forgotten.”

The airwaves fell silent for a full twenty seconds, leaving those entranced by this tale wondering if a technical glitch had preempted the monologue.

Then, a quiet baritone stated, “Now, for the rest of the day's news...”

A Big Mistake

The temptation proved too overwhelming.

Every afternoon, while Hank stocked the outdoor vegetable bins in front of the health food market, he noticed the silver and blue-framed racing bicycle propped in the coffee shop rack. Its owner rode through the rustic town on a fifty-mile circuit, stopping for an espresso before heading back toward the bay.

The damned thing must've cost more than Hank's second-hand Toyota.

And, his mother recently diagnosed with cancer meant every penny counted.

Thus, it transpired that particular Friday, the tow-headed, lanky teenager watched through plate glass until the biker gave his order at the counter and was sliding his credit card through the machine. Trembling hands wrenched the tire from its slot and he leapt on the seat, pedaling like mad to the nearest alley.

Hank stashed his acquisition behind a dumpster, covered with newspapers and boxes, until he clocked out at the end of his shift. By then, the cops would've filed their report, without searching too thoroughly.

His father, a former officer on the local force, impressed that fact upon the youth.

Except, in this instance, the owner carried a bit of clout, being a wealthy vintner.

The patrolman who responded to the call deflected accusations of negligence - all of which Hank heard from his vantage point next door. Phrases such as, "The culprit is probably miles away by now," and, "Without any witnesses, it's difficult to tell which direction he fled," ensured no one would exert themselves during the investigation.

Left without transportation, the short, hairy biker - helmet slung over his shoulder, psychedelic jersey more suited to a younger individual - had phoned an associate, who arrived in a black Lincoln Town Car before the police took their leave. Prior to dropping onto the passenger seat, the man glanced up and down Main Street, blue eyes meeting Hank's brown orbs briefly.

The boy didn't flinch. Too much at stake.

He rode the bicycle home as the sun set, parking it in the garage beside the rusty green Celica. It would go on Ebay before midnight and, hopefully, score some substantial bids before the auction expired five days hence.

Hank's next door neighbor, Brian, descended the basement stairs around 8:00, anxious to view the college basketball game. He carried a six-pack of Mountain Dew and bag of tortilla chips.

“We’re doing this, right?” he greeted.

“In a minute.”

Brian peered at the computer screen, and gasped. “What the hell’s that?”

“A bike, why?”

“You know who’s it is?”

Hank spun on the chair. “How do you know who’s it is?”

“Damn, dude! Everybody around here knows who’s bike that is! It’s a custom job, been featured on TV and in magazines...”

“Shit!”

“How’d you get it, dude? The guy’s too much of a scrooge to give it up voluntarily.”

“I... stole it.”

Brian spit a mouthful of soda on the carpet. “Stole it? Are you nuts?”

“I must be. I wanted to score a little cash to help Mom...”

“You’ll end up dead. That won’t help your mom.”

“Dead? Who said anything about dead? I’ll... just put it back where I found it. No harm, no foul.”

“No way. Joey Craig doesn’t forgive, or forget. How do you think he got to be such a big shot?”

Hank shrugged. “Search me.”

“I’ll search for your corpse once he finds out about this.”

On that note, Brian departed, leaving his friend to consider options.

He didn’t have time.

Saturday morning, Hank cooked his mother breakfast and made sure she was comfortable in the living room recliner, television remote and phone handy. Rain threatening, he drove downtown, parking in the municipal lot behind the bank. He rounded the corner onto Main Street, halting mid-stride at the sight of the black Lincoln idling at the curb. Joey Craig loitered near the market entrance.

The businessman presented quite a different appearance in black t-shirt and trousers, with a red and black-striped sportcoat, and red Converse sneakers. His brown hair was slicked off his forehead, aviator sunglasses hiding his eyes.

He didn’t wait for Hank to approach, crossing the distance before the youth could retreat.

“You’ve got a lot of balls, punk,” rumbled the aggravated baritone.

“Anyone with half a brain wouldn’t have posted my bike on the web for a week or more.”

“I...”

“Where is it?”

“At... my house.”

“I won’t ask why you did it. Your face says it all: you’re stupid.”

“I... did it for my mom.”

Craig guffawed. “You think feeding me some sob story will soften me up?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Too bad for you.”

Unexpectedly, Craig slung his arm over Hank’s shoulders, almost a friendly gesture, except for the pressure applied to walk toward the intersection

“Give me your address,” insisted the older man.

Hank complied, stammering, “Please, don’t disturb my mom. I don’t want her upset.”

His last words. Crossing the street, the pair veered into the alley between a video store and an electronics outlet. Craig barely had to adjust his stance to snap Hank’s neck, depositing the limp form beside the very dumpster where the teen had hidden the bike the previous day.

Signaling for his car, Joey Craig gave the driver Hank’s address.

He rode the recovered bike through town the next afternoon.

It took the police a week to find Hank’s body.

Robot Lover

Donna wrenched on the bolt, without success. The plant manager where this assembly robot performed a vital task had phoned five times in the last two hours, anxious to reclaim it in good working order. These interruptions not only frustrated the woman, so did the failure of the building's electricity, making it impossible to use her power tools to finish the repairs.

She sank on a nearby metal stool, sipping from a water bottle. Enough sunlight streamed through the windows to permit some labor, and she saw a utility truck parked on the corner where the transformer had blown that morning. The sooner, the better.

Her life had been a lot tougher in the past, she recalled. A "child prodigy", her twelfth birthday saw trophies for wins in three successive high school robotics competitions adorning the mantle. Her innovative models would later be developed commercially for the medical and dental fields.

A locked room in the basement of the vast Hobart mansion contained her most secret project, never to be entered in any contest. Industry executives had widely acknowledged for decades that the general public would not cotton to androids with human attributes. Donna determined to violate that taboo, constructing a prototype with pliable "skin", realistic fingernails, natural hair and body features. When her father ordered his minions to violate her privacy, she'd been molding the facial trappings.

The argument between father and daughter had been heard throughout the house. She watched from her confinement in the tool shed as a crew loaded the incomplete being onto a truck, to be destroyed.

She ran away from home at 16, after graduating *summa cum laude* from M.I.T. Her father had insisted she accept the position of Vice President of Engineering at his factory, keeping the family business alive. So young - yet so brilliant - she balked at the notion of sitting behind a desk for 40 or 50 years.

Cut off without a cent, she roamed the roads and highways, ending up in San Francisco. Using an alias, she was hired to repair the very equipment her father had designed and constructed back in New York. She'd eventually opened her own shop overlooking the Presidio, preferring to work alone.

The structure's upper level had been renovated into a comfortable, if bleak, apartment. She kept a low profile in the city; she'd entertained a sneaking feeling her parents had commissioned private detectives to search for her, circulating photos in every major metropolis. One slip, and she might be hauled back East, even after 15 years.

Break refreshing her to a point, Donna adjusted the rubber band holding her brunette locks in a pony tail, and gave the obstinate bolt another squirt of WD-40. Ceiling lights flickered - finally - and she opted for the impact wrench.

The fixtures illuminated her appearance, reflected in smudged panes to her left. Cheeks smeared black; callouses on her fingers were embedded with residual gear oil. No amount of presoaking or laundry detergent would ever clean the stains from her tattered 49ers jersey and ragged jeans.

She chuckled at the sight, old photos of her grandfather - the first in the family to dabble in robotics - coming to mind. His motto, emblazoned on his work shirts, had been, "I'm not happy unless I'm greasy."

She mirrored that sentiment.

The street door opened, bumping a cow bell which served as an alarm. Donna had originally hung a set of tiny silver sleigh bells at the entrance, but she couldn't hear them over the din of machinery.

Into the large, cluttered space strolled a broad-shouldered silhouette. "It's not ready!" called the owner, unconcerned which of the six units, in various states of assembly, the individual had come to retrieve.

"I'm... looking for a job," announced a quiet tenor.

Snatching a towel off a lop-sided table, Donna wiped the fresh layer of moisture from her skin. She squinted at the man, who'd stopped beside an old B-946, converted to stock grocery store shelves. Memories of her initial inquiry in a similar situation gave her some insight of how to conduct an interview; she'd never had prior occasion to do so.

"How much do you know?" she began.

"I traveled the country performing on-site repairs for the last ten years."

"Laid off?"

"The van broke down, and I'm too strapped to replace the engine."

"So, if I hire you, the dough will go toward the van, and you'll take off?"

"No. I'm ready to settle in one place."

Donna studied the applicant's face. Perhaps unconventionally handsome, his forehead too high beneath close-cropped brown hair, his nose a shade too large, lips thin, and chin prominent, the pale blue eyes captured her interest. They seemed to take in every facet of her appearance and record it for perpetuity.

"What's your name?"

"Jack Quinelle."

"Two weeks' trial period," she declared, "then, we'll discuss salary and benefits."

“That’s... an unusual arrangement. I won’t be able to afford a hotel or apartment...”

“There’s plenty of room upstairs.” She retraced her steps to the bench. “Take off your jacket and see what you can do with that M-24.”

Beneath the windbreaker, her new employee wore a tank top and linen slacks. When he plucked the screwdriver off the rack, he resembled a gorilla playing with a new toy in the zoo, so dark and thick the hair on his arms and torso.

The phone rang, and Donna cringed. Automatically, Jack left his post and plucked the receiver from its cradle. “Good morning, Master Repairs.”

She listened, surprised when Jack told the customer, “You can pick up the unit in thirty minutes, sir.”

When he turned from the cluttered desk, she scowled. “Was that Tad Moynihan, nagging about this?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“If I can’t get this bastard loose, it’ll never be done.”

He wound through scattered parts and tools to her side. “Allow me?”

“Have a go.”

His biceps bulged, teeth grit, but he broke the obstinate piece from its nut. “How’s that?”

“Grand. Thanks.”

The smile he flashed reminded her of someone... upper lip sort of vanishing, and a slight gap between his front incisors.

“Have we met before?” she hinted.

“I would recall seeing someone as lovely as you.”

Donna felt herself blush. “Get back to work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And, don’t call me ma’am. I know it’s polite, but you don’t have to worry about me evaluating your manners, just your skills.”

“Thanks, Donna.”

“Bet you could use some lunch.”

“Later. I think we can get three of these fixed by mid-afternoon, then I’ll take the truck and fetch the ones on the waiting list.” He paused. “If that’s okay with you.”

“Sure. The more we get in and out, the more I can pay you.”

“Good deal.”

The boss warned, “No overtime, though. Nothing is so important that we have to keep our noses to the grindstone more than eight hours a day.”

“An admirable philosophy.”

“Glad you approve.”

Not the sort to chatter idly during business hours - except to herself - Donna noted Jack maintained a concentrated silence, as well. His estimate correct, she found herself well ahead of schedule by 3:00, with another four robots on tap for the morning.

The deadbolt secured at 5:00, she led Jack upstairs. “What about your bags?”

“They’re in the truck.”

“You picked them up while you were out?”

“From the homeless shelter.”

Halting on the metal steps, Donna gazed at him. “How long had you been living there before you came to see me?”

“A week.”

“The pride thing?”

“A bit.”

“Did you apply anywhere else?”

“I... did my research. You’ve got the best reputation in the Bay Area.”

“Get your stuff. I’ll dig out some clean sheets for the sofa bed.”

Before she opened the hall closet, she slipped into the bathroom and showered, Lava soap eliminating a decent percentage of filth from her flesh. Her hair wrapped in a towel, terry robe tied at the waist, she emerged to the sight of Jack frying bacon in the kitchenette.

“Your job description doesn’t include cooking dinner,” she stated.

“I’m hungry, and I didn’t know how long you’d be in there.”

“Practical. I like that.” She pulled a carton of eggs from the refrigerator.

“You want to scrape off a layer of gunk before we eat?”

“Sure.”

He left her to continue preparations for a simple meal. Joining her at table in sweat pants and a blue polo shirt, they spoke little, both famished.

“You’re welcome to use the computer, or watch television, or read a book,” she advised once the dishes had been washed. “I tend to hit the sack early.”

“You still have a television?”

“And a collection of old DVDs. Even though I make my living from advanced technologies, I don’t... like much of what’s happened in the last twenty years. As long as the box is functional, I’ll keep using it.”

