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The
Reward
of the
Fool

The Reward of the Fool
by
Obi



Penknife Press

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Resentment kills a fool, and envy slays the simple.

The Holy Bible
Job 5:2

... because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say.
Come and put a curse on these people for me..

The Holy Bible
Numbers 22:17

I

My life has been wasted. Squandered. Thrown away like a bag of shit. And I'm the one who did it. Second by second, breath by breath, I spent it. I spent it a penny at a time, penny after penny after penny.

It's a funny thing about pennies. They don't seem worth much. So they're easy to throw around. At first, they don't appear to be the atoms, molecules, cells of a life. So you throw them away without really thinking about it. Sometimes one at a time, sometimes by the fistful. The other thing about pennies is that they disappear quickly. They don't hang around under your feet reminding you that they've just been thrown away. So you forget. Then one day after several decades of watching them fly from your hand in a steady stream, your reach into the theretofore bottomless bag for yet another handful, and you feel it. You feel the sides of the canvas bag rubbing ever so lightly against the knuckles at the back of your hand. It happened to me for the first time this morning.

I guess the notion to stop and take stock wasn't new. It had insinuated itself into my mind countless times over the years. Always uninvited, always quickly dispatched. But *this* morning was different. *This* morning, I felt the sides of the canvas bag against my knuckles. *This* morning, I wanted to see exactly what my pennies had purchased.

I made a list. I actually got a pen and ink and some paper, and I wrote it down. I wrote 'MY LIFE' in capital letters across the top of the first sheet of a stack about a quarter inch thick of clean, white, acid-free, 25% cotton fibre, 24 pound bond. Each sheet had the manufacturer's watermark emblazoned in the middle, a round circle with a winged dragon clutching a ribbon banner with the

manufacturer's name in calligraphic script. I wrote clear, blue Arabic numerals along the lefthand margin careful to insure that the period after each one was spaced a consistent distance from the numeral itself. This was going to be a document that I could frame and hang on the wall and point to and say with some degree of justifiable pride, "This is my life."

I pondered the first entry. The words, 'I was born' leapt to mind quickly followed by a date, a month, a day, a year. Then I thought about it. There was nothing especial about that month, that day, that year. Hundreds, indeed thousands, of people could make the exact same claim. Everybody ever born could at least make a similar claim. No, that wasn't the kind of first entry I wanted. I wanted something bold, something that would stand out, make someone take notice.

This time, the words 'I graduated' came to me quickly followed by the names of schools I had attended. Admiral David Glasgow Farragut High School and Wilson Junior College. But again, so what? Hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands could make the same claim, or even better ones.

The thought that I had been in the military made me chuckle.

I stared at the numeral one and the little period that followed it. Then it struck me. I hadn't done anything worthy of note. I was nothing. I was no one. I had made no mark. Shit!

I had just recently arrived at Chicago's O'Hare Airport from a job in Texas. I had just killed a man. That's what I am. That's what I do. His name was Avel. His name is always Avel. I killed him to stop him from killing America. I killed him for the good of democracy.

What his real name was isn't important. It's what he did that counts. What he did was head up Post, Tanne and Leef, the construction

company that made billions of dollars over the years supporting U.S. military aggression around the world. He didn't just support military aggression, he contributed to the campaigns of politicians who advocated for war, who sought war. In fact, he ran for president himself. He and people like him start wars just so their corporations can make money. He thinks the president should be above the law. He thinks that *all* rich people should be above the law. He thinks its okay for poor peoples' blood to run in the streets. His favorite line during his campaign was that he had no quarrel with the people of whatever country he wanted to invade, only their leaders. Never mind that it is the people with whom he has no quarrel that end up dying by the hundreds of thousands. Almost every war this country has been in since World War II was started with those words.

Well, today he got his comeuppance. Today, *I* was above the law.

It was easy. From a distance, I reconnoitered his every move. As a candidate, he had had the Secret Service watching over him. But the election was over, and he lost, so they were gone. I'm partial to poisons, so I was looking for a way to get him with nicotine. It took about a month, but I noticed that he liked toothpicks. He always had one close by. From what I could see, he had a hole of some kind— a cavity, a gap— around his upper right molars. After every meal, he would get his toothpick, and pry out stuck food.

I knew how I wanted to kill him, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to pull it off. I began to conduct a reconnaissance of his house. He lived in a mansion. It didn't have guards, but it had a camera system with motion detectors connected to lights to record everything that happened on the grounds and around the house. It did not, however, have people monitoring the system 24/seven. I knew that a black ninja suit with

FBI markings would do the trick, but I still wasn't sure about how to deliver the hit. That's when I got lucky. I found a dead blowfish on the beach. It wasn't as big as they come, only about eight inches long, but I felt like I had struck gold. I kept heavy gloves in the car, and I used them to carry this baby back to the car and back to the hotel where I was staying. I bottled as much of its fluids as I could salvage, and disposed of the rest.

I didn't know what kind of toothpicks Avel used, so I got an assortment. I soaked three of each in the blowfish fluid, dried them, and stashed them in a plastic bag.

The motion sensors were placed at the sides of the house, and in the back. So, dressed in my FBI black ninja suit, I ran straight up to the front door at 3:00 o'clock in the morning. I used a bump key to open the front door, and headed for the kitchen. I wore soft kung-fu boots, and hugged the walls as I moved to lessen the chance of the floors squeaking. I used a weightless technique I had learned years earlier from my teacher. I found his toothpick box. He liked the flat ones. I took the flat ones from my plastic bag, and put them in his box right on top. Then I left the way I came in.

Back at the hotel, I pondered how long I should wait around town to make sure the job was done. But the lead story on the noon news the next day made the decision easy.

"This just in," the broadcaster said, "the CEO of Post, Tanne and Leaf was found dead this morning on his kitchen floor. The cause of death is unknown. Police are investigating."

That was all I needed. I packed up, and headed for the airport.

The flight was late arriving, and I was tired. The taxi dispatcher waved me to a dented, red and white Ford. One of the bulbs in the

taxi's beacon was out. I threw my bag onto the rear seat and crawled in behind it. My butt slid into the depression that had been created by countless other passengers' butts. The car was cold, smelled of gasoline, and had standing water on the floor behind the driver. I didn't care. I just wanted to get home.

"Welcome to La Guardia!" the driver shouted in a thick New York accent. He slapped the top of the dashboard to get the instrument panel to work.

La Guardia?! Did I take the wrong plane? Have I been somnambulating for the last twenty minutes? I sat up straight and looked around for clues. This *looked* like O'Hare.

The driver was a big man, about 30 years old with pock marks on his cheeks from teenage acne. His head was covered with dark curly locks, and he steered over a sizeable beer belly.

I told him this was Chicago.

"New York is a great town," he bellowed. "I'm shore you'll enjoy your visit." He stomped on the gas so that the corner of his cab could establish a place in traffic, then stomped on the brake because there was no place to go.

I told him again this was Chicago.

"New York! Chicago! They're all the same," he said.

A ten foot interval opened up in traffic. He lurched into it, then jammed the brake.

"Where you goin'?" he asked.

I gave him the address.

"Oh, yeah," he said, "Sheridan Road. That's way on the west side of town."

I was beginning to catch on. Sheridan Road was east by the lake.

“Just so you know,” he said, “the trip will be between 18 and 22 dollars.”

He was right. I usually spent 20 dollars for this ride, and that included a generous tip. I looked over at the meter and saw that a thick cable dangled loose out of one side of it.

A small clearing opened up in traffic. He leaned on the horn, then leaned on the gas. He peeled around an airport bus, then stopped short behind a string of other cabs. He tapped the horn again, this time to get the attention of a black porter beside whom we happened to have stopped. They exchanged waves and greetings that I couldn't hear above the roar of traffic. Another clearing opened up, and we zoomed through a small space between a black Cadillac limousine and a short, silver limousine bus. There was about a foot of clearance on each side. Then, like magic, we were on the open road, the I190 home.

I sat back and watched the signs and lights and passing traffic. “Welcome to Chicago, Richard M. Daley, Mayor.” Cities are beautiful places at night. Everything is lights. Red taillights. Yellow signal lights. Blue, green and white lights framing and topping the buildings of the downtown. There is something comforting about seeing familiar surroundings. I began to relax in a way that I hadn't been able to for days, especially since this morning. I began to anticipate being in my own apartment, my own bathroom, my own shower, my own bed.

Oddly, the gasoline smell pulled me back to the musings of earlier in the day. As is my wont, I contemplated death immediately prior to my flight. Is that what people in airports think about? Everybody knows that few have survived airplane crashes. Do we all do it? Calculate the odds? The chances? Recall the statistic comparing airplane deaths to automobile deaths? How many people *do* die in car

accidents per miles traveled anyway? How many miles are traveled by car? Does anybody know? How many people die because of gasoline fumes in cabs?

If I were to die today, now, what would I regret not having done? What is the fulfilled life anyway? What does it mean? Who has it, and who missed out?

The road between O'Hare and Chicago is right under one of the approach lanes to the airport. I watched the planes high in the distance bank into the lane, and follow one behind the other to the runway every thirty seconds or so. The pitch of the roar increased until they were directly overhead, then decreased as they each disappeared into the lights of traffic out the back window.

On balance, my life was good. Maybe more than on balance. Maybe by any measure, my life was good. I had not made the money I always thought I would, but now I knew that was a plus. In this country, men are measured by many yardsticks. How much can you drink and smoke? How many women have you laid? How big is your dick? Greatest among them is, how much money have you made?

There was no question about it, money was power. Look rich, and people will treat you altogether differently. I remembered going to the Boat and Camping Show at McCormick Place some years ago. I and my woman *de jour* were in line to tour a yacht. I had on my long hair beaver coat. I had just recently declared bankruptcy, but never mind that. We looked the part.

The people showing the boat looked bored until we stepped on. My woman was wearing a full-length tanuki. The ship came to life. People began to minister to us. I told them straight away that I could not afford a boat. No matter. They told me that I might one day. They

showed us every inch of the place.

But it wasn't real. They weren't reacting to me. They were reacting to whom they thought I was. Worse, they were reacting to whom they thought I might become.

The cab pulled into the semicircle driveway in front of my building. The light from the vestibule provided enough light for me to count my money out.

"Twenty bucks," he said, "and don't forget to catch a show on Broadway."

"That's low for New York," I said. "Here's twenty-five."

I was still tired, but I felt strangely refreshed. I opened the door, and wiggled out of the dented seat pulling my bag behind me. The driver flipped me a smile and a wink. "My man," he said, then stomped on the gas, and lurched out into the traffic. I placed my back against the glass vestibule door, and pushed my way inside.

I checked my mail, then let myself in the inside security door. As I pushed the elevator button, I looked at myself in the mirrored hallway. I was different now. What happened to that young boy whose school pictures I used to be so ashamed of? How did his skin get so weathered looking, his hair so grey? Black might not crack, but it sure as hell will sag. I studied my image. The curve of my pointed chin and shallow cheek bones, the full lips and bony, angular nose were the same as they were when I was young, but the lips had parentheses around them now. The close set, light brown eyes were more heavily pigmented, and had bags under them. The widow's peak was gone, pushed away by the swath of shiny skin on the top of my head that defined the horseshoe shape of the hair around the outside of my head. Not only had my life been squandered, now I was ugly.

When the elevator door opened, I stepped in eagerly hoping against hope that the image I had been studying would remain behind.

It's the choices we make that determine who we are. So what was wrong with my choices?

I remembered the day I got shot. I was at Rainbow Beach, lying under a cottonwood tree. I saw this Chinese woman wearing a purple silk Manchurian jacket duck to the ground. She had heard shots before, and knew what to do. She was about twenty-eight, and the ends of her waist-length silky black hair waved in the breeze as she moved. Her dark almond eyes darted from side to side. Her delicate round and flat face was calm. She saw the assassin leave, then, crouching low, ran to help me. She made no sound as she moved.

I was surprised that I opened my eyes. It felt like Sunday. It felt like Easter Sunday. I had expected to be dead. In fact, I was dead. Al Pearsons no longer lived. That single shot set him free. Now, all I had to do was live. Who was I going to be? A corollary to the ontological question of all times: Who am I? I was no longer Noel Bodie, and Al Pearsons was dead. I knew I would never die. Who would I be?

The young Chinese woman had her mouth on my mouth, blowing her life into my lungs. Feeling the pain in my side, I flinched. The woman raised up and looked at me. She seemed pleasantly surprised to see me.

"Don't die," she said. "Don't die. I'll call a doctor."

"No doctor," I said. "No doctor."

"You need a doctor!"

"It's ok if I die. I don't want a doctor."

I reached over and felt the clump of rags she had wedged at my side to stanch the flow of blood. She had used the jacket she had been

wearing. “How bad is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “There are two holes, one in front and one in the back. You’re bleeding from both of them.”

“Good. It went through. Is the blood oozing out, or is it pumping out?”

“It’s oozing. What does that mean?”

“What’s your name?”

“Jiqin Dong.”

“I need you to help me home, Jiqin.”

“I’m taking you to a doctor.”

“No doctor!”

“I’m taking you to my uncle’s place.”

“No, Jiqin, please. No one must know.”

“What is *your* name?”

I had to think fast. Jesus, what was I going to say? The Lord’s name teased my lips, “Je . . . Jes . . .”

“Jay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I answered, “Jay.”

“My uncle will take care of you, Jay. He’s a doctor.”

I couldn’t let her take me to a doctor. Doctor’s are required to report gunshot wounds to the police. If this wound got reported, the wrong people might find out about it.

“You got a last name, Jay?”

Still holding the wad of rags, I swung a back fist at her head with my right hand. She blocked it easily. I scarcely felt her touch on my wrist.

“What your last name?”

“I’m just a guy,” I answered, “you don’t know me.” I swung at her with my left hand. Using the same hand, she blocked that, too.

“Stop fighting me, Jay Guy. I try to help you,” she said. “What your middle name?”

By then, I had thought of a good first name. “Samuel,” I said. I didn’t know why I picked Samuel. I couldn’t remember having ever known anyone who called himself Samuel.

“Jay Sam Guy,” she said.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Just some guy.” Then I fainted.

I didn’t remember the trip to her uncle’s house. I just remembered opening my eyes and seeing Jiqin and an old Chinese man that looked like he could have stepped out of a Fu-Manchu Mystery. He was tiny. He was old. He smelled of herbs that I didn’t recognize. There was a naked light bulb. I was hot and I was freezing. I shivered under the blankets they had on me. My breathing was shallow because it hurt to take deep breaths. I felt the room begin to spin. I heard the roar of mosquitoes buzzing in both ears. My eyes closed by themselves.

My eyes opened by themselves, like a doll’s eyes when you sit her upright. I was staring at the ceiling. The room was light even though the naked bulb is off. Almost as an exercise, I moved my eyes from one side to the other, from one object to the other, from the lightbulb to the single strand of spider web hanging from the ceiling in the corner, to the cream painted wood molding going around the wall at the ceiling, to the small round window at the top of the wall to my right, to the crack in the wall that had been repaired with plaster that was itself cracking again in the exact same place. I turned my head slowly and followed the crack down to the walnut table resting beside the wall. There was a glass pitcher filled with water on the table. There was an empty glass.

