

matters familiar



e. g. fabricant

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DEDICATION

For Frank and Betty, for the gifts of life and love—theirs,
mine, and ours—and
For M. A.; BeeEss; Tomiss; Jerome; J. L.; Fuffy; and The
Brat, for helping me fill in the blanks.

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1 Ashley Alert



She pushed her ginger curls away from her ear and laid it carefully against the door and listened. *All right!* She clapped her hands and squealed, thought better of it and almost as quickly shushed herself. She sailed into the room and onto her trundle bed, one knee aboard and a straight leg trailing. She glimpsed the lacy blouse, pinafore, and Mary Janes on her image in the mirror and frowned. *I hate me! Why do I have to be so girly all the time?* Out came the tongue. *Oh, well...* Pushing her round, black eyeglass frames up her nose brought a hint of a smile. *Very Harry Potter. Daddy'd won that one, liking them over those wiry things Mommy picked out.*

She reached behind all the “educational” stuff on her bookshelf and brought out her latest guilty pleasure. She gladdened as she traced the image of the wild-haired girl on the cover, airborne in vapors and gaily pinching her nostrils. *Betty has red pants with green polka dots—and yellow socks! I could be her, 'cause our hair's almost the same color.* Looking

up again, she frowned at the pastel clasps holding her locks. *No barrettes for Betty!* She tore at them, flung them aside, and shook her head fiercely. Freedom was pleasing.

Settling in cross-legged, she cracked the book and laid it reverently across her thighs. Page One—again; there he was, in all his blue-eyed, dirty-sheep splendor. She turned the page and read softly to herself, savoring every word:

“Mother walked in and said, ‘He still smells awful.’

And that’s when they got the first clue. The tell-tale bubbles in the water.

‘He’s probably just a little nervous,’ said Mother, hopefully. ‘His stomach must be upset.’

But Walter’s stomach wasn’t upset. Walter’s stomach was fine. He felt perfectly normal. He just far—“¹

The door cracked. A laundry basket. Her Mother.

“Come on, Ashley! It’s the second Wednesday—you know that. We’re late for your play date at Ryan’s and there’s tap class, after that.” Rosemary Butterworth looked up and saw her panicky, slack-jawed daughter hugging a book to her bosom. She shoved the basket onto the toy chest and put her hands on her hips. “What’re you reading?”

Ashley’s eyes fell, as did the book. “Nothing...”

Rosemary took it. “*Walter the Farting Dog?! Where did you get this?*”

Ashley pushed her lower lip out and her dark eyes

¹ Excerpted from *Walter the Farting Dog*, ©2001 by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray. Published by Frog, Ltd. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

blazed. “Found it.”

Rosemary scowled and tucked the book under her arm. “We’ll talk about this later. Get your sweater and your shoes.”



Alex Butterworth nudged the front door open with his briefcase, juggling his keys and the daily mail in his other hand. He slid inside, shoved the door closed with his heel, and pitched the keys onto the hall table. Dropping the case by the banister, he stretched, sighed, and scratched his scalp. *Another day in the particular Paradise that is the San Bernardino Unified School District.* He’d barely begun shuffling paper when the door burst open behind him. Ashley grazed him behind the knees and hit the stairs hard.

“Hey, half-pint! How ‘bout some love?” Alex’s voice trailed off as she ascended; she turned, briefly, her face wreathed in anger. The *thump-thump-thump* of her footfalls receded until replaced by the echo of her door slamming. He turned back to see Rosemary standing in the doorway, clutching Ashley’s wrap, book bag, and dance regalia. She wasn’t a lot happier. “We need to talk,” she said as she climbed the stairs.

Oh, boy. Alex calculated he could weather the gathering storm a little better with some nourishment, so he made for the kitchen and stuck his head in the refrigerator. As he took inventory he tried to guess the basis for this complication *du jour*. He shrugged and settled on string cheese and a low-carb beer. Leaning against the counter, he took a couple swallows and paused when he detected his wife’s low, insistent monotone leaching through the ceiling. At that, he drained the bottle and went after another. He chose the back route to the family room and planted himself in his recliner. He had both the TV remote

2 Boys Will Be Men



"Can Mommy come live with us again?"

Chad Wilcomb's shoulders sagged as he switched off the coffeemaker. He turned. His six-year-old's eyes shimmered above his cereal bowl like tiny blue Christmas balls. "Chuckie, we've been over this a million times in the last three years. No; Mommy's not going to live with us anymore."

Chuckie frowned into his milk. "I don't like two houses and Mrs. Sherwatter—she smells funny. Mommy has day care; she doesn't need no babysitter at night."

"*Any*'—*any*' babysitter," Chad said. "Daddy and Mommy have different jobs. Sometimes Daddy has to work late or go away. Finish your Lucky Charms. I gotta drop you and get to the office." As he swiped up his keys from the hallway table, the phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hi, dear." It was the "ex"—Lana Margo McCarthy. "I'm glad I caught you. Don't forget Chuckie's appointment at Dr. DiPassini's at four; I'm pretty sure

he's got a cavity. All that sugar weekend mornings, no doubt."

"Shit."

Silence.

"I forgot. Look, can you cover it? I got a full day today."

"Goddamn it, Chad. I've run through almost all of my sick leave as it is." She paused, and sighed.

"Listen. Did Chuckie bring up getting back together again?"

Chad turned toward the wall as Chuckie emerged from his bedroom, struggling with a backpack strap.

"Yeah. He said something this morning."

"Did you talk to him about it, Chad?"

"Yeah—sorta."

A longer pause and deeper sigh. "Do you ever really *hear* that kid?"

