

FLOTSAM (SUBMISSION DRAFT)
by Joe Oppenheimer

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Comments, criticisms welcome.

This, my first novella, is dedicated to my first love. She certainly knows who she is.

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PROLOGUE: CLOSED WEDNESDAY

Old man Buttervogel snapped off the car radio. The Bach sonata was silenced. Only the whine of the failing engine, the clanging of the exhaust pipe, and the vibrations from the road were left to fill the void.

And then he saw it. What grabbed his attention, was the sign:

SHARPSBURG ARSENAL!
LAST CHANCE!
BEST PRICES IN MARYLAND!
GUNS, AMMO, CIVIL WAR MEMORABILIA!
NEXT LEFT TURN, THEN 300 YARDS AHEAD

Marc had occasionally passed the sign before, but paid it no mind. However, this Wednesday morning, the sign caught his eye. Or was that his convenient distortion? Perhaps he had chosen this route to follow the sign to its implied solution to his problems. One can, of course, never untangle the thousands of neurological connections in a man's mind to understand ultimate causes. But here he was, the Professor, in a tunnel of fear, imagining an exit.

Might the venerable Professor Marc Buttervogel buy a gun? He, whose once loving wife, Elsa, like so many other students, had been attracted to him as a crusader for peace and righteousness, was now turning a corner. He, a responsible reviewer of manuscripts for *Ethics* and *Mind* – he, the one time philosopher of peace, war and evil – was he ready to kill?

Yesterday's threats by Vera and Frances to turn him over to the police had caused him to panic. He had started off this morning on his frantic exit, driving far too fast. But now, the adrenaline was wearing off, and with it his attention turned to his massive headache. He brushed off the pain to the pressure he was under. It was debilitating and made him feel much older than his 77 years.

His driving began to reflect his diminished self. As he now aimed at 'The Arsenal,' he slowed and rode the brake like so many of the aged-still-driving. Marc justified his extreme caution by noting that the roads were slick with slush, "Perfect weather for an accident." But they had been far worse when he left home and violated all the posted speed limits.

A car passed on his left. Sticking his head out the window, the driver screamed, "Get the the fuck off the road you old shit!" Another car began honking behind him. He completed the turn. He was relieved to arrive in the dirt parking lot of the gray, two-story wooden building. Marc cut off the motor, and sat. In the moment of intense quiet he tried to regain his composure and overcome the violent pulsing in his head.

Exhausted, he let go. His thoughts drifted. Years ago, he had visited another gun shop. In Istanbul, at the underpass near the ferries at Galata Bridge. That visit was out of touristic curiosity. Elsa had grabbed his arm and urged him in. She had viewed the hundreds of guns in the shop window with the same sort of repellent curiosity that his vegan sister might have felt toward a lamb carcass in a butcher shop window. Elsa was always like that, pushed by her own macabre interest in contradictions. It was what had driven her toward philosophy in the first place.

These thoughts of Elsa turned to her billowy red and black skirt, her white sleeveless blouse and long hair. With what joy they had shared their exploration of Istanbul. Turkey was their best time.

They weren't yet married. They were celebrating Elsa's just-accepted-for-publication dissertation, and attending a political philosophy conference on "The Possibility of the Non-Violent State."

With the memories of the Galata crossing, Marc wandered further back in time. There was Elsa, entering his life. He had supervised her dissertation, even while others on the Cornell faculty had been aware of their affair.

He knew publications from dissertations are never automatic. They come much as a chance for a close encounter comes from the right costume. Of course, the woman wearing it must have something to offer. Elsa did. She had been 27, long legged, with stunning features. But even then, the wrong dress, fumbled make-up and the party comes to naught. Both he and Elsa knew that. It was during the last years of the Vietnam war and her dissertation had been on the ethics of nonviolence. Like her mini skirts, she had selected the topic to be alluring and she had found publication to be easy.

The noise of a passing truck pulled Marc out of his ruminations of details from a life once lived. He began to refocus on the here and now. First task – regaining the energy to make it to the door of the gun shop in Sharpsburg – Sharpsburg, the gateway to Antietam, site of the bloodiest one day battle in American history. They now say, "It's hard to hear the gunfire in Sharpsburg." Memories of Elsa left him.

