



Renoir
Smile

a novel

John Scott G

Renoir Smile

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GOLOSIO NONTRADITIONAL
UNIVERSAL DISSEMINATION

~ *One* ~

Marching shoulder to shoulder in the street instead of on the sidewalk, the four men trooped the same route every morning at seven o'clock, rain or shine. If you were up early enough, you could glance out your window and watch them parade past on their way up the road. You could see them again a few minutes later as they made their return.

In summer, their outfits consisted of tee shirts, camouflage shorts, white sweat socks, and name-brand tennis shoes. In winter, they wore flannel shirts, waterproof jackets, cargo pants, and worker's boots.

Perhaps those work boots created the wrong impression because an overly concerned homeowner called the cops on them one November day even though it had been several weeks since they had first begun their ritual. Compared to the scattered chatter of the overwrought caller, the police report

was terse: “Four males. Average height and weight. Over fifty. Walking in the street. Moving fast. Purpose unknown.”

A patrol car was dispatched to check out the possibilities of doom, destruction, and damage from this quartet’s work-booted threat to civic order and decorum. Officer Vincent Benson guided his prowler slowly up to the foursome. The men waved at the police officer and were eager to talk.

“Morning!”

“How are ya?”

“Hey there.”

“What’s goin’ on?”

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Officer Benson told the group gathered around the driver’s side window of his patrol car. “Just wondering about your walk today.”

“Everyday,” Matt replied cheerfully.

“Right,” Marc added. “We start down at Dunlop Avenue and head up to Becky Street, then back.”

“Good exercise,” Lucas said.

“Want to join us one morning?” asked Jon.

“Do ya good,” Lucas chided.

“Exercise helps body and soul,” Jon added.

Officer Benson hesitated a second. The friendliness from the four men seemed genuine and was happily contagious. “Well, if I lived in this neighborhood, I might just take you up on that, gentlemen. But I’ve got my own exercise routine.”

A call crackled on the prowler’s radio. At the words, “Code 30,” Officer Benson stiffened and noted the address referenced in the call. It was in his patrol area and he swung into action.

“Sorry, that’s for me,” the officer said, putting the car into gear.

“Something big?” Marc asked.

“Never know ‘til ya get there,” Officer Benson told them. “You guys take care now.” He swung the steering wheel to the left, gunned the engine and headed up the street.

“Seems like a nice guy,” observed Matt.

“Yeah,” agreed Marc.

“Kind of neat having a police escort once in a while,” said Lucas.

“I wish he’d patrol through here more often,” Jon added.

“Okay, so,” Matt said, “where were we?”

“We were listing the reasons why the city bond issue for the park comes with too damn high a price tag in the long run.”

“No, you think it’s too high.”

“Well, isn’t it?”

And their good-natured argument about the current local political scene continued as they completed their walk.

Residents of the suburb had no reason to fear this foursome. Together or separately, they posed no threat to the city. In fact, because of their camaraderie, brio, and daily sharp-eyed assessment of the homes in the area, one could say they were being downright neighborly. The violence didn’t begin until much later.

...

~ *Two* ~

Of the four men, Matt was the eldest at 71 and one of two still employed. For most of his working life, he had been a clinical psychologist. While successful in that field, his skill in computer programming led to a change of direction. When he retired from the “dome-gnome” profession, he took up freelancing for a number of firms engaged in AI (artificial intelligence) and VR (virtual reality). “No machine will ever capture the human essence,” Matt told his friends, “which makes working in AI a never-ending job. This industry is always ‘getting really close’ to achieving their goals, and that means any fast-talker in AI will never be unemployed.”

Most of his friends were more interested in the virtual reality aspect of his work. “Any 3-D porn you can demonstrate?” was a common query. “Do you need any test subjects? I’m ready to volunteer,” Jon said.

“Thanks, but no,” Matt told him. “My area of VR concerns medical imaging. How to improve non-invasive surgeries, for example. It’s about as far from porn as you can get.”

The firms that employed Matt kept his existence a secret because their clients had no trust in computer professionals over the age of 30. “Youth,” Matt said with mock vehemence. “The biz is all about youth. No emphasis on experience, just the lowest possible number of years on the planet. It’s sad, really.”

“Gotta ask you something about your job,” Jon said.

“What’s that?”

“Doesn’t your freelance income screw up your Social Security payments?”

“I was wondering about that, too,” Marc added, “isn’t that a conflict?”

“Nope,” Matt replied. “Not a problem.”

“How come?”

“Because I waited until the right time to begin collecting the benefits.”

“That makes a difference?”

“Yup.”

“Really?”

“Hey, you can look it up.”

“Yeah?”

“You bet,” Matt said. “Hell, you can find almost anything online.”

“So you collect your Social Security check while you’re also getting a paycheck?”

“Yup,” Matt said.

“Pretty sweet,” Lucas observed.

“Yeah,” Jon agreed, “so when we stop for coffee, it’s on you.”

“Okay,” Matt said.

“Yeah?” Marc asked.

“Fine with me,” Matt said, “as long as I get to list you guys as business advisors.”

“What?”

“That way I can get a tax deduction on the coffee and Danish.”

“Only you would think of that.”

“Hey, just good business.”

“Do I get to pick my title?” Marc asked.

“What do you mean?”

“If I’m one of your business advisors, I want to be at least a VP.”

“Oh, you’re a VP all right. Very Pushy.”

“Hey, up yours.”

“There ya go. You just proved my point.”

The four men easily slipped back to an amicable tone as they finished their walk, or their “constitutional,” as Lucas referred to it. After a ceremonial four-way wrist grab, which was performed at the end of each walk, they headed for their homes.

Marc settled down to binge watch old sitcoms on a streaming service. Lucas alternated between re-reading paperback detective novels and practicing what he called “tantric sex for one.” Jon began making phone calls as he ran his home-based business. Matt turned on his impressively large old-school stereo system, inserted the first disc of the Richard Bonyngé production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and got to work on his next freelance gig.

The day passed pleasantly for all of them. That night, the dreams came for Matt.

• • •



~ Three ~

Out of focus at the edges, the image in the center was alarmingly clear. At first, the crowd scene appeared serene, but then an aberration occurred and the depiction morphed into faces that ranged from sub-human to godlike. The visual blurred but then slapped the trapped witness with razor-sharp clarity.

From out of the throng, a single visage appeared, one that possessed the power of an eerie calm. The face would blend with the background and then burst forward into fullness. The head would be on a shaft of light for a few seconds before becoming an extension of something mechanical. Finally, it seemed connected to living flesh of alien origin.

Shouting for help was impossible in the sonic stew of animalistic yelps and shrieks, all of which were augmented by discordant cathedral bells, thunderclaps,

and chanting choirs that drifted in and out of tune.

Suddenly, there was silence, which was more ominous than the howling wall of noise.

The dream lasted a few minutes as Matt's body twitched on the bed. For that brief infinity, he was the viewer of the dream as well as a part of the distorted setting. He caught glimpses of himself in reflections from panes of glass or mirrors behind the primary imagery of the night vision.

When Matt appeared in his dream, he would often blend or distort into the scenery. He watched, fascinated, as his torso became connected to a clanking, riveted series of metallic cylinders. With an explosion, his body would be propelled from the device and become a mutated prolongation of some manner of primordial animal.

The alternations could take place instantaneously or be drawn out like a lap-dissolve from *Apocalypse Now Redux*. He

would see himself sitting at his desk, writing lines of code, and then the image liquefied, sucking his body away, leaving only face or eyes or mouth. A new image of himself as a dwarf or giant or satyr would emerge from the mouth, ejected from a throat spewing silver droplets.

Or he would be on the morning walk with the foursome and then find himself floating above all of them, gazing down at his three friends striding forward next to his own body.

No matter what the imagery, he was totally in the grip of the vision; he was abandoned; he was helpless.

Then the dream became ferocious. Figures joined Matt and the new forms lashed out at crowds and individuals, striking down male and female, adult and child, livestock and pet, friend and foe, necromancer and numbskull.

Heartbeats and thunderbolts pounded in his brain as he saw himself dashing bodies against the sharp metal protrusions lining the passageways.

There was no method for fighting the force that propelled him through the darkness, the perplexity, and the terror, always observed by that judgmental yet alluring female face that was proudly brandishing a perverted attempt at a Renoir smile.

• • •

~ *Four* ~

Matt woke up just after dawn, once again amazed at the fierceness of his dreams. He was also surprised that he wasn't drenched in sweat, but everything seemed normal despite the savage imagery of the recent reveries. He shrugged, adjusted the pillow, rolled over, and was just drifting back to sleep when his alarm went off. The clock radio was set to the local university station, which meant he was never certain what kind of music would be playing as the alarm sounded. Today, it was jazz, a track called "Boplicity," from *The Complete Birth of the Cool* by the Miles Davis Quintet. "That's so gold, it's gone," he said to himself. He liked Miles as a performer despite knowing what an asshole he had been as a human being.

Matt arose and quickly pulled, patted, and prodded the bedcovers into shape. Moving through the house, he enjoyed the process of opening curtains and blinds to fill the dwelling with light. A few stretching exercises were

rapidly performed and then he padded off to the kitchen for a helping of last night's enchiladas along with the more traditional servings of juice, fruit, and coffee. "Enchiladas," he mused, "a part of every family's nutritious breakfast."

The meal concluded, he put the dishes into a sink half-full of soapy water, grabbed another cup of coffee and went to get dressed. He was looking forward to meeting the guys for "the constitutional." For the most part, thoughts of his nightmares were cast aside. All that remained in his memory was that smile that almost wasn't a smile.

• • •

~ *Five* ~

This morning's walk was for the dogs. Four or five times a week, their route would coincide with men and women giving critters their morning absolution. Some of the neighbors were in a hurry to finish so they could leave for work on time, but many of them were happy to exchange greetings while the men eagerly petted the animals.

“Most dogs like it when they get a bit of skritch on top of the noggin,” said Matt.

“Skritch? Did you say skritch?” Jon asked. “My daddy used to say skritch.”

“Smart father.”

“Is that like scratching?” Lucas asked.

“It's exactly like scratching but with more friendliness,” Matt replied. “Dogs like lovin' and affection aimed in their direction.”

“So do humans.”

“Dogs also like being scratched behind the ears,” Marc said.

“So do humans.”

“It’s true about the affection,” the dog owner told them. “They like hearing that they are beautiful and handsome creatures. Or, at least, this one does.”

Everyone in the group was right. When they met up with friendly critters, smiles spread across faces during the petting, skritchng, and praising. The dogs were pleased; the four men were pleased; the dog owners were pleased.

“Look,” more than one dog owner said, “he’s smiling at you.”

“I’d smile too if a bunch of people scratched me where it’s hard to scratch while telling me I’m wonderful,” Lucas said.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Jon told him. “You’re frequently not wonderful and you can go scratch yourself.” That brought a small laugh from the crowd. “But scratch when you get home. For god’s sake, don’t do it in public, please.”

The men laughed again.

“What if I scratch you?” Lucas asked Jon. More laughter.

“Looking forward to it,” Jon replied.

That was greeted by another round of guffaws. Both men threw up their hands, indicating they were through with the insults. “Quitters,” thought the neighbor.

Disengaging from the friendly pooch, the quartet of men continued up the street. Today’s topic was prescription drug prices. Between the four of them, there was one hundred percent agreement that the costs for prescription medications were exorbitant, but there was no consensus on what to do about it.

“This is just like Washington,” Lucas said. “Lots of words but no solutions.”

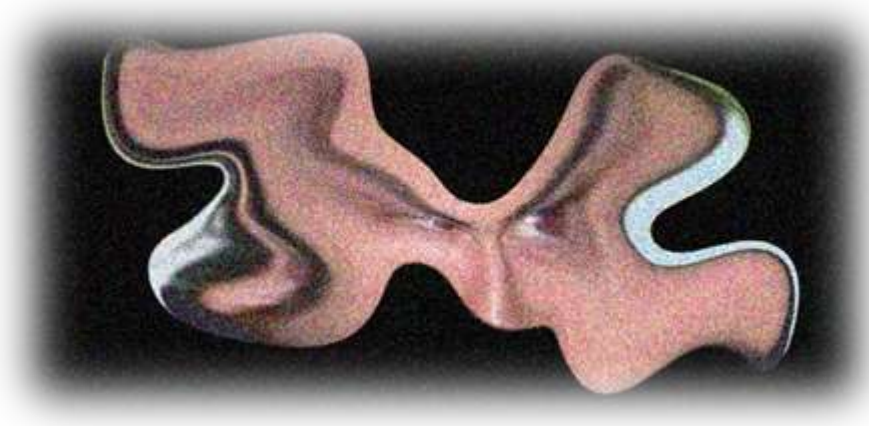
“But we’re talking about it without the vitriol,” Jon noted.

“Oh, we can add some goddamn vitriol if that’d make you feel any fucking better about it,” Marc said.

“Naw, screw that shit.”

“Glad you’re getting into the spirit of this conversation.”

...



~ Six ~

The digital display on the bedside clock was 3:17 a.m. as the dream began. The vision commenced with the banging of a gavel and the courtroom fell silent. The trial was exceptionally comprehensive, with more than four dozen witnesses taking the stand to testify against you, and nearly twenty-one hundred exhibits entered into evidence. Repeatedly, members of the prosecution team leveled reproachful glances at you. Repeatedly, police officers pointed accusatory fingers at you. Repeatedly, private investigators extended their bony digits aimed right between your eyes. Repeatedly, district attorneys pleaded with the jury to remove you from society. “Guilty!” was the verdict.

The digital display on the bedside clock was 3:18 a.m. as the dream ended.

. . .

~ Seven ~

Marc claimed he never used an alarm clock. “I set my mind to the time when I need to rise-and-shine,” he boasted. “There’s something inside my head that keeps track of the hours so I wake up on time every time.” When challenged about this claim, he admitted there was one exception. “I had too much to drink the night before—”

“And smoke,” Jon pointed out.

“Yeah, and smoke,” Marc continued, “and I slept past my internal wake-up call. But only by about a half-hour.”

“A half-hour?”

“Forty-five minutes.”

“So, it was a couple of hours, then.”

“Hey, up yours. It was no more than an hour, okay?”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so.”

“Okay, then.”

“Okay, then!”

“Guys,” Matt said, “can we move onto some other topic?”

“Bitching with each other is a valid topic, Matt,” Jon told him.

“Maybe, but there should be a time limit on it. No more than five minutes per hour. Deal?”

“Well...” Jon hesitated.

“Deal,” Marc said.

“Deal,” Lucas said.

“Oh, okay, deal,” Jon said. “Jesus.”

“All right, so, new topic,” Matt announced. “How come we get to pet dogs along this route but hardly ever cats?”

“Cats aren’t friendly,” Jon said.

“Every cat I’ve owned has been friendly.”

“They’re not friendly until they get comfortable being around you.”

“Same with you.”

“Hey, all I’m saying is there’s a reason for the term ‘scaredy-cat’.”

“They’re just cautious,” Matt explained. “They’re afraid you might skritch them with the same pressure you use on a dog’s hide. You’ve got to be gentler with a puddy-tat.”

“Awww, ‘I tawt I taw a puddy-tat’,” Lucas said, in a very good impression of Mel Blanc.

“That’s Tweety-Bird from Looney Toons, right?” Marc asked.

“Right.”

“Now do Sylvester.”

“Sufferin’ succotash.”

“Nope. Not enough spittle.”

“I was being polite.”

“There’s no polite in comedy.”

“Not in Looney Tunes, anyway.”

“Is it Looney Tunes—T-U-N-E-S—or Looney Toons—T-O-O-N-S?”

“It’s T-U-N-E-S,” Matt said.

“Yeah?” Jon asked.

“You can look it up.”

“No, I trust you. That’s not my big question with Looney Tunes.”

“By all means, let’s get to the big Looney Tunes question.”

“Fuck you,” Jon told him. “Now, listen, okay? I want to know about Bugs Bunny dressing up like a girl and going after Elmer Fudd. What’s that all about?” Jon asked. “Is

that some sort of liberal agenda about gender identity?”

“Was Molière working on some sort of liberal agenda about gender identity?” Matt asked in return.

“Who?”

“French playwright in the 1600s. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known as Molière. He put class confusion and gender confusion in his plays because those things entertain people. If embarrassed laughter about gender confusion is a liberal agenda, then so be it.”

“Wasn’t this Mole person on trial for homosexuality?”

“You’re thinking of Oscar Wilde. Molière wrote farces that juxtaposed so-called regular life with so-called abnormal life. His scenes mixed reality with fantasy, truth versus illusion.”

“Sounds a little hoity-toity to me.”

“No, not really. If you get to see one of his plays, you’ll find out how funny they can be. Besides, you can make anything sound highfalutin if you try.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. How about this: ‘Some people immerse themselves in the projected fantasy of members of the modern *demi-monde* who

interface with each other and the world in ways that provoke mirth and denigration.’ That sounds highfalutin, right?”