"Gotta go," Chad mumbled, and hung up. *A woman who uses all three names—I should have known better.*



"Why me?"

Chad sat and propped his feet on Tim Ireland's desk—he, the *Sacramento Independent Review's* News Editor and his boss.

"What I got from his mother's letter was that he saw the piece you did on the temple bombers and decided you were fair." Tim grinned. "Go figure. Maybe he used to be a 'subscriber.'"

"Okay—so Charlie Don Morton, convicted local rapist and murderer, wants to give our little lefty rag an exclusive before he gets put to sleep at San Quentin in three months. That about it?"

"Not entirely. Two conditions."

"Oh?"

"One, he wants the piece to be 'first person' — you know, 'Charlie Don Speaks.' Your ruminations and purple prose in sidebars only. Two, he wants you as a media witness."

Chad used his best Ted Baxter voice. "Won't giving a felon an 'open forum' besmirch our journalistic integrity?"

"Listen, wise-ass. This is a no-brainer, a *coup*, if we can pull it off. Set all your other stuff aside. I've already gotten the Department of Corrections' new guidelines. You work on whatever phone calls you need and a visitation request, and I'll get started on getting us into the media pool. There's one slot for a weekly and Morton's local, so we should have a shot. A guy I used to play racquetball with works in CDC's legislative office, which might help."

Any lingering *bonhomie* evaporated.

"Get *on* it, Chad," Tim said.



Chad leaned into Tim's doorway. "Here it is. Under the Department's media policies, non-'random,' face-to-face interviews and recording devices of any kind are prohibited. Inmates can make outgoing, recordable collect calls 'according to their privilege group'—Death Row being the most restricted. I can visit only after I get CDC Form 106, 'Visiting Questionnaire,' from Morton, return it, and wait for the prison to approve it. Realistically, that'll take four to six weeks—just on their end."

"I should write him immediately," Chad continued, "since their search of a Number 10 envelope and a one-page letter for 'contraband' also can take four to six weeks. I'll give him the *Review's* number, and you'll authorize all charges. I'll ask him to try to call me at least three weeks in a row, since each call will be

3 Chosen



The teenaged Volvo, a kaleidoscope of rust, gray primer, and gloss red, wheezed into a ground-floor space in the Twelfth Street garage. Marie Kohlfeldt snapped off the ignition and glared.

"For Christ's sake, Don—Do you have to do that with the kid in the car? And today, of all days?"

Her husband of nine months pinched the roach delicately and sucked the last life out of its glowing coal. "Jesus, honey, cut me some slack. Ronald Reagan's been in charge for five months and the band hasn't played so much as a toilet in six weeks. I'm having enough trouble dealing with another Catholic in the house."

Marie sighed, climbed out, and forced the rear door open. She leaned into the back seat and lifted the baby into his christening blanket. "If we get through this, it'll be the first promise to me you've kept since our wedding day!"

Don's ponytail trembled lazily while he held in the last of the smoke. He exhaled with more force than necessary. "Go ahead — I'll be along." Marie tried to

kick the door shut but it stopped halfway with a rusty croak. She slumped into it until it latched. *Good thing there'll be godparents and sponsors, she thought. Otherwise, I'd have to confess to breaking the Fifth Commandment.* Cooing and bubbling saliva brought her out of it. She smiled at the tiny, swaddled face as she emerged from the garage's darkness and headed up the alley toward the Cathedral's front steps. The bluff of its doeskin-colored stone protected the momentary peace.

Still absorbed as she made the corner, her vague sense of a physical presence was confirmed by sharp odors and a near-collision. She saw his boots first, shoulder-width apart—buckles and smooth, black leather up the calf; early aviator, maybe, but for the moldy cracks and dilapidation. His trousers featured sidelong stripes of hand-applied yellow material. For the effect, they might have been cavalry jodhpurs, rather than black Slim-fit jeans long ago consigned to thrift. The filthy fatigue jacket was anonymous. Its name-and-rank identifiers had been torn away and replaced with an amalgam of patches, pins, and bric-a-brac that added up to a busted-back and grounded starship commander from a nearby galaxy. A Jamaican-flag, knit cap, and greasy dreadlocks framed a stubbled face, inches from hers, that revealed nothing but wear. The eyes were masked by heavy wraparounds. The utter calm in the sound that emerged from between his uncharacteristically sturdy teeth banked her shock and fear.

"What's his name?"

"Halston."

A dirty index finger touched the infant's downy cheek. "Beautiful."

With that, he spun around and took the handlebars of an old bicycle festooned with street flotsam—im-

provised reflectors, foil-and-hanger antennae, and miscellaneous logos—and draped with makeshift saddlebags crammed with repossessions. He guided its flaccid tires away from her, up the K Street Mall.

Don loped up behind her. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing—I guess," she said, as she watched the figure recede.

Inside, Marie pulled the blanket away from the infant, which roused him enough to mewl a little. The priest nodded toward her. "And what name do you give this child?"

"Halston."

The priest winced slightly. "Halston...?"

"Just Halston," she said, beaming into the little pink face. "Halston Kohlfeldt."



Perched on the edge of his desk, Brother Ambrose folded his arms and furrowed his brow at the question. He frowned. "Mr. Kohlfeldt, *The Celestine Prophecy* is not on the study list for sophomore religion here at Christian Brothers. Your search for spiritual meaning will be guided by Scripture and acceptable theology—just like everyone else's. What you read outside class is your business."

RING!

Halston sighed, slung his backpack, and headed for the door, dogged by the usual exchanges of nudges and murmurs. Adrianna Wong caught him by the elbow in the hallway. "Hey, Aristotle! Gonna pick up from last year and start the fall semester of '97 as the designated deep-thinker of the Class of '99?"