He was back in his murderous rage, back in the problems of the day. Back with his throbbing head. Just at this point of momentous choice, of potential transformation, he felt his doubts and hesitated. The freezing February drizzle left him chilled in his car, under the naked branches of a large beech tree. Like the small areas of green grass at the edge of the lot, he was surrounded by patches of dirty snow. All around were plowed mounds of old snow pockmarked with mud and sand and yellowed by urine.

The professor flitted through the stale cast of characters leading to his demise. Identifying the list became terribly difficult. Of course there were more than Vera and Frances - there was Julia. But just as the other names came close to the surface, so did the pounding in his head. How did everything go so wrong? As if in a fast paced video game, the characters presented themselves as threats and required his attention. But as soon as he tried to focus, they disappeared. He could no longer find them. The increasing pain in his head distracted him. Left unidentified, the characters encircled him, entangled him, as if with barbed wire. Targeted, hunted, he heard his ears ringing, his blood pressure rising. He was left facing threats that overwhelmed him.

His vision began to cloud up by the random pattern of droplets and flakes that obfuscated his cracked windshield. To clear this new annoyance, he turned the key to start the wipers and clean the glass. But it didn't help. The radio inexplicably blasted on again, with a wild Shostakovich scherzo, a dance with death. Marc grabbed at the key and turned it off just as the dance leaned into its crazed climax. The wipers stuck at two o'clock.

Marc continued to sit there desperate to locate the energy, the courage to act. He couldn't get a grip on his options. A gun was the great simplifier. Marc gave up trying to foresee its consequences. He had to go into the long gray building; he had to understand his options, had to make his choice. Even more concretely, he had to feel a gun in his hand.

Marc opened the door of his beat up Chevy Cavalier, slowly moved his always aching hips to get out of the car, and slammed the door. A rather large piece of fender rust, speckled with the car's white paint, fell onto the dirt parking lot, just missing the icy puddle gelling to encase the left rear tire. He stuck his key into the old wagon's lock, watched the lock button go down near the cracked

Closed Wednesday

window, and turned toward the store. Shivering, he zipped up his jacket. He touched the car roof to steady himself and gain his balance. He bit his lip to mask the headache, and headed up the path toward the door and the weathered sign to its left stating “Sharpsburg Arsenal: Guns, Civil War Memorabilia. Prices you can’t beat. Closed Wednesday.”

The old professor turned and felt the cold wind on his face. He leaned against the old building and held his head in his hands to assuage a sense that his head was about to explode. He struggled back to the car. As he sank into the seat, he fell back into his memories.

CHAPTER 1: ANGELS AND ROACHES

When the shysters and do-gooders of the East Coast look for targets, they can do no better than to enter ‘blind, widow, alone in apartment, monthly lease, land line only,’ and hit ‘search.’ For the shysters it would yield the low hanging fruit, the easy pickings that keep coins jingling in pockets and bills in wallets. And for the boy scout crowd, it would lead to quick merit badges.

But generalities are statistical artifacts. Individuals in a sample never quite fit the averages they generate. One such odd ball in that prime target set is Vera. Always wrestling with, and always losing to, her macular degeneration, Vera still gets by. She doesn’t call herself blind, though that was the category some thought appropriate.

Because they believed in truth her parents named her Veritas. Because Vera came to realize that her parents had betrayed her, isolated her, and set her up for ridicule by giving her such an unusual name, she developed a tough, aggressively self-protective, untrusting veneer. When she was in fifth grade, Ralph McBride, three inches taller than she, taunted her and threw rocks at her. He teased her about her name: was she a boy? What kind of crazy name was Veritas? Certainly not American.

She leveled him. That was by the bike rack at school. Even now, more than three quarters of a century later, she occasionally recalls the satisfaction she felt when she pounced on top of him, grabbed his mop of hair and pulled his head up, smashing it down and pulling it up again, stopping only when blood started to spill out on the concrete and pebbles.

He was whining as she looped her leg over his shoulders and stood up. She hissed, “Vera, not Veritas, you filthy fool!” and walked away. And with that, her name was changed in all but the most official records.

In late spring 2007, almost two years before Marc went to the Sharpsburg Armory, a social worker on a par with an Eagle Scout called Vera to discuss support services. Vera hung up. The state’s scouting club would have to work harder for their victory. Frances Bussa had experienced this sort of denial many times, and opened her appointment calendar. Looking for a free hour, she found one on a Thursday afternoon in August, and entered ‘Veritas Tableau, Claridge House, 2423 Lytonnsville Road, Apt. 4F: sight impaired - in denial.’

