

As Others See Us

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COMPLETE

Author's notes follow the main text.

Jack Marx prowled the corridors of the 15th floor of his office building. He was in a foul mood, partly because of the way his day was going, partly because of the way his year was going, and partly because of his name. Election years were hard on him, and this one just as much if not more than previous, because of his damn name. There were three kinds of people in the world, he reflected; those who liked Karl Marx's ideas, those who didn't, and those ignorant fools who didn't even know who Karl Marx was but had heard the name on the radio or television. These last ones were the ones he hated the most, but he heard it from all of them. "Great name!", "Bummer of a name, dude!", and "Hey, they were talking about you on the radio today" were three phrases he'd be very happy if he never heard again.

Of course he was no relation to the famous (or infamous) German political philosopher and Communist. In high school Jack had done a research paper on Marx on the assumption that if he was going to hear about the man all his life he might as well know all the facts. He came away with the opinion that Communism sounded like a good idea on paper, but that human nature would never allow it to come to fruition. Too much corruption, too much selfishness, too much looking out for "number one." He'd gotten a 'B' on the paper, a miraculous feat considering that he'd stopped just short of copying the whole thing verbatim from one of his sources, opting instead for a hasty paraphrase.

He turned the corner and found his desk, third cubicle on the right, and plopped down in his chair, putting his head in his hands as he did so. He sat like that for a few moments before rubbing his eyes deeply and then taking a deep breath. When he opened them he couldn't see very well, but his vision soon cleared as he blinked away the last remnants of mucus from his eyes and then he reached for his mouse, clearing the screen saver. His screen saver was a blank screen...he couldn't tolerate the ridiculous sayings his co-workers put up on theirs, nor the pipes, starfields, bouncing logos, or any of the dozen other stock screen savers available, so he just opted for the blank screen.

As the monitor warmed up he could see that he had new email. Wonderful. As if he didn't have enough to do. Jack clicked open the folder and saw 3 ads for various products that had eluded the spam filter, including one for generic Viagra, one for stock tips, and a third for how to be a master in the bedroom. Deleting all three without a second glance, Jack then turned his attention to the fourth email in his box, which was from one of his co-workers on the other side of the building.

"Jack, can you send me that report from the last meeting, please? I've misplaced the hard copy you gave me. Thanks! Doug."

This was Doug's third reminder to Jack in the last two weeks. Of course he hadn't misplaced the hard copy, he had it right there, but he needed an electronic copy so he could file it with the rest. Doug didn't understand why this was so difficult for Jack to comprehend, but the truth was he

didn't really need the report, he just wanted to have a complete record and if Jack didn't respond by the next meeting he'd probably just let it drop.

Doug switched off his computer and began gathering his things. It was just after one o'clock and he'd decided to leave work early since there wasn't anything particularly pressing until Thursday, which was two days from now, and he'd have plenty of time to work on it tomorrow. Today was going to be a day of well-deserved rest. He snapped his briefcase shut, stood up, and walked to the elevator where he found Doris already waiting for it, her arms full with a box of stuff for the recycling bin downstairs.

"Short day today, Doug?" she asked.

"Yep!" he replied. "Can't work on Phil's project until Sandra gets me the graphics, which won't be until tomorrow morning, so I'm taking the afternoon off."

"Lucky you," she said. Her long blonde hair hung straight, just past her shoulders and she gave her head a slight toss to get it out of her eyes. Doug considered asking if she'd like any help, but then remembered the icy reaction he'd gotten the last time. There'd been a time when he'd had a serious crush on Doris, but after that incident he'd decided that he'd offended her and ever since he thought she'd been avoiding him. Office relations being what they are and the threat of sexual harassment always present, he'd decided to exercise the better part of valor and give it a rest.

The elevator doors opened revealing a crowded mass of people in business suits. There was just enough room for Doris and Doug to get on with her box of recycling and then someone had to push the button for the basement. As the elevator descended that strange silence that comes over elevators descended with it and nobody said anything, even as the car stopped at what seemed like every floor for one or two people to get off. At last they reached the lobby where Doug, along with two other people, got off the elevator leaving Doris as the last one aboard heading to the basement to drop off the recycling.

"Seeya later," Doug called over his shoulder as he hurried off the car.

"Seeya," Doris replied as the doors closed. She closed her eyes and sighed. Other people would have just done it, she reflected. Just asked him. Where would the harm have been? He'd acted interested a while back, but then one day he just stopped and seemed to be avoiding her for some reason. It was depressing. She reached the basement and the elevator doors opened, allowing her access to the basement and the recycling bins. She dumped the contents of her box into the one marked "office paper" and the box itself into "cardboard" and finally got to scratch her nose, which had been itching for the last several minutes.

Could have asked him to scratch it, she thought. That would have been a great ice breaker, and then she could have asked him to the movies or something. Or something. Or nothing. She got back on the elevator and pushed the button for the 20th floor. Maybe she should take the afternoon off, too. But, no, there was a stack of email waiting for her, and each one would need an individual reply, and then there was the filing she was behind on, and the expense report, and the phone calls to return, and none of it would wait until morning like Doug's stuff would.

Astonishingly the doors opened at the 20th floor after having not stopped at any of the intervening floors and Doris stepped out. An African-American deliveryman with an empty hand truck got on and the doors shut. He pressed the button for the lobby.

Let's see, he thought, that's the last delivery for this business district, must be time for the residential stuff. He glanced at his tablet to see where he was heading next. Yep, up the freeway to the bigger houses on the north side. The elevator reached the lobby level and the deliveryman stepped out onto the marble floor that was the first thing that visitors to the building saw. Greg had seen most of the rest of the building and was constantly amazed that the lobby always looked so shiny and spotless compared to the threadbare cubicles, poorly-vacuumed corridors, and frankly disgusting refrigerators that populated everything from the second floor on up.

He wheeled his hand truck across the marble, waved to the bored-looking security guard at the front desk, and through the sliding glass doors out to the parking lot. He hopped in his truck, took out a cigarette and inserted it into his mouth, and punched the button for the lighter. Then he took out his cell phone as he began pulling away from the office building, stopping at the traffic light before pulling out into traffic. Greg hated calling into the office. His tablet recorded every delivery he made, why did he have to call in? Three years on this job, a spotless record for on-time deliveries, and he still had to call in. Probably because of the incident at that one house.

He'd been exonerated...eventually. But it had taken six months. Six long months for people to believe that when his tablet said he'd been in Jonesboro making a delivery that that meant it was impossible for him to have been in Alpharetta burglarizing that home. That had been a year and a half ago and he'd have thought he'd have been due for promotion by now, but not only was he still in the same old grind but he had to call in at certain checkpoints along his route. He wondered if anyone had actually believed him or if the company had just worked out a settlement.

At the delivery company headquarters the phone rang. Hank looked at it, saw that it was Greg, and let it go to voicemail. He hated making Greg call in like that. None of the other delivery guys had to do it, why should he? But then he remembered the conversation he'd overheard between two guys on the upper floors one day about how Greg's little incident had cost the company too much time and money and they really wanted him gone so they could forget about it, but they couldn't actually fire him since he'd been exonerated. At some point in the conversation it had become

clear to Hank that it wasn't about Greg or his incident, that it was more personal and that the whole thing might have been racially motivated, which was weird because half the guys on the delivery team were African-American, so why pick on Greg? Maybe it was more personal. Who knows? Who cares? You show up and shut up and do your job and hope the same thing doesn't happen to you.

Hank picked up the phone and pressed the button to access the voicemail, listened to Greg's short call, heard the bitterness in his voice, and then deleted it. Then he hung up and dialed his wife's cell phone number.

He reflected on his marriage briefly while he listened to the phone's little noise letting him know that it was ringing on the other end. He'd married Gail four years ago and wondered at the time if he was making a mistake. They'd dated for about eight months before making the decision and then had an engagement of about three while they tried to plan the perfect wedding and then eventually just went down to the courthouse to get it over with. The only thing they'd done was buy her wedding dress and his tuxedo, so they tried to go through as many of the motions as they could without all the flowers, cameras, and family that they knew were going to hate them for this.

He felt his first pang when he opened the door to the judge's office and saw Gail standing there in her dress and he found himself, for the first time, wondering if he was really attracted to her or if it was just easier to be around her than to actually break up with her. But he'd gone through the vows and exchanged rings and carried her over the threshold anyway, which also felt weird since they'd been living together for the last five months and he'd never even once tried to do so much as pick her up, let alone carry her anywhere. That night they'd spent about 15 minutes consummating the marriage and then both went to sleep with the television on. He'd been really depressed that morning.

But as the days had gone on after that soulless ceremony he'd forgotten about that and found himself feeling really lucky that he'd been able to find someone willing to go through that same soulless ceremony with him. With him. That was the key. That ceremony could have been done with anybody, but she'd picked him. And they didn't fight, and they didn't have money problems, and they had common interests that they could have actual conversations about, and he was content. Unlike Rick down the hall who wouldn't shut up about how awful his girlfriend was and how he was just waiting for the right time to dump her, which Hank interpreted as "as soon as I find someone else willing to put up with me so I don't have to be alone". Loneliness could drive a man to strange lengths, Hank reflected, because he'd never met anyone as miserable as Rick.

Gail picked up the phone on the third ring, after checking the caller ID and seeing that it was Hank on the other end. She'd been hounded by a salesman at a cleaning supply company all day and was

in no mood to talk to him again, but a call from her husband was always a bright spot in her day...he was so busy at work that he didn't make time to call her often, although he tried.

"Hi, honey," she said.

"Hi, Gail," Hank replied.

"How's your day?"

"Same old. Just needed to hear your voice. How's it going for you?"

"That jerk from Spotless Solutions has called me about a dozen times in the last two hours."

"Wow. Points for persistence?"

"No, more like an urge to kill. With sharp stabby knives."

"Hrm. I'm not in that same boat, am I?"

"Not even close, dear. I do have to go, though. See you tonight."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

She hung up and put the phone down on her table where she'd been having a late lunch and smiled to herself. She'd known he'd had his doubts...she'd had a bunch of her own. But they'd stuck it out. They'd beaten the odds and stayed married and, if she was any judge, he was happier now than he'd ever been. Could they keep it up? At that moment her thoughts were interrupted by her waitress.

"Everything ok, ma'am?" she asked in the monotone that was practically a trademark of the bored service industry peon. Gail wondered how people like this could stand their jobs.

"Yes, everything's fine. Here's the check back, keep the change," she said, handing her the little faux leather folder and putting her phone back in her purse at the same time.

Anne took the folder from Gail's hand, which contained several rather wrinkled bills, and watched as her customer rose from the table and walked out the door. Anne took the money over to the register to cash out the check wondering why the good ones were always taken. She counted the

money out into the till and pocketed the generous \$8 tip, cursing the wedding ring on Gail's finger all the while. How could she be married so young?

Anne had been sleeping with a real loser of a guy for about four months when she realized why he was the fifth loser in a row that she'd gotten involved with. She'd been proud of herself for realizing she was bisexual without all the fuss and expense of having to go to therapy. She'd dumped the guy and had gone cruising lesbian bars looking to scope out the scene and then realized four months later that she was still sleeping with the same loser only this time it was a woman instead of a man. Not that it hadn't been fun...at least at first. Just not fulfilling. She wanted someone with some ambition beyond making it to the next paycheck with more than \$2 left over for a cheap drink.

Not that she was a paragon of ambition herself working at the local Chili's. But she told herself that it was to build up her social skills. And the exercise. Every waiter or waitress she'd ever seen had the best legs and ass she'd ever seen and she longed to be in that category. Not that she'd characterize herself as fat, she just wanted to be a little more fit.

"Hey, Anne, you've got a new table,"

"Thanks," she said to the hostess, closing the cash drawer and heading over to the newcomers. Two guys in polo shirts with their menus open in front of them, but not really looking at them, lounging in their booth with the air of people who intend to be there for a while whether they order something or not.

"Hi, guys, welcome to Chili's. My name is Anne and I'll be your server this afternoon. Can I interest you in an appetizer or maybe a margarita?"

She hated that mantra. It was called 'suggestive selling' and the worst part was that sometimes it actually worked. Lots of people picked up their menus after hearing that little introduction and really looked at the appetizers to see if there was something they might like and then many times they ordered it. Same thing with dessert. She always felt a pang of guilt whenever she asked some horribly obese person if they wanted dessert and then they said yes.

"No thanks," said the first guy. He had short, dark curly hair and dark skin. Looked Indian, maybe, she thought.

"Actually, yeah," said the second guy. "We'll have some chips and salsa." He had on a green shirt, glasses, and looked up at her through touseled dirty-blond hair with a grin on his face.

“Chips and salsa, sure thing guys,” said Anne. She tried to suppress the feeling of attraction she felt for him as she walked away.

“Derek, why’d you do that? You know we’re just here to meet Joe and then we’re getting out of here.”

“Keeping our options open, Haresh, keeping our options open. They get touchy in these places if you wait too long. Besides, she was cute.”

Haresh rolled his eyes. “Cute? She’s a cow.”

“And I thought your people worshiped cows.”

Haresh rolled his eyes again. How had he gotten mixed up with such an ignorant moron as Derek? Derek was a friend of Joe’s and Joe was a great guy with great ideas. You wanted to be around Joe because you knew he was going places...the only problem was that he was going lots of places at the same time and you were never sure which one was going to catch on. He’d already been involved in several aborted projects, each one with a lot of potential, but Joe could never focus on one long enough to see it to completion. It was maddening, but he was also charismatic enough to get you to stick around in the hopes that the next one would be the big one, the exception, the one that would vault you into an actual project with purpose and a future.

In the meantime none of the three of them could actually afford to eat at a place like Chili’s, which made meeting there even more annoying. Derek wasn’t helping. Every time Joe came up with a new idea Haresh would always ask about the old one, but Derek was all about change, keeping it “fresh” as he called it, and generally encouraging Joe to come up with the next idea, sometimes even before Joe was finished with the old one.

Derek’s cell phone began to ring. He’d chosen some obnoxious, dissonant sound for his ringtone on the grounds that he’d always be able to hear it and that it would encourage him to answer the phone sooner.

“Yeah, Derek here. Oh, hi, Alice.”

“Hi yourself. How’s it going?”

“Oh, the usual, just hanging with my homeboy Haresh.”

“...I’m not on speaker am I?”

“No, no, babe, it’s just you and me. Haresh is right here, though, you wanna talk to him?”

“No...listen, I’m just on a break at work and wanted to know if you were going to have the rent money by tonight. The landlord is getting really pushy and I’d like for her to leave us alone for a few days if that’s possible.”

“I’ll have it, don’t worry.”

“...Fine. I’ll see you later.”

Alice hung up and put her cell phone on the desk. He didn’t have the money, she knew it. And despite his assurances, he wasn’t going to have it. They were going to be evicted and the only other place she could go was back to her parents’ house, which was only an option because the alternative was the street.

She turned to her computer monitor and stared at the spreadsheet she was supposed to be working on. How had she gotten into this? They were supposed to test you for this kind of thing, weren’t they? She’d been so desperate for a job that she’d started sending out resumes to anyone with contact information, any job, anywhere, any pay, and had eventually been contacted by a consulting firm whose job filtering software had flagged her Excel experience (which had consisted of one class she took at the local community college) and brought her in for an interview.

She’d gone simply because she had nothing else to do and the idea of getting some actual interview experience seemed like a great idea. Getting the job had never seriously crossed her mind because the description had gone over a lot of mumbo-jumbo about reach, frequency, standard deviations, and had included acronyms that she’d never seen before and couldn’t even find on Google to see what they meant. Not going had crossed her mind briefly because she felt just a little bad about wasting the interviewer’s time, but in the end she couldn’t justify turning down the one nibble she’d had in the last seven months.

And here she was. An Assistant Consultant trying to make a spreadsheet to track the number of participants in some big chain store’s new promotion so they could find out whether it was worth it to extend it. Her last project had been similar and she’d skated through it on the merits of the fact that the store wasn’t spending much money on the program and nobody really cared what it cost or whether it continued, but this one had a budget to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars and it really mattered to the CEO that it continue.

What little data she’d been able to cobble together sort of maybe suggested that the program was a failure, but Alice was having a hard time proving it. Having her boss breathing down her neck about it, both literally and figuratively, wasn’t helping. She was seriously stressing out and now it

looked like she'd need to pack up her things at home as well as here at the office if this kept up much longer.

"Everything ok, Alice?"

She hadn't heard him walk up to her cubicle. She whipped around and looked at him and only then realized that she'd been crying just a very little bit. She was glad she didn't wear mascara, but knew her eyes must look wet.

"Yes, it's fine, Aaron. Just some allergies," Alice said, sniffing, proud of herself for thinking of that particular lie so quickly.

"Glad to hear it. I'll let you get back to work, but don't forget our...appointment tonight."

"Oh, Aaron, I'm...I'm not going to be able to make it tonight," Alice stammered. She had to get home to talk to Derek about the rent...or to pack, more likely, so that her things wouldn't end up on the sidewalk. Plus...it had been exciting when she'd started, but lately she'd begun to feel cheap. The thrill of the illicit affair was gone and all that was left was the feeling of being used. But she felt as though she owed him...this job could be the beginning of something great, something that meant she didn't need Derek anymore. She had to stick it out a little longer.

"I see," said Aaron, clearly disappointed. "I thought I told you to put that on your calendar."

"I did," Alice protested, reaching for her planner and opening it to show him, "but something...something's come up. I've been relying on my boyfriend to pay the rent until payroll clears up the problem with my checks here, and I'm afraid he's going to come up a little short this month. I'll...I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"Well...ok. Tomorrow night. It'll be extra special, I promise."

Alice smiled weakly. She knew what that meant. She still had marks from the last time.

"I'll let you get back to it," Aaron said. "See you tomorrow."

He turned and walked away from her. She made it too easy, he thought. The challenge was gone. After tomorrow he'd be done with her.

This was the third time he'd run this routine and it was getting easier all the time. Find some desperate young, attractive girl who was clearly applying for any job she could get and bring her in for an interview. She was grossly underqualified and probably sent out resumes to everyone in

sight, praying for as much as a simple interview. Once she comes in she's all yours. He gives her the job, much to her surprise, and then gives her a simple little task to do and no matter what she turns in, tells her that the Board loves it and wants to challenge her with something a little more.

But he works with them on the first project. Closely. And after a few late-night meetings where he basically walks them through the thing he takes advantage of their gratitude. Gratitude for getting the job and for helping them with it. Eventually he gets to the point where making appointments to do work together is just a pretense.

But the best part was that he hadn't really hired them. He told them that they had the job, had them fill out all the paperwork, and gave them an empty cubicle at the end of the hall where hardly anybody ever goes. Then he told them that HR was having a hard time with the new computer system or that they'd lost something and that the check was delayed. This could go on for weeks, especially with him promising that they'd make it up to her with a bonus later on for being so patient. Just keep them busy with work that was way over their pretty little heads and keep them away from anybody who might help them. It was just a happy bonus that she had a boyfriend who was just as dense as she was.

It was going to be a real shame to let this one go. Redheads with pale white skin didn't drop by just all the time. But, on the other hand, variety was the spice of life.

Aaron turned left and headed down the corridor towards his office, opened the door, stepped inside, and closed it behind him. He looked out at the view. It was stunning here on the 50th floor. He'd had his first one of those girls right in here and the memory of it was still an inspiration for him. He wondered what had happened to her, but only vaguely. He sat down in his black leather chair and opened the top right drawer of his mahogany desk. God, it was good to be king. Reaching into the drawer he extracted the tax forms and other HR nonsense he'd had Alice fill out. Name, address, social security number...it was all there. His last fence hadn't given him much, so he'd have to find someone else to buy this information. Frankly, though, this was just a minor bonus. It wasn't worth what it used to be.

On the other hand, tying them up with identity theft and ruined credit kept them from pestering him about the paychecks they never received.

Aaron was interrupted by his phone ringing...his secretary paging him. He sighed and picked it up.

"Yeah."

"Just reminding you of your two o'clock. I know you never put it in your Outlook calendar."

“I hate that damn program. Ok, I’m leaving now. I probably won’t be back this afternoon.” No sense coming back if he wasn’t picking up Alice.

“Fine, sir. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, Laura.”

Laura put the phone back on the hook and turned back to the email she was sending. She’d been put in charge of the department newsletter, as if being secretary for Mr. Perfect Aaron Masterson wasn’t enough work. Not only did he have all the usual workload that comes with any company executive, but he also had a ton of additional baggage. It was enough to make her sick just being in the same room with the man. Luckily she could do most of her interaction with him over the phone or via email and rarely had to work with him face-to-face. God’s gift to women had nothing on Aaron Masterson as far as arrogance and chauvanism were concerned. She’d been looking for a new job for the last two months, but it was hard to match the pay scale here. She thought Masterson had done that on purpose...he knew he was a sick bastard but he also knew that once you got used to the money he paid you, you couldn’t just give it up. It was like a green drug, and potent enough that she’d ignored most of his foibles, even when he practically cornered her late at night and only escaped by being just slightly quicker on her feet and with her words.

But the grunts that had come from his office that next night had been the final straw. It was hard to report an Executive Vice President to Human Resources for harassment and creating a hostile work environment, so she’d decided to just gut it out until something else presented itself. She hoped it would be soon.

In the meantime she still had to put out the newsletter. The department had all of 20 people in it, but some of them were three floors down and a few others were actually in Chicago, so it was worth it to give them all some news just to remind them who they really worked for.

She stared at the monitor, silently willing it to write the HTML code for her, but the flat screen merely stared back at her. She’d been working on it for the last two days and it had to go out today whether it was finished or not. In all her 40 years she’d never even seen a line of HTML but now she was writing it with the help of a piece of software she’d lucked into finding with Google. If only it wouldn’t insert that extra blank line between those two headers it would be perfect, she thought.

She looked at the clock. Three hours to go, but Masterson was gone. She got up and let herself into his office and stared out the windows. The sun shone and she could see the trees below waving gently in a slow wind, their leaves turning amber and cherry red and beginning to fall off. A gorgeous autumn day in California.

It should be a crime to work indoors on a day like today, she thought. And with that she turned, walked out of the office, closed the door behind her, and went to her desk. Once there she copied the code from the program's window, pasted it into an outgoing email message, previewed it to make sure it looked right (minus that annoying extra line break she couldn't get rid of) and hit send. She watched the progress bar until it acknowledged that the message was now winging its way to its intended recipients, logged off, picked up her purse and started down the hall to the elevators.

In Chicago, Lewis heard the signal and felt the vibration from his iPhone that indicated he had a new email. He took the small device out of his pocket, looked at it, noticed that it was from his boss, or more accurately his boss's secretary, and deleted it. He'd read it at home later. He walked briskly, having just gotten off the elevated train, and made his way to the stairs down to street level. He was running late. He had a ton of errands to do, none of which could wait until tomorrow, and he had a date tonight to see *Wicked* with Lucy. He was really looking forward to both, but neither would happen unless he picked up the tickets, which meant retrieving his car and driving out to his brother's house in Brookfield. Then he'd have to run back home and change. Flowers would be a good idea, too, he thought.

Why did parking in the city have to be such a pain? He could have left work at a normal hour and been done in plenty of time if he could have parked near where he lived, but the cost of doing that was completely outrageous. He'd considered a taxi, but that was out of the question as well...too expensive. Guess you really do pay for convenience, he mused to himself. He glanced at his watch and quickened his pace. Another three blocks to go, and this extra weight he was carrying around wasn't helping.

He kept meaning to exercise, it was just that since he didn't have his car he had to walk everywhere anyway. Seemed pointless to walk all day and then join a gym so you could get on a treadmill and walk some more. The indoor pools intrigued him, but not enough...at least not yet. Maybe if it turned out that Lucy liked someone with a trimmer physique he'd find the motivation. Not that she was a picture of physical fitness herself, Lewis caught himself thinking. Not obese, certainly, but...what was the word...zaftig. Definitely zaftig. He pictured her in his mind's eye and loosened his tie just a little. Zaftig she may be, but still beautiful...and that English accent... Two blocks to go.

Waiting impatiently for the light to change at the intersection, Lewis felt the buzz of the iPhone again. It was simultaneously the best and worst purchase he'd ever made. It kept him on top of things when he couldn't be at the office, and also with his personal life, but it also meant people could bug him wherever he went. Text message this time.

“See you tonight! Maybe afterwards we’ll...discuss the play.”

Lucy Stone grinned mischievously as she closed her flip-up cell phone, imagining in her mind’s eye Lewis’s reaction to the text she’d just sent him. He’d probably just be confused, but there was always the chance that he’d pick up on the allusion to the name of the play they were to see together tonight.

It was going to be their third date and she rather liked him. She could tell he liked her. It was pretty obvious by the way he tripped over himself to be helpful whenever she was around. Some girls might have found it obnoxious, stifling, or even needy, but she thought it was charming, especially considering the cad she’d dated two months ago.

She walked over to the full-length mirror in her apartment and examined the latest dress she’d put on. This one was flowy and loose-fitting, coming down to her knees. She liked the red color and the way it fit, but wished it was a little more revealing, especially around the neckline. It was the fifth dress she’d tried on this afternoon and she was trying desperately to find an outfit that said “available” without actually crossing the line over to “slutty”...she wanted “yes” but not “please?” The one saving grace of that last relationship was that she hadn’t actually slept with the jerk, but on the other hand that meant that it had been over a year for her and she was feeling a little...she hated to use it, but it was the most appropriate word...desperate.

Desperate. The word offended her sensibilities and left her with a feeling of doubt. Did she really like Lewis or was he merely tolerable enough for her to be with right now? Would she get two months into this relationship, satisfy her more carnal cravings, and then find herself unable to look at him? He was a cheapskate, after all, and fat.

Sometimes she hated being able to work from home. Not having a commute was great, but with all the extra time on her hands she felt like she should be doing something more than angsty about someone who, really, was a nice guy and should be given a chance to make his own destiny with her rather than be pre-judged.

I need some air, she thought. She looked at herself in the mirror one more time and then took the dress off and replaced it with a grey sweatsuit, put her apartment keys in her pocket with her cell phone, and headed outside into the cool fall air. A walk around the block will help me clear my head, she assured herself, and certainly the smells of the outdoors were already having an effect on her. She sighed deeply. Not the effect she’d wanted. She felt depressed and lonely...but thoughts of Lewis didn’t invade her mind. Instead she found her thoughts wandering towards Matt, the completely unavailable and still highly desirable Matt Keans, married to Susanne Keans, father to Sally and Billy Keans.

Lucy turned the corner and let the bad mood wash over her. Dammit, this was supposed to be a fun evening. She was going to see a play she'd wanted to see for over two years with a perfectly nice guy and she was wallowing in self-doubt about a relationship that hadn't even formed yet. Stopping, Lucy glanced over at the buildings across the street, her eyes attracted by a metallic sound and a sudden movement. Just a cat.