His wan smile breached the embarrassment. "Yeah—I guess."

"So," she said as they merged into the stream of

4 Gemini



Flowers, candles, incense. Context is everything.

The thought promoted itself from vagrant to insight as Jim traced the outline of his oxblood brogans against the dull, gray veins of the cathedral's marble floor. Altar-boyhood artifacts that transubstantiated into adult talismans of sensual carnality became the stuff of Gothic nightmares again, as he stood there. Smoke curled lazily out of the thurifer being dangled by a somnambulant acolyte. *Christ. Twenty years of smoking and that crap still makes me dizzy.*

“What do you think he’s going to say?” she hissed. Jim looked at Laura, the baby, as his little brother, Cary—all six-and-a-half feet of him—embraced the rostrum. The meadow of blue, gray, and oddly strawberry heads that had known them all as children stirred slightly, as if anticipating a chilly gust—fed, no doubt, each by their own recollections of the rocky history between mother and son. Laura’s chrome-blue eyes summarized her, and their, concern. So did her fingers, tamping her notes to her silk-covered

thigh. Jim's were already pocketed, him having led the tribute. Candle flames jumped and bowed spastically at the corners of his vision.

"Not a goddamned clue," he whispered.

Cary had no notes. He stood, feet apart, and stared hard at the dull silver casket under the floral sprays—his Superman to her Lex Luthor—to satisfy himself she was truly vanquished, and her Kryptonite of passive aggression entombed with her.

"Good-bye, Mother."



There they stood together, again, at the edge of what was weakly called a wake by such as themselves, two generations removed from the authentic. The lack of a propped-up stiff with coins on the eyes was a bargain, maybe even a blessing. Even a medium-watt look from the old girl while alive could etch glass at a considerable distance. Cary had bailed and planted his glass and elbows in front of the bartender, expiating the boredom he was loudly inflicting with clumsy gropes between pocket and tip jar. Jim and Laura had pretty much worked the room, getting their cheeks pinched ambiguously by Alzheimer's candidates as they flashed the mordant wit she'd passed to them to mollify those peers who retained some clarity.

Father John, the nephew canonized as her favorite by dint of his vocation and distance, drifted by, basking in his Jameson's. "Nice touch, you two. She'd have been proud."

She watched him leave to resume the cheerful falsehoods of ignorant comfort. "I need air. C'mon."

They repaired to the stunted ballroom's balcony. Jim lipped a cigarette and flicked at a balky flint.

"Gimme one."

He withdrew another, lit it, and handed it over.

“When did you start smoking?”

“Tobacco? Never.”

Even half-hidden under her lids, her irises were huge. Lesser men had slipped into those pools and drowned desperately, like non-swimmers. Until Jon. In low heels, she was his equal. *Six feet tall; blonde, gorgeous. My little sister, The Man-Eater.* He entertained the phenomenon of magnetism between weak men and strong women again and almost as quickly dismissed it, still unresolved. She caught the quiver at the corner of his mouth opposite the butt.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She exhaled, her blue vapor creating a vortex in his. “Ever think of quitting?”

“Constantly. Should be a no-brainer. The old man croaks from lung cancer—not young, but not old. The grandkids nag her into quitting, so she lives another 20 years, then dies from emphysema. I was the athlete, and the only one who took it up.” He reflected, then pointed the tiny ember at her. “See, this is why my therapist’s Benz is never more than three years old.”

She laughed. Her head cycled up methodically, like an observatory’s telescope, measuring the winking constellations. “Did they really love each other?”

Pathos and guilt radiated in him like gin. *Eight years old when Dad died. She missed so much,* he thought. “Oh, yeah.”

“How do you know?”

“I’d catch ‘em.”

“Ick. Do I want to hear this?”

He realized, and waved the specter away. “No, I mean touching and kissing and stuff. It was weird; they tried not to fight in front of us, but the same restriction applied to PDAs. Like there’s a rule that

5 Intentional Walk



*“Won't you be my luh-ver (yeah)/
I'll treat you ri-ight (uh)/
I know you hear your friends when they say you
might...”*

The nascent 16-year-olds rocked and bumped hips under the earnest, two-dimensional eyes of their favorite boy-band, crooning along into their hair-brushes.

“LeLe!” her mother cried from below. “Turn that racket down!”

They froze and eyed each other. “Uh-oh—Busted!” They embraced in mock terror and collapsed onto LeLe’s bed in peals of laughter.

“You two are supposed to be studying!”

LeLe rolled her eyes. “Yesssssss, Mu-THER.” On reflex, she reclaimed an abandoned book, browsed, and listened for disengagement. “So, Tif; you ready to crank it tomorrow?”

Her best friend in the 10th grade world and

starting pitcher for the Scottsdale Copperheads made a face. “Whatever—regionals and all. At least we’re at home; travel-ball so, like, totally *sucks*.”

This took the shortstop/leadoff hitter by surprise. “It’s all still fun, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Tiffany waved the concern away like a minor odor. “*Playing* is so *cool*. When the hitter’s dug in, you’re all down behind me, and Tonya’s glove goes up, it’s like I’m in charge of this big, powerful *machine*. Everyone is tense, straining, and nothing happens until I make it. I kick to the plate—*BOOM!*” She slapped her hands together, startling LeLe a little. “Everything, something, or nothing. Then I do it again!”

“Yeah, gurrll!” They clasped hands, holding it just long enough to allow the sensation to course through them both. Tiffany’s soaring eyes returned to earth. “It’s all the other stuff I can do without.”

“Like?”