Jack inspected the flat screen Sony. “I remember watching one of these... ages ago.”

“A unique experience, these days. Everyone running around with their computerized glasses, wrist watches, and that nonsense. Makes me sick.” She switched on a floor lamp. “Good night.”

Not that Donna slept. She heard Jack creeping around in the dark, heard him test the stereo system she’d restored, and watch a John Wayne movie. She chided herself for not checking his references - if he’d had any - or delving more into his background. Yet, his logical, efficient approach to the repairs he’d made impressed her.

He appeared fully rested when she shuffled to the coffee pot at 6:00 AM. Breakfast of cereal and fruit satisfied them both, then they descended to the shop, open for business promptly at 8:00.

Rather than wait for necessary replacement parts to be shipped, having Jack on the payroll allowed Donna to send him to the supply warehouse, expediting completion and increasing customer satisfaction. While Donna hadn’t considered herself poor, or merely eking out an existence prior to Jack’s arrival, within a month she possessed ample surplus funds to purchase state-of-the-art tools and contract renovations to the building.

Even after his trial period, he didn’t relocate to separate lodgings. The pair got along well together, as if they’d been friends since childhood.

They swapped stories some evenings about their schooling, families, and hobbies. Jack quickly acquired a love of classic movies, so they would share the sofa and a bowl of popcorn, laughing or discussing the plots.

Then, the earthquake changed everything.

Donna often wondered why millions dwelt on a fault line which had wrought destruction numerous times over the centuries. That Sunday morning’s 4.6 tremor might not have toppled San Francisco skyscrapers, but it propelled her into Jack’s arms as their coffee mugs vibrated off the table, shattering on the tiles.

“Sorry,” she apologized, withdrawing from his unwitting embrace after the motion ceased.

He replied, “It... scared me, too. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“And it wasn’t strong, if you ask those who lived here during the 1989 or 2018 quakes.”

“I’ll pass.”

A second, prolonged jolt flung them together once more and, as they clutched each other in fear and desperation, the meeting of their lips provided solace.

Jack relinquished his hold first. “I... shouldn’t have done that,” he stammered.

“It’s all right,” soothed Donna. “I’m equally guilty.”

“Guilty? Of what?”

“Of... wanting you to do it.”

Those blue eyes scanned her calm expression. “You did?”

“You’re a marvelous person, Jack, and I like having you around. I was hoping you felt the same...”

“I like being with you, Donna, but that doesn’t mean I can presume...”

“Presume, please.”

He swept her off her feet, literally, and their combined passion consumed them to the exclusion of all else, repeated tremors included.

They lay, entwined and tranquil, on Donna’s bed through the afternoon, listening to traffic beyond the gridded windows. Brief doubts about the situation pulsed through the woman’s mind; she discounted them.

Jack Quinelle couldn’t have been more perfect if he’d been a robot.

She rolled toward him, his steady breathing an unspoken mantra.

Caressing his chest, she felt an odd lump, instantly concerned. She drew aside his pajama top, hazel orbs widening at the eerily familiar discoloration on Jack’s epidermis near the shoulder blade, partially obscured by swirls of black hair.

Adrenaline righted her on the mattress; she glowered at the man beside her. She didn’t care if he thought her abrupt examination of his body intrusive or rough. Within minutes, she confirmed her suspicions.

Here lay the android her father had prevented her from finishing years earlier.

“God damn you!” she shrieked, slapping him while fully cognizant he felt no physical sensation.

Or, did he?

In her schematics, she’d never intended this creation to express emotions or be able to simulate intercourse - she hadn’t really decided, at the time, whether the final product would bear male or female traits.

“Get up!” she commanded, scrambling to her feet.

“What’s wrong?” Jack puzzled.

“Who made you?”

He countered, rising, “How’d you know?”

Donna raised her left leg, revealing a tattoo on her calf. “Recognize this?”

“The Kanji symbols for happiness and laughter.”

“The signature I used to brand all my inventions.”

Jack averted his gaze.

“Now, you’re going to tell me what the hell is going on, or I’ll rip you to pieces with my bare hands.”

“Donna, chill.”

Her father’s terse baritone emitted from Jack’s mouth, the phrase he used to preempt any arguments, unnerved her.

Jack caught her before she collapsed. He lowered her on the dressing table stool, uncertain where to begin his narrative.

“When did you achieve consciousness?” Donna prompted.

“Last summer. From conversations I overheard in the Hobart labs, your father’s cancer diagnosis inspired him anew to find you. He thought, since you’d put so much of yourself into my initial programming, I might gravitate to you in time...”

“In time for what?”

“For a reconciliation.”

“Not likely.”

His usual tenor asked, “Why?”

“If he intends to will me the business, I don’t want it. I don’t want to be tied down...”

“He’s entrusted the day to day operations to a team of experts. You’ll be CEO in name only. Your actual duties would involve supervising research and development...”

What she’d wanted all along, but he’d refused her. “You’re serious?”

“You should know, my programming doesn’t allow me to lie.”

“Bullshit. You’ve told some whoppers since you’ve been here.”

He smirked.

“This is too crazy,” she moaned, slumping on the seat.

“What should I tell him?”

“Tell him? You mean, you’re leaving?”

“I... don’t want to. I wasn’t lying when I said I like being with you, Donna. This afternoon... I will cherish until my memory circuits malfunction.”

“By the way, who did... that to you?” She pointed at his crotch.

“Barry Johnson and his boys.”

She chuckled. “I remember Barry. Hot shot kid, tried to beat me at the M.I.T. annual science expo. Dad hired him?”

“He graduated the year after you ran off.”

“He responsible for your face?”

“Your father mandated a visage with... flaws. Barry experimented with various configurations.”

“Then, let him run R and D.”

“You refuse to go back?”

“Dad will never be privy to the reason, because if you try to leave, you’re history.”

“You’d kill me?”

“It’s impossible to kill something that’s not alive,” she retorted.

“Then, deactivate me?”

“And use you for parts in those robots waiting to be repaired downstairs.”

A genuine spark of fear darkened Jack’s eyes momentarily. “What do you suggest?”

“You’ll see.” She grasped his hand and led him to the bed. “Come here.”

What woman wouldn’t sell her soul for an absolutely faithful man, capable of giving her pleasure on both physical and mental levels? In the midst of their renewed exertions, she covertly switched him off, and ran a cable from his access port (cleverly concealed in his ankle) to her computer.

Reviewing the expansion of his parameters, she isolated the subroutine featuring input from her father. Erasing it eliminated the probability Jack would continue to nag her about mending fences with the elder Hobart. All else would remain the same.

Donna couldn’t help but grin at the supine form, seconds prior to reviving him.

Gave the term “boy toy” a whole new meaning.

Eulogy for an Adventure

Insightful what memories worm their way into the conscious mind after a friend dies.

As I sat before the bier in the stark, stone New Melleray chapel - where William and I had spent many hours chanting the Divine Office with our fellow Trappist monks - images of a ludicrous journey flashed before my mind's eye, and I felt myself smiling.

Forty years, and I still could chuckle at what most would have considered a disaster.

The abbey southwest of Dubuque, Iowa, had worked even then to become a leader in sustainable farming, cultivating over 3,000 acres of corn. William and I had celebrated our 25th jubilee that particular summer, a quarter century of blending prayer and labor under the Rule of St. Benedict.

In the fields, we wore jeans, t-shirts and boots, changing into white habits with a black scapular and leather belt for various times of psalms, readings and petitions. Invariably, William would rip his shirt, step on his hem, or spill some concoction on the cloth. He was known within the community of 45 monks as a klutz, and avoided by many for that reason.

Nonetheless, I liked him.

The brother I'd never had growing up, we could joke together, and laugh at our own foolishness. He was of medium height, solidly built, with a somewhat oversized nose. His wavy brown hair, cut in a shag back then, often hung over mischievous blue eyes. I was thinner, my black hair included. When Abbot Chrysologus would summon us to his office, we'd try to hide our levity with bowed heads.

We seldom succeeded.

So, that fine June day when Father Prior Amos brought the message to the barn, where we were cleaning mud off a John Deere tractor, William and I glanced at each other and smirked.

"Wonder what we did now?" he muttered as we marched to the north entrance.

I had no idea.

"Sit down, Brothers," greeted the abbot, a kindly, balding elder with fifty years of religious life under his belt.

We did, and he simultaneously rose from behind his heavy oak desk. Not a good posture, him staring down at us, and we fidgeted on the coarse upholstery.

"I called you here to offer you an opportunity."

Realizing we'd been holding our breath, we both exhaled in relief.

"There's a conference on organic fertilizers in California next week. Brothers Samuel and Bartholomew were scheduled to go, but other obligations will keep them home. You were suggested..."

Later, we learned we were the only two who didn't refuse.

You see, Trappists live in a cloister, away from the public, focused on their vows, sustaining more active religious ministries through prayer. Except for doctor appointments, the monks never left the enclosure - or, at least, the property.

Most preferred it that way. William and I were, frankly, itching for a little adventure, a change of scenery.

We packed duffels borrowed from the common storeroom with what secular clothes hung in our own closets, and others we scrounged from our confreres. On the appointed morning, Fr. Francis - en route to say Mass for the Trappistine nuns near the Mississippi River - dropped us at the Dubuque Airport.

The first order of business took us to the men's room, to shed our habits in favor of cut-off shorts, colorful Hawaiian shirts (donated by some kindly patrons ages before) and ratty sneakers. Too hot to be draped in yards of heavy fabric!

Our flight to Chicago was temporarily delayed by a thunderstorm which passed overhead, leaving us plenty of time to make our connection, according to my wristwatch. From a small Midwestern town, myself, O'Hare International Airport overwhelmed me, a city unto itself. Multiple terminals, endless gates, I felt quite lost.

William, confident despite his innate clumsiness - catching his duffel strap on a luggage cart and dragging it half way down the concourse - plowed ahead, expecting me to follow. "We're at Gate C4," he announced.

To compound our confusion, renovations diverted our progress from the main concourse, through an older section of one building, and around to we knew not where. Tarps and sheets dangled from the ceiling, making it difficult to see the gate designations.

"Here!" cried William, pointing to a barely visible sign.

I sank on an uncomfortable metal chair near the attendant's podium, exhausted. My breathing had almost returned to a normal rhythm when people started lining up to board the 747 parked outside the full-length windows.

Admittedly, I wasn't paying attention. I hadn't heard any announcement over the loudspeakers, which might have been disconnected due to the construction. The stewardess standing beside the door leading onto the tarmac chatted with a member of the ground crew, and didn't glance at the boarding passes William and I presented.

Our seat assignments weren't challenged. In fact, after the cabin was secured, passengers were encouraged to move where they liked, since the flight was only half full. William and I stretched our legs in first class, accepting complimentary orange juice even before the plane taxied onto the runway.

How was I to know we would spend eighteen hours westbound - rather than a mere five - and land in Tokyo, Japan?

William and I figured out the mistake over the Pacific Ocean. We decided to remain silent - silence being an integral part of our lives as monks - and see how the matter would be handled by the authorities. Since we had no passports, limited cash resources, and no knowledge of the language, we believed ourselves doomed to prison.

With great politeness, English-speaking Japanese police escorted us off the aircraft at this destination and into the Customs director's office. We waited there another hour; William dozed, and I contemplated a poster declaring Fiji the hot vacation spot.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," began the man who would decide our fate, with a thick inflection making it difficult to comprehend him. "We seem to have a situation."

"Yes," I replied. "And we'd simply like to board the next flight back to the States."

"That will be impossible."

I hadn't uttered a swear word since the day I entered New Melleray as a postulant. "Shit."

Multiple explanations didn't convince this official to change his mind. We would be detained - comfortably - in the city, until the legal ramifications of our status was determined.

"We can't afford a hotel," William ventured.

"Your other option is jail."

We both swallowed our hearts.

Knocking on the glass half of the door distracted the director momentarily. He left us to chat with a middle-aged black woman, sporting long dread locks and wire-rimmed glasses, while we recovered our composure. She accompanied him when he returned.