This didn’t look like a hospital. I tightened my stomach muscles in

order to sit up, and felt the pain. I let out a short moan. Within less than a minute, the door to my left opened up, and Jiqin Dong looked in. She wore a tattered grey University of Wisconsin t-shirt and a long denim skirt.

“Jay,” she said. “You didn’t die.”

I was about to look around to see who Jay was, then I remembered that was my new name. “Where am I?”

“You woke up just in time,” she said pouring water into the glass.

“Help me up.”

“We have to leave town.” She helped me sit up.

“Why? What’s up?” I sipped some water.

Before she could answer, there was a loud pounding at a door that sounded like it was downstairs.

Jiqin panicked. “They here!”

“Who’s here?” I asked.

“The INS is after my uncle. He sneaked into the country three months ago in a cargo container with some other people. They want to deport him.”

The INS pounded on the door again. “Open up in there,” someone said.

“Pretend this is your house.” She begged, “please.”

I could hear a small glass pane being broken, then the door being unlocked, and being flung open and hitting hard against the wall. I could hear heavy footfalls on the floor below me. It sounded like a football team running through the house. Finally, there were heavy feet thumping up the stairs outside my room. The door crashed open and three men lunged in, falling over themselves. They were dressed in cheap, ill-fitting suits, one grey, one blue, one brown. The one in grey

was tall; his suit was too short. The one in blue was fat; his suit was too snug. The one in brown was small; his suit was baggy. They looked at me, and stopped in their tracks.

“Who’s going to fix that glass?” I asked.

“Who the fuck are you?” the tall one asked back.

“I own this place.”

“We thought she owned it,” he said, gesturing to Jiqin.

“Would it be all right to break into the house without a warrant if she owned it?” I asked.

“We have a warrant.”

“Let’s see it.”

“Ok, we don’t have a warrant.”

“Then get the fuck out.”

“We’ll be back later.”

“Bring some money for that window,” I said.

As they left, they broke the rest of the windows in the door. Why do cops always do shit like that?

I lived in an abandoned apartment building on Seventy-seventh and Lakeshore Drive by Rainbow Park. I found it years ago when I got back from a trip to Europe. It was from there that I had created the character of Al Pearsons. It was there that Ida and I returned after striking a blow for freedom. There is where she went crazy.

It was a three-flat in which a fire had gutted the first floor. The back porch was still in tact, though, and the third floor was surprisingly clean. All of it, that is, except the kitchen. The kitchens on all three floors were destroyed. I slept in the master bedroom on the third floor huddled against the closed door so that no one would walk in on me undetected.

I left and reentered the house only after dark through a basement window. I didn't want anyone to know that the house was being used. I even rearranged the rubble at both entrances to discourage anyone from exploring. It was perfect! I felt like Ellison's invisible man. No one knew I was there, and yet I had all the comforts of a paid-for apartment. The water was still on, and one outlet in the building still worked. It was located in the basement behind the furnace, but it didn't appear to draw juice from the building's circuits. I never did figure out why. I used a series of extension cords to provide power to my room on the top floor. A space heater and hot plate provided me with heat and warm beverages throughout the winter. I didn't know why the building remained empty all this time.

I told Jiqin that she and her uncle could stay with me. I gave them the ground rules. Come and go only after dark. Stay away from the windows. No loud noises.

After about a week there, Jiqin suggested that we didn't have to hide.

"I checked it out," she said. "The owner of this building lives somewhere in Mississippi."

"What's your point?" I asked.

"The neighbors won't know that we're not the new owners. We can simply open the place up, make a few repairs, have the light and gas turned on, and live here."

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I said no."

"That's not good enough." She turned to walk out.

"What about the INS?" I asked.

"They have no clue where we are," she said on her way down the

stairs.

The girl was stupid. Of course the INS had no clue where they were. But if she wanted to keep it that way, they would have to keep a low profile. I tried to raise up to argue my point before she got out of earshot, but a wave of pain in my side stopped me. I flopped back down on my mat, and clenched my teeth.

Then I thought about it. I wasn't the one in danger here. Nobody was looking for me. They all thought I was dead. That thought was my only comfort in the days and weeks that followed. I decided not to oppose the project.

I don't know where she found them, but she managed to get a crew of half a dozen guys together to work on the place. One of them was her uncle. But the others, I had never seen before. They were all Chinese; they were all illegal. They spoke no English, but they worked. They cleaned the debris from in front of the doors. They fixed and cleaned all the windows. They fixed the kitchens on all three floors. It wasn't like new, but it was sound, and it was weather tight. Jiqin shouted orders like a drill sergeant, all in Chinese. Even her uncle obeyed her every command.

The men rarely came up to the third floor, but when they did, they would bow to me. It wasn't a deep bow, just a slight bending at the waist and a lowering of the head and eyes. Especially her uncle. I figured it was because he felt he owed me, but he seemed to go out of his way to bow to me. I asked Jiqin what that was all about.

"I told them this your house," she said. "I told them I represent you, and if they don't do as I say, you will have them deported, or worse, killed."

"You told them *what?*!"

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I take care of everything.”

“Who’s paying for all of this?”

“They work for free,” she answered.

“And the supplies?”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “police won’t come after *you*.”

I got the real answer after the work was done. The guys who did the work moved in the following day. They moved in on the second floor, all of them except the uncle. They all found someplace to go during the day, but by evening, they were all there studying English or reading Chinese newspapers. They did nothing to draw attention to themselves.

By then, my wound was healed enough that I could move around with some degree of ease. I felt as if I were on vacation. I didn’t have to hide anymore. What would I do with myself? Who might I become? Better yet, who was I now? Shakespeare asked it first. What’s in a name? Mine, this time, was Jay. But so what? Wherefore art thou Jay? Thou art Jay because thou christened thyself Jay. But again, so what? I answered to Jay, but I was who I was. Would Jay by any other name be as devoid of direction? Would Jay as Oliver still be Jay? Would Oliver as Jay? Oliver Nelson? Eddie Oliver?

Living in the streets, out of mainstream society, below the radar for years can warp a man if he isn’t warped already. I had lived—hidden is a better word—in this house for longer than I cared to remember. I was a young man when I began hiding out. By then, I was nearly middle-aged, and all I had to show for it was the fact that I was still breathing. Well, no. I had more. I had my freedom. I had my freedom, and I had my writings. But having the house remodeled even a little gave me an eerie feeling. It marked the end of an epoch.

Part of the change in no small measure was the fact that I lived with someone now. My life in the street was a solitary existence. It had to be, because I couldn't trust anyone. But then I lived with this woman and her uncle. We weren't exactly cohabiting— they had their part of the apartment; I had mine— but they were there. More to the point, *she* was there.

I hadn't been with a woman since Ida left, haunted by and running from the images of death she had helped create. I should never have let Ida come with me that night. She was no killer, but there was no way to know that. There was no way to know that night that I *was* a killer. Ida's ghost was that she had killed someone. My ghost, the one that I had been carrying around concealed in my breast all those years like one might carry the corpse of a mouse whose stench one would have to struggle to conceal, was that I wanted to do it again. I was ashamed to look at it. It's smell sickened me. But when Jiqin mentioned that she had told her workers that I might kill them, my reaction was: *what?* But my *gut* reaction was: *yes! Let's do it, again!*

I asked Jiqin if she and her uncle wouldn't be more comfortable on the first floor by themselves. She smiled a little smile, and looked at the floor. She looked like one of the guys downstairs looking at the floor as they bowed.

"You protected us," she said, "and my uncle feels that we owe you. Part of the reason we fix your house is because we owe you."

"It's not my house," I said.

"To him, it is your house."

"You owe me nothing."

"If you had not saved him from the INS," she said, "he would have been deported back to China, and maybe killed. He owes you

everything.”

“Well, we’re even,” I said. “He saved my life before I saved his.”

“There is one other small thing,” she said, looking at the floor again.

“Here we are your guests, and we might need your protection again.”

“You would be my guests on the first floor as well.”

“We were hoping to bring other guests there.” Now she was almost bowing like the guys downstairs.

“Who?” I asked.

“Mexican guests,” she said.

“Mexicans?!”

“They have money,” she said. “Their money paid for food and these repairs.”

“Fuckin’ Mexicans?! Are you smugglers?!” The mere thought was exciting.

“Liberators,” she said.

“These people are getting robbed and killed by smugglers.”

“Yes,” she said. “In the wrong hands, they are in danger. In our hands, they get treated fairly.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“We need a house.”

“How do you know I can be trusted?”

“A man who gets shot and who does not want a doctor can be trusted. Besides,” she said, “I know you.”

Maybe this was it, the new me. “What’s in it for me?” I asked.

“What do you want?” she asked back.

I couldn’t help myself. It’s almost as if my eyes moved of their own volition. Against my will, I began staring at her chest. She really didn’t have any tits to speak of. They were more like over-sized nipples. And

in the baggy t-shirt she wore, they were barely visible. But I couldn't look away.

"You want sex?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, "no!" Then I said yes again, then I said no again. Then I tried to act as if I really meant it. I turned my back on her. "No," I said, "not like this."

"Then, how?"

"I don't want your pity."

"I'm not cute enough?" she asked.

"You're cute enough."

"My chest not big enough?"

"It's big enough."

"Then why you not want sex?"

"I *do* want sex."

"Ok, let's do it."

"I want love," I said. I sounded like a fool even to myself.

"Love?" She said, "This is business. I have something you want; you have something I want. Just business."

"Let's talk about it tomorrow," I said.

"The Mexicans will be here tomorrow," she said. "We need a deal tonight."

"I need to think a few minutes," I said.

"Ok," she said. "I go wash myself."

I could hear her turn to leave, and I turned to watch her. From behind, she looked like a boy, skinny with no ass. At the last minute before reaching the door, she turned her head and caught me looking at her butt. Her tiny mouth hinted at a smile.

Choices. Maybe I shouldn't have let Jiqin and her uncle stay. I

stepped off the elevator when it arrived at my floor. The image in the panel of mirrors across from the elevator was the same, so I looked away. God, I hated my appearance.

I unlocked my door and went inside. The room smelled of sandalwood and linseed oil. I flipped the light switch. I was finally home. No mirrors, no funky images. Just my stuff. My books. My swords on the walls. My drapes. My black leather couch. My aquarium. I plugged the aquarium light back into the timer, and the little guys darted back and forth. I kept African cichlids, about a dozen of them in a 55 gallon tank. Blue, golden yellow, orange. They looked African, big lips and eyes. They looked like me, and they were glad to see me. They knew they were about to be fed. I kept smelts in the freezer for them. I took a few out and run water on them to thaw them. When I opened the lid, the little guys went wild, leaping to get the first bite. Water splashed all over me. I dropped the smelts in, and the guys attacked, snatching pieces off. I loved watching them eat. There was something about the colors and the light and the plants and frankly the carnage that calmed me. The blue one, the only blue one in the tank, was bigger than the others. I called him Chuck. Chuck ran the tank. Or at least he tried to. He snatched a mouthful of a smelt that was as big as he was, then tried to shoo the others away. Like he could eat the whole damn thing! He acted like an idiot. The other cichlids gave him his props. He was, after all, bigger than any of them. But they just circled around his posturing, and snatched more food. Chuck was the blue number one, but in the end, the little guys always won.

II

“Why did you help me?” I had to ask that question in order to forestall her asking the how-was-it question. I didn’t want her to ask, because I didn’t want to have to lie. She was the worst fuck I had ever had in my life. It’s not that I had had that many women in my life. In truth, I had only had a few. But Jiqin Dong had no clue what to do with a man.

“You hurt me,” she said. She was lying there huddled on her edge of the pallet in the fetal position. “I a virgin, and you hurt me.” There was a pout in her tone of voice.

“A virgin?” I said, “I’m sorry.” Maybe I was a little rough with her. “I didn’t know. You were so . . .” My voice trailed off. I wanted to say brazen, brassy, forward. But then I thought that might add insult to injury. I felt ashamed. I felt like an animal. Reflecting back on it, I devoured her. She was the first woman I had had in ten years, and I couldn’t stop myself. I was like a pile driving machine.

This time I asked to forestall her asking the how-could-you-do-that-to-me question. “So, why *did* you help me?”

“I don’t know why,” she said. Her voice was more relaxed for a moment. Then it got that edge again. “I wish I let you die.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m really sorry.” I put my hand on her bony hip. She shifted away from my touch. “I didn’t know,” I said. “The way you came on, so direct, so matter-of-fact, I thought you were more experienced.”

“I didn’t want you to think I a little girl,” she said.

“Next time I’ll be gentle,” I said. I put my hand on her shoulder, and she gave a little shrug. I scooped down behind her and into the

spoon position. I slipped my hand over her waist, and rubbed her stomach. “It not so bad,” she said. “It feel better.”

We lay there long enough that I began to doze, and she twitched in my arms because she was dozing, too.

We didn’t screw any more that day. In fact, we didn’t screw again for another week. But we slept together every night. It was rough. I slept naked. And every night, I could smell her there next to me. She slept in a t-shirt and her panties. The first night, I spooned with her. I wanted to, but I didn’t dare feel her up. The shame of that first session was still strong. I woke up the following morning with my dick as hard as a broom stick. After that, I stayed on my side of the bed. About a week passed before she came to bed naked, too.

“I help you,” she said, “because you look like the Buddha.”

“What?” I asked.

“I help you because you look like the Buddha,” she said again. “You look like a picture my mother had next to the Buddha at home.”

I had never noticed it before, but her voice was tiny, like a child’s voice. And I was surprised that her words, those tiny baby words, had such a profound effect on me. I caught my breath. I literally stopped breathing remembering how years before, Lillian, an old woman in Germany that I met while stationed there in the Air Force, had told me that I looked like God. She meant that I looked like my Great Uncle Buddy King with whom she had been in love during World War I, and who had been the founder of a religious group the head of which, according to Lillian, I was the heir apparent. The remembrance of Lillian brought a flood of images to my mind. I remembered the car crash in the German woods after she strangled Hans, her driver, to death. Hans had learned who she believed I was, and was bent on

revealing my whereabouts to a rival group bent on assassinating me. I remembered that I was the last living member of the King family. I wondered how my life would have turned out had I gone with her to Stockholm as Lillian had wanted instead of coming back to the States. What if I had become the Messiah they believed I was. I certainly would have had a lot more pussy over the last ten years.

I was already huddled on my side of the bed curled into a ball. I straightened out a little. I forced myself to breathe again, and I relaxed a little. “Yes,” I said, “the Buddha.”

“She said that she was one of your children.”

“Seine Kinder,” I said.

“Yes!” she said. “You know them?”

“I’ve heard of them,” I said.

“Well, that’s why I help you,” she said. “You look like that picture.”

“We all look alike,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “You do.” There was wonderment in her voice.

This time, she spooned behind me, and put one leg over my waist. I ignored her. After being shoot, I was so relieved at the idea that folks now thought that I was dead that it never crossed my mind to wonder how they found me in the first place. Was it luck? Or could someone have led them to me that day by the beach? And how did that someone find me? How would that someone even know me? Jiqin pressed herself against my butt. I guess she wasn’t having any of this ignore-her madness.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“I sure,” she said. She reached around and squeezed my dick. “It so big.” There was that wonderment again.