Not that schemers were likely to have more luck. The kind who emailed found they never received an answer. Charity hawkers, and financial salespeople were similarly blocked by a slammed receiver whenever they called.

Vera was tough. But when, on that hot Thursday afternoon, Frances rang her doorbell, she had been taken down a peg. Vera had dropped a glass she was carrying to her sink and it had broken into invisible shards on her vinyl tiled, gray kitchen floor. Such incidents were rare, but they always fed her fears of weakness and vulnerability. Now, as in other moments of terror, she slips into silent prayer, “Lord Jesus, please, if you don’t see fit to restore my eyesight, at least find someone who might help me.”

So she experienced a totally uncharacteristic mix of surprise and religious anticipation when, just a few moments after this fervent communication, she heard the knock. With the threat of sharp pieces of broken glass, Vera planned her detour around the most likely area of danger, and used her hands on the walls to guide herself to the door. Upon arrival at her destination, so full of hoped deliverance, she was not her usual brusque self.

“Who is it?”

In response, she heard a friendly, “Hello, it’s Ms. Bussa, a social worker from Montgomery County.” Vera opened the door.

“I called a few weeks ago, but we were disconnected, and I thought it might be better if I just came by. Here is my county identification card.” Frances, knowing full well that Mrs. Tableau wouldn’t be able to read it, continued, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to see if I could help you with anything. Perhaps I could come in?”

In the middle of that hot afternoon in July, the prayed for miracle from the broken glass led the door to swing open. Vera saw her angel had arrived. “My lord, you must’ve come from heaven! An answer to my prayers! Of course, don’t just stand there, come right in. Help from strangers, I do say!”

Vera was renewed with energy by this prompt answer to her prayers, “Just put your things on the table. Let me show you what’s wrong.” She was pointing to a small table where Frances could, perhaps, find room for her checked canvas and leather purse and briefcase. It was also serving as the pedestal for a rather large cockroach. Frances eyed the roach’s swaying antennae and looked for an alternative perch.

Not seeing the wildlife, nor the social worker’s reaction, Vera was feeling her way back along her path of safety toward the closet that held her broom and dust bin.

“I’d bet you knew before you knocked,” she continued with a disbelieving smile that reflected her new understanding of her privileged position as living under the shield of the almighty, “I broke a glass and have trouble seeing. You’d be such an angel if you’d just sweep up the splinters for me so I won’t cut myself.”

Realizing that a full search for a safe place for her belongings would take more time than was now available, Frances picked Vera’s sole upholstered chair, laid down her bags, smiled, and thought ‘denial overcome.’ Noticing a second affront to her middle class expectations, the foul odor of burnt coffee, Frances looked for the offender. The old percolator on the counter was unplugged. Reaching into her social work soul she responded warmly, “Of course, Mrs. Tableau. I’ll be glad to do it. Just give me the dust bin and broom. I’ll have it up in no time.”

And once no time had transpired, shards were swept away. Help had been delivered; prayers were answered. Frances, looking angelic and feeling comfortably triumphant, then glanced around the room. On one wall abutting the kitchen cabinets, above the percolator she noticed a wooden rack that held a set of decorative, or special spoons. On an adjoining wall, with light green wallpaper printed with yellow roses was an old three-barred Eastern Orthodox crucifix. Off to one side of the sitting area was a table with an old Apple computer that looked as if it hadn’t been used in a while.

Frances decided it was time to turn to matters of business, “Now, Mrs. Tableau . . .”

“Please, Vera. Simply Vera. How can I thank you? I am sorry, but I am really bad at names, did you say you were Mrs. Buthar? Can I give you some coffee or water?”

“No thank you. But my name is not quite Buthar. It’s Frances, Frances Bussa, like Saint Frances of Rome. Not Buthar. But why don’t you call me Frances? I see you have a computer. Do you use it a lot?”

“Oh but you must! Are you sure you wouldn’t want a cup? It’s fresh from breakfast. This morning. Probably still warm.”

Urged on by the offensive odor of the burnt coffee, Frances responded quite emphatically, “No, really, thanks but I surely couldn’t. But now about that computer ...”

“That was a gift from a neighbor who got a new one from her family.”

“Do you use it?”

“Well, no. I can’t really read such a small screen. I don’t know how to thank you. I wish I could give you something, or do something, to show my gratitude. ”

“That’s not necessary, really. Tell me now, how bad is your eyesight?”