“Drills. Camps. Videos. Special coaching. The rants. ‘Trophy, Tiffany.’ ‘Scholarship, Tiffany.’ ‘The Olympics, Tiffany.’ It’s not bad enough that we play half the year...” She drifted away, lost in her laced fingers.

LeLe bounced into her, trapping her thick, blond French braid against her neck inside the crook of her elbow. “Hey—we’re 15. What *else* are we gonna do?”

Evil Tiffany rolled her eyes up to meet LeLe’s. “Boys?”

They tumbled backward, smothering giggles and kicking their feet. Again, quiet descended. Tiffany stared at the ceiling. “What if I’m not that *good*? I mean, like they all want? What then?”

LeLe took her hand firmly. “My Dad has this favorite Zen saying: ‘Wherever you are, be there.’”

Tiffany smirked. “That’s deep, Le. What in Hell

does that mean?"

"It means, you're spending all of today worrying about tomorrow. You've got the ball *now*. Live in that as long as you can before you have to find something else. Softball ends—for all of us."

Tiffany was pensive. "Do Buddhists play ball?"

"No, but Christians do." LeLe jerked Tiffany toward the computer. "We'd better check Arnie's web site. You *know* there'll be a quiz in the dugout." They logged on, bringing up "Arnold Jeffries' First Calvary Chevrolet—Proud Sponsor of the Scottsdale Copperheads," and clicked on "Today's Inspiration." They read, aloud:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?

The Lord is my life's refuge; of whom should I be afraid?

When evildoers come at me to devour my flesh,

My foes and my enemies themselves stumble and fall.

--PSALMS 27:2

Tiffany screwed up her face. "I wonder if he has a clue what a goober we all think he is."

"Dunno." LeLe chewed a thumbnail. "Four sets of uniforms for us, and the 14Us and 12Us, plus equipment and fees. That's got to run into serious money."

"Yeah, but it's not like he *owns* us. And why do we get the same Old Testament 'vanquish mine enemies' rap all the time?" Tiffany was up again, hands on hips. "Jesus is about love and forgiveness, right? What do fear and hatred have to do with competition, anyway?"

6 The Jewel of Genoa



It started like any other Friday at Maranatha Senior Residence.

Just give it a few more hours, she told herself.

Pearl O. Mutter gathered up her purse, gloves, and hat. *Oops—Almost forgot.* She stepped over to her freshly-made bed and retrieved the balled-up napkin she'd carried back from dinner last night and secreted under her pillow—a ritual begun at each meal, years ago. She opened the linen carefully and picked out the tiny, peach-colored oval. *Huh. Xōnoft. Get on it, like Fern, you don't give a shit. Get off it, you can't stop. If that pill-peddler Delroy hired ever saw me, he'd know I don't need it. Old Doc Morgan never would have stood for this. Oh, well—it'll come in handy today.*

She added the dose to the dozen others she'd squirreled away, in rotation, in an old breath-mint tin. She smiled at its more-pregnant slogan—'Curiously Strong!'—and returned it to the bottom of her purse. She walked around the other, vacant bed and stood

behind the half-closed door, finding herself in the full-length mirror. Even after all this time, she still couldn't believe her eyes. In another glass she'd seen a strong, brown woman with auburn locks, eyes that danced over a nose that drew more breath awake and alive than asleep, and a grin-prone mouth. Sturdy frame in a faded denim shirt, Levi's, and rough-out boots. A woman more familiar with the essences of lime, sweat, and just-singed cowhide than with those of Paris. Sinewy forearms and gnarled hands with the veins, knots, and calluses standard on the wife of a working cattle feeder. All she could find now were the eyes, if she allowed it, and the hands, which she couldn't help. *Where did she go? Pearl asked herself. Well, I'm going t' find her again, and the lookin' starts now.*

The door parted slightly and another, dark-haired woman with brown skin appeared—the nurse-assistant. "Señora Mutter, are you ready? You must hurry or you will miss the bus!"

Pearl looked grave and took the attendant's hands gently into hers. "Marisól, you've been real good to me for a long, long time. Made life in this place almost bearable—almost. I'm goin' to miss you the most."

Marisól Contréres patted Pearl's hands, puzzled. "But, Señora; you are only going overnight to the South Shore, like you do every four months." Her eyes flashed. "Maybe even to gamble a little, yes?"

"Whoop-tee-do," Pearl said. "If Miss Goody Two Shoes takes her eyes off us for five minutes." She dropped her hands and her eyes. "Anyway—Goodbye, Marisól." She sidled past her and pushed her octogenarian's bones determinedly down the dim hallway toward the lobby.



"Attention, 'Sprightly Seniors!'"

Anna Mae McDonald, Maranatha's Director of Recreational Services and Spiritual Development (although not necessarily in that order), stood beside the steps of the ancient, converted Blue Bird school bus and tapped her pencil on her clipboard. It was an uphill effort, quieting the gaggle of 20-odd residents queued up to escape, if only for 36 hours.

"Give me your attention, please, so I can review the slate of exciting activities we've planned for all of you!"

We're going to the playpen of the Sierra Nevada over a Friday night, thought Pearl, to go to church. Is this a great goddamned country, or what?

Anna Mae was warmed up. "We'll be meeting Reverend Alston at the First Church of the Evangelist, as usual, for a spirited afternoon of Holy Land slides. Then, a *yummy* early buffet at the Royal Plate—"

"Aw, fer Chrissakes, Anna Mae," complained Barney Rasmussen. "It's the same dern trip every time. Give us a little credit, willya? All the droolers are stayin' home, anyway!" His Adam's apple bobbed over a turquoise bolo tie and under a hat that would have made Roy Rogers jealous.