"Miss Hixon is a countrywoman of yours," remarked the squat Oriental. "She is aware of your predicament, and has offered you accommodations in her apartment."

"Meaning, we'd be in her custody?" I asked.

"Yes."

“Under what conditions?”

Our savior responded, “House arrest, essentially.”

“Agreed.”

How were we to know Karen Hixon’s idea of “house arrest” meant staying on the island?

Her single bedroom flat in a high rise on a secondary street didn’t offer many amenities, other than a fantastic view of the city. Frightening, a bit, too - the funds spent on recovery after World War II had transformed Tokyo into a modern hub of business, pleasure and culture. Towering structures lined the boulevards, neon lights flashed, and sidewalks teemed with pedestrians. Traffic jams comparable to those at rush hour in any American metropolis reminded me the world had become a very small place.

A surprisingly American dinner - hamburgers, beans and potato chips - preceded our night’s sleep. William and I settled on tatami mats: the living room floor. Miss Hixon provided thick quilts and pillows, but I missed my bed in Iowa.

Next morning, we were treated to breakfast at a neighborhood café, before being driven on a tour of the Japanese capital.

“How do you make your living?” William prodded as we passed a glorious public park.

“I’m a translator for the State Department. I’d just returned from Calcutta when I heard one of my friends in Customs talking about your... dilemma.” She pulled her compact Toyota into traffic. “You don’t travel much, do you?”

William supplied, “Never before by plane.”

“Through O’Hare? That’s a real trial by fire. I’d read about how they’re trying to make the terminals more hospitable for travelers.”

I expressed appreciation for her hospitality.

“Don’t mention it. The least I can do for a couple... greenhorns.”

Uncertain if I should be offended by the comment, I resumed gazing out the car window at the sights. Over the course of five days, we sojourned north and south, visiting a Buddhist monastery in Kyoto - exchanging cultural and religious information, while failing at an extended sitting meditation.

Hilarious, that. Neither William nor I could manage the full lotus position. We’d heard about some American monks who found that position conducive to introspection. We found it downright painful. While struggling to manipulate his left foot, William pitched backward and sent a row of shaved-headed, saffronrobed locals tumbling like a line of dominoes.

Fortunately, the event elicited no ill feelings, just serene smiles.

They were probably glad to see us depart.

Meandering through tiny villages, Miss Hixon's engine malfunctioned. I bent beneath the hood, trying to diagnose the problem, unsuccessfully. We set off walking, discussing what we'd seen with our hostess, who offered wise reflections based on her six years assigned to the Eastern hemisphere.

Abruptly, William began singing. I glared at him, vaguely recognizing the melody, but embarrassed by this breach of decorum.

"It's from the Bing Crosby movie *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*," clarified William. "I thought it was appropriate."

A film seen in the theater during my childhood, I recalled the lyrics. Miss Hixon, about the same age as ourselves, knew the chorus.

"We're busy doing nothing, working the whole day through, trying to find lots of things not to do. We're busy going nowhere, isn't it just a crime. We'd like to be unhappy, but we never do have the time."

William tried to dance a few steps, tripping over some gravel and pitching forward. Miss Hixon and I caught him before he scraped his knees on the ground, and we dropped onto the grass, content to be in the midst of this natural beauty, enjoying the day.

Locating a garage where a vehicle could be rented to transport us back to Tokyo meant we slept under the stars that night. Our arrival at Miss Hixon's apartment the next evening elicited vehement disapproval from U.S. State Department representatives, Japanese immigration agents, and Father Prior Amos.

Swearing would be a habit I would be compelled to break at some future point. "Shit!"

The remonstrations lasted until midnight, Miss Hixon accepting the blame for violating the house arrest arrangement. Before departing, we offered her our sincerest thanks, and bid her a fond farewell.

We were escorted to an embassy limousine and conveyed to the Tokyo Airport. I felt like a child as William and I were ushered by a cadre of uniformed guards to the foot of the truck-mounted stairs parked beside a TWA 747.

Another round of recriminations accompanied our return to New Melleray, though Father Abbot Chrysologus hid his amusement well. "Mistaking Gate C41 for C4, in the midst of all that chaos..." He concluded, "Before any more of the brothers travel, we need to have a class on how to properly navigate the major airports."

"Good idea," agreed William, setting a water glass on the edge of the oak desk, which promptly tipped and spilled its contents across the blotter and assorted typed documents.

The Abbot's snicker grew to almost a roar, and we joined in. He dismissed us with a cursory blessing, hoping - I suppose - that we'd concentrate on our labors in the cornfields and cause no further trouble.

If he'd only been that lucky.

William and I kept a series of abbots on their toes through the ensuing years, until my good friend fell from the bell tower while reattaching a frayed rope. He lingered in a coma for three days, opening his pale blue eyes only once and favoring me with his innocent, gap-toothed smile.

"Thanks," he'd murmured, barely audible.

It was to him I owed genuine thanks, for making my life the adventure we'd both craved. I might never set foot off the abbey property again, but I'd carry the recollection of many exciting occasions with me until I joined him in heaven.

Pan the Man

No actor or actress wanted to be on stage if - when - Al Sayer got angry. His sapphire blue eyes, which twinkled with delight on good days like a small boy on a merry adventure, could tear through the offender's heart like two double-edged swords.

Six years earlier, the Juilliard graduate had starred in a successful musical revival on Broadway, even scoring a Tony award nomination. For unknown reasons, the past three summers, he'd served as artistic director at the historic Rampart Palace in Rock Island, Illinois. His initial press release claimed he'd waived his salary to promote appreciation for community theatre. Receipts from the various productions had steadily increased since his arrival, but some board members and volunteers sensed an ulterior motive.

Not that Sayer's assistant, Jody Burns, would divulge what she knew. He'd hired her his first week on the job, after a very unconventional interview. Her wages paid for a cozy apartment, silver Lexus convertible, and frequent lunches at upscale Quad City restaurants - since she mostly worked nights, keeping the accounts in order. Like any employee worth her salt, she maintained the highest standards of confidentiality.

Especially since the theatre is full of gossips. One stray word could be blown out of proportion, creating scandal which would damage the reputation of a time-honored tradition. The QC Players had been a staple of the artistic scene for seven decades. Sayer had enabled the group to reestablish its preeminence after the previous director had exposed flaws in the system during a nasty embezzlement trial.

The building had benefitted from the increased income with detailed renovations: reupholstered auditorium seats, fresh paint, tuckpointing, roof repairs. Dressing rooms were modernized, faulty plumbing replaced. The media, and those who regularly passed beneath the restored, neon-lit marquee, could only praise Sayer's leadership.

These folk weren't privy to other contracted services. Old storage space above the theatre's lobby had been transformed into a club, open nights after rehearsals concluded, solely accessible by an alley door, guarded by a former Iowa State defensive tackle. Patrons required a membership card to park in the designated lot, sworn to secrecy. Sayer's own office suite had been outfitted with an alternate entrance, to facilitate "auditions" for the specialized entertainers. Above that, some furnished rooms accommodated... patrons of more primitive arts.

Jody marveled how Sayer maintained the separate and distinct operations without cracking under the strain. Here he was, prepping the production of *Peter Pan* - appropriate, given his own childish foibles - then mounting dimly lit stairs to take two pole dancers to task for not netting their quota.

She couldn't help but smile at the irony.

That smile gradually faded, as more and more empty vodka bottles and baggies coated with white powder residue appeared in the trash basket under his desk.

His behavior, overall, seemed normal. The only complaints came from stunned parents when he let fly with choice expletives about the paint job on flats for the Neverland set. The "lost boys" learned some new words that evening!

Legal pad bearing notes on blocking and character development, Jody accompanied Sayer to the office once the youngsters were safely en route to their beds. She hadn't yet booted up her computer when she heard the click of glass on glass.

"Al, do you think you should?" she chided through the open door.

"You're not my wife, babe."

"God forbid! But, you really lost it tonight..."

Liter of vodka gripped by the neck, he presented an interesting silhouette on the threshold, with his shaggy brown mop, broad shoulders, trim wrestler's physique, distinctive nose and stern jowls ending in a prominent chin. "Didn't you think those trees looked like shit?"

"Sure, but they're volunteers..."

"And we have to tip toe on egg shells because their time and effort is appreciated? Give me a fuckin' break."

"Without them..."

"We'd have a better production hiring professionals."

"Which would cut into the profits."

Sayer guffawed, "This is a fuckin' non-profit, you ditz."

"The excess is reinvested in community projects..."

"Feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless? Some of them would be more conscientious about their work, if we paid them by the hour."

Even intoxicated, Sayer's logic merited consideration. "Why don't we start such a program?"

"You do it. The club needs my attention." He didn't quite reverse his steps, and stumbled sideways. Jody rushed to catch him; he slid his arm playfully around her waist. "Y'know, I love you, babe."

"You love everybody when you're like this."

“Except when I’m pissed.”

“Except then,” she concurred. Settling him on the throne-like chair - used in lieu of a casting couch, on various occasions - she pried his fingers off the bottle. “You don’t have any... blow around, do you?”

“You want to do a line?” he drawled.

“No, thanks.”

“I’m out, actually. Expecting a delivery around midnight.”

“You’re going to kill yourself, Al. Or, is that the point?” Jody perched on the desk’s edge. “Are you so disappointed in your career...”

“Career? This?” he snorted. “It doesn’t matter to you I’ll never work in legitimate theatre again...”

“You’ve implied as much in the past, but never explained why...”

“I fucked the producer’s wife, that’s why!”

Not a total shock to the woman, who realized he’d jump anything in skirts. That included most of the strippers in the club, and star-struck cast members - a few “jail bait”. Jody had to question her own motives for continuing to protect him from public scrutiny, when a prolonged prison sentence might enable him to kick his addictions and recalibrate his outlook on life.

Then again, she wouldn’t wish that fate on a dog.

The in-house phone buzzed, the club manager needing approval for a repeat patron to start a tab after his debit card had been declined. “Throw him out,” Sayer instructed, slamming the receiver on its cradle.

“Not good for business,” advised Jody.

“What’s he gonna do? Spread it around that he couldn’t get laid because he didn’t have the price? That’ll improve his reputation as vice president of the bank.” He rose, planting a sloppily passionate kiss on her lips, eyes smoldering. “You’re the only one who won’t do me. One of these days, you’ll have to explain *that* to me.”

“My... girlfriend wouldn’t like it,” the black-haired assistant chuckled.

“If you’re a lesbian, I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

“I’ve seen you with your shirt off. All that hair? You very well could be.”

They laughed together, before he mustered the wherewithal to activate the mechanism which rolled aside varnished pine paneling.

Left alone, Jody focused on the balancing the checkbook, before her eyelids grew heavy. She awoke to gunfire rattling the ceiling fixtures, and leapt from her chair.

Sayer’s door was locked from the inside. Fortunately, she’d had a spare key made, concealed beneath her keyboard. The inner room remained dark, a shaft

of light penetrating a gap in the opposite portal. She pushed it open and nearly stumbled over Sayer's groaning form at the base of the stairs.

A second shot deafened her; she ducked while simultaneously glancing up at the landing, where a woman fumbled with her pistol, cursing the jammed trigger.

"Is he dead?" she yelled.

"I... yes!" bluffed Jody.

"He'd better be, after what he did to my daughter!"

"Shit!"

The assassin had no opportunity to escape, as the club bouncer and a bartender broke through the stairwell door and relieved her of the weapon, pinning her against the banister and stuffing a towel in her mouth to muffle her screams.

"Boss? What do we do with her?" hollered a New England accented baritone.

"Hold her in one of the" - what had Sayer dubbed them? - "love nests."

"Right."

Ignoring the commotion above, Jody retreated to the office, switching on a floor lamp. This enabled her to determine Sayer's injuries did not stem from a bullet wound, but from his tumble down one flight.

"Do you think anything's broken?" she asked when those blue orbs reflected consciousness.

"Only my skull. God, what a headache!"

"Who... was she?"

"Fuck if I know."

Lifting his weighty bulk proved a chore for the diminutive female; had he not been drunk, the task might have proved easier, but more bodily damage might have occurred in the fall.

"You got lucky, Al," she observed, transporting him to a leather sofa in her space. "You could be on your way to hell right now."