Not fully understanding the purpose of what she took as a non sequitur but always ready to believe in miracles, Vera responded, “The good lord hasn’t always looked after me like he is today, you know. I can read large print - like headlines in the paper. And I can see things to the side. The doctor says I have macular degeneration. He says there is nothing to do for it. That screen is too small for me to see people most of the time. Same as the TV. Even if I sit right up to it.”

Frances turned to look a bit more at the room. Surprisingly, the cockroach was still on the small table. Its antennae were constantly and slowly rotating, patrolling its environment. A slight involuntary shudder went through Frances’s small frame. In a corner, just below where the flowered wall paper was discolored from age and water stains, sat the TV Vera had spied and a straight-back chair. The TV was an old 17 inch model.

“I guess you don’t have a digital converter box.”

“A what? Oh, no. I heard about them. I don’t watch . . . It’s so hard to watch TV. Same as the computer. I just haven’t bothered.”

“There is a foundation that works with the county. Maybe we can persuade them to give you a grant to upgrade all this. Since you can read headlines, we would ask for a large screen TV and a large computer screen that you could use. That could help.”

“My Lord, what a day this is! To think, it all began with my broken glass and then a prayer. And then I was sent a saint! Who sent you Frances?”

“It’s my job. I work for the county welfare bureau.”

“Oh yes, so you said. But I’m sure it was providence that led you to my door at just such a time. I would so like it if you could share a coffee, after all that you have done. I’d make some fresh.”

“Well, all right, thank you. Just a quick one. I still have lots to do this afternoon.”

Vera was sure that must be so: angels and saints have very few minutes to spare. Moving as quickly as her corpulent body would allow, she moved toward the electric percolator. With practiced feelings by fingers that substituted for sight, she opened the bag of grinds, felt around for the measuring spoon she kept inside it, and measured the coffee. She then carefully filled a measuring cup with water 3 times and poured the water into the coffee maker. Feeling for the plug, she set it to perking.

An angel deserved her best and so in a similar fashion, using her hands to see, she reached for her fancy china cups. She felt the rims and chose one with care. They all were somewhat cracked,

and the saucers were chipped, but with practice Vera had learned to identify the ones in the best shape. They all still retained some gold on the rim.

It was the gold that led them to be included in the small treasure the Tablinkoviches had struggled to salvage when they fled the old country. She also picked out one of her sterling spoons from the special little wooden rack on the wall, and put it on the saucer. When the percolator stopped its bubbling, she poured the coffee.

Frances sipped, but hardly tasted the coffee. She was too eager to escape the depressing environment for her more comfortable office quarters, and was forming a gracious exit. “Delicious, thank you. So what I plan to do is to get some paper work started. Then one of my assistants will be back in a week or so. She’ll then do a fuller assessment. If all works according to plan, we’ll begin the application process for that new TV and computer. My assistant will call you first. We will need some luck, but let’s try.”

“Oh yes, try. It would be great to have a larger screen,” Vera added with a genuinely happy lilt.

Putting down the cup Frances embraced Vera’s hand in her two as a sincere gesture of solidarity. She then proceeded to rescue her purse and briefcase from the surveillance of the cockroach. As she left, she was happy to have had such an easy time. Soon, she knew, the county would hire exterminators, and the apartment would be spotless; Tableau would be assigned a case number that she could hand over to one of her staff. Frances now had another story to share with her kids over the dinner table to illustrate the power of positive thinking.

And Vera? Vera felt blessed. Totally blessed and in rapture. How so many things could have gone so wonderfully on a day that had started to fall apart just was beyond her. As the door closed, she said, once and once again, “Thank you, Jesus!” and then sat down heavily on her big upholstered chair, letting out an audible sigh. The draft of her movements was picked up by the scilla on the rear legs of the roach, and it skedaddled to safety even quicker than Frances would have expected.

Memories flit into the mind, emerging from a past for just an instant to justify the present. One, two, three: they become a collage. The detritus of our experiences, sticking together like burs, using previously stored shards of our discomforts, cutting one's time into events, giving pattern to happenings that float from, and then back into, the past.

CHAPTER 2: MEMORIES

As he sat there, in the car, outside the Armory, unsure of his own survival, Marc's memories commanded his attention. They were stirred up by his fears and pain. They formed dark images of past death as they strung themselves together.