The cat, a grey tabby, scampered across the concrete and found refuge behind the dumpster in the alley. It had jumped onto the trash can for a better view of the surroundings, but the can had been empty and had fallen over from the impact, knocking the lid off and creating an awful din. It had been a rough day for the cat and things weren't really looking any better since the trash can had been empty. It had seen several people go by in the last few hours and a couple of them had knelt down and made strange sounds at it, but none of them had any food and so it had stayed back, cautious, until they got tired and left.

After a few moments its nerves calmed from its initial fright and it began sniffing around the trash can to see if there was anything left over. There wasn't and so it sauntered back down the alley where it spied a small rat. Crouching down, the cat surveyed the scene. Rat nibbling at a piece of something, nothing else around. The cat inched forwards, tail twitching, eyes wide, pupils dilated, senses on high alert. Closer. Closer. And then with a sudden pounce she sunk her claws into the soft fur of the rodent, her teeth on the back of the rat's neck. She felt a brief struggle from her prey, but quickly gave her head a violent shake and snapped the rat's neck. The body fell limp in her mouth. She dropped it and looked around to see if there were any other cats coming to steal her prize, but there were none, so she began to eat when suddenly a noise startled her.

A man clomped by, stumbling as he went, dressed in shabby clothes, his scent clearly detectable by the cat. But the man didn't stop and so the cat returned to her meal.

James Prote dodged neatly around the trash can that had rolled out of the alley. He hadn't seen it until the last minute, what with being distracted. Being drunk didn't help either. He staggered down the sidewalk a little further, ran into a small tree, and fell down. Lying there, he considered his predicament. Not that he could pronounce the word 'predicament' right now. He had found a twenty dollar bill on the ground this morning and had spent it on the strongest, cheapest drink he could find and since then he'd been trying to remember what it was called so he could get it again some time.

He rolled over into the path of a woman walking down the street who stepped around him muttering disparaging remarks under her breath about pride and getting a job and so on. James heard them, but paid them no attention. He heard them all the time. Groaning, he managed to get on his knees as a prelude to standing up, but only succeeded in rolling over on his side again. At least now he was closer to the building. He crawled over and leaned his back against it, holding

out his hand just in case money should happen to fall into it. Even in his current condition it came naturally. When you'd lived like he had for as long as he had, this position was like a reflex.

It hadn't always, though. James had graduated high school with a middling GPA and aspirations of going into business for himself one day. He attended the local community college for one semester before he and his dad both lost their jobs simultaneously, which meant that he couldn't pay for another. He spent his days looking for new work and his nights with his girlfriend, who subsequently got pregnant. When it became clear that he couldn't deal with the situation either emotionally or financially she dumped him. That's when he'd discovered alcohol.

He remembered, but only dimly, that first night he'd gotten seriously drunk. He'd woken up the next morning with a terrible hangover, but also with the knowledge that for several hours the previous night he hadn't been miserable, hadn't been overwhelmed by life, and indeed hadn't really even known what was happening around him.

That was twenty years ago. Since then he'd gotten very good at what he did, starting with simple con jobs, proceeding to petty theft, and finally finishing up with just straight begging now that his body could no longer sustain the activities of a younger man. Once you hit 40 it's tough to outrun the police like you used to. He heard footsteps approaching and looked up to see a woman walking briskly down the sidewalk. An attempt to ask for change turned into an unintelligible slur and the woman kept walking on by.

She couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. When she'd married him he looked like a reasonable kind of guy. Moderately intelligent, thoughtful, and kind to animals. Well, these days one out of three was about all she could hope for, and the animals were certainly thankful it was the latter. She wondered if this could be grounds for divorce, but only briefly. At her age the idea of re-entering the dating pool gave one pause. But still...

The addresses on the shops around her were difficult to find, but every third or fourth store had had the presence of mind to post the numbers in a visible place and she could tell she was approaching her destination. Dumb dumb dumb. Maybe it was her own fault for leaving it lying around, except that, no, she'd told him what it was. There really wasn't any excuse at all...there was only trying to undo the damage if you still could.

At last number 5872 came into view. Tom's Pawn Shop. She wrenched open the door and stepped inside where she heard one of those annoying electronic sounds that some stores put on the front door to let the employees know that someone is either coming in or going out. She hated those things. The guy behind the counter was wearing a wifebeater and about a 3-day growth of stubble. "Slob" didn't even begin to cover it, the stains on his shirt and the smell coming from his direction made you wonder if it had been washed since the Reagan Administration. There was a "No

Smoking” sign pasted to the front of the counter, but the whole place reeked of cigarettes and the sign showed indications of being coated with a thin layer of nicotine.

“Hello?” she said, when the clerk offered no greeting.

“Yeah, what do you want?”

“Hi, my name is Courtney Atys. My husband was in here about an hour ago and sold you a ring and I’d like to get it back, please.”

“Yeah, dat ring’s in processin’. Can’t sell it until tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t understand. That was my mother’s wedding ring and it wasn’t supposed to be sold at all. I’ll give you all the money that you gave my husband, plus I’ll pay whatever restocking fee you charge here.”

“Sorry, boss’s orders. He’s got to look at every bit of merchandise before it gets put out on the counter and he won’t be in until tomorrow morning.”

“He doesn’t have to know about it. I really need the ring back today. Couldn’t you make just one exception?” Courtney knew the desperation was creeping into her voice, but she couldn’t help it.

“Can’t help ya. Come back tomorrow.”

“There’s a little something for yourself in it if you’ll help me.”

“Lissen, lady, I can’t. Help. You. Ev’ryting that comes in gets wrote down in this here book,” and here he brandished the book like a shield, “and then gets put in the processin’ bin until the boss has a look at it. Now I’ve already told you to come back tomorrow, so get outta my face!”

“Can you give me your boss’s name and phone number? I’m sure if I called him and explained he’d help me out.”

“His name’s Brian Stuart, but I don’t have his phone number. He’s outta town and won’t be back until tomorrow. Come back then and give him a hard time, ok? Now unless you’re gonna buy somethin’ that’s actually for sale I’m gonna ask you to go now.”

“Can I at least put the ring on hold or layaway or something?” Courtney was near tears now.

“Can’t put nuttin’ on layway unless it’s for sale. Stuff that come in today ain’t for sale ‘til tomorrow. Now I’m gonna tell you again, get out!”

Courtney began sobbing, but retreated out the door anyway. She didn’t know what she was going to do now, but she thought that maybe divorce wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Ben Stubling sighed and began rearranging the merchandise on the shelves. Stupid broads. Emotional, that was their whole problem. It was just a ring. Besides, he liked it and had already put it in the bin for himself to have as soon as the boss got in. He’d get a discount and Gladys, his girlfriend, would be impressed. And that was important, because she was a real looker but she wouldn’t put out, and he’d only put up with that for so long before he dumped her.

His dad had always told him that women were worthless except for one thing, and if you couldn’t get that thing out of them then you should just kick ‘em to the curb and get another one. They were a dime a dozen. And Ben had found that largely to be true. Gladys, however, he thought was worth a little extra time, what with those long legs of hers. He liked girls with long legs because they could still wrap them around him even though he was fat. Being fat was something Ben disliked, but not enough to do anything about it. The main reason he didn’t like it was because it was hard to find clothes that fit, which was why he typically wore things until they completely wore out, and sometimes even past that point.

His fantasizing about Gladys was interrupted by the sound of that annoying chime that played whenever someone came in the store. He looked up and saw Zach Boyan and wondered what he’d done to deserve a day like today. First that crazy bitch with the ring and now Zach.

Ben hated Zach. Slick suits, sunglasses, that maddening smile he always had on his face, and he always seemed to come in with the best jewelry. Nobody in the store knew where he got it, and mostly they didn’t care, but there was always that slight bit of curiosity mixed with jealousy.

“Ben! Good to see ya!” Zach said that all the time. Ben never knew if he was really glad to see him or if it was just his standard greeting.

“Hey, Zach. Whatchoo got today?”

“Only the best, Ben, you know that.” Zach placed a briefcase on the counter, snapped it open, and withdrew a small cloth bag. Royal Crown was embossed on it. Ben had seen those before, but had never tasted the drink that came in them. He’d been told it was good. Zach tipped the contents carefully on the counter.

The glint of gold and diamonds shone up as it emerged from the bag, making a slight clinking sound as the metal pieces clattered against one another. Ben examined about 10 pieces in what passed for some detail with him and dismissed the rest as being similar. Zach always brought a bunch of the same stuff, more or less.

“I can give ya \$400.”

“Make it \$500,” Zach said, the smile fading slightly.

Ben hated this part of the transaction. Haggling was not something he was good at and his boss knew it and tried to get him not to as much as possible.

“Sorry, Zach, boss’s orders. We’re overstocked on some of this stuff.”

“Well, I can take it down the street then,” Zach said, beginning to scoop the assorted rings and necklaces back into the bag.

Ben put his hand on Zach’s hand. The boss had said no haggling, but he’d also said not to let any of Zach’s stuff get away. Ben wasn’t the smartest guy in the store, but he’d been working here a while and knew when to give in.

“\$450,” he said.

“\$500.”

“Gah, fine, whatever,” said Ben. The truth, which they both knew, was that this stuff was going to get resold to another dealer in another city and was going to get marked up anyway and was probably worth closer to \$1000 in any case. Any time you dealt in quantities as large as what Zach brought in you knew he hadn’t just found them on the street and unloading it here was bad news. He opened the cash drawer, counted out \$500 in assorted tens and twenties (Zach never took anything higher), closed it with a bang, and scooped the pile off the counter into a plastic bin.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Zach said, placing his Crown Royal bag back into his briefcase and latching it shut. “See you next time.” And with that he picked up his bag and walked out the door, making that awful chime sound again as he went.

Zach stepped out onto the sidewalk, walking briskly, shaking his head. How dare that moron try to gyp him out of \$100? Did he think these suits grew on trees? Didn’t he know the risk he ran getting that stuff in the first place? Actually, he thought, he doesn’t. And just as well. He reached the corner just in time to make the bus which would take him back to work. With luck he’d make it

back before his lunch was over and actually have time to eat. Late lunches were the worst, but in this case it had been necessary. He'd had to wait for the interment before he could take the stuff to the shop.

Zach was constantly amazed at how his life had turned out. An "emo" "goth" kid growing up, he'd been obsessed with death, dying, and depression. He'd worn a lot of pale makeup with black eyeshadow at first and then had found himself drawn into his college drama group as a makeup artist. That had been ok, but he still found himself drawn to death and the macabre, which was why he'd gone to work at the mortuary. They'd discovered that he had a natural gift with cosmetics and, with a little training to refine his technique, he'd gone on to become a valued member of the staff.

Unfortunately this success hadn't cured his depression. A fascination with goth culture could get expensive what with the black leather clothes, makeup, jewelry, cover charges at the club, drinks, and so forth. He was only really happy when he was so made up that he was unrecognizable and he couldn't afford that on a regular basis on what the mortuary was paying him. A second job hadn't helped because the hours kept him working late, which precluded going to the club.

It had been Mr. and Mrs. Wills that had given him the idea. An old couple with only one surviving relative, a son who evidently hated them. They'd lived to 83 and 85 respectively and had been together for 45 years when they decided together that they'd had enough of life and locked themselves in the garage with the car running. Zach doubted the the son, whose name he couldn't remember, would ever forgive them for that; he'd never seen anyone so bitter, and for someone who hung around with the goth crowd that was saying a lot.

At one point during the embalming they had asked the son how he wanted his parents dressed. The kid had stopped by with a box that still had crime scene tape on it from where it had been returned by the police after the investigation had concluded that it was suicide. The clothes they'd been wearing when they died. In the box were all the usual clothes plus the old couple's wedding rings.

Zach had remarked at the time what a waste it was to bury the diamond on Mrs. Wills's ring and asked the son if he wanted it back, but he'd said no. Said he didn't want anything lying around to remind him that his parents had "given up", in his words, and that Zach could do whatever he wanted with it. So he'd taken it, along with the father's gold wedding band, down to the local pawn shop and had gotten \$100 for the pair. He'd been amazed at how easy it was. You just walk in, give them something you don't want, and get back something you do want.

Afterwards he thought about it and realized that what had just happened was going to be very rare. You couldn't just ask for that kind of thing...most people were actually sentimental about it. So he got in the habit of making "one last check" of his work after everyone else had finished up and

quietly removed as much jewelry as he thought he could get away with and replacing it with cheap costume jewelry. He'd had to leave a few pieces behind because they were too distinctive, and he'd nearly been caught on one occasion but passed it off as saying he was just polishing the gem, but overall he'd been very successful and his only regret was that he hadn't thought of it sooner. Eventually he'd given up the goth lifestyle, which just increased the amount of money he made for other things.

The bus lurched as it hit a pothole at speed and Zach was awakened from his reverie just in time to realize that his was the next stop. Slowing to a stop, the bus's air brakes hissed and Zach rose from his seat and made his way to the exit. He glanced at his watch and realized he was just going to make it. Being late wasn't an option, he had an appointment with Mrs. Cleary, the last appointment of the day, to discuss the details about her husband.

He walked into the mortuary, thankful that the bus ride hadn't wrinkled his suit too badly, and went around to his office to check messages. Thankfully there were none, nor email on his computer, which meant he could go home immediately after talking to the Widow Cleary about what she wanted done with Frank's remains. In fact, it was time to meet her now, so he went back out into the reception area where he found her already waiting.

Dressed in black, as befits someone of her age in mourning, she had decided to forego the veil. She stood about a foot shorter than Zach, or about 5 foot 2, and had that stern no-nonsense air about her that told Zach that there wouldn't be any crying over her dead husband, at least not in front of anybody.

"About time," she said. "Just because the dead have infinite patience doesn't mean I do, too. I'd like to get him in the ground before I have to join him in eternity myself."

Zach had seen this type before. All bravado and bluster in the mortuary, and many times at the funeral, but the moment they got home they'd break down and gush a torrent of tears to rival the Great Flood. He'd heard it from friends of the bereaved on more than one occasion.

"My deepest apologies," Zach intoned in his most sympathetic and apologetic tone. "I was unavoidably delayed. How can I help you?"

Mrs. Cleary then went on to detail with great specificity how she wanted her late husband to be properly interred into the ground. It involved, as far as Zach could tell, a bunch of his usual treatments to the corpse, a couple of routine special orders, and nothing remarkable or out of the ordinary to any trained, competent mortician. To her, however, it was a monumental task demanding the greatest care and loving dedication and so she decried it in such minutia as to leave

no detail unattended. Zach had seen this before, too, and was frankly bored out of his mind. He kept eyeing her wedding ring and wondering if she might join her husband after all.

Jill Cleary rather liked the young man standing in front of her. He seemed sincere, caring, and attentive. She knew she was bombarding him with too much information, that she was letting her grief get the better of her and that it was making her run on at the mouth a little and that she was effectively telling the poor man how to do his job, as if he didn't know perfectly well what his business was, but he just smiled and nodded and humored her. There had been a time in her life when being "humored" like this would have offended her, but that time was past. All she cared about now was getting her poor Frank properly cared for now that he was gone to his reward.

It had been the greatest ten years of her life, being with Frank. They hadn't met until they were both in their late sixties and had both already buried their previous spouses, but they also both knew that *this* was their time, that there was no room for regret or might-have-beens in their relationship. They had been different people when they were younger and had been transformed by marriage, parenthood, and mourning of their previous partners into the people they were today. And just because the people they were today got along didn't mean the other people they were yesterday would have done so. It was remarkably philosophic of both of them.

He'd been sick the last few weeks...pneumonia, the doctors said. But he kept his mind until the end, and they'd both been glad of that. There was nothing, in Jill's mind, worse than losing someone you loved unless it was losing them twice...first to dementia and then to death itself.

She continued prattling on to Zach for several more minutes when she began to notice that she felt a little light-headed.

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry..." she began as she began to sway a little.

"You're just upset," said Zach. "Here, why don't you sit down?" He felt nervous. A moment ago he'd been wishing her dead so he could steal her ring, and now here she was looking faint. He didn't need that on his conscience.

"Yes, that sounds like a good...oooooh," and with that she gently crumpled to the floor.

Zach practically panicked. He hovered over her for a few moments asking if she was alright, but got no answer. Eventually calling 911 occurred to him and the nice operator on the other end said they'd send the EMTs right over.

You got all kinds of calls as a 911 operator. Frankly, little old ladies collapsing at mortuaries was a bit of a relief from the usual murders, fires, muggings, and other evidences of people's cruelty,

desperation, or carelessness that she usually got. They'd trained her to stay calm when people were reporting dire situations, but after the call was over...well, sometimes it got to you. Maybe this was why the burnout rate in this job was so high.

A typical night for Sheryl Weisenhopf began with a shooting and went from there. There were the horrific stories, such as people finding corpses (human or animal) in the bushes, many of which turned out to be false. Then there were the funny stories, which usually involved unusual objects trapped in unlikely orifices. There were the tragic stories, including fires which you knew were going to destroy people's lives and memories as well as family members having terrible accidents. Sheryl genuinely felt sorry for these people, even more so than all the others. And then there were the crackpot stories. Calls about UFOs, aliens in your garage, nerve gas pouring out of your fireplace because the logs had been contaminated, and on and on. And this didn't even include the rash of false alarms, people asking for the time or weather report, and other assorted wastes of time.

Her boyfriend had told her to ask for reassignment on any of a number of occasions, but she'd committed up front to working a full six month rotation and she'd be damned if the job was going to get the better of her. Besides, it made for great conversations at parties as long as you were careful to leave out names and addresses.

No, there was no need to be reassigned. Besides, being here took her mind off of her other problems. She'd had an ache in her lower back for the last three days, her mother had been nagging her about "living in sin" with Rick, as she called it, and had apparently recruited her brother and two cousins to help with this particular attack. Not to mention the fact that she was pregnant.

She hadn't told Rick yet. She hadn't made up her mind what to do about it, but she knew that there was one course of action that Rick couldn't be a part of. She'd found out a week ago and suspected that's where her back pain was coming from...the stress of carrying around this extra little bit of guilt and secrecy. She'd weighed over the options in her head a million times. They couldn't afford a baby, her mom would probably give her hell about having it out of wedlock, there was no room in their apartment, and she worried about the dogs and how they'd react. And she was scared shitless of the entire prospect. But so far she'd been scared of the alternative just a little bit more.

The abortion issue was one she'd never given much thought to. She supported a woman's right to choose, but she wondered often how much of that stemmed from her independent streak and not wanting anybody to be able to tell her what to do at any time. All she knew was that three of her friends had had one and she'd never been able to look at any of them the same way since.

The phone rang. Instinctively she picked it up.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“Is your refrigerator running?”

Sheryl rolled her eyes. “Sir, the 911 service is for emergencies only. Do you have an emergency?”

“Yeah. Your mom!”

click

The boy hung up the phone and laughed and laughed and laughed.

“Did she answer you?” his friend, Mike asked.

“No,” Mason replied. “She just said ‘Sir, the 911 service is for emergencies only. Do you have an emergency?’” This last he said with a mocking voice that he was sure would have cut the woman at the 911 place like she’d never been cut before.

“And you said your emergency was her mom??” Mike asked incredulously.

“Yeah! Can you believe it? That was awesome. We should do it again tomorrow night.”

“Yeah...oh, wait, we can’t. My family’s going out of town tomorrow, I can’t come over again for a couple of weeks.”

“Too bad, ‘cause that was too great to wait. I’m gonna do it without you!”

“Bastard,” Mike retorted.

Mason Andrest and Mike Aller had been best friends ever since first grade when they’d had to sit next to each other in class because the teacher had done his seating chart alphabetically. Mason thought that Mike was the absolute best, mainly because nobody else would hang out with him. A chubby kid who was good at neither sports nor academics he was shunned by jocks and geeks alike, but not by Mike.

Mike, for his part, was skinny but awkward. There was nothing special about him, a fact that his parents had made very clear to him over his 15 years, and so he sought attention any way he could get it. Most of the time just by being loud. He did everything over the top. Even everyday

conversations with Mike could be overheard from fairly far away as he seemed to have no concept of an “indoor voice”.

The two were perfect for each other. Each craved attention and each found it in the other. Those around them wondered how much trouble they’d get into together when they were older and why it was taking so long for them to get around to it.

“So...is your sister here tonight?” Mike asked.

“Shut up, man!”

“No, way, dude, she’s hot! You’ve totally got to have your birthday party at the pool this year so I can see her in a bikini.”

“Man, that’s my sister you’re talking about. That’s gross!”

“For you, yeah!” Mike punched Mason on the arm.

“Hey, no free hits!” Mason punched Mike on the arm, just a little harder.

Lots of their discussions made their way to this point eventually.

“Besides,” Mason continued, “she’s a *senior* this year. She’s graduating in another few months and going to college and even if she didn’t have a boyfriend already she wouldn’t want to be seen dating a *soph* like you.”

“Who said anything about dating? I just wanna hook up with her.” Mike said with a leer, making suggestive movements with his hips.

“Ewwwww!” Mason exclaimed, throwing a pillow at Mike.

“You’re just jealous because if you did it it really *would* be gross.”

Just then the door opened and Jen poked her head in.

“Would you two keep it down, please? I’m trying to study and I can’t do it with you two thumping on the floor up here.”

“Sorry, Jen,” said Mason.

“Hey, Jen, howzit goin’?” Mike asked. “C’mon in for a second.”

Mike had had a crush on Jen Andrest since he was old enough to have a crush on anybody. Jen opened the door the rest of the way and leaned on the doorframe, giving Mike a private little thrill. Her body showed all the signs of the exercise she got being captain of the cross-country team and on the tennis squad. She also had a habit of going around the house in shorts no matter what the weather was outside.

“It’s fine, except I’ve got this AP calc test to study for and I’ve got my noisy brother and his noisy friend upstairs from me making too much noise.”

“Yeah, sorry...so, whadda ya say, how about you take a break from that and we go to the movies?” Mike said.

“I can’t. I have to study, remember? Besides, I like it if my date at least has the option of driving us there.”

Mason sniggered under his breath.

“Hey, I can drive,” Mike answered defensively.

“Not according to the state, you can’t.” Jen retorted.

“Yeah, well, whadda they know?”

“They know how to arrest you. And now why don’t you see if you know how to be quieter, ok?” She straightened up and started to shut the door. Just before it closed completely she heard...

“I told you...hot.”

The door clicked shut and she frowned to herself. Of course Mike was a twerp who she wouldn’t give the time of day, but they’d known each other for forever and she thought his little puppy love had been cute at first. She’s appreciated the attention when she was a little girl, even though Mike’s definition of attention had been the same as other adolescent boys everywhere, which meant lots of hair-pulling and other assorted teasing. It was all part of growing up. Lately, though, she’d found him vaguely creepy, as if he weren’t kidding anymore and really was ready to get serious about some of the things he’d been saying.

She descended the stairs lightly and went back into the den where her father had set up the computer for her and her friend Ashley to use for their history paper. Of course they’d finished the

paper yesterday, but this was a good excuse to keep it set up so she could chat on IM with her friends while they both gave passing glances to their calculus homework and generally gossiped about whatever they could think of.

There was one friend in particular that she was anxious to talk to again. She'd been friends with Steve on AIM for about the last three weeks and she'd never met anyone like him. Nice, funny, sincere, and he complimented her on some of the most unique things like her teeth. She'd always been very proud of her teeth having never needed braces and brushing twice a day just like the dentist told her to. Unfortunately the dentist was the only one who ever noticed and all her parents ever said about them was how great it was that they'd been able to save money by not having to have all that dental work done that most teenagers needed.

His picture was hot, too. She'd sent him one of her in a dress with the lowest neckline she could find in the house. It was one of her mother's dresses that she didn't wear much and Jen had almost acquired it for herself, but she was afraid someone would notice it missing. They'd traded pictures at the same time after three days of talking and she'd wanted to impress him from the get-go. He'd done the same, sending a picture of himself at his pool, looking great in a pair of boxer-style swim trunks that were black with cool red designs on them. He said he lived in Atlanta, but that his family was planning a trip to Chicago in the summer and that maybe they could get together. That seemed impossibly far away to her.

He was also a year ahead of her in school and was looking at colleges. This was one of the reasons for the family vacation to this area, so he could check out the University of Chicago. When he'd said this it had sounded like a dream come true to Jen and she couldn't wait to get her girlfriends over to see him for themselves. Up to now she'd been pretty quiet about Steve, fearing the reaction she'd get to the idea of dating a guy she'd met online, but she felt that now was the time.

As she approached the computer she could see the blinking indicator light that told her she'd gotten a new IM while she was away. Meredith, Beth, and Treva were looking at her, grinning.

"You've got a new message," said Meredith with that awful smirk she used so much. "Wonder who it's from."

"I hope it's from Steve," said Jen, sitting down. Sure enough, there was the message.

Hey, babe, wassup?

Max Lang, aka "Steve", was having the time of his life. He currently had five IM windows open as well as LiveJournal and Facebook. It had started out as an experiment to see if this new-fangled Internet was anything to get excited about and he'd started small. Typical for his

nature, he'd also started in exactly the wrong way by writing a web page. Max had a very difficult time talking to people and had lived alone for the last twenty years, ever since his parents had kicked him out of the house at the age of nineteen.

The intervening years had been spent reading books and working at whichever job he could find that would have him and didn't involve talking to people much. This left out most retail or other sales jobs. He'd gone to college briefly, but dropped out with nothing to show for it other than moderate grades in the core curriculum classes and one or two computer science classes.

That's where the Internet had come in. At first he'd dismissed it because the whole point was to interact with people. But he felt awkward, unsure of himself, and generally preferred being alone. His first web page had been quite impressive from a technical point of view, but had lacked design finesse. He also didn't update it much. At first he was ok with the fact that there was no traffic, but eventually he decided that while he had no interest in interacting with people if he could help it, he felt a strange and strong desire to have them admire his work.

For the first time in his life he started paying attention to what other people were doing. He noticed that the pages that got the most traffic were the ones that got updated the most. Pages that sat there, like his, got no visitors. So he began updating it every day with little tidbits that he found online, especially if they had to do with popular culture and web design. Looking back, he was never sure if he had created the first 'blog', but it didn't really matter. What mattered was that people were admiring his work.

And then they started asking him things. He was uncomfortable with that at first, but most of the requests were coming via email and so he answered them. It wasn't much different from just typing code or a story. And then someone convinced him to sign up for Instant Messaging. Another thing he was never sure of was where the name "Steve" had come from. He supposed it was just his natural tendency towards privacy and shyness which made him want to suppress his real name. He'd always hated the name Max anyway.

These days he maintained several web pages and lived off advertising revenue. His online persona, "Steve" was very popular and he conversed regularly with any one of dozens of people using at least three different IM programs. And one of the people he talked to was Jen. Jen thought he was the greatest person in the world. Unfortunately she also thought he was still nineteen and seemed to have no idea of his true age. He'd been on the verge of telling her for a while, but had always backed off, fearful that she would reject him and stop talking to him altogether.