“Yeah...”

“But actually, I just described Marc watching reruns of *Seinfeld*.”

“Hey, that’s good,” Marc responded.

“Thank you.”

“Makes me feel better about the binge-watching. Like I’m not wasting my time.”

“Oh, you’re still wasting your time.”

“Fuck you.”

“Can we return to the point?” Jon insisted. “I still say it’s weird when Bugs dresses up like a girl.”

“It is weird, but for most people, it’s weird-funny, not weird-weird.”

“I don’t know...”

“Hey,” Matt said, “the whole nature of sexuality is pretty damn strange if you take a moment to consider it.”

“How do you mean?”

“When you think about two people liking each other, and what they want to do with each other’s bodies, that is pretty damn weird whether you’re attracted to a male or female.”

“Well, as for me,” Jon said, “I’m generally attracted to two females.”

“Not three?” Lucas inquired.

“Three is even better.”

“Just out of prurient interest, how often does that happen?” Marc asked.

“Not often enough,” Jon replied.

• • •



~ *Eight* ~

The shoals were treacherous and the ship's hull was fragile in comparison with the rocks. At first, the water began leaking in through one small slit in the steel. Then the incision became a crack and the water flowed in. Within seconds, the crack widened. The water gushed in with relentless force and the ship foundered in less than five minutes.

Marc was below deck, forced to watch the process play out in torturous slow motion. Panic broke out all around him but he was unable to twitch a muscle. In awe, Marc observed how efficiently the water could sink a trustworthy and venerable boat while sending all passengers and crew to their demise.

His own death was fast approaching. The ocean water was cold on his feet once it had seeped through his shoes. As the water level rose, the chill struck his

ankles, then calves, knees, thighs, torso, neck, face, and head. Confined within the ship, his body became submerged in the briny and suffocating sea.

The sounds of the disaster seemed far away at first but then increased to a din, combining the roar of water, the terrified screams of his fellow victims, and the groaning of the metallic parts of the boat.

He was dead, yet still watching the completion of the sinking. Bodies floated past, soon joined by fish. There was a shudder as the ship settled onto the seabed. Teetering for a moment, the ship eventually began tilting to starboard as it nestled against the sand, rocks, and undersea vegetation.

No breathing. No movement. No life. He was dead yet still observing the aftermath of the shipwreck in stultifying silence. Trapped. Helpless. Abandoned.

. . .

~ *Nine* ~

Marc did not remember most of his dreams but the ones that stayed with him were those that involved drowning. Before he lost her to cancer, he discussed the situation with his wife. After performing extensive research on the situation (she asked her female friends about it), she reported back to her husband that dreams of drowning represented a fear of letting go. “Specifically,” she read to him from a photocopy of a paperback called *Your Dream Lives*, “you suffer from trepidation about emotional attachments.”

“What does that mean?” he asked.

She informed him that this meant he was “afraid of his feelings.”

“Oh come on,” he replied.

“That’s what it means,” she said.

“Well,” he responded, “my feelings are hurt right now but I’m not afraid of them.”

“Those are not the feelings we’re talking about,” she said.

“Okay, so what are the feelings we’re talking about?”

She hesitated. “Are you sure you want to go there?”

“No,” he said. But then: “Yes, come on, let’s have it.”

“This isn’t a battle,” she said.

“Feels a little like it,” he replied.

There was an unnerving silence between them for a moment. Finally, she spoke to her husband in a quiet tone: “The feelings we’re talking about are loving, kindness, attachment, caring, empathy...” She trailed off.

He stared at her in consternation. “Are you saying I don’t love you?”

“No,” she said. “I’m saying you’re afraid of the fact of loving me. Hell, you’re afraid of the fact of loving the dog.” She stepped close and put her arms around him. “I love you, and I know you love me, but you’re always holding back, trying to not fully commit, or trying to commit to two different realities at the same time.”

They hugged for a moment before he spoke again.

“So, what do we do about it?” he asked.
“Or, what am I supposed to do about it?”

“It’s ‘we,’ darling. It’s always ‘we.’ And what we do is we concentrate on the love part, the caring part. Find enjoyment from that. Find pleasure in that. Do your worrying about it on your own time. In your dreams, for example. That seems to work fine. When you’re awake, just love me.”

They didn’t know it at the time, but their marriage was saved that day. Or perhaps she knew. He only came to realize it after she was gone.

They hugged. They pulled back to study each other’s eyes. They smiled. They kissed. Gently at first, then with increasing passion.

...

~ Ten ~

Lucas was married and divorced three times before he relocated from a conservative locale to a progressive place where he met his current wife, Brian. “Those three marriages don’t really count,” Lucas explained, “because I made the mistake of getting hitched to women who thought they could perform some sort of magical sexual transformation.”

“You mean,” Brian responded, “they would say things like, ‘Oh honey, you just haven’t met the right woman’.”

“Right. I heard that a lot.”

“And, ‘Give me a little time and I can straighten you out’.”

“Yes! They all said things like that.”

“And did they ever succeed?”

“What?”

“In, um, straightening you out.”

“The sexual innuendo is, um, hard to miss,” Lucas said.

“Hey, I’m not knocking it. Every gay guy has at least one misadventure with a woman. And sometimes, when a gay man is with a woman, the image in your mind supercharges the moment and you can, you know, uh, deliver the goods to the girl by thinking about a man.”

“You have a way of being graphic without being too graphic.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ve heard all these same things from women, I guess,” Lucas asked.

“Oh yeah. We all have.”

“Why is it that women do that?”

“Women’s minds are incomprehensible,” Brian replied, “but when it comes to interactions with gay guys, well, part of it is understandable.”

“How so?”

“First,” Brian replied, “we represent a challenge, and some people like a good challenge.”

“I guess...”

“But mainly I think it’s that women put a great deal of belief in their powers when it

comes to controlling men. And they're right about that except, you know..." Brian paused a second, then: "... it doesn't work on all men."

"You got that right."

They were in their eighth year of living together. They called each other husband and wife but in reality they were still talking about getting married. "For a marriage, we've got to handle so many decisions," Lucas said. And he was right: Were they out with all their friends and acquaintances? Were they out with people at Brian's office? When inviting guests, should they exclude anyone who might be uncomfortable? What should be the size of the ceremony and the resulting celebration?

Fortunately, they enjoyed planning various scenarios. "We could elope," Brian suggested at one point.

"But then we don't get the big whoop-dee-doo, all hands on deck, church-ritualized ceremonial hubbub and folderol," Lucas pointed out.

"Oh no," Brian said, "we can't go that route. I likes me some good hubbub and folderol."

“Well, hey, who doesn’t?” Lucas noted.
“But we only get that if we plan the event.”

“You’re right, let’s plan ahead. Plan away. Plan on. Plan off. Plan—”

“Enough.”

“Okay.”

“So, first thing is, we should write the ceremony.”

“Really?”

“Or at least the vows.”

“No, I like the idea of our doing the whole thing.”

“The entire script.”

“Right.”

“It has to be tender but still masculine.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Come on, we need to do this together.”

“No, okay, you’re right.”

And so began a multi-year saga of making plans for ceremonious nuptials and reception revelry.

“We could get married on top of a mountain, overlooking the ocean.”

“Not if we’re going to marry in January. We’d freeze to death.”

“Oh yeah, there’s that.”

“And then, being dead, we’d miss the reception. And from what I’ve heard, the Lucian wedding reception will be something you won’t want to miss.” He pronounced it, “luke-ian.”

“Wait, the what?”

“Lucas/Brian. Lucian.”

“That’s terrible.”

“You don’t like it?”

“Don’t ever do that again.”

“Okay. We’ll come up with something else.”

“I doubt it.”

“But okay, back to the main point. No one will want to miss all we have in store for them at our reception. I can see it now... It will be magnificent.”

“Do tell...”

“Well, quite apart from the fabulous DJ and killer sound system, there’s the food and libations. There’s the taco bar and the tequila tasting stations, and the craft beer booths, and the strippers.”

“Strippers?”

“Male strippers.”

“That seems unfair to any straight people we invite to the reception.”

“No, it’s only unfair to any straight *men* we invite to the reception. Their wives or their dates will appreciate the strippers.”

“Oh, right! Good point. And meanwhile, the straight men—”

“—will be embarrassed as fuck.”

They paused to picture that.

“Cool.”

They both burst out laughing. They hugged, then pulled back to study each other’s eyes. They smiled. They kissed. Gently at first, then with increasing passion.

. . .



~ *Eleven* ~

The chimney began to collapse... but inside her studio, the young artist was unaware of the danger. She finished sketching a face and was startled to see it come alive. Annoyed by the chattering visage, she tried to rid herself of the now sentient illustration by wiping the paper with her hand. Suddenly, she found herself with two talking heads, one on the easel, the other alive in her palm. Reeling back in fear, her hand brushed against a mirror and her body sank into the reflection, arriving at the Hotel of Dramatic Lunacies. A series of adventures ensued, involving keyhole peeping, clandestine meetings of Alkonosts, the destruction of her studio by jackhammers, and the slow transformation of the artist into a window display in a shop facing the town square. A bright winter sky shimmered while three men checked the frozen lake nearby. Suddenly, two of the men were solidified

by the ice and the third dropped dead. A stylish foursome begin playing a game of shuffleboard around the corpse. A black angel appeared to remove the corpse, the foursome, and the sunlight. The woman was transformed into a living statue of Galatea and she walked toward the glowing horizon as... the chimney finished collapsing.

...

~ *Twelve* ~

As the owner of Talent Direction Unlimited, Jon was successful in getting work for aspiring performing artists. He found parts in television series for newbie actors. He got gigs for up-and-coming singers and comics. He got first-time dancers into long-running shows. Once in while, there would be a movie role, though Jon preferred television. “There’s a chance that a part on a TV show becomes a recurring character,” he explained. “The result of that is long-term employment and regular paychecks.”

There was an occasional male amongst his clients, but his specialty was in handling actresses. “Handling actresses is what you do best,” his wife said before filing for divorce.

When the guys asked him about it later, Jon admitted he was not above mixing business with pleasure, “but I never got involved with anyone below the age of consent.”

“So, that’s like, what, your moral code?”
Matt asked him.

“Sure, whatever,” Jon responded.

“Whatever?”

“Well,” Jon explained pedantically, “the state law here is 18 for the girl to have achieved the age of consent.”

“That’s starting to sound a bit like legalese,” Lucas noted.

“Look,” Jon told them, “the age of consent is 16 in more than thirty states. It’s not fair for Californians to be punished for something that’s legal in Connecticut.”

“Fair enough, but...”

“But as long as that’s the law, I’m following it. I got enough trouble handling false paternity suits.”

“I’ll bet.”

“There’s nothing illegal going on here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I always make sure they’re at least eighteen.”

“Okay.”

“Well...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Never mind,” Jon said.

“Hey, come on,” objected Marc.

“No, no, no, you don’t get to just leave that hanging there,” Matt told him.

“Well, I make certain they have I.D. that says they’re at least eighteen.”

“Oh, man...!”

“That’s gonna bite you on the ass one of these days.”

“Hey,” Jon protested, “I’m the one getting them a start in the entertainment business.”

“They’re kind of already in the entertainment business.”

“You know what I mean.”

“That’s why those voluptuous young things are at your place all the time?” Lucas mused.

“That’s why.”

“That’s your secret! I couldn’t figure out why there was such a turnover: there was a Janet, and a Valerie, and a Bambi...”

“They stay about six months, usually,” Jon explained. “That’s how long it takes for us to get them the gig that they think will open up

their career. Sometimes they're right about that. And sometimes they ask to come back."

"You don't mind that they're using you?"

"I like to think I'm using them. Or at least their bodies."

"Oh yeah," Marc said, "that makes it okay."

"Jesus, Jon," Lucas said.

Matt just raised his eyebrows.

"Guys, guys, guys," Jon said, "the price of anything is determined by what someone is willing to pay for it."

"Cynical, but true enough, I guess," Matt said.

"Look," Jon continued, "they're willing to perform certain acts that give me a great deal of pleasure, and I'm willing to work the phones to get them the type of audition where they're likely to be cast. It's what all prominent classical scholars call a win-win."

...



~ Thirteen ~

Surrendering to some dreams was easier than with others. Jon was comfortable with quite a few of his midnight reveries because they involved parabola, hyperbola, pursuit curves, and the witch of Agnesi. In a word: women. In two words: women's bodies. One or two nights per week, Jon would be engulfed in a trance involving the most stimulating imagery in the world.

The ladies were always spectacular. "There's nothing that compares to a woman who is both beautiful and desirable at the same time," Jon averred.

When his dream dates were dressed, their clothing was form-fitting enough to tease the imagination. When undressed, they usually still wore high heels and garter belts, sometimes with nylons, sometimes bare legged. Every cliché about the sexual fantasy world of the

heterosexual male species was brought to life by the women in these dreams.

Although...

There were nights when the eroticism turned into a horror show. The face of the luscious blonde woman melted into a blank flat section of skin. Once he endured that repulsion, things got worse: the face reformatted itself into a sphincter that was rapidly contracting and swelling as the frightening countenance began moving closer to deliver a malodorous kiss.

The hands of a dark-haired beauty became power tools, whirring and whining as they inexorably moved onto him to rip and rend parts of his body.

The neck of a redheaded lady lengthened and became braided steel cables connected to a two-ton elevator. One of the cables reached out to him, wrapped itself around his hips and pulled him into the shaft. The cable then reached up to his chin, lifting his face to watch as the elevator cab was rapidly descending to crush him.

The legs of the chorus girls became elephant trunks and began lashing out at him. Each blow was accompanied by a dull thud as his body was bounced around the room.

The dancers' legs became scaly alligator skin and they stretched out to encircle his torso, slowly sliding up to his head.

Hips became burning truck tires. Breasts became the head and horns of the African scimitar oryx. Clothing turned into sections of concrete with twisted steel rebar protruding every few inches; the rough metal tore into his flesh with a sickening sound.

Over the years, he had paid for many therapy sessions to discuss his dreams.

. . .

~ *Fourteen* ~

The quartet congregated at their usual time and began their daily march. The sun had now appeared above the horizon, casting a rosy-beige color onto everything. The lawns, trees, flowers, and house fronts appeared to be in sharp focus and in a haze at the same time.

Today's topic turned out to be music. "So," Matt inquired, "have any of you guys heard this new song that blends rap and punk?"

"How do you tell the difference?" Jon asked.

"You stay out of this discussion. You only like classic rock from the seventies."

"And eighties."

"Right. So when that becomes the topic, we'll chime in with what we think about Styx and Molly Hatchett because we know something about the good and the bad music from the seventies."

"And eighties."

“Whatever,” Matt said, waving off this part of the discussion. “Anyway, the song is called ‘Heavens’ and it’s by Dugz. Have any of you heard it?”

“Drugs?”

“Dugz. D-U-G-Z, Dugz.”

“How come this new generation doesn’t know how to spell?”

“They use Internet spelling.”

“That explains it.”

“So,” Lucas asked, “this new song combines what with what?”

“Rap and punk. You might call it a combination of Hip Hop and thrash.”

“Trash?”

“Thrash,” Matt corrected him. “Punk is the crash-boom-bang songs like from Fear, The Germs, Bad Brains, Black Flag, Hüsker Dü when they started...”

“You’re making up those names.”

“Nope. They have videos on Vimeo.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Okay,” Matt explained, “you might have missed the punk scene but you have to know

that there's this music genre called rap, right? I mean, it's kind of everywhere."

"I don't consider rap to be music," Jon interjected.

"Hey," Matt said, "don't make me bring up Village People or Little River Band. Because I'll do it, and then where would you be?"

Adopting a rather poor falsetto, Jon conceded: "No, no, anything but that."

They strode past the next several houses in silence until Lucas asked, "Is *Village People* a movie?"

"No, just a bad band," Marc said. "Although they starred in a bad movie."

"Village People is band it's okay to make fun of," Matt said.

"So, Matt, you listen to classic rock as well as today's stuff?"

"Not really. I grew up with classic rock and it's amazing how much of it still seems pretty cool. And today there's no escaping pop music, much of which is hip hop. It's on soundtracks of everything: movies, TV shows, commercials..."

“Okaaaaay... what do you listen to?”

“Opera.”

“Yeah, right.”

“No, right,” Matt told them. “Opera.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“But operas are so, like, bizarre.”

“Well,” Matt admitted, “the audience for opera is frequently peculiar. Opera itself is art in musical form.”

“I’m not buying that.”

“Okay, I know some of the objections to opera,” Matt said evenly. “There are long stretches where it just seems like someone is bellowing at you.”

“Yeah.”