A faded oil cloth covered the table in Marc's parents' kitchen. Once it had been white with little bright flowers. Like the rest of the apartment, the kitchen was less than spacious. His father, Isaac, had once painted the now chipped and dirty trim around the narrow casement a cheerful yellow. Looking out the window over the kitchen sink, the trim framed a section of the blank brick wall across the ally. At age 11, Marc was tall enough to look down and to the left to see just a corner of the sidewalk and street. He could even view the tops of the garbage cans in the ally. And extending himself over the sink, if he looked up, he could see a sliver of sky.

But now it was Esther, his mother, who was standing by the sink, staring out the window. Marc and Melissa, Marc's little sister, were sitting on either side of their father at the kitchen table. Isaac was in his army uniform. His heavy duffle lay by the front door. Mom had made a special breakfast of French toast. But it was not a morning of celebration. Breakfast was silent. Melissa was deep into her maple syrup and her gloom when father said, "Esther, what do you say, gorgeous? I'd love another cup of coffee before I go."

"I wish you weren't going, Isaac," was Esther's response. It came with her immigrant parents' German accent. Although born here, Esther still used a slight 'v' in her pronunciation of words that began with 'w' when she was anxious. Hers was an English at the side of her mother and on the streets of the lower East Side. Listening closely he could still recall those faint roots in his mind.

"Someone has to knock out Adolph and those krauts. It might as well be me."

Mom poured the coffee. "Ja, but other fathers aren't getting sent to Europe. They seem to stay State-side," she said sadly.

"Well my fortune's different," was Isaac's response.

"You be sure to write, when you get a chance. Don't forget us."

"How could I forget my family?" father responded with a big smile for the children. He extended his arm to hold Esther closer but she broke loose and turned back to the window. Marc recalled details of this 67 year old event as if it was yesterday. His dad rubbed Marc's head and added, "And you all write too."

“Of course we will - we all will. We’re going to miss you terribly. What will I do without you, Isaac? Isaac. Don’t volunteer for any dangerous mission. No heroics. Stay safe. Promise? Just finish this war and get back home,” Esther said quietly, always facing the window.

“Are you two kids going to write me? I’ll be missing you two bumpkins. And you Esther. God, I’ll be missing you. What do you say Marc? Melissa? Are you going to write?”

The siblings were struck dumb, trying to understand.

“Melissa, don’t pout like that. I’ll be back before you finish your French toast if you eat it that slowly. I’ll get back here pretty quick - just got to catch Adolph’s tail before he kills too many more of us.”

Marc’s father turned back to the coffee, downing it in a gulp, grabbed his duffel and got up. Going to the door, he put his hand on the knob. The rest of the family had followed behind him in silence. Tears flowed down Esther’s cheeks. Melissa and Marc were stone-still. Isaac walked out the door with the duffel in his hand. The three followed.

“Now kids, I’ve got to go.”

This time, Daddy was leaving the building in his khaki woolen army uniform and it wasn’t for training. He didn’t express any qualms. There he was, draping Esther’s back with his arms. Then they just held each other for a long time. When he let her go, he was laughing at something they had said to each other. He then stopped and said, “There is nothing to worry about.”

But they all knew he was going off to war.

Suddenly, Marc couldn’t hold back. “Don’t go. Daddy, don’t go.”

With movements he had long perfected, Isaac reached down putting one arm around Marc’s waist, and the other around his shoulders, picking him up and putting him on his shoulders. “You know I’ve got to go, Son.”

“No you don’t! Jimmy’s dad isn’t going,” came the denial. “Don’t go!” Marc recalled how he screamed, “NO!” over and over again.

Marc’s father tried to ease his son down from his shoulders but Marc fought back. He kicked and held on to his father’s hair. Finally, Isaac succeeded in placing his son gently next to Melissa on the cold top step by the front door, and said “Take care of Melissa; she’s your little sister. Remember you are always going to be her big brother! And help your Mom. Mom’s boss while I’m gone, but she’s going to need those big muscles you’ve got. You are going to have to be the man in the house!”

Then with another quick move Dad had Marc back on his shoulders. This view is always in Marc’s mind. He recalls, from up there, the top of his sister’s head; his mother’s eyes - reddened by crying; and that final endless swoop down off the shoulder onto the step. He often relives that swoop – how his Dad turned Marc upside down as he was swung down and then how his permanent replacement, a lifeless duffel bag, went up in an arc done with the same simple swing of his father’s strong arms. This is always followed by father going down to the street. He never looks back. Never comes back. He never holds Marc again. Marc was left there next to his little sister, herself standing bow-legged, not long out of diapers, and not quite comprehending that the day’s pleasant departure was apocryphal: Daddy was lost and would not be home again.