Telling her that he was coming up to see her had been a mistake. He knew this. He could go if he wanted to, but he knew it would only end in distaster. He'd have to find a way out of it. He couldn't meet her.

The IM bell rang on the computer. Another message coming in. This one was from Jasmine.

You figured out what you're going to do yet?

Jasmine was the only person Max had told about Jen. She was almost out of college, graduating with a degree in Psychology from the University of Georgia. Her conscience told her that she should report "Steve" and that he was delusional and needed help. But she also thought that since he lived so far away from Jen and since she was nearly finished with her psych degree with an intention to go to grad school that she could handle his situation. He still seemed to have at least one foot in reality.

"You talking to that crackpot again?"

"He's not a crackpot, Ruth, he just has a hard time with people." She loved her roommate. She had to keep telling herself that to keep from killing her, but she really did love her roommate. They'd been together since freshman year when the computer assigned them together. Neither had seen the point in letting the computer assign them to new people every semester, especially when they got along so well...at least most of the time. The rest of the time Jasmine spent wondering what her life would have been like without Ruth in it. Better, she couldn't help but think. But she was the known evil that Jasmine could deal with as opposed to the unknown evil that she didn't know if she could deal with.

That was the double-edged sword that was being a psych major...you were learning how to help people. But who was lining up to help you? The self-diagnosis, the constant analysis of your friends and associates, and the feeling that as much as you knew, you'd never *really* know anything important because you could see the signs of the secrets but you couldn't see the secrets themselves.

Like with Max. In a way he was world famous, hundreds of people knew him via IM and the social networking sites. He got thousands of hits a day on his website. But who knew him, really? Who could predict what he'd do if the EMP went off and fried all of his electronics? Jasmine liked to think she could...but there was no way to really know. And it bugged her.

"I'm going out for dinner. You coming?" Ruth asked, purse in hand.

Jasmine looked down at the flannel pajamas she was wearing currently. "No, thanks, you go on." She actually was hungry and wouldn't have minded getting away from the computer for a little while, but she also knew how Ruth would react to having to wait for her to get dressed. Badly. Better to just sit at home and eat soup.

“Suit yourself,” Ruth replied and walked out the door.

Ruth closed the door behind her and shook her head. Her roommate needed to get a life. She was too studious, too analytical, and let all that psychology stuff go to her head. Although, she mused to herself as she headed down the hallway of the dorm to the parking lot, where else would psychology stuff go if not to your head? She chuckled at her own cleverness.

Ruth Wester had known from the moment that she met Jasmine that they’d be roommates until graduation, and possibly even beyond, depending on where their own career aspirations took them. She could tell because she had a gift with people...she could tell things about them that they couldn’t tell themselves. Things their mothers would never guess about them and that their lovers would never clue in on no matter how close and intimate they got with one another. It was the little things. How you wore your hair, what you wore *in* your hair, the shape of your glasses or if you wore contacts, the colors you wore when you were meeting someone for the first time, your shoes, your pants or dress, the condition of your skin, and what you smelled like. She could tell tons about you just by looking at you, and then there was your body language.

Fifteen minutes with Ruth Wester was enough for her to write your biography. She’d considered going into psychology herself, but she knew it would just drive her buggy to be told all the procedures when she could do it all by instinct. She knew there were people who would have used this “power” for good, but she wasn’t one of those. Marketing was her major and making a killing by selling things to people was her goal. And in the meantime she had a blast by pushing people’s buttons. It also helped to know that you’d have the evening to yourself even though you politely asked your roommate to join you. The last thing she wanted right now was company.

A lot had been on her mind lately. She was bored, primarily, but she was also lonely. A side-effect of knowing everything you needed to know about a person within just a few minutes was that you tended to reject prospective suitors before they even got out of the gate. That depressed her and she’d considered on many occasions lowering her standards, but in the end that idea depressed her more.

She made it to the parking lot and walked towards her car. Standing next to it was a man she didn’t recognize. She squinted in the darkness under the harsh glare of the street light, but couldn’t make out anything about him except that he was wearing a heavy jacket and a toboggan. Cold, or shy, or both, she reasoned. And creepy for hanging out near my car this late at night. She slowed her pace slightly, hoping he’d go away, and even considered turning back, but at that moment the man turned and walked away.

She sighed and continued on. When she got to her car she unlocked the door and was about to step

inside when she felt a strong grip on her arm pull her out and spin her around, slamming her into the side of the car.

“What the...?” she began, but she never finished. She felt a powerful blow to her head and was knocked unconscious.

The man in the toboggan watched her body sag, but held her up before she could hit the ground. He looked at her with rage in his heart and hit her again. Ruth’s body convulsed reflexively, but she remained otherwise unresponsive.

The man had never seen Ruth before. He had no reason to do this. But something in his brain told him that this was the right thing to do. It was what he had to do here, in this place, at this time.

Before he came to the parking lot at the college he’d been out with friends. It had been unusually cold and so he had bundled up with a heavy coat and a toboggan. They had been drinking and a few had been doing drugs, but the unknown man hadn’t participated in that part. He’d sat on the sidelines and looked at his friends. They were all in their thirties, all reasonably respected, all reasonably well-paid at reasonable jobs and had reasonably good lives all around. But the man felt he was two rungs further down the ladder than he deserved and looking around he felt the bitterness rise up in him. How could they do this? How could they treat themselves with such little respect, he thought, and still be successful in the eyes of overall society?

He watched them poisoning themselves with alcohol and drugs, inhaling nicotine and injecting other venoms directly into their veins. He watched them do this and did nothing, and that ate at him as well. What could he do? Tell them what fools they were making of themselves? Tell them to stop? And what would he do when they said no or, worse, laughed at him?

He’d left the party and gone for a walk in the cold. He didn’t know where he might go or what he might do when he got there. He must have walked a mile...perhaps five. There was no way for him to know. And eventually he found himself on the college campus and saw a few students. It was late and so most of them had gone home, but a few were still out from study groups, trips to the library or the laundromat, or other activities that the newly-adult engage in with such frequency. And he felt sorry for them and angry at himself at the same time.

He had been standing in the parking lot contemplating all this when Ruth came out of the dorm and he saw her and he could see that she saw him and was nervous. He realized what he looked like, a man in a heavy coat and a toboggan alone on a college campus, and he turned and walked away before she could get a really good look. But then, as he walked away, he wondered how good of a look she’d really gotten. Would she call the campus police? The *real* police? How far away from his friends had he gone? How could he explain his presence there? He couldn’t. And in that

moment he made a decision. He let his anger at himself take control and demand that he master the situation.

And the result was that he stood here, holding the limp body of Ruth Wester, a woman he'd never met and whose name he didn't know, at his mercy, his blood running hot through his body, his heart pounding with nervousness, excitement, and exertion. Ruth stirred a little. He raised his hand and struck her again with a strong backhand. Her head lolled and she groaned softly. He let her sink to the ground and leaned back on the car behind him. He had never in his life felt such power. Such majesty. He basked in it, his breath heaving with an ecstasy he had never known before. Which made it much more shocking when Ruth drove the pocket knife through his shoe and into his foot.

The man screamed and began hopping around on his good foot. Having gained a slight upper hand, Ruth pressed her advantage by staggering to her feet and raising the bottle of pepper spray from her purse and taking dead aim. In her dazed state, her aim was off and the majority of the stinging stream hit the man in the toboggan, but enough trickled into his eyes to have the desired effect. The man cried out again and kicked in her direction, but missed by several feet. Panicking, he began to run blindly, running into cars several times before his eyes cleared enough for him to see a little and then he ran in earnest.

The man ran and ran, he didn't know where, but the important thing was to get away. He stumbled over rocks, tree roots, and curbs, somehow managing to keep his feet. On one occasion he fell, but scrambled to his feet, and with every step the knife wound pounded as if he were being stabbed again. A tree loomed in front of him and he attempted to dodge around it, but his foot betrayed him and he instead ran headlong into the solid wood. He grasped the trunk to steady himself, but only for a moment. His mind told him he must keep running. The police were almost certainly on the way by now. If she had enough strength left to stab him and mace him then she had enough strength to make her way back to the dorm and call them. He had to get away.

Releasing the tree, the man lurched forward. His eyes still streaming from the pepper spray, he could really only see light and dark and so he headed towards the darkness, hoping against hope that he could hide in the shadows. He felt the softness of the earth beneath his feet change to hard pavement, briefly saw a bright light, and then felt a strong, solid impact.

Gary slammed on the brakes as the figure in the toboggan lurched suddenly into the street, but it was too late. His Chevy Silverado had too much forward momentum and he hit the mysterious man at almost full speed, sending him flying several yards away. He hadn't even had time to turn and see what had hit him.

Gary sat in the now-stopped truck stunned and dazed. His headlights shone on the grisly scene

ahead of him. A body. Lifeless. Unmoving. With an ever-widening pool of liquid coming from beneath it around the head area. A nightmare.

In slow motion, Gary unlocked the door of the truck, unfastened his seat belt, and opened the door. He stepped out cautiously, the engine still running with a low rumble. Advancing carefully towards the body he saw no movement and the pool of red blood escaping from what must be serious wounds. What had he done? He looked around. The street was deserted, the only lights coming from his own vehicle as the street light overhead flickered feebly under a dying bulb. As he approached he strained his ears and fixed his eyes on the scene before him, desperate to hear or see some sign of life, but there was none. The body lay there, the heavy coat and toboggan now soaked with the deep red of blood that was rapidly drying and cooling.

“Hey...hey...are you ok?” Gary asked. It was a foolish question. Even if the man were still alive, he was certainly far from ok. But the body did not answer. Gary looked around again and continued to see nothing. No witnesses. His eye roamed upwards. No cameras. No functional streetlights to illuminate the scene. The man was clearly already dead...surely he had no more role or responsibility here. He could leave and let others deal with the carcass. What use would he be if he stayed? He couldn't bring the poor man back to life by going to prison or paying a fine. And if he lost his drivers license then his business was finished. Better to leave and preserve his own life and livelihood than to allow this tragic accident to claim two lives.

He started back to the truck, determined to make good his escape, when he suddenly and unexpectedly felt the stab of his conscience. I've just killed a man, he thought, and I'm trying to weasel out of it. It's vehicular homicide, involuntary manslaughter at best. How fast was I going? Are there skid marks on the pavement? Who will I pass on the way out of here and how long will I spend looking over my shoulder, waiting for the police to knock on my door? He had no answers for any of his internal questions.

“I need help,” he whispered and, with a shaking hand, he withdrew his cell phone from his holster. “Who can I call?” he asked rhetorically, and licked his lips in thought. The contacts list on the phone shone up at him, waiting his command. He looked at the first name on the list. Alicia. No. Bill. No. Carey, David, Edouard, Fritz, Gerald, Heather, Ingrid. No. Jerry. Jerry? No. Kyle. Lyle. Martha. Norris. No, no, no! Paul. Paul? Yes.

He pressed the green button that would initiate the call and put the receiver up to his ear. He hadn't seen Paul in about a year, but they'd been good friends at MegaCorps together before Gary had started his own company. How would this conversation go? “Hey, Paul, I just ran over a guy and I need you to tell me what to do.” No. “Hey, Paul, how's things? Good, good. Me? I've been better, let me tell you what just happened to me...” No.

The line began ringing. Gary began to sweat and pant harder, hyperventilating.

“Paul, listen, I’ve got a big problem...” Maybe...no.

The ringing continued. Maybe he wouldn’t pick up. That would be good...he wouldn’t leave a voicemail. But then who else could he call?

Ring. Ring. Click.

“Paul Estes here.”

...

“Hello? Hello? Gary, is this you?”

Shit.

Click.

“Hello? Gary?” Paul looked at his handset and saw that the caller ID still showed Gary, but that the call had been terminated. He pressed the redial button and listened to the ringing for a couple of minutes, but then it went to voicemail.

“Hey, Gary, did you call me? Man, I haven’t heard from you in forever. Hope everything’s going ok. I think your cell phone dropped the call, but gimme a call back when you’re in a better area for reception. Things are pretty boring around here, so call anytime. Seeya.”

Paul pressed the end button to disconnect the call and returned his attention to the spreadsheet he was working on. He hated bringing work home, especially because of the look his wife, Sheila, gave him whenever he did it, but this was one of Matthew’s “can’t wait” projects and he knew he’d get more than a dirty look if he came into the office without it. And now there was Gary. Maybe the phone had just gotten bumped around in his pocket and he’d called without meaning to.

Whatever. He gazed at the Excel sheet and cursed whoever invented the damn thing. Bill Gates, probably. He could add that to his list of sins. Paul sighed and took off his glasses to rub his eyes.

“Paul, dinner!” Shiela called up the stairs. Paul sighed again. He loved his wife and he was grateful for all she did for him, but why couldn’t she realize that if he didn’t get this work done tonight that this might be the last dinner they could afford for a while? He weighed his options.

Telling her he'd be right down would buy him a few minutes, but if he didn't get down there right away then it would get cold and she'd be mad at him and it would be unappetizing. Reminding her that he'd told her he would eat when he got hungry would start an argument and would have the same results as option one. In both cases the ensuing argument would take longer than actually eating the dinner. The best option seemed to be to go ahead down and eat it and get back up here as quickly as possible.

He got up from the desk and descended the stairs quickly, turned the corner at the bottom, and headed for the kitchen. At least whatever she'd made smelled good, he thought as his stomach rumbled. Maybe it was time for a break at that.

When he entered the kitchen he saw two pots bubbling on the stove and the light for the oven was on. The rich scene of meatloaf filled the air and he could see there would be green beans and corn to go with it. Sounded good to him. But then he glanced at the timer and saw there were still fifteen minutes left until it would be done.

"Sheila, is that timer right?" he asked.

"Oh, Paul, good, can you set the table for me?" Sheila asked.

Paul paused. How long would the argument take? "Sure," he said, going to the cupboard and taking out two plates. He then went to the silverware drawer and extracted two knives, two forks, and two spoons. How could she not know how important this was? It was due tomorrow. The data in that spreadsheet was going to justify his department's budget for next year and if he couldn't do that he was low-man on the totem pole and his salary would be the first money-saving idea to come down the pipe from on high.

Trying to simultaneously control his temper and consider how best to broach this subject, Paul carefully laid the plates on the table and arranged the knives, forks, and spoons next to them. Knife and spoon on the left, fork on the right. A brainstorm struck him. He went to the cupboard again and got down two glasses and began to fill them with ice.

"Oh, no, Paul, don't do the glasses yet."

"Why not?"

"Because there's still more than ten minutes left on the meatloaf. It'll melt before it's ready."

"Ten minutes? Sheila, do you remember the conversation we had on the phone earlier today about what I had to do tonight?"

“Yes. What about it?”

“Do you remember my telling you that if it didn’t get done I might lose my job?”

“Yes, I do, but you know how I feel about you bringing work home. This is family time.”

“Sheila, we’re going to have entirely too much family time if I lose my job. Do you know what the job market is like out there? Have you looked at our credit card bill lately? I can’t afford to be out of work.”

“You’ve got vacation time built up, don’t you? And there’s unemployment insurance. We’ll be fine. I think our time together is very important, too.”

How could she be so naïve? Yes, he had vacation, and yes there was unemployment, but how long would they last? And what sacrifices would they have to make in the meantime?

“Yes, Sheila, we’ll be fine at least for a little while. But what if it takes longer for me to find a new job? And what about our plans to have a baby? How long will we have to put that off if I’m having to hunt for employment?”

“We’ll manage,” she said, turning back to the pots on the stove and giving them a stir.

Paul closed his eyes. He’d successfully managed to avoid the argument so far...the discussion was still pretty civil...but he hadn’t managed to impress upon her the importance of what he was telling her. He wanted kids and if he could get this spreadsheet done and justify his existence to the company they could start actively trying to get pregnant again, but if not then there was no way they could afford to have a kid...especially without the company’s medical insurance. He decided to go for broke.

“Sheila, I’m going back upstairs. Call me when it’s ready.”

“But it’s almost done now, Paul. Only five minutes left.”

“I can get a lot done in five minutes.”

She laid the big plastic spoon down on the stovetop and bowed her head. “Paul, please don’t do this. You know how important this is to me. It’s all I ask of you.”

And there it was. The guilt trip. That was always the starting gun for the argument and there was

seldom any way to get around it once it had been fired.

“I give you your precious family time as much as I possibly can, Sheila. But there’s a real world out there and the real world doesn’t care about family time.”

“You don’t see me bringing work home, do you?” she shot back, spinning around to face him.

“No, you don’t. You also have no ambition, no drive, and that’s why you’re in a position where it’s not necessary for you to bring work home. I’d like to have a higher standard of living around here. I’d like to be able to go to work in something besides a 10 year old junker Mazda that leaks oil. I’d like to have children, Sheila! And we can’t do that on our current salaries. And since you won’t try to advance yourself, then I have to advance twice as fast, and that means bringing work home, dammit.”

He regretted the curse as soon as he’d uttered it. He always regretted these arguments, and what was more his evening was now shot.

“I really wish you’d stop badgering me about kids,” Sheila said softly. That was her way. She didn’t yell and scream, she just got softer and cut you down with choice words. “I’ve told you I want them just as much as you do...”

“Then start acting like it,” Paul said, interrupting her. “Let me earn a living and then we can have all the family time you want, with even more members of the family.”

“Oh, so you’ll make time for kids that aren’t even born yet, but you won’t make time for me, is that it?”

“You know damn well that’s...” Paul began, but his thought was disturbed by a loud boom in the distance and the kitchen suddenly plunging into blackness.

Paul’s blood ran cold. A power outage? But there were no storms anywhere near here. What could have caused it? Some squirrel in the transformer? It couldn’t happen. Surely he hadn’t been so stupid and distracted. He turned and raced down the hall, Sheila’s voice trailing behind him, “Where are you going? We’re not finished yet!”

We may be more finished than you know, Paul thought. Why had he married her? At the time she’d seemed like a reasonable person. The wedding was his first indication that things might not be the way he’d envisioned. He reached the stairs and scrambled up them in the dark. He’d almost bought a UPS, but Sheila had convinced him it was a waste of money...

Behind him he heard Sheila slamming cabinet doors. She would eat her dinner by the light of the blue gas flames of the stove, apparently. Paul made it to his office door and dashed inside. His laptop sat there, the screen glowing at him. The battery had kept it alive this long, but it was old and didn't hold a charge like it used to. He always kept it plugged into the wall outlet because it didn't hold enough energy to do anything useful. Two steps across the room, find the keys in the dim light from the screen...Control+S. In the lower right corner he could see the low-battery indicator light. He found the keys. He put his fingers on them. He pressed them. The screen went dark. Had it saved the file? He pushed the power button, but the machine stayed silent having given up the last of its battery life.

Paul paced around. The kitchen below was silent. Sheila must be sulking, he thought. Good. That would give him time to think. Think about what? Either the file saved or it didn't, and he wouldn't know one way or the other until the power came back on and who knew how long that would take? If it came back within an hour and if the file had saved he just *might* still be able to save himself. That's a lot of if and might and maybe, he thought.

Absentmindedly he picked up the phone and pressed the 'talk' button, but got no dial tone. This confused him for a moment until he remembered that there was no power and a cordless phone without power is useless.

"Might need to get one corded phone just for emergencies," he muttered, looking around for his cell. The room was pitch dark except for the moonlight coming through the window. The street lights had all gone out. A flashlight...I need a flashlight, he thought. He knew there was one downstairs. He didn't want to go get it, but he didn't have time to look for the other one. Walking slowly so as not to bash his shins on anything, Paul made his way back down the stairs, feeling along the walls of the hall, and back into the kitchen. Sheila was sitting at the table eating her meatloaf, corn, and green beans placidly, but she didn't look up when he came into the room.

Without a word he crossed the room, took the flashlight from its magnetic hold on the refrigerator, and left. Back up in his office he located his cell phone after a few minutes rummaging around on the desk under all the papers he'd accumulated lately, and then looked up Matthew's phone number.

"Hey, Paul," Matthew answered gloomily after a few rings. "Power out for you, too?"

"Yeah," Paul answered. "And there's something else."

Matthew braced for it. Paul wasn't the most reliable guy in the world. Please, God, let him have at least saved the part of the file he'd gotten done, even if he hadn't finished the whole thing.

“What is it, Paul?” he asked with a sense of dread.

“I’m not sure if the file got saved or not.”

Dammit.

“What do you mean you’re not sure, Paul?”

“I mean when the power went out I ran back up to save it and the battery died just as I pressed the buttons.”

“And why didn’t you save it before you went downstairs?”

“Sheila distracted me. She fixed me dinner when I told her I’d just make myself something later.”

“Uh huh.”

“We’re screwed, aren’t we?”

“Probably. Depends on whether the file saved.”

“Yeah.”

The line was silent for a few moments except for a soft whining noise.

“Well, Paul, I gotta go. My son’s dog is over here whining about something, so I better go find out what it is. Call me when the power’s back on and tell me if we need to update our resumes.”

“Will do.”

Matthew closed the flip-up cell phone and looked down at his son’s dog, a golden retriever, in the dim candlelight that he was using to find his way around his home right now. The damn thing freaked out anytime the power went out and nobody could figure out why. He hadn’t wanted a dog, he was a cat person, and they had a beautiful calico cat named Leaves, which he had named because of its pattern of black and orange colors. Leaves was currently asleep somewhere, not bothering him like Goldie was. And that was another thing. He felt that his name for his cat was clever and appropriate. Calling a golden retriever Goldie was trite. Might as well have named the stupid thing ‘Dog’ and gotten it over with.

“Sam, come here and get your dog,” Matthew called out. There was no immediate response, so he

went looking for his son. There was no need to call out a search party, he knew where he was. Walking down the hall, Matthew reflected on what he'd do if Paul really had neglected to save the file. He hadn't trusted Paul as far as he could throw him...or, possibly more accurately, he hadn't trusted Sheila to let him work on it. Matthew couldn't understand why Paul put up with that. Divorcing Gloria had been the smartest move he'd ever made. Hadn't regretted it for an instant. Even if the house did get kind of chilly on winter nights.

Down the hall he found his son's room and opened the door. There, on the bed, was his son, not that he was proud of the fact. Visitation had been discussed and Matthew had very nearly declined that parental right, but then he thought of his poor offspring in the company of Gloria every day of his life and he took pity on the boy. And every other weekend he regretted it. He looked at his son lying on the bed, fully dressed in black with silver chains draped at various points across the (certainly fake) leather outfit. Heavy black eye makeup that made him look like a raccoon and a spikey hairdo that could probably put someone's eye out if he made any sudden moves. He hadn't actually gotten the nose piercing yet, what with being only fourteen, but he'd put in a temporary replacement with a clip-on nose cuff.

It was hard to believe that just three short years ago he'd been normal. That's how they'd gotten Goldie. Sam had insisted on having a dog and wouldn't shut up about it. Now he had it, but he never took care of it. For one thing Gloria wouldn't allow it in her house. She claimed she was allergic, but she'd never shown any signs of allergies when they were still living together. So Matthew was stuck with her.

Matthew knocked on the door frame, but he knew it was no use. As if the wires coming from his son's ears weren't enough of a clue that he was listening to his Zune, he could practically hear the music through the closed door. He knocked louder, just in case, but still the boy didn't stir. Pathetic.

"Sam!" he yelled. "Get up!"

The music continued to play. Matthew kicked the bed. He couldn't possibly be sleeping with that racket going on in his head. He shook his head, stepped into the room, and shook Sam's shoulder. Finally he opened his eyes.

"What do you want?" Sam asked.

"Take your headphones off, we need to talk."

"What?"

Matthew rolled his eyes, reached down and yanked one of the buds out of Sam's ears.

"I said take those damn headphones off."

Sam looked disgruntled, but sat up in the bed, removed the other earbud, and pressed the pause button on the portable mp3 player.

"What is it?"

"I need you to look after Goldie for a few minutes. She's scared to death because the power's out."

"When did the power go out?"

"About twenty minutes ago. You didn't know? Where have you been?"

"Listening to music."

"If you can call that music. Anyway, look after your dog. I've got to make some calls."

"Sure, whatever," Sam said sullenly. Matthew turned, led Goldie in by the collar, and left, shutting the door behind him, leaving them in darkness.

Sam sat on the bed and looked at Goldie by the soft light that the Zune was putting out. Eventually it faded, leaving them both in inky blackness. He loved her, he really did. But his mom wouldn't let him have her and he didn't like to spend a lot of time with her when he was at his dad's because it hurt so much to have to leave her behind.

Goldie whined a little in the dark and gave a soft "wurf".

"It's ok, girl," Sam said, holding out his hand. He felt the dog's cold nose snuffling his fingers and then felt the coarse, short fur of her muzzle under his palm. Reaching out with his other arm and pivoting into a sitting position on the side of the bed, Sam pulled the dog to him and buried his face in the fur of her neck and sighed.

How had it happened? He'd grown up thinking his parents had always been together. He had no concept of the idea that people grew up, met, fell in love, and had children. The world had always been exactly as he was experiencing it right then...himself, his mom, and his dad. Sure, he heard them yelling at each other, and he could feel the tension even when they weren't...the cold looks, the icy demeanor, the...unthoughtfulness. Little things they could have done to make each others' lives better, easier, happier, but neither would do them and then they both got resentful. He could see all these things happening, but he thought that was just how people were.

And then one day they'd sat him down and told him that he and his mother were moving and that dad wasn't coming with them. That he could visit dad sometimes, but that he wouldn't be seeing him every day as he had done every day of his life so far. His mother's eyes had been very shiny that day, he remembered. Lots of things about that day stood out so clearly to him. The rough texture of the yellow fabric on the couch, the slight chill in the air as he could see autumn leaves turning their yearly shades of umbers, yellows, and reds, the smell of their recently completed lunch, which had consisted of hot dogs and french fries. He remembered that his dad had fixed the lunch and loved it, but that his mother complained the whole time about why they couldn't have had something more nutritious. All of these things stood out in his memory as if they had happened just yesterday, even though it had been one full year ago today.

People celebrate their anniversaries, but neither his mom nor his dad had said anything about today being the anniversary of their separation and subsequent divorce. Divorce. The first time he'd heard that word he'd known it wasn't good. It was an instinct. Since then he stayed with his mother and only saw his dad every other weekend and occasionally in between, but only very occasionally. He seldom saw both of them together for more than a few seconds. He got dropped off outside whichever house he was being shuttled to and nobody ever walked him to the door.

Sam felt Goldie's warm breath in his ear and felt her body relax as he held her. He was glad he could comfort somebody. They'd learned in biology that animals weren't as smart as humans, and even though he hadn't said anything at the time, he was glad. Glad that animals were too stupid to hate or hold petty jealousies or steal. Or divorce. Or any of the other evil things that humans were capable of and perpetuated on a daily basis.