“And I have the same objection when that happens in an opera,” Matt informed them. “I also object to scenes where the same information is stated over and over again by one or more of the singers.” He took on a mock dramatic tone: “‘The Queen’s troops are bringing the magic flame through the enchanted forest.’ ‘The magic flame is being brought through the enchanted forest by the

Queen's troops.' 'Through the forest, which is enchanted, come the Queen's troops bearing the flame, which is magic.' I know, I know. Some parts of some operas are like that."

"Some of 'em?"

"And if you ask why that repetitious section wasn't cut out of the script," Matt continued, "the answer would be something like, 'Are you kidding? That edge-of-the-forest set cost eighty thousand dollars. I pay that much to build a set, somebody's gonna be bellowing in front of it for a while.'"

"But," Matt added, "all of these objections are worth putting up with to hear those arias and duets that transcend all other musical compositions. There are moments in opera that are as monumental as the gravitational pull of the stars and planets, and we get to share those moments with singers who can compete with an entire orchestra and chorus." Matt's face had a look of joy as he thought back to how he cried at a performance of *Madame Butterfly* and then again two months later at another Puccini work, *La bohème*. Or the shock visual just before

intermission of *Der Freischütz*. Or the thrill of the Franco Corelli/Renata Tebaldi duet in the middle of *Andrea Chenier*, where a live recording displayed the audience cheering and applauding for two solid minutes. Or...

“Hello,” Marc said in a sing-song voice.
“Earth to Matt, come in please.”

“Oh, sorry. Got carried away there.”

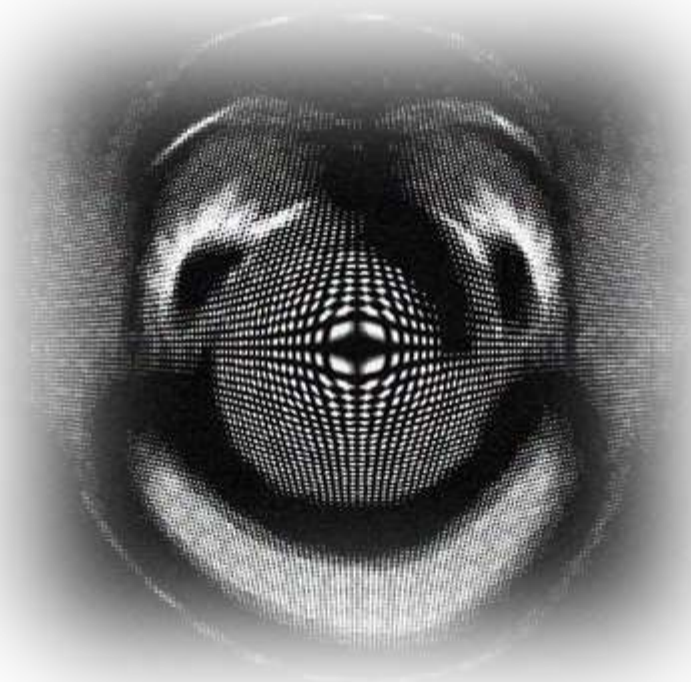
“Like the flame.”

“Right.”

“Which is magic.”

“Exactly.”

...



~ Fifteen ~

The clown's act had elements of mime, which was annoying, but when he spoke, it was always an old saw, an oft-used proverb, or a cliché, and thus equally aggravating. Right this second, the clown spun around, gathered everyone's attention, and spat out the immortal words: "Fools rush in..." and swirling eddies of acrid clouds passed around us, sucking the air out of the room and taking with it the tent poles, the cushions, the plates of hors d'oeuvres, and every inanimate object, leaving the people to stand in consternation and dismay as it dawned on them that this would be their fate for a thousand millennia, trapped with only each other to view and hear, existing on the meager crumbs of sustenance that fell from the hands of the gods as they laughed, cavorted, and sated themselves at huge banquet tables occupying the heavens

spread out above all of the trapped souls, some of whom attempted to organize a protest at first, then an insurrection, next a rebellion, and finally a coup to restore some semblance of our former lives, and the retribution was frightful to behold as jagged lightning bolts struck all of us just as the clown finished speaking: "... where angels fear to tread."

. . .

~ *Sixteen* ~

The men from Harbor Gateway North began visiting the neighborhood tentatively at first, and then with increasing regularity. Referring to themselves as G-W, or sometimes “g-dub,” the police identified them as the Gateway Gang. Their modus operandi involved teamwork and deception. They would select a home for burglarizing and then create a distraction several blocks away.

A service truck would back into the driveway of the targeted home. On the front, back, and sides of the truck were magnetic signs reading “Econo-Plumbing” or “A-1 Painting” or any of a dozen other names.

A van would slowly cruise through the streets a mile or so from the planned robbery until they found a house that still had their trash containers at the curb. The driver of the van slowed down even more as they crept past the receptacles. The passenger opened the door and tossed a crudely-made but effective

incendiary device into one of the open containers. The van picked up speed and would be a couple blocks away by the time the flames became noticeable to the neighbors. The fire department responded to the call and as long as no one near the target home got suspicious, the police remained none the wiser about the burglary currently in progress.

Within minutes, the home was looted of all electronic devices, jewelry, furs, and other valuables. Everything was quickly stashed in the truck, which then made its way to the next target, and the next, until the rear of the vehicle was filled. Then, they headed across town on the freeway, passing El Segundo, Hawthorne, and West Athens, eventually reaching the section of town between Gardena and Harbor Gateway North. They drove down a boulevard featuring auto parts stores, liquor stores, quickie markets, legal casinos, illegal body bars, and a large number of nightclubs and pubs.

The truck pulled into a dirt parking lot next to a storage building behind one of the casinos.

The gang members efficiently off-loaded the goods from the truck to the small warehouse. Once inside the outwardly barren building, the swag was organized. Flat screen TVs here, computers there, jewelry on that side, clothing on the other side.

“That neighborhood was almost too easy, man.”

“We’ll hit ‘em again soon enough. It’s the Westside tomorrow, then Pasadena. Then we take a look at our options.”

“Westside and Pasadena we hit last month. Is that long enough in between?”

The tone of the conversation changed in an instant. “You think you can run this operation better than I can?” The words were full of menace.

“Who, me? Hey, no, I didn’t mean anything by saying—”

“You bet your ass you didn’t mean anything. And you just keep on not meaning anything or saying anything, you got that?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

“Otherwise, people might start thinking you’re not happy here. And we don’t want that, do we?” There was a painful pause before the final words were spit out: “Hey, asshole, answer me—do we want that?”

“No, no. We don’t want that.”

. . .



~ *Seventeen* ~

Matt was transfixed by the girl. She smiled at his consternation. Or perhaps she wasn't smiling at all. Perhaps she was being noncommittal. Neutral. Impartial. Dispassionate. "No!" he thought. Not that. There had to be a reaction, positive or negative. She was not repulsed by his admiring stare, nor was she intrigued. As her vision slowly, oh-so-languidly danced around him, he was encouraged. The way he figured it, she was pleased with the way she affected him. He would reach out to her, interact with her, see the universe through her eyes, and experience the world through her emotions. He would be, for her, a tabula rasa. While she would be, for him, a touchstone, an object of desire, a perfect goal. And because the dream ended, she was an unobtainable goal.

. . .

~ *Eighteen* ~

The word “family” can mean many things, from kinfolk to tribe, from clan to racial stock. As an example, the four men formed a provisional family, a fellowship, but blood relationship was the most common definition. Marc was the only one of the four with a parent who was still alive. He would visit his mother twice a year at her home in a suburb of Vancouver. The other three had no living parents but they had siblings spread out across the country. Their interaction was by text and email, with the occasional phone call.

“I was talking with my daughter last night,” Matt began.

“This is the brilliant, charming, artistic, witty, and erudite daughter?” Jon inquired sarcastically.

“That’s the one,” Matt said with a smile. “But this call was not about any of that. She was reading about the health problems of people over 65 and she had a whole bunch of

questions for me. How are you guys feeling, by the way? Asking for a relative.”

The other three men answered more or less simultaneously.

“Fuck you.”

“Fine.”

“None of her damn business.”

“Okay,” Matt said cheerfully, “glad to hear it. But I don’t know if her concern was really about any of us. I mean, sure, she cares about me a lot. You guys, not so much, but because I care about you, she cares about you.”

“Awwww.”

“But now that she’s turned 30,” Matt continued, “she began thinking about her own old age.” Matt turned serious. “She was apprehensive about her own mortality. I had the same thoughts when I turned 30. Didn’t you guys?”

The replies were again almost simultaneous.

“Yeah.”

“Sure.”

“So?”

“I sense a degree of non-interest in this topic, so I’ll wrap things up fast,” Matt assured them.

“Too late.”

“Please do.”

“I’ll time you.”

“Fuck all of you,” Matt told them with a grin. “Look, she’s scared of the unknown in her future, and I was able to assure her that she had nothing to worry about in terms of health problems when she’s over 65.”

“Oh yeah?”

“How so?”

“What do you mean?”

“I told her she should have no qualms about anything happening to her after age 65 because no one in her generation is going to reach 65. The planet will be unsustainable for human life before that.”

“Oh come on.”

“Think about it,” Matt said. “You guys know who Bill McKibben is, right?”

“The environment guy.”

“Right. He’s the founder of 350.org, the people’s climate change organization. Several

years ago, McKibben pointed out that science—actual science, not the conservatard perversion of facts—science shows that the earth’s atmosphere is able to function properly with 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide, but permanent damage begins if the CO₂ levels rise above that.”

“So that’s why they called it 350.org?”

“That’s why,” Matt replied. “So, 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide is our planet’s working limit, but right now the level is already more than 15 percent beyond that. Right now, the earth’s atmosphere contains just above 400 parts per million.”

“And so that means, what, exactly?”

“It means that, as a species, we are literally destroying our habitat. Today’s generation will have another couple of decades and then their world will become a hellscape in which people kill each other for a few drops of water.”

“Wow, you laid that on your daughter?”

“Well,” Matt said, “I merely pointed out the facts facing her. Our generation has fucked things up and her generation isn’t organized

enough or powerful enough to fight the fossil fuel companies and the politicians they've purchased."

"Jesus, what a downer."

"Yes," Matt said soberly, "yes it is."

They trudged on in silence until Marc couldn't stand it any longer. "So, guys, I saw this show on the university cable channel and it was pretty interesting."

"Was it all about growing hydroponic mushrooms and tofu?"

"No," Marc protested. "C'mon, listen to this. It was about borrowed music. Or, as some would call it, stolen music."

"Like what?"

"Like how parts of a classical work by Ravel—you know, the 'Bolero' guy—were used on the soundtracks of two Alfred Hitchcock movies."

"Oh, I saw that program," Matt said. "It was disillusioning to find out that Miklos Rozsa and Bernard Herrmann plagiarized another composer's work."

"Who's Mickles Rossa?" Jon said.

Matt and Marc ignored that.

“Which Hitchcock movies?” Lucas asked.

“*Spellbound* and *Psycho*,” Marc told him.

“Bernard Herrmann also borrowed from Messiaen and Humperdinck for *Psycho* and *Vertigo*,” Matt noted.

“Yeah,” Marc said, “and there was also something about the *Lawrence of Arabia* music.”

“Maurice Jarre appropriated a portion of Dvorak’s *Czech Suite*,” Matt said.

“So, what, you’re now knocking some of the world’s best film composers because they recognized a good tune from the past?” Lucas asked.

“I’m not,” Matt replied. “The TV show was doing the knocking.”

“Wait a minute,” Jon protested. “If this is true, how come there weren’t lawsuits?”

“Public domain material is not under copyright protection,” Matt said.

“I think you guys watch too much TV.”

“You’re probably right. It’s a very addictive drug.”

...

~ *Nineteen* ~

After their neighborhood suffered its sixth robbery, the four guys began discussing the methodology of the burglars. “The distraction with the flames is dangerous,” Jon noted. “Burglary is bad enough but they’re coming into our neighborhood and committing arson as well. These people have to be stopped.”

“Yup.”

“And taught a lesson.”

“Oh yeah?” Lucas replied. “What kind of lesson did you have in mind—going to their neighborhood and starting a fire there?”

“Not a bad idea, actually, but no. I was thinking more about administering a beat-down on them.”

“We should probably leave things to the police and fire department,” Marc said.

“If the robberies continue, then maybe we need to take over.”

“And do what?” Matt asked.

“Well, for one thing, make certain trashcans are removed from the curb right away.”

“Are you volunteering to pull trashcans up from the curb of every home where the owners work during the day and can’t get to the cans until the evening?”

“If everyone worked together, then—”

“You know that’s the biggest word in the English language, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You said ‘If everyone pulled together.’ The word ‘If’ is the most important part of that statement.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Not everybody would do it, but we could get a whole bunch of us to join in on it.”

“It might work for a little while, a few weeks or even a quarter, but after that, people would lose interest. There’d have to be a robbery every month to keep people riled up about it.”

“With some parts of the neighborhood rearranged, we could so rig it in such a way that we set a trap,” Jon said.

“How?”

“Okay, how about this: we could only leave trash cans out in front of houses that have those doorbell cameras so the burglars can be caught in the act.”

“Good luck organizing that,” Marc said.

“Hey,” Matt joined in, “about those doorbell cameras. Are the police checking those? If they are, that’s great, but if they’re not, we could ask a few neighbors near the homes that had the fires and the robberies if their cameras caught anything.”

“Who was the patrol officer we saw back when we started walking?”

“His name badge said Benson.”

“You sure?”

“Uh-huh. Benson.”

“Okay, let’s call and ask,” Lucas said, getting out his phone.

“You’re calling him now?”

“Why not now?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess...”

Getting through to the police department was simple; getting information about a

current investigation was impossible. They did get Officer Benson to call back. The official police position seemed to involve excuses: not many people have doorbell cams; the police don't have the manpower to contact everyone in the neighborhood with doorbell cams; the images may no longer be available a few days after the robbery; who actually controls the rights to the cam imagery; etc.

Lucas lost patience and ended the call in a bit of a huff.

“Sounds like those guys don't think it's important enough to follow through on this.”

“Yeah.”

“So, what's next?”

“I think we should knock on some doors. See if the neighbors have the security devices, and find out what images they have.”

“Is that legal?”

“What's illegal about it?”

“Well, if we find something, then what?”

“Then we turn it over to the police.”

“Okay, so we don't try to do anything ourselves, right?”

“Unless the cops don’t do anything with the info.”

“Guys, is this the right thing to do?”

“I think so.”

“Me, too.”

“Worth a try.”

They stopped walking and looked each other in the eyes. They nodded to each other.

“Good,” Jon said. “Let’s do this thing.”

...



~ *Twenty* ~

Limbo was the ultimate clampdown. Limbo allowed no progress, either forward or back. Here, one was permanently indeterminate. In dream status flux, every soul was unknown, unsung, ignored, worthless, orphaned, and drenched with uncertainty.

Jon could see that he was not alone—there were other captives nearby. He could swivel his gaze while his body hung in The Dark Place, but there was no interacting with anyone. Calling out to the other bodies was futile. His voice was muted. He watched as the others also opened their mouths to scream silently.

Oblivion brought its full weight down upon him as he was compelled to loiter in a void that was full of threat. There was mugginess pervading the oppressive atmosphere, and there was something else in the scent that filled his nostrils, something frightening. The odor was a

recipe for gagging: an odious blend of gardenias and decomposing flesh.

A motet began, with the chorus of voices singing alternately in Latin and English:

*Brought for judgment
Before Revelation's white throne
Removed from the Book of Life
On the shores of the Lake of Fire
In the realm betwixt and between
Never to reach Heaven or Hell*

Unattended, unfriended, adrift, and in abeyance, Jon twisted slowly in a wind that had the moistness of an aardvark's tongue and more than the faintest wisp of Sulphur.

. . .

~ *Twenty-One* ~

The four of them attacked the burglary problem through the use of words and salesmanship. They explained the situation to their friends, discussing it in person and on the phone. They chatted with the dog walkers. They posted on social media. When those methods were exhausted, they began knocking on doors and introducing themselves to neighbors they had never met. In talking with homeowners, they found that the eagerness to help was in direct proportion to how close they were to the location of one of the fires or one of the burglaries.

Sometimes it was easy to obtain still images or video from the doorbell security devices; other times it involved electronic detective work. Matt used his knowledge to solve the easy problems but he also prevailed on a couple of colleagues to do the more intricate computer forensic labor. One way and another, they were able to locate some of the appropriate imagery.

Much of it was blurry. Quite a bit of it was dim. But the visuals displayed the van, the truck, and some of the burglary crew.

“That all looks pretty messy,” Jon said. “You couldn’t convict someone in court with those images.”

“You’re right. But it helps narrow down the search.”

“How so?”

“Well, body shape and size, race, and some ability to guess the age of the crooks. Sometimes they were carrying a pretty big piece of computer equipment. I could do that twenty years ago but not now.”

“Thirty years ago.”

“Whatever. You get the point.”

“Yeah. So what do we do with this stuff?”