I smiled to myself. This girl had never seen a really big dick. I

wasn't all that big, but I seemed big to her because she was so small. "Yeah," I chuckled, "I know it's big." I rolled over onto my back feeling alternately like Superman and a phony. After about three seconds, the Superman feeling won out.

"What I do?" she asked.

Not wanting to risk losing control and doing the pile driver thing again, I said, "Sit up, and crawl on top of me."

She did. She drew her knees up so that she was astride my body, and relaxed so that I could enter her more easily. But it only helped a little. She was simply too small. She was gallant and endured the pain as best she could, but when tears began to well up in her eyes, I moved to take it out.

"No," she said, "leave it in. I a woman now. I will get bigger."

So I left it in. We fell asleep with her lying on top of me like a rag doll nailed to a board, and with me feeling like the biggest jerk in the world.

She woke me up by whispering in my ear. "They here," she said.

"The Mexicans? Here? Now?" I sat up abruptly. Jiqin was already dressed. I looked out of the window. It was still dark.

"Yes," she said. "They early."

I could hear the diesel engine of a large truck idling in the alley. "How many people are here?" I asked.

"23," she said.

"23 people?! Where are we going to put them?"

"In the downstairs apartment," she said.

"No," I said, "it's too small."

"They'll be fine," she insisted.

So we moved them in, nine women and fourteen men. It was a real

zoo. I didn't know how long they had been in that trailer, but they smelled like shit, literally. The driver paid Jiqin \$500 a piece, \$11,500 in cash. He was little man with a huge beer belly. In front of the truck, out of sight of his passengers, he peeled off hundred dollar bills by the score. Then he climbed back into his cab. The air reeked of diesel smoke for several minutes after he drove away.

Once inside, they all crowded noiselessly into the livingroom. It was as if being stacked on top of each other had become normal for them. The familiar feel and smell of the next person's body was somehow comforting. The room was thick with cumin and funk.

"Welcome to America," Jiqin said.

There was a pause. Then a smile began to spread across one woman's face, then another, then a man's. Within a few seconds, the entire room was animated with grinning faces and staccato chatter in Spanish.

"Shhhh," Jiqin said. "Who here speak English?"

Like metal filings being arranged by a magnet, all heads turned to one young man up front in the middle. He was short, scarcely five feet tall, and skinny. He had a mole at the inside corner of his left eye.

"I speak a little," he said.

"Good," Jiqin said. "You can stay here one week. After that, I charge you ten dollar for one night for one person."

The young man translated for the group, and the smiles slowly faded. Everything now was strictly business. The chatter now was short, clipped.

"*Si, si*," one man said.

A couple of the women came up and shook Jiqin's hand. "*Gracias*," one young woman said. She had straight black hair down to her butt.

“*Gracias.*”

Only then did they begin to explore the apartment to stake out space to sleep.

Omri was right. We don't see Death in America. In this country, Death is ushered in by men and women wearing white coats in cold white rooms. They adhere to a ritual not unlike the rituals in a church. They bring out their instruments and long faces. They whisper among themselves and with the family. They extract a pecuniary offering. Then, at the appointed time, Death comes in and plucks.

Sometimes, Death plucks *sans* His ministers. But even then, the pluckee is carefully covered in a plastic bag, and delivered to Death's ministers so that they can consecrate the action. They issue papers that certify the plucking. It is rare that the actual plucking is witnessed. In this country, we have seen so few pluckings that we have come to believe that Death is shy. We nurse a distant notion that Death is off on the horizon somewhere coming at some later time. We forget that He is always here.

“*No,*” another man said. Then he rattled something off in Spanish. He was older, but he, too, was short. He was broad in the shoulders and chest with skinny hips and small legs.

The young man with the mole by his eye translated, “He said he was told he could stay here one month at no extra cost.”

“One week,” Jiqin corrected.

The young man translated.

The older man grew stern. His eyes narrowed, and his gaze darted from side to side. “I have no more money,” he said in English.

The others tried to console him in Spanish. One woman tried to put her hand on his shoulder, but he jerked away. He reacted as if her

hand were a spider.

“I have no more money,” he said again.

Jiqin approached him, but he stepped back sharply. “I have no more money,” he said.

Jiqin reached her hand out to him. The man pulled a knife. Someone gasped, “*Juan, no,*” as the crowd moved away from Jiqin and Juan standing in the middle of the floor.

Juan looked at the knife as if he had surprised himself. Probably accustomed to pulling his knife at home, he suddenly realized that pulling the knife here was a mistake. Now, not only was he not going to be welcome to stay a month, he knew he was going to have to leave tonight. His changing facial expressions revealed his changing mental state. He furrowed his brow, then relaxed it. He clenched his jaw, then relaxed it. His gaze moved from one spot on the floor to another then to another as if he were searching for money. He was confused. Where was he going to sleep? Where was he going to get money for food? Who, if anyone, would be willing to leave with him? His changing expression told it all. He was alone in a strange country, and he now had no place to go. He was desperate. Maybe he could scare her into letting him stay the night. He lunged at Jiqin with the knife.

Jiqin was swift, and she was accurate. Using the same hand she had used to block my feeble blows that day in the park, she parried the strike up, controlled his wrist, and spun under his arm. Suddenly, she was behind him, and she had the knife. Her thrusts were so quick that I wasn't sure she had really delivered them. Once in the liver, and then straight into the side of his neck. She stepped back in horror, her hands covering her open mouth, as if she were witnessing something someone else had done.

I was so completely fooled by her reaction that I had to look again to see what had been done. That's when Juan dropped to his knees. It looked as if his tiny legs were finally buckling from the weight of his massive upper torso. Then he dropped over onto his face.

There was surprisingly little blood coming from the wound. In all likelihood, his blood was collecting in his lungs and stomach.

The women in the group all looked away. One or two buried their face in a neighbor's shoulder. The men all stared stoically at Juan, all of them except the translator. He puked on himself. Rather he would have puked on himself if he had had anything in his stomach to puke. Instead, he merely heaved. His voice as he heaved was the only sound in the room.

That's when Jiqin surprised me again. I was beginning to think that she was going to do what Ida had done. Cry. Shrink into herself. Fade to nothing. But she didn't. She looked at the translator with a fixed, steely gaze. "Tell them Juan was stupid, and he got what he deserved. Tell them if anyone talk," she said, "they get what Juan got." She drew in a deep breathe, then sighed. Then she said, almost matter-of-factly, "I get someone to clean up this mess." She headed for the door, and a path opened in the circle of people. I moved out of the circle, and joined her as she left.

"What are you going to do with the body?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Get me a couple of men," I said. "I know what to do."

III

When I was young, I didn't know white people existed except at school or in the news. Where I lived, I didn't even pass them in the street. The first one I ever met went by the name Miss Blue. The irony of a white woman named Miss Blue escaped me at the time, but in later years, I wondered about it. Maybe Mama or Grandma Daughter knew the story behind the name. If they did, they never told me.

What I remembered most about her was that she smelled different. Back in the early fifties, people didn't clean themselves as often as they do today. As a rule, people were pungent. Miss Blue was no exception. I didn't know how old she was, but I thought she was older than Mama and not as old as Grandma Daughter. She was my baby-sitter. Mama would take me to her apartment over on State Street whenever she and Grandma Daughter had someplace special they needed to go.

Miss Blue was a small woman, flat-chested with no curves to her body. She wore straight-cut house dresses in dark blues, greys and browns. She wore black comforts with short heels and shiny, black toe-caps. By her own admission, she did herself up plain. She had small, grey eyes that almost blended in with her pasty face. Her nose was tiny and pinched looking, not full and round like the people I knew. Her lips had permanent creases from where she squeezed them together all the time. By my reckoning, she was an odd duck. Back then, I was too young to understand the message she offered. Now, I understood her perfectly.

Miss Blue was in exile. She was a white woman married to a black man who lived in the black community. Her husband was a cop. His story Mama and Grandma Daughter eventually *did* tell me. According

to them, he was one of those black cops that the white police department depended upon to keep order in the Negro neighborhood. And, apparently, he was well-known. Folks knew him as Cop Buck, though his real name was Sydney Beaman. Miss Blue's real name was Faith, Faith Beaman.

According to the stories, Cop Buck was a wild man. He loved it whenever a tavern owner called the police because some patron had consumed too much and had gotten rowdy. He would charge in, night stick swinging. He would thump anybody who was handy. People in the neighborhood hated him.

It was Grandma Daughter who told me that Cop Buck liked to play a game. After whipping people's heads, he would seat himself at a table by a wall, and pull his gun out. He would place the gun on the far side of the table. Then he would dare anybody to go for it. As a rule, no one dared. It was rumored, however, that twice, someone took him up on his dare. Cop Buck fought and killed them both. He liked being in fights to the death.

In all the times I had been at Miss Blue's place, I had never seen Cop Buck. He was always gone. One day, I got my nerve up and asked, "Miss Blue, are you married?" I knew she was, but I couldn't think of any other way to broach the topic of her husband.

Miss Blue liked it when Mama brought me by her house. She always smiled and hugged me. She didn't have children of her own, and in a way, I was kind of a surrogate. And I liked being there. She talked to me the way she would talk to an adult. I was unaccustomed to being talked to that way, and I liked it. Most of the other adults in my life talked down to me. I was a child, and they just didn't have time for me. Miss Blue wasn't like that. Whenever I came by, she would fix warm

milk and cookies, and we would sit in the kitchen and talk. Mostly, it was she who talked. But I was a good listener, and I always enjoyed her musings about times past, about riding in buck boards, and raising chickens, and life in Arkansas. I felt as if I knew her in a way that I had never known an adult.

The day I asked if she was married, her face changed. Her little thin smile faded. The creases in her lips became more pronounced. She focused her pale grey eyes off into the corner at the bucket of wood by the big black stove.

Then she folded her bony little hands in her lap. The tendons and veins at the back of her hands pushed hard against the skin. After a few seconds, she looked down at them, and said, "He never liked my dressing."

"Huh?" I asked.

"He never liked my cooking. Said it was too bland. But he especially disliked my dressing. Said it was gooey."

"I like your cooking," I said.

"You've never had my cooking," she said.

"I know, but I like it, anyway."

She smiled, and gave me another cookie. Then the smile faded as she looked over at the bucket of wood again. "I never should have married him," she said. "I never should have married him."

"Why, Miss Blue?"

"You're too young to understand," she said, "but I'm alone. I have no friends. Negroes don't befriend me because I'm white. Whites shun me because I married him. And to top it all off, he's never here. He has girlfriends." She paused, and looked at me. She was probably wondering if she was divulging too much. But she was on a roll. She

sighed, and continued, “He comes in, and I can smell the women on him. He doesn’t even bother to clean himself up.” She paused again. “I have no children. I have no property because my family disowned me. They think I’m a whore. I have nothing. I sit in this house all day, every day waiting for him to come home. And maybe he’ll show up, and maybe he won’t.

“Oh, but he was something when we were young.” Her face became animated at the recollection. “He was big and muscular and black. He wore his head clean-shaven. His features looked as if they had been chiseled in stone, pronounced and angled. His chin, the line of his jaw, his lips, his cheeks, the flare of his nostrils, the ridge over his eyes were all angular. Even his ears had lines that were oddly juxtaposed.” Then her face got sad again. “If the folks back home had known what he was doing to me, they would have hanged him. That’s why we had to move here.”

Miss Blue’s sadness infected my whole stay that day. It was the only time that I was glad when Mama came to pick me up.

It wasn’t true that she had no friends. She had one. Miss Abbey. Miss Abbey looked just like Miss Blue, except she was bigger than Miss Blue. Bigger and taller. They both wore those straight, formless dresses and plain black shoes with the round toe-caps. But where Miss Blue had thin features, Miss Abbey’s features were fleshy, and they drooped. Her eyelids drooped; her jowls drooped; the flesh under her chin drooped. And where Miss Blue was married, Miss Abbey was a spinster.

Miss Abbey came to visit several times when I was there. I wondered why she didn’t visit more often, since they seemed to get along so well. Once in a while, Miss Blue would go out shopping, and

leave me with Miss Abbey. And Miss Abbey was like Miss Blue in that she talked to me like an adult as well. She never married, because, as she put it, she preferred other women to men. She gave me a curious look when she told me that, as if she was wondering whether or not I understood what she meant. I didn't. And my blank expression must have communicated that fact to her. Because then she got that same far-off look that Miss Blue had gotten, and mused that loneliness was the price to be paid for being too independent.

She was unlike Miss Blue in another way. They didn't smell the same. Miss Abbey had no smell. Sometimes, I preferred Miss Abbey's company to Miss Blue's for that reason.

Miss Abbey confided in me that she had known Miss Blue for many years, since they were young women in Arkansas. She told me that she saved Miss Blue's life once. Miss Blue had diphtheria, and was suffocating on mucous gathered in her throat. Miss Abbey took a thin stick and used it to removed some of the mucous. Miss Blue was able to breath after that, and soon recovered. She loved Miss Blue, and was heartbroken when Miss Blue ran off to Chicago and married Sydney Beaman. That's when she told me that Miss Blue was the reason that she came to Chicago as well. It was years later that I understood what she meant by that.

IV

It's funny how you don't pick your profession; your profession picks you. Growing up, I had always wanted to be an engineer, someone who built things, cars, houses, bridges. There had always been something intriguing about gathering raw materials and building a tool that could then be used to modify the course of history. I read books about the works of engineers: the New York subway system, the Erie, Suez and Panama Canals, the federal highway system were among the topics I devoured. Later, I wanted to be a poet. But that was just 'cause I wanted to be with Gwen. Both those dreams, however, died in a blaze of glory along with a couple of cops in a secluded near-west side police station. But like the proverbial sphinx, a new reality was born from those ashes. I saw that night for the first time who I really was, a creature. In fact, I had begun calling it . . . me . . . that. The creature. Ida saw it, too, and it scared her. It scared her because she saw the same creature in herself. But it intrigued me. I couldn't rid myself of the thought that I was a dangerous motherfucker. And who knew? Certainly, I didn't. I knew that night that I was capable of anything. *Anything!* All I had to do was think it, and I could do it. But I also knew that I didn't look like who I was. I was the real live wolf in sheep's clothing. That was a part of what made me so dangerous. I was what most people only see in the movies.

I began to look at other people differently. Maybe there were other people like me out there. Not maybe, there *were*. But like they couldn't recognize me, I couldn't recognize them. In a world filled with sheep, there were wolves, wolves that practiced looking like sheep. I became vigilant. I began to look at everyone as if they could be a wolf, a fellow

creature. Because, in fact, they could. I began staring men down for sport. On busses, on trains, in elevators, I would stare them straight in the left eye.

The reactions I got were many and varied. Some men looked away as soon as eye contact was made. They looked away scared; they looked away ashamed; they looked away disinterestedly. In my mind, though, it didn't matter. If they looked away, they were sheep. Other men stared back for a second or two, then deliberately looked away. These were the guys that I thought might be most like me, guys who didn't want to blow their cover by appearing too aggressive. Then there were the guys that said, fuck you, and stared back hard. When I met them, *I* looked away so as not to blow *my* cover. I reasoned that those guys were real wolves, but less dangerous than me, because they didn't bother to hide. As a result, they would be easy to locate and pick off.