Sitting back, Sam felt around on his bedside table for his flashlight. A small black Maglight that he almost never used, but in this case he turned it on, creating a harsh glare at the source which dissipated into the blackened room. Goldie sniffed it.

Pets were great. Sam didn't care if it was a dog, cat, gerbil, frog, or some reptilian species, he loved them all. Except tarantulas. He couldn't quite get into the completely alien way they thought. Even cold-blooded reptiles could seem a little cuddly from time to time, but spiders didn't seem cuddly in any sense of the word.

He looked at Goldie and wondered what she was thinking. Which was a crazy thing to think. Dogs didn't think, at least not in the same way humans do. Dogs react, he thought. You scratch them on their heads and they wag their tails. Stimulus, response. You feed them, they eat and they feel good, and that makes them want to stay with you. Stimulus, response. You throw a frisbee and some instinct says "catch it!" and off they go. They bring it back because they want you to throw it again. Stimulus, response.

But if that was true, then why did Goldie sometimes know exactly when to come put her head in his lap? Why was she afraid of the dark? Nothing had ever happened to her in the dark, except that one time when the two of them had gotten locked in the basement. They'd only been there for a couple of hours, but to Sam it had seemed like forever, like they'd never get out. He'd been eleven at the time, they'd only had Goldie for a couple of months, and they'd gone down into the basement together. He'd been looking for some old toy or something and had taken her for protection from the monsters he was sure were lurking under the stairs.

And then the door had shut. He never found out why, whether it was a gust of wind or a ghost or his dad playing a mean trick on him, but the fact remained that it was shut tight, locked, and no amount of pounding, banging, or yelling had brought anyone to rescue him. He'd sat down at the top of the stairs in the dark, too afraid to even go to the bottom and flip the light switch. The one at the top had never worked as long as he could remember, although he did try it a few times in desperation.

He sometimes thought that the only thing that had kept him sane during that time was Goldie. He couldn't see her, but he had felt her presence near him, guarding him, protecting him. Eventually the initial panic had softened and he became calm and Goldie was right there, snuggling up to him as tightly as she could. And, even more eventually, the door was opened and he was rescued.

Since then the darkness hadn't bothered Sam at all. He relished it and spent as much time in it as he could. He wore dark clothing to blend in so he wouldn't be noticed. But for some reason, Goldie always got agitated whenever the power went out or the lights dimmed unexpectedly.

"You're a good dog, Goldie," Sam said. Goldie licked his face and said "wruuf".

And then the electricity came back. Sam had the lights out in his room, so they were not treated to a flood of new light, but he could still tell the power was back on because suddenly the room was filled with the soft blue light of all his electronics. The stereo, the clock by his bedside, the chargers for his cell phone and Zune, they all had little lights to let you know they were plugged in.

Friendly little lights that said "as long as we shine, your world is different from the world your parents lived in, you are enjoying a life easier and more interesting than any in recorded history. You live better than the kings of old because we are here."

So let's take advantage of it, Sam thought. He got up and sat at his desk, turning the computer on. Goldie came and laid down next to his feet. As the monitor warmed up another light was added to the room and he listened to the whir of the cooling fans and the hard drive, the beep of the motherboard. These things never let him down. These things were with him always.

The computer completed its startup procedures and he clicked the icon for the MSN Messenger program. It went through the login procedures and displayed his contact list. Eighteen people online, twenty-five offline. Nobody he really wanted to talk to. He started Firefox and surfed over to his Facebook account and checked out the pictures his friends had uploaded.

Happy people in happy families doing things together.

Hey, Sam, what's up?

Samantha smiled when Sam logged on to MSN. She'd first seen his profile in Facebook while looking for people with the same name as her and had been astonished to find that there was a boy named Sam! She'd heard the name Samuel before, obviously, but had somehow never made the connection. Since then they'd become good friends, despite living a whole time zone away from each other.

It's really cold here in Minnesota, she typed. How's the weather there?

She waited for a reply. She liked Sam a lot, but she knew he was depressed when he didn't answer back right away. This looked like one of those times. Deciding against trying to draw him out like she'd done before, she instead typed *Well, I gotta get my homework done and then go to bed. It was good seeing you, though.* And then she closed the program. Talking to Sam while he was depressed was sort of a hit-or-miss proposition and she always ended up feeling sad for him either way.

She turned the computer off in the living room and went to her room. Getting her textbooks out, she intended to study, but her thoughts kept drifting to Sam. Poor Sam. Why couldn't he realize that things just happen? You can't control everything, and things aren't always going to work out the way you want them to, but that doesn't mean you can just give up and let the current take you. That was a metaphor she'd kept coming back to recently. Ever since she'd been rafting.

"Water takes you where it wants to," was what she'd been told. "If you fight it, it'll win because it's got more strength than you do. But if you fight it the right way you can convince water that it wanted to take you to certain places. If you let the current take you, then you never know where you'll end up."

That's how she felt about Sam. He was letting the current take him, he wasn't fighting it the right way, and in a lot of ways he wasn't fighting it at all anymore. She idly turned a page in her history book and skimmed a paragraph about the War of 1812. When she'd found out that this section of her class was going to cover this war, she'd asked her father if he'd studied it in school. He said

that he had and that, from what he could remember, it had been an attempt by the British to retake the American colonies and resubject them to the rule of the king.

As she'd read the chapter, however, the book had said that there were trade disagreements, a blockade, involvement with Native Americans who were unhappy with the United States, and even an American invasion of Canada! How much more complex than what her father had told her...and that complexity led to a completely different viewpoint of the war. It took it from a simple matter of British aggression and transformed it into a situation where both sides could be seen as being at fault.

She thought about Sam again. He'd railed against his parents' divorce. Samantha's parents had been happily married for seventeen years and so she had little point of reference for what Sam was going through apart from what he told her and what she heard from her other friends who had gone through similar situations. It hadn't happened to her, though. And she began to wonder if she was getting an accurate picture of what it was really like...or if Sam's bitterness about the whole thing had skewed his telling of it. Could there be more than one side to this story?

She yawned and glanced at the clock. Not technically time for bed, but she couldn't concentrate. Closing the history book, she rose from her chair and went to brush her teeth.

"Getting ready for bed?" her mother asked as she walked by the bathroom and saw Samantha brushing away.

"Uh hguh," Samantha replied, her mouth full of toothpaste.

"Good girl. I'll come tuck you in in a few minutes."

Samantha spat out the toothpaste. "Ok, mom."

She finished rinsing her mouth out, flossed, and gargled with that foul tasting mouthwash that her mother bought. Then she put the cap back on the toothpaste and put her tooth brush back in its holder. Then she padded into her bedroom where she turned on the bedside lamp and got under the covers.

In a moment her mother came into her room, kissed her forehead, said goodnight, and turned out the main room light as she went out. Samantha lay in the bed for a few minutes, thinking, her eyes drooping, and then gave up and turned out the bedside lamp and went to sleep.

In her dreams she saw a strange man who beckoned for her to come with him. She hesitated at first, but eventually followed him onto a rickety old bridge. Looking down between the missing

slats she saw, far below her, a river with little yellow dots moving along it. Rafters. Then the image faded and she found herself in an unfamiliar building. Looking up she saw a criss-cross lattice of support beams overhead. Rafters.

She awoke to the sound of her alarm telling her that it was six in the morning, time to get up. Hitting the snooze would buy her about four more minutes, so she did so and then covered her head, huddling beneath the blanket to keep the cold out just a little while longer. The alarm went off again much sooner than she'd hoped and she turned it off and pivoted into a sitting position on the bed, yawning.

Her morning routine was not marked by anything out of the ordinary. She ate breakfast, showered, dressed, gathered her schoolthings, and found herself waiting at the bus stop down the block, just as she had every other day this week, this month, this school year. Shivering in the cold, she wished the bus would hurry up, but it came at the usual time of 7:25, which got her to school just before the eight o'clock bell.

She guided herself through all six periods of class as well as lunch, and then got back on the bus to come home, letting herself in with her key.

"Hi, honey, how was school?" her father asked.

"The usual. It was fine," she replied.

"Do you have any homework tonight?"

"I always have homework, but nothing is due tomorrow. Why?"

"I thought we'd go visit your brother after dinner."

"Oh. Ok. Sure."

Visiting her brother was not her favorite activity. It reminded her, even more than talking to Sam when he was depressed, that the world wasn't always a nice place. She liked to think the world was a nice place, even though she knew it wasn't. But it was her brother. She had to go. There were a hundred reasons why she had to go, but the most important was that she loved him. Weren't you supposed to love your brother, no matter what?

She put her schoolthings down and took off her heavy coat and boots and went to her room. Dinner would be in an hour, which was enough time to get what little homework she had knocked out. She read a section on reptiles and amphibians in her life science book, did three problems in geometry,

and was about to re-read the section on the War of 1812 in history when her mother called her for dinner.

Because they were going out, dinner was a moderately simple meal of spaghetti with sauce from a jar. Afterwards they all bundled up against the harsh Minnesota winter and got into the car, which had been warming up for the last ten minutes and was therefore quite comfortable.

The drive to the hospital was uneventful. The snow wasn't deep and the plows had pushed it out of the way in any event, and then they got to the hospital and took the elevator up to the fifth floor and stopped at the reception desk.

"Hello, may I help you," asked the nurse at the desk.

"Yes, we're here to see Ron."

"Oh, yes, he's awake. You can go right down to room 6."

"Thanks. How's his foot?"

"Oh, much better. It turned out to just be a hairline fracture, so a cast wasn't really necessary, but the doctors wanted to keep him another couple of days just in case."

"Fine. Thanks."

The three of them, Samantha and her mother and father, walked down the hall to room 6. Ron had been admitted here about a week ago after an altercation at the facility where he usually stayed had resulted in some injuries that the facility wasn't prepared to deal with, including what they had thought was a broken foot.

Ron had been diagnosed with severe mental retardation at the age of twelve. He was five years older than Samantha and had never had a routine day in his life. Prone to fits of anger when he was a child, tantrums were common. As he had aged, he had not done well in school, even in the special classes they had enrolled him in. At the age of eighteen he had been admitted to a special care facility when it had become clear that his parents were no longer capable of giving him the attention he needed. The altercation that had given him his injuries had been caused when he lunged unexpectedly at one of his fellow residents, tumbling them both over the back of a chair.

"Hi, Ron, how are you?" Samantha said.

"I'm fine, Samantha, how are you?" said Ron.

“Your foot and arm are looking better,” said Samantha.

“Thank you. The foot was nothing and the arm was just a carpet burn. They really did make a big deal over nothing. How was school today?” asked Ron.

“I hope they’re feeding you well here,” said Samantha. “I’ve heard awful things about hospital food.”

Ron could never understand why Samantha would never answer his questions. It was like she couldn’t hear him when he asked her things. It was like this with everyone and it left him horribly frustrated. They really did treat him like a child sometimes. He was twenty years old! He deserved some respect!

Every day, in his own mind, Ron went to work. He was a Traffic manager at one of the many ad agencies that called Minneapolis home, and it was a stressful job, but he could handle it. He had friends at work. But for some reason he’d been doing the same job forever without changes. And when he got home his roommates tried to take care of him, like he couldn’t do it himself.

“The food here is ok. But enough about me, tell me about your day. Mom, Dad, what about you? Are you doing well? We don’t visit enough.” Ron said.

“I’m glad to see your foot is better, too, dear,” Ron’s mother said.

“Yes, I knew it was nothing. You’re tough, son,” Ron’s father said.

“Enough about my damn foot!” Ron exclaimed. It was like this everywhere he went. The doting, the serving...he wanted to take care of himself! Why couldn’t they leave him alone?

“I think he’s getting agitated,” Ron’s mother said. “Maybe we’d better go.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. Good to see you, son,” Ron’s father said.

“Goodbye, Ron,” Samantha said in a small voice.

And all three of them shuffled back out the door.

And good riddance, thought Ron. Who needs them, anyway?

A short while later Ron’s doctor came in, looked over his chart, and signed his release papers.

“Someone will be here shortly to pick you up, Ron. You’re going home,” said Doctor Griffiths. He looked at his patient in his bed, head lolling, eyes seemingly unfocused...completely unaware of his surroundings in any meaningful way, and sighed. Nature could be so cruel.

Dr. Griffiths put the chart back in its holder at the foot of the bed and walked out, closing the door behind him. Of course to say that “nature” could be cruel implied a sentient force. “Nature” wasn’t any more cruel than the doughnut he’d eaten for breakfast or the linoleum in his kitchen. It was the conundrum of the medical profession. How to satisfy your patients and their families desire to have someone to blame when the only available option was beyond blame itself.

The subject of religion made Dr. Griffiths uncomfortable, mainly because he felt as though he *should* believe in something...he just couldn’t actually bring himself to do it. The miracles of the world cried out for a driving force...there was just too much that made no sense.

He’d been raised Baptist in a church that was on the large side of moderately sized in a suburb of Charlotte...at least technically. There hadn’t been much churchgoing when he was a kid. It actually made for awkward questions because many of his friends would try to relate to him by asking which church he attended and since he visited so infrequently he could never remember. He’d gotten a lot of funny looks back then.

Eventually he’d gone to medical school and, even though he was sure this wasn’t the case, the popular perception around campus was that every doctor or aspiring doctor was either deeply religious or atheist. There didn’t seem to be much room for middle ground...you either viewed yourself as doing God’s work or else you were a glorified mechanic, putting the pieces back together as best you could when they fell apart.

To prevent further awkward moments with his peers, the not-yet-Dr. Griffiths had allowed himself to fall in with the atheists because that seemed to be where he felt most comfortable. But there was something missing in his life that he couldn’t quite place. After a lot of soul searching, much of it spent on the sleepless nights of his residency, he’d decided that it was faith. He tried to fill the gap by going back to church, but the words of the preachers sounded hollow to him now. In his quest he actually listened to several and individually they were all good men, but their words did not fill his soul with the meaning and purpose that he craved. Especially when he could turn on any TV and see people behaving Godlessly with no recrimination...and no regret.

He completed his walk down the corridor of the hospital and returned to his office, shutting the door behind him. Walking over to his desk, he looked at his half-finished cup of coffee from the morning, now stone cold. He made a mental note to pour it out later, but then realized that if he didn’t do it right now that he’d forget. Then he looked at the half-finished cup next to it and

realized that he'd already forgotten once before. Too much on his mind, clearly.

This happened to him often because he was so preoccupied with finding that missing part of his life. Plus, his ambiguity about his religious convictions created moral conundrums for himself. For example, take the case of Ron. A religious man would have no moral problems. The man's condition was the will of God and keeping him alive was an imperative. There could be no room for doubt because to kill him would be a mortal sin.

Likewise, a true atheist would feel little conviction about putting to end a life that was clearly not going to accomplish anything or benefit anyone, not even itself. The laws of the land might stay the atheist's hand, or possibly compassion for the family if they were not ready to let go, but from the point of view of the individual there was little if anything to live for. Better to allow it to pass and remove the economic and emotional drain on the family. To the atheist, there was no soul in peril on either side.

Only the agnostic felt the pang of doubt. Is he suffering? Does he know his situation? Does he understand his limitations? Does he comprehend what those around him are capable of, and does he yearn to imitate them? Or does each passing second stretch on into an infinity of boredom, repetition, and tedium?

Dr. Griffiths shuffled through a few files on his desk. Finding Ron's, he put it on the pile to give to his assistant to file away into the permanent record. The rest he began to leaf through one at a time.

Mr. Michaels with pancreatic cancer. Mrs. Smith with lung disease. Miss Phineous with the fractured tibia. Mr. Nichols with AIDS. Why did the body have to break? It was one of the most remarkable self-replicating constructs the universe could possibly have produced, and yet it was also so imperfect. Little things that the body did, sometimes in an effort to preserve itself, ended up destroying it. Sometimes being a doctor was depressing because for every one thing you fixed, there were a thousand more that you couldn't.

The phone on his desk rang. He startled out of his reverie and glanced at it, trying to reorient himself with his situation after being deep in thought. It rang two more times before he finally pronounced himself ready to pick it up.

"Hey, Harold, just checkin' on ya. We had a lunch appointment, remember?"

Dr. Griffiths looked at his watch and realized that lunchtime had come and gone and he had completely forgotten about his date with Amy. It was now not only past lunchtime, but also past time for any kind of respectable dinner without quite having reached the realm of the midnight

snack.

“Amy, I’m sorry...I got caught up with my patients today.”

“Yeah, as usual. Don’t worry about it, dear, I’m used to it. Same bat time tomorrow?”

“Sure. Sure. I’ll write it down. The diner on 12th Street?”

“No, that’s where I ate today while I was waiting for you. I want you to make it up to me. How about that other diner on 10th Avenue?”

“Isn’t that pretty much the same place?” he asked, grinning into the phone.

“Yeah, but we won’t tell them that. Seeya tomorrow.”

Amy hung up the phone and put it in her purse, then started the car and backed out of the driveway. She hated this part of selling real estate...the Open House. At least it was over for today. It was always such a waste of time for her. People who weren’t even in the market for a house came to them just for the cookies and to waste their time dreaming about a place they could never afford. You could see them rearranging the furniture in their heads. She’d bet dollars to doughnuts that when they got home they were depressed and sat down on their couches to watch TV and never lifted a finger to actually move the first stick of furniture in their own houses, let alone do what would be necessary to buy the one they’d just looked at.

Which is a lot like my life, she thought bitterly. She liked Dr. Griffiths...hell, she’d better, she’d been dating him for over a year, if you could call it dating when your partner missed a third of your appointments. The only reason she hadn’t dumped him yet was because she was sure he was telling the truth about losing himself while tending to his patients instead of cheating on her like her last three boyfriends and her ex-husband had done. Actually, that wasn’t true...it wasn’t the only reason why she hadn’t dumped him. But it was the number one reason. Or in the top five, at least.

The fact was that she enjoyed the idea of dating a doctor, even if a lot of the time that was all she had...the idea. The idea that maybe one day he’d figure out how to have a balance between work and the rest of his life. The idea that she could help him find that. But reality told her that she didn’t really have the charisma for such a thing. She ignored reality a lot. That was one perk of being in real estate...nobody came around asking you to pee into a cup. She had to get up early tomorrow, so no fun for her tonight, but after tomorrow’s open house she could definitely see controlled substances in her future. Might as well get the weekend started early.

She turned a bend and found herself in a worn down, neglected part of town. This wasn't her favorite part of the trip from the house she was trying to sell, but to avoid it meant going about 10 miles out of her way and she was tired. The sun had just set and a husky dusk gripped the area, the light bright enough to see by, but just barely. She flicked on her headlights and reflected that she really should have done that a lot sooner.

Looking around the area, she found herself wondering about the people that lived here. Were some of them the same ones that had come to the Open House? She was going to have a devil of a time selling that place with a neighborhood like this so close by. What would it take to spiff the place up, she thought idly. Nothing short-term, that was for sure. The whole area had been taken over by blight and neglect, probably brought about by a general corruption. Nobody struck out to be this poor, but it had to happen somehow. One person takes advantage of another, and then another, and then another. Eventually politicians get involved, trying to solve the problem and plug the loophole, but by then it's too late, the damage has been done. And then, worst of all, the local populace gets used to the idea.

The adaptability of human beings was truly astonishing, she thought. We can survive virtually anything and come out of it without a shred of blame for ourselves. The mind can twist and turn and say should have and could have and before you know it you're the fourth generation of minimum wage workers who think it's always been this way and that there's no way out. Bitterness seeps into the souls of places like this and what hope is left takes the form of the lottery or vague feelings that some new politician or government program will rescue them, when in reality they're more useful in the gutter where they are than actually being helped. After all, if the government actually did help people, who would vote for them? That was the other thing about people...short memories. Help me today, but tomorrow today is yesterday and now I want something else.

She slowed for a traffic light and noticed a woman with a shopping cart on the sidewalk, the cart loaded high with garbage bags, old clothes, and aluminum cans hanging off the sides. That might be that woman's life savings, Amy thought. Or a day's work, at a minimum.

Glancing up at the light, which remained red, she saw a man crossing the road in front of her car. The lights at the cross street were changing to yellow, so she would get to go soon. She prepared to accelerate when the light changed, but the man stopped in front of her car, blocking her way, and then she screamed as she heard a tapping on her side window from a second man she hadn't seen. She looked in his direction and saw that he had tapped on her window with a gun. Looking forward again she saw that the man blocking her car also had pulled a gun. The man at the side window motioned for her to roll her window down.

Amy considered her options and decided that she was going to have to play along and hope to get

out of this as quickly as she could by cooperating. She rolled the window down.

“Yes?” she asked, feeling foolish.

“We notice you got a flat tire,” the man said in a gruff voice.

“Oh. Thanks. I’ll have that looked at. I’m almost home,” she replied, wondering where this was going.

“No, I think we gots ta take it into the garage for ya,” the man said. “Why don’ts you get out and we’ll take it from here. Bring it right back.” The man in front of the car stifled a laugh.

Silently, Amy got out of the car. The man in front moved to the passenger side. Amy stood back and looked around her. This was not a nice place to get left and all kinds of things could happen once these two guys took her car, which was clearly what they were aiming to do. The man standing next to her reeked of cigarettes and alcohol. Was he drunk? Or had he just not changed clothes recently? She wondered if she could get away with what she was thinking now.

When she was sixteen her older brother had taken martial arts classes and had taught her a couple of things for self-defense. Of course this was a long time ago and she hadn’t exactly kept in practice, but she could remember the basic principle of the thing. The man at the passenger door tried the handle.

“’s locked!” he called out.

The man next to Amy slid into the driver’s seat and leaned over to unlock the passenger door. This was her chance. She aimed a kick directly at his kidneys and, in that instant, found herself grateful that she’d suffered through wearing high heels all day today. Unfortunately, the man’s heavy coat had hidden the bottle of whiskey that he’d been drinking all day and the glass deflected her kick. In his still-drunken bravado, the man whirled around, gazed briefly at the look of shock and panic on her face, and shot her.

Amy fell to the ground with a small sound of exhalation, her head making a thumping sound as it hit the pavement.

The man who had shot her laughed, leaned over again and unlocked the door, but found that his accomplice had fled. So what? More money for him when he sold the damn car. He didn’t need that coward anyway.

Pete shut the car door, put the car in gear, and drove away, leaving behind the memory of Amy, his

former accomplice, and anything else except getting this to the local parts shop where he could get them to strip the thing down. Not worth as much as a whole car, but when you factored in the reduced chances of getting caught selling a stolen vehicle it was completely worth it.

Why'd that stupid bitch have to get all uppity, though? Pete couldn't understand it. He had a damn gun! A gun was supposed to mean you got respect! And instead she kicked him in the side. Good thing the bottle'd been there, otherwise she'd have impaled him with that damn shoe. Speaking of the bottle...

Reaching into his coat pocket, he withdrew the precious object, removed the cap, and took a swig. Good stuff. Made him feel better. Made him feel like he could do important things. Like shooting that stupid girl. The law said he wasn't supposed to do that. His mom had told him shooting people was bad after he shot that last person a year ago. But what did they know? He'd just taken out another rich bitch who would have done the same thing to him if she'd been given half a chance. Just look at what she'd tried to do to him, and all he'd done was try to take her car. The car ain't nothin' compared to your life!

As he drove, Pete got angrier and angrier. He felt self-righteous, he felt justified, and he felt empowered. These were things he seldom felt at all, but now he was drunk with the power as well as with the alcohol, and he sped along the city streets secure in the knowledge that he was unstoppable. This area of town was seldom trafficked and he found no obstacles as he continued faster and faster along the pavement until he reached a slightly better area of town when some idiot tried to cross the street in front of him. Pete laughed as he sped by.

William Townes dove back for the sidewalk as the car careened along, weaving and seemingly out of control. He'd been lost in thought and listening to his iPod, trusting in the traffic signals to control the oncoming cars and felt safe in his possession of the right of way. It was only a lucky chance that caused him to look to the side and see the mass of metal heaving towards him much faster than it had any right to on a narrow street such as this. He got a glimpse of the driver, a rugged individual if ever there was one, just before he jumped for the safety of the curb.

Breathing hard, Will got up and surveyed the street. Now that the light had changed there were a very few cars moving through the intersection at a more sane rate of speed and there was no sign of the demon driver...nor, Will couldn't help but notice, any sign of the police giving chase. He pressed the button on the crosswalk and waited patiently for the light to change.

This was one of the unknown hazards of living downtown. You could easily be closer to work, you could save time and gasoline and parking fees (not to mention parking tickets) by walking everywhere, but at the same time you had to deal with people like that. He crossed the street and spied his destination just another two blocks away down a gentle hill. Getting to the James Stuart

Memorial Playhouse was easy...getting back was more work. But the extra \$100 every month that he got for working there part time as a House Manager was worth it. He could practically feel the money in his bank account now...and he could also practically hear his bank account breathing a sigh of relief. That electricity bill last month had been unexpectedly high and since then he'd been eating a lot of peanut butter and even skipping the bus in favor of walking to save every nickel and dime he could to get back on track.

Hefting his backpack into a more comfortable position, he set off for the final leg of tonight's journey. He'd been looking forward to the start of the play for a while and had even attended one of the final dress rehearsals and knew the audience was going to love it. It was hard to get tired of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, after all.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, William let himself in through the front door with his key, locked it behind him, and went down the hall to the House Manager's office where he turned on the computer. It was hard for him to imagine that there had been a time when people had to run theatres without computers. While it booted up he removed his coat, gloves, and scarf and then extracted his tie from his backpack. He tied it quickly and then checked himself in the mirror before putting on his suit coat which he kept at the theatre. He never wore it anywhere else, why bother carrying it back and forth?

At last the ancient antique of a computer finished its bootup process and he logged on. He opened the inventory program and checked the attendance of the night's performance. Only half a house, he thought to himself...disappointing for opening night, but better than nothing. It was bitterly cold out and it wasn't surprising that many people had elected to stay home, especially since the wind was supposed to kick up later in the evening and not calm down for several days.

He then checked on his ushers. Three were scheduled...Maude, Garrison, and Leroy. All three were good, experienced ushers. He could be assured of a reasonably smooth night, barring disaster. It was important to remember that "barring disaster" part because even with a team of six veteran ushers the patrons could often find a way to make your evening harder work than it had to be.

He heard a key in the lock of the front door and stepped out of the office to greet Sarah, the Stage Manager.

"Hey, Sarah,"

"Hey, William. Y'know, one day I'm going to beat you here. Why do you always show up so early?"

“Gotta make sure my house is in order,” William quipped.

Sarah rolled her eyes at the lame pun and came into the lobby, shivering as she did so.

“You ok?” William asked.

“Yeah, but the wind is coming in sooner than they said. It’s frickin’ freezing out there.”