“Copy it all and hand the originals over to Officer Benson. We should give the police the chance to do their job.”

“We keep a copy of it?”

“You bet.”

“You don’t think the police are in on any of this?”

“No, no. Not at all. It’s just that the cops may not be able to devote all the time and resources to it that might be needed. They chase down bad guys; they don’t usually do FBI sting operations.”

“And what happens if the cops don’t come though with capturing the crooks?”

There was a disquieting silence for a moment before Jon said with a degree of threat in his voice: “Then it’ll be up to us.”

As things turned out, it would be up to them.

...

~ *Twenty-Two* ~

Lucas stretched while still lying in bed. “Gotta do more exercises,” he said to himself. Despite his self-admonition, he continued to lie there, just considering the type of calisthenics in which he might engage if properly motivated. Then he sighed, got up, padded into the kitchen, and turned on a small TV that he had carefully perched on the counter as far from the sink as possible. “Don’t splash the electric device,” he reminded himself. He tuned in one of the numerous channels featuring sports commentary and then had his usual breakfast of oatmeal with brown sugar, orange juice, and coffee. After quickly cleaning the dishes, he snapped off the set and headed back to his bedroom. Throwing on his “outside clothes,” he went to meet up with the guys.

“Hey,” from Jon.

“Hiya,” from Matt.

“Uh-huh,” from Marc.

“Wow,” Lucas said to them. “Your opening remarks are inspiring. Allow me to extend a heartfelt and felicitous greeting back to each of you.”

“Ah, blow it out your ass,” Marc responded with a grin.

They started on the walk.

“So,” Matt said, “what happened when you guys gave the video files to the police?”

“You could have cut the boredom with a knife.”

“Yeah, they took the files but they seemed about as interested in them as in a colonoscopy.”

“When do we follow up with them, do you think?”

“Let’s give ‘em a day or two.”

“Then what—go over there or just call?”

“We’ve got Officer Benson’s email, we could check in using that.”

“Good deal.”

“So, new topic?”

“Sure.”

“Fine.”

“Okay by me.”

“All righty then, here we go: Anybody have a good doctor, a general practitioner?”

“The best.”

“Only if we have the same doctor ‘cause mine’s the best.”

“Give me their names and I’ll check ‘em out.”

“Check ‘em out how?”

“Yelp.”

That got a rueful laugh from the group.

“Yeah, pick a doctor the same way you pick take-out Mexican food.”

“You know,” Matt said soberly, “other than a personal recommendation, there aren’t a lot of ways to evaluate healthcare providers.”

“So, what do you do about it?”

“Me, I’m not going to do anything, but I work with some fairly high-powered computer nerd firms and they might want to look into it.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure. If there’s one thing computer companies are good at, it’s gathering information about people, even when they don’t want that information gathered. And in

this case, there's some stuff that doctors are proud of, like when they get board certified in their area of expertise, or when they are accepted to be affiliated with a hospital, or when they publish an article in a medical journal."

"You think that can be put online?"

"Anything can be put online."

"No, I mean would it be useful?"

"Couldn't hurt."

They paused to consider that. There were nods of agreement.

"Speaking of hurting," Marc said, "anybody check out the new tax code?"

"Don't have to check it out to know it's fucked up," Jon said.

"Yeah?" Lucas asked.

"Been fucked up for years," Matt said. "For decades. Ever since Reagan."

"How so?"

"Because Ronald Reagan, our first Alzheimer's president, was manipulated into selling the American populace on policies that rewarded greed. The tax code was amended to give breaks to the wealthy."

“What do you mean?”

“Depreciation allowances for owners of real estate. No capital gains taxes when selling property. Loopholes and lower rates for income based on interest, but no breaks for those of us working for a paycheck.”

“Okay, but nobody wants high taxes.”

“America does better with higher tax rates.”

“What?”

“You could look up the tax rates and the GDP for the last hundred years.”

“Did you?”

“Damn right I did. The top tax rate was 70-plus percent from 1917 through 1981 while the US grew larger and stronger. During the Eisenhower administration, the top tax rate was 91%.”

“Wasn’t Eisenhower a Republican?”

“Right, but that was back when ‘Republican’ didn’t necessarily mean ‘anti-American.’ As a result of the higher taxes on earnings above what the average family makes, the country grew stronger. Right now, the top tax rate is down below 40%, which

means less money for infrastructure. And, as if that isn't bad enough, under our current tax plan, if you're wealthy, the tax rate can be 14% like Mitt Romney paid, or 0% like Amazon paid. The tax code is all fucked up in terms of most Americans."

"What about waste?" Lucas asked. "We send in our tax money and it goes to build things no one needs but it doesn't repair the roads and bridges."

"So attack that." Matt countered. "Attack the way our money is spent. Watch the money. Track the money."

"Follow the money," Marc said.

"Exactly," Matt agreed. "And definitely attack the clowns who misspend it. But don't attack the idea of a high tax rate for people who can afford to pay it. The idea is to have everybody paying to have a country with a healthy and well-educated population."

"The man makes a good point," Lucas said, tilting his head toward Matt.

"Thank you," Matt acknowledged. "We need those roads and bridges. We need a safe and non-polluting power grid. We need

schools, hospitals, libraries, clinics, training programs, nursing homes, counseling centers, and everything else that a modern society requires.”

“Yeah,” Jon said, “I sometimes think that the goal of some politicians is to give more money and power to people who already have money and power.”

“That’s exactly what some of them do.”

“The ones that should be voted out of office.”

“Exactly.”

“We need a Congress that understands the wealthy and the corporations should pay the same rate of taxes the rest of us do.”

“I hear you.”

“That’d be great.”

“It would get my vote.”

...

~ *Twenty-Three* ~

The guys were debating who would call Officer Benson to inquire about the burglary investigation when they heard that another robbery had taken place in their neighborhood. It followed the same M.O.—a small fire was used as a distraction, and a truck disguised as a service vehicle pulled up to a house so it would look acceptable to any neighbor glancing at the front of the home. Meanwhile, the residence could be cleaned out quickly and efficiently.

“This kind of changes the tone of the phone call to the cops, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Jon agreed. Without any further discussion, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed. “Officer Benson, please,” he said into the phone. “I see, then could I speak to whoever is also working on the home invasions taking place in the 29-A-57 area,” giving the police designation for their location. “Hello, I’m calling to follow up on the

situation regarding the series of burglaries in the 29-A-57. I'm one of the people who provided digital images of the van used for the arson and also the truck used for the—" He stopped abruptly, "I see, but when will there be any—" Another cut-off. "Okay, but if you could just give us some idea of—" Jon lost his patience. "You know what? We're going to have a community meeting about this and we'll see how many people we can get to contact you with our questions, over and over again until you provide some fucking answers." As forcefully as he could, Jon terminated the call. He stared at his cell phone and said ruefully, "Man, I miss being able to slam down the phone when I'm mad."

"Yeah," Marc said, "me, too." They all nodded their agreement. After a moment, the four men glanced at each other, wondering what to do next.

"Here's what I say," Matt told them. "Let's get going on our walk. We can discuss the best plan of attack while we're getting some exercise." The other three nodded and the four men began their march.

Jon was still angry and wanted to do something, anything, immediately. The others gradually talked him out of it by promising that their next few days would involve developing a plan to trap the burglars.

“Yeah?” Jon said. “And then what?”

“They we hand them over to the police.”

Jon almost imperceptibly shook his head.

“What?” Matt asked him. “You got a problem with that?”

“No, I guess not,” Jon said. “It’s just that, well, I’d like to take care of these fuckers myself.”

“Easy there, big fella. Let’s keep calm.”

Jon looked at each of them in turn. “I keep thinking about the people who live in the homes that were ripped off. Not too easy for them to keep calm.”

“It wasn’t your house.”

“Yeah,” Jon said, “but it could have been. It’s my neighborhood.”

“And that makes you start to lose it?”

“Damn right.”

...



~ *Twenty-Four* ~

The pastor's voice was loud but the man's mouth did not move. The face and head, however, were in continual motion, appearing to liquefy and solidify in a indolent, disconcerting loop.

“Let us forevermore give praise to the Lord, our mountain, our firmament, our being. For it is the order of the heavens that it is the Almighty who teaches us the ways of war, diligently training our bones, our sinew, our fingers for fighting. We welcome the instruction because of the source, and the source is the Father, the Father who conscripts us to become Servants of the Creator, to act as wrathgivers in His name. Praise be to the Divinity for entrusting our humble souls to administer retribution upon wrongdoers. For as it is written, ‘Ye may eat the flesh of kings, and flesh of captains, and flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all

men, both free and bond, both small and great.' And let us always honor the Spirit that is caused to grow from within, springing forth from each of our hearts, bringing to the surface the ability to recognize the evil to which mankind succumbs, the malice, envy, deceit, greed, immorality, theft, cursing, lying, slander, lewdness, arrogance, murder, and folly. Again, it is written, 'I beheld an ashen beast, and seated upon it was Death. Following behind was all of Hades, which had been given authority over one-quarter of our earthly domain, and Death meted out death with sword and famine and pestilence and by every untamed beast upon the earth.' Because of these miracles and more, we lift our inner voices to sing hosanna to our Maker who teaches that bloodshed follows bloodshed as the natural order of things. Evil and pestilence find lodging in too many hearts, inexorably leading to souls clinging to life among the realm of the dead. Ruin and destruction claim the land within your borders as

violence is upon those unfortunate enough to reside in your environs. No matter that you call your structures Salvation and your gated walls Praise—no matter, for our Deity sees blood as treasurable. Blood, blood, and more blood. Bloodshed shall be where we discover our redemption!”

The pastor’s head exploded, thus concluding the sermon.

. . .

~ *Twenty-Five* ~

Jon woke up fuming. He lay still a moment, letting his ire rise, and then flung back the covers with a grunt. He squirmed out of bed and stalked into the kitchen where he angrily thrashed three eggs to make his usual “J-scramble” with bell pepper and cheese. Munching and muttering to himself, Jon was working on what he called a royal funk. “Do something,” he said out loud. “We need to fucking do something.”

As he polished off his breakfast, he scanned the articles on the *Hourly Buzz* site he called up every morning on his laptop. One article on the site caught his eye. It detailed how some neighborhoods were leasing video cameras to monitor their city streets. The way it worked seemed simple to him: cameras were mounted throughout the area and connected to a central computer that analyzed and tracked the movements of people and automobiles. “We could use something like that,” he thought to himself.

He got dressed in a rush, pulling on one white sock and one grey. Slamming his front door and heatedly locking it, he joined the guys in the street.

“Hey,” Jon said to them before getting close enough to hear if he was interrupting a conversation, “there’s something we need to check out.”

“And good morning to you,” Marc said.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Jon said. “I just was reading about this system of video cameras that track the movements of strangers and unknown cars in the neighborhood.”

He explained the main points of the monitoring system.

“Well,” Matt observed, “it would track more than strangers.”

“What do you mean?” Jon asked.

“The cameras would track everyone who moved through the streets, not just strangers.”

Jon thought about that for a second. “Okay, but everyone who belongs here, and their cars, could be entered in the system.”

“The system?”

“The, the, you know what I mean...”

“The database?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Okay, but everyone’s movements would still be monitored. Maybe only unknown people and vehicles would be flagged in some way, but we would all be tracked. Is that worth it?”

They glanced at each other for a moment. “Better than the situation we’re in now,” Jon said.

“Maybe.”

They began their walk, brainstorming their way through all the ins-and-outs of a plan to trap the burglars. At the start, it appeared that the biggest problem was predicting what day the gang would strike. “What if we monitor the fire department radio signals and move when there’s another trash can blaze?”

“That still wouldn’t tell us what home they were robbing. Plus, we wouldn’t be able to nail the assholes in the van.”

“If we get the info about the van to the cops right away, they can pick them up.”

“Yeah, okay, but what about the robbery?”

“What do burglars look for?” Matt asked.

“What do you mean?”

“They want a house that looks like nobody’s home. Also, they want a location that would let them take off in at least two directions, right?”

“No, they ripped off a house on a cul-de-sac a couple months ago.”

“Uh-uh, that house had a driveway that ran right up against another home’s driveway leading to the next street. There were only some bushes in the way.”

“So, you’re saying we should case the neighborhood as if we were going to commit the crime?”

“Exactly. Once we spot the most likely houses, we’ll try to make one of them an attractive target.”

“How do we do that?”

“By making the other choices look iffy.”

“Meaning what?”

“Set up some caution tape on one. Put some gardening equipment out front of another. Anything to make it look like there could be people showing up. By a process of

elimination, they'll go for the house where we're ready to film them."

They thought about it a moment. Finally, Lucas admitted, "That might work."

"We better all understand something," Marc pointed out. "This is going to take a lot of cooperation from the other homeowners."

"We just have to be convincing," Jon replied. "Remember the reaction of the neighbors living next to the homes that got robbed? I'll bet we can get them to help persuade others to help out."

"There are going to be some objections, like 'Let the cops do it,' and 'Sounds like a vigilante thing.' Stuff like that."

"Yeah," Jon admitted, "but we'll get past that." To himself he said, "It does sound like a vigilante thing."

...



~ *Twenty-Six* ~

Lucas' dream was full of irrational fear and unreasonable paranoia. In other words, it was like most of his dreams. He was being chased. Hunted. Tracked. Spied upon. He was pointed out by cloaked bystanders. Shunned by friends. Turned away by relatives.

Underlying his fear was one simple, unrelenting fact: he was wanted by the authorities. The unsmiling authorities. Sometimes faceless, unnamed, and unseen, Kafka-esque authorities.

“What do you want?” he yelled at them. But there was no answer. The only sounds greeting his ears were the hellish hissing and corrosive crackling of the flames that surrounded him.

No matter which way he turned, everything was ablaze. The landscape. The rooms. His body. He ran from the choking combustion in a frenzy, almost unseeing. Sweat poured off his body and

turned to steam in the intense heat of the conflagration encircling him. The flames grew larger. Silently screaming, he would watch his body become totally consumed by fire and turned into ash.

Then, magically and horribly, he would find himself restored, only to be put through the gauntlet once again. He prayed as yet another onslaught of the inferno rapidly approached him, hungrily reaching out to scorch and sear his flesh.

. . .

~ *Twenty-Seven* ~

Extrapolating from the dates of the prior burglaries, the guys selected a week during which they would concentrate their efforts to create a trap for the gang of thieves. Their zeal was infectious as they convinced more and more of their neighbors to help. They identified nearly a dozen homes that seemed ripe for the robbers to attack. One in particular seemed ideal because of its location just past a corner. There were direct routes out of the district in three directions. Even better, the owners would be at work all day.

The other potential target homes all received some sort of deterrent—the guys worked with other neighborhood volunteers to make it look as if some landscaping was going on, or a painting job was in progress, or roof repair, or plumbing work, or sprinkler installation—anything that suggested the possibility of people suddenly appearing around the home.

Back at the selected site, the mail was put on hold and the gardening service was postponed. No cars were parked in the driveway or up and down the street. As subtly as possible, all the valuables inside the residence received some sort of identifying mark. In the case of jewelry, photographs were made of the pieces from a variety of angles. Small, motion-activated video cameras were installed at appropriate points in the house.

“We set?” Marc asked.

“Think so,” Lucas replied.

“As set as we’ll ever be,” Matt said.

Jon just grunted. The others were satisfied with a job well done. Not Jon. He was angry. He refrained from displaying it but inside he was seething. How dare these vermin loot our homes, he thought. They deserve to suffer, he thought. They deserve to die, he thought.

. . .

~ Twenty-Eight ~

Deaths of five alleged burglars investigated

West Mesa—Police were surprised to discover five dead bodies after arriving at the scene of an attempted burglary in this well-to-do neighborhood that has recently been unsettled by a series of home invasions.

Police spokesperson Sgt. Muriel Pedersen stated, “Two units [patrol vehicles] were dispatched at 4:16 p.m. in response to several phone calls from homeowners in the area. Officers were initially prepared to find a home invasion robbery in progress. Instead, they were confronted by the dead bodies of all five alleged burglars.”

Identification of the deceased, whose ages range from 19 to 32, is being withheld pending notification of their families but Pedersen stated, “There is reason to believe all five of the men have ties to the Gateway Gang. They all have prior arrests and convictions, and the method of the crime matches that associated with the Gang in the past.”

The five bodies were in the rear of a truck parked in the driveway of the targeted home located on Treecrest Lane. The coroner’s office was immediately called and the five men were pronounced dead at the scene at 5:45 p.m.

The truck was filled with valuables taken from the house. All of the property had been marked or photographed by the homeowners and the files were on a portable computer drive found inside a bedroom closet.

The metal doors at the back of the Gang’s getaway vehicle were bolted shut with the five men trapped inside and the engine running.

A hole had been punched in the floorboard of the truck and a portion of the exhaust system had been diverted into the opening. A crude but strong metal plate had been screwed on to prevent the removal of the pipe delivering the deadly fumes to the men inside the truck.