"There'll be no cursing on this bus, Barney Rasmussen," she scolded. "Remember: 'To say is to pray; to curse is worse.' Now, if I may continue ..." As she resumed her sing-song prattle, Pearl relived the parade of outrages that helped her crystallize her plan, beginning with getting dropped in this Bible-thumping Purgatory and culminating in the loss of her old friend. She'd known Hattie Gardner for 70 years on the outside. When Hattie's husband died of emphysema 12 years ago, Pearl had bargained with her son, on condition of good behavior, to move Hattie over from Minden. A third-generation Nevadan, Hattie Churchill

7 Medalists



He noticed her first while on the Stairmaster in the hotel's fitness room. (In truth, she may have noticed him then, too—or before. Selfish indifference and no eye contact were strict guidelines in these preliminaries.)

She staked herself to a treadmill and removed her Reebok Hipster warm-ups. *Nice*, he thought. *Champion JogBra, Chickabiddy Retro Boardshorts, Nike cross-trainers; athletically stylish. Jewelry. Eye and lip liner. A player.*

He'd claimed the spa when she emerged again, after changing. As she busied herself with a deliberate deck shower, he updated the inventory. *Black mesh, high-cut Polo tank—Caesarian? Stretch marks? No breast cups; outstanding nipples. Quality salon tan, no lines. Subtle—therefore, expensive—surgical enhancements: nose, lips, gluteals. Breasts? Can't tell; good contours. Why leave the weaker jaw line? Interesting. Above-average manicure and pedicure.*

He feigned interest in the pool rules as she lowered

herself into the sanitized froth. Their heads and eyes moved in non-synchronous orbits. *Wait. Wait. Now.* Discreetly, he tucked in his TYR Heatwaves Male Racers to accentuate his genitals. He stood, grasped the handrail and climbed, hesitating on the top step. Slowly, his eyes moved to her fingertips, lingered at her tennis bracelet, and glided up her arm into her pupils. *Violet—real, or lenses?*

"Cartier?"

She smiled, holding his gaze, but did not reply.
My contact. Your move.



She was already there, conducting business, when he met his own clients that evening. He'd confirmed the sighting by doing a men's room fly-by, two tables away. *Evening Business Utility: DKNY separates; DuF fragrance; pearl choker and matching bracelet. Gucci sling-backs. Coach briefcase.* She feigned interest in her dinner partner's tablet electronics.

No further intelligence to be gathered through the meal, since their table was out of his seated line of sight. He disguised his slight alcohol intake with accustomed ease. His own commerce concluded with light, conversational cuddling to take the edge off the deal making. He called an end to it, got up, and walked his *confreres* out toward the valet desk, leaving his paraphernalia behind. He loitered politely, bid them away, and turned to see her disappearing into an elevator. Withholding judgment, he went back into the restaurant and over to his table. There it was, under his Dunhill cigarillos—a magnetic key-card, with a room number in neat cursive applied to it. *Mont Blanc Meisterstuck Classique Rollerball, fine,* he guessed. *Game on.*

To give her time to prepare the home field, he lin-

8 Meridian



Light came over him, slow, dappled, and indistinct.

It was the gauze that bordered his eyes thickly, along with a single layer draped loosely over them, which accounted for the lack of luminary definition. It seemed the strongest source was to his left. He turned in that direction; hot pain shot from his trapezoids through the cords in his neck to his temples. Its shock tensed him and the exertion, combined with his drugged and weakened state, relaxed him just as abruptly.

“Brace own yuh nehck.”

Startled, he tried to focus on the area from which the words had bolted, somewhere just above and beyond his feet. His pupils fought with the cotton web, laboring to make out the high-contrast details of the figure seated against the wall. *Hat?* As he groped for more data within the “thing-on-top-of-human” concept, he catalogued its details. Construction: textured substance, dark lines cross-hatched against general gray; protuberance above...*face?* Its rear half was en

circled by a loose flap tied up into the top-center.

Below the face, a garment similar in coloration but less severely textured covered the upper limbs; the center torso was interrupted by a dark, heavy panel supported by metal clasps and thin straps of the same fabric as the panel. Some kind of framed-glass object was partially hidden by a stitched-on enclosure. The bed rail behind his feet masked everything below there. His attention drifted upward. Wide dark eyes shone beneath full, angled brows as light as the gauze framing them, against darker, deeply lined leather. The grizzle of high contrast mustache and stubble and a halo of thick hair hugging the head under the hat completed the picture. The lips parted and a tongue wagged out of the darkness between rows of brilliant ivory.

“Thet aron thang keep yuh head fum toinin’ round. Much payn?”

I...don't...understand. He signaled an extremity and a...*hand?*...appeared before his face. He turned it slowly, wiggling its fleshy digits arrhythmically. *Left?* Through them he saw the figure glance in that direction and rise abruptly. Pressed into its thick middle was a zippered bag, its dual handles looped around hands and wrists for...*why?* He tried to track the movement but another stab of pain put his lights out.

The sensations of warm breath and cool taps against the gauze at his temples revived him. His eyelids fluttered. He started and recoiled slightly until he managed to focus on a pair of rich umber irises and black pupils; they receded, joined by soft angular facial bones and a full smile.

“Don’t pay him no mind; he’s crazy.” She arose from his side, dark hair falling away from her bosom. The starched cap distracted him until she straightened fully; he traced her from her shimmering hairline to

her slender waist. Ganglia came to pleasing life in the center of his body, giving him confidence that at least one piece had been added back to his puzzle.

“Can you talk yet?”

Talk?

She touched his barely exposed lips gently. That sensation activated another sector and he heard himself rasping. She tapped his lips again and wagged a finger. He stopped.