Jiqin got a couple of her workers to help me. One of them was her uncle. This time, he almost genuflected. Maybe he thought *I* killed Juan. Or maybe he heard Jiqin's warning to the Mexicans, and thought it just might apply to him as well. Maybe he thought I would have him deported. In any case, he was so obsequious, I wanted to smack him and say, stand the fuck up like a man. If ever there were a sheep, he was it.

The other one, the younger of the two, was cool. He wore his hair slicked straight back over his bowling ball-shaped head like Rudolf Valentino. His jet black hooded eyes and the nostrils of his upturned nose looked like the finger holes in the ball. He looked cocky and self-assured like a boxer, like someone who would call himself Kid something or Chico something. Yeah. In my mind, that's who he was.

A Chinese Chico. Chico looked at Juan lying dead on the floor, and showed no emotion at all. Then he started looking around for some way to dispose of him.

We wrapped Juan's body in an old carpet that had been stored in the basement for years. Someone had rolled it up and put it down there even before I moved into the place years ago. Really, it was just a remnant. But there was enough to wrap him a couple of times, and tie him with some clothes line. We waited until about three in the morning, then carried him down the back stairs and to the alley. Juan was so short that we hardly had any room to maneuver as the three of us carried him. I was in the front. The sheep was in the middle, and Chico brought up the rear. Nearly stumbling over each other's feet, we carried Juan down the alley to the intersection with the street. We stopped at the edge of the building, and dropped Juan on the concrete. I was being cautious, looking both ways to make sure no one was coming. But Chico didn't hesitate. He stood straight up and walked right out into the middle of the street. Nothing was coming. He pulled a claw hammer from his belt and pried up the steel sewer cover.

I immediately grabbed one end of the rolled up Juan, and began dragging him in the direction of the sewer. The uncle just stood there. I gave him a sustained steely-eyed stare to remind him of who he thought I was, and it worked. He grabbed the other end, the heavy end, and dragged with a vengeance.

Fear is an amazing motivator. With just a little fear, some people perform feats of crystal clarity, incredible speed and enormous strength. Everybody knows this. But not everybody has witnessed it. *I* had never witnessed it. The sheep changed all that. He pulled so hard, I thought he was going to hurt himself. He leaned his entire weight into

it. Tendons protruded from his wrists and arms. Blood vessels bulged from his neck. And Juan moved. Slowly at first. But as the sheep strained, Juan gained speed. I pushed a little, but I wanted to see how far the sheep would be able to pull him. He surprised me. He pulled him all the way over to the sewer, then dropped Juan's head over the opening. The sheep then scurried around to where I had been pretending to push, and lifted the end of the roll containing Juan's feet. But Juan's shoulders were too broad. The sheep signaled to Chico with his chin, and Chico knew exactly what to do. He made some exploratory hits along the rolled carpet looking for Juan's collar bones. Then he hit them as hard as he could until they broke. Both of them. I heard them snap. Juan's shoulders slumped in, but still not enough for him to fit into the opening. That's when Chico started working directly on the sides of Juan's shoulders. The bone fragments crunched as he hit them over and over again. Then, all at once, Juan dropped straight in. Actually, he slipped out of the carpet roll and thunked on the sewer floor. The sheep dropped the carpet in for good measure. Then he harrumphed, and snapped his head to one side as a signal to Chico to pull the sewer cover back into place. Chico complied.

Then the sheep did the oddest thing. He looked at me, and winked. The motherfucker winked! Then he led the way back up the alley to the house. Half way there, though, he switched again. He drooped his shoulders, and began to shuffle his feet. For a few minutes at the sewer, he was somebody else. Now, he was the sheep again.

That night in bed, I asked Jiqin about him.

"He is my uncle Master Yuen," she said.

"And?" I asked.

"That's all I can tell you," she said.

“That’s all you can tell me? What does *that* mean?”

“That’s all I can tell you,” she said again. She turned her back to me, curled into the fetal position, and arranged the pillow under her head.

“I thought he was afraid of me,” I said.

“Master Yuen is afraid of no one.”

“But he always bowed to me.”

“Yes,” she said.

“But why?”

“To show you respect.”

I thought about it for a moment. Then I said, “I thought your uncle was a doctor.”

“He a doctor,” she said. “He heal you. That why we here. That why I in your bed.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Wait just a fucking minute.” I sat up in the bed. “You want an arrangement here with me. Well, the way to keep this arrangement is to be honest. If you can’t be honest with me, the deal is off.”

This time, she thought about it for a moment. Then she sat up in the bed facing me. “Ok,” she said. “No more bullshit. You’ve seen too much for me to continue this charade anyway.”

These people were full of surprises. First it was the sheep, or rather Master Yuen. Then it was Jiqin. All of a sudden, the broken English was gone. Was nothing as it appeared?

“My uncle is a doctor, just like I said he was.”

“What kind of doctor?” Curiously, the image of an African witch doctor popped into my mind.

“A *medical* doctor,” she said. She didn’t even bother to try to hide the indignation in her voice. “And he is respected worldwide for the

research he has done on exotic viruses.”

“So, what’s he doing here?”

“He was tricked,” she said, “tricked into endorsing the validity of the results of some experiments that were never conducted. He had been shown manufactured data. When he threatened to go to the international press, the government came and arrested him. His supporters bribed the jail personnel, and he was able to escape.”

“And from there,” I asked, “he came here?”

“Almost,” she answered. “It turns out that the escape was a setup. He was supposed to get caught by the warden who would then provide evidence at Uncle’s trial of the attempted escape.”

“So what happened?”

“Uncle escaped anyway. In the process, the warden was killed.”

“Did your uncle kill him?”

“That part isn’t clear. Uncle says no, but they did fight. And the warden was no match for uncle.”

“Meaning?”

“Uncle studied with the Shaolin monks.”

“So what about you and that phoney accent?”

“I use the accent to avoid having to talk too much,” she said. “If people think you don’t understand them, they are less likely to want to be around.”

“Are you running from the law, too?”

“No,” she answered. “The law is satisfied that I am here legally.”

“Well, are you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Should I take that as a no?”

“I have a green card.”

“Then you’re here legally.”

“It’s a fake.”

“So get a real one.”

“I don’t have a sponsor.”

“I’ll sponsor you.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“How so?”

“We would need to be married, and you would need to be more than Jay Sam Guy.”

That stopped me cold. Here I was pressuring her into being open and honest, and my entire existence was a lie. More than that, Jiqin knew it was a lie. As much as anything, I was surprised that she was that astute. “Right,” I said, “we are not getting married.”

I had thought I was ending the conversation, but I guess she was on a roll. “Fine,” she said, “we don’t have to be married. But what about the honesty part?”

I knew what she was asking. I just wasn’t ready to answer. “What about it?” I asked back.

“Are we going to do a show and tell, or not?”

“I don’t know?”

“You brought it up,” she said. “I’m perfectly content to not know. Apparently, you are not.”

“I wanted to know about your uncle.”

“And I told you,” she said. “Now I want to know about you.”

“What’s to know?” I was playing coy.

“*You tell me.*”

I thought about it for a moment. My story was too long and unbelievable. Then it hit me. I looked her straight in the eye, and said,

“I *am* the Buddha.”

“I know that part,” she said. “Tell me something I *don’t* know.”

Damn this bitch! Who did she think she was pressing me to the wall like this.

“For example,” she continued, “why have you become Jay Sam Guy? That’s not who you were born. What’s up with that?”

I thought about it a moment, then decided to tell her the whole story. I told her about Uncle Buddy, Mighty Red, Lillie. I told her about the shooting at Rainbow Park, and how it now meant that I was free, that I no longer had to sneak around, that since my enemies now thought I was dead, I could start a new life. I could do and be anything I wanted.

When I finished, she looked at me. Her expression wasn’t one of awe or admiration. Neither was it one of loathing or disgust. I don’t know what it was, but it wasn’t her normal expression. “Well,” I said, “you wanted to know. Happy?”

She smiled. Again, it wasn’t her normal smile. “You’ll need papers,” she said. “I can get them for you.”

“The same folks who made your green card?”

“When do you want to have been born?” she asked.

I was surprised at how easy it was slipping into my new life. Jiqin had been right. Papers were as easy to get as bubble gum at a sweet shop. I took the name Jason Samuel Guy, and picked December 25th of my actual birth year as my new birth date. I figured that would be easy to remember. And our life together seemed easier now. There was an openness between us that made her real comfortable to be with. Jiqin was becoming more of a wife than either of my real wives had ever been. Even her uncle seemed to be taking to me. He wanted to teach me kung fu, but I told him no. I told him Jiqin would protect me. He didn't like that very much, but he didn't push.

"Maybe later," he said.

"Yeah," I said, "maybe later."

All the Mexicans were gone after about two weeks. And we had money. Human trafficking was a lucrative line of work. The Chinese workers that were her crew still lived downstairs. We rarely saw them, though. They lived their lives, and we lived ours. Until there was a job to be done, of course. Life was good.

Maybe it was too good. There's a law of balance in the universe. If shit gets too good, something comes along and fucks it up. Sometimes, that something will be obvious, like getting hit by a car right after hitting the lottery. But other times, it's obscure. The fuck up that came this time was one of the obscure kinds. In fact, it was so obscure, I didn't even recognize it as a fuck up.

We were sitting on a bench by Thorndale Beach on the north side, Jiqin and I. It was a Sunday. We sat along the lake shore looking out over the sand and the water. Seagulls squawked overhead. Children splashed in the waves rolling in. A soft wind blew, and I could feel

myself wanting to doze in the sun. In the distance, I could hear the tinkling of bells as an ice cream vendor pushed his cart along the path. It was pleasant enough. In fact, I began to imagine licking ice cream and feeling the melted confection sticky on my hand as I pulled the paper down for a clear bite. I was about to ask Jiqin if she wanted something when a cop car squawked breaking my reverie. It sounded like a giant seagull. I turned my head to see. Sure enough a blue-and-white cruised over the lawn crushing the grass beneath its mud-encrusted tires. I looked back along the path it formed in the grass, and the tire tracks clipped the corner of one of the flower beds between us and the street. One of the flowers, a yellow one, was completely crushed into the dirt. The wind rolled one of the loose petals into the space between the tire tracks.

The cop in the shotgun seat rolled his window down. "Hey, you," he shouted to the vender. "Get over here!"

The vender, a short Mexican with a stomach that sagged over his belt, pushed his cart towards the police prowler. He reminded me of Juan, and I wondered whether or not Juan's body had ever been found. I figured that a body having been found in a sewer wasn't the kind of thing that would make the evening news.

Because of the wind rustling the leaves of a nearby Cottonwood tree, I could not hear what was being said. But from his body movements, I could tell that he was asking them what kind of ice cream they wanted. The driver opened his door and exited the car. He was big, a full foot taller than the vender. The bulletproof vest he wore made him look even bigger. The corners of his vest pushed against his blue shirt giving his upper body a mechanical, almost robotic appearance. He looked like a machine as he squared the corner in route around the front of the car. He flipped open the cart cover, and

began pushing the contents from one side to the other looking for what he wanted. He looked like a bear clawing through a beehive for honey. The vender protested by his gestures. Just then, the wind died down.

“You better shut the fuck up,” the cop said, “or I’ll haul your ass to the station and take *all* your ice cream.”

He flipped a cone to his partner, grabbed one for himself, then got back into the car and drove off. He gassed the car so hard, it fish-tailed in the grass leaving two ‘S’-shaped streaks where the grass had been plowed away by the tires.

The vender stood for a moment dumbfounded. Looking at him, I almost felt guilty that Juan had to be killed. Then he closed the lid on his cart and pushed it back toward the path. After a few seconds, he began tinkling the bells.

“Let’s go,” I said to Jiqin.

“What’s the matter,” she said.

“We need to expand our operation,” I answered.

“Oh,” she said. “Into what? Drugs? We don’t do drugs.”

“Not drugs,” I answered. “Assassinations. We need to kill somebody.”

Master Yuen allowed himself one small smile when I told him I was ready to study kung fu. “I teach you good,” he said. “You protect Jiqin.”

Fool that I was, I thought studying kung fu would be fun and easy. After all, whenever Master Yuen gave a demonstration, it looked fun and easy. It was smooth and fluid looking. But he changed my mind on the very first day.

He got up early, and the first thing he did was put on a kettle for tea. More than a kettle, really. He put a two-gallon pot of water on to boil,

then he dropped in a couple of handfuls of loose green tea. I wondered as I watched him stir it who the hell all this tea was going to be for. I learned the hard way. It was for me.

After he put on the tea, we talked. He assured me that he wasn't going to teach me the way he had been taught in China. That way was too hard, he said. He was going to teach me the easy way. Then he showed me some warmup stretches. He started with head rolls to stretch the muscles in the neck. Next came shoulder rolls and pulls, wrist rolls and pulls, finger bends, trunk twists and bends, back leans, hip rolls in both directions, knee rolls in both directions, deep knee bends, ankle rolls and toe flexes and bends.

Next we did leg stretches. With my back against a wall, he lifted my leg as high as he could get it. My Achilles tendon was resting on his shoulder as he locked my knee down with his hands to pull the hamstring. I was feeling proud to be able to get my leg that high until he said, "Don't worry. I've seen worse." Then he stretched my legs to the side to pull the tendons at the groin. Finally, he had me do splits, American and Chinese. I was already exhausted. He said, "Good. Now we can get started."

I looked over at the clock. We had been at this for about forty minutes. Master Yuen walked over to the clock and turned its face to the wall. He used a ladle to issue some tea into a glass.

"Drink," he said, "You'll feel better."

He had me do sit-ups, crunches, leg lifts and jumping jacks by the score. I did about sixty of each.

"Wow," I said, feeling proud of myself. "Sixty is a lot."

He smiled and nodded his head slightly. "Two thousand is lot."

I was stunned. As I stood wondering whether or not a person could even do two thousand crunches, he started me on push-ups. I did

twenty. I was afraid to express any kind of pride. I looked over at Master Yuen. I could tell that he knew what I was thinking, but he said nothing. Just as well. I couldn't even imagine two thousand push-ups.

We worked on punches, kicks, blocks, locks, holds, escapes, balance and strategies. We did that all day, every day for months. After a while, he introduced me to weapons, knives, swords, sticks, bows and arrows, darts, pistols, rifles and explosives. We covered it all. He introduced me to things that could be used as weapons, belts, string, cards. He taught me cover, stealth and camouflage. Then one day, he surprised me.

"You no longer need me," he said.

"What?!" I was confused.

"You're ready," he said.

"But . . ., but . . .," I said. "I don't *feel* ready."

"If you feel ready, you're not," he said. "When you need it, it will be there." He emptied the pot of tea, then turned and walked into his room, and closed the door.

In a flash, I remembered all those martial arts movies with the bad dubbing I had seen as a kid. The master leaves or is killed, and the student always feels abandoned. Now, I knew why. I felt like a child in the wilderness, uncertain of his ability to survive. In the end, though, I had to trust his judgment. It didn't matter how I felt. My training was over, and I had to move on.