“Not that I want you to move away or anything, but if you hate the cold so much, why do you live here?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. I guess it’s because when it *does* get to be spring it’s so beautiful around here. I hate hot summers, too, so I think I’m going to be miserable no matter where I am,” she said with a smirk.

“Really? Miserable everywhere? That’s gotta suck,” William retorted. “Maybe after the show we could get together and see if we can make each other a little less miserable.”

Sarah grinned. “Yeah? Maybe. We’ll see how I feel after this performance. I really wish we’d had just one more rehearsal.”

William smiled. He’d been working on a tactful way to ask her out for weeks, but could never seem to get her by herself. This was the real reason he showed up so early these days, trying to catch Sarah alone. He was grateful that not only had it finally worked, but that he hadn’t frozen up and failed to accomplish his mission. “It’ll be fine,” he said. “Seeya later.”

“Later,” she replied, heading off for the backstage area.

People said you shouldn’t date theatre people, but outside of his day job these were the only people he knew and he didn’t have the time or the energy to get out more. He looked out the panes of glass in the front doors to the street and saw a couple of the actors for the play arriving. Here was a classic example. April and Mary had been together for two years and seemed perfectly happy with each other. Although, he had to admit, they did look upset as they got closer to the theatre, and when they came inside he could feel the argument they had just had. Apparently calling a truce now that they were at work, they had fallen into giving each other the silent treatment.

“Hi, William,” said April, stalking past him like a woman on a mission.

“Yeah, hi, William,” Mary said with a touch of derision in her voice. William could only conclude that the argument had been about something April had done...or that Mary had thought she had

done. April clearly had a difference of opinion.

This hurt William because he'd been friends with both of them for years. He hadn't actually introduced them, but he'd been there when they met and had hit it off with each other almost instantly. Within just a few weeks it was as if they'd always been together and always would be. He'd seen these arguments before and they always blew over. It was just part of being in a relationship with someone...disagreements crop up, arguments happen, and sometimes you say things you regret later. It's inevitable. It's practically part of the job description. But he was confident that after they'd gotten their performances out of the way they'd be better.

The rest of the cast would be arriving soon and he hadn't even started his survey of the theatre yet. He always went over it carefully to make sure it looked clean and tidy before all the actors got there because sometimes they liked to warm up on the stage and he always felt like he was intruding if he was in there while they were doing that, even though every actor he'd ever spoken to said they understood. It was his job to make sure things were where they belonged, they said, and he shouldn't worry about doing his job. It still made him feel funny.

He closed the door to the office and started to go into the theatre when he felt the blast of cold air that meant someone else was coming in the front door. Turning, he saw that it was Charlie.

"Hey, Chas," he said, waving.

"William! William, I had the best idea on the way over here," Charlie exclaimed.

William looked apprehensive. Charlie's ideas were sometimes a little offbeat. He'd tried to convince everyone that the theatre was haunted a few months ago by insisting that he'd seen some kind of sparkle of lights hovering in the middle of one of the dressing rooms. When it had been pointed out that there was a sequined gown in there he'd stuck to his guns and said that he knew the difference between a ghost and a dress.

"What's the idea, Charlie?" William asked, feeling as if he'd regret it.

"It's an idea for a story. It would be set in a fantasyland, y'know, with elves and dwarves and dragons and stuff," Charlie began. William listened politely. "And the main character, he's this really funny guy, always telling jokes and quips and stuff."

"Oh, so it's based on me," William joked.

"Haha," Charlie said. "Anyway, this guy, he's really mysterious, right? Nobody knows much about him. He's short, but you can't tell if he's an elf or an imp or a dwarf or what he is. All you

really know is that he's NOT a gnome. Definitely not a gnome. And because he's so funny, they all call him the un-gnome comedian."

Charlie grinned hugely and waited for William's response. William smirked, groaned, and admitted that it had been a good, albeit awful, pun.

"Anyway, gotta go get in costume...or out of it, as the case may be," Charlie said in reference to his part as Caliban. In this production Caliban wore almost nothing, a fact which suited most people just fine due to Charlie's heroic proportions.

"Seeya, Charlie," William said, watching him go. Charlie was always doing things like that. It was like he spent his spare time coming up with puns and other plays on words. They were clever...but it's not like they were going to get him anywhere. Not even stand up comedians used puns much...not if they wanted to avoid having produce thrown at them.

William entered the theatre, an intimate little 300 seater, and began walking up and down the aisles and rows, checking the seats and making sure all the litter from the final dress rehearsal had been cleaned up. Finding nothing amiss he returned to the lobby and unlocked the cabinet for the concession stand. Muriel would be here soon to set it up.

His major tasks complete until the ushers showed up, William sighed the sigh of the contented. He loved the theatre. He loved the divergent personalities, the passionate opinions, the unique perspectives offered by emotionally disturbed playwrights from around the world and across all generations. He also loved looking at actresses. Hey, why deny it, he'd said on many occasions. Here was a group of people whose entire outlook on life centered around putting themselves on public display in one fashion or another. Some did it with their superb performances, nailing an emotional character and a poignant moment flawlessly, making you believe it, making you feel the way the character being portrayed felt. Others did it by not wearing much. And he was perfectly fine with both groups, even better if they managed to do both at the same time.

Of course most of it was just wallpaper. Actresses were notorious for being unavailable, and those that *were* available were probably available for a reason. Sometimes it was worth a little misadventure to find out what that reason *was*, but there almost always was one eventually.

William looked out the glass doors at the city beyond. This little theatre, down in a hole, might not make it through another season. It was hard to get to, hard to park at, hard to find, and hard to insulate properly which really drove up the heating and cooling costs associated with running the place. He'd seen the books once and was amazed that they'd lasted this long.

A stomping noise interrupted his thoughts and he turned to see April push the theatre doors open,

storming through them, her makeup in streaks and her costume only in the beginning stages of being put on. She was playing Ariel and therefore had a body stocking, some heavy makeup on her hands, and eventually wings, but so far all she had were the rudimentary basics of the makeup job and the body stocking. She looked up with tears in her eyes, saw William standing there, and rushed over towards him.

“April, everything ok...?” William started to say, but he was interrupted by April putting her arms around him and giving him a squeeze stronger than he’d expected her slight frame to be capable of. She held him for several seconds, gathering herself before she spoke.

“Mary broke up with me,” April whispered.

“What, just now? Right before the show?” William asked, incredulously.

“Yes,” April affirmed, breaking down into fresh sobs.

William put his arms around April to comfort her and then led her over to the House Manager’s office so she could sit down. They still had plenty of time to get her calmed down and into costume before the patrons started to arrive, but there wasn’t room for dawdling.

Once in the office William sat April down in his chair and reached around behind the door to pull out the folding chair he kept back there for occasions such as this.

“I should have seen it coming,” April said, her crying subsided but still sniffly.

“Why?” William asked as gently as he could. He still couldn’t believe it. What could have happened to cause something like this? The idea of them breaking up was unthinkable on its face, but for Mary to have done it just before a performance was more callous than anything he could imagine.

“She said we just weren’t meant to be,” said April, mysteriously.

“What’s she telling you, William?” asked Mary who had arrived unannounced.

William looked up at the unexpected new arrival and saw Mary looking angrier than he’d ever seen her. “So far nothing,” William confessed. “All she’s said so far is that you broke up with her.”

“How dare you come in here,” April shot at Mary, also full of rage. “You break up with me right before the show and now I can’t even find comfort with my friend? What next, Mary, are you going to physically rip out my heart?”

“Oh, listen to her, just listen! This overreacting emotional crap! It’s all I get from you, April! And since when is William only friends with *you*? I’d known him for five years before you came along.”

William felt himself getting pulled into the middle of the situation and started immediately trying to figure out how to get himself back out. He loved them both like sisters, but he’d be damned if he was going to let them both pull him into their private drama.

“Stop,” William said firmly. “I’m both of your friends, and I’m not going to be used as a pawn in your little argument. Now, Mary, sit down here and let’s hash this out.” William stood up to allow Mary to have his seat, but she stood resolutely and folded her arms in front of her.

“I have nothing else to say. I just came up here to tell you that it’s freezing backstage and could you please call maintenance to come and do something about it,” Mary said defiantly. She then turned on her heel and stomped away.

“The temperature is fine backstage, Mary,” April called after her. “It’s just your heart that’s gone all icy!” She then resumed her crying.

William sat down again, but stayed silent for a few minutes, collecting his thoughts. He didn’t care so much now about why this was happening, but was concentrating more on what he could and should do about it. He had dual obligations...well, three obligations to be precise. He had an obligation to his friends (that one counted twice) and an obligation to the theatre. Since he still wasn’t sure how he could help his friends, he decided to try to help the theatre first.

“April, are you going to be able to go on tonight?”

April sniffed and sighed and sat still for a moment. “She’s just so stony, William. It’s like she doesn’t have any feelings anymore.”

“I know,” William lied. “We can talk about that later. Can you perform tonight?”

April raised her head and looked off at some corner of the room, saying nothing until finally she said “Yeah, I guess.”

“Good,” William said. “Now, can you tell Sarah what’s happened or do you want me to?”

“Why does Sarah have to know?” April asked, shooting a look at him.

“Because she’s the stage manager and if anything happens on that stage tonight I don’t want her coming to me and asking if I knew anything beforehand.”

“Fine. I’ll go tell her,” April said, and walked off in a huff.

Why do they always take it out on me, William asked himself. The truth was he’d seen this before, too, but not in quite such a dramatic fashion. Breaking up right before the performance really was beyond the pale and he wouldn’t blame April a bit if she didn’t take Mary back after this one...although he’d hate to see that happen.

The drama having been, if not resolved then certainly removed from his vicinity, he returned his attention to his computer where he prepared the nightly show report by clearing out last night’s template.

He heard a tapping on his door frame and looked up to see Sarah.

“April find you?” he asked innocently.

“Yeah. I’m sure she’ll be fine, but sheesh...”

“I know. Tell me about it. So what can I do for you?”

“Well, I was passing by and I saw two of your ushers in the lobby. Thought you should know.”

“Thanks,” William said, getting up and heading out there where he saw Garrison and Maude waiting for him.

“William!” Garrison said. “Good to see you again.”

“Garrison, Maude, nice to see you as well,” William began. “You’re both early.”

“Yes,” Maude said. “We just wanted to see if you needed any help stuffing the programs and we didn’t have anything else planned for the evening, so we came on over.”

Maude looked at Garrison as if to say “isn’t that right, dear?” and Garrison piped up with a muttered “that’s right...”.

They’d been married twenty years and ushering together for the last ten. It got them out of the house, kept them upright and mobile, and only annoyed Garrison a little when they had to stuff programs. He’d gotten a pretty bad paper cut about three years ago and the House Manager at the

time had seemed rather uncaring about the whole thing. Garrison had had to ask him three times for a bandage, even though the cut was deep enough that the blood was dripping out of his thumb rather more than would be expected.

It was because of those damn special programs that the theatre had printed for the play that year. A thick cardboard shell which had to be folded and then inside that was where the program and a few other pieces of literature had been stuffed. The entire thing had been a massive pain in the neck and Garrison had sworn to his wife that if they ever made them do anything like that again it would be the last time.

“Well, it’s the two of you and Leroy tonight,” William continued. “There’s no stuffing tonight since it’s opening night.”

Garrison smiled. He’d forgotten that it was a theatre tradition around this place not to do any stuffing of the programs on opening night.

“So you two can just kick back and when Leroy gets here I’ll go over the play with you, although the three of you could probably take over and do this without me if you had to.”

“Hope it doesn’t come to that,” Maude said.

She liked William. He took his job seriously, which was more than you could say for some of the other people they called “House Managers” around here. Her only worry was that he didn’t get out enough. He needed a girlfriend. She’d tried to set him up with her granddaughter once, but afterwards Carol had said that if she ever tried to set her up with someone who was as big of a nerd as William was she’d never speak to her again. Maude had had a bit of an argument with her about that, but the end result was that Maude never tried to set Carol up with anybody ever again and took a decided disinterest in Carol’s personal life. The last Maude had heard, she was dating some guy with a black leather jacket and metal studs in all kinds of places on his body as well as his jacket.

“Me, too,” William said. “Well, like I said, just relax and I’ll let you know when I need you.” He turned and went into the theatre.

“Does he seem on edge to you?” Maude asked.

“He looks like a man who might have a date later, but he’s not sure yet,” replied Garrison.

“How can you tell?”

“I acted the same way the first time I asked you out.”

Maude grinned. After twenty years he was still an old sentimentalist. Those were hard to find...not just these days, but in general. She'd had some doubts when they first got married...who didn't, really? Anybody who was honest with themselves had doubts about committing to anything for what was supposed to be a lifetime. But she'd never once regretted it. Even as he slowly evolved into an old curmudgeon, she'd loved him every step of the way.

Which was why she was feeling guilty now about not telling him about the cancer. The doctor had told her a few days ago, but she hadn't had the heart to pass the news along to anybody. She'd been upset at first, but upon further reflection she'd decided that she'd had a very good life and that there was no need in being surprised that it was eventually going to end. It happened, as they say, to the best of us.

“Did you really?” she asked.

“Did I? I still do, sometimes,” Garrison said, grinning.

Garrison made his way over to the bench against the wall and sat down, motioning for Maude to join him.

“In a moment, dear,” she replied. “I want to check out these new posters for the show.”

“Ok, I'll be here,” Garrison replied. He watched her move about the room, looking at the posters, reading the new pamphlets that had been sent over by other theatres, and checking out the season brochure for the theatre.

He knew she was sick. He didn't know what with yet, but he could tell just by looking. You don't live with someone as long as they'd been together without noticing the subtle changes...at least you don't if you're really paying attention, and Maude was worth paying attention to every day. She'd tell him when she was ready, and it wasn't like whatever it was could be a big surprise. At their age virtually any disease was possible and some more likely than others.

He thought about that first time he'd asked her out and she'd said that magic word, 'maybe'. She was so far out of his league that he'd thought the possibilities ranged from 'no' to 'hell no' to just plain, outright laughter. A really lucky response, he considered, might have been for her to ignore him completely...or so he thought. As it turned out she'd had her eye on him for a while, too, which surprised him greatly. He'd been a big hulk back then, overweight and awkward, at least in his own mind. These days he was just overweight, but being married to a woman with the grace that Maude had could do things to a man. It was like she drew the awkwardness out of him like a

sponge and metabolized it and changed it and then let it flow back into him. She claimed she'd never seen him be awkward about anything for any days of his life. He wished he could have seen that in himself.

Maude eventually finished reading all the literature in the room and came to sit next to Garrison. He looked at his watch and saw that there were only fifteen minutes left until the house would open and there was still no sign of Leroy, which was very unusual. Leroy was always very prompt as he considered punctuality to be the politeness of princes.

"Do you think we should tell William that he's an usher down tonight?" Garrison asked.

"No, he's got enough on his mind. Besides, he doesn't need us until the house opens and there's still time."

And then Leroy came in from the cold.

"Well, speak of the devil and he shall appear," Garrison said, standing up and extending his hand.

"What, a man can't be late one time in his life?" asked Leroy, shaking Garrison's hand warmly.

"A man can, but you can't," Garrison retorted.

"Oh, man! Maude, you gonna let him talk to me this way?"

"I haven't heard a thing, Leroy, haven't heard a thing," Maude replied with a grin.

"Huh. Old married couples stick together, eh?"

"Always," Garrison said, grinning.

Garrison and Maude had met Leroy about five years ago ushering at another theatre in town and had gotten off to a bad start when Garrison, thinking he was the "senior usher" in the group had given much more detailed instructions to Leroy about how to seat patrons for that particular show than were strictly necessary. Leroy was a retired house manager himself and had spent about the last 15 years or so ushering at every theatre in town. It had only been by coincidence that they'd never met before.

Once they got past Leroy's mock indignation and Garrison's deep embarrassment, however, they discovered that they quite liked each other. These days they not only ushered together whenever possible, but they also would meet for lunch, dinner, and for no apparent reason at various locales

or each other's houses. Garrison felt glad to know that there were people like Leroy in the world...people who were proud of their race, but didn't feel compelled to make it the centerpiece of their lives. It defined him, but he didn't let it dictate every action he took. In Garrison's experience, most people of nearly every race hadn't quite learned that knack.

Leroy looked at his two friends and wondered how he was going to tell them that the reason why he'd been late was because he'd been making final arrangements to move to California to live near his grandson. Ever since his wife had passed on the year before last he'd felt a wanderlust building within him...a desire to move on, not just from the marriage and the woman whom he missed, but from nearly his whole life. There were a handful of things he wished he could cling to, Garrison and Maude among them, but they didn't offer him the fulfillment he was looking for. And the Lord knew that the boy needed help. He hoped that by moving to California he could save both their lives by giving his a purpose and by giving his grandson's some hope for the future.

"So who's our HM tonight?" Leroy asked.

"William," said Maude.

"William? Uh oh..." began Leroy.

"Now just you hush. That woman at the last performance wasn't his fault and I thought he handled it rather well."

"Yeah, you're right, it's just that that kind of thing seems to happen to him a lot. Remember the drunk lady that thought he was gay? Or the woman whose leg fell down the hole because she tried to climb over the chairs? Or how about the sign that fell down and hit that other woman on the head? The man attracts weirdness, that's all I'm saying."

Garrison laughed. "He's got you there, dear," he said, chuckling.

"Hrmph. I still say those things could have happened to anyone," Maude maintained.

"But they didn't! They happened to him!"

Maude had no reply to that, so Leroy and Garrison began talking amongst themselves about how they should write a book about all the strange things that happen in theatres. She liked Leroy because Garrison liked him. They got along well and they had stimulating discussions about a variety of topics. He was pleasant, asked thought-provoking questions and gave thought-provoking answers. She suspected, however, that if Garrison weren't around that she would find fewer and fewer reasons to spend time with the man. Despite all his good qualities he was also gruff, quick to

blame, and at times over-opinionated.

Just then William emerged from the theatre.

“Leroy, good to see you,” he said.

“William, I gotta tell you, from the bottom of my heart...it’s good to be here,” Leroy joked. This had been a long-running gag between Leroy and William ever since William had inadvertently made what really was an innocent comment about Leroy’s age which Leroy had deliberately taken the wrong way.

“If the three of you would like to come on in the theatre, I’ll tell you a bit about the show.”

Everyone filed into the house, the three ushers taking seats and William sitting on the back of a chair a few rows in front of them so he could face them. He went over the usual information about the length of the play, whether there was an intermission, the fact that drinks could be brought into the theatre, and so forth. The sign on the door defiantly contended that drinks were definitely *not* allowed in, but every production manager for the last twelve years had waived the rule on the grounds that selling a few extra drinks was worth the hassle of having to clean up the odd spill and besides, someone’s cell phone was bound to disrupt the performance eventually, so what harm could a few drinks do?

When he was finished William asked if there were any questions. There weren’t, so he assigned Garrison and Maude to take tickets and himself and Leroy to the inside of the house to help the patrons to their seats. Leroy’s late arrival hadn’t set them back as much as the drama going on backstage, which seemed to be calming down a little, so there was plenty of time for William to retrieve the programs, set them out in the small shelves they were kept in, and for everyone to use the restroom before taking their positions.

When they re-entered the lobby they saw that a small crowd had gathered in the last fifteen minutes. The box office personnell had arrived and were handing out the will call tickets as well as selling a few to walk up patrons. Sarah came down at about five minutes until “half hour” and asked if everything was ok.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” William said.

“Good. When you hear the pre-show music start you can open the house,” Sarah replied.

“Sounds good.”

Sarah winked at him and then went upstairs to the booth. William's heart went upstairs with her, although the rest of his body stayed downstairs doing his job. Garrison looked at Maude meaningfully, but said nothing while William was within earshot.

"Good evening, sir," Garrison said. "Do you have your ticket?"

"Yes, of course," the newcomer replied. He handed over the paper rectangle that served as the magical key that would allow admittance, waited as a small portion of it was torn off, and then received the remainder.

Walking into the theatre he was greeted by an elderly usher with a grey beard who handed him a program. Instinctively the man scanned the room for the exits.

I'm not at work, the man chided himself. I don't need to know where all the exits are. But then he relaxed a little. These kinds of instincts served him well in his job and there was no sense in getting upset about being good at something.

He found his seat and opened the program, perusing the cast and crew bios. Theatre people amazed him. Working in the Secret Service didn't allow Neil much time for artistic pursuits. Looking for exits, planning for all eventualities, and coming up with creative ways that someone might bring an attack were the crux of his job and it was hard to spend any time painting or sculpting, dancing or acting, or even writing when all your ideas centered around someone getting hurt or preventing same.

The theatre began slowly filling up as more people arrived. A man and a woman squeezed by Neil as he pulled his knees as close to himself as he could.

Maria and Robert found their seats a little further down.

"I can't believe you talked me into coming to see Shakespeare," Robert grumbled.

"What? It's a classic," Maria said, surprised that she was just now hearing about this.

"How many thousands of times has this play been performed? How could it possibly still have any relevance or interest in anybody's life at this point?"

Maria had no answer for this and decided to treat it as a rhetorical question. She sat down, smoothed out her dress, and opened the program.

"Oh, so now I get the silent treatment just because I don't like the play?" Robert said derisively.

Maria rolled her eyes. “No, you’re not getting the silent treatment, but what do you want me to say? I told you about this weeks ago, bought the tickets, we drive all the way into town, and *now* you tell me you don’t want to be here?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to be here, I just said I thought it was going to be boring.”

“Besides, you haven’t even *seen* the play yet. How do you know you won’t like it? Maybe they’ll do some new staging, new blocking, new interpretations of the characters.”

“How would I know? I’ve never seen this before,” Robert replied.

Maria gaped at him. “You’ve *never* seen it before? Have you read it, at least?”

“Nope.”

“Then it’s all brand new to you! How could it be boring?”

“It was written in the 1600s, it’s old and outdated by definition.”

Maria carried on gaping at him. “You know what, don’t talk to me until intermission, ok? See the damn play before you criticize it. Geez...”

“Fine,” said Robert, turning slightly away from her. He couldn’t believe she was being like this. He made one little comment about Shakespeare being some old fart who everybody hero-worshipped like he was some kind of writing god and she gets all pissy about it. Opening the program, he looked for a plot synopsis to see what he was getting himself in for. Finding none he turned back to the graphic on the front cover to see what he could glean from it. Not much there. Some girl with wings and a boat and some guy who wasn’t wearing much.

Beside him, Maria uncrossed and recrossed her legs. Robert didn’t understand why women wore short skirts in the dead of winter, but he appreciated their effort. He appreciated it very much, in fact, and shifted in his seat a little so that he was angled more towards her than away like he’d been a moment ago. Maria ignored him, focusing on the program.

Sometimes she wondered what she saw in him. They’d been together for about three months, which wasn’t a long time and certainly didn’t obligate her in any way. It was just that he’d been such a nice guy when they’d first met and now he was acting like a total jerk. Was it that the newness was wearing off their relationship? Was he becoming complacent? Was she? Three months in and already taking each other for granted...that’s a bad sign, she thought. But she was

comfortable around him, she had to admit that. She felt totally at ease, like she could tell him anything, do anything and it would all turn out ok.

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine growing old with him, maturing, and settling into their later years. Then she opened her eyes again because she realized that was stupid for a 24 year old to do such a thing. No matter what she conjured in her mind it wouldn't actually turn out that way. For one thing, there hadn't been any children in her imagined scene and she knew he wanted kids. She hadn't made up her mind yet.

Eric, sitting in the row behind them, heard the exchange between the couple in front of him and smirked. Attending a lot of plays meant that you got to see a lot of that kind of thing, and Eric being a reviewer for one of the smaller local papers meant that he went to see a *lot* of plays. Glancing at the set, Eric made a note. The set showed good craftsmanship, a good sign for the play. It showed that the company had high values and cared about what the audience's first impressions were.

He'd been to a play last week that had had a set consisting of a single chair and one flat with a door painted on it. Characters entering the scene couldn't even use the door, they just walked around it. That kind of thing was fine for high school, some colleges, and poorer theatres, but this had been the third largest theatre in town and he really felt as though they could have done better. They hadn't gotten a good review from him.

He felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you a reviewer?"

"Yes, I'm Eric Trow, reviewer for the *Herald*."

"Pleased to meet you, my name is Pete Kred," said the man, handing over a business card which Eric received reluctantly. Eric had a feeling he knew what was coming next and he wasn't looking forward to it.

This happened to him all the time. If he could find a way to take notes on the performance without having to have an actual notebook in his hands he'd do it in a minute. The notebook attracted these guys like a hummingbird to a flower. And, like a hummingbird, they'd drink your time away from you telling you all about their fabulous new play that they're sure would be the next Broadway smash if only they could get his endorsement or recommend them to a producer.

There were two problems with this general approach. First, most of the plays were really horrible. When he'd first started his reviewing career he'd offered some advice to the playwrights. After all,

he'd studied fine arts, he'd seen hundreds of plays. In a way he was reviewing their play before it was produced, and he thought that was an invaluable service. Unfortunately the playwrights didn't see it that way. They saw it as a layman trying to meddle with their master work or, worse, that he was trying to get a co-author credit by telling them how to re-write it. All they cared about with him was his supposed connections to producers and directors.

Which led to the second problem, which was that nearly every producer and director in town hated him. It went with the territory. Newspapers carried reviews of plays because they wanted readers. If a newspaper got readers then it got advertisers, and that's where the money really was, not in the dollar or dollar twenty-five it cost the end consumer to get the paper. Reviewers quickly learned that writing good reviews was a quick way to end up out of a job because for some strange reason, people didn't want to read good reviews of plays. If the play was good they wanted to hear about it, sure, but what they really wanted was for the flaws to be pointed out. No play was perfect. Find the flaw, magnify it, and then recommend the play anyway if it was any good. That was how to stay employed as a reviewer.

The consequence was that artists hated you, and Eric had decided a long time ago that if it was going to come down to an artist hating him or him getting a paycheck...well, he'd laugh all the way to the bank.

"Listen," said Pete, "I've got this friend who writes plays..."

And so it went. Eric had heard it all before. Sometimes it was a 'friend', sometimes they actually owned up to writing the thing themselves. He hadn't actually read one since 1996 when he was just starting out so he had no idea whether they were any good or not. The memory of taking it to a local producer had been enough to deter him ever since. The look of disbelief, the incredulous look as they accepted it, and then what he was pretty sure was the sound of it hitting the circular file before the door had even closed behind him. He knew he'd do these guys more harm than good so he accepted as few of them as possible and kept a file at home for the rest...just in case.

Pete could tell he was winning him over. Just pour it on a little more, he thought, and he'll give you his email address and you can send him the play and then it'll be easy from there.