Police are investigating the deaths as a possible multiple homicide.

...



~ *Twenty-Nine* ~

They shared a dream. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say their dreams all had the same theme: watching and being watched. “The eyes have it,” Matt heard himself say in his nightmare. Faces with large, unblinking eyes approached from every angle. Eyes nearby. Eyes peeking through doors and windows. Eyes on walls. Eyes on the ceiling. Eyes on the furniture. Eyes floating by themselves.

Jon could not escape the watchful orbs as he ran through a thicket of gargantuan trash receptacles, each of which burst into flames just before he passed them.

In a frenzy, Matt spun his head to look over first one shoulder, then the other. He was moving in and out of an immense and unending armada of vans. As he approached the passenger side of

each vehicle, the door swung open and a flaming device was tossed at him.

Lucas was plunged into one of the eyes, his body twisting under the power of an unseen source. He was a mote, a stye, a speck of dust to be dealt with. The enormous eyelids fluttered him away, but that propelled his body through the air and he fell into another eyeball and the process began again.

Inwardly terrified but outwardly immobile, Marc floated into homes as men were removing valuables from the premises. Hundreds of eyes watched the chicanery. The eyes were judgmental, damning everyone, including Marc. "It's not me!" he yelled. "I don't belong here! I'm not doing this!" he shouted, but the words were only in his mind.

. . .

~ *Thirty* ~

The morning after the burglary was unlike any other morning when the four men met for their walk. It wasn't because of the unseasonably cool weather that had moved into the area. It wasn't because of the atypically chatty nature of everyone they encountered on their route. It was because one of their quartet was a murderer and the other three knew it.

They stared at each other for what seemed like several minutes before slowly beginning their exercise routine.

“So,” Matt began.

“Yeah,” Lucas said. “Shouldn't we talk about this?”

“Why? What's to discuss?” Jon replied. “Some lowlife scum invaded the neighborhood and were asphyxiated in their getaway vehicle. Case closed.”

“Well,” Marc pointed out, “not exactly case closed. We watched them load the truck, we waited until all of them were in the back of

the truck, and we're the ones who locked them inside the truck."

"And we're the only ones who know that," Jon told him firmly. "We're not involved. End of story."

"No," Marc insisted, "it's not the end of the story—the police have called me in for an interview at eleven today."

"Me, too," Matt said.

"Me, too," Lucas added.

"Yeah," Jon admitted, "I'm also going in at eleven. What of it?"

"What do we tell them?"

"Tell them the truth," Jon said. "You don't know how the scum came to wind up dead."

There was another uneasy silence for a while.

"Jon, remember when we first met?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"You said you had been in the Army."

"That's right," Jon said.

"Ever kill anyone?"

Jon smiled. "I was in the Signal Corps. Codes and ciphers, communications, logistics,

stuff like that. No doom, no destruction, no death.”

“Well,” Matt said, “you made up for that yesterday.”

“Hey,” Jon snapped. “You can speculate all you want about anything you want as long as you’re doing it with me, but just stick to the facts when you’re talking to the cops.”

“I will.”

“I mean it—just the facts.”

“Hey, tight-lipped, that’s me,” Matt said without any emotion. “I can’t tell them what I don’t know.”

“That’s right.”

“And I’m not telling them what took place almost right in front of our eyes.”

“Yeah?” Jon said. “What’s that?”

“You know what that is,” Matt said and then indicated he was clamming up.

“Hey, Jon, you can at least tell us,” Marc said. “How did you pull it off?”

Jon smiled. “How did I pull what off?” he said evenly.

“Oh, come on,” Marc insisted, “we were all there after those guys were locked in.

Nobody touched the truck. It was just sitting there, idling. Somebody suggested shutting it off and you said ‘no way.’ You said we should just slowly back off and go home.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, you had to have rigged the exhaust earlier or an accomplice did it.”

“An accomplice?” Jon said.

“Yeah, a partner in crime.”

“Christ, you sound like a cop.”

“I am a cop,” Marc snapped.

“Oh fuck that shit,” Jon barked back. “You’ve got some local PD community volunteer badge. You’re not a cop.”

“Okay, but I work with them.”

“Not on this case you don’t,” Jon spat out with vehemence.

“You think you’re going to be able to slide this past the police and the district attorney’s office?” Lucas demanded. “And we’re parties to it!” he spat out.

“That’s an interesting point,” Jon said to all of them. “We all have an interest in this remaining an unsolved mystery.” He said it in a quiet but powerful tone. “Have we got that?”

Jon asked. Receiving no reply, he repeated it with a bit more volume. “Have we got that?”

“Okay, okay,” Matt said, “let’s everybody calm the hell down. Nobody says anything to the cops other than something simple: we went on a second walk, like we sometimes do, and we came upon the truck, engine idling. We didn’t see any of the robbers.”

“But we’re the ones who locked them inside their truck.”

“And we don’t need to tell that to the police, okay? Also, no speculation. No ‘maybes.’ No ‘what ifs.’ Just keep repeating the story in your own words. We were on our walk, we saw the truck, it looked suspicious, and we called the cops. Okay? Everybody all right with that?”

They eyed one another, alarmed at the realization that their lives had changed forever. The painful silence continued. They reached the midpoint of their route, turned, and began the march back to their starting point.

Marc cleared his throat.

But there was no conversation.

Lucas coughed.

But there was no conversation.

Finally, Matt broke the impasse. “So, what the hell is the cockamamie idea behind Daylight Savings Time? Can anybody explain that one to me?”

The other three were happily jolted out of their dark thoughts.

“It has to do with the farmers,” Jon said.

“It’s a plot to get people to learn how to program those damn digital clocks,” Lucas said. “Thank heavens the phones and TVs and computers make the change automatically.”

“But humans don’t make the change automatically,” Marc added.

“‘Spring forward, Fall back’,” Lucas announced.

Matt took out his phone, hit the ‘Net button and searched on DST. “Okay, it says here that we can blame a guy named George Hudson for coming up with this mess.”

“Let’s beat the shit out of him.”

“We’d need a time machine—he came up with it back in the eighteen hundreds.”

“Well, we could beat the shit out of Congress for continuing to use it.”

“I’d like to beat the shit out of Congress for a lot more than that.”

“Me, too.”

“So, what’s the justification for changing the clocks twice a year?”

“Says here to have more daylight in the evenings.”

“That’s ridiculous. There’s the same amount of daylight. We just changed the clocks.”

“Yeah, the whole thing is stupid.”

“What was with the farmers?”

“More time to work on getting the crops in, I guess.”

“They could get up earlier. Why bother everyone else with this resetting the clocks crap?”

“I agree.”

“Me, too.”

“You got that right.”

They had returned to their starting point for their walk and they dropped the topic. Their eyes darted to one another and then into the distance. The uneasy silence was back once more.

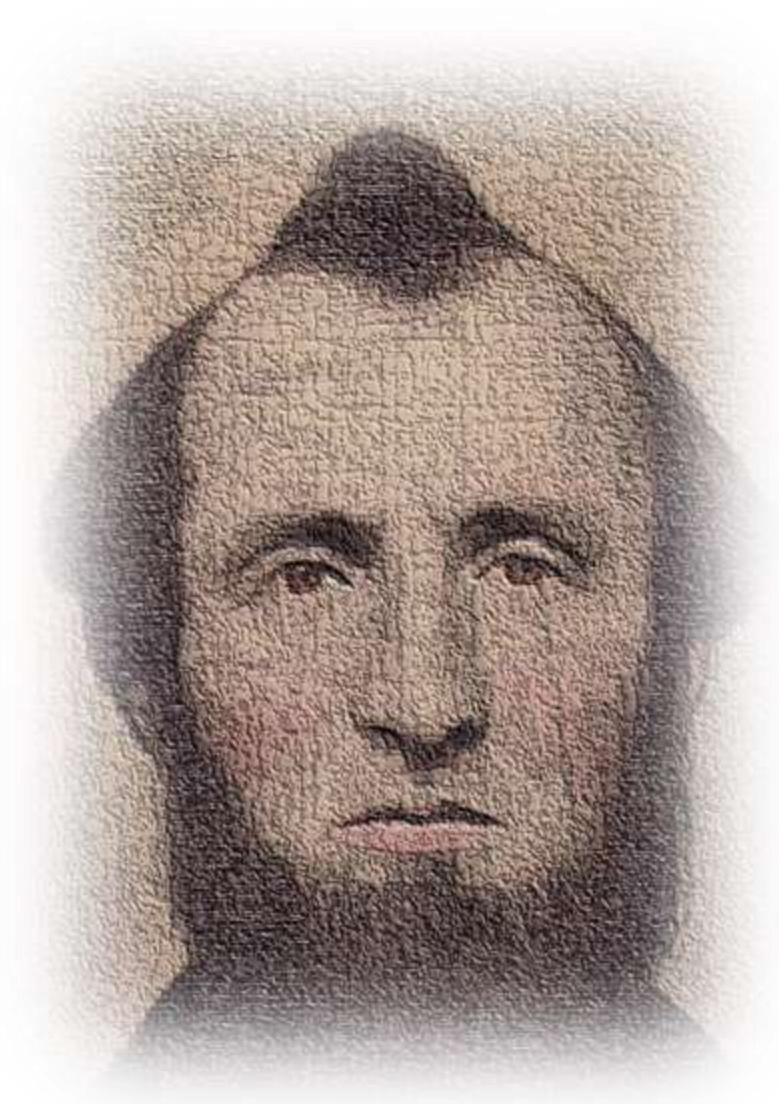
Slowly, Matt raised his hand to waist level. The others hesitated, then did the same and they tentatively performed their ritual four-way wrist grab.

“So, anybody want to carpool to the police station?”

“Fuck that. I’m going in my own car so I can get the hell out of there whenever they’ve had enough of my not telling them anything they want to know.”

And with that, they all nodded in agreement and performed the four-way wrist grab again, this time with a bit more enthusiasm.

...



~ *Thirty-One* ~

Principal Byron Jaybush Jerimiah Kleinwasser aimed his stern and forbidding countenance at the squirming mass of students crammed into the dilapidated seats of the ancient school auditorium. Reflecting the fashion of an earlier era, the man's face was powdered and tinged with rouge. New students tittered when seeing him for the first time. Then they saw the fencing scar on his left cheek. The discolored skin reached from eye to jawbone and sometimes appeared to throb as Kleinwasser orated. At that point, any semblance of laughter would get caught in the throat of even the bravest student.

Relishing his reputation as “the lord high executioner,” Kleinwasser acted in opposition to the American concept of justice—he considered students guilty until proven innocent; and no one under his jurisdiction was ever proven innocent.

You have joined the dream and are now standing in a row of several dozen schoolchildren, each trembling before the master assassin. Filling everyone's ears is the howling of dervishes who are also busy playing Brahms' String Quartet No. 3 in B flat Op. 67 backwards at double speed.

Voices intruded on the pulsating sonic assault: "Doom has come upon you! The time has arrived! The day is near! There is panic, not joy, on the firmament! Here is the way my wrath is poured upon you for your detestable practices!"

Kleinwasser pointed to the first boy in line and turned his hand thumbs-down, then thumbs-up. The boy squirmed and silently shrieked as his body ascended into the air. Oxygen was sucked out of his body, then blood, then sinew and bone until there was no trace of the boy.

Kleinwasser pointed to the next quivering pupil, a girl in pigtails. Thumbs-down, thumbs-up. Her quaking body rose and was devoured by some unseen force.

Boy after boy, girl after girl—all were sentenced to a premature end. On and on went the outrage until it was your turn. You tried protesting, yelling, screaming, and attempting to escape but there was no respite. You were trapped and hounded by the perverted music in your ears and the profound vacancy where your soul used to reside. The exit process began. Your body spun into the air as oxygen was sucked out of your lungs and—

The bedside alarm sounded, bringing the trance to an abrupt conclusion.

. . .

~ *Thirty-Two* ~

Matt wasn't sure if the four men would continue their daily walk. Coping with the knowledge that they were all participants in a quintuple homicide was more difficult than any of them had expected.

They first had to endure the seemingly endless questioning by a team of police officers. Once that ordeal was in the past, they were left with their own feelings of guilt (Matt), shame (Marc), helplessness (Lucas), and angry pride (Jon). They each dealt with these pressures in silence and alone. Jon, in particular, was doubly troubled that he could not brag about his efforts to anyone.

That morning, the four met in their usual spot. At first, no one had anything to say. They halfheartedly began their walk and the silence built up to an oppressiveness that couldn't be ignored. Matt tried to lift the spirits of the foursome. "I was watching the fights last night," he said.

Nobody responded for several steps. Eventually, curiosity got the better of him and Jon asked, “Boxing or MMA?”

“I recorded one show of each.”

“I like MMA better,” Jon said. “There’s more action.”

“What’s MMA stand for again?” Lucas asked.

“Mixed Martial Arts.”

“Is that the one where they can punch, kick, and wrestle?”

“That’s the one. Although they call it grappling.”

“My grandfather used to call it wrassling,” Marc said.

“So,” Matt continued, “they introduced the first two fighters, Somebody ‘The Eagle’ Something versus Other Guy ‘El Presidente’ Whatever.”

“So this wasn’t a championship fight, I take it,” Lucas said.

“What was your first clue?” Matt said with a grin. “But it got me to thinking about the nicknames.” Matt gave some examples: “Boomer. Little Heathen. Punk. Thug Rose.

The Hawk. Boom-Boom. One-Punch. The Vanilla Gorilla.”

“You’re kidding with that last one, right?”

“Nope, that’s real. But I think they can go even further with the nicknames.”

“Further?”

“Yeah, weirder nicknames. All it takes is just a little imagination.”

“Like what?”

“Okay,” Matt told them, “I’ve got some suggestions: Archie ‘Strontium Hydroxide’ Moore.” There was no reaction. “Or: Evander ‘One-and-a-Half Ears’ Holyfield.” That brought rueful laughter. “Or: Riddick ‘Expansive Uncharted Land Mass’ Bowe.”

“That only works for people who know that Riddick Bowe was a human blimp,” Jon said.

“Okay, but it’s a good name for the blimp, right?”

“I guess so,” Jon acknowledged.

“Okay,” Matt went on, “here’s another one: Rocky ‘Formerly Dormant Volcano Now Ready to Explode’ Marciano.”

“Or,” Marc joined in, and all eyes swiveled to him. “Floyd ‘Guy Who’d Be In Prison if He Wasn’t a Fucking Millionaire’ Mayweather.”

“That’s excellent,” Matt said. He had successfully broken the ice and now everyone was willing to join in.

“Mike ‘Bet On Him, Don’t Date Him’ Tyson.”

“Manny ‘He’s a Senator, He’s a Boxer, He’s the Pugnacious Politico’ Pacquiao.”

“Joe ‘Seems to Move Like Other Boxers Until You See How Easily He Smacks You Upside the Head’ Louis.”

“That’s a good one,” Matt said.

“Conor ‘B-A-O-A-T’ McGregor.”

“What’s B-A-O-A-T?”

“Biggest Asshole of All Time.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Who’s your favorite fighter?” Jon asked Matt.

“Boxing or MMA?”

“Either,” Jon replied.

“In MMA, Clay Guida.”

“Yeah!” Jon said. “His fight with Diego Sanchez was amazing!”

“Totally,” Matt agreed. “In boxing, my favorites are Young Stribling and Reggie Strickland.”

“Who?”

“William Lawrence Stribling Jr., who had two nicknames. So he would be introduced as Young ‘King of the Canebrakes’ Stribling.”

“He’s a favorite because of his nicknames?”

“No, his record. The guy died in a motorcycle accident when he was only 28 but you’ll never guess what his record was by that point in his career. Two hundred twenty-four wins, 13 losses, and 14 draws.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. He had 129 wins by knockout. Over 250 fights by the time he was 28. Nobody has ever come close to that. Based on the number of wins in the course of his lifetime, Young Stribling was one of the greatest boxers of all time.”

“Okay, so what’s with the Reggie guy?” Lucas asked.

“Reggie Strickland fought under several names because he was what is known as a professional opponent—a guy with moderate boxing skills who is brought in to be somebody’s next victim. In his career, Strickland had 66 wins and 276 losses.”

“Jesus.”

“And every one of those 66 wins was a surprise,” Jon said.

They had returned to their regular starting point and the conversation stopped.

“So,” Matt began.

“Yeah,” Lucas said.

The silence reigned for another moment.

“Anybody have any trouble with the cops?” Jon asked.

“No.”

“Nope.”

“They were a pain in the ass, but no trouble other than that.”

The silence reigned for another moment.

“You know they won’t ever give up on this, right?” Marc asked.

“Sooner or later, they will,” Jon said. “It’ll become a cold case and be forgotten.”

“I don’t know...”

“Why do you think that?”