Thoughts about the loss of his father are always tied to Jake, Jake Trowley. Even before the war ended, indeed, in Marc's memories, almost immediately after his father left the stoop, Jake took his father's place. Of course that's not quite right. Marc can always recall the horrible afternoon when coming home from school he heard Melissa cry out, "Daddy is lost. Daddy is dead."

And then the service. Everyone chanting the Kaddish, "Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba." But dead was thousands of miles away. For Marc and Melissa, Daddy was absent. Then one night, the new man just appeared. Esther declared Jake a new 'father.' But he wasn't.

Marc recoiled at the sight and smell of this new man. Some horrible switch had occurred. A pariah had come into their apartment – chosen by Marc's suddenly uncaring mother, some substitute picked up from those who didn't go to fight the war.

And when Marc complained, Mom replied, "You'll learn to love him. Jake will help us now. He has money."

Marc heard the words Esther had always said to Isaac now said to Jake: 'Darling,' 'Love,' and 'Dear.' When he visited, Jake would sit in father's chair. Jake wasn't Jewish. Marc was soon in tow to church. Marc's father wasn't mentioned. Then, one day, Mrs. Buttervogel became Mrs. Trowley. The family moved to a much bigger, upstairs flat on Mulberry Street. And Marc's half brother, Michael, was born. Trowley was in finance. He had his own company.

They learned quickly that he was not a good man. But it was too late. Where were they to go? Jake never liked Isaac's children. They were too often angry, and the stepfather never could forgive or understand their anger. They never got along. For Melissa and Marc, their daily task was to stay out of the way of his anger, his fists, his feet. Jake wouldn't budget adequately for those children. But Michael got everything. Nothing seemed possible for Isaac's son. Everything was available for Michael. Michael got praise. Marc got blame. Michael could do anything, Marc was a witless do-nothing. And although Marc graduated cum laude in high school, Jake wouldn't support Marc's going to college.

The memories stirred old anger, new fury, and caused Marc's temples to pound ever more terribly. Marc sat there, suddenly feeling himself spinning uncontrollably into a black vortex, a space detached from this world that previously had such a grip on him.

CHAPTER 3: SUPPORTING CAST

When the sky is properly gray and pregnant with rain, the boundaries between it and the endless county office buildings in Rockville disappear. One of those modern cement toms contains the Montgomery County Office of Disability Services. On the third floor there is a small windowless cubicle occupied by Margery Whitman. She is one of Frances Bussa's interns.

When assigned to work with Bussa, Margery felt fortunate. Her professors at the University of Maryland's School of Social Work had spoken of Ms. Bussa's magnificent record of successful struggles within Disability Services. Many of those struggles were waged for her vulnerable clients. Of course, others were over purely bureaucratic matters incomprehensible to those outside the government. But often, and certainly that summer, those victories had allowed her to accumulate interns.

Once she arrived, Margery discovered from the gossip around the office coffee machine, that many others believed Mrs. Bussa was every bit the saint that she had heard at the University. Frances seemed to possess boundless energy and time to bring her cases to her supervisors. As we might expect of county officials overseeing disability services for the elderly, they quickly signed off on such things as requests for exterminators. More specifically, they also gave her permission to set her summer interns to do whatever they could to ameliorate Vera's situation – as long as it cost no county funds.

Much as Frances had foretold, the appointment of Margery, had been fortuitous. Margery's was no academic success story. It followed that Margery needed some sign of merit on her resumé. With but a month or so left in her internship and a semester in her MSW program, she was desperate to accomplish something positive.

But Margery had considerable assets of her own. She was the granddaughter of Martha Whitman, a wealthy matriarch of local renown. When Grandpa George was alive the couple was known for the luxurious bashes they hosted as benefactors of progressive causes.

Grandmother Martha's early diagnosis of macular degeneration did not obscure her keen eye. She was renowned for her acute judgment of generational slippage of her descendants: a fact not lost on Margery. Martha saw her granddaughter as her only (albeit slender) hope of avoiding the inevitable social entropy others refer to as 'regression to the mean.'