"Oh, shut up."

"How'd she get into the club?"

"A couple guys distracted Eddie, and she sneaked in before the door closed."

"Careless."

"She... thought it was the stage door, and really freaked out when she saw what was going on. A good thing she didn't hurt anyone else when she whipped that gun out of her purse."

Jody sighed, "This is the end, then."

“What do you mean?” Sayer tried to prop himself up on one elbow, but fell back, dizzy. “Nothing’s done until I say it is.”

“When you turn her over to the police to face charges...”

“Who said that’ll happen?” he objected.

“It... only makes sense.”

“She’ll never leave this joint alive.”

Horrified, the woman recoiled. “You can’t mean that. What about her daughter? Her husband? Her family?”

“She shouldn’t have made such a big deal out of it. None of the girls I’ve done were virgins, for fuck’s sake. Why didn’t she go after the macho jock who despoiled her little girl in the first place?”

“Maybe she did.”

“Then, she’d already be behind bars.”

“Juries have... a different attitude about convicting those accused of defending their children...”

“Then, they’re fuckin’ stupid.” Abruptly, Sayer reached for his trouser pocket, extracting a plastic sandwich bag plump with cocaine. “Good, it didn’t break.”

“My God, how much is that?”

“A three day supply, or thereabouts.”

Jody attempted to snatch it away, but his reflexes prevented her. “Al, you can’t be serious.”

“If you don’t like it, babe, get out.”

“And leave you to commit cold-blooded murder, or possibly O.D? Sure, why not?”

Crossing to the desk, she grabbed her beaded clutch and strode toward the exit. Sayer lurched to intercept her.

“What... will you do?” he demanded, staggering backward.

“Go home, go to sleep, and forget I ever knew you.”

“What about...” He pointed upward.

“That’s your own affair. The police will figure it out soon enough.”

“They’ll haul you in for questioning, too. What will you tell them?”

“The truth.”

“Then” - he reached for her; she dodged his grip - “I can’t let you go.”

She seized the collar of his rumpled shirt and shoved him against a garish mural, effectively steadying him. “You know what your problem is, Al? You want to be Peter Pan. You never grew up, never took responsibility for your actions. Like so many men, you want to play around, and let someone else take the blame,

or clean up your mess. Well, you can't hide in Neverland any longer. Your time as a lost boy is over, and all you've done has come back to bite you in the ass." She released him, turning the doorknob. "Best of luck with that."

Instantly sober, he caught her wrist and twisted, wedging it against her spine. His chest pressed against hers, he kissed her with unrelenting determination. "You talk a good line," he growled between breaths. "But you'd have quit long since, if you didn't get off on the idea of mixing the legal with the illegal. If the cops haul me in, you'll be in the next cell, because you handled the money, fully aware where it came from." He planted his mouth on hers afresh. "So, we're in this together. If I'm Pan, you're my Wendy."

Jody gasped, in her heart, Sayer spoke the truth. Her head slumped on his shoulder as she wept. "I'll stay, if you agree we can't kill... whoever that is upstairs."

"Then, how do we solve this?" he prodded.

With a shudder, his assistant contemplated the cocaine. "Have your boys force her to do a couple lines, then drive her to Chicago and turn her loose on Michigan Avenue. Any story she tells the police will be suspect..."

"You're a genius, babe." Sayer caressed her tousled mane, eyes once more calm pools. "That's why I love you."

Jody straightened. "I doubt you're capable of loving anything, not even yourself." She opened the door, adding through grit teeth, "Just like Peter Pan."

Far From Home

Living in San Francisco's Chinatown reminded Zak of his decades in Hong Kong, attached to the U.S. Embassy. He could patronize any of the stores near Stockton Street, listening to conversations in many languages, including Mandarin and Cantonese, and respond like a native to the employees, who'd come to know him on sight.

The quiet, arthritic man would sip tea - he didn't eat much these days, thanks to stomach discomfort. Also, weird dreams haunted him, visions of being trapped in a jail cell with a single shaft of light illuminating blank walls on all sides. He heard voices beyond those concrete blocks, but no amount of concentration allowed him to understand their words.

So, he struggled to stay awake as long as possible each day, lingering in restaurants and coffee shops, even browsing the kiosks where trinkets were sold to thousands of tourists who visited the district each year.

He relished occasional strolls to Nob Hill, when his knees didn't ache. He'd gaze out over the bay and recall the junks with their squarish sails, trolling the waters for fish or ferrying Hong Kong residents from place to place.

A full life for an octogenarian whose mental capacities hadn't failed. He counted himself fortunate to interact with countless friends on a daily basis. The florist's assistant may have been thirty years his junior; he seriously considered asking her to dinner some night. She had a pleasant demeanor and infectious smile, always quick with an off-color joke.

The lone, bothersome aspect of this existence: the homeless and drunks who wandered the streets. He'd attempted on several occasions to assist them, collaborated with local agencies to fund programs. The numbers remained constant, however, and far too high.

Passing them money accomplished little. They had mental issues, or addictions to address. His experience with psychology amounted to two semesters in college, ages ago. He could sit and talk with them, but their oft-slurred speech or rambling thoughts reminded him too much of his nightly dreams, making his skin crawl.

He returned late to his apartment above a grocer's after enjoying a band at one of the area bars, though he sipped ginger ale instead of liquor through the show. Modern music didn't annoy him, as it did some elders. He distinguished a resemblance to Chinese melodies, except he never could explain quite how.

Zak brewed himself a fresh pot of coffee, settling in to watch cable news. He hoped to not close an eye until morning, but his body's exhaustion confirmed he would sleep, and awake screaming.

Sprawled on the sofa, an old movie droning on the television, his mind traveled to that confinement he sorely wished to avoid...

He struggled; his limbs would not move. Glancing down, he saw his arms and legs strapped to a metal chair in the middle of this cramped, dank chamber. He could not cry out, as if gagged. Such a wave of desperation washed upon him, he felt his heart would break.

A tear trickled down his wrinkled cheek.

From across the homey room in the nursing facility, Zelda rose. "Dad?" she hailed, optimistic. Kneeling beside the leather recliner, she repeated, "Dad?"

A gruff male snarled, "He's not in there anymore, hon. He doesn't even know you're here. Let's go home."

Clasping her father's gnarled hand, Zelda didn't budge. "The doctors told me Dementia with Lewy Bodies patients come and go with their cognitive functions. He might be trying to let me know he's conscious..."

"Bullshit," snapped her husband. "I've got a full day tomorrow at the office. If you're not in the car in five minutes, I'm leaving without you."

Reluctantly, Zelda rose, planting a kiss on the Zak's furrowed brow. "I love you, Dad."

Saved By the Comedian

It sounded like the beginning of a cheesy joke.

“A comedian was biking through Central Park...”

From his agent’s dour mien, Hugh realized the younger man wouldn’t believe the tale, yet he couldn’t have concocted such a plot for his best stand-up routine.

“You missed what might have been the most important on-air interview of your career,” barked the bleach-headed rep, sipping from his Starbuck’s cup as he gazed out ceiling high windows at the bustling city fifteen stories below.

“How many times do I have to apologize?” sighed Hugh, clad in his tie-dyed cycling jersey and black tights, goggles dangling from his neck, brown mop matted with perspiration. “I’ll go on the show tomorrow and explain...”

“They don’t want you now.” Nathan shuffled to the brass-trimmed teak desk and settled in a buttoned leather chair. “Not unless you tell me the truth.”

“I already did.”

“Well, try it again. You may squeeze more actual facts into the narrative.”

Hugh muttered, “Smart ass.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Leaning forward in the armchair opposite this obnoxious - yet effective - hireling, elbows resting on his knees, the comedian exhaled to calm his nerves. “I went for my usual ride at six o’clock this morning.”

To Nathan’s consternation, Hugh’s story didn’t change. He related how, pedaling at moderate speed near the lake, a woman abruptly walked into his path. He veered to avoid a collision, jumping from the seat a second before the titanium frame slammed into a tree.

When he recovered his composure, uninjured, he spun toward the path, seeing no one. “At first, I thought my eyes might’ve been playing tricks on me with the pre-dawn shadows.”

“No such luck, eh?” scoffed Nathan.

“Right. I discovered the woman slumped on a bench near the Bow Bridge. I figured the bike must’ve grazed her, but she didn’t realize she’d been hurt and passed out from weakness.”

“You didn’t see any blood?”

“Like I said, the light wasn’t good.” Hugh continued with details of how he tried to rouse the unconscious female, unsuccessfully. He would’ve called the authorities, but he’d left his cell phone at his apartment. He sat beside her, intent

on waiting until she woke, and noticed a set of folded papers peeking from her tattered coat pocket.

“I thought they might identify her.” The sheets, printed from a computer, proved to be a manifesto of dark, personal insights into human existence. The last page, however, featured instructions on the disposition of her body after death.

That’s when Hugh grasped she wasn’t merely unconscious; she might be dead.

And, not through any fault of his.

He fingered her limp wrist for a pulse - extremely thready. Rather than leave her alone, or petition any of the few passersby to remain close, he swept her into his arms and carried her across the bridge to where a taxi idled while its driver smoked a cigarette.

Hugh gave him an address while loading the woman in the rear seat. “A bad choice, I know, taking her to my place,” he admitted to Nathan. “I guess I didn’t want to be involved in a media circus at the hospital.”

“Understandable, I suppose.”

Three doctors lived in the same building, only one would respond to his summons at that hour. Using the bedside lamp, he checked this patient’s pupils: fixed and dilated. Her respiration and heart rate were barely detectable.

“It’s not like the movies, where the empty pill bottle is on the night stand, or on the floor next to the chair,” lamented the medical expert. “Without knowing what she took, I can’t do much. Emergency personnel can draw blood and determine what toxins...”

Hugh countered by asking what could be done to save her.

“I could lose my liability insurance if I give you any unofficial advice,” came the reply.

Thus, it transpired that Hugh perched on the edge of the king-sized mattress, cradling the woman’s hand in his, commenting on her philosophy that the world wasn’t just going to hell, it was already there.

“Some of her ideas were... intriguing,” he told Nathan. “Happiness is a fallacy, and contentment is the optimal state of being, for instance. Others, I didn’t agree with. That nothing we do has any real meaning, and nature will wipe humanity off the planet and start over...”

“Crazy, if you want my opinion,” grumbled the agent.

Hugh kept his vigil past noon, himself dozing occasionally. “I felt a jerk on my arm around three o’clock. Her green eyes were staring at me in shock, and her horrified look...”

“Why have you done this?” she’d raged, trying to make a fist, but too weak.

After a prolonged discussion of the day’s events, she defiantly confirmed her suicide attempt. “If you try to have me committed...”

“I won’t,” Hugh pledged. “It’s not my place to judge a person’s sanity.” He’d presented her with the papers. “I’m sorry. I read these.”

“They’re supposed to be read, by the cops who hauled my corpse to the morgue - and the newspapers.”

“Why?”

“To prove nothing will ever change.” She scrutinized the messy room. “You remember the Occupy Wall Street movement? Did that accomplish anything?”

“No.”

“Did our troops in Afghanistan improve the lives of those people?”

Hugh shrugged.

“I could go on... Might I trouble you for a drink of water?”

A tumbler was brought from the kitchen; she drained it in one gulp.

“There’s something I don’t get,” stated Hugh. “In what you wrote, you debunk the notion of God, pick apart human tendencies toward greed and addiction, but there’s no mention of love.”

“Another fallacy. What people consider love is often something entirely different, like lust, or envy. Parents, for the most part, don’t love their children. They want their children to behave a certain way, to have a ‘better life’ than they had. They take responsibility for their children - and some don’t even do that - and want to treat them like puppets.”

“Wow, that’s harsh.”

“It’s true. In the old days, marriages were arranged for practical reasons. Love didn’t enter into it. Both parties had duties to perform, and did so accordingly. With the introduction of love into the mix, the duties were forgotten, and lust took the fore. When the lust fades, the couple divorces.”

“Haven’t you ever experienced true love?”

“My mother was an alcoholic. My father busied himself with work and many projects, to stay out of her way. I was beaten and, when I expressed a desire to pursue a given career, told I would not be allowed to do so. Plans had been made for my future. I balked, and was summarily banished. I... had men in my life at various times; they were flawed and stupid. Men never grow up. They may act mature for extended periods, but they always revert to five year olds fighting in a sandbox.”