“That’s all right; let’s not rush it. I know you’re in a lot of pain.” He watched her turn a translucent dial on a snake of tubing above his head. She smiled broadly again and a warmth bathed his sharpened present.

Hopeful?

“You rest now.” She placed two fingers against his wrist and looked at the metallic object on her own. She turned and he followed the rhythm of gluteals undulating beneath her uniform skirt; his pubic nerve endings fired again. After she was gone, he turned away and wallowed in this state of satisfied confusion until the edges bled away into narcotized slumber.



Another specter came into his focus—different. The effect was startling, since it became apparent to him that the gauze had been removed. Her hair was shiny black too, but there was no cap and her face, while pleasant enough, was broader with flatter features. He felt her rough, strong fingers creep past his cheekbones and down the sides of his neck. Her palms slid across his shoulders, their warmth penetrating the gown; she monitored his eyes and facial muscles for sensation. She seemed satisfied. She arose and receded toward his feet, gently uncovering them. He lifted his head slightly to watch and was surprised, happily—no pain. His range of motion told him that

9 Pallbearer



Harry clamped his arms around Hank's waist as much as their bulky clothing permitted and sucked in a breath. He buried his cheek in big brother's shoulder blade, knocking his leather visor askew and filling his inside eye with a damp lambs-wool earflap. He knew he'd be mocked, but it would be worth it. He liked the sensation of falling blind but was desperate for the closeness.

"Ready, 'Freddy?' Twenty-three skidoo!"

Hank jerked up his left galosh. The Flexible Flyer shot forward before he could plant the foot on the steering bar; his leg flailed upward, knocking his balance to starboard. They both heaved instinctively off their right buttocks. As they shuddered to the left, Hank saw the half-bare boulder, dead-legged on the right, and set his free boot into position. The left runner fell and bit into the snow and they regained the fall line. Down they hurtled, hitting successive ridges and getting more air with each one as their velocity increased. His legs pinned securely to the seat planks

by his brother's rigid arms, Harry marveled in the weightless intervals and squealed at each impact. The angle started to come out of the hill. Harry grinned to himself in anticipation.

Here it comes!

Hank tapped out the first feint on the steering bar; the only remaining mystery was, *How many this time?* The answer? *One*—but on the same side. He punched his right leg out hard and buried their craft's front edge into a wet drift. The sled bucked and launched them into a crazy arc, like a collapsing seesaw. After a clinging aerial somersault they tumbled head over teakettle to a stop, just short of an icy stump. Hank rolled gingerly off his little brother and they lay on their backs, two heaps of sweaty flesh in sodden wool, framed by snow. They stared skyward through spindly aspen branches at the leaden sky as their heart rates subsided. Slowly, their heads rolled toward one another.

Harry's eyes shone. "Are we dead?"

Hank feigned seriousness. "Pert near."

They erupted, laughing like maniacs. *Perfect!* Harry basked in the unfettered affection, wishing it could endure. He stopped first to savor the sound of Hank's last few *huh-huh-huhs* until there was silence. Suddenly, there was his brother's ruddy face above him, at the other end of a dangling scarf and beyond his extended hand.

"Whaddya say, short-stuff? Once more—in front, this time?" Hank's eyes narrowed in mocking mirth. "Or..."

Harry stifled himself and reached for the hand. *Wait for it...*

Hank hoisted him until their faces were inches apart. "...Are you a 'FRAIDY-CAT?!'"

Giggling, Harry pushed at Hank's face and replied with equal force. "YESSS!"

with equal force. "YESSS!"

"That's what I thought!" Hank really tried to force some contempt into it this time, but as always it didn't take. He brushed at the crystalline cakes clinging to his brother's back then stood apart to get his bearings. He arched his back and looked skyward, wiping clear mucous from his upper lip with a drenched mitten.

"Better get on home—light's goin'."

Harry looked down at steel buckles and black rubber. "Aw—What for?"

The elder Martz examined their "combined" Christmas present with satisfaction; it was his brother who wanted it more, but no chance with Ma that way. He took his case straight to the court of appeals and, in a rare published opinion, Pa took his side. He dug for the Flyer's rope and slung it over his shoulder as he groped for the seven-year-old's hand. They trudged out of the blanketed meadow and slipped into the carved ruts on the road downhill. As they crunched along, Hank's eyes wandered westward and up the silver and aquamarine shoulders of the peak named for Zebulon Pike that dominated their town. He stopped, nearly yanking Harry off his encumbered feet. He scowled.

"What are you doing?"

Hank's mouth hung slightly open; he shook his head slightly.

"Nothin'. Just thinkin'."

"'Bout what?"

"Drivin' up the Pike in an auto-mobile—goin' real fast. Thirty, maybe 40 miles to the hour."

"Aw, g'wan."

"Yes, sir—you'll see. Gonna be in Mr. Penrose's 'Hill Climb' one day." He put his hands on his knees and peered into Harry's face. "Got to dream, little brother. Don't you have a dream?"

10 Pipe Dream



Jay Johannessen glanced at his diamond-inlaid Cartier. *C'mon, man—let's go! It's just a leaky trap!* He watched the gaunt haunches in Khaki coveralls jiggle from the torque being applied invisibly ahead. *Well, that's a plus, I guess—no butt crack.* The gyrations stopped and two oxblood Red Wings glided noiselessly backward, followed by an auburn ponytail that just cleared the sink cabinet's top frame.