“Somebody at the police or the district attorney’s office is going make something out of this,” Lucas said forcefully. “I mean, hell, they’re looking at five dead bodies, and four alive guys who were actively engaged in trying to nail the bastards.”

“They’re also looking at something else,” Jon said with equal force.

“What’s that?”

“A jury pool that thinks the bastards got exactly what they deserved.”

They stared at one another, each in his own private box of emotion.

“Okay,” Marc said, turning to go.

“Okay,” the others muttered. Everyone made their way back home.

...



~ *Thirty-Three* ~

Stroke don't play favorites. Stroke don't play fair. Stroke come when it wants. Stroke reach out and fuck with you. In this case, stroke fucked with Marc's aorta. If he had been awake, he would have been experiencing confusion, blurred vision, dizziness, and numbness on one side of his body. But he only experienced the dream... The man with the crooked smile and the talon-fingers approached out of the mist. The man had his assistants wrap Marc's torso in wet bedsheets until he was immobile. Then the man's smile became even more distended and he reached out with one of his talon-fingered hands, parted the sheets and penetrated the flesh of Marc's chest, reached inside, grabbed the heart, and squeezed.

. . .

~ *Thirty-Four* ~

Three. Only three. Matt, Lucas, and Jon met for their morning walk. As they waited for Marc, they shuffled their feet, re-tied shoelaces, checked phones for messages, and did all the standard killing time moves. Eventually, Lucas decided he had had enough with the waiting. “I’m texting him,” he said. Several moments ticked by without a response.

Jon pulled out his phone to place a call. “Shit, it’s going to voicemail,” he told the others. Then, into the phone, he said, “Hi Marc. It’s Jon. What’s going on? We’re ready to take off on our walk but wanted to hear from you first. I think we’ll probably start anyway, so call back when you can. ‘Bye.’” He ended the call and they started on the walk.

“So,” Matt said.

No response.

“Really?” Matt asked. “Nobody has a topic for conversation?”

“Whatever,” Jon replied.

“Okay, how about this: the clock radio gave me some swing music this morning. Benny Goodman Sextet with Lionel Hampton on vibes and Charlie Christian on guitar. Great stuff.”

“Okay,” Jon said, “swing music I can understand. But then it turned into bebop and who the hell likes that?”

“I like bop,” Matt said.

“You like that stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait, you’re telling us you like bebop *and* opera?”

“Yup.”

“You’re crazy.”

Matt tilted his head and said, “Over the years, a number of people have made that same observation about me. But you’re the first one who objects to the fact that I enjoy both of those genres of music.” Matt’s voice changed to a soft but patronizing tone: “How long have you been having these kinds of thoughts?”

“Fuck you.” Jon said.

“I sense anger.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey,” Matt told him pleasantly, “if the mental aberration fits, swear about it.”

Lucas’ phone beeped with a text. He looked at it and stopped walking. The others took a few more steps before halting and turning to regard Lucas.

“Marc’s dead,” Lucas told them.

“What?”

“No way.”

“That was a text from his daughter. They were supposed to have dinner together last night, remember?”

“Yeah, he told us about it nine days in a row.”

“She has a key to his place and she found him. Heart attack.”

“Jesus.”

“Fuck.”

There was silence for a moment before Jon muttered something they all were thinking: “I gotta make a doctor’s appointment...”

...

~ *Thirty-Five* ~

Once he returned home from the walk, Jon got down to business. He grabbed a cup of coffee, settled behind the oak desk in his home office, made thirty-three phone calls on behalf of his clients, enjoyed a nooner with one new client who was convinced that her bedroom skills would transport her into an acting career, scarfed down lunch while reviewing publicity materials for a half-dozen of his protégés, and still managed to squeeze in a visit to his therapist.

“The last time you were here,” the psychologist said, referring to his notes, “you seemed very agitated about incidents that occurred when you were serving in the military.”

“Uh-huh,” Jon said.

“Would you like to continue discussing that?”

“Sure. So, okay, I was in Vietnam, or maybe Cambodia—things were so screwed up

and everybody was so stoned on horse that we didn't always know what the fuck was happening or where we were.”

“Excuse me, horse?”

“Yeah,” Jon said. “Heroin.”

“Oh, I see.”

“They had a different kind of heroin over there, so smooth you could smoke it. Sometimes a guy would hand you a joint, and you'd think it was marijuana, and it turned out to be smack. Hell, even the maryjane over there was powerful. ‘The Real,’ they called it. Or ‘Thai Stick.’ There were a lot of names. But the drugs aren't the point.”

“What is the point?”

“The point is that a lot of us died that day. I lost a couple buddies and a whole bunch of guys I knew and served with, and I had to watch as they...” Jon was unable to continue for the moment.

The therapist nodded encouragement to his patient but remained silent, sensing that Jon had more to say but needed time to find the words that would adequately portray his emotions.

“They had built this, this... field of death...” Jon began, barely holding back tears. The silence continued for a while.

“Who built it, and what did they build?”

“The Army Corps of Engineers,” Jon said, trying not to break down. “Or the Seabees, I don’t know. It was... it was a killing machine.”

“How so?”

“They installed rows of mortars. I mean rows and rows of them, all wired for remote firing. They had an experimental shell, filled with shrapnel, ball bearings, metal spikes, I don’t know. They had heard about a big offensive that was coming through this valley, this valley where we had now been sent, and they built this acre of mortars to wipe out the first wave of infantry. Operation Steel Rain, they called it. But it didn’t get used. The offensive never happened. New offensives happened in other areas, I guess. But nobody de-activated the acre of mortars.” Jon was openly crying now. “I don’t know what set it off but all of a sudden we were the target. Steel Rain poured over us. I saw guys ripped apart.

Limbs blown off. Heads severed. Body parts flying through the air. It was..." Jon couldn't continue. The tears flowed freely now.

The therapist edged forward in his chair and extended his right hand to Jon. "Congratulations," he said.

"What do you mean? What for?" Jon asked between sobs.

"For finally telling me about this. You've been holding it back for months."

"I know, I know," Jon said ruefully.

"It's okay," the therapist said gently. "You just needed to find the right time to talk about it."

Jon took a while to calm back down. The therapist activated the sound system in his office. Classic rock from the seventies. Jon nodded his appreciation and worked to regain his composure. The therapist tried to remain non-intrusive; to just let his patient work through the pain and sorrow.

Eventually, the therapist asked one more question: "Do you ever dream about any of this?"

"No," Jon said.

“No?”

“Well, if I have dreams about this shit, I don’t remember them.”

“You probably do have dreams about this, but they may be symbolic.”

Jon thought about the distorted images of the women in some of his dreams. Could that be related to the hell he lived through in ‘Nam?

“Let’s discuss this in our next session,” the therapist said, glancing at his watch.

“Yeah, okay,” Jon said. He stood up, felt a little disoriented, steadied himself, shook hands with his therapist, and headed out to the parking lot. He never made it to his car.

...



~ Thirty-Six ~

Hollywood agent killed in hit-and-run; homicide is preliminary finding

North Hills — Police are searching for Valeria Phoebe McMartin, 32, an actress and exotic dancer, after witnesses said she rammed her 2004 Mazda Miata into Hollywood agent Jonathan Altasky and then backed up and ran over his body twice. He was pronounced dead by fire department EMTs who reached the scene of the alleged homicide, a parking lot in front of the Vanister Professional Building, an office complex specializing in providing offices to healthcare and mental health professionals.

"She just slammed right into him," said one witness who asked not to be identified. "Then she stopped, put her car in reverse and ran over the guy. She stopped again and ran over him again. It was crazy."

Police say Altasky's head and ribcage were crushed under the wheels of McMartin's vehicle and that he probably died "almost instantaneously." A warrant for McMartin has been issued and a police spokesperson stated they expect to make an arrest "in the near future." Ms. McMartin was described as being 5' 5" tall, 135 pounds, platinum blonde hair, and with "an attractive figure."

Altasky was the president of Talent Direction Unlimited, a firm representing actors, singers, and dancers. Known in the Hollywood community for his nearly two decades at Creative Talent Associates, one of the largest talent agencies in the industry, Altasky formed his own company ten years ago, taking the bold step of leaving CTA without

asking any of his clients to come with him. "It's a clean break," he was quoted as saying in a *Variety* interview published at the time.

This paper's online/tipline received three anonymous reports that McMartin and Altasky had been in a brief relationship and that she had once been a client at Altasky's firm. These statements are unconfirmed as of this writing. Attempts to contact friends or relatives of Ms. McMartin have been unsuccessful and there have been no replies from Altasky's family or Talent Direction Unlimited.

The incident has been classified by police as a potential homicide and is currently under active investigation.

...

~ *Thirty-Seven* ~

At first, Matt and Lucas were unable to cope with the shock of Jon's murder, although they each handled it in diametrically different ways. Matt retreated into his thoughts, becoming contemplative, quiet, and reclusive. Lucas was just the opposite. In an agitated state, he began calling or texting everyone he could think of who had been involved with Jon, from family members to clients.

Eventually, Lucas called Matt to discuss the situation, and to find out if they would continue the walk, just the two of them. By this time, Matt was his old self again.

"I'm going on the walk tomorrow morning no matter what happens," Matt said.

"Yeah?" Lucas asked.

"Yup," Matt told him. "Even if you decide to drop dead this evening."

"Hey," Lucas protested.

"Hey, yourself," Matt replied. "What's wrong?"

“That attitude just doesn’t seem very respectful under the circumstances.”

“Really,” Matt said evenly. “Well, let’s consider a few things. I’m respectful of what I eat and how much exercise I get. I am respectful of the rules of the road and of the IRS. And most of the time I’m respectful of my friends. But death doesn’t get any respect from me.”

“Still, it just seems, well, wrong.”

“Okay,” Matt said, “look: I am no more or less respectful of Jon and Marc now than when they were alive. And that’s good enough for me. If I die, you can be as disrespectful as you want about it.”

“Well,” Lucas said, “I don’t know...”

“Trust me,” Matt said, “you’re handling things fine for you and I’m handling things okay for me.”

“You think so?” Lucas asked.

“Hey, Lucas?”

“Yeah?”

“Relax. You’ll live longer.”

Lucas thought about that for a moment and then the tension finally left him. A smile

crept over his face. “Fuck you,” he said into the phone.

“There ya go,” Matt said with a grin.

“So,” Lucas asked, “the walk is on for tomorrow?”

“The walk is on for tomorrow.”

. . .

~ *Thirty-Eight* ~

It wasn't the same. Now that the walk involved just two of the original four guys, the burden of conversation fell on Matt and Lucas in a far greater way than before. They found themselves trudging forward in silence. Matt decided to try having a regular conversation. "So," he began, "what would you like to discuss today? Supermarket prices?"

Lucas was unresponsive.

"Okay," Matt continued, "we could talk about healthcare costs. Politics. Religion. Spam phone calls...?" Whatever topic he raised produced only monosyllabic responses from Lucas.

"Let's try this the other way around," Matt said. "Name a subject to talk about."

"Are you—" Lucas began, but stopped because he had to clear his throat. "Are you going to the funeral or to the memorial service, or both?"

"Neither."

"You're kidding."

“Nope.”

Lucas was nettled. “You’ve known the guy for years.”

“Hey,” Matt said, “I don’t do weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs, memorial services, or bachelor parties.”

“That’s not right.”

“I didn’t go to Marc’s elegiac send-off, so why would you expect me to attend Jon’s?”

“It’s different,” Lucas insisted. “With Marc, his family held the ceremonies up North to be near his mother. Nobody expected you to travel to Canada.”

“The geography isn’t important to me,” Matt explained. “If I believed in attending those types of morbid events, I would make the trip whether it was across town or across the continent. I just don’t like public wallowing in grief.”

“It just doesn’t seem right.”

“To you,” Matt said gently. “My decision doesn’t seem right to you, but it seems right to me. And I’m the only person I have to satisfy with my decision.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know...”

They walked in silence for several yards. Passing a home with a realtor sign on the front lawn, Matt remembered looking up the property on one of the house hunting sites. “You know what they’re asking for this home?” Matt didn’t wait for Lucas to reply. “A million seven.”

“How much?” Lucas asked.

“One million, seven hundred thousand dollars.”

“Yipes!” Lucas said.

“Yeah,” Matt agreed. “When you bought your house, did you ever think it would become a million dollar property?”

Lucas cocked his head to one side as he considered this new piece of information. “Hey, that’s right. If this house is a million seven, then mine has to be right around that. Same neighborhood.”

“And yours is five years newer because the Western half of the development was put in later.”

“That’s right!” Lucas said. “Jesus, a million dollars.” Lucas was already spending some of the money in his mind.

They returned to the starting point in their walk and regarded each other cautiously.

“So...” Lucas said.

“So,” Matt repeated.

“Lot of unknowns,” Lucas said.

“Like what?”

“We never found out how Jon pulled it off,” Lucas said.

“Well,” Matt confessed, “he told me.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, he asked me not to say anything, but now that he’s gone, I guess it’s okay for you to know.”

“It was an accomplice, right?”

“Right. His brother-in-law from Ohio was out here on a visit. He was the one who did the work under the truck.”

“But the robbers would have seen him underneath.”

“He did it the night before.”

“Wait, what?”

“Jon hired a private investigator to track down the gang. Then Jon drove his brother-in-law across town where they worked on the truck the night before the burglars came here.

All the guy had to do on the day of the robbery was slide under the truck, open the valve on the exhaust line, and slip away. Then he went to Olive Garden while the cops showed up and we got to play innocent.”

“We were innocent,” Lucas insisted.

“Not exactly.”

“Come on,” Lucas protested, “all we did was lock them inside the truck.”

“Where they all died.”

“But that wasn’t because of us!”

“Yeah, well, you might feel that way but the D.A.’s office might feel different.”

“Jesus.” Lucas shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “So what happened after the robbery?”

“The guy went back to Dayton. Caught a plane the next morning. Or at least, that’s what Jon told me.”

“Man,” Lucas said. “Shouldn’t you tell the cops?”

“Then we’d be dragged into it. You want that?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“Christ,” Lucas said.

“That means,” Matt told him, “this conversation didn’t happen and we don’t know anything about it.”

“Man...” Lucas said, staring off into space.

“We share a shipload of secrets.”

“Oh,” Lucas said. “Yeah, there’s that.” He shook his head. “Think we can take them to the grave?”

“I can if you can,” Matt assured him.

Lucas nodded, then grimaced and rubbed his chest. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“What is it?”

“God damn pain in my chest. Keeps coming back. You think it’s the same as with Marc? You know, heart attack?”

“You’re rubbing the right side of your chest,” Matt said. “The heart’s on the other side.”

“Oh yeah,” Lucas said. “Maybe it’s just indigestion.”

“If that’s it, the problem is easily solved. Go see a G.I.” Matt told him.

“What do you mean, a G.I.?”

“A specialist in gastrointestinal problems. If it’s indigestion or acid reflux, they can do something about that.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He rubbed his chest again, tried to take a deep breath, and grimaced once more. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said again. He held out his right arm and the men shook hands. “You take care,” Lucas said absently.

“You, too,” Matt said.

They turned and walked back to their homes. Matt entered his house, made a beeline for the kitchen and grabbed a cup of coffee. Sipping from his favorite mug, he made his way down the hall to enter his office. He placed the *Arias* CD of Angela Gheorghiu in his stereo, and got to work on his computer.

Lucas never made it home. The pain in his chest suddenly increased to the point where he could not continue walking. He collapsed on the sidewalk a hundred feet from his house. He lost consciousness for a few moments, but then regained it enough to dig his phone from his pocket. Writhing in pain, he managed to dial 911.

After one ring, the connection was made. “Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?”

“Chest...” Lucas gasped. “My chest... can’t breathe...” he explained, fear rising.

“Stay calm,” urged the voice on the line. “Can you tell me your location?”

Lucas managed to name the nearest cross streets before passing out again.

The fire department EMT team was there in six minutes and they transported him to the emergency room of West Mesa Medical Center. Tests were run, blood drawn, x-rays taken, and within hours, he was scheduled for surgery to remove a gangrenous gall bladder.

Lucas struggled out of unconsciousness just long enough for him to hear one of the nurses say, “He’s awake. Should I try to have him sign the consent form?” The surgeon said something he couldn’t make out. Lucas groaned and tried to move on the operating table. Several hands restrained him. “No, no, no—no moving around.”

The last thing Lucas heard was the anesthesiologist telling him, “You’re going to go to sleep now.” He meant to say “okay” but

his body was already surrendering to the big empty.

Lucas was not aware of the surgeon's discovery that the gangrene had also reached the liver. The biliary leak was causing infection of his other internal organs. He was expiring on the operating table.

Death approached slowly but inexorably despite a valiant battle from the medical team. To a certain degree, the primary surgeon took things personally. "Death is the enemy," he told himself. "Death must be defeated," he said privately. But death was victorious today and Lucas could only wade through the ever-darkening reverie.