Hugh sat, silent. The woman's eyelids fluttered, and he suddenly comprehended that she had swallowed more pills with the water he'd provided.

He shook her violently. "Hey, wake up!"

"Why?" she drawled.

"You can't die!"

"You can't stop me."

"Wanna bet?" Hugh dragged her off the bed and hauled her into the bathroom, where he positioned her above the toilet, then applied a heimlich maneuver. The contents of her stomach erupted into the bowl.

"Damn you!" she cursed, snatching a towel off the rack to wipe her mouth. "You have no right..."

"I'm not going to have some lunatic kick off in my apartment. That kind of publicity, I don't need."

She tried to straighten; her knees buckled. Hugh caught her before she hit the tiles, lowered the toilet lid and balanced her atop it.

"So, this is all about you," she rasped. "I might have known."

"No, it's about *you*. What I read... you have a brilliant mind. You could write books..."

"I have. No one bought them."

"Go on a speaking tour."

"No one would listen."

Hugh pressed, "Why are you so negative?"

"The world situation - from individual flaws to global turmoil - is negative, and there's no way to reverse the trend, without annihilating the species."

"Fine. Go ahead and off yourself."

The comedian stormed from the chamber.

"That's when I phoned you," he recounted to Nathan.

"That was nearly five o'clock. You didn't get here until past seven."

"She... thought the jacuzzi would relax her, I suppose. Make the pills work faster. I must've fallen asleep in the living room, and when I heard the water running..."

Hugh had struggled to pull the woman from the sunken tub; she hadn't bothered to remove her clothes. Sprawled in a puddle on the floor, he lay his ear on her chest, hearing nothing. He began CPR compressions, and tilted her head back to breathe into her lungs.

Within two minutes, she bolted upright, coughing until she vomited again. Coupled with a ghostly paleness, her scowl frightened him.

“When are you going to stop interfering?” she demanded.

“When you decide to live.”

“You haven’t given me any reasons worth considering.”

“Marry me.”

Even Nathan shook his head at his client’s pronouncement. “What ever made you say such a thing?”

“Desperation. She’d never known genuine love, her views jaded beyond belief. At least, it made her laugh. A delightful titter.”

“Where is she now?” queried Nathan.

“Memorial Hospital. I convinced her to get herself checked, and I’ll pick her up on my way home.”

“What? For the sake of your career, you should avoid this broad like the plague...”

Hugh rose. “We may not get married, but we’ll be sharing my place for awhile. She confessed laughter might be the key to changing the world, which gives her a glimmer of hope, a reason to live.”

For now.

The Devil in the Details

Trudging down unlit, warped stairs that Saturday morning, I massaged a kink from my neck, having awoken half off the twin mattress when my alarm clock erupted in its daily cacophony. I'd showered and eaten a light breakfast of corn flakes and orange juice, and had a day's business to conduct before I would touch another meal.

Laying my shoulder into the shop door, I shoved it wide; overnight rain had lent enough moisture to warp the wood - again. I switched on fluorescent ceiling fixtures, illuminating the stock of boxes and plastic cases lining row after row of metal shelves. The local newspaper, earlier that month, had pronounced mine the "finest collection of classic Hollywood films" in a three state area, and suddenly my clientele grew from a select gross of regular patrons to those who'd drive hundreds of miles to view recordings not even available on the internet.

Notice I said "view" and not "rent". When I decided to become an entrepreneur, be my own boss, I swore I would not let any of the treasures I'd amassed over 30 years to leave this *sancto sanctorum*. "The Vault" - painted in large gold lettering on display windows facing Main Street - served as a library, so to speak. For a modest monthly membership fee, customers could transport any number of movies through a curtained portal into what once had been an ample, albeit cluttered, storeroom. Eight 10' x 12' cubicles, constructed with sound-proof insulation and high definition televisions, provided a place to kick back on a comfortable recliner, operating VCR and DVD players by remote control.

Most days, I also provided popcorn and soft drinks.

This particular Saturday, I noticed petals from large, white snowball flowers - cut off the neighbor's bush as a gift for me by their precocious son - created a white coating on the former soda fountain's warped counter. Gingerly removing the vase to the bathroom, I managed to transfer ailing blossoms to the trash without their stems dripping on the floor tiles. Then, I emptied foetid water into the toilet.

The plastic receptacle also served as a repository for the brown and dried remnants of the flowers, which I gathered into a pile and scraped off the counter's edge, earning myself a splinter for my efforts.

I swore. Unusual for me, since giving up the stress of the corporate world reduced the need for four-lettered expressions of my frustration.

Before tweezers could be located to remove the offending sliver, a knock on the front door distracted me. Good ol' Ralph, the ex-high-school athlete who wore shorts with his USPS uniform shirt on this warm spring day - ostensibly to

show off his muscular legs - delivered a parcel which would not fit through the mail slot.

Thanking him, I left the door ajar to catch the delightful breeze. No sooner had I unwrapped the order of obscure 1950s-era VHS tapes, than familiar faces began appearing, searching for their weekend “fix” of good entertainment.

Not a superior income, this enterprise, but never a dull moment. More than anything a willing ear to listen to stories of when an individual had first seen a certain movie, or its effect on their teenaged years, I’d deliberated writing a book based on the frequently unsavory revelations. I recurrently felt like a bartender or a priest and, when the last end credits had rolled, the titles returned to their respective categories, I relished the evening silence.

An almost mystical atmosphere enveloped the shop once the deadbolt secured the entrance. Believing as I did not in a god or deity, I sensed in those moments the universal energies gradually resume their neutral state. A variety of positive and negative vibrations disturbed the flow as bodies came and went, and I’d always felt it important to wait until equilibrium descended on the premises before climbing the stairs to my stark apartment.

Having bid farewell to my final customer at 5:30 PM, 45 minutes elapsed without attaining the requisite peace. I inspected the viewing room equipment; nothing anomalous there. Snatching a broom to sweep the floors, I plucked a few candy wrappers from where they’d blown beneath the counter, straightening to find myself face-to-face with an intruder.

“I knew it!” escaped my lips. I sensed something hadn’t been right, but where this man had hidden himself over the course of the past hour, I could not guess.

For that matter, I hadn’t seen him in the shop through the course of the day. I glanced past him at the door; the deadbolt had not been forced.

Fear mingled with confusion, the moreso because I vaguely recognized this lean, sharp-jawed countenance, intense brown eyes, and straight nose broadening slightly at the tip. His short, blow-dried bronze hair was parted on the left and dangled over his forehead. He wore a black turtleneck sweater, slacks and polished loafers, though the temperature had reached 70 degrees that afternoon.

My brain reeling, I could only stammer, “Sorry, we’re closed.”

“I’m here on business of a different sort.”

That voice caused me to shudder, a unique tenor with a light British accent which had, periodically, haunted my dreams after I’d wasted a Sunday - my sole day off - curled up in my own private theatre for a marathon featuring the likes of *It!*, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, or *Kidnapped*.

Unwittingly, I recoiled, doubting my own sanity. “What... kind of business?”

Negative energies, almost tangible, emanated from this manifestation of a middle-aged Roddy McDowall, yet he smiled innocuously with even, white teeth. He slid onto one of the red naugahyde stools and assessed my collection. “Does this magnificent ensemble include *Forever, Darling?*”

“With James Mason and Lucille Ball? Sure. But, what has that to do with... your business?”

“That particular plot involves the leading lady seeing visions of an angel, who appears in the guise of her favorite movie star.”

“Correct.” No more had I spoken, than icy fingers crept up my spine. No angel, this.

“I see you understand my presence.”

My tongue felt swollen, my mouth dry, but I managed, “Frankly, no. I don’t believe in supernatural beings...”

“Ah, then attribute this visit to a subtle manipulation of the ether, of which all living creatures become part upon their demise.”

“Are you saying, you’ve drawn the essence of Roddy McDowall from the stream of energy, to materialize in his body?”

Left eyebrow arched, he reached out a well-manicured hand and caressed my cheek. Absolutely corporeal, this.

I pinched myself, hoping against hope I’d fallen asleep and was caught in a nightmare.

“That will do you no good.”

Pain in my right bicep confirmed his statement. “What... is it you want?”

“Your soul, of course.”

My knees gave way, and I grasped the wall for support. “I... I’ve done nothing...”

“You have, on many occasions, expressed a desire to live a number of distinct fantasies based on these celluloid fabrications...”

For the second time that day, I uttered an expletive. Whoever - whatever - this was, he was inside my head, privy to my darkest dreams.

Feigning nonchalance, I countered, “Who doesn’t watch a movie and wish...”

“True, true. Your whole reason for leaving your previous occupation, however - for moving to this... remote hamlet - was not to cater to a singular clientele, but to indulge your own romantic delusions by surrounding yourself

with an endless array of mirages.” He spun the stool; I could not escape the gaze of those brown orbs. “I can make them real.”

Detecting the lie, I nonetheless asked, “How real?”

He rose, embracing me before I could resist. The kiss he planted on my lips resurrected memories of the bizarre film *Arnold*, where McDowall’s character does likewise to Stella Stevens.

I hadn’t been kissed like that since college. Despite basking in such passion at the time, that same classmate had also physically abused me in an alcoholic rage, souring me on interpersonal relationships. Thus, I’d remained single through the decades.

The realization my own arms held something... something... nefarious gradually penetrated the emotional upheaval short-circuiting rational thought. I wedged my hands against his chest, shoving him across the room.

“You cannot honestly claim to have not enjoyed that,” he oozed, smirking wickedly.

No, I couldn’t. Nor did I want the gesture repeated.

“Come, then. Every dream can be yours...”

“I don’t like the price.” Turning toward the shelves, I tentatively stroked worn VHS cases. “What happens to us after we die?”

“Do you mean, is there a heaven or a hell?”

I nodded.

“Each person makes his own heaven, or her own hell, right here on earth.”

“So, once we’re dead, we simply continue on as before?”

“In terms you’ll grasp: if you generated positive energies, things will be... more pleasant than if you emitted a preponderance of the negative.”

“And those who maintained a balance?”

“Oblivion.”

That declaration chilled me anew. For so long, life had seemed a futile waste to me, nothing good could be accomplished beyond temporary enjoyment or respite from suffering. The poor continued to starve; the wealthy increased their riches. Civil wars raged, and new governments achieved little more than their predecessors. I’d been determined to remove myself from the chaos, to avoid the turmoil...

“Indeed, you’re well on your way to a banal eternity,” he surmised aloud, scowling. “Why not immerse yourself in a reality of your own making - relishing every second, instead of dreading the sunrise - before it’s too late?”

“How... long would I have?”

Lips twitched in a grin of anticipation. “The terms are... negotiable.”

I'd heard that before, in too many movies! The secret of any deal with the devil: details, details, details! Leave nothing to interpretation. Cover all the bases.

Crossing to the cash register, I tore a sheet from the notebook where I kept count of the movies used each day. Writing with deliberate clarity, I listed twenty specific points, rereading and editing them, and running a duplicate on the dwarf copy machine prior to imparting the document to my guest.

How I prayed - to what or whom, I wasn't sure - he'd deny me due to the harshness of my demands.

Glancing at the wall clock, I noticed not a second had elapsed since this... being had arrived in the shop. For the first time, though, I saw his face twitch uncertainly as he perused the items, high cheekbones quivering.

"Had I known your... appetite for this sort of thing was so insatiable, my dear, I..."

"Never would've come?" I concluded.

"Indeed. Are you willing to discuss a compromise?"

"No."

"Ten years, or until bored?" he quoted with obvious distaste. "Who's to determine when you become bored?"

"Me, of course. I can perfectly predict I'll wake up one morning and decide I've had enough. At that point, you'd be free to collect."

"Why me?"

"Because you've... already proven yourself interesting, and skilled in areas I deem vital to the enterprise."

"You make this sound like a screen test."

"On your own initiative, you auditioned for the role."

"I... suppose I did." Even fraught with doubt, his voice thrilled me. "You should've been a screenwriter."