Looking for my first hit, I felt like Robin Hood, a protector of the weak. But I wasn't after money. I was after justice. I remembered the job Ida and I had pulled years ago. It virtually killed her, but it made me feel alive. The rush of adrenaline, the danger. I loved it!

I scanned the news papers for stories of police misconduct. I looked at big stories from New York to California. I thought about

Mark Fuhrman, but decided that the publicity around the O.J. trial made him too risky. Besides, O.J. got off. Then I found a small story in a small neighborhood newspaper in Chicago about the death of Marcus Pemberly at the hands of one of the Chicago Police Department's finest. This was it. Showtime.

It was luck, really. I had no idea how I was going to find the guy, so I started by listening to the account of the incident on television. They never give the address of an incident on the local news, but they always give the neighborhood. The neighborhood was the north side not far from the lake. I stopped at a tavern over on Broadway near Lawrence. I bellied up to the bar and ordered a beer. I deliberately sat near a brother who was in a heated conversation with the barmaid.

He was a tall man with long legs, so he had to sit on the barstool with his knees wide apart in order to be able to get close enough to be right in her face as he talked.

"You a fool if you believe that," he said, "a motherfuckin' fool."

"Why?" She defended herself, "just because I don't believe what you believe?"

The man sat back exasperated. Then he turned to me, "Would you tell this bitch that oranges got more vitamin C than any other fruit on the planet."

"I don't know that, brother," I said. "I don't know how much vitamin C other fruits have."

"That's my point," he said. "If some other fruit had more vitamin C, we would've heard about it."

"I don't listen to the news much," I said, "so I wouldn't know."

"Well, I listens to the news all the motherfuckin' time," he said, "and I ain't heard shit."

The barmaid was a big woman with relatively small tits. Her tits

looked like pecs on a male body builder. She had fat cheeks with dimples and big lips that turned down at the corners when she smiled.

“Sorry, boo,” she said, “hip-hop news ain’t news.”

The brother was visibly irritated. He clenched his teeth as he looked back and forth between the barmaid and me.

“What did you hear about the young brother up this way not long ago who hanged himself in his cell?” As much as anything, I asked the question to get the brother’s mind off the vitamin issue.

“Hanged hisself!” he said. “When?”

“I heard about it,” the barmaid answered.

“You did?” the brother asked. “When? What happened?”

“The boy got busted sticking up a beauty shop,” she said.

“A beauty shop?!”

“And when the cops got there, he pulled a gun.”

“Wha-a-t?”

“And it was a big gun, too. Or so they said. The cops didn’t waste no time dragging his ass off to the slammer.”

“Where did it happen?” I asked. “Do you know?”

She hesitated a moment.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’m wondering how much I should tell you,” she said.

“What does *that* mean?”

She hesitated again, then said, “I knew the boy. His mama and me went to school together.”

My heart leaped. I wanted to blurt out question after question. Where did he live? What was his mother’s name? Who were the witnesses? But I didn’t want to come off as overly eager. I looked away shyly, and said, “Oh.” I let the silence between us hang there. I wanted her to volunteer the information. She inhaled sharply.

That's when the brother piped up. "Well, goddamn it, say something. Tell us what happened."

She exhaled slowly as she cut her gaze to him. "You are such a clown, Jake. I ain't telling you shit."

I wanted to do more than cut him with a gaze. My heart was pounding in my chest. I wanted to punch him in the mouth. I lifted my glass slowly, and took a long swig.

"Aw, c'mon, baby." Jake's voice was smooth. He reached for her hand and pulled it to his lips. "You know I love you." He placed a soft kiss just behind her knuckles. As he did, he caressed her palm with the tip of his index finger.

She recoiled in mock indignation. "You so crazy," she said. "I don't care how much you love me, I ain't telling you shit." She stuck her hand right under his nose. "Kiss my hand again." Then she yanked it away before he could respond. "Ne-ver mind." She turned her attention slowly in my direction. "Marcus Pemberly was Bebe's son. Bebe and me used to run together back in the day. I hadn't talked to her in some years, really. But when I read that story in the paper about somebody with that name dying in the police station, I called her. I mean, how many people do you know named Marcus Pemberly? None, right? So I called her. I hadn't seen Marcus since he was five years old. He was a cute little boy, and proud as he could be. I called him Marc once. And you know that boy corrected me. He folded his little arms and said his name was Marcus, not Marc. 'Call me Marcus,' he said. And I did. Marcus Pemberly."

She turned to the sink and picked up a rag and wet it and began wiping down the bar.

"So I says to Bebe how sorry I am, right? And she breaks down crying. I mean I could hear it in her voice that she had been crying all

along, but hearing my voice after all them years and her son having just been killed. It was too much. She broke down sobbing. And then, damn, I broke the fuck down, too. So for a solid minute, there we are, two grown ass women crying on the phone. Not talking, just crying. It was sick, you know? It was sick, but it was cool. And after a minute, we sniffed, and she started talking.”

By now, she was done with the bar, and was arranging glasses on her side of the bar. They clinked together as she moved them around.

“In truth, he hadn’t done anything. There was no beauty shop robbery, no gun, no nothing. They made all that up for the press, and put the word out to the beauty shop owner that she better back up the story. They picked him up because he looked like somebody they were supposed to have been looking for. They said he was robbing the store so they would have probable cause to lock him up. Bebe went down to the station over on Clark Street, but they wouldn’t let her see him. She sat there for four hours before they came out and said he was dead.”

The glasses were all in place. So now she re-arranged the ice with the ice scoop. Each thrust of the scoop made that crushed-ice sound.

“Bebe even told me the cop’s name. Avel something or other. I just remember the Avel part.”

The ice was done, and so was her story. I stood up to leave. She looked over at Jake.

“You gon’ buy me something to eat?” she asked.

“We got food at home,” he said.

“I don’t want nothing we got in that house.”

As I pushed the exit door open, I could hear her saying to Jake, “I want you to buy me some shrimp for when I get off.”

I stepped out into the daylight. I had a name, but I needed more.

I needed a way to get information about the name. I needed to know who Avel was. I wondered if Reverend Milton could help me.

VI

“Beware of anyone who claims on any issue to have the mind of the Lord.”

“I know,” I answered. “I don’t trust anyone who walks around with a Bible in his hand except you.”

“Well, don’t even trust me if I claim to know the mind of the Lord. To begin with, the Lord ain’t got no mind. The mind is a function of the brain, and God ain’t got no brain ‘cause God ain’t got no body.”

We were standing outside the Salvation Army building up on Broadway. We called it Sally’s. I used to stand out there a couple of times a week when I was moving around incognito. It was a known place to pick up moving jobs that paid cash with no questions asked. It was also on the other side of town from where I lived. This was in Uptown. I lived in South Shore.

“And the corollary,” Milton continued, “is that language does not apply to God. God is beyond the scope of language, and beyond the grasp of the mind. In the sense that the mind can know, God cannot be known.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You ain’t no dummy,” he said, “you know what it means.”

“Well, humor me. Pretend that I don’t know. It sounds like you’re saying God cannot be known.”

“That’s not what I said. What I said was, God cannot be known with the mind.”

“But that’s how we know things, with the mind.”

“No, it isn’t,” he corrected. “We know things with the gut.”

“We digest food with the gut,” I said. “We think and know with the brain.”

“You’ve got a long way to go,” he said, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

Reverend Milton was a huge man, six foot six, two hundred and fifty pounds. His hairline formed an “M” over his high and broad forehead. We used to work together whenever we could. He was old enough to be my father, and he took to the job eagerly after he learned that my real father died when I was very young. “Every boy needs a father,” he told me, “even if the boy is over 21.” Even his voice was big and booming. He sounded like he should have been a movie star. But quite frankly, I wasn’t looking for a father or even a father figure. I reckoned that I didn’t need one. I had, after all, reached majority without his or anyone else’s help, thank you very much. But the day he said that boys needed fathers, I heard it as old men need young men to look up to them. And for whatever reason, I thought having him around might enhance my cover, so I acquiesced.

“You think you know everything,” he had told me, “but you don’t. You ain’t lived long enough to know everything.”

“And you have?” I had asked him.

“No, but I been around a whole hell of a lot longer than you, and I know stuff that you don’t even know need to be known.”

I didn’t get a chance to retort, because a guy in an old, faded sand-colored Peugeot station wagon pulled up looking for some men to help him move. The guy was a skinny brother with a short ‘fro and a full beard. He had bulbous eyes like Peter Lorre, and crooked yellow teeth.

“I need a few good men,” the brother said.

“Me and this boy right here is all the Marines you need,” Milton said latching onto my elbow. “Let’s go.”

He pushed me into the back seat. He rode shotgun. We couldn’t have driven more than a block from Sally’s before Milton started in

again. “Young blood here is my play son,” he said to the brother. “I’m teaching him the ins and outs of life.”

“Good for you,” the brother said. His voice sounded small following Milton’s.

We worked all day moving that brother. At the end, he gave us some good money. Apparently, he liked the service we provided. On the walk back to the train station, Milton surprised me. “A man on the lam got to be careful who he work for. Maybe even need somebody to run interference for him.”

I hadn’t told him I was on the lam. I hadn’t told anyone. So I wasn’t sure how or even whether he knew what he was talking about. “I’m not sure what you mean,” I said, feeling him out.

“Cut the bullshit, son,” he said. “I see what I see, and I know what I know. You got to be careful who you work for and work with.”

I never questioned him again after that. He negotiated all the deals with the people who stopped by looking for folks to help them move. He also did most of the work. But we split the money 50-50. That was his arrangement.

In time, I did begin to look up to him, and the advice he gave me was always sage. That’s why, years later, I was trying to seek his advice again. “People’s image of God is limited by their imaginations,” Milton was warming to his topic. “People can’t imagine God without a body even though they say He’s only spirit.”

“So, can you help me?” I cut in.

“You still running?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I answered, “but not as fast. That’s not what I need help with.”

I waited for him to ask me what I wanted. He didn’t, so I continued, “I need information on a cop named Avel something or

other.”

“What do you need to know?”

“Everything.”

“*Why* do you need to know it?”

“It’s part of a project I’m working on,” I answered.

“What kind of project?”

“He hurt somebody.”

“I know that,” he said. “What I want to know is what that has to do with you.”

I hesitated for a moment too long.

“Look, son,” he said, “I ain’t never asked you why you running or who you running from. But I’m gon’ give you some free advice. Leave Office Avel alone.”

“He’s a murderer,” I protested.

“They all murderers, son. That was the one credential they needed to get the job. In order to get the job, they had to have killed somebody in somebody’s war somewhere. That’s the one thing that qualified them to be cops in the first place. But you can’t fix all the wrongs that all the cops in this city have done.”

“I can try,” I answered. “I can try.”

“You’ll be sorry,” he said.

Then he started telling me about the Marcus Pemberly case. I couldn’t help but wonder, though, how he knew what he knew. The information he gave me was simply too detailed for it to have come from folks in the street. I was an ex-street person. I knew the kind of stuff street people knew. This wasn’t it. And just like he had never asked me anything about my past, I had never asked him anything about his. Until now, that is.

“I *am* a cop,” he answered after I clumsily posed the question. “Or

rather, I used to be. I still know some folks in the department.”

The expression on my face must have betrayed my surprise. He rocked his head back and laughed with that huge voice.

Then he said, “When we first met right here in front of this very building, I had recently finished doing twenty years in a federal prison.”

My expression must have betrayed me again, because he laughed again, though not quite as loudly.

“I was a good cop,” he said, “maybe the only one on the force. I went after bad guys for real. Especially drug dealers. What I didn’t know was that these dealers were on the FBI’s payroll. So they set me up. The FBI busted me for trying to bust them. While I was still on the inside, I got word that one of the main guys I was after laid the ground work that led to the raid on the Black Legion office.”

It had been years since I had given much thought to that raid. It was odd that Milton would be the one to remind me of it, and to have indirectly had a connection to it. I remembered Felton Kirby and his boney little wife, Lois. I remembered Felton Junior. All of them died that night in that raid. I remembered the account of Felton, a big man with nappy, rust-colored hair, charging into the police, and beating one of them to death with a club. It was that raid that led to my first blow for freedom. Being reminded of it was a good sign. I remembered the brother I had seen standing across the street from the Legion office taking pictures. Ida had identified him as an FBI agent. I wondered if he was the same guy Milton had been trying to arrest for drug trafficking.

“But who’s giving the orders?” I asked. “Ordinary agents and cops aren’t the ones out here mandating that drugs be distributed to the community. They might be a part of the trafficking on a lower level, like your guy. But these plans seem to be getting passed along from

generation to generation at the upper levels of government. Who are these people who are always in power and always formulating these twisted plans to poison us? They must be part of a think tank or secret society or something. They're like seagulls, and we are the fish. As fish, we can't even see them. We don't even know they're there. So we can't protect ourselves from them. But they *are* there. And our inability to see them is part of their plan. They don't want us to know that we're being exterminated. As seagulls, they literally swoop out of the blue, dive into the water, and snatch us to an instant death."

Reverend Milton's big shoulders sagged. "I can't answer that one," he said. "I spent twenty years asking that same question. Eventually, I gave up. I started reading the Bible instead."

"The answer ain't in the Bible," I said.

"I know, but reading it helped ease the pain of not having the answer to that question."

The Reverend looked ashamed of having been broken, of not having the answer to the biggest question ever: Who's *really* running the show in America?

"But this is what I figured out," he said after a long pause. "The plan is masterful. The formulators of the plan put rules into place for the common man to follow, because as long as he is busy following the rules, he won't even conceive of the notion that there is a plan in place, a plan that he ain't part of. The United States Constitution was put into place to give the people the illusion that they are masters of their own destiny. An elaborate system of government was created with seeming checks and balances, with seeming recourse for injustices, with seeming rules for the way the country is run. But it's a fake. It's all a fake. Oh, it works on a certain low level. And the working on that level helps perpetuate the fiction that it works on all levels. It helps

perpetuate the fiction that there is no master plan in place. That's part of the beauty of the plan. As people see the every day workings of government, they begin to believe what they see. After a while, when evidence of how things really work surfaces-- briberies, stolen elections, political favors, cronyism, assassinations-- the people see *them* as abnormalities, aberrations. It's like a magician setting up an act. He shows you a canary in a cage. When he shows you an empty cage, you think there's something wrong. So he shows you a different canary, and you're satisfied. In truth, the cage is always supposed to be empty. We expect a canary, because we are conditioned to expect a canary. There's never any applause when the canary re-appears, because the people never know that they've been duped. Their only reward is blissful ignorance. Their only reward is that of the fool."

"So going after Avel is worthless," I mused aloud.

"Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's."

"*Nothing* is Caesar's," I answered. "Caesar gets only what I decide to give him."

"Forget about Officer Avel," he said. "He's just a footnote in the plan. In fact, the formulators *want* you to go after Avel. That's the proof they need that the plan is still working."

"But if not him," I mused aloud again, "who?"

"Indeed," Milton said. "Who, indeed?"

He hesitated a moment, then reached into his pocket and slipped me a crumpled up piece of brown paper bag. I unfolded it. There was a phone number, an address and a name scrawled in pencil and scarcely visible against the wrinkles and folds of the paper. The graphite itself was smeared. The writing was barely legible, but I made it out. The name was Tina Pemberly.