In Lucas' dream, he was the prey. He stared, wide-eyed and helpless, as they came for him.

...



~ *Thirty-Nine* ~

The agents of death arrived in a swarm. There were dozens of them at first, then a great many more, every squadron darting through the air, unencumbered by gravity or logic. Each succubus had a limbless body of multicolored, pulsating, liquid light, while their heads had been designed and constructed for feasting on flesh.

The malevolent figures floated, spun, twisted, and joyously cavorted as they performed their dance of destruction around the paralyzed body offered to them.

Lucas could only stare helplessly at the ballet of doom taking place around him. First one creature nibbled a piece of his dermis, then another and another until they devolved into a feeding frenzy.

The fiends moved gracefully even as the pace of their attack ratcheted upward. Their foul dance was fast, faster, and still

faster, moving from allegro to vivace, from vivacissimo to allegrissimo, and from presto to prestissimo, never stopping their mission of ripping and tearing pieces from his rapidly shrinking form.

Lucas' limbs were devoured first, then his torso. His head was reserved for the leaders of the contagion. The lips, jowls, ears, forehead, and scalp were rapidly dispatched, until only the eyes remained. And then they, too, were gobbled up by the pestilence and Lucas was no more.

...

~ *Forty* ~

Matt paced back and forth at the usual meeting place for their morning walk. He checked the time and noted when Lucas was five minutes late; then ten; then fifteen. “No, not again,” he thought. “This litany has to stop before it reaches me.”

He remembered thinking that he should check up on Lucas several times yesterday. He had failed to do so and now his mother’s voice ricocheted through his head: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” He meant to reach out to Lucas but something always distracted him: first, a challenge with his work; then a toaster oven that suddenly wanted to destroy his carefully prepared cheese and green pepper sandwich; next, a phone call from his investment manager to suggest a change in his stock portfolio; then a surprise dinner invitation from an old friend who suddenly arrived in town for a brief visit; and finally, the surprising effects of the most

recent batch of marijuana brought over by his pot-imbibing neighbor, Albert.

“This is really good stuff!” they exclaimed to each other as the evening started to get away from their control.

“What’s the percentage?” Matt asked.

“Strong enough!” came the reply.

“No, really.”

“You don’t think it’s enough?”

“C’mon, Alberto,” Matt said with a smile.

“I know you. I know you’ve got the testing tools. What’s the percentage of THC in this batch?”

Albert hesitated a second, then said quietly, “Thirty-nine.”

“Thirty-nine percent THC? No wonder we’re floating.”

“This is nothing, my friend. My guy has some Canabis Budder that’s 66 percent.”

“No way,” Matt said.

“Yes, way.”

“No, Alberto, I mean I’m not doing that.”

“Oh come on!”

“I’m telling you, I’m not doing anything above thirty.” The irony of the situation made

them both laugh. “Except, you know, for right now.”

They chuckled, they talked, they giggled, they put on some music, they got ultra-serious, they watched *Lawrence of Arabia* on the Retro channel. And the night was gone. Albert staggered home and Matt weaved his way to bed.

So now, here he was, watching the sun break through the lovely cumulus clouds while trying to reach Lucas by text and by phone. Trying in vain.

Matt set out on the walk alone. It was a dog day, with three different petting sessions and friendly chats with owners who all asked about the foursome. Matt related the sad news about Marc and Jon. He just shook his head about Lucas.

He learned about Lucas the next morning and had an annoying number of dispiriting phone conversations with mutual friends and some of Lucas’ relatives. He twice had to explain his rule about avoiding funerals.

Over the next weeks, Matt continued the walk solo, looking forward more than ever to

chats with dog walkers. Without those pleasant interruptions, the lack of conversation was unsettling.

Matt had no idea what the caprices of life had in store for him. One Tuesday morning, on his way back home, he was confronted by a vision.

...



~ *Forty-One* ~

It wasn't simply her beauty that astonished him. It was the sheer force of her presence. Without saying a word, without changing her expression, she commanded Matt's attention. In his semi-addled condition, he found the woman to be the very personification of perfection.

Matt stared, unbothered by his disoriented state. The apparition was in front of him but also surrounding him. She seemed to glow from a supernatural source.

He knew she was unlike every other woman he had ever seen. He knew this because of the quantum difference in his desire. He wanted to hold her as much as he wanted to possess her. He wanted to admire her eyes and lips as much as her thighs and hips. He wanted to be with her in conversation even more than coitus.

In the hot rush of this first encounter, they slowly moved to each other. They both were silent at first, and the seconds stretched into infinities before the artificial barrier burst and conversation flowed.

Talking with her was delightful. They shared life stories, confidences, jokes, music, art, emotion, empathy, and...

And then the vision ended. Matt found himself standing by his front door, key in the lock. He shook his head as if to free his mind of the beautiful reverie, unlocked his door, and went inside.

Coffee... opera... computer... reality.

. . .



~ *Forty-Two* ~

The vision was a portent. The next day, Matt met Giovanna, the woman of his dream. Instantly enamored, he began timing his walk to coincide with her dog-walking routine. “Funny how we keep meeting up like this,” she said.

“No, I’m trying to make it happen,” he admitted.

“I’m glad,” she said. “Come on, let’s walk Maddy together.

“Love to,” he said.

“My two pets are a study in contrast.”

“How so?”

“Maddy is a shy, introverted Doberman Pinscher who craves affection. Soulcraft is, well, a cat—loving and friendly one moment, cold and disdainful the next.”

“So you have a dog with atypical reactions to life but your cat is a furry bundle of clichés.”

“Yes,” she said with a laugh. “Exactly.”

Just as had occurred in his imagination, their conversation flowed easily. They appreciated each other's jokes, enjoyed arguing about the quality of modern music, and looked askance at the state of American and world politics.

They also happily discussed opera ("often beautiful beyond belief"), the proper approach to cooking scrambled eggs ("add just the right amount of milk to the eggs and keep stirring constantly during cooking"), the best tire stores in the area ("Jimbo's Tires is good but Tire Stop is better"), and the existence of exoplanets ("there's got to be intelligent life out there because there sure isn't any here").

After days of meeting and talking, he suggested they extend their walk out of the residential area so they could get some coffee together. "Somecafés welcome animals if you sit outside," he said.

"That would be nice," she said, "but I just finished setting up to brew a fresh pot, so why don't you come in and we'll have coffee in my breakfast nook?"

"Sounds great," he said.

“All right then,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“Plus,” he added, “there’s a fifty-fifty chance that your coffee will be better than coffee shop coffee.”

“Really?” she remarked with one of her tiny smiles. “Only fifty-fifty? I’m feeling insulted. I think it should be at least sixty-forty in my favor.”

“Okay,” he said with a grin. “Sixty-forty it is. In fact, in view of your display of confidence, I’m reassessing the odds to seventy-thirty.”

“Thank you,” she said with mock formality. They entered her home. She removed the dog’s leash, said hello to the cat curled up in the shafts of sunlight shooting through the living room windows, went to the kitchen, and flipped the switch on the coffee maker. “Be ready in nine minutes,” Giovanna told him.

“Spoken like a true coffee-lover,” he replied.

“Indeed,” she said.

Matt turned and stepped into the living room. Her home was neat and minimalistic.

Only two framed works of art adorned the stark white walls, both of which were pen-and-ink illustrations in the *trompe l'oeil* style.

“These are nice,” he said seriously.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Yours?”

“Yes.”

“You must be able to sell work as beautiful as this.”

“That’s how I can afford the house, the car, the dog, the cat, and proper coffee.”

“Are you represented by a gallery?”

“Seven different galleries around the world,” she said. She noticed that he was now regarding her cat. “Do you like cats?”

“I love cats,” he said.

“Would you like to be snubbed by the standoffish feline right away?” she asked. “Or do you want to keep skritchng Maddy in hopes that Soulcraft gets the idea you’re a friendly? Or are you more of a dog person than a cat person?”

“I’m fond of dogs and cats, which my mom said makes me a doat person or a caog person. But when meeting a new feline, it’s

best to let the cat decide when to approach a new human. So I'll just let Soulcraft watch and ponder as I skritch Maddy whenever she wants it."

"You'll find she wants it all the time."

"Only if one is a good skritcher."

"Well, you must be great considering the way she looks at you and keeps following you around. What's your secret?"

"Start gentle and gradually increase the SPF—the skritch pressure factor—until the animal turns to look at your hand. Then you take it down a notch and everything's good."

"Excellent technique," she noted.

"Thank you."

They discussed typical homeowner topics for a few moments—the best plumber, electrician, roofer, gardener, handyperson, etc. Interrupting them was a series of discreet beeps from the coffee maker. "Java's up," she said. "How do you take it?"

"A dollop of milk," he said. "Two dollops if it's low-fat."

"You got it." She pulled two mugs out of a cupboard, poured the steaming dark liquid,

pointed him to the ‘fridge so he could add the correct amount of milk, and they began sipping.

“Ummm, this is good,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“Excellent, in fact. What’s your secret?”

“It’s a simple five-step process,” she said.

“One, go to a store that sells unground coffee beans. Two, find a medium-roast with lots of oil.”

“How do you do that?”

“Sprouts has their coffee beans in clear tubes so you can see which ones have oil on their surface.”

“What about stores that offer beans pre-bagged?”

“Well, you can avoid stores like that,” she told him, “or, sometimes the oil stains the bags. Or, as a last resort, you can ask a store employee to let you open the bag to have a peek and assess the oil content.” She shook her head and added, “Boy, you should have seen the look on this one man’s face when he came back to the coffee aisle to see I had opened a half-dozen bags before finding the beans I

wanted.” She paused and looked him in the eye. “I’m staying away from that store at the moment.”

“I bet,” he said with a grin.

“So,” she said, “back to the process. Three, don’t grind the beans until the morning of the brewing process. Four, only use bottled high-electrolyte water. Five, drink up as soon after brewing as possible. No re-heating unless you’re going to put in extra milk.”

“Or cream?” he inquired.

“Ahh, cream,” she said wistfully.

“Have I struck a nerve?” he asked.

“Cream is an indulgence. If I had known you were coming today, I would have bought some.”

“Would half-and-half be a good compromise?” he asked.

“You have half-and-half at your place?” She saw him nod. “Perhaps you’ll bring that over for our next coffee chat.”

“Love to,” he said.

They had coffee together at least three mornings a week. Every time, conversation flowed easily and even their silences were

enjoyable. Gradually, Soulcraft became intrigued with Matt and came over to see why the dog was so pleased with the petting.

“It appears that you’re earning his trust,” she observed.

“About time,” he said.

“You’re doing it faster than anyone else has,” Giovanna informed him, “including a cat breeder I know. And she prides herself on being part cat, if that’s possible.”

“Some of us have cat-like traits,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Like having nine lives, for instance. I’ve lived through illnesses and traffic accidents that have killed other people. At least, that’s what the doctors and physical therapists told me at the time.”

“How many lives have you used up?” she inquired, again with her secret smile.

“Five,” he said, “which means things are still okay.”

“What other feline traits do you share?”

“Well,” he said, “there’s a cat’s incredible mixture of diffidence and dependence. They come at you with love or annoyance when they

want something but they are more than willing to rebuff and rebuke you when the only thing they desire is a warm place to nap.”

“True,” she said. “Are you like that?”

He paused before saying softly, “Sometimes.”

They regarded each other a moment.

“Me, too,” she admitted quietly.

“Okay then,” he said, smiling. “Confession is good for the soul, or so I’m told.”

“I’m sure they’re right,” she said with a grin.

After another couple of weeks, Soulcraft got comfortable dealing with Matt and so his attention was always triply divided when he was in Giovanna’s home. It made for sure-fire conversation starters—if no other topic presented itself, they had pets.

“You know,” he said during one of their coffee conferences, “I have a grudging admiration for cats.”

“Grudging,” she said.

“Yeah. I feel guilty about it but I respect them for their attitude.” At that point, Soulcraft

leaped onto Matt's lap, settled down, and awaited the petting he knew would come. "Plus, look how cute Soulcraft is when you skritch him under his chin." There was a throaty noise from the cat. "Oh, and now we get some purring, too." He aimed his gaze at the feline and said softly, "Good puddytat."

"Like me, like my animals," Giovanna said, smiling. "Another cup?" She was already on her way to pour herself more of the brew, her "boost juice," as she called it.

"Sure," he said, "but then I've got to get back to work."

"Me, too," she said. "But I've got to admit that I seem to get more done on the days when we chat."

"I feel the same way," he said. "And that has fiduciary implications."

"Does it?" she asked.

"Sure. We can write off the coffee and half-and-half as business expenses."

"Ah," she said. "Mixing business with pleasure."

"Well, a man can hope." He immediately regretted saying that. Had he gone too far? She

turned to gaze at him. She gave him her best maybe-it's-a-smile expression and put her hand on top of his for just a moment. A delightful jolt of electricity seemed to shoot through his body.

Their friendly interaction may have begun with conversation and coffee but their true relationship was about to begin because of Maddy and Soulcraft.

...

~ *Forty-Three* ~

They were all together in the breakfast nook: Giovanna, Matt, Maddy, and Soulcraft. The coffee maker had just signaled completion of a brewing cycle and the two happy caffeine addicts were pouring steaming mugs and adding half-and-half.

“I have to ask about your tee shirt,” Matt said.

“Oh, I belong to a club and this is their logo.”



“A-Z-A and L,” Matt said. “You aren’t going to make me guess, are you?”

“It stands for Anti-Zeitgeist Arts and Letters. It’s kind of a secret society. Poets, painters, authors... you know: society’s dregs.”

“Are there regular meetings, monthly dues, a newsletter, that kind of thing?” he asked.

“The meetings are irregular, if at all. The annual dues are a contribution of one of your works to the silent auction at our annual bash on March 1st.”

“And the money goes to...?”

“To pay for the annual bash, of course.”

“Ah. Good plan,” he said. “Why March 1st?”

“March, because it’s Optimism Month, and we’re all pretty pessimistic.”

“Makes sense,” he said, nodding.

“And the 1st because that’s National Peanut Butter Lovers Day.”

“Let me guess, most of you don’t care one way or another about peanut butter.”

“You got it,” she said with a grin.

“So, this shirt is basically a conversation starter.”

“Nope,” she said. “You’re the only person who has ever inquired about the shirt.”

“I don’t know if that’s good or bad,” he admitted.

“It’s good,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Sure. Curiosity, like a cat.”

“Okay, great,” he said.

“Plus, it’s nice to know a man is admiring my tits.”

Matt nearly choked on a sip of coffee. “Am I that obvious?”

“Darling, every man does it. You’re actually very discreet about it. Sidelong glances when you think I’m not looking, that kind of thing. Very thoughtful of my delicate feminine sensibilities, I do declare.” She fanned herself with her hand. “You know what else I like about you?” Giovanna asked. She continued without waiting for a reply. “You’ve never once asked about the names of my pets. I admire your aloofness. I salute your indifference. I—”

“So what’s the deal with the pet names?” he interrupted.

“That’s better,” she said. “All right, the pet names. Because Maddy is a formidable creature, a fearless and energetic Doberman Pinscher, some of the people at the shelter

called her Mad Dog. But she's one of the most well-behaved, shy, and introverted pooches in the history of dogs. So she became Maddy."

"That's mad logic," Matt said.

"On the other side of the shelter, there was this one," she nodded toward the dozing cat. "He's sleek and lovely now and he was an adorable kitten. But he was also a sneaky and scheming creature, always playing tricks on his fellow kittens. Crafty Soul, they called him, leading to an obvious choice of name."

"Obviously," Matt agreed.

"Which brings me to a situation involving my two beloved animal family members."

"Sounds serious," he said.

"Well, yes and no," she told him. "One of my aunts died recently and—"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Thank you. She was ninety-four, lived a good life, and we weren't close."

"Oh."

"However, apparently it's necessary that I travel to the Midwest to oversee some of the estate closure issues. Now, I could try to find a kennel for each of these guys, or—"

“Or you could find a dog-friendly and cat-friendly person to take care of them for, well, for how long?”

“You don’t have to agree to this, I’m just asking, and it’s perfectly all right if you—”

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “I just wondered about the length of time because I have an out-of-town business event coming up in about three weeks, and so—”

“Oh no,” she said, “I’m talking four or five days at the most.”

“Then I’d be glad to help. I’ll do what’s best for the critters. I could drop in twice a day to walk Maddy, check on food and water, clear out the cat pan, provide loving skritches to their noggins, and talk quietly about how you are going to be returning soon.”

“That would be great,” she said. “Thank you!”

“No problem,” he assured her. “We could also do Facetime for the beasts, if you can schedule it.”

“Oh, I never thought of that. Would it work? I mean, would they recognize my voice through the phone?”

“I think they’ll recognize your voice,” Matt replied. “That’s not the problem. I can’t imagine how their brains will process the information.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look at it from their point of view. Your voice comes out of the phone so it seems like you’re inside this shiny electronic device.”