"Translation: I've written you into a corner from which you cannot escape."

"It's... definitely not the standard contract."

Chuckling, I shook my head. "If you wanted the standard contract, you could've paid a call on any poor sod battling stage four cancer. You came to me for a reason: you craved a challenge."

"A challenge, an adventure," he admitted, extending manicured fingers. "Deal."

The bargain was not sealed - yet. I relieved him of the paper, laying both the original and the copy side by side on the counter. Offering him a pen, I warned him a contract not bearing the actual names of the signatories would be invalid.

“Damn your head for legalities,” he cursed, inscribing his mark in an unfamiliar script, above the phrase, “Duly Authorized Agent.”

“Self-protection,” I retorted, accepting the pen. “What shall I call you?”

“Mac is as good a name as any.”

Mac - short for Roddy McDowall.

Accompanied by a flash of lightning and deafening thunderclap, we embarked on the very adventure for which we’d both yearned. From one exotic location to another, on ship and land, we crossed swords with 18th century adversaries - myself no “damsel in distress” requiring rescue, he with the flare of Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks. He danced me across 1930s Europe, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly inspiring his feet. We encountered dangers in war-torn Africa, and on snow-capped Himalayas, where the bravery of Clark Gable and Stewart Granger came in handy. Traveling the Silk Road, we met every nationality and viewed magnificent vistas.

Romance filled the nights, Cary Grant and Richard Burton among those whose techniques were infused into my constant companion. As we lay side by side in whatever accommodations were convenient - deserted island or posh Paris suite - I listened to him prattle on about that day’s events, a child discovering the heretofore unknown world. He would squeeze my hand with joy, as I’d always suspected he would.

While traveling through the Middle East one sultry summer afternoon, we found ourselves caught in the crossfire of a rebel uprising. Bullets ricocheted off stone dwellings and whistled past as we lay prostrate on a dirt thoroughfare. Suddenly, I glimpsed an approaching shadow, and hissed, “Play dead.”

That bronzed head cocked back and he muttered, “What?”

And took a projectile between the eyes.

He didn’t need to pretend now; he’d really died.

Anger - an emotion I hadn’t experienced since the commencement of these escapades - engulfed me. Before the militant could kick me to affirm my lifeless state, I rolled toward another corpse and commandeered his semi-automatic rifle. Scrambling to my feet, I sprayed the entire clip of ammunition in an arc, killing at least thirteen men.

Then, I rushed to Mac, flipping him onto his spine. Surprisingly - or, not, when I think about it - no blood stained his skin. His eyes open, he eventually blinked and coughed from the dust.

“You... saved me,” he croaked. “You killed... to save me.”

“Sure, why not?”

He propped himself on his right elbow and scrutinized the devastation.
“How can you be so callous...”

“Death is what it is. It comes to everyone, eventually. But, I wanted you alive, because I’ve never had so much fun in my life.”

“Neither have I,” confessed Mac. “And I’ve existed for aeons.”

Pulling him upright, a violent tremor propelled us into a petrified embrace.
“Earthquake?” I ventured.

“No, nothing that simple. I’ve... made a grave error...”

“How so?”

“I... have allowed my enjoyment of this mission to blunt my sense of duty. Charged with obtaining your soul, I acquiesced when you revised the standard contract, then did nothing to ensure the onset of boredom, whereby you would surrender to your inevitable fate. My... superiors are not pleased.”

“What can they do about it?”

“I’m not... sure of anything, except that it won’t be pleasant. My sort is not supposed to become attached...”

“Attached?”

“Nora, do you trust me?” he queried.

A damnable question from the very devil himself! “Yes.”

“Then, know that I love you, kiss me, and prepare for all hell to break loose.”

Even in the most intimate scenarios, Mac had never spoken those words - and I understood why. Love is not part of a devil’s nature. For that proclamation to be uttered, I could not imagine the retribution he would face.

Regardless, I did as requested. We clung to each other, and his lips sent fires through my soul, as they often had. Then, invisible forces tore us apart. I saw Mac in the clutches of two horrific, red winged creatures, dragged into a chasm caused by the tremor, ostensibly to the recesses of what some call Hades.

A basso profundo reverberated along the street. “You have corrupted one whose task it is to corrupt the innocent. You have twisted evil to good, and rent asunder the ether. Your contract is hereby revoked, and you shall be restored to your previous life, without further encumbrances.”

This announcement briefly confounded me, but I recalled hundreds of movies I’d viewed over the decades. “Restore Mac to me, then!” I shouted. “If he’s been corrupted, he’s of no practical use to you, and we can revel in our togetherness!”

I received no reply. Instead, I was instantly transported to The Vault, where the wall clock began ticking once more. My right palm itched; that damned

splinter protruded from my skin. What seemed like years, the townsfolk and my customers would acknowledge as a mere second, unaware I'd absented myself from their midst.

Steady rain beating against second story glass panes, I slept badly that night. Tears periodically wet my pillow, when I wasn't reliving that ghastly finale...

Sunday, I stared out at the thriving little metropolis, in no mood to watch any movies. No movie, for that matter, could match how I'd lived in Mac's company. Perhaps the greatest hell was dealing with a humdrum routine...

The deadbolt snapped open Monday morning, and a few regulars wandered in before noon. Every first of the month, I spent lulls totaling membership receipts. My peripheral vision, this day, registered unusual motion near the corner shelves. I glanced up to see Mac, smiling tranquilly.

"What the devil..." I snapped.

"Devil no more, and I thank you for that." He extracted the original contract from his hip pocket, unfolded it on the counter and pointed to the last entry. "When I signed, that clause concerned me..."

"You damned me for such legalese, and you were the one who was almost damned."

"Indeed."

I'd covered my ass, as the saying goes: "Should the party of the first part attempt to prematurely revoke this contract, the party of the second part shall receive final and binding compensation of her own choosing, which can neither be negotiated or denied."

"You chose me. Why?" puzzled Mac.

Striding to the display window, I flipped the "Open" sign to "Closed" and locked the door. I retraced my steps and took both Mac's hands in mine, kissing him lightly. "Let's go have some fun."

And we have, ever since.

Cross Country

Thwack. Thwack.

“Damn!”

Kate Bronner slowed to a stop, sinking on the grass beside the bike path to inspect her damaged shoe. The sole’s glue had given way, tread flopping like a landed fish.

“Need help?” The rest of Redwood High’s cross country team had vanished around the last curve near the school. Eddie Nyland brought up the rear, on “clean up duty”.

“No,” replied the teen.

Jogging in place, the perspiration-drenched, brown-haired senior squinted pale blue eyes at the mangled footwear. “I’ve never seen Adidas fall apart.”

“You ever see Adidas nine years old?” Kate knew the answer before she voiced the question. Rich kids in Marin got new running gear every couple months, whether they needed it or not.

Rising, she trekked the asphalt track in her stockings. Eddie remained close.

“I don’t need a keeper,” she protested.

“I... wanted to tell you how much I admire what you’re doing. Not every girl would have the guts to fight so hard for what she wants.”

“It wasn’t much of a fight. I simply had to convince Coach Washburn I could run as well as my brother.”

“Yeah, that was...” Eddie had spun toward her, running backward. “You want a ride home?”

“Sure.”

Kate grabbed his arm, preventing him from bumping a tree trunk as the path veered. They laughed together, and hiked side-by-side to the vast brick structure.

“Meet you out front in ten minutes,” Eddie directed.

That didn’t give Kate time to shower; she didn’t mind. The locker room facilities left much to be desired. She dumped the contents of her assigned cubicle into her backpack, pausing only to slip into Birkenstock sandals.

Eddie’s candy red 1957 Chevy surprised his passenger. “Your dad’s?”

“My grandfather’s. He left it to me in his will.”

“Sweet.”

“Not really. It only comes out when the weather’s really nice. The rest of the time, I hoof it.”

“Poor baby.”

“Where to?”

Cranking down the window, Kate provided an address.

Eddie steered south toward the bay, winding through streets until he braked at the curb near a Spanish-style dwelling. “Wow, cool,” he commented of the stucco and tile, surrounded by a high wrought iron fence and sculptured gardens.

“My mom calls it ‘The Bungalow,’” explained Kate with distaste. “At least...”

Sensing her tension, Eddie prompted, “At least?”

“It means I can stay in school.”

“How so?”

“Come on in.”

The driver obliged, awed by parquet tile in the foyer, and the expensive furnishings.

“You want a soda?” Kate offered, dropping her load in the living room corner.

“Ice water would be fine.”

“Suit yourself.”

She returned to find Eddie admiring bric-a-brac on the fireplace mantle. Handing him a glass, she sipped chocolate milk.

“Your folks at work?” queried the guest.

“Probably.”

These cagey responses irritated Eddie. “What gives?”

“If I tell you, you can’t breathe a word to anyone.”

He raised his right hand in pledge. “I promise.”

“I live here alone.”

“Huh?”

“After... Matt died, Mom refused to stay. She insisted Dad put the place on the market, but every realtor they contacted declined the listing, saying no one would want a house with such a history. Besides, I didn’t want to leave Redwood before graduation. So, Dad got himself transferred to the Denver office, and they left me to care for the place.”

Eddie recalled the story, which made local news broadcasts and all the Bay Area papers. Matt Bronner, rising basketball star and avid runner, had finished a grueling game against Central High, driven home, and collapsed of a heart attack in his kitchen.

Age 18.

“Those shoes that crapped out on me - they were his.”

“Really?”

“He considered them lucky. Won his first meet with them.”

“He... must’ve had small feet.”

“When he was 13, yeah.”

“Ah!” Eddie put the pieces together. “That’s why they’re nine years old.”

Kate smiled, a pleasant expression.

The young man flopped on a buttoned leather sofa. “So, you can throw some great parties, with no parents around.”

“I don’t have time. With school, homework, cross country, and a part-time job on weekends...”

“A job?”

“Sure. All the utility bills go directly to Dad’s accountant, but I have to earn my own spending money. That was the arrangement.”

“Harsh.”

“Not really.”

“Well, if you’re cool with it.”

Kate bristled. “Eddie, would you mind getting up?”

“Why?”

“You’re sweating on the couch.”

He leapt off the cushions. “Sorry. I didn’t stop to shower...”

“Neither did I, and I feel really grubby, so if you don’t mind...”

“You ready for the physics test tomorrow?”

“As ready as I can be.”

“Ol’ man Hargrove lost me about three weeks back. You wouldn’t be willing to...”

“Help you cram?”

He dug in his 49ers duffel. “Go over the last couple chapters with me.”

Reluctantly, Kate agreed. “First, you can use the bathroom down the hall. I’ll get changed in my room.” En route, she called, “We can call out for Chinese...”

The girl spent less than ten minutes in the shower, whereas Eddie lingered under the pulsating jets for twice that. Then, he started yelling, “Where’s the towels?” reminding Kate she hadn’t put clean linens in her parent’s room since they’d moved.

She grabbed a stack from the linen closet and knocked on the door. Eddie pulled it wide, revealing his solid, dripping frame.

Kate didn't flinch or act embarrassed. She'd seen her brother naked - by accident - and other guys on the cross country team made a habit of trying to shock her with their antics.

Wearing a school spirit t-shirt and jeans, Eddie joined Kate in the stainless steel and marble kitchen, where she'd laid out textbooks and a laptop computer.

"Favor for favor," she proclaimed.

Rubbing his shaggy brown mop, he grumbled, "Depends."

"The only reason I've ever needed a man."

A cold shiver ran down Eddie's spine, instantly dispelled when Kate broke out a jar of pickles.

"I've never been able to open these."

He gaped at the lid. "They're two years old, well past their expiration."

"I know."

"You don't plan to eat them?"

"Of course not! I want to dump them, so I can recycle the glass."

Relieved, he popped the seal, a foul smell wafting toward the ceiling.

"I meant to ask you," he said, dropping onto a stool at the island, "how come you're so fast on the track?"

The garbage disposal grinding, she stated, "Matt trained me. I adopted his stride."

"You think you can train me?"

"I don't see why not. We're the same height..."

Eddie's turn to squirm. "You saying I'm short?"

"No. But, you're no Kareem."

"Thanks," he snapped.

"Dinner will be here in a few. Let's get started."