VII

“Who is Tina Pemberly?” I asked.

“That’s Marcus Pemberly’s mother,” Milton answered.

“How did you . . . ,” I was going to ask how he knew this was the person I was looking for, but he cut me off.

“I didn’t,” he said. “I got this information for my own use.”

“I’m confused,” I said.

“I know you are.” He hesitated. Then he looked me straight in the eye, and said, “Maybe it’s time I came clean. I know who you are, and I know what you did.”

I answered with as much resolve as I could muster. I said, “Huh?”

“I said I know . . .”

I cut him off. “I know what you said,” I said. “I don’t know what you meant.”

“You know what I meant,” he said. “You’re just not sure you can acknowledge it, because you didn’t know anyone else knew.”

He was right on both counts. I knew he was alluding to the blow Ida and I had struck for freedom years ago. I also did *not* know that anyone besides Ida and me knew about it. I was cautious with my question.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I worked out of the station you hit,” he answered. “One of the guys you gunned down helped the FBI set me up.”

“What makes you think it was me?”

“Ida,” he replied.

His answer stunned me. I hadn’t known anyone knew who or where Ida even was.

That night years ago destroyed her. She killed a man, saw the

creature in me, and, more importantly, she saw the creature in herself. Maybe that's why she lost the baby. It was more than she could handle. After her D & C at Cook County Hospital, the doctor recommended that she get counseling, because she seemed to be more depressed than was normal for having had a miscarriage. He arranged for her to see a staff psychiatrist. Within a year, she was being treated in Kankakee. I visited her a few times, if for no other reason than to assure myself that she wasn't spilling the beans about what happened that night. She didn't even know who I was. She literally sat on the floor cradling an imaginary baby to her bosom. Or maybe it wasn't a baby at all. Maybe it was the ghost of a cop.

"How did you find her?" I asked.

"The doctor who was treating her ratted her out. My partner went out on the follow-up."

"Your partner?" Now there were *two* other people who knew.

"I was in prison, remember? The doctor told Bruce-- that's my partner-- what Ida had said, and Bruce wrote up a report."

"And?"

"And nothing," he said. "She was a crazy woman. Nobody believed her story. Nobody except me and Bruce."

"Why did *you* believe it?"

"I believed it because Bruce believed it. He believed it because she knew details that only the cops and the killers knew."

"Such as?"

"Such as the make and model of the weapons used."

"So how did you link it to me?" I asked.

"Based on Ida's tip, Bruce tracked down the pictures that were taken of the Black Legion office by the punk I had been trying to bust. On the day these pictures were taken, only two people were in the office,

Ida and some man.”

“And you think that man was me.”

“I’m coming to that part,” he said. “Bruce blew the picture of the man up, and showed it to her. She didn’t say yes or no. But her reaction changed enough that Bruce was sure who it was.”

“So then?”

“So then nothing. We had no idea where to even start looking, and Ida gave us no clue. But after I got out of prison, I started looking for work at Sally’s. Then one day, you showed up. I knew instantly who you were.”

“Why didn’t you turn me in?”

“Turn you in?! You avenged me. Why would I turn you in? All I wanted was to shake your hand.”

“That’s why you took me under your wing.”

“Bingo,” he said. “Now, you’re beginning to understand.”

An eerie feeling came over me. For years, I had assumed that Ida and I had committed the perfect crime. Now, years later, I learn that not just one, but two other people knew about it. I felt vulnerable. I resisted the impulse to look over my shoulder.

“So, now what?” I asked. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I got Tina Pemberly’s information because I wanted to help.”

“Help how?” I asked. “She’s going to think you are what you are, a bum.”

“Yes,” he said, “that’s the reason I haven’t done anything with the information until now.”

“What’s changed? She’s still going to think you’re a bum.”

“That’s where you come in.”

“Where *I* come in? I’ve got my own plan for this project.”

“I know,” he said, “but maybe we can help each other.”

For the first time since I'd known him, I was having trouble trusting Milton. Ignorance truly is bliss. As long as I thought my secret was mine alone, everything was fine. But now that I knew that Milton-- and Bruce, too, for that matter-- knew my secret, everything was different.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure I want to work with another partner. I let Ida be my partner the last time, and look what it got me."

"You can't do it alone," he said.

"I know how to do a hit," I said, acknowledging for the first time my involvement in the caper years ago.

"That part's easy," he said. "How much advance research did you do for that job?"

"Almost none. We just picked a target, and hit it. It was like a target of opportunity."

"Exactly," he said. Then he asked, "How much research are you doing this time?"

His point was made. There were already people whom I have had to question in order to get as far as I had gotten. Now I was facing the prospect of talking to Tina Pemberly.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

"We'll do the leg work; you do the hit."

"We?"

"Me and Bruce."

Damn! In the span of thirty seconds, I had gone from no partners to two partners. That eerie feeling was growing.

"I've got to think about this," I said.

"What's to think about?"

I didn't want to have to confess to the eerie feeling, so I played the need-for-time card.

"I'm not good at making snap decisions," I said. "I just need to

sleep on it.”

That night, Jiqin gave all the signals. She rubbed my foot with hers; she mock yawned; she nudged me with her behind. I ignored them all. She took her panties off and rubbed them in my face.

“What?” I said.

“What do you mean ‘what?’ I want you to screw me.”

“Not tonight,” I said. I turned over and pulled the cover over my shoulder.

“What?” she said.

“What do you mean ‘what?’ I’m not in the mood.”

“Not in the mood?”

“What?!” I said again.

“What do you mean you’re not in the mood?”

“I mean I don’t want to screw you, because I’m preoccupied.”

“Wait a minute,” she said. She sat up. “When *you* want to screw and *I’m* not in the mood, we screw. But when *I* want to screw and *you’re* not in the mood, we don’t screw. What’s wrong with this picture?”

She had a point. It’s like we were married. Humph. Who was I kidding? There was no like about it. We *were* married. We were more married than any of my other wives and I had ever been.

“I’ve got a problem,” I said.

“Maybe I can help,” she said. Her interest was genuine.

“There’s a part of the story that I haven’t told you,” I said. “A part that at the time didn’t matter.”

“Now it does?” she asked.

“Now it does.”

I was resigned to the fact that someone else was going to have to know what Ida and I had done. I took solace in the notion of picking that someone.

I told her everything. I told her that Ida and I had committed murder. I told her that we attacked and killed police officers at a small and remote police station in retaliation for an attack the police had launched on the Black Legion office. The Black Legion, I explained, was an organization dedicated to the cause of freeing Black people in the United States of America. I hadn't been a member, but Ida had. She had joined at the urging of two of our close friends, Felton and Lois Kirby, who were also members.

The office had been under surveillance for weeks by an operative of the FBI. Then one night, they struck. A meeting was being held that night, and members were there with their families. Under the guise of breaking up a dope selling ring, the police broke in. Claiming that Legion members resisted arrest, they killed almost everyone there. Felton, Lois and their son, Felton Junior, were killed in that raid.

Shortly thereafter, Ida and I decided to conduct a counter raid. We bought a couple of rifles, and I showed her how to use them. We picked a target, and we struck.

We were really lucky. We did virtually no planning. We picked a small police station on the near west side, and simply walked in. I shot the desk sergeant, and Ida shot another officer who emerged from a nearby office. She shot him in the face. Granted, it was late at night, but nobody else came out to challenge us. We threw Molotov cocktails into the corners, and left.

Ida had been pregnant at the time. However, the stress of killing a man caused her to lose the baby. Eventually, it drove her mad. Not everyone is cut out to be a killer. I told Jiqin that I had thought we had committed the perfect crime. I told her about my living as a street person for years until that day she rescued me in the park. I even told her where Ida was now out in Kankakee.

Then I told her about Milton and Bruce. I told her the arrangement Milton had offered.

“So, what’s the problem?” she asked.

“The problem is that I don’t know if I want more partners.” I said, “I have a partner. You.”

I didn’t mean for it to sound like I was in love with her, but apparently, it did. Her face got that soft, weepy look that women in love get. By now, I was sitting up, too. So she crawled over into my lap, and sort of melted with her arms around my neck. Hell. Maybe I did mean it.

“I love you,” she said.

I wasn’t going to reply, but the words came up like a belch. “I love you, too,” I said.

After that, how could we *not* screw?

VIII

I rolled off of Jiqin exhausted. She was the best she had ever been. I came deep inside of her. Twice. She then crawled on top of me and lay with her head on my chest breathing heavily. We must have lain like that for twenty minutes.

“Does Milton know about us?” she asked finally.

I knew she was referring to her crew and uncle.

“Certainly not,” I answered.

“Then let him help you. If he gets to be a problem, we’re here to back you up.”

I waited a while before deciding to thank her. But by the time I got around to forming the words, she twitched. I knew she was asleep.

That night, I had the oddest dream. They always say that if you fall in a dream and don’t wake up, you’re dead. The reason is that the natural reflex of the body to tighten up to brace for the fall will wake you. I don’t know who figured that one out, because only someone who had died would know if it was true. Then there is the obvious problem of communicating what was learned back to those still living. Still, that’s what they say.

In this dream, I was riding my bicycle in Grant Park by the lake across from Buckingham Fountain. Suddenly, a fog rolled in that was so dense, I couldn’t see anything around me. I couldn’t see the ground; I couldn’t see my hands on the handlebars. But I could still feel the wind on my face, and the peddles under my feet still offered resistance. I could hear a voice somewhere near me pleading, “*No mas! No Mas!*” The voice was tiny like Jiqin’s, but I knew it was Juan begging for his life. I couldn’t see where I was going, but, somehow, I knew where to steer. It was as if I had the road memorized. The turns I was making

did not correspond to the actual bends in the path along the lake in Grant Park. I didn't know where I was.

Then, without warning, I hit a pothole in the path. The bike stopped cold. I didn't. I sailed over the handlebars, and headed straight for the ground that I still couldn't see. This is where I guess I thought I should have flinched. I hit the ground, and the ground was soft. Well, not soft. Just not hard, either. The overall sensation was comfortable. Hitting the ground was comfortable, and the incongruity woke me up. I didn't have to open my eyes. I could feel that I was cuddled behind Jiqin. I could smell her hair and skin. I could smell her pussy. I was overcome with a feeling of well-being so powerful that it bordered on bliss. I was supposed to be the protector, but holding Jiqin like that made me feel like the one being protected. I felt safe. I drew in a deep breath, and slipped back into slumber.

The following morning was Sunday. Her boys didn't have any place to go, so the house seemed alive with activity. Somebody was running a vacuum cleaner. Somebody else was hammering something into the wall. And I couldn't be sure, but it sounded like someone was running water full blast in the bathroom.

Jiqin stirred next to me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

She yawned. "Another shipment is coming in tonight." She got up and headed for the toilet.

"Mexicans?" I asked.

She didn't close the door, so I could hear her in there taking a piss. "Yes," she answered. "They came across the border yesterday."

"How much will you get this time?"

"We'll get the same amount," she said, "five hundred dollars each."

I sat for a moment pondering where the money from the last

shipment had gone, and wondering what the dollar amount of this shipment would be.

Then, as if she had been reading my mind, she said, "We have a lot of people here to feed. It takes money. Lots of it." She paused for a long moment, then asked, "How much can you get for assassinations?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Depends on the client."

She thought about it for a minute, then mused, "I wonder how much the government pays."

"They have their own assassins. Besides, they're not going to let someone wanted by the INS do killings for them."

"Maybe, maybe not," she said.

"Besides," I said, "I know who I'm after."

"Who?" she asked.

"Dirty cops," I said.

She yawned. "Dirty cops? There's no money in killing them."

My choice of targets obviously fell flat with Jiqin.

I got up and took a shower and got dressed. By the time I got downstairs, the kitchen was crowded with folks foraging for food. Master Yuen was at the stove fixing sticky rice. Jiqin was whisking eggs in a bowl. Chico stood in a corner with one foot on a chair eating a banana. The whole scene was one of controlled chaos.

I usually fixed toast and jam and tea for myself for breakfast. In fact, we all usually fixed whatever it was that we wanted for ourselves. So when Jiqin said, "Sit down; I'm fixing these for you," everybody stopped what they were doing. Master Yuen looked over at Chico and winked. Chico affected a love-struck grin, and fluttered his eyes.

"Ignore these assholes," Jiqin said. "I can fix you eggs if I want to."

She sautéed them in butter, and served them to me with a serving of Master Yuen's sticky rice. Then she kissed me on the forehead, and

left the room. I guessed that she was going to take a shower or something.

As soon as she was gone, Master Yuen sat in the chair across the table from me. Chico was finished his banana, and was straddling his chair like a cowboy.

“When are you going to see Milton again?” he asked.

“She told you about him?”

“Of course,” he answered, “she tells me everything. I’m the only family she has left.”

“What about her mother?” I asked. I remembered her telling me that her mother had had a picture of me back home.

“My sister is dead,” he said. He showed as much emotion as if he had said that the moon was rising.

I waited for him to say something tender like “I miss her,” or, “she lived a good life,” or, “she was my baby sister.”

He said none of these things. When he finally spoke again, he said, “When are you going to see Milton?”

“This afternoon,” I answered.

“Good,” he said. Then nodding his head in Chico’s direction, he said, “I want my man here to go with you to get some pictures. Don’t worry, Milton won’t even know he’s there.”

I gave him the address of Sally’s up on north Broadway, then finished my sticky rice.

Milton was animated when we met up later that day.

“We have a contact,” he said. “Bruce found her. Her name is Beverly Zajac.”

I wasn’t quite sure how to process this information. I didn’t know her relationship to Avel. Was I supposed to go knock on her door?

Was I supposed to call her? What was I supposed to say to her? What was I supposed to ask her? “Cool,” I said. “So what’s the next step?”

“This is a slam dunk,” Milton said. “Turns out that she and this dude used to have a thing together. Now, he’s raising her baby.”

“Oh,” I said.

“It gets better,” he continued. “She walked out on both of them right after the kid was born, but now she wants to see her baby.”

“But let me guess,” I said. “She’s afraid the old boyfriend will be pissed.”

“Bingo! And that’s where you come in. You smooth the way for her to see the kid, and she leads you to the mark. Easy as child’s play.”

All at once, Milton stiffened up. Then he relaxed a little, and took a step to his right.

“So, where can I find her?” I asked.

“Don’t move,” he said.

“What?”

“Don’t move. Don’t turn around. Somebody is across the street taking pictures of us.”

In retrospect, I should have said, “What the fuck?” But I didn’t. Instead, I took half a breath, and froze.

Milton looked at me. “You bastard,” he said. “You set me up.”

Again, I should have said, “What the fuck?” Again, I didn’t.

Stepping away from me, and still using my body to shield him from the lens, he said, “You on your own, Jones.” Then he turned abruptly, and darted around the corner.

I stood for a moment conflicted. Should I have told him about Chico? I walked the few paces to the corner, and looked for Milton down the street. He was already gone.

Now *I* was pissed. I spun around expecting to see Chico with his camera pointed in my direction, but he was gone, too. A CTA bus roared in front of me, blocking my view of the area for about two seconds. When it passed, nothing had changed. The tavern, the grocery store and the tattoo parlor were still there. As I headed back to the car, I wondered whether or not I could find Beverly Zajac by myself.