David DuPriest squatted, storing his tools deliberately. He finished wiping his hands, stood, and pressed into a languid stretch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his retainer furiously drumming his fingertips against his face. "That ought to do it, Mr. Johannessen. Use it for a couple days and call me if there's any further trouble. Oh, and you should have a carpenter check the sink base's floor. That was a steady leak, so you're probably looking at dry rot. I can give you a couple references, if—"

Jay had seized his arm. "I have a major meeting in 15 minutes and it's a 20-minute drive!" David looked

at Jay's hand until it fell off his bicep. "Give me a minute and I'll make out your bill." He fished into a hip pocket and produced a well-worn, triple carbon invoice pad.

Jay shifted on his feet. "Can't you just have your people bill me?"

David half smiled. "No 'people'—just me."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. 'Sole proprietor.'" He toted up the charges with flourish. "Here you are. A signature and a check would be appreciated."

Jay snatched the sheet away and peered at it. His mouth fell open. "Two hundred sixty-eight dollars? For a balky *trap*? *Jeezus!* What's that—20 minutes' work?"

David was stoic. "Plus the replacement J-bend."

"Some racket, man. *Goddamn.* That works out to more an hour than I billed out as a senior associate at my firm."

David turned half away, toolbox in hand. "That's more than *I* billed out as a senior associate, as well."

"Huh? Wait!" Jay lunged and caught David by the arm again, with the identical response.

"I assume you remember the hornbook definition of battery, from Torts class."

Jay looked down at his offending fingers. "Uh...oh. Sorry. You're a lawyer?"

"*Was.*" David set down his tools.

Jay brushed at his forelock. "And you gave it up to be up to your eyebrows in *shit* every day?"

David's cheeks dimpled ever so slightly. "I regarded it a lateral move."

"Why, for Christ's sake?"

"Stress, mostly. Failing marriage. Responsibility for another life."

"What do you mean?"

"Which part?"

"'Another life.' What? Somebody on the side?" Jay leered. A frosty stare obliterated his feeble attempt at camaraderie.

"A daughter."

The muffled pounding of footfalls on carpeted stair treads accelerated into the clatter of stilettos on Italian foyer marble. A mid-teen Britney Spears replica—abdominal baby fat straining over distressed, low-rise jeans, pushed-up caricature of a bustline, and calculated makeup—burst into the kitchen.

"Daddy! Did you transfer \$500 into my checking account, like you promised? If I don't get that Moo Hoo bag by Friday night, I might as well die because I won't dare leave my bedroom this summer." She cocked an eyebrow, hands perched on her hip-folds; the sole of one of her expensive, impossibly pointed high heels marked time on the olive slate.

Jay had retreated to the counter and his knuckles grew whiter against the dark granite edge. "Why do you dress like that for a weekday? You look like a hooker."

Her eyes narrowed and her Lancôme-glossed lips parted. "I'm 15. If you knew *anything*, you'd know that *everyone* dresses like this. Besides, I'm hanging with my friends at the Galleria today." She sneered. "You know? *Friends*? Like *clients*, except they actually *like* you?"

David could almost hear the bile and invective backing up behind her teeth. He cleared his throat.

They looked at him as if he'd just materialized. Jay extended an arm. "David DuPriest. Meet Skylar, my stepdaughter."

"Oh—the plumber guy." Dismissive filters slid through her eyes. "Nyztmeechoo." She bored back into her stepfather. "Well?"

11 Robbin' Hood



The furrows above Pettirosso “Petey” DiCappello’s mono-brow plotted all his meager concentration, intent on the fiberboard tray between his porcine hands. His lips formed unuttered words as he left Italian People’s to cross Butler.

Lemmesee—two milk, one sugar; one cream, no sugar; one double-mocha, half-caf... He blinked. That Billy. What a fessacchione—coffee is coffee, right?

BEEEEEEeeeeeeep!

“*Madre del Dio!*”

The red SUV’s glancing pass caused a comic bull-fighter’s pirouette. Panic forced Petey to collapse his grip, sandwiching the tray and crushing the bagged baked goods in the middle. Only one lid popped, but half that cup sloshed onto his left hand.

“OWWWW! Sonafa—”

He faltered in pain momentarily, but the insistent rush hour restored his grip and he waddled to safety through the remaining maelstrom of cars and curses.

He laid the tray on a trash can, dug out his handkerchief, and pressed the throb out of his wet flesh. He picked the errant lid off a mummified rodent corpse in the gutter, cleaned it deliberately with his handkerchief, and replaced it. He mopped vainly at the cups, their ochre stains already preserved in the absorbent Styrofoam, and turned his attention to the crumpled bag. It was stained through and clung to its gelatinous inner mass like clothing to a burn victim. He tried a careful separation, tearing one seam top to bottom. He poked at the amorphous mess but only managed only to separate the Danish shale into an approximate number of indistinct units. Rearranging a few raisins and relocating some jelly at random helped, he thought.

Petey lifted his project, exhaled, and headed for the door of the *Ereditare di Italia* (Sons of Italy) Social Club, a storefront that grew more anachronistic daily as Butler Avenue and the rest of Chambersburg—known with affection to its denizens as “The ‘Burg”—was dragged by gentrification toward that REALTOR® kind of respectability that typifies 21st-Century urban renewal. The Club’s ugly, squat elevation could illustrate “eyesore” in Webster’s on the natural; nearby pastel-oak-and-fern renovations and re-openings just made matters worse. It was anchored to the sidewalk by four courses of the blond brick last popular when Buicks were classified by their number of fender “holes.” The shin-to-hairline plate glass and aluminum-frame door were all sheathed inside by vertically applied rolls of contact vinyl that looked less like the intended stained glass than a blizzard of Technicolor confetti. One small corner offered the only promise of a glimpse inside but most of it was taken up by an old duochrome of John Paul II, which by now—being outside the beaten awning’s daytime

penumbra—looked more frail than its subject. Up above, the paint-starved *basso-rilievo* featuring Jupiter, Juno, and a gaggle of lesser deities might still have lent a modicum of dignity, had time and perching pigeons been kinder.