Pete had been writing plays for as long as he could remember. It had started out in elementary school with a little comic strip he doodled called "Hurricane Zelda". It had been a multi-cast effort with the title heroine, her friends Smiley and Beardy and their evil adversaries, the Tornado Gang. Unfortunately, while the writing came easily to him, drawing was another matter. He knew it was wrong to draw a hurricane and a tornado looking like pretty much the same thing...a spiral funnel cloud with a head coming out of the top...but he didn't know how else to draw it and so he decided not to worry about it.

That was in the early days. Now he was writing epic, sprawling play cycles. His latest story, the “Kangaroos in Paradise” series, could have been turned into a TV mini-series except that he didn’t want this particular story corrupted by the suits in Hollywood. Besides, lots of successful writers got their start writing plays. He’d cash in later when they begged him to write for them.

“So, can I send you a copy for you to show around?” Pete asked hopefully.

He listened politely as Eric talked about the number of plays that got written each year and what percentage of those got produced. Pete nodded, but vaguely wondered why Eric was telling him this. Wasn’t this why he was going through a reviewer? If a reviewer liked it, wouldn’t that carry some weight with the producers? He couldn’t think of anything more likely to succeed than a reviewer coming to a playhouse with a play he liked. Talk about a guarantee of a good write-up!

Just then the lights dimmed and Eric silently thanked whichever gods might happen to be watching and made a mental note to get up quickly during the final blackout before intermission, feign a trip to the restroom, and then find a new seat when he got back. There seemed to be plenty, which he was disappointed in. *The Tempest* was one of his favorite plays and he had been looking forward to it.

Pete sat back, confident that he’d made a good impression and that he’d be given a business card as soon as the intermission hit.

The play carried on and reached the intermission with no major hiccups despite the other ‘drama’ which was playing out backstage. April and Mary weren’t speaking to each other unless they had to deliver a line. Mort had been keeping a copy of his script backstage to review lines when he wasn’t actually on stage and Charlie had replaced it with a copy of *Twelfth Night* for a laugh, and Sarah sat up in the booth calling the show, hoping against hope that not too many shenanigans were going on backstage.

Meanwhile, William cooled his heels in the House Manager’s office while Maude, Garrison, and Leroy watched the play.

At intermission there was general applause, which Sarah breathed a sigh of relief over. Applause meant that either the audience hadn’t noticed Mort dropping half a page of dialogue in Act II or else they thought it had been an artistic decision. Either way was fine with her.

Eric remembered about Pete just in time and made a dash for the exit just as the house lights were coming up. Pete considered following him, but noticed that he’d left his coat behind. He’d be back.

Walt stood in the lobby, drink in hand, considering what to do. He'd been disturbed by the text message he'd gotten just before the intermission and was deciding if the situation was urgent enough to warrant leaving the play in the middle. Since he'd paid for the tickets he was inclined to stay, but his brother had implied that he needed to see him right away. Of course there was no answer when he tried to call back. That was just like Stan...cry wolf and then disappear. The problem was that he didn't cry wolf often. Just often enough to make you wonder. Every one out of five times he called with some new crisis turned out to be nothing, but the other four usually did require him to be bailed out...sometimes literally. Not answering him would really be rolling the dice, Walt thought.

At last, cursing his luck, Walt decided he needed to go. He went back to his seat, retrieved his coat and scarf, and made his way out into the frigid night. On the way out he saw the house manager giving him a funny look. Not many people leave in the middle, Walt guessed. On the other hand, Walt had also noticed the couple who had snuck in during Act III and had wondered who would bother showing up that late to a performance.

Walking up the hill, Walt noticed that it had gotten quite a bit colder since he'd arrived. He bundled himself into his coat a little deeper and stuck his gloved hands in his pockets. Circulation had never been his body's strong suit and his hands and feet were consistently cold no matter what kind of gloves or socks he wore. At least going uphill meant he'd be getting some exercise and possibly keep his blood moving, he thought.

He reached the top of the hill and glanced at his watch. Damn Stan...there was still time to make it back to the play if he hurried. He turned and took a single step before his conscience realized what he was doing and stopped him. If this turned out to be the real deal...he turned back and walked up to the gusty intersection where the buildings formed a wind tunnel of icy air.

Stan had been involved in some shady things in the past. Sometimes when he genuinely needed help it was the kind of thing that nobody else in the family wanted to be involved in. Somebody always had to "take one for the team", and that someone was usually Walt. Once it was a drug deal gone bad and Stan needed a place to hide for several days. Another time involved a dog which Stan swore the owner had given to him, who then wanted it back. All over the spectrum with the man, some good, some bad, and some a complete waste of everyone's time. After a while it got to be kind of a rotation amongst the family members to see whose responsibility it was to get Stan out of trouble this time. Current players included his parents, two cousins, his sister, and an old family friend who said he'd help out as long as there was no criminal activity involved.

Walt cursed every time his turn came up. It was a small miracle that Stan had only served one year of prison time, as much trouble as he got into. Of course that didn't count the year he'd spent

overseas hiding from an irate mother and the State Patrol, nor the probationary period he'd had in Omaha, nor the six months he spent under a self-imposed house arrest on a houseboat off Miami. But for actual prison time, only one year.

Crossing the street that led to the train station, and ultimately back to his car, Walt shivered under the wintery blast of air that flowed between the tall buildings that lined the street. He wondered if he'd left just at the right time because it was going to be worse later or if he would have been better off staying at the play. Of course staying would have meant having to live with the guilt of having ignored his brother. Not really an option, especially with their mother.

Margaret, Walt and Stan's mom, doted on her children to such an extreme that many people wondered how she had time for anything else. Certainly she couldn't do such a night-and-day job as look after her three beloved kids and still amass the family fortune that had made them all so well off, but somehow she had. Their father had been left out in the cold on that particular deal, which was a source of some family friction from time to time, but the fact remained that he had stayed with her long enough to sire the three children and then mysteriously vanished, saying only that he'd see them later.

Eighteen months later he'd sent a letter from Cancun with a picture of himself with his mistress. Margaret, who had stubbornly stuck by him the entire time, saying that he'd surely come to his senses and just needed some "away" time, finally saw the light and filed for divorce, although she cried while she was filling out the paperwork. It took a couple of years for her to work through the grief she felt over the loss of the marriage and her own self-doubt in terms of how she could have possibly driven him away, but eventually she snapped out of it and, since no alimony was forthcoming, started finding ways to make extra money for herself so she could take better care of the kids.

She started out selling door-to-door during a time when that was still possible and eventually progressed to owning her own franchise. After a brief and unfortunate run-in with a pyramid scheme she refocused her efforts and eventually found herself not only a franchise owner of a regional marketing and sales business, but also a highly paid consultant for other corporations teaching her sales technique to up and comers.

In just twenty years she'd gone from down-and-out housewife to gracing the cover of Forbes magazine and one of the richest women in the midwest. Shortly thereafter she met and married Walt and Stan's step-father and then made a point of tracking down their biological father and returning his bowling trophies saying that they no longer matched the décor of her life.

Waiting for the train to get there, shivering against the cold, Walt wondered whether he shouldn't have gone to Cancun to be with his father if for no other reasons than to rub his nose in the fact that

he could afford a better house and for the weather. He also wondered whether being so far away would get him out of having to help take care of Stan.

At last the train arrived and Walt boarded, glad to be out of the fierce wind. He loosened his scarf and made his way to the center of the train to get as far away from the doors as possible, sitting down in almost the exact middle of the car. At this hour there were only a few people on the train, most of them looking tired and ragged...either members of the poorer classes or people who worked overtime to keep from being one of the poorer classes. He looked at his watch. 9:30pm. Maybe he'd try to call Stan again...maybe he could go home instead of all the way to his car and then to Stan's place. He glanced at the book the woman across the aisle was reading, but didn't recognize the title and focused instead on calling his brother.

The woman idly turned a page, pretending to read, but really watching the newcomer sitting across from her. He was cute. She turned the page back and refocused her attention on her reading. What was the point of commenting to herself how cute anybody was when she wasn't going to do anything about it? She did this every day. She sat in this godforsaken train in the dead of night with a bunch of deadbeats, losers, and wannabe overachievers who thought that the secret to getting ahead was to burn the midnight oil. So why was she here? Oh, yeah. She was one of the wannabe overachievers.

Glancing up at the station map she noticed that the next stop was hers. She marked her place, put her book away in her bag, and stood up in preparation for departure. The train hit a small bump and lurched slightly, but stayed on track. What was that?, she asked herself. She looked around the car. None of the other passengers seemed concerned. The cute man was yelling into his cell phone. Another was reading the newspaper. A woman at the far end of the train looked like she was asleep. No sign of anxiety from anyone except her.

The train reached its destination and stopped, the doors opening on the left. Wanda shook herself out of her stupor and walked off, determinedly setting out for her apartment. The chill in the air bit through her jacket, which was just slightly too thin for this weather. Remember the heavy coat tomorrow, stupid, she chided herself. She pulled her woolen hat further down over her ears and retightened her scarf. It didn't help much.

She did this all the time. Forgot things. Overlooked things. Like weather reports, although that was just for starters. She realized that men had asked her out about a week after they'd done so and was always too petrified to call them back later. Making the first move was, of course, out of the question. Her mother had always advised her against asking men out because of what it could do to her reputation. What she hadn't mentioned was that by avoiding one reputation she'd lose out on important social skills and gain another reputation instead; that of the ice queen. It was a role she'd grown into, mostly.

With her evenings free of dates and other social activities, she found herself spending more and more time finding other things to do. Television bored her, so she read books. It started out with some light reading...Danielle Steele, an author who she still had a guilty pleasure with from time to time. It progressed from there to include something with a harder edge, like Michael Crichton. Eventually she decided that these were more 'pop' authors than serious writers and she'd moved on to more classic literature. George Orwell, Ayn Rand, C. S. Lewis, which lead to Tolkien, and Frank Herbert. She crossed over into the *real* classics once she'd finished the *Oz* series and started reading F. Scott Fitzgerald and Steinbeck.

But after a while even those bored her and she moved into non-fiction. She eased into it with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Eased into it because she thought they were fictional books at the time, not "how-to" essays.

All this bookishness gave her something to do of an evening, but kept her from making friends with living human beings. She knew that Gatsby would be there for her...Herb from accounting was another story. She'd been let down so many times...

Men weren't the only things she found disappointing. Machinery, electronics, computers...all of them seemed to turn to mush whenever she came around and it had given her quite an anxiety complex. She couldn't count the number of times the computer had crashed in the middle of her work, or the train had broken down while she was already running late, or her phone had mysteriously missed the important call while letting the telemarketer straight through.

Now she wasn't sure who she could trust. Certainly not herself...she'd forget her own head if it weren't attached. Books were her refuge. And she was on her way home to one right now, one whose pages she could caress like a passionate lover. Not the trashy book she was reading on the train, but one she could really sink her teeth into.

Her phone rang. She looked at the caller ID. "Unknown" it read. She put the phone back in her purse.

In Miami, Gail listened to the ringing on the other and eventually got voice mail. She hung up and pushed the button to get the computer to pull another number from the list of thousands that her company had purchased last month. They were working through them as quickly as possible because the company was having a cash flow problem and they needed as many sales as they could get.

Telemarketing has to be the worst job in the world, Gail thought as she listened to the ringing again. These day so many people screened their calls or had caller ID that most of the time she

never even got to talk to a living person, and even when she did only about one out of eight was actually polite. She'd been hung up on, yelled at, cursed at, been made to go through her sales pitch five times in a row before being denied, and on several occasions been subjected to an air horn in her ear.

It wasn't all bad, though. Sometimes you got a horny guy who wanted you to talk sexy to him. And then there was the memorable occasion when the conversation had gone like this:

Ring. Ring. Click.

"Wrong number."

"Um...what?" she'd said.

"You have the wrong number."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me, I do."

"You don't even know who I want to talk to."

"Ok, fine, who do you want to talk to?"

"Is George there?"

"No. See? I told you."

Click.

She'd never figured that one out, but the number had gotten crossed off the list.

Who were these people? She sometimes wondered. Did they have wives? Husbands? Children? Cousins? Were any of them "only" children? Was she really disturbing them in their daily lives or were many of them just acting this way because their parents had? Telemarketing had been around long enough for the first people to be called at home with a sales pitch to have had children by now...maybe even grandchildren. How much of how telemarketers were treated had less to do with their intrusion into the dinner hour and how much had to do with how these people had been brought up?

It wore on Gail. Her self-esteem was in tatters and she was nearly frantically looking for another job, but she didn't want to be too blatant about it. She suspected that looking for a new job was nearly part of the job description for a telemarketer. The ads in the paper ought to read something like "Make calls to vicious people who will make you feel like scum for fun and profit. Be the envy of your friends as you make little money to do depressing work in a profession that is the butt of jokes worldwide. Look for new employment in your copious free time, assuming you have any after making your quota for the day."

But she couldn't be sure that it was that much a part of the norm...she couldn't take the chance that her boss would hear about her search and fire her for, she didn't know what...disloyalty maybe.

Ring. Ring. Click.

"Hello? Oh, hi. Uh huh. Well, no, I don't think I'm interested right now. Could you please take me off your call up list? Thank you. Bye."

John hung up, annoyed. That had been the second call this week from a salesperson. What the hell was the point of the national do-not-call list if everybody could call you anyway and feign ignorance of your presence on the list? He'd stopped even asking anymore. They all just claimed they had an old list and that they'd get him removed right away. He'd also gotten bored with being mean to them. They were just making a living, after all, and had no control over the content. There was no point in beating them up over it. Better to just politely decline and get rid of them as quickly as possible. Unless they didn't take the hint, in which case he considered them fair game.

He looked at the stack of papers on his desk. Even bringing work home hadn't really diminished the size of it. More got added every day, as if the paper fairy came in the night and made a special delivery just for him. He'd like to throttle the thing if he ever found it.

Looking longingly at the guitar in the corner, he returned his attention to the legal documents in front of him. Coming up through high school and college he'd been considered a gifted musician and even played in a few bands, always lead guitar, always lead songwriter, and always the most dedicated person in the group. He'd stuck with college because, as his parents put it, he needed a safety net. They'd never really seen why he had such a fascination with music anyway. To them it was a hobby, a nifty little trick to pull out at parties, but nothing more.

Five years after graduation he'd looked at his life seriously and noticed the striking lack of big money recording contract. He'd also noticed the rattletrap car he drove, the roach-infested apartment he lived in, and the threadbare clothes he was wearing and decided he'd had enough. At that point he'd had three guitars and he spent a whole night making a tough decision...which one to sell. In the morning he'd picked the one he thought he could actually live without and took it down

to the local used instrument store and put it on the counter, receiving enough money for it that he could afford to go to one of the discount suit stores and buy the nicest clothes he'd ever worn, which wasn't saying much.

Then he started hitting the streets looking for work. His education had been in journalism...he'd figured that if he could get the inside scoop on how reviewers and other newspaper columnists operated that he could use that knowledge to launch his music career. It hadn't exactly worked out that way. Nor did he find the local newspapers and magazines to be falling all over themselves to hire a guy with a degree but no experience. Eventually he'd managed to land a job as a receptionist at a local law firm.

Once there, he found that the subject actually interested him. The law was a fascinatingly complex subject. He was continually astounded that people had figured out that certain laws actually were necessary, and had convinced others that the unnecessary ones needed to be written and passed anyway. The entire profession was a con job...you either conned people into passing your law or you conned people into believing that you hadn't broken it. Sometimes both. After two years he'd advanced from receptionist to an actual office assistant and was convinced by the firm to go to law school. Of course the fact that they offered to pick up half of his tuition helped convince him that it was a good idea, but he probably would have gone anyway. When he was finished, he was officially hired on as counsel.

He sometimes looked at his business cards and saw the word "attorney", but he never dreamed such grandiose dreams. In his own mind he was a lawyer, and he was proud of it.

During the entire time at law school he'd buckled down and concentrated on his studies, never picking up his guitar even once. He still had two left, but they stayed in their cases in a closet in the back of his apartment. When he'd finished he'd thrown a party and one of his friends asked him if he still played. Without thinking he'd said yes, gone to get one of the instruments, came back and played for the entire rest of the party, about 4 hours.

When he was done his hands hurt, but he felt better than he had in years. The next day he'd gone out and bought a guitar exactly like the one he'd sold all those years ago and dreamed his dreams of musical glory once again.

And then the day after that he'd reported to work and found himself so busy that he hardly had time to touch the damn thing.

He picked up the next case file on the stack and examined it in detail. Malcolm Cote, 26, arrested for shoplifting. He set it aside and picked up the next one. Abigail Stuart, 79, arrested for leaving the scene of an accident...hit and run. He set that one aside as well. He always did this...searched

through the files until he found something that caught his interest, knowing that he'd come back to the others later. Some people thought that was an inefficient way of doing his work, but he found that it helped him keep his concentration.

Elise Masterson, 45, petty theft.

Peter Novem, 19, selling drugs.

Terry Orobosky, 37, weapons charge.

Boring. They were all boring. He leafed through the rest of the stack, but nothing caught his eye. People were doing the same things they'd always been doing. Lying, cheating, betraying, trying to get one up on their neighbor and resorting to physical violence as the easiest option way too often. Always looking for a good time, never considering the consequences, never wondering how it might affect another person's life. Always looking out for number one.

He turned to the next case. Justin Tomlinson, 22, jaywalking. Jaywalking? Who got arrested for jaywalking anymore? John looked at the case more carefully.

Justin lay on his bed in his room, staring at the ceiling. Who got arrested for jaywalking anymore? He'd seen dozens of other people do it hundreds of times, sometimes into oncoming traffic. Hell, he'd seen people jaywalk in front of his car and while he'd seriously considered running over them, he'd always stopped or at least slowed down. Swerved, at a minimum. The point was he'd never hit any of them. And here he was, out on bail, arrested for jaywalking just because he hadn't wanted to walk the extra 50 yards down to the crosswalk.

Probably should have gone ahead and kicked the cop, he thought bitterly. If I'm going to get arrested, I might as well make it for something that'll make a good story later. As it was, the best part of the story was that his girlfriend had broken up with him. They'd had a date for that evening and he'd been on his way to it. What he hadn't told her, though, was that he had planned to break up with *her* at some point during the evening, as soon as he judged that the time was right. He didn't dislike her...he just didn't love her. Now that the burning passion of a new relationship was past, he saw all of her minute little flaws as magnified and, he was honest with himself, he just didn't have the patience to try to work through them.

Not that he saw himself as any great catch, either. And, all things considered, he figured that breaking up would probably be the best thing for both of them. He'd been running late, decided to cross the street a little early, and ended up getting arrested for something that most people probably didn't even know was against the law. And then, citing his frequent lateness and undependability, his girlfriend, Toni, had broken up with him when he finally arrived. No waiting for the right time,

no preamble, no lead-in, just BAM! You're single again.

It was funny. In a sad kind of way. When he'd been on his way to break up with her, he'd been very certain in his mind that this was the way it had to go. This was how his own personal story was to be written. And then this stupid little thing had happened and things hadn't gone the way he'd envisioned them in his own head and suddenly he realized that he missed her. There was a hole in his life, a gaping expanse of loneliness, and it got carved out in a most unexpected way.

He carried on staring at the ceiling. He noted its crinkled texture from where the workmen had put in the plastering when the house was built. He saw the cobwebs in the corners. He saw the smudges from where he'd touched it, proving to himself in some childish, immature way that he was all grown up now and could touch the ceiling, a goal which had seemed so completely out of reach when he was a child.

And despite fixating on all these things about the ceiling directly above his head, he couldn't escape the fact that he missed her. He missed her terribly. He tried to convince himself that it was just because she'd broken up with him, that it was his ego that was bruised and nothing more, and that he'd get over it quickly.

The time for the word "quickly" to apply to the situation had come and gone two days ago, he admitted to himself. That was when it had all happened. And here he lay, still thinking about it, nearly to the exclusion of all else, two full days later. But what was there to do?

Call her?

What would that look like?, he asked himself. On the other hand, what does it look like now? He got up and made his way through his semi-darkened room to the bathroom where he flicked on the light. After having spent the last several hours laying in darkness, the sudden bright light made him blink. He made his way to the mirror and looked at himself. Two full days of no shaving or showering had taken their toll. That was something else she'd mentioned...his seemingly chronic unemployment. He still had savings to cover his rent for a few more months and his parents had come through with a fantastic birthday gift. He didn't see what the rush was.

He stared at himself some more and noticed acne starting to develop around the edges of his facial hair from where he hadn't washed his face recently. His scrubby growth looked unkempt and the hair on his head was starting to mat together from excess oil. Rubbing his chin with his hand, he suddenly felt dirty. He couldn't remember actually feeling dirty his whole life. He brushed the hair out of his eyes and detected the greasy residue that the action left on his fingertips.

Suddenly and inexplicably disgusted with himself, Justin stripped, lay a towel on the floor, found a

washcloth and turned on the shower. He waited for a few moments while the water heated up to a tolerable temperature, then climbed in, letting the flow of liquid refreshment wash over him. He felt better already.

Out in the next room, his phone began to ring.

Toni listened to the tones for several seconds and then gave up before it went to voicemail. It was a waste of time anyway, she told herself.

She'd broken up with Justin in a fire of righteous indignation. She'd said things that had been on her mind for months. She'd let them build up until she couldn't hold them in anymore and they'd come running out of her mouth as if there weren't enough time in the whole world to say everything, to point out every little flaw, to tear him down brick by brick, down to the molecular level if she could possibly manage it, to leave no stone unturned in her quest to shred his living soul and char anything that might remain intact. He deserved it. He deserved it and so much more for being the putrid, paltry, irrelevant, and asinine human being that he was.

And yet...somehow, his not being there, disturbed her. She'd fought against it for two days, telling herself that she was being silly, that it was something she'd get used to, and as well she should. She was better off without him.

And yet...she hadn't erased his phone number from her phone. In fact, he still occupied a speed-dial button. In fact, she still hadn't deleted his last voice mail and had listened to it about a dozen times in the last several hours, trying to convince herself that his voice wasn't that handsome, that it didn't remind her of the good times they'd had.

Sitting on her couch, she scowled. She didn't miss him. And even if she did, so what? Who would take back someone who had said the things she'd said?

She heard her roommate open his door down the hall and emerge, the scent of soap and shampoo wafting into the open area. Tim entered, fresh from the shower.

"I'm going out," he announced. "Care to come with?"

"No," Toni said, trying to keep the melancholy out of her voice.

"You sure? I'm sure there will be some straight guys there," Tim said. He knew she'd broken up with Justin.

"Yeah, I'm sure, thanks," Toni replied, smiling a weak smile. He knows, she thought. That was

one of the things she liked about Tim...he always knew. Her mother had nearly had a fit when she found out that she was moving in with a guy, and finding out that he was gay hadn't really helped much. At first it was the usual reaction of a mother being protective of her daughter, but then it morphed into her mother's religious dogma getting in the way of what was a perfectly satisfactory financial arrangement. She got to save money on the rent by having a roommate, and the fact that he was a fun guy and non-threatening just made it a complete package.

Her mother still didn't understand. Tim wasn't a partier, which was the stereotype of the typical gay man in his 30s. This evening he happened to be going to an art gallery where one of his friends was opening an exhibition of his work. Tim himself defied most of the other gay stereotypes. He wasn't flamboyant, he didn't wear a lot of pink, he didn't have a rainbow pride sticker on his car, and he wasn't always the 'sensitive' guy. In fact, sometimes he could be a real jerk in much the same way that straight guys could be real jerks. He also didn't bring dates home.

He did, however, have a fascination with art history, which he dismissed whenever anybody brought it up, saying that anybody who *didn't* appreciate art and its history was somehow deficient.

Toni liked him quite a lot. They'd only known each other a few weeks, having met through a mutual friend at yet another art gallery, but they'd hit it off as well as a gay man and a straight woman could and it didn't take long for them to realize that rooming together would be a great way for them to finance their own lifestyles better than they were doing currently. The fact that those lifestyles overlapped in many cases made it even easier.

"Suit yourself," Tim said, grabbing a light jacket before heading out the door.

He'd hoped to be able to drag her out tonight. Knowing what she was going through, the only thing he could think of to help was to get her out of her own head. She was probably really beating herself up and she didn't deserve it. Justin hadn't been bad for her exactly, he just wasn't good. He was a bridge, a way to fill up some time in her life while something better was still in transit. Now he was gone and Tim, for one, didn't miss him a bit. He was, however, worried about Toni.

She'd seemed listless the last couple of days. Of course that's to be expected after a breakup, especially considering how she'd raged at the poor man. He hadn't really deserved that, and Tim felt that she knew it. But brooding over it wasn't going to solve anything, and taking him back would be worse. She'd just have to get over it. Coming to the art show would have helped, but he couldn't drag her along.

Tim reached the curb where his car was parked, opened the door, sat down, closed the door, fastened his seat belt, started the engine, and pulled out onto the street. It was a ritual with him that had been ingrained by his parents when he learned to drive. They'd had him go over the

procedure several dozen times. They'd even gone as far as to make sure that the first car they let him drive had an unusual set of keys...one key to open the doors and a second key to start the engine. For the first several weeks they'd only given him one of the keys so he could practice the ritual of getting in, shutting the door, and fastening his seat belt.

At last they'd given in and let him have the second key, but every few weeks they'd run him through the procedure again. He hadn't found out until a few years later that one of his dad's cousins had been killed in a car wreck when his dad was a kid because he wasn't wearing his seat belt. His dad had been close to that particular cousin and it had left a lasting impression on him, which was why he ran Tim through the procedure over and over and over again until he could prove he would do it through sheer muscle memory.

At the time Tim had been annoyed by this treatment, but eventually the exercises stopped, although his adherence to the ritual did not. The double-key entry system did result in a rather humorous incident in college, though, when Tim had gone to a party and had gotten drunk for just the second time in his life. He'd given the keys to two separate friends as a precaution against driving home under the influence, but both keys had ended up in the hands of one of those friends who had decided not to indulge that evening.

When Tim, the driver, and another friend had gotten into the car, Tim had asked who had they keys. The driver had replied "here's one..." and Tim, fearing that one of them had gotten lost somehow, had said "you'd better say 'two', man...you'd better say 'two'"...

His friends had never let him live that one down.

The drive to the art gallery didn't take long, but finding a place to park did. After about thirty minutes he finally decided to take the first space he could find in the general area and hoof it to the gallery rather than risk being even later than he already was. He walked into the gallery about fifteen minutes late, which everyone considered to be perfectly fashionable.

The room was moderately populated with several dozen people. The concept of the exhibition was about space and its use in art, and so the aisles had been purposefully left wide, free of pedestals and other impediments which might have detracted from the overall vision. There were only a very few pieces of sculpture that had been placed strategically throughout the area in addition to the paintings and tapestries on the wall. Alphonse, as he chose to call himself, was a multi-talented individual who had crafted and curated all of the art in the exhibition himself, highly unusual for most artists, but not for Alphonse. The man was well known as a control freak.