Kate exhibited the patience of a saint through the evening, a natural teacher. She had the ability to translate complex scientific concepts into terms Eddie's more mechanically-inclined brain could grasp. She peppered the discussion with humor, even using Chinese dumplings as examples of formulae involving inertia and gravity.

Toting dishes to the sink, the pair both felt amply prepared for the next day's exam. Eddie washed while Kate dried, and they joked about their teachers through the years at Redwood.

"Mrs. Tishman is the weirdest," stated Kate. "There are days when I think she dropped a little too much acid during the sixties."

"Her take on history is definitely... unique. Showing *Ben Hur* to illustrate injustices in the Roman empire was a bit over the top."

“Never know what to expect, and too often, she doesn’t remember what assignment she gave.”

“Tommy Vance took advantage of that, remember? He’d interrupt just as the bell rang, so she couldn’t announced the pages or pass out the questions,” Eddie chuckled.

“We got about half as far as the other classes that semester.”

He rinsed a stack of plates, arranging them in the drainer, when their hands brushed.

“I’d... better get going,” he stammered. “Mom will be wondering where I am.” His fingers pruned, he wiped them on his jeans and strode toward the bedroom, to retrieve his bag.

Kate met him near the front door. “I’ve... enjoyed myself. It’s nice to have someone around.”

“Me, too. If I score a ‘B’ tomorrow, I’ll buy you a chocolate shake after the next meet.”

“I meant to ask you...” Kate fumbled, gripping the brass knob.

Eddie’s blue eyes flashed. “What?”

“How come you always bring up the rear on the team runs?”

His smile intrigued her, almost as if his upper lip disappeared, showing a slight gap between his front teeth. He quipped, “Gives me a perfect view of your ass.”

Kate snorted and blushed. Eddie leaned over and kissed her lightly.

Her reaction to the gesture stunned him. Fingers entwined in his hair, she pulled him close and assaulted his lips with hers. Difficult not to respond to such passion.

After five minutes, both panting, he broke free. “What’s the deal?” he gasped.

“All night, I’ve caught you watching me. Checking me out like some guys do strippers in a bar. I thought you wanted...”

“I... didn’t think you... wanted me.”

Kate confessed, “I’ve wanted you since freshman year. Especially after you punched out Linc Palmer when he insulted me at Matt’s memorial.”

“You... never said anything.”

“My life was such a mess... then, and now. And, you had your pick of the sluts...”

“I don’t like sluts.”

“You seemed to like the one you took to the junior prom.”

“Her dad and mine... were in negotiations on a business deal.”

Kate smirked. “Like an arranged marriage?”

He nodded.

“Then...”

So slender, his arms more than encompassed her, and they surrendered to their mutual attraction.

Eddie’s cell phone buzzed repeatedly, in silent mode, through the night. He responded to his father’s text in the wee hours: “Sorry, study group went late. Crashed at Dan’s.”

Through the first hour physics test, the pair kept glancing at each other, and snickering. Mr. Hargrove suspected some manner of cheating, and required them to remain after the bell.

He didn’t have to interrogate them, standing hand in hand before his lab table. He’d seen students in this condition countless times.

“Get out,” he snarled.

The pair exited, planning a busy weekend. As they’d lain on the king mattress, sunrise visible through sheer curtains, they’d concurred, “For as long as it feels good.”

And, it felt good through their graduation, and even after they both started at Stanford that August, both earning scholarships.

To Kate, it made a world of difference, having someone close. Her entire outlook on life transformed, even to the point she no longer resented her parents.

Possibilities stretched in an endless panorama before the young woman. She finally stepped from her brother’s shadow, and determined not to ignore her potential.

Full Color Illustration

No fun, pneumonia. Mitch last suffered a bout 25 years earlier, at the same time his mother died of cancer. That had been a... bizarre episode. Trying not to cough in people's faces at the wake, supporting his father as best he could.

This go 'round, even two weeks after he'd taken his last antibiotic, the cartoonist had to stop drawing when his diaphragm spasmed repeatedly, giving literal meaning to the phrase, "Coughing up a lung." Yet, behind on his submissions to the syndicate, he couldn't lounge around, recuperating.

As much as his weakened body demanded he do so.

He hoped his father, deceased 15 years, didn't object to the use of the heirloom architect's desk to create his comics. Somehow, it gave Mitch a sense that his art had merit beyond a paycheck.

Twitching muscles warned him of another spell. He laid aside his pencil before finishing the bubble on the second frame, spun the stool away from the paper, and prepared himself.

No sense resisting.

A tidal wave slamming against him couldn't have felt worse. He gripped the table's edge for balance, shaking ink bottles and pens in an old coffee can like an earthquake.

One final hack sent him toppling backward; he must've passed out momentarily for, when he opened his eyes, he thought the original caricatures from his current strip had landed atop him.

Recovering his composure, he realized they weren't two dimensional images, at all. They *stood* over him, gazing down, their faces conveying concern.

"What the fuck?" grumbled Mitch.

Dave, the blustery main character, muttered, "We'd say the same, but the papers wouldn't print it."

Mitch glanced around. Besides Dave, with his black hair, brown eyes and hokey grin, he recognized Patti, blonde and alluring, as cartoons go. Stash, the elder statesman - grey and stooped - hovered beside her. Acid, the spotted mutt, bounded up to lick his face.

"Weird," he sighed, sitting upright.

His studio apartment no longer surrounded him. Brightly colored backgrounds - a Sunday edition, since weekday issues ran in black and white - depicted the landscape he'd imagined for this crew of social misfits, based on high school friends and co-workers he'd met doing the starving artist gig in San Francisco.

Dave's three-fingered hand reached down to lift Mitch off the pseudo-grass.

"What happened?" queried the latter.

"Hell if I know. You were barking so hard, you may have blown yourself into our dimension."

"That's ludicrous."

"See for yourself." Patti pulled a make-up compact from her tacky pink sequined clutch.

Mitch peered into the mirror. "Whoa!" he gasped. His brown hair stuck straight out from a bulbous head, chin excessively pointy with a huge schnoz. So blue his eyes, he averted his gaze. "Who drew this creep?"

"You did," responded Stash, admittedly based on Mitch's father.

"Remember, in fourth grade, you tried a self-portrait..."

"Which you burned." Mitch corrected himself immediately. "Which Dad tossed in the fireplace."

"Still, that's how you saw yourself."

"Fine. Hideous, but fine. So, how do I get out of here?"

Even the dog shrugged along with his companions.

"What do you do here all day?" Mitch prodded.

Patti stated, "Whatever you want us to do."

"Sounds boring."

The comment met with noncommittal silence.

An abrupt weakness in his knees caused Dave and Stash to catch Mitch before he collapsed. Patti brought a chair, and Acid jumped on Mitch's lap once he settled on the seat.

Stroking the animal's unusually textured coat gave him a bit of comfort in this unbelievable hallucination. He considered the situation, and realized his lungs no longer ached - if he had lungs. Still, he had to escape.

"This isn't just a dream?" he vocalized, for his own sanity.

Countered Stash, "Do you dream in color?"

"Sometimes."

"Then, it might be."

"Pinch me."

Patti volunteered for that task, following the pain with a soothing peck on his lips.

Mitch rubbed his arm where a blue mark was already appearing. "Well, that proves I'm not asleep."

In the lull which followed, having these figures linger, staring at him, made the artist edgy. “Do you guys mind getting lost? I need to think.”

“We do what you tell us,” affirmed Dave, and they moved away, eventually blending with the vivid scenery.

Acid remained, and Mitch recalled the black Cocker Spaniel of that name he’d owned as a teen. The spastic energy, wagging his nonexistent tail so hard, Mitch thought his hips would pop from their sockets, made the young man laugh.

One bright spot in the midst of hell.

Had the hell ever ended? he mused. His domineering mother had passed, freeing him from constant criticism and, while he and his father didn’t converse often, Mitch had been fully aware of the abiding disapproval of how he used his inherited talents.

The family wealth could have sent Mitch through the country’s most prestigious architectural program; he’d rejected the notion. Leaving home at 18, he found himself cut off from funds and communication, even with cousins he presumed were close allies. His mother’s funeral hadn’t been the chance for reconciliation he’d intended, though his father seemed to appreciate his presence.

The only occasion he’d seen the old man cry.

Mitch had made a modest living with early editorial cartoons, and when his latest effort, a humorous strip, captured national interest, he didn’t feel so bad about being temporarily disinherited.

None of that mattered at the moment. He was stuck in a realm of his own making, for some unfathomable reason. He had his full faculties and five senses. In fact, his stomach growled, reminding him he’d eaten no breakfast.

On impulse, he tapped together the heels of his blocky green sneakers - another memory from his childhood - chanting three times, “There’s no place like home.”

Didn’t work.

“Shit.”

“You need to figure out what’s missing in your life, before you return to it,” came an ethereal voice.

Had it been an actual strip, the words would have appeared in a cloud.

“Jack?” he ventured.

The character, never seen, served as Mitch’s alter ego and periodic narrator. He offered wisdom in odd moments, an infrequent punch line to a running joke, or commentary on a situation.

“You’ve been sick enough to contemplate death,” offered the disembodied tenor. “You want to leave a mark on the world, but you’re not certain what that will be.”

“If I’d married Cindy, it would have been our kids.”

“According to her last Christmas card, she has six.”

“What do you suggest?”

“You’ve got to decide for yourself. Maybe a foundation to assist other aspiring cartoonists, whose parents object to their gifts...”

Mitch felt himself smile, glad Patti had taken the mirror so he wouldn’t have to view the exaggerated expression. “I’ve been thinking about something like that since Dad died. Those millions, sitting in the trust...”

“Once you’re caught up on work, get serious about it. A fine legacy, indeed.”

Opening his mouth to speak, Mitch felt a jolt to his system. Acid scrambled off his lap just prior to convulsions forcing the man double.

He closed his eyes, the anguish horrendous. Five minutes later, the spasm subsided and he straightened to see himself once more in his own space.

Still lacking comprehension of the ordeal, he straddled the stool to resume drawing, his creations standing in a row, their arms poised as if cheerily waving to him.

“Thanks, guys,” he whispered.

The Major and the Miner

Next door neighbors in the subdivision of '60s era ranch-style homes, the two could not have been more different. Their paths usually crossed each morning about 7:30 AM, when ebony-maned Mo Miner would arrive home from work, and blond Tommy Sayer would be en route to his office. They would exchange a cursory wave, seldom engaging in actual conversation.

Mo, having lived in the yellow brick dwelling most of her life, had heard the dirt circulating about the Sayers, if it could be termed "dirt". Tommy was a Salvation Army major, assigned to the local detachment. His wife, now seven months pregnant, took care of the house.

Good Christian people.

Herself active as a volunteer with the domestic violence shelter, a soup kitchen and thrift outlet, Mo might have fallen into that category - except for being atheist.

Which is where the problem originated.

That particular Tuesday, Mo steered her Ford Focus into the driveway, noticing Tommy seated on his front stoop, as if waiting for something.

He crossed the lawn with long strides, despite his short stature. He edged nose-to-nose with her when she alighted from the vehicle.

"What's up?" asked the woman, recoiling.

Tommy stated, "I couldn't sleep last night, so I turned on your program. Some of your comments... were very ungodly."

Dammit! Mo swore silently. After five hours on the air, followed by planning meetings with her production crew, she was in no mood... "I offend a lot of listeners, if the volume of calls is any indication."

"What you said, though, will hurt our annual holiday collection."

"How so?"

"You said the homeless don't need God, they need practical assistance."

"It's true."

Tommy stormed, "No, it's not! Without God's loving inspiration of generous souls, there'd be no help for those most in need."

"Bull. I know hundreds who help the poor and never attend church."

"They... might be lapsed Christians, who still believe."

Exhaling, Mo devised a plan. "Tell you what: come on my show Friday night, and we'll debate the existence of God."

Tommy's blue eyes blinked with sudden terror, fingers fumbling with his uniform buttons. "What?"

“Sure. We’ll let the listeners decide. The winner will be the one who gets the most support, via the internet and the phones.”

“What... will the prize be, besides pride in such an accomplishment?”

“The loser will donate \$100 to the charity of the winner’s choice.”