Petey put his beefy shoulder to the door and stumbled inside, underestimating as always the spring's degree of exhaustion. The Club's dim interior was consistent with its public face. Light came from sputtering fluorescence, beer signs, and the clanging glare of *macchine del pinball*. Sludge from generations of grease, grime, and tobacco smoke had paralyzed the beaten-tin *cherubim* in the ceiling tiles. Even a trained eye could produce at best a guess as to what color they—or the walls or the floor, for that matter—were. The kitchen, bar, and corner stage had long ago ceased to pique or satisfy gustatory and carnal appetites; about the only evidence they ever had were the odd bottle of Grappa or Galliano and the few remaining dingy portraits of regional headliners and ecdysiasts. The place's ambience had fallen so far below its own traditions or bare potential that it seemed to magnify the suffering of the occupant of the Crucifix in the far corner. A brand-new, imported brass espresso machine stood as sole evidence of the Club's present utility—a day room where mob *soldati* congregated for morning roll-call and family business assignments. Like its possible users, all it lacked for efficient performance was the proper connections—but who was to call the plumber was an assignment that always seemed to fall between the stools. So, after the ritual of accusations and throwing up of hands, Petey was pushed into traffic every morning to fetch breakfast for those without domestic resources.

The cascade of light punctured Giovanni Nonnula's concentration as he pounded his hip into the *Star*

12 Term Limit



Recreational soul mates Zev Brannan and Barney Isleton bobbed and dozed in Zev's 18-foot Alumacraft northwest of the pier at Pinole Point, near where the Sacramento River empties into San Pablo Bay. As the silent November dawn cracked behind them, they shared the unspoken hope that not all the King salmon had found their way upriver, pursuing their evolutionary suicides. Sure, they'd settle for a trout or two; truth be told, they were grateful just to be out of the house—and on a Sunday morning to boot. Barney cradled his rod and fished a beer out of the cooler, opening it with some difficulty. "Durned arthur-itis." He neglected to rotate the EZ-open tab a quarter turn and it tore out a mustache hair at the first draught. "Gol-*DANG* it!"

Zev reeled in his bait, inspected it, and recast. "You rather be in church with the old lady this mornin'?"

"Point made," Barney said. He stood to stretch, and his eye caught a lumpy mass riding the current

about 70 yards to starboard. "Hey! What you suppose that is?"

Zev peered through the mist layering the opaque olive waters. "Looks like deadfall to me."

"Let's check it out." They laid aside their gear and Zev

fired up the Evinrude while Barney hauled in the drift anchor. As they motored alongside, Barney hooked the shape's far edge with a gaff and rolled it over.

Zev flinched. "Mother a God!" A male face, handsome in spite of its pale bloat, surfaced, the well-dressed trunk and appendages below it sinking away from it. "What do you suppose—"

"Hold on a minute," Barney said. "I *know* this guy!"



The Commissioner admired the sapphire blue California sky over Vallejo through the front passenger window. All the clouds, it seemed, were inside his head. He studied the pump-action shotgun bracket-mounted vertically above the transmission hump. At the wheel in plainclothes, California Highway Patrol Sergeant Ernesto Nuñez noticed, and prepared himself for the usual question—but with more steel. *Ernie: Don't laugh this time; it wouldn't be appropriate.*

"So, Ernie," Insurance Commissioner John Quincy "Jack" Quisenberry asked, "when are you going to let me break that bad boy out and squeeze off a few?"

Ernie checked his left outside mirror in case he softened prematurely. "No can do, Sir." He couldn't help himself; he cracked a smile and turned back. "When you going to stop asking me?"

Jack wasn't smiling this time. "Well, Ernie, my man—since the hearings start Monday, that may have

been the last time."

Shit, Ernie thought. *Nice going, pendéjo—the only statewide elected official in memory who's treated his details as equals is going down, and you go and stick your foot in it!* He focused on his hands gripping the wheel and the horizon beyond them.

Jack read Sgt. Nuñez's discomfort; by reflex he came to his rescue. "Cheer up, Ernie. Maybe the next guy will drink *real* beer, instead of that Colorado Kool-Aid I like." Satisfied at seeing his driver's jaw and fingers relax, Jack resumed his dark reverie. *How did it come to this?* he wondered. *Military combat pilot. High-concept marriage. Business credentials. Three Assembly terms as a journeyman moderate. Elected and re-elected to a third-rail office, to which I brought management skills and, God forbid, results. Now I'm probably a fortnight away from being run out of Sacramento—and without benefit of electorate, unlike the other guy.* He came out of it when he saw the Maritime Academy exit sign.

"The Carquinez coming up, sir." Sgt. Nuñez eased the Dark Blue Pearl Crown Victoria over and onto the right shoulder, pulling in behind a white CalTrans pickup. A hard-hatted employee in engineer semi-formal and orange safety vest got out and presumed to guide him to a stop.

Jack produced a business card and scribbled on the back. He extended it to Sgt. Nuñez. "Here, Ernie. After you drop me, head into the City and pick up this guy at the *Chronicle*. He's expecting you; his office number is on here. Bring him here and call me when you arrive. You've got my cell number, right?"

The sergeant nodded. Jack stepped out and the sergeant pulled away. Jack had scarcely buttoned his topcoat before the excitable engineer was on him. "Good afternoon, Commissioner," he said. "Supervising Engineer Steve Soblett at your service."

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