As Tim entered the room he could see Alphonse strutting around the room, a cocktail in one hand and a laser pointer in the other. Some of the art had been hung very high, some of it dangled from

the ceiling, and some of it was just really tall and reached the top of the high-ceilinged room. He would alternately gesture with his drink expansively while using the green laser light to point out some aspect of the work of which he was particularly proud. He seemed to have a lot of pride tonight, based on the way the light blinked around the room.

Tim at once admired and detested Alphonse. He admired his determination, his drive, his artistic genius, and his ability to get things done in the face of formidable obstacles, but he pretty much hated everything else about him. His excessive drinking, his excessive pride in his work, and his excessive gesturing. Tim had heard about people who if you tied their hands behind their back they wouldn't be able to talk, but those people had nothing on Alphonse, who occasionally looked as though he might achieve liftoff if he didn't weigh almost 350 pounds.

"Timothy," Alphonse boomed, striding towards Tim affably. "So good of you to make it!"

"Good evening, Alphonse," Tim said, extending his hand. He knew Alphonse had both hands full, but he did it anyway just to vex the man. He hated being called 'Timothy'.

"Tim!" Alphonse enthused, looking awkwardly at both hands and then choosing to just ignore the proffered handshake. "Good to see you, Tim, good to see you. Enjoying yourself?"

"So far. I just got here a minute ago," Tim admitted.

"Course you did, course you did," Alphonse replied. "Busy man such as yourself, I'm probably lucky you came at all. So what do you think?"

"Very impressive at first glance, Alphonse. Give me a few minutes and I'll take it all in and get back to you."

"Fair enough, fair enough. Courtney! Dearest! How are you?" Alphonse said, calling across the room to a new arrival before bustling off.

Tim looked around and saw several people he knew, more that he didn't, and a couple that he knew but wished he didn't. The usual art crowd consisted of about 10% people who actually cared and knew something about art, 50% people who cared but didn't actually know anything, and 40% hangers-on who neither knew anything nor cared, but wanted to look important and/or sophisticated. It was easier to pick them out than you might think. If you saw someone at more than one of these openings and they had a different date with them every time, then there was an excellent chance they fell into the 40% group.

He grabbed a canape from the tray on the central table and noticed with amusement that there was a

painting next to the tray of what the stack had originally looked like before people started eating them. Either Alphonse was painting particularly quickly these days or else this tray had been arranged to match the painting. Either way, it was a nice effect and Tim made a mental note to congratulate Alphonse on this little tidbit of creativity.

“Stunning, isn’t it?” asked a familiar voice from behind him.

Without turning around Tim replied, “It speaks to me. It’s man’s struggle in the universe.”

“Absolute genius must be appreciated in its own time,” the voice continued.

“Indeed,” finished Tim, completing the silly little ritual and turning to face the woman he knew was behind him. “How are you, Christine?”

“Fine, and yourself? I’m amazed you remember it after all this time.”

“How could I forget?”

“Well, it’s been 2 years. I forget things walking from one room to the next.”

“True. Too true.”

Tim and Christine had, several years ago, frequented these art openings with a regularity that had people talking. His lack of the stereotypical gay flamboyancy and his tendency to show up with what people assumed was a regular date had his boyfriend at the time livid, especially since his night job kept him from attending many of them. They’d met at an opening, in fact. It was easy to meet people at these things. Tim wondered if he knew anyone that he hadn’t met at an art gallery at one time or another.

The ritual had started after the third chance encounter between Tim and Christine. Both admiring the same bit of art, both had resorted to the same bit of cheesy beginners-art-critic mantra that you sometimes adopted at these things as a form of self defense against appearing too snooty. They’d both recognized each other’s patter and had broken down laughing and had been practically best friends ever since until two years ago when Christine had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She’d stopped coming to the openings during her treatments because she’d been horribly self-conscious, a condition that all of her close friends had told her was unnecessary. There was no need, they’d said, to lock yourself away and deprive us of the pleasure of your company prematurely.

It had been said tongue-in-cheek, but Christine had taken it the wrong way, assuming that all of her

close friends were assuming she was going to die, and had buckled down, determined to prove them wrong. Her body had reacted badly to the chemotherapy and her doctors were privately very concerned about her prospects for recovery in the long term, but in the end she'd pulled through. She was now involved in flaunting her still-living condition to as many people as she could.

"So how are you?" asked Tim. He'd tried to stay in touch, but Christine had refused to see or talk to anyone after a while.

"Fit as the proverbial fiddle," she replied in a chipper tone of voice.

"Ah, a little too tightly wound and high strung as usual, then?"

"Of course."

"We missed you, Christine," Tim said baldly.

"I know you did. I'm sorry."

In the middle of her treatment, when things had looked fairly bleak, Christine had essentially cut herself off from all of her friends and acquaintances. Her doctors had advised her against such a move on the grounds that one's friends can be a source of comfort and strength during the recovery process, but Christine had stubbornly stuck to her guns. It had created quite a rift amongst the people who knew and cared about her.

Some felt that she was making a courageous last stand against cancer and silently applauded her from afar, but most felt she was making a gigantic ass of herself by letting vanity get in the way of letting people help her. Nobody ever came out and said anything publicly, but there had been many whispered exchanges regarding whether her course of action was fair to her friends and whether it mattered if it was fair or not.

Throughout the whole ordeal one of the people she missed most had been Tim.

"Well, well, the dynamic duo, together again!" said Alphonse, coming up to them with a different drink in his hand than the last time Tim had seen him.

"Hello, Alphonse," Christine said, clearly nonplussed at his intrusion.

She didn't like Alphonse much. She respected him as an artist, but only barely, and that was about it. He threw a good party, though, she had to admit, and attracted all the best clientele and art critics. She wondered how he did it.

“Hope you’re both enjoying yourselves,” Alphonse continued, completely unaware that he wasn’t welcome. “Be sure to try the dip. Oh, and lest I forget, I recommend giving that particular piece,” and here he pointed out a sketchy drawing hanging in a corner with his laser pointer, “just a little extra attention. The subtleties there are quite striking, if I do say so myself.”

“And you always do,” muttered Christine.

“At any rate, must dash. Talk to you both again later. I must say, Christine, it’s good to see you looking healthy again.”

And with that Alphonse dashed off, away from the two friends.

Alphonse looked around and saw that everything was going pretty well. Some philistine had accidentally gotten some of the dip on one of the paintings...or, wait, perhaps he’d painted it like that. Yes, now that he looked again, that was exactly what it should look like, so even if it had been accidental, it was part of the piece now. The refreshments were holding up, everything was looking stylish, and he’d noticed several of the critics looking carefully at a number of his works and hardly giggling at all. That tended to be a good sign.

He glanced at his watch. Two more hours of this wretched show. Throwing these parties was a necessary evil. Before he’d found his calling as an artist he’d taken a course in college on marketing and had learned the only lesson he felt he really needed when it came to selling his work. First, create the product. Then tell people about it. And finally, make it easy for them to acquire it. Do those three things and everything else was just miniscule details. The gallery openings fulfilled a portion of the second requirement and most or all of the third, but the only part that really interested him was the first one.

Coming across as an affable artisan was very difficult for him. He essentially had to become a completely different person. And he was never more at home than in his studio creating art. If he could have found a way to pull it off, he’d have happily hired an impersonator to pretend to be him during these accursed events. Even now his mind was filled with images of new things to be created and he knew, with a sadness in his heart he could never describe to anyone, that many of those ideas would be lost forever by the time the evening was over through sheer forgetfulness. The drinking didn’t help, he knew, but it was the only way he could think of to make it through the evening without having a complete breakdown.

“David, Silvia,” he said in greeting to a handsome couple he was passing. He’d never seen them before tonight, but had decided that learning their names was worth the effort on the strength of their luxurious wardrobe. They had money. He wanted money. It sometimes really was that

simple, especially when he knew what the stack of bills looked like back at the studio. It looked disturbingly like the leaning tower of Pisa.

Then he felt a slight breeze and looked across the room to the opening door at the entrance to the gallery and stopped in his tracks. “Bat” had come to the party. This was completely unexpected for Alphonse and he didn’t know exactly how to react.

“Bat” was the nickname of one of Alphonse’s oldest friends. His given name was Bartholemew Wilkinson, which Alphonse always maintained was proof positive that parents didn’t always love their children, but that had quickly been shortened to Bart through elementary school before he’d discovered the joys of staying out all night, which had caused the eventual morph into “Bat”, which is what absolutely everybody called him now.

Seldom seen by day, Bat didn’t make it to many of the late night parties either, because he shunned the light so much that he even had a night job. Tonight must have been one of his off nights, or else he’d gotten the evening off specifically to come to it. Alphonse always felt glad to see Bat...or nearly always. Bat wasn’t exactly cultured, to use a precise definition, so his appearance at an art show was quite unusual. In fact, his presence was downright shocking and, in some ways, alarming for Alphonse. Bat was the kind of guy you hung around with in bars when nobody was looking. And if people *started* looking then you denied all knowledge and started looking *with* them just so you’d seem like part of their crowd rather than Bat’s.

The man was over six feet tall, wore what he called his ‘safety black’ all the time (“all the better to see me in the dark” he often said), was thin as a rail, and smoked. Of course smoking was commonplace amongst artists, but Bat could turn smoking a cigarette into an issue of freedom of expression and a debate about obscenity laws.

Alphonse decided to take the offensive...see what he wanted and then quietly usher him out the door if necessary.

“Bat! What a truly magnificent surprise!” he said, striding purposefully across the room before Bat could interact with anyone else.

“Alphonse,” Bat replied wheezily, coughing slightly as he acknowledged his friend. He held out a nicotine-stained hand for Alphonse to shake, realized that both of his friend’s hands were full, and instead tried to play it off by running his fingers through his own greasy black hair. “Nice setup you got here.”

“Thanks, Bat, thank you very much. We do our humble best,” Alphonse replied graciously. “What brings you out tonight, and here of all places?” He did his best to try to sound accusatory without

actually sounding like he was accusing Bat of anything.

“Well, since you mention it, I’m in the market for some art,” Bat said unexpectedly. “Been lookin’ around the apartment and noticed that the old calendars are expired and I need somethin’ else to hang up. An’ of course, I thought of you, buddy!”

Bat clapped Alphonse on the back. Alphonse winced. He’d worn a white jacket to the event and he just knew he now had a yellowish handprint on the back of it from Bat’s nicotine-soaked hands.

“Of course you are, of course you are,” Alphonse said, trying to think of some way out of this situation. Bat reeked of alcohol, coffee, and cigarettes. He had a sneaking suspicion that Bat had suddenly lost his job, which was how he would have had time to evaluate the contents of his apartment. Alphonse never visited Bat at home because the place was so dreary. Bat slept all day and worked all night. What good was art to him?

“So,” Bat continued, “I thought I’d just take a look around and see what was available at this here bigtime art show.”

“Alphonse!” called a voice from across the room. Alphonse looked and saw Christine standing with David and Silvia who were looking admiringly at one of his more expensive sculptures, motioning for him to come over. He looked at Bat, then back at Christine, then back at Bat with a look of panic in his eyes because in the two seconds he’d had his gaze averted, Bat was using one of the nearby bowls of dip as an ashtray. It was an exotic kind of dip...dark colored with lots of speckles that he had no idea what they were. There was an excellent chance nobody would notice. He grabbed a cracker scooped up the top layer of the ashy dip and popped it in his mouth. Then, eyes watering from the taste explosion he had just experienced, he hustled over to where Christine was standing with the two prospective buyers, or so he hoped.

Bat looked around the room and saw that he didn’t recognize anybody. The room was way too bright with lots of white objects and harsh lighting. He hated bright lights. When he was younger the doctors had told him that he was allergic to sunlight, very rare condition they said, and that he needed to wear a lot of sunscreen. Wearing sunscreen, especially during the winter, was a nuisance and made him feel greasy, so as soon as he was old enough he started staying up later and later just to avoid the sun altogether.

A few days ago, though, he’d lost his job and was now looking for work. The problem with that was that very few hiring managers worked at night, so he’d been forced to venture into the realm of the sun for the last two or three days. He was tired, cranky, and the sunscreen he was wearing made it look like he hadn’t had a bath recently. In fact, not only had he had a bath recently, but he’d had several trying to get the nicotine stains off of his hands and fingers. It no longer rubbed

off on anything like it used to, but the jaundiced look remained.

He'd also tried to quit smoking, but that wasn't going so well. Every few hours he'd resolve that he'd smoked his last cig, but then shortly thereafter he'd find another one between his fingers, frequently with no memory of how it had gotten there. This was causing an unexpected side effect because, to combat the tension of trying to quit smoking, he'd started drinking to calm his nerves. The mix of stimulant and depressant, which he wasn't used to yet, was making him feel funny. The coffee hadn't helped, either.

Wandering amongst the sculptures, tables, and the strange hanging art, Bat felt entirely out of his element. A lifetime of being in the dark had dulled his social skills to the point where he hardly had any left at all, which was why he'd come here. He knew Alphonse, so the theory went that he'd have one safety person to latch onto and could use that lifeline to go out and try to learn how to meet other people. What he hadn't counted on was that Alphonse, being the most important person at the show, wouldn't have any time to stay in one place to talk to him. Bat instinctively edged towards the corners on the assumption they'd be darker, but the light filled every corner of the room. He was actually feeling slightly panicky, a feeling which wasn't helped by his accidentally bumping into a young woman.

"Oh!" she said in surprise.

"Ah, er," said Bat awkwardly, stifling a cough with a snuffle. "Sorry," he eventually managed.

The woman was dressed in a vivid red dress, her raven black hair coming down just past her shoulders. She had a drink in her hand which had narrowly missed spilling down the front of the dress, which would have looked extremely awkward under the circumstances. Bat noticed that she'd really dressed up for the occasion. Ruby red lipstick, a string of white faux pearls, and a huge pair of hoop earrings, not to mention the requisite small black handbag all served to make her look like she'd stepped off a magazine ad for some perfume or other. Bat didn't know much about people, but he read magazines. Sometimes at night jobs that's all there was to do.

"Sorry," he said again after a moment. "Didn't see you there."

"It's ok," the woman said, clearly still startled at having been backed into by Bat. "I'm Alexis, I'm a friend of Alphonse's. What's your name?"

"Bat," said Bat. "I'm a friend of Alphonse's, too," he continued, thinking that something else was expected of him by the way the woman was looking at him.

"Your name is Bat?" she said. She sounded skeptical. The fact was that if she'd been to many of

these art shows she'd have run into all kinds of names that would have made "Bat" sound positively normal, but this was her very first one. When she was a child she'd doodled, as all kids do, but she'd never grown out of it. Even now she carried a sketch pad around with her nearly everywhere and made little notes about things she'd like to draw. She didn't try to draw them from life, she tried to draw them from memory. Things often turned out looking better from her imagination than they did in real life.

In high school her art teacher had tried to get her to paint still lifes, but Alexis had resolutely refused, preferring instead to set the scene up, dismantle it, and then proceed to paint it. Her teacher had taken photographs on a number of occasions to show her the obvious differences between what she'd painted and what it was "supposed" to look like, but she stood her ground and was probably the most talented artist that had ever received a 'C' in the course in the history of the school.

"Um, yeah. Bat," said Bat. He wasn't sure where to go from here. Had he offended her?

"What's your *real* name?" Alexis asked.

"Um...Bat," said Bat. The question hadn't made any sense to him. People had called him Bat for so long. What did it matter what his birth certificate said? If nobody called him by that name, was it really his? If he had a separate name for everyday life and for the government, who insisted on putting Bartholemew on his income tax checks, what of it? He'd had several arguments with the bank over that one. They insisted he couldn't endorse his checks as "Bat" when it was made out to "Bartholemew", but he'd eventually overcome the difficulty by using the night deposit. It was more convenient for him and they never called him to ask about his signature, they just deposited the damn money.

"Your name cannot possibly be "Bat"," Alexis continued stubbornly.

"Why not?" asked Bat, suddenly feeling defensive. Who was she to tell him what his name could and couldn't be? "It's what people call me," he finished lamely. The coffee, alcohol, and cigarettes combining to drain the fire out of any fight or argument he might have picked.

"Because it's absurd," said Alexis. "Who names their kid after some flying mammal?"

"I knew someone whose parents named them Curvaceous Bass," Bat said. He hadn't actually known them, but he knew a friend of a friend and had it on good authority that someone had, in fact, named their child Curvaceous Bass.

Alexis gaped at him. She took a sip of what was left of the drink in her hand and looked him over.

He was pale and scruffy and smelled funny, but other than that he looked reasonably handsome. She would have to remember what he looked like and draw a picture of him later.

“Bat!” said Alphonse, bustling over again. He was simultaneously elated and horrified that Bat had found Alexis to talk to. Elated because he knew Alexis had no money and that therefore Bat wasn’t jeopardizing potential art sales, but horrified because he knew that Alexis would never, ever, not in a million years ever understand Bat and his eccentric ways. Plus, she was a gifted artist and Bat didn’t have an artistic bone in his body.

“See,” said Bat, “Bat”.

Alexis gaped some more. “His name really is Bat?” she asked Alphonse incredulously.

“Not according to the state,” said Alphonse, “but we all call him that anyway.”

“Ah ha! I knew it,” Alexis exclaimed triumphantly. She did so loudly as well, attracting funny glances from around the room.

“Knew what?” asked Bat, trying desperately to keep up from within the fog his brain was currently in.

“Knew that your name wasn’t Bat,” said Alexis.

“But...my name *is* Bat,” said Bat.

Alphonse looked at the two of them and tried to decide whether it was worth it to explain the situation. He decided that it was, but wasn’t sure how to proceed since he had never learned Bat’s given name. He’d just heard him complaining about how the bank wanted him to sign some name that wasn’t his.

“Bat, why don’t you go sit down?” Alphonse suggested, pointing to a single chair he’d set up in the corner of the room. “Alexis,” he said, turning to the young woman, “quit being so literal. If he wants his name to be Bat, then his name is Bat and let it be.”

Alexis frowned. “I can’t imagine going by a name that wasn’t mine,” she said.

“But it *is* my name,” Bat insisted. This whole conversation was worrying him immensely. If Bat somehow wasn’t his name, then what was it? Was Bat some other person and he’d gotten confused and gone to the wrong house all these years? He certainly wasn’t going to be Bartholemew. He had unpleasant associations with that name and he wasn’t going to let people call him that no

matter what.

“It might be a nickname,” Alexis conceded, “but it’s not your name.”

“Bat, really, why don’t you go sit down?” Alphonse said, getting slightly desperate. The last thing he needed was his potential new protégé getting upset about a little thing like this. Artists were temperamental. Get them in the wrong mood and suddenly their ‘muse’ stops speaking to them and you don’t get any productivity, any art, and therefore any sales out of them for weeks...sometimes months.

But Bat had no intention of sitting down until this issue was resolved. Just because his parents had written something down on a piece of paper didn’t mean that was his name. As far as he was concerned, his name defined him. More so than some other names. What kind of name was Alexis anyway? Yeah, that was a good point.

“What kind of name is Alexis anyway?” Bat asked, putting his thoughts into words.

“It’s the name my parents gave me. They certainly didn’t call you Bat,” Alexis shot back.

“Actually, they do,” said Alphonse, trying to defuse the situation before it got any worse.

Bat, meanwhile, was feeling dizzy. This whole conversation was upsetting him because the whole reason why he’d come here was to meet people. So far he’d only met one and she was acting crazy. Was everyone like this?

“His parents call him Bat?” Alexis asked.

“Yes. I’ve met them. Wonderful people, wonderful,” Alphonse enthused, glancing around him and seeing a few people start to leave. That was money walking out the door, he thought.

“Wonderful...” Bat muttered to himself, feeling slightly faint.

“Bat, are you feeling well?” Alphonse asked. The last thing he needed was for Bat to collapse in the gallery. For one thing he might break some of the sculpture if he fell over on it, not to mention the fact that they’d probably have to call an ambulance and then the whole party would be over. He couldn’t afford that.

“Not so hot,” Bat managed, stumbling slightly.

Alphonse panicked. “Alexis, would you do me a gigantic favor and take Bat here out the back

door so he can get some fresh air?"

"Not as long as he keeps insisting his name is Bat," she countered.

"Look, you can continue the debate outside, but just please take him before he falls over!"

"Fine," said Alexis, grabbing Bat by the arm and dragging him towards the back of the gallery. Alphonse breathed a sigh of relief and made his way towards the front to try to head off some of the early departures.

Reaching the back door, Alexis opened it and considered briefly tossing Bat into the back alley and locking him out, but changed her mind and instead led him outside herself, propping the door open behind her so they wouldn't both get locked out.

Bat leaned against the nearby wall and took a deep breath, felt nauseated from the stench of garbage in the dumpster in the alley, turned, bent over, and threw up. Alexis backed up a couple of steps and made a mental note to not try to draw that later.

"Ugh..." said Bat.

"I concur," agreed Alexis.

Bat took another deep breath, through his mouth this time, and felt better. The cool air was reviving him after the stuffy atmosphere in the art gallery. He reflected briefly that that assessment could be taken literally or figuratively.

"Thanks," he said, turning back to Alexis.

"You're welcome," she replied. "Feeling better?"

"A little. Too much coffee, cigs, and drinking," Bat admitted. He looked at her again, but his eyes were still watering from having thrown up and also from the noxious smell coming from the dumpster, so all he saw was an amorphous red blob.

"Well, I'm going back in. I'll leave the door open for you, Bat." Alexis pronounced the last word with a roll of her eyes and then disappeared through the open door back to the party.

Bat leaned against the wall again and stared up at the night sky. What a weird world. He came to a party for the first time in years, met a crazy woman, and ended up losing his lunch in an alley because he'd been drinking. He'd smoked since he was seventeen, but he'd never really gotten into

drinking before. Maybe sticking to the coffee and cigs would be better, he thought.

As his eyes cleared up he could discern a few of the stars that managed to shine through the haze of light pollution that the city always produced. Light pollution annoyed him. It made it brighter than it had to be.

He breathed in the night air, but the dumpster made the whole experience very unpleasant so he elected to go back in. Shutting the door behind him, he noticed that the crowd had thinned somewhat. Alexis was nowhere in sight. Alphonse was talking with an elderly couple over by one of the larger paintings.

“Excuse me,” said a voice from off to his left.

Bat looked over and noticed a man with the chair that Alphonse had been trying to get him to sit in earlier. He was carrying it somewhere, presumably to get it out of the way. It was the only chair in the room and Bat suspected that it had been put there specifically for him to sit in.

“Sorry,” Bat muttered, moving out of the way.

“Not at all,” the man said, carrying the chair past him.

He weaved through the hanging tapestries and sculptures and made his way to the storage closet where he put the chair in a corner and then closed the door.

Simon looked out at the room and saw a lot of art still hanging on the walls, the floors, and from the ceiling that had no ‘sold’ signs anywhere near them. He owned the gallery and he loved Alphonse and the clients he brought in, but it looked like he was going to take a bath on this showing. Which was a shame. Simon had seen a lot of art come into the gallery in the last 12 years and he had to admit that this was some of the best of the lot. Not quite as good as the showing by Raphael last year or Leon the year before, but certainly in the top five in his experience.

Alphonse was directly across the room from him talking to an elderly couple. He knew them, the Williams family. Very old, very rich, and very, very picky about their art. Alphonse should have known better than to try to sell them something. They always made up their own minds and the harder you tried to sell them, the more they dug in their heels and found ways to say no. Simon decided he’d better rescue Alphonse before all the other patrons left while he was wasting his time with this couple.

“Mr. and Mrs. Williams,” Simon said, coming over briskly. “So good of you to come. Enjoying

yourselves?”

“Quite,” said Mr. Williams. “I was just remarking to Mrs. Williams that this is quite fine art. Overpriced, as I was also just telling Mr. Alphonse here, but quite fine nonetheless.”

Alphonse smiled, but his eyes revealed that he was nonplussed by this reaction. Didn't this man understand how long it took to create art like this? Didn't he understand that while you were creating art it was hard to do anything else? Regular jobs require too much of your attention to hold them and create art at the same time, but he still had the same bills as everybody else. If you were to extrapolate the time spent against the price he was charging, this stuff was a bargain!

Simon could tell that Alphonse was stressing out, and rightfully so, but pressuring the Williamses was not a time-honored tactic for how to make a sale. They bought so much art here that the better course of action would be to let them go because if pressed too hard they might go away altogether. One studio across town had actually gone out of business because not only did they stop coming themselves, but they told all of their well-heeled friends that the place had gone to seed and the whole place just withered on the vine.

“Mr. Williams,” Simon began, “I do hope you've had a nice time tonight.”

“Oh, indeed,” Mrs. Williams said. “The art, as Mr. Williams mentioned, is quite fine and pleasing to look at. We're just not in the market just at the moment.”

“As you say,” Simon continued. “Perhaps we'll see you again in the future and will have something more to your liking.”

“I think that's extremely likely,” Mr. Williams said. “And now we really must be going.”

With that, Mr. Williams doffed his hat, offered his arm to Mrs. Williams, who took it, and they both walked out the door. As the door shut they fancied they heard raised voices on the other side of it, but they paid it no mind. They understood that their custom was very important to places like this. But the galleries needed reminding that their support had to be properly appreciated. They hadn't actually gotten invitations to this opening and had heard about it through friends. That, Mr. Williams had said, was unacceptable. They didn't appreciate having to feel like gate crashers when their business could make or break the place.

They'd heard about the studio across town, which had been called Lionine and had specialized in cats and other feline-related works, and they felt bad about it. But the young man in charge of the place hadn't even begun to know when to quit selling. It had been like walking into a furniture store or a used car lot. If they'd wanted that kind of treatment they could have gone to one of those

places or even to an electronics store, but they wanted to look at and buy art. In that order.

The wind whipped along nearly knocking Mr. Williams's hat off, but he grabbed it just in time. Hats weren't commonly worn these days, he knew, but he'd worn one all his life and it kept his head warm. Plus, his father had worn a hat, and *his* father had worn a hat. Bygone traditions stayed put in certain families, and this was one of them. Plus, it looked distinguished, or so his wife said, and that was good enough for him.

They walked sedately along the sidewalk. Living downtown had its advantages, Mrs. Williams had often said. She hated cars. She thought they were noisy and smelly and traveled far too fast for it to be good for anyone. Living close to everything they did meant that they could walk most places and having money meant they could afford a taxi when they needed it. As a result of walking everywhere her whole life, she was in remarkably good shape for a woman of her age. Both of the Williams's were, in fact, quite trim and prided themselves on the fact, although Mr. Williams sometimes used a cane and Mrs. Williams had slowed slightly in the last few years. No matter. At their time of life they had no reason to hurry anywhere.

Meeting one's life goals is something to be done while you're young, and they had both realized it early. They started out by making their living, saving, scrimping, and investing wisely until they felt comfortable with their financial position and then they had traveled. There had been no time for children, but they hadn't missed them a bit. Their brothers and sisters had had plenty of children of their own and so they got all the benefits without most of the responsibility, apart from the occasional bout of babysitting. It was like skipping parenthood and going directly to grandparenthood.