“Your man messed up,” I said walking into the house.

Master Yuen already knew what I was talking about. “We have some good pictures,” he answered.

“Yeah,” I said, “of the back of my head.”

He handed me an 8.5 by 11 color print. It wasn’t the back of my head, and it wasn’t Milton. It was somebody crouched behind the brick facing on the roof of the building that housed the tattoo parlor. He was taking a picture of something across the street. Then it struck me. Chico got a shot of someone who was taking a picture of me and Milton across the street!

“Who is this?” I asked.

“We don’t know.”

“Milton was right,” I said. “Somebody set him up.”

“Maybe somebody set *you* up,” he said.

This was getting too complicated. Besides the people in this house, the only person who knew I met with him there was him. If he was the one who set me up, he didn’t have to let me know what was going down. On the other hand, by telling me about it, he had established a solid ground for plausible deniability should the pictures ever come to light.

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe somebody *did* set me up.”

I didn't tell this to Master Yuen, but now I couldn't know who to trust. From my vantage point, it could have as easily been him or Chico as it could have been Milton. And that's only assuming that I was the mark here. It could still be that Milton was the mark.

That night, the same truck drove into the alley behind the house. The same little man with the huge beer belly rolled out of the cab, and waddled to the front of the truck. This time, I took delivery. He paid me \$15,000 in cash for 30 people, fifteen women and fifteen men.

Unlike the first group, this group made themselves right at home. I reckoned a couple of them had done this before. They checked out the whole apartment, then broke up into smaller groups for sleeping arrangements in each room. By the time I left, those who had blankets were staking out spaces to spread them out. Those who didn't were simply huddling in a corner somewhere. These folks must have been really tired.

Sex that night was like a continuation of the night before. Jiqin couldn't wait to get me inside her, and I couldn't wait to oblige. She writhed as I pushed into her deeper with each stroke. Damn! If I had known she was going to be this good, I would have told her that I loved her a long time ago.

IX

It was Miss Abbey who told me the rest of what I learned about Cop Buck. Of course, she didn't call him that. She called him Beaman. And every time she mentioned his name, her face would slide into a different expression. Sometimes it reflected sadness, sometimes anger, sometimes melancholy.

Finally one day, she came out with it. "I hate the man," she said. "He destroyed my life."

She had that far-off look in her eyes. She wasn't really talking to me. She was simply venting her regrets. But I think she felt more at ease venting with me around, because she was reasonably certain that I didn't understand her musings anyway. She was right. At the time, I didn't.

"Beaman was a thug," she said. "I should have told Faith's daddy what Beaman was doing to his little girl out behind the shed of an evening."

"What was he doing," I asked.

She came back to the moment briefly, and looked at me. Then, remembering that I was young and didn't understand the 'behind the shed' reference, she said, "He was taking advantage of her innocence."

"Huh?" I said.

She leaned over a little, and lowered her voice, "He was sticking his thing in her." She sat back in her chair now assured that she had made everything crystal clear. I was about to ask, what thing? But she blinked a couple of times, and was back into her story. "And the funny thing about it," she said, "he wasn't doing it for her. He was doing it because of the danger. He knew that he was risking his life, and he

liked it.”

“What was dangerous about sticking his thing in her,” I asked. I phrased the question as if I knew what she was talking about. My hope was that she would give some more details about what she meant.

“Niggers weren’t supposed to fuck southern white girls,” she said. “Not in Arkansas.” The words must have had an acerbic taste, because she stopped talking for a moment as she worked her tongue around in her mouth to clear the bile. Then she looked at me, and said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have used that word around you.”

I was young. I didn’t even know why she was apologizing.

“Faith was a Carpenter,” she continued, “and the Carpenters ran that little town.”

“Like Jesus was a carpenter?” I asked.

“No, honey,” she said, smiling broadly, “her maiden name was Carpenter.” Then the smile faded slowly. “Thad Carpenter would have hung Beaman from the tallest pine in the county.”

“So, why didn’t you tell him?” I asked.

“Because in Thad Carpenter’s eyes, I was trash.”

“Why?”

She paused for a moment, then went on, “I loved Faith like a sister. At least, that’s what I used to tell her. We grew up together, went to school together, everything. But in truth, as we got older, my love for Faith changed.”

“What? You didn’t love her anymore?”

“No, it changed in a different way. It changed from sister love to woman love, and Thad Carpenter saw it. He never said anything, but he began filling Faith’s time with chores so she couldn’t be with me. Thad never told Faith about me, because he didn’t want to discuss such

a worldly topic with his young daughter. I was so hurt. Faith was, too, but for a different reason.”

“So, what did you do?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she answered. “There was nothing I *could* do.” She paused for a long moment, then slowly shook her head. “That’s when Beaman moved in on her. He used to sweep up around the Carpenter’s store, and do odd jobs. Nobody really knew where he came from. He just showed up in town one day looking for work. It was rumored among the Negroes that he had run away from something he had done in Alabama or Mississippi or Georgia or somewhere. It was never really clear. And to tell the truth, she was the one who made the first move. She asked him if the rumors were true. She always was too curious for her own good.”

“Well, were they?” I asked.

“He told her they were, but to not tell anyone. And oh, she liked that. Nothing appealed to her more than knowing something her daddy didn’t know.”

“So, what did he say he did?”

“He said he killed a man in a knife fight.” She paused again, then said, “a white man.”

I didn’t know what difference that made, and was looking for a graceful way to phrase the question. Apparently, she saw my dilemma.

“Negroes don’t kill white people in this country. Especially, not in the south. White folks hang them if they do.”

For some reason, I felt really glad to be living in Chicago, just in case.

“What’s wrong with white folks?” I asked. “They want to hang somebody for every little thing.”

“Murder is not a little thing,” she said.

“Would they hang him if he killed a Negro?”

“Probably not,” she answered.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “They would hang him if he stuck his thing in a white girl, but not if he killed a Negro. That’s not fair.”

She exhaled sharply through her nose. “Life’s not fair,” she said. “Life’s not fair.”

“So, when did he stick his thing in her?” I blurted out.

“Oh, that took a few weeks,” she said. “After he confirmed that the rumors were true, she was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. He tried to avoid her, because he knew the risk. But after a while, when her daddy wasn’t looking, she would brush up against him accidentally on purpose. He would pretend to not notice, but she wouldn’t be ignored. One day, she brushed up against him, and he put his broom down and walked out back behind the tool shed. She followed him.”

I hated it when she paused like that. “So, what happened next?” I asked.

“He grabbed her up in his arms, straddled a sawhorse, rested her butt on that sawhorse, and fucked her. That’s what happened next.”

“You mean he stuck his thing in her?” I asked.

The far-away look was gone for now. “Yes,” she answered. “He stuck his thing in her.”

I still wasn’t satisfied. I didn’t want to ask the question, because I had been leading on that I knew what she was talking about. I looked around at things in the kitchen searching for a way to ask without appearing to be asking, the coiled metal handles on the old stove, the slats of wood making up the floor. Then it hit me. “What did his thing look like?” I asked.

Miss Abbey looked at me. Her expression was so . . . I don't know what it was. But I couldn't look at her. I had to look away.

"His thing looked like your thing," she said.

"My thing?! I've got a thing?!"

"Yes," she answered. "The thing you pee-pee with."

"That thing?!"

"Yes."

"He stuck *that* in her?!"

"Yes."

"Why would she let him do *that*?"

"Because it feels good," she answered.

"Suppose he had peed in her? No wonder they wanted to hang him. That's nasty!"

She laughed at me. I laughed because she laughed. When the follow-up question flashed in my mind, I stopped laughing.

"Where did he put it?" I asked.

Miss Abbey stopped laughing, too. She pointed to her lap. All I saw was the pale yellow flowers on her dress.

"What's that?" I asked.

"He stuck it between her legs," she answered.

"Oh," I said. "That's different. That's not actually *in* her."

"It's in her," she said.

"How is it in her? There's nothing there. I've seen my mother with no clothes on. There's nothing there."

She thought for a moment. "You've never seen one, have you?"

"Seen what?"

She thought again, then said, "I'm going to show you something, but you must promise never to tell anyone that I did."

“What?” I asked.

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die.”

“Yes.”

“Do it,” she said.

“Do what?”

“Cross your heart and hope to die.”

So I did. I crossed my heart and hoped that I would die if I ever revealed that she showed me whatever it was that she was about to show me.

“Ok,” she said, “stand here.”

She positioned me right in front of her knees. She pulled the hem of her dress up along her thighs and gathered it around her waist. She shifted her bottom from side to side to get it all the way up in back as well.

Her knees and thighs were pasty white. I had never seen this much of a white person before. She wore white cotton panties. She hesitated a moment, then slipped her fingers inside the leg opening, and pulled the material to one side. There was a mat of grizzled hair.

“All I see is hair,” I said.

She fumbled around moving hair from side to side, but it always flipped back into place.

“There’s nothing there but hair,” I said.

“Ok,” she said. “Let’s do this right.”

She moved me back a pace or so, then stood up. Her dress fell back into place around her calves. She reached under her dress and pulled her panties all the way down. She stepped completely out of them.

She gathered the hem around her waist again, then sat back down on the front edge of her chair. She leaned back, pulled her knees up to her chest, and spread her legs as far as she could. She positioned one hand on each side of the patch of hair, and pulled the patch apart. There it was.

“Oh,” I said.

“Oh,” she mimicked.

I leaned forward to get a closer look. I was still standing that pace or so back.

“You can come closer,” she said.

I was afraid. At the same time, I was fascinated. I stepped forward one pace, then another, then another, all the while bending closer and closer to it. I was transfixed. I couldn’t take my eyes away. As I got closer, I could smell it. I had never smelled anything like this before, and it affected me in a strange way. My breathing became deeper as I tried to pull more of the aroma into my nostrils.

“Can I touch it?” I asked.

“No!” she said sharply.

“I see it, but I don’t actually see a hole that you could put anything in.”

“Give me you hand,” she said.

My hand was small compared to hers. She took my index and middle fingers, and guided them across the smooth pink flesh until magically they pushed the tissue apart and disappeared into her body. She was deliciously warm inside. I was trying to understand what had just happened when she pulled them out and ordered me to go wash my hands. I wanted to explain that I wanted to explore this thing further, but she stood up and pulled her panties back on. By the time

I had gathered my thoughts together, she was standing up brushing her dress back into place with short downward strokes.

“Go wash you hands.”

I walked slowly into the bathroom and closed the door. I wanted to smell her scent on my fingers, but I didn’t want her to see me do it. I inhaled deeply several times. I wanted to taste it, but I heard myself telling her “that’s nasty.” It didn’t have the same ring now as it did then. All of a sudden, nasty didn’t mean nasty the way it used to.

I washed my hands and dried them. I smelled my fingers again, but her scent was gone. I smelled of Lifeboy.

Anxious to talk about what we had just done, I dashed back out into the kitchen. She was sitting there with her hands folded in her lap. I took a breath preparatory to firing off multiple questions when I noticed Miss Blue sitting in my chair.

“So,” Miss Blue asked, “did you guys have a good time together?”

I nodded yes.

“So, tell me what you did.”

I shrugged. “We talked,” I said.

“Is that all?” she asked. “Didn’t you do anything fun or interesting?”

I shrugged again.

After a long moment, Miss Abbey said, “It’s getting late, Faith. I’ve got to go.”

Miss Blue saw her out, then came back to the kitchen.

“Your mother should be here soon to pick you up,” she said. “I know you must be tired. Sue can rattle on.”

She tilted her head to an angle and sniffed. “What is that smell?” she asked.

I shrugged yet again.

Mama picked me up shortly thereafter, and we walked home. All the while though, my thoughts were on Miss Abbey's scent and the feel of her warm, moist flesh.

X

I got up early the next morning. I needed to talk to Milton. I needed to look him in the eye as I asked him about who might have been taking pictures of us yesterday. I hoped he would be outside Sally's early trying to get some moving work. I approached Sally's from the other side of the street. I wanted to see the scene in front of the place before I actually walked into it. I didn't want any surprises.

From my vantage point, I could see three men milling around the entrance. They were standing close, almost huddled together as if they were whispering something among themselves. I suspected they were looking for work. Sure enough, within five minutes, a minivan drove up, and, after some preliminary talk, two of them got into the van. As the van pulled off, the third man headed back into the building. Checking the traffic, I loped across the street. As I approached the building, I decided to go inside and ask for Milton rather than milling around outside waiting. I yanked the door open, and a woman on the other side about to lean onto it to get out came crashing into my chest. Both of us went sprawling to the ground. Well, almost. I managed to catch myself with one hand on the ground and a twist of my body. The woman wasn't so lucky. She went face first into the concrete sidewalk.

"Goddamn you," she said, rolling over, then heaving her body into a seated position in the middle of the pavement.

She was in bad shape. Her forehead was cut and bleeding into her eye. A half inch round of flesh was missing from the side of her nose. The shoulder of her jacket was scraped where it rubbed across the concrete, and her knee was bleeding from a four inch hole in her

stocking.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

“Fuck you,” she said. Then she continued, “Help me up.”

I grabbed her by the arm and tugged. She weighted a ton! I was in shape, and it was all I could do to keep from being pulled to the ground with her. The problem was that she was trying to get up while favoring the leg with the busted up knee. She was sort of trying to hop onto her good leg, but she weighted too much. The hop ended up being nothing more than a flinch that yanked down on me. Eventually, realizing this approach wasn't going to work, she gingerly brought the injured leg into play. She grunted and groaned and finally heaved herself into an almost upright position. She leaned on me to avoid putting too much weight onto her bad leg.

I angled us around to head for the door. I wanted to get her back inside so that she could sit down.

“No!” she said. “I'm not going back in there.”

“Why?” I asked. “We can get help in there.”

“Fuck them,” she said. “I want a drink.”

“A drink! You need to get some help.”

“I got help,” she said. “I got you. Get me a cab, and let's find a tavern.”

“I can't go to a bar. I'm trying to meet somebody here.”

“You *did* meet somebody. You met me. And the least you can do is buy me a fucking drink.”

The only bar I knew was the one over on Broadway at Lawrence, where the brother wanted me to confirm the vitamin content of orange juice. The same barmaid was there.

“Hey, boo,” she said, smiling that smile that pulled the corners of

her mouth down. Then she saw that I was with someone and that the someone was bleeding. “Oh, my God,” she said, “What happened?” She reached under the bar for something, then came out of her work area to the table beside the door where I was helping this woman ease into a chair. “What happened?” the barmaid asked again, “Did this fool hurt you?” There was mock indignation in her voice again.

“No,” the answer came, “I fell. I am such a klutz sometimes.”

The something the barmaid had grabbed from behind the bar was a first-aid kit. “Here,” she said, “let me take a look at that.” She tore open a packet that contained a miniature moist towel of some sort, then began dabbing at the cut over the woman’s eye. “My name is Joyce,” she said. “What’s yours?”

“Bev.”

It was a good thing that I was sitting on the side of her with the cut eye. Otherwise, she might have seen me flinch. This was Beverly Zajac. I just knew it.