Horrified, Tommy cringed. “I don’t think I can agree...”

“You’ve got three days to send out a blast e-mail to friends and family, so they tune in,” chuckled Mo. “They should be willing to give up a bit of sleep for your cause.”

“Okay.” The pair shook hands on the deal.

Mo opened the garage door, while Tommy slid into a vintage gold Chevy Nova and squealed his tires on the asphalt.

That night, when Mo arrived at the radio station, three network camera crews, a print journalist and her own news director paced the lobby. Incoherent explanations gleaned her the information that Tommy Sayer had notified the media about what had already been deemed “The Great Debate”.

These representatives were, to a man, on Sayer’s side. They peppered her with brutal questions about hating Christians, and purported other nonsense. She remained calm - unusual for her - content to release her fury over the airwaves in less than an hour.

She had developed “Miner Considerations” during college to augment her limited income, featuring commentary interspersed with classic rock and phone calls. It ran weeknights from midnight to 5:00 AM. She had a loyal audience, many working the graveyard shift in area factories or cleaning office buildings.

Mo didn’t disparage Tommy for wanting to garner public sympathy. She lambasted the reporters who’d lost their objectivity, their ability to tell both sides of a story. She beat them to the punch, explaining herself in full, before the others had broadcast or printed their versions of the tale.

Two of the offenders found themselves unemployed for their folly the next morning.

Beyond that, Mo didn’t really prepare for the confrontation. She watched the evening news, clips of Tommy perusing a bible and various theological texts quite effective. If anything, her show’s rankings would rise substantially from the publicity.

The chimes announcing midnight sounded that Friday, with Mo and Tommy seated across from each other in the studio, wearing headsets and facing sensitive microphones mounted on booms. A Salvation Army photographer snapped pictures during the introductions, then departed, at which time Tommy shed his uniform coat and loosened his tie.

Mo, as always, wore a t-shirt and jeans. She hadn't consciously picked this specific shirt from her closet, but the logo, "You can be good without God," fit the occasion.

Her tactic had been devised from simplicity. For every quote Tommy read to assert the existence of a deity, she countered, "Why?" or "How?" This forced him to expand on the statements, a difficult task. He fumbled his prepared materials, rifled bible pages, and looked quite foolish.

Mo didn't have to bring up similarities between Greek, Roman or Egyptian mythologies and the Christian scriptures. She didn't have to postulate on the accuracy of the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the fact that various "councils" of early church authorities were very selective about the writings they chose for inclusion in the final canon.

Extra operators had been scheduled on the computers and phone banks, which lit up like Christmas trees. From fundamentalists to scientists, the opinions were wide-ranging. The tally impressed Mo after she signed off in favor of the morning "drive team" - 2,378 calls, and hundreds of social media comments. She didn't care that Tommy won the battle, despite his poor performance. She'd known atheists stood in the minority, and even the lamest evidence supporting a God is sufficient for many Christians.

She didn't see much of the Sayers in the weeks which followed. They decorated their house for the holidays; she didn't. They celebrated the largest influx of contributions in ten years; she merely smirked at the headline in the paper.

After the new year - thanks to a bit of national exposure - she garnered some key celebrities as guests, sufficient justification for her own beliefs.

A Kiss Before Dying

“The plane will be here in an hour,” announced Jim from the dressing room threshold.

“Plane?” Les Stillman countered. “What plane?”

His assistant grunted, “I don’t know if it’s a Gulfstream or a Cessna, but it’s on the way.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I told you this morning. Some rich broad will donate ten million to the Make-a-Wish Foundation if you fly east to see her before she dies.”

“What about the production schedule?”

“The director is willing to shut down until tomorrow.”

Les signaled the makeup artist to leave as he spun the chair toward the lean youth. “Who authorized this?”

“Dan and Steve.”

“Nice of them to keep me in the loop.”

“The woman’s secretary contacted them six months ago, after she received her terminal diagnosis. We’d scheduled a Christmas visit, but her condition has worsened.”

“Does she have a name?” pressed the actor.

“Emma Falmouth.”

A pensive expression claimed the man’s face. “Sounds familiar.”

“It should. Her old man was one of the ten richest in America before he croaked.”

“And Emma wants to see me? Why?”

“She refused to divulge her reasons, in writing or on the phone. She just kept upping the donation amount until Dan agreed.”

Caught in a situation not of his making, Les finished removing the wig and latex appliances, scrubbing his skin with soap and water before dumping the towel on the mirrored table. He grabbed a black t-shirt off the sofa and ran uncertain fingers through his short, greying mop. “I’m ready, I guess.”

Driven to the private airport in a limousine, Les boarded a gold-trimmed G5, impressed by the amenities. Jim waved from the tarmac, content to remain on location.

A two hour flight landed the reluctant traveler at Chicago’s Midway. A helicopter waited outside the designated hangar, transporting him above afternoon traffic to a Lake Forest mansion.

Les had spent his first decade in the posh suburb, and the emotions rushing his conscious as the craft descended over the houses caused him to bite his tongue, drawing blood.

A prim butler greeted him on steps leading from the chopper pad to a stone-paved deck. They passed through French doors into a vast library, then into the marble-accented main hall and up the grand staircase.

Along a balcony, the third door opened onto a sun-drenched bedroom. Emma Falmouth had been positioned in a leather armchair, shadows concealing her ravaged countenance.

Les hesitantly crossed the Persian carpet. "Hello, Mrs. Falmouth," he greeted, extending his hand.

She didn't accept the gesture. "Thanks for coming on such short notice, Les."

"No problem. I was... glad to."

"Bullshit." Curled brown locks swiveled in his direction. "You have better things to do than cater to an old classmate's whims."

Curiosity peaked by this assertion, Les knelt beside the chair, gazing at the pale features and sunken eyes. "Classmate? Where?"

"Fourth grade. Mrs. Buchinski. Before your family moved."

"Damn! That's why I recognized this place!" Les sank on his heels. "You were..."

"Emmy Slater."

"Right!" Abruptly, a sense of the awkward claimed Les. He couldn't easily launch into a series of reminiscences, given the woman's situation. "I... ah..."

She managed a feeble chuckle. "I asked you here to do me a small favor."

"Anything."

"On that dresser, there's a photo."

Pale blue orbs followed her finger. He retrieved the gilt gold frame, astonished. "That's... me."

"You never knew I had that. My father snapped it at my tenth birthday party. You were the only boy who came from the entire class. When Mom brought in the cake, I bent to blow out the candles, and you kissed me at the instant the flash went off."

Les chortled, "Not just once, as I recall. Later, before I left..."

"And, after you moved, we were pen pals for awhile, but come high school..."

"You got involved with Brad Falmouth."

She nodded.

“And married him, obviously.”

“We had a good life, Les. No kids, but charity work kept me busy. It was nice having the money to support so many worthy causes...”

“Horrible death, that.”

“He knew the risks of his profession.”

Les remembered the headlines: Falmouth killed when an oil drilling prototype exploded.

Six years, his widow had lived alone in the huge dwelling.

Alone, not counting a staff of twelve.

He leaned toward her. “What’s this favor you want?”

“You’re a good man, from all accounts. I’ve had my lawyers draw up a new will, naming you executor. The three estates - here, Florida and France - are to be sold, and every cent distributed to charity. I couldn’t trust anyone else with the task.”

“I... Emmy, why me?”

“You don’t need the money, so you won’t find ways to skim off the top” - she glared at the partially open door - “like some others.”

“I’m... honored, I guess.”

“It’ll be a lot of work, I know. You might have to forego making films for a couple years...”

“My obligations run until next summer...”

“It’ll take that long to sell the houses.” She struggled to rise; Les straightened and supported her with his strength. The pink satin robe flowed like an evening gown, giving her an ethereal appearance. “You’ve always held a special place in my heart, Les. You were kind as a boy, and never lost that gift, even when fame and fortune came your way.” She slumped against his chest. “Thank you.”

He wouldn’t admit that he hadn’t thought about her in decades. So fragile, he could have crushed her with a simple hug. She raised her face, and their eyes met. Bony fingers caressed his stubby cheek - he hadn’t taken time to shave.

“Good-bye, Les.” Her lips brushed his, as brief as the peck he’d given her so long ago on her birthday.

He eased her limp shell onto the cushions as attendants swarmed the room.

Awed by the force of will which had kept her alive until she saw him, Les withdrew. Westbound on the airplane within an hour, he pondered whether the favor she’d really wanted was his services as executor, or that innocent kiss before dying.

The Journalist's Theory

“Adrian Hillard Dead,” read world-wide headlines that paradoxical morning. Sketchy details and speculation accompanied the bold print, hinting at “alleged” suicide.

In this age of instantaneous news and information, theories began popping up within hours about the demise of this creative genius and philanthropist - including some totally insane ones touting conspiracy theories, “living sacrifices”, and so forth.

Turned my stomach.

A review of Adrian Hillard's art, interviews - printed, audio and video - and work confirmed he'd considered suicide for at least a decade prior to choosing that ending for himself. He'd been crying out for help throughout, and his pleas had gone unheeded. He'd been diagnosed with a disease which gradually robs its victims of physical motion. From experience with my father, I knew such a situation would be unendurable for a superior mental power like Hillard. He had every right to be depressed, and to fear the future.

There's no denying he had plenty of reasons to “fake his death,” as some purported, using improperly spelled, grammatically incorrect sentences. Anyone of such social prominence had obligations to numerous “hangers on”, from high-end lawyers and accountants to maids and gardeners. Wealth and debt could create a horrendously heavy yoke for anyone's shoulders.

Hillard hadn't led an entirely virtuous life. In this youth, he'd made mistakes, some serious and expensive. Yes, he fell into that category - as do the majority - of “addict”. His particular addictions made no difference. I, myself, am addicted to chocolate, and discovering the truth.

So, when the conspiracy theorists started publishing insipid tripe about Illuminati involvement in Hillard's death, I started digging.

The Illuminati, after all, weren't some exclusive club of individuals intent on taking over the world, a “shadow government”. They were geniuses of various eras long gone, who understood there was more to our short lives than mundane daily existence, politics or organized religion. Most of them never met each other. Instead, they shone as beacons of inspirations for later generations.

In my opinion, Adrian Hillard could have stood in their company, a lauded addition to their ranks.

Simply because no photos of the “crime scene” leaked to the tabloids - living outside the big city, no paparazzi had been loitering outside his modest dwelling, anticipating the tragedy - his remains cremated upon completion of the

coroner's autopsy and scattered at a site with sentimental significance, the internet trolls analyzed his family's reaction, citing their lack of grief.

Their narrow focus didn't allow for the possibility that different people grieve in different ways, especially after what must've been a mind-numbing shock. Wanting to believe their parent, spouse, sibling still alive - in some sense of the word - made them speak with hope, rather than dissolve in tears before the cameras.

Hillard's failure to leave a note... If, some quiet, moonlit night you're enduring indescribable mental anguish while staring at your bedroom ceiling - the phrase, "Just do it," reverberating through your skull - it is not unlikely you'd eventually seek relief, without stopping to jot down thoughts or regrets on paper.

That very pause might preclude fulfillment of the plan, as guilt overrides determination.

Had Hillard's suicide been "staged" by the Illuminati, or the mob, to cover up a murder - another theory which circulated *ad infinitum* after the story broke - I would think any competent medical examiner would have found evidence to that effect. Of course, bribes could have been paid to falsify the death certificate, but in this age of constant surveillance, on street corners and in elevators, someone would have seen *something*.

Hillard could not have remained in his own house, if he still lived. He would have had to elude neighbors, family, staff, casual passersby, to make good his escape. He would've had to disguise himself, and required forged identification to vanish into thin air the way some fools concocted the scenario.

In a similar way to those who placed blame on Hillard's family for driving him to suicide, the conspiracy theorists do nothing more with their ludicrous statements than reopen loved ones' wounds, which heal so slowly, if at all.

Death is the natural conclusion of life. How some people die is their own business, and should neither be judged nor distorted to suit any certain viewpoint. What is needed is for people to get on with their own lives, rather than poking around where they don't belong.

This humble journalist's opinion is: Adrian Hillard has ascended to a better place. May he rest in peace.