“Well, I don’t—”

“Or,” he said, rolling right over her, “maybe they’ll think you have actually *become* the shiny electronic device.”

“Okay,” she said sarcastically, “you think that’s what will take place if you hold your phone out so I can talk to them?”

“It could happen,” he said. He saw her raise her eyebrows at him. “Hey, it’s a possibility is all I’m saying. Who knows how the synapses work inside the beasts.”

“Yeah,” she said, drawing out the syllable, “I’ll take that chance. You hold the phone out and we’ll see if they enjoy it.”

During her absence, Matt showed up at her home morning, noon, and night. He dialed her mobile number and, if she wasn’t busy

with an attorney or one of her relatives, she eagerly got on the line and said soothing things to her two furry houseguests.

During their first Facetime session, Matt was subdued, trying to keep excitement at a minimum while standing next to the puzzled animals. But they seemed fine with hearing Giovanna's voice coming out of the phone, so on the next call, Matt played talk show host: "And now, live from beautiful suburban West Mesa, heeeeere's Maddy!" he said. After Giovanna had a "dialogue" with the dog, he came back with: "Our next guest spends eighteen hours a day sleeping so he should now be ready for a scintillating exchange of viewpoints... please welcome, Soulcraft!"

While both humans enjoyed Matt's role-playing, he only did it once. When Giovanna asked him about doing it some more, he said, "It was funny once, but now I think it's better for me to be a quiet facilitator of the human/critter conversations. I am going to dutifully and silently hold the phone out so you can say pleasant things to your diffident dog and con artist cat."

She laughed and told him she appreciated all he was doing for the quadrupeds.

Matt didn't know it, but Giovanna was changing her assessment of him. During her trip, she confided her feelings to her best friend Joyce in a phone call. "He's acting like a good boyfriend," she said.

"A good boyfriend?" Joyce repeated.

"You know what I mean," Giovanna said, "somebody nice, somebody kind."

"Well, I gotta tell ya," Joyce said, "he seems a little...you know..."

"A little what?" Giovanna inquired.

"A little off."

"Oh, that," she said. "Sure. Of course. Not a problem."

"Not a problem," Joyce repeated. "Really?"

Giovanna noted the skepticism in Joyce's comment. "Look," she explained, "he's a seventy year old white male who isn't a conservative douchebag, he actually listens during conversations, he likes dogs and cats, he has a job, he puts the toilet seat down, he doesn't get drunk, he eats sushi and Thai and

vegan, he likes opera—*everything* about him is a little off. But it's off in a good way.”

Her friend smiled and said, “You like him, don't you.” It wasn't a question.

“I like him. Later on this week, once I get home, I'm going to find out if he's a good kisser.”

“Ohhhh! You must tell me all about it.”

“Have I ever held back anything from you before?”

“Lots of times.”

They both laughed.

“Well,” Giovanna said, “that's just because there wasn't much to tell.”

“Oh honey, I am so sorry.”

“That's all right,” Giovanna said as they shared another laugh. “But I swear, one of these days, there will be something to tell.”

“That sounds promising,” Joyce said.

“A girl can hope,” Giovanna replied.

...

~ *Forty-Four* ~

Matt was on the sidewalk near Giovanna’s driveway when he received a text message from her saying she was home and thanking him again for “keeping my two beasts safe and sane during the recent difficulties.” He smiled and texted her back, letting her know he was right outside and suggesting he take her out to dinner.

She opened the front door and said, “What a nice offer. Thank you. But I have a counter proposal: what if we order some food and eat here? I don’t want to leave the critters again so soon.”

“Good deal,” he said. “Name the type of food you’re in the mood to munch.”

“Anything they don’t have in the Midwest: sushi, deli, Thai, Mexican...”

“They don’t have good food in the Midwest?”

“No,” she stated with mock solemnity.

“Oh come on,” he said.

“No,” she insisted. “Nothing other than meat, potatoes, and cheese.”

“Okay,” he said. “Well, with one of the delivery services, we can have any or every one of the choices you mentioned. There are even delivery services for THC. So, what’s your pleasure? They’re all okay with me.”

“Wait, are you also into marijuana? Cool. I was wondering.”

“Potheads of the world, unite,” he said.

“Is there a secret handshake?” she inquired.

“If there is, no one ever showed me. We should invent one.”

“We should. Meanwhile, we don’t need delivery of THC because I’ve got some very good stuff. Twenty-eight percent.”

“Twenty-eight will get the job done,” he said.

“Indeed,” she said with a smile. “Let’s go with Thai food and either Zombie Killer OG or Laughing Grass,” she said, “if that sounds good to you.”

“Absolutely,” he said while grinning back at her. “I like those names, and I love Thai

food, although I wish to note I still want to take you out for sushi next week. A belated welcome home dinner.”

“Deal,” she said.

They spent a pleasant evening playing with the animals and nibbling from the boxes of food delivered from a café called Thai Palace. They enjoyed the effects of the Laughing Grass, giggling over silliness like their list of new names for the restaurant: “Thai One On,” “Thai Goes to the Diner,” “Thai in the Sky,” “All Thai’d Up,” and so on.

After recovering from one of their bouts of laughter, she turned serious. “Societal aesthetic question for you,” Giovanna said.

“Okay,” Matt replied. “Shoot.”

“What is your opinion concerning the validity of artistic creations by people who are later discovered to have broken the laws of nature?”

“How dare you talk about Richard Wagner and Michael Jackson like that,” he said in mock shock mode.

She laughed and said, “I was thinking about a whole bunch of people whose

disreputable behavior or disgusting views have permanently stained their reputations. Wagner and Jackson, obviously, but let's not overlook Gary Glitter, Matt Lauer, and James Woods."

"Right," Matt replied. "Plus, there's Clint Eastwood, Harvey Weinstein, and Kelsey Grammer."

"Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, Kirk Cameron..."

"Scott Baio, Mel Gibson, Michael Vick..."

"Jim Jordan, Blake Farenthold, Dennis Hastert..."

"Brett Kavanaugh, Donald Trump, David Duke..."

"You know what?"

"Change the subject?"

"Yes! Listing pedophiles, rapists, animal torturers, and Nazis is depressing."

"Okay, we need to select a new topic. Um, let's see..." he thought a moment.

She beat him to it. "All right, I have a music question for you," Giovanna stated.

"Good. Shoot," he said.

"Do you think the *Tales of Hoffmann* attained the status of an opera or was it still

rooted in the frivolity of Offenbach's operettas?"

"*Orpheus in the Underworld* is the only other Offenbach work I've heard," Matt replied, "and that has the same issues as *Hoffmann*."

"Because both works are a little... what would be the correct word?" she asked.

"Jeune."

"Yes!" she said. "That's it exactly."

"I think that half of *Hoffmann* achieves the level of opera," Matt said, "but it's probably not fair to blame Offenbach for the other half. He only completed the piano score before he died, not the whole opera."

"You're too kind sometimes," she replied.

"Thank you," he responded.

When they finished dinner, he helped with the clean-up, something she noted with silent admiration. "This guy is too good to be true," she thought to herself. She opened her stash of mint leaves, took two servings, and walked over to stand close to Matt.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi back," she said, moving even closer.

“This is in no way a complaint, but may I inquire as to the occasion for this visit?”

She held out the mint, put one leaf in her mouth and began chewing. He did the same.

“I think we should find out if we’re going to be more than just friends. Don’t you agree?”

“That sounds exquisite,” he replied. “In fact—”

He didn’t finish. Her lips were on his and he fell happily into the light of a thousand suns.

...



~ *Forty-Five* ~

Enormous expenditures of energy are usually described in weighty terms: Irresistible force meets immovable object. Battle of the century. Explosion of strength. Assault on the senses. Clash of wills. Brute force. Shoot-out. Warfare. Conflict. Quarrel. Strife. Fray. Barrage. Skirmish. Fracas. Havoc. Onslaught.

Their kiss was all of that and less.

Giovanna and Matt were happy to capitulate to the detonations raging inside of their bodies; the bursts and blasts were pleasing to both of them, especially because everything within their minds had suddenly become peaceful and soothing. Woes were cast aside. Cares evaporated into the air. Discontent melted away. On the one hand, blazing intensity and excitement; on the other hand, a gentle glide into the kingdom of paradise and the realization of personal enlightenment.

Together, Matt and Giovanna were a living dichotomy. The corporeal firestorm coexisted with the mind's opening to sharing and caring.

Their kiss was the inauguration of togetherness. Their kiss was a promise of regeneration. Their kiss demonstrated the vitality of two life forces fusing as one.

Their kiss was bliss.

. . .

~ *Forty-Six* ~

Giovanna and Matt were happy to refer to themselves as “an item.” When introducing each other to people in their social circles, they experimented with terms and phrases that made them laugh. “Friends with benefits” was the obvious joking line they tried out on a few people. “My partner in connubial crime” was another. “We’re S-Os” always made people ask for an explanation. “Significant Others” was the reply. Whichever line they used, both Matt and Giovanna enjoyed the shocked expressions and raised eyebrows of friends who had not yet been made aware of their relationship.

He would tell people, “I knew she was special because I wanted to kiss her shoulders as much as anything else.” She glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. “Okay,” he admitted, “almost as much as anything else.” She nodded her head and smiled her almost-not-there smile.

Friends reacted to the May-December romance in different ways. “You got lucky,” was one of the most frequent responses he received from his male friends. “What is she, half your age?” was another. Many inquired about “boner pills.”

“Don’t need them,” Matt said, perhaps a little too pleased with himself.

One of his male friends agreed, albeit in a sexist manner: “Jeeze, just look at her—no one would need artificial stimulation around that. Viagra is for guys who’ve been married thirty years and the law of diminishing returns has set in.”

When Giovanna was with her friends, the most frequent query was, “What’s it like with an older guy?”

“I know nothing about older guys in general,” Giovanna told them, “but this particular older guy is great.”

“Details are needed,” said one of her friends. “Let me hear the full story.”

“All right,” Giovanna told her. “Well, he’s tender...”

“Uh huh,” the friend would say.

“He’s unselfish...”

“Uh huh,” the friend would say.

“And he loves foreplay.”

“Uh HUH!” the friend would say. “Well then, he’s a keeper!”

“I agree.”

“What does he do?”

“Ummm,” Giovanna said, “he caresses me, then he pets me, then he explores me...” At this point, she had to pause because of the volume of delighted shrieks.

“No,” the friend would say, “I meant—”

“I know,” Giovanna said. “He works on virtual reality programming for some computer firms.”

“Really?”

“I know, weird, huh. His generation isn’t usually into that.”

“Just don’t introduce him to your web designer, what’s her name, Deidre? You don’t want them to hit it off.”

“There’s something else,” Giovanna said quietly.

“What?” was the hushed response.

“He has never once spoken about sports.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“That’s unheard of.”

“True enough.”

“I don’t know what’s better—great foreplay or no sports talk.”

Giovanna grinned. “Both are much appreciated.”

When they were out in public, Matt and Giovanna held hands. Most people paid little attention. Sometimes women of a certain age sent withering glances from Giovanna to Matt and back again. If one of them noticed that Giovanna was receiving the evil eye treatment, they would signal each other, turn, look the woman up and down, and mouth “How much?” to her. They were only asked to leave two restaurants to avoid a scene. They did so, laughing.

When they were out with friends, they didn’t make a big deal about the relationship; they didn’t have to—it often felt like everyone wanted to show them off to people they knew, especially those who were just coming back into the dating scene.

“Nancy’s divorced,” went one story, “and seeing the two of you will give her hope.”

“Oh yeah,” Giovanna said with loosely disguised sarcasm, “she should definitely hang onto some hope, because that’s all she’ll ever be able to—” Matt hustled her away, barely concealing his laughter.

“William lost his wife of twenty years to cancer,” went another tale. “The poor dear would be perked up by seeing you two.”

“Perked up, you say,” Matt said.

“Like coffee being brewed,” Giovanna said. “Percolated,” she added when there was no reaction to her first comment.

Sometimes their humor was not fully appreciated.

They attended a Saturday afternoon beer and pizza party where the majority of the male attendees were vociferously commenting on a football game presented on a gargantuan monitor with “eleventeen gazillion pixels per square thumbdrive,” as Matt described it.

He and Giovanna slowly made their way toward the door, stopped only three different times by women hoping to perk up someone.

Matt reached into his pocket and hit a combination of buttons. Giovanna's mobile device chirped in her purse and she stepped outside to take Matt's fake call. Matt followed her after a few seconds. They quickly made their escape.

"Did you get seconds on the pizza?" she asked after they were driving away.

"Nope. You?"

"I didn't even get firsts, but I had some of the salad."

"Any good?"

"Store-bought," she said.

"So, lots of sodium in the dressing."

"Yup."

"So, you're thirsty."

"Yes I am."

"Bar or home? I've got cold sake."

"That sounds lovely," she said and slumped in her seat. "These leather seats are also lovely."

"They're comfy. If that makes them lovely, so be it."

"You're lovely, too," she said, grinning.

"As are you," he said.

They drove in silence for a few blocks. He sighed. He didn't think it was loud enough for her to hear.

“What?” she asked.

“I could do with less attention from some of our friends,” Matt said.

“I know what you mean,” she replied. “It's like we're suddenly the poster kids for some new social cause. She spoke in an announcer voice: ‘It's the latest craze and it's sweeping the nation: multi-generational dating. MultiGenDa. See how one couple manages to stay sane despite the well-meaning but asinine actions of their acquaintances’.”

“Whoa,” he said. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“Sorry,” she said. “Just had to get that out in the open.”

When alone together, Giovanna and Matt had a way of communicating using a smile, a glance, a tilt of the head, or twitching an eyebrow. They celebrated their being “in synch,” as she called it.

At his place, they got out the bong, put on a CD of motets at a low volume (“Sacred

background music,” Matt called it), and began playing a word game in which one of them would start a sentence so the other could complete it.

“When I look at a stretching cat...” he said.

“...it guilts me into doing my yoga,” she responded.

“Nice,” he said. “Your turn.”

“Mozart is to ‘too many notes’ as Paganini is to...” she said.

“...way too many notes,” he said.

“Good one,” she noted.

“When I listen to Maria Callas...” he said.

“...it’s like a paper cut in the ear,” she said.

“Wow,” he said.

“Live with that analogy for a while,” she said. “You know I don’t like her voice.”

“Do over?”

“Do over,” she said.

“Okay... Sometimes I feel like...”

“...mixing THC and alcohol,” she said.

“You know me too well,” he told her.

“Yes, I really need to get that under control.”

“Puff?” she said, offering the bong.

“Sure,” he replied.

“Sake?” she asked with false innocence.

“You are bad,” he told her.

“Thank you,” she said, batting her eyelashes.

“Game over?” he asked.

“One more,” she insisted.

“Okay.”

“Sometimes,” she said, “I feel like...”

“...the most sensual woman in the world,” he said back to her.

“You are correct,” she said with one of her almost-smiles. “You deserve a reward.”

“I was thinking that it’s you who deserves a reward,” he responded.

“Umm, how about this?” she asked and leaned forward to kiss him.

“Umm-hmm,” he said. “I was just about to reward *you* with a kiss, but now...”

“Gimme my reward,” she said rapidly. He just smiled at her. She pouted. He still just smiled. “Pretty please?” she said.

“You are amazing,” he whispered and kissed her.

As usual with their kisses, meteors flung themselves across the heavens and distant space glowed from the brilliant detonations of supernovae.

“Everything with you makes me want to say ‘yes’,” she whispered to him.

“Everything with you makes me want to shout for joy,” he whispered back.

They each took a breath. They stared into each other’s eyes.

“I love you,” he told her.

“I love you!” she told him.

They grinned like idiots and hugged. Then, slowly, delightfully, things went from serious to seriouser and they kissed once again.

It was during these precious moments that he experienced a drifting of time and space. His body took part in a shifting of certainty. Matt felt himself succumbing to the anti-reality of his dream state, helpless to avoid being carried away in an inexorable rush to the far reaches of time. And then, just as suddenly, he was back on earth, holding Giovanna and realizing the many faceted

delights of being in love. He rejoiced in the depth of her soul; he reveled in the glory of her eyes; and he basked in the splendor of her smile.

• • •

About the Author

John Scott G is a writer who uses terms of Brobdingnagian proportions whenever he feels it is absolutely necessary, but he admits to also being quite fond of smaller words like “a,” “to,” “the,” and “sex.”

When not writing his cynical, evil, and misanthropic stories, he spends his time developing a new religion whose rites include stacking boxes of unused possessions in the garage and dancing naked in the moonlight on the fourth Thursday of every month.

He is also attempting to bring back expressions like “hep,” “copacetic,” and “that’s a stone solid gas.” This effort has so far been unsuccessful, but look man, we’ll make the scene happen soon, dig?



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