Traveling wasn't done as much these days because they'd both lost a step and felt more inclined to stay at home, but in their youth they had seen a good part of the world. Starting in Cancun they had made their way around the Yucatan peninsula and had seen the Mayan ruins before they had gotten all touristy. They had also spent a great amount of time seeing the unbeaten paths of southern Mexico, steering well away from Mexico City and other major cities until later in the trip. They appreciated culture, of course, but had found that culture was difficult to find in a museum. Better to go to the source first and then come back to see what other people thought culture was. It gave you a basis for comparison without giving you preconceived notions.

To Rome they had gone next, seeing first the outskirts of Italy and then the major city itself, followed in the coming years by France and England, paying particular attention to the many wars these two great nations had fought. Spain, Portugal, and many Slavic states were also visited until they grew tired of Europe and inquired after African destinations. On one memorable trip they had seen South Africa and then, without returning home, proceeded on to Australia.

In all that time, not a fuss, not an argument, and very little in the way of even minor disagreements. It was as if they truly had been made for each other. And they carried the old world with its style, manners, and customs everywhere they went.

Now they regarded themselves largely as homebodies, seldom leaving the city and only venturing forth to see cultural events. Their investments took care of them financially and their nieces and nephews came to visit periodically, so there was no need to work or to go to be with family.

They had a few regrets, mostly having to do with age. When they had visited Hawai'i they had been forced to forego a rather lengthy hike because Mrs. Williams felt as though she was no longer up to it and Mr. Williams had missed out on a special tour of the Kremlin what with being laid up with pneumonia. The famous Russian winter had claimed another potential invader, he'd said with a chuckle.

Now they ambled home through the darkened streets. Ahead they noticed a figure staggering towards them.

"Mrs. Williams, if you could cross the street with me here. I'd prefer not to have to deal with the drunkard ahead," said Mr. Williams.

"Of course, sir," Mrs. Williams replied.

They reached a crosswalk and waited for the light. The shambling figure drew nearer, but they paid it no mind. At last the light changed in their favor and, looking both ways to be sure there were no potential red light runners approaching, they crossed. The staggering man lurched by where they had just been standing a moment ago. Had they stayed they would have noticed the bleeding from his head wound.

He'd hit his head earlier today. He didn't know exactly when, but he remembered the sun being up at the time and it was dark now, so he must have been knocked out for several hours. He'd been building a deck from the looks of things and a board must have fallen and hit him rather solidly. When he'd awoken on the ground he had no memory of where he was or what he'd been doing. Being able to piece together the construction project based on context clues had been fairly simple, but he didn't know why he'd been there. All he knew was that he was bleeding and needed help. He hoped there was a hospital nearby.

There was a vague impression in the back of his mind that he ought to know more than he did. He ought to know his name, for example, or his address. He ought to know whether or not he was married. Looking at his hands revealed no wedding band, but there was an indentation where one might have gone. Perhaps he had taken it off while he was working. If he had been married, were

there children? How many? Would they be missing him and looking for him right now? He had to get to the hospital. Wherever it was.

He lurched down the street some more, looking for signs that would point the way. He felt confused. Where did he work? What did he do? Was he a construction worker by trade? Or was this something he did in his spare time? An uneasy feeling went through him as he realized that he might have been working on his own home. Perhaps he should turn back. But which way led back? He couldn't remember.

Stopping to lean against a wall, the man tried to control his breathing. Panic was not going to help. Several passers by walked near him, but none stopped to help.

"Got to think," he muttered to himself. "Got to figure this out."

He looked down at his clothes. Old and faded, but that was to be expected for someone working on a construction project. He wouldn't have worn his good clothes for that kind of thing. No wedding band. Again, he might have taken it off to do his work. Or maybe he'd gotten divorced. That was a possibility. Maybe the building project was busy work to keep his mind off of the sorry state he was in. He checked for his wallet and found nothing in his pockets.

Nothing really to go on. He'd be better off finding someone to help him. But now that the thought had been introduced, he was having a hard time letting it go. Divorced. Unhappy. He thought he could just barely remember being unhappy. He didn't want to be unhappy. Who did? His mind's confused state led him to believe that if he'd been unhappy...maybe now was the time to change that. A new life. A new start. Why bother going through all that was necessary to remember a life you hated? It was like suicide, except without all the messy consequences.

Feeling calmer and freer than he had just a moment ago, the man started walking again, but felt dizzy almost immediately and had to sit down.

"Blank slate," he mumbled to himself. "I'm a blank slate. I can do anything..." he trailed off.

"Hey, watch out for that guy in the middle of the sidewalk."

"Oh, he ain't nobody. Let him watch out for himself. Damn bums."

The two youths steered around the man on the sidewalk. Jerry had just met Darryl a few days ago in class and were on their way to Jason's house to meet up with Meredith and Michelle. They were supposed to be working on a project together, but so far Jerry seemed to be doing most of the work while the rest were just kibitzing. Jerry particularly didn't like Darryl. His callous attitude

towards everything was really offensive. He, Jerry, couldn't wait for the project to be over and it was only half done, which he regarded as a particularly bad sign, especially since it was supposed to last the entire semester with various reports as the project went along.

"Did you do the spreadsheet?" asked Jerry, knowing the answer before he asked.

"Nah, I'll throw it together this weekend," Darryl answered.

Jerry had heard that before. The first report had been due within the first week and was supposed to define the mission and topic that they had chosen for the simulation. After browbeating the rest of the group into having a meeting to discuss the situation, Jason and Darryl had agreed to do the presentation. Eight hours before it was due Darryl had called Jerry in a panic saying that his computer had crashed and that Jerry would have to do the presentation himself. There were no written notes, he'd said, it was all on the computer. So Jerry had spent all night doing some extremely last minute research, gotten up there in front of the class and his teacher and had given a pretty mediocre assessment and had somehow scraped a 'C' on the first report. In his defense, he'd been distracted just before he went up to speak by overhearing Jason, Darryl, and Meredith talking about the *World of Warcraft* campaign they'd been on last night and how they'd finally beaten some boss of some area.

Afterwards, Jerry had asked the teacher to be reassigned into a different group, but had been refused on the grounds that everybody else had already picked roles and that to insert him into someone else's group would disrupt everybody's workflow. So Jerry had pretty much resigned himself to having to do the whole thing. The truth was that the spreadsheet was already done, but if Darryl had, by some miracle, actually done it himself then Jerry would have used it just to encourage him to do more of the work.

"So you got your computer fixed?" Jerry asked.

"What? Oh! Yeah. Turned out one of the boards just needed to be reseated."

Darryl prided himself on having never bought a manufactured computer. He always assembled the things himself from parts he gathered together and he tried to have at least two functional at all times with a third in reserve to steal bits from when certain components wore out. Like the power supply. Or the network card. Or, on one memorable occasion, an entire motherboard.

He was only taking this class with the others because he needed one more elective and all the other classes were full. And no wonder. This class was a complete drag. Still. He felt bad for Jerry. Everybody else had pretty much decided, through non-spoken agreement, that if he was going to let himself be used like that then they were going to take full advantage.

Jerry felt his pocket buzz with the vibration that meant a text message was coming in. He pulled the device out of his pocket and looked to see what it said.

Hey, Happy Birthday little cousin. How's it going today?

Lawrence set the phone aside and looked out at the field. Today had been a good day for him. He was on vacation and had found a cabin out in the middle of nearly nowhere. Of course he wasn't *that* far from civilization. He still got a cell phone signal here, for example.

His phone made a beeping noise and he checked for the return text from Jerry.

Thanks, cuz. It's ok. Too much schoolwork.

Grinning, Lawrence put the phone back in his pocket. He remembered those times himself. Being in school, having your group members dump all the work on you, and being unable to bring yourself to tank the class just for the pleasure of watching them fail. Your pride got in the way of a good revenge. He knew someone who had done that once. A girl who he'd had a major crush on, especially after pulling this particular stunt which he thought had exhibited more moxie than he'd ever seen in his life. What was her name? He racked his memories, but couldn't unearth the identity of the girl. How many years ago had it been? Ten? Twenty? That didn't seem that long ago to totally forget someone who he thought he'd been in love with.

He sighed and walked off the front porch of the cabin, down the stairs to the front lawn, and sat down in one of the chairs he'd set out. Dusk had fallen in Montana and he was looking forward to the famous star view in that Big Sky.

The solitude of the area filled the space around him. It was invigorating to him, like cool water on a hot day, like the proverbial breath of fresh air, which was getting harder and harder to come by with pollution what it was these days. Looking around him, he found it hard to believe that this used to be the status quo. A cabin or some other kind of shelter and lots of space. You didn't used to have to live within six yards of your neighbor. You didn't used to have to have building codes to keep houses and apartments a certain distance from each other. He'd read a story once that said that the Earth could probably only comfortably support about 3 billion people, and here we were at 6 billion plus and counting.

The sun was fully set now and Lawrence could see more sky than he'd ever dreamed of seeing in the city. The light pollution was at a minimum and the stars shone down. How had early man felt? Had early man felt anything at all? People philosophized that before technology, man must have felt vulnerable and alone, insignificant beneath the vastness of space and the universe. But early

man didn't know about those things. How can you feel small in comparison to something you know nothing about? All they probably cared about was where the next meal was coming from and whether it would put up much of a fight.

Early men hadn't felt afraid of the void. They had found hope. They looked up at a random series of dots and somehow found shapes and patterns. They had found Leo and Gemini, Cassiopeia and Draco, Hercules and Taurus. How had they done it? Lawrence had never been able to find constellations, except for the Big Dipper. An infinity of stars and someone had found the gods. In a finite number of people in the world, some of them couldn't even find themselves.

His job as a public speaker had him interacting with hundreds, sometimes thousands of people every day. And yet he knew none of them. Sometimes he'd attend conventions with tens of thousands of attendees and he'd stand on one of the upper floors of the convention center and look down on them milling about, each going on their separate errand, paying just enough heed to one another to maintain the air of civility and politeness. How many of them had seen each other before but couldn't remember? How many of them were seeing each other for the first time and would never cross paths again?

And where did they go after the convention was over? Pass someone in the street and you automatically make judgments and assumptions about them, but what do they actually do once you part company? Do they go home and beat their wife? Or do they help their kids with their homework? Perhaps they don't make it home at all.

Lawrence sighed. He'd thought of all this before and he had no doubt he'd think of it again. Seeing as many people as he did, you couldn't help it. You wondered who they were and where they went. You wondered what they thought of you, of other people around them, and of themselves. The old saying went that a great gift would be to see yourself as others saw you, but would it be a gift or a curse? How many different opinions of you were there in the world? How could anyone live up to those kinds of expectations?

A raccoon scampered across the field in the distance, heading for the safety of the trees. How had it gotten so far away from them?

Chuckling at how his line of thought had somehow been extended to animals, Lawrence sat under the stars until he finally fell asleep.

In the morning he awoke, cold and hungry and upset with himself for sleeping outside unprotected. His throat felt a little sore and he hoped it was just from breathing the night air and not from some illness he had contracted due to his exposure to the elements. Getting up, he found himself very stiff from sitting in the chair all night and staggered towards the cabin to get a hot shower and some

breakfast. On the way he checked his phone. No voicemails, but one text message.

Hope you're enjoying the vacation, dude.

Joshua swept through the hospital. Literally. Dustmop in hand, no dirt or dust escaped his sight. He checked his phone, but Lawrence hadn't replied to the text he'd sent last night. Must be enjoying the vacation more than he'd expected, Joshua thought. Lawrence had seemed out of sorts right before he left, but had needed the time away more than he'd wanted to admit and so had gone anyway.

It constantly amazed Joshua that Lawrence would still pal around with him. After all, he'd made it. Big time public speaker, giving motivational lectures and other presentations around the world to thousands of people...and here was Joshua, head janitor at the big downtown hospital. Not manager, mind you, that would have required too much thinking and responsibility, but he certainly had seniority. Unless you counted Old Man Mike, as everyone called him. Mike had been there for forever. But Joshua was certainly number two in seniority and that counted for something, although nobody was sure what.

Growing up together counted for something after all, Joshua guessed. Lawrence could have easily left him behind years ago, but they still lived in the same city, still got together whenever Lawrence was in town, and still remembered the good old days. Like the time when they got Millicent drunk and she went home and told her mother that she'd done it because pink elephants were so cute and she wanted to see one. Or the time they convinced Aaron to steal the hubcaps off the preacher's car. Of course they hadn't told him that the preacher had alloy wheels, but it was still funny to watch Aaron try.

Still friends after all these years. Joshua pushed his dustmop, picking up stray bits of lint from the mostly pristine hallways of the hospital. Cleaning this place was a full time job for the staff because it was hard to find time to run the automatic floor cleaners. They made too much noise for a place where quiet time was so important for the patients. Some of them had been there for a while. Others wouldn't be there much longer, one way or the other. Joshua didn't actually know or even really talk to any of the patients, but he waved and smiled whenever he saw one. Most of them weren't serious cases. A little broken arm, some bronchitis, the occasional pregnancy. There were one or two cancer patients and one AIDS case down the hall, but most of the really serious stuff was in another wing and Old Man Mike patrolled those halls. It was like his territory, and Joshua was just as happy to let him have it. He saw enough death and suffering where he was.

Many people would have been upset by Joshua's position in life at his age. He'd turned 39 for the third time last May and was still working in what a lot of people would have considered a fairly lowly position, but he didn't care. Rent was paid every month, good friends were enjoyed on a

fairly regular basis, roof was overhead and food was consumed. What more was there to life? Putting in 8 hours here on your feet all day was a lot less stressful than some jobs he could name. Lawrence's, for example. Joshua had no idea how Lawrence could get up in front of such large groups of people and enrapture them the way he did. Something about the way his voice carried, the way he could make you feel like he was looking at you and you alone...the effect was almost magical. And it was a magic that Joshua had no understanding of, no ability to tap into, and not even really that much of a desire to.

Once you started showing talent like that then suddenly you got responsibilities. People expected things of you. You gained that most horrible of all afflictions, *potential*. A good potential meant that you had to live up to it, and if you didn't then suddenly what was good enough for the kid down the hall wasn't good enough for you because you weren't meeting your potential. Joshua had managed to avoid that particular pitfall, at least in his own eyes. His mother kept nagging him about finding a better job, but whenever he'd go looking he could never find one that met his definition of better.

The tell-tale squeak of a gurney came echoing down the hallway and Joshua ducked into a side hall. No sense being in the way when someone was coming through. They might be in a hurry, something that he tried to avoid whenever possible. Show up on time, do your work, don't get behind. Being in a hurry led to mistakes and the only thing worse than a mistake was office politics or other drama. He'd learned that in his first job, many years ago when he'd thought that if you kept to yourself you'd be immune to that kind of thing. He'd found out the hard way when Jack had leapfrogged him for the promotion and then used his new power to make sure Joshua never had any hope of advancement. Shortly after that incident was when he'd taken the job as janitor at the hospital, and he'd never looked back.

Well. Except for that one time when he'd asked Millicent out on the date. Now that they were all grown up, he'd figured now was a good time to admit to the crush he'd always had on her. Unfortunately, she'd said there was no way she was going to date a janitor, and that was that. Joshua had spent the next two days mulling it over and had decided that, all things considered, he liked his new career path more than he liked Millicent and that was the last he'd ever seen of her. That made him all the more grateful for Lawrence.

"Excuse me," said a weak and elderly voice from one of the rooms.

Joshua poked his head in the room. "You need something?"

"Yes. Could you get me a glass of water?"

"Sure," Joshua said, going to the nearby bathroom and grabbing a paper cup. After filling it up he

checked the chart. He'd gotten into trouble exactly one time, and that was for giving a patient a cup of water when they were about to go into surgery. Afterwards he'd gotten one of the doctors to show him the very basics of how to read a chart so a similar mistake wouldn't be made again. This patient was in for recovery from a small stroke. He looked feeble and Joshua wasn't sure how well the recovery was going, but there was nothing on there about not being able to have water so he handed it over.

"Thanks," the old man said gratefully.

"No problem," Joshua said, turning to go.

"What's your name, son?"

Joshua sighed. He tried not to get involved with the patients, but he didn't want to be rude either.

"I'm Joshua, sir. I'm one of the janitors here."

"Joshua. Joshua. I knew a Joshua when I was a child, I think. May have gone to primary school together. Damn fine athlete."

The old man laid there a few moments more and closed his eyes. Joshua turned to go, but suddenly the man opened them again as if he'd just taken a short catnap and said "My name is Jeremy. It's good to meet you, Joshua."

"Same here, sir," said Joshua, trying desperately to think of a way out of this. "Do you need me to go get a doctor?"

"No...no, that's ok. I don't think I'll be needing doctors much longer," said Jeremy. "How old would you say I am?"

"I've no idea, sir."

"Take your best guess."

Joshua hated guessing games. "I'll say 87."

The old man chuckled. "I must look worse than I thought. I'm 79."

"Sorry, sir, but I'm a terrible judge of age."

“No, not at all, not at all. They say that the first thing to go is either hearing or memory, but they’re wrong. The first thing that goes is your vanity. There’s not much point in it after a while.”

Joshua smirked.

“Now. Tell me about your job here,” the man began, but was interrupted by the appearance of a man in a white coat.

“Jeremy, didn’t I tell you to get some sleep? Is Joshua bothering you?” the man said.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Wiesen, but I was thirsty. No, he’s not bothering me, he got me my drink of water and I was just passing the time with him.”

“I’m sorry, too, Dr. Wiesen,” Joshua began, but the doctor cut him off again.

“Nevermind, Joshua. You did the right thing. But Jeremy, in future if you want water you should use the nurse’s call button, not flag down whoever happens to be passing by.”

“Yes, doctor,” the old man said with a trace of sarcasm.

“Fine. I’ll see you later.”

Dr. Wiesen walked out. He hated that tone of voice from his patients. That holier-than-thou sarcasm that seemed to come out whenever he tried to give advice that wasn’t popular. It was the same kind of tone he’d used with his mother once he reached his twenties and she kept trying to ‘mother’ him.

If it had been anyone other than Joshua they would have gotten a reprimand at the very least, but Dr. Wiesen had been the one to teach him how to read the chart. The man had caught on fairly quickly and Dr. Wiesen wondered how he could have ended up as a janitor. Not to say that he could have become a doctor. There was no way to evaluate that kind of potential just from reading a chart, but he was certainly bright enough to be an administrator.

Of course around here being an administrator was nothing to be proud of and certainly didn’t require great intellect, Dr. Wiesen observed quietly to himself. He always made those kinds of observations quietly to himself these days, especially after the incident two years ago that had nearly cost him his job. Some people hold a grudge.

He stalked down the hall, trying to remember that he was a doctor and was therefore almost required to have a cheerful bedside manner, but the truth was that he was in a foul mood. Patients

ignoring orders, calling janitors for a cup of water, not taking their medicine, going for walks when they'd been ordered to bedrest. Why had he gone to medical school for all those years, racked up all that student debt, and then amassed thirty years of experience in practice? The patients always knew better. They didn't actually need him, or at least that's how they acted.

"Good morning, Dr. Wiesen," someone said.

"Morning," Dr. Wiesen returned. He didn't know what made it good. In fact, he'd probably go as far as to say that it was a terrible morning, but again with the bedside manner. Small talk disagreed with him, and mechanical greetings annoyed him, and the only thing worse was rhetorical questions like 'how are you?'. Nobody actually cared.

He turned the corner and ran into one of his colleagues, Dr. Michaelson.

"Wiesen, morning," Dr. Michaelson said.

"Morning," Dr. Wiesen said, mentally rolling his eyes. This usually went on until about 11 in the morning when people started getting uncomfortable with the phrase so close to the afternoon, or else had already greeted you.

"Ah, you're grumpy. Still having trouble with Mr. Tos?"

"Of course I am. He asked Joshua for a cup of water just a few minutes ago. Is the nurse's call button so difficult to use? He could have flagged down anybody!"

"Well, at least it was someone who has some sense."

"Yeah, but what about next time?"

"At his age, there may not be a next time," Dr. Michaelson replied sagely.

"True. But the principle is the same."

"Yes, but I doubt he's living on principle at this point. In fact, I'd say there's a chance he's living on pure stubbornness."

Dr. Wiesen chuckled in spite of himself. "Yes, I'd say you're probably right. So how's Mrs. Charleton?"

"That's Ms. Charleton, as she will be only too happy to remind you, and she's fine. Bringing her

into the hospital was the right move. Her diabetes is complicating her pregnancy, but she should go into labor soon and all indicators are that the baby will be fine.”

“Good, that’s good. Well, I have to go.”

“Of course. See you later,” Dr. Michaelson said, waving.

Dr. Michaelson had known Dr. Wiesen for the last fifteen years and was constantly amazed that the man didn’t have a stroke or a heart attack. He agonized over every little detail and wouldn’t leave anything to chance. He also couldn’t get his head around the fact that his patients were human beings, not lab experiments, and that there were some bits of advice that they simply weren’t going to follow no matter how good it would be for them to. It was like his son.

He’d told him that seeing that girl wasn’t the best idea, but he’d done it because he felt it was his duty as a father to try to warn his son away from trouble. He hadn’t actually expected George to break up with her. Quite the opposite, actually, but trying reverse psychology on him seldom worked, mainly because he was studying to be a psychologist himself. So he’d done his fatherly duty and then waited to pick up the pieces when it all went bad, which it ultimately did. Blaming his son had never entered into his mind. It was natural. It was to be expected. And so you did what you had to do and then later you did the other thing you had to do.

Dr. Michaelson stopped by room 221B and poked his head in.

“Everything ok in here, Mr. Benefield?”

“Just fine, Dr. Michaelson. Just waiting on breakfast to get here.”

“That’s fine, Mr. Benefield,” Dr. Michaelson said, observing the empty breakfast dishes at the side of the bed. Breakfast had been an hour ago, but Mr. Benefield’s memory wasn’t what it was. The dementia seemed to be taking a more permanent hold. It wouldn’t be long until the hospital couldn’t do anything else for him. A broken arm had caused him to be admitted, and he’d been her for a few weeks while it healed and his family made arrangements for more permanent care. Dr. Michaelson waved, watched Mr. Benefield smile and wave back, and then departed.

Mr. Ernest Benefield sat back on his pillows and wondered why he felt so full when he hadn’t had breakfast yet. Maybe he should ring and tell them he didn’t need it? No, as soon as he did that they were bound to show up with it anyway, or else he’d succeed in getting them to not bring it and then he’d be starving before lunch. He looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. When had he gotten here? His arm hurt. He looked at it and saw the cast. He’d seen one of those before, but it had been very different.

When he'd been younger. There had been a log and a waterfall and friends and he'd fallen off and broken his arm. His mother had been very upset and taken him to the hospital where he'd gotten a cast on his arm. All his friends had signed it. This cast was different though. For one thing, nobody had signed it at all. He looked around for a pen to sign it with, but found none. Perhaps he could find one somewhere else.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Ernest got up with some difficulty and staggered over to the doorway. This shouldn't be this difficult. A pen should be in easy reach wherever you went, he thought. Walking shouldn't be this difficult either, he thought again. I'm an athlete. I should be able to get around better.

Fifty years ago Ernest Benefield had trained for marathons and was serious enough about them to travel to other cities to compete. He'd run the Boston Marathon, the Peachtree Road Race in Atlanta, and several other lesser known races. Winning had never been in his mind, although he did unexpectedly place fifth once. Finishing was what his goal had always been, and he'd only failed once when he'd sprained his ankle right at the start. He'd gutted it out for half the distance, but his girlfriend at the time had seen him limping and had forced him to stop.

God, he'd loved her. What was her name? He wracked his memory, trying to see through the fog and tangle to find her face and recall her name. What had become of her? A puzzled look came over his face.

"Ernest? What are you doing out of bed, dear?"

"Winifred, it's good to see you," he replied.

Winifred Benefield beamed. He'd remembered her. She had just come from talking to Dr. Michaelson and he'd indicated that with the dementia advancing that the days when he remembered people might be coming to an end.

"Winifred, can you help me?"

"Maybe. But first let's get you back in bed."

"No, no, I'm fine here. I'm just fine. But I need you to help me remember something."

"Ok, and if I do, will you get back in bed?"

"Yes, yes, but I have to remember this first. Do you remember when I used to run marathons?"

“Of course I do, dear.”

“And do you remember me telling you about the time I sprained my ankle?”

“I remember you spraining your ankle that one time in Texas, yes,” she replied.

“Do you remember the name of the girl I was dating then? The one who pulled me out of the race so I wouldn’t hurt myself more. Do you know whatever happened to her?”

Winifred paused. She could feel all their long years draining away. The feeling that wonderful times had come to an end was stealing over her and that nothing from this point on would be the same. Hold onto the good times, everyone had told her. Hold onto them because they might not come again in your lifetime.

“You married me, dear,” she finally managed.

Ernest looked at her. The fuzz in his memories clouded his memories. He could see the face standing in front of him, but he couldn’t see it in his mind’s eye. He couldn’t remember what she had looked like on that rainy day in Texas when she’d insisted he come out of the race before the injury became more severe.

“Maybe I should get back in bed...” he began, but then he heard a commotion out in the hall. Two commotions, in fact, one in either direction. He shuffled over to the door and looked out in time to see a gurney being wheeled down the hall. An old man lay on it and a doctor was running along beside it.

“Hang on, Jeremy,” the man was saying, but even in his diminished state, Ernest could tell that the man didn’t expect Jeremy to last much longer. And then, from the other direction, he could hear crying. A baby crying.

“What’s going on?” Ernest asked.

“Nothing, dear,” Winifred said, taking him by the arm. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

Author's notes:

This novel began as a simple writing exercise. I wanted to work on character development, to flesh out histories and give myself building blocks. There are lots of places in the above text (as I'm sure you noticed) where I put the characters in sticky situations and then veered off to new characters without resolving the dilemmas in which I placed them. I hadn't actually intended to handle the transitions that way, but it seemed the most natural way of dealing with them after a while.

The statement I was making, as I'm sure I bludgeoned you with towards the end, is that a person sees themselves differently than nearly everyone around them. Opinions change over time and snap judgments can be made, which are sometimes accurate but more often are not. And in most cases we never find out one way or the other.

At any rate, what started out as a throwaway writing exercise actually turned into something I'm rather proud of. I think I came up with some very interesting scenarios and even I wonder what some of these characters might have done with the situations I put them in. Your mileage may vary.

Next year...I dunno. I always say I won't do it again, but on the other hand I don't seem to find time to write any other time of the year. Maybe I'll do NaNo again just out of sheer stubbornness.

Oh, and as if you needed me to tell you, this novel has not been subjected to any editing whatsoever. You get what you pay for.

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