“Ok, Bev,” Joyce said, “here’s the deal. This cut could use a couple of stitches.”

“I got no money for stitches,” Bev said. “Can you just throw a Band-Aid over it?”

“Sure, honey, I can do that. But it will probably leave a scar.”

Joyce put a bandage on Bev’s eyebrow, then used a fresh towel on Bev’s nose. “This is just a scrape,” she said. “Now, let’s see that knee.”

Bev moved her meaty leg over so that Joyce could look at it.

“Make this clown buy you some more stockings,” Joyce said dabbing at Bev’s knee.

“He’s going to buy me a drink instead,” Bev countered. “Something expensive.”

“I got Champaign in the basement.”

“I hate Champaign. Just make it a Cosmo.”

“This knee will probably be stiff for a little while, but I think it’ll be all right. You should have it X-rayed.”

“Just make it a double Cosmo,” Bev said. “The booze will fix whatever is wrong with me.”

Joyce cleaned up the mess from the kit, and returned to the bar. “What are *you* going to have, slick?”

“I’ll take a Shirley Temple,” I said.

“Now, that’s what I call a real *man’s* drink,” Joyce chortled.

Joyce served our drinks, and I paid her. I gave her a ten dollar tip. What she did for Bev was above and beyond. She thanked me, then disappeared somewhere in the back.

“So who did you think you were supposed to meet at Sally’s?”

“That’s not important,” I answered.

“I know everybody there,” she said.

“His name is Milton.”

“Reverend Milton? You know Reverend Milton?”

“Well,” I answered cautiously, “yeah.”

“Fuck me,” she said, “of all the assholes in the world to run into, I pick a friend of the biggest asshole on earth.”

“What did I do to be an asshole?!”

“You mentioned asshole’s name, that’s what you did.”

“All I said was Milton.”

“See, you did it again.”

“Did what?”

“That fool owes me money.”

“Who?”

“It’s a good thing I ran into you. I saved you the heartache of missing out on his company.”

“Oh?” I said.

“He wasn’t there. Hiding from me, no doubt.”

“You shouldn’t have loaned him money.”

“I didn’t. He was supposed to pay me for some information I gave him.”

“Maybe you should have kept it to yourself,” I said. “How much does he owe you?”

“Fifty bucks.”

“Must have been some good information.”

“He thought so.”

“So what was the information? The next winner at Sportsman’s Park?”

“It wouldn’t interest you.”

“Try me,” I said.

“You got the fifty dollars?” she asked.

“I might.”

“I might ain’t good enough.”

“I got it.”

“Let’s see it.”

“I got it,” I said again. “What’s the information about?”

“A cop. My ex-boyfriend.”

I reached into my pocket and fished out the money. A twenty, a ten, three fives and five singles.

“So how did Milton even find you?” I asked.

“That’s a long story.”

“Give me the short version.”

“Through a mutual acquaintance named Bruce.”

“Bruce was his buddy.”

“Bruce was my probation officer.”

“What were you in for?”

“Hooking.”

“First time?”

“Yeah, and last time.”

“So what did Milton want to know?”

“Reverend Milton wanted to know who killed that kid. What was his name?”

“Pemberly,” I answered.

“Right. Marcus Pemberly. He wanted to know who killed him.”

“Did he say *why* he wanted to know?”

“No. He simply offered fifty bucks for the name.”

Now my interest was really piqued. “How did you come to know who did it?” I asked.

She hesitated, then gulped down her Cosmo. She motioned to the glass. I nodded to Joyce who was now back at her station behind the bar. Joyce mixed up a fresh batch, and served it up.

“I can’t tell you any more,” Bev said.

“You haven’t told me anything, yet.”

“I’ll give you what Milton wanted. The guy’s name is Avel.”

“I know his name,” I said. “I need to know more than that.”

Bev knocked back the second Cosmo, and thumped the glass on the table. I nodded to Joyce again. I raised three fingers indicating to make it a triple.

“I can’t,” Bev said. “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

Joyce served up the new batch of liquor. Bev reached for it, but I

moved the glass just beyond her reach. She leaned forward more, and I moved the glass a little more.

“I’m not telling you shit without this drink,” she said.

I pushed the glass with one finger to just within her reach. She lunged for it and drained half the glass. She sat back and took several deep breaths through her nose.

“Talk to me,” I said.

She sat breathing deeply. Then she said, “If I tell you, he’ll kill me.”

“You’ve already given me his name.”

“That’s nothing,” she said. “I could give you his name, address, phone number and schedule. He wouldn’t care about that.”

“There *is* nothing else,” I said. “That’s all I need.”

“Yes, but that’s not all there is.”

“Meaning?”

She sat with her lips pressed tight together. Then she turned her head slowly from side to side. “I don’t want to die,” she said. She scribbled Avel’s address on a napkin, finished her drink, then staggered out of her seat. She limped because of her leg injury, and the Cosmos were beginning to take their toll. She hugged the wall for stability as she headed for the door. “Don’t call me. I’ll call you,” she said reaching for the handle.

“I’m going to have to tell him who gave me his name,” I said.

“So tell him.”

“If I do, he won’t likely let you see your baby.”

She stopped cold. “You bastard,” she said. “You fucking bastard.”

“Wasn’t that part of the deal you cut with Milton? You give him the name, and we smooth the way for you to see your kid?”

“I kept my end of the deal,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “And you’ve done a good job. But the deal has changed.”

“That’s not fair,” she protested.

“I know, but sometimes life is like that.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to talk to me,” I said. “I want you to tell me about Avel.”

She struggled back to her seat. With one finger, she eased her glass in my direction. I signaled Joyce.

“Avel works for the Heritance Foundation,” she said.

“Avel is a cop,” I corrected. “He works for the city.”

“He gets paid by the city,” she said. “He *works* for the foundation.”

“I’m confused,” I said.

“I’ll explain. The Heritance Foundation was formed in the late sixties by ex-members of the Ku Klux Klan. They gathered in Dearborn, Michigan, and decided that the methods used by the Klan were the Klan’s undoing. They decided that the Klan had been too public, too in-your-face despite the fact that everyone kept their faces covered.”

Joyce served the new Cosmo.

Bev’s speech was beginning to slur because of what she had already had, but she took another long swallow. Some of the fluid ran from the glass down both sides of her chin. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “The Klan had been secretive, but they decided that the true intention of the foundation would be invisible. Even the name would sound all-American. And rather than work outside the system as the Klan had done, they would use the system. They did their homework. They remembered how the state of Georgia had used the

law to prevent Black people from voting. Georgia simply mandated that felons couldn't vote, then proceeded to make every law that Black people broke a felony. After a while, white people ran the state with no input from the large black community. The founders of the Heritage Foundation decided to expand that concept, and to implement it nationwide."

She took a sip of her drink, rolled it around in her mouth, then swallowed. "So now," she continued, "they hire conservative eggheads who do nothing but sit around and think up policies, policies that make it impossible for Black people to get ahead in society. One of their primary goals is the elimination of the federal Social Security program. Black people depend almost exclusively on Social Security for support when they retire. Dismantling that program would decimate the Black community. So what do they do? They issue position papers claiming to support the concepts of self-reliance and self-determination and self-responsibility. They make Social Security sound like welfare. Cowboy politicians in Washington pick up on the notion, and before long, folks are talking about Social Security being bad for the country."

"Social Security is self-supporting," I said.

"I know that, and you know that. But they tell people that Social Security is paid for from the general revenue fund. It's a flat out lie, but most people don't know the difference. They don't know that Congress borrowed money from Social Security years ago when Social Security had a huge surplus. That surplus is gone now because Congress spent it. Now, Congress is having to pay Social Security back, and it looks like welfare."

"Where do they get their funding?" I asked.

"Their goal is to make their policies the guiding principles of

American politics.”

“Where do they get their funding?” I asked again.

“Corporations,” she answered. “Large corporations spend millions of dollars annually supporting the Heritage Foundation. It’s a cycle. Large corporations pay the Foundation to announce these right-wing policies, then the same corporations support the campaigns of politicians who support these policies in government. The Heritage Foundation has an enormous influence on the policies being adopted by right-wing politicians, and Avel works for *them*.”

“In what capacity?” I asked.

“The Foundation recruits people. It recruits young white men, indoctrinates them with conservative dogma, then encourages them to join police forces across the nation, especially in big cities. Why do you suppose there aren’t any white gang bangers? They’re all cops. As cops, they get to kill Black and brown men, and never be held accountable. That or charge them with felonies that end up stripping them of their voting rights. Cops *never* go to prison.”

I thought about Milton. Cops go to prison if they are Black, and are trying to protect the community.

“Did you ever tell Milton this?” I asked.

“No,” she answered. “Why should I?”

“He would give you a week’s pay for this information.”

“And that ain’t even all,” she said.

“There’s more?”

“Oh, there’s lots more. Why do you suppose there are so many abortion clinics in the African American community?”

“The ones under Planet Parenthood?”

“That’s the one! Their slogan is ‘A Whole New World.’ What do

you think that means?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “A planet free of struggling single moms?”

“No! It means a planet free of Black people. Planet Parenthood is an extermination program conceived, implemented and funded by the Heritage Foundation. Black babies make up the lion’s share of abortion deaths. 2000 a year!”

“What?!”

“That’s right, 2000 Black babies get aborted every year, year after year after year. And that was Planet Parenthood’s goal. They want to build a thoroughbred race of people on earth. All white; all blonde; all blue-eyed. The Nazis have returned, and they have set up shop in America.”

For the first time since starting this project, I began to doubt it’s importance. Maybe Milton had been right. Avel was only a foot soldier. Maybe I should just pass him up. On the other hand, foot soldiers can and do wreak havoc in the community, and these assholes need to be sent a message. Besides, I had to start somewhere.

“We can stop him,” I said. I kept my voice low so Joyce wouldn’t hear me.

“How? He’s a cop. He’s protected by the badge.”

“Badges don’t protect a fucking thing,” I said. “Give me your number. When the time is right, I’ll contact you.”

“What about my baby?” she asked.

“Tell me about that,” I answered.

She told me everything. I guess I had expected her to tell the story in a way that cast her in a favorable light. But she didn’t. She was a flaky ass bitch, and she knew it. And that’s the way she told the story.

The way she told it, Avel became a sympathetic character. I began to doubt that he was a suitable mark. I began to doubt that he should be killed. Then I recalled what she had just told me about the Heritage Foundation.

“Ok,” I said after her narrative, “I want to help you get your baby back.”

“You can do that?!” she asked.

“I can try.” I pulled the crumpled piece of paper that Milton had given me with Tina Pemberly’s information on it. I turned it over, and told Bev to write her telephone number on it.

“What do I have to do?” she asked while scribbling her number.

“I’ll call you and tell you what to do,” I said. “Don’t worry. You’ll see your baby.”

I could hear Milton telling his magician story. “Their only reward is that of the fool,” he had said. His words cut me more deeply now than they did then. The Heritage Foundation was playing all of us for fools, and getting away with it. It was time for this “fool” to get a different reward. I gave Bev the fifty dollars, paid for the drinks, and left.

I had wanted to head back to the house. But something told me to check in front of Sally’s before I left the north side. Milton was there standing by the door with his hands stuffed into his pockets. It was as if he was just standing there waiting for me.

He didn’t see me as I approached, because he was caught up staring at the flashing blue lights of a passing squadral in the opposite direction. But when I called his name to get his attention, he didn’t act surprised. He started in as if nothing had happened. “Think about this,” he said, “What do Bob Marley and Tupac Shakur have in common?”

“Both brothers,” I answered, “both musicians. What are you getting at?”

“Both died young?”

“Both died young. Where you going with this?”

“Both murdered,” he said.

“One murdered,” I corrected, “Marley died of cancer.”

“They were both murdered,” he said, “by the CIA.”

“Milton,” I said, “you’ve got your facts wrong. Marley died of cancer.”

“That’s what it was made to look like,” he said.

“Look, he either had cancer or he didn’t. There is no middle ground here.”

“What kind of cancer did he have?” he asked.

“I don’t know of what. What difference does *that* make?”

“It makes all the difference in the world.”

“You’re baiting me, aren’t you? Ok, I’ll bite. What kind of cancer did Bob Marley have?”

“I have no idea.”

“So what’s your point?”

“My point is that nobody has any idea.”

“C’mon, man, cancer is cancer.”

“No,” he asserted, “cancer is *not* cancer. Cancer is cervical cancer. Cancer is bone cancer. Cancer is cancer of the brain.”

“You’re losing me here.”

“Cancer starts in one spot, then metastasises.”

“Ok,” I said.

“Except in Marley’s case it was everywhere all at once.”

“That’s not possible,” I said. “It had to start somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Milton said, “it started in a CIA laboratory.”

“Come on, man! You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Jumping to conclusions where no jump is warranted.”

“But the jump *is* warranted.”

“You cannot be serious!”

“Why not?”

“How did they get it into his body? Telepathy?”

“They injected it into him.”

“When? How?”

“Marley had hurt his toe playing soccer about a year earlier. He went to the doctor to have it treated, and they gave him a shot in his toe.”

“The cancer shot.” I couldn’t believe Milton was making such an idiotic claim.

“Right,” he said, “the cancer shot.”

“And how did they hook it up? Were all the doctors in the world supplied with cancer-causing serum just in case Marley stopped in?”

“They knew who his doctor was, I guess.”

“Ok,” I said. “But why? Why him?”

“He had become too dangerous.”

“The man was a musician! How dangerous could that have been?”

“Have you listened to his music? He sang about revolution. He sang about getting out of slavery. And people were listening. He was getting a worldwide following.”

“They were only songs, for Christ sake.”

“Bob Dylan wrote ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’”, and changed the planet. He was like Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt. In fact,

if the CIA had had any idea of the impact that song would have on American culture, they would have shot *his* ass. They didn't want Marley's songs to do the same thing."

"And I guess they killed Tupac for the same reason?"

"Damn right! His following was getting too big, too. Men were writing him from prison asking him to tell them what to do. Tupac's power was awesome. He was considered to be the single most powerful Black man in America. Maybe even the world." He paused for a moment, then said, "But you know what?"

"What?" I answered.

"Their strategy won't save them. They think the movement needs a Moses. It don't. Every man walking is a Moses all by himself. The genie is already out the bottle, and when the time comes, we *will* win."

Milton stood nodding for a few moments staring at the sidewalk. He stood staring at the exact spot where Bev had earlier crashed like a sandbag.

"Look," I said, "we need to talk about yesterday."

"Nothing to talk about," he said.

"I didn't set you up."

He looked me straight in the eye. "I don't believe you," he said, "but I don't care." He lowered his eyes. "I'm not going back inside no matter what you do or what anybody else does. Now, get the fuck away from here." He jerked his head in the direction I would have to leave. As I walked away, he was still staring at the Bev crash site.

"Don't come back," he shouted from behind me. "I can't afford to give you any more help."

It crossed my mind to show him the picture of the guy on the roof taking pictures. But that would only serve to confirm his suspicions

about me. Someone working for me, after all, had taken *that* picture. I had to let it go. Besides, I had already gotten everything I needed and more from Bev. I didn't bother to look back. He was right. This epoch was over.