Indeed, from Margery's perspective, her Grandmother's obsession was indelibly experienced as an escalating general concern with preserving the family's status. This compulsive preoccupation first manifest itself when Margery's Uncle Charles began to drift downward. Grandparents Martha and George became possessed with one cause: establishing a family safety net. They established the Whitman Foundation to secure respectable employment for Charles. Indirectly The Foundation also pursued the preservation of eyesight.

Mirroring her Uncle Charles' trajectory at the University of Maryland, Margery had apprenticed in lavish bashes, frequenting countless fraternity parties. Near the end of the last semester in her 6-year quest to obtain a degree, she discovered that her background in partying advantaged her neither for post-graduation employment nor for further schooling. Indeed, Margery was pollinated by so many rejections from graduate programs and job openings in physical education that a great interest in good causes blossomed within her.

Finally, with some aid from the family Foundation, she settled in for a degree in social work at the University of Maryland. And now, after a couple of years of education, as things unfolded that day in 2007, Margery was called into her boss's office.

“Are you enjoying your internship so far, Ms. Whitman?” Frances asked, opening the conversation.

“Oh yes, thank you. The orientation program has been really awesome.”

“Good. But that is not why I have asked you in. We need to have a short discussion.” Frances emphasized the importance of what she was about to say by leaning forward in her chair. Her breasts hovered now low over her desk. She was looking straight in the eyes of Margery, who was standing in front of the Director's desk. “You should know I have an excellent placement record for my best interns. Those that perform best receive my strongest recommendation. They always get satisfactory employment upon their graduation.”

“Wow. I hadn't even thought about that. But now that you bring it up, a solid recommendation would certainly be awesome.”

“Recommendations have to be earned, Margery. Isn't Martha Whitman your grandmother?”

“Yes.”

“She has done some wonderful things in this county. Especially to help with macular degeneration. She even set up a foundation. Do you know about her work for the poor sighted?”

“Of course. You know, she suffers from the disease herself.”

“As I thought,” interrupted Mrs. Bussa. “I want to discuss a case with you. I recently initiated a file on a new client, a woman called Veritas Tableau. She suffers terribly from macular degeneration. She lives a much reduced life, but some electronic tools could improve her situation greatly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, a large flat screen for TV and computing, magnifying software, and so on. I'd like you to see if there could be money available from any local charities, foundations or merchants to subsidize or even secure such equipment to improve her life. Check it out. Then, in a few days get back to me.”

Upon leaving the office Margery immediately called her grandmother. This was not unusual. Margery sought her Grandmother's advice before setting out to accomplish anything more important than attendance at a fraternity party. Martha made it clear that Margery was to come to her Grandmother upon leaving work. Soon Margery was seated in Grandma's parlor.

It was a formal room. The dark parquet floor was covered with tightly woven Persian rugs adorned with blood red floral designs. Martha was sitting in a rather vertically backed antique English wing-chair. The upholstery was a rather severe slate gray velvet that went well with her own high necked front button dress. Margery was seated facing her grandmother and the window to the side rose garden.

Martha began, “Why weren't you able to come over immediately?”

“I was at work.”

“Margery, that's not work. You don't have a real job. You aren't being paid.”

“Sorry, Grandma but it is work.”

“Are you still planning to graduate?”

“Of course, Grandma.”

“Don’t be so presumptuous. It isn’t so ‘of course.’ You were said to graduate from college in 2003, right?”

“Right, but . . .”

“And that plan didn’t work. Your graduation only occurred in 2005, right?”

“Yes, but . . .”

“And now you are supposed to graduate in December, right?”

“I will.”

“I would hope so. You should be able to understand my concerns. I can’t be seen setting up a foundation every time one of my relatives heads for welfare, you know.”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“And then do you plan to get a job in this field - what is it called? – after you graduate? What is the work?”

“Social work. That’s my plan, Grandma.”

“All that is as it should be. I always wished your father had a clearer direction in life. I do hope this all works out properly.”

“That’s why I am here. As I was saying on the phone, my boss . . .”

“Yes, yes, I know. But what precisely is needed to satisfy your boss, this Mr. Who?”

“Mr is a she. Mrs. Bussa.”

“I don’t care about that. What does he want?”

“She hoped I’d be able to get some electronic gear to help a visually impaired person get on.”

“And will he give you a paying job if this happens?”

“Well she indicated that if I did it all well, she would reward me with a strong recommendation that would lead to a good job.”

“Hmmm, indeed! I would hope so,” Martha was warming up her delivery of an oft repeated lesson she reserved for special moments. “If only your father had secured a proper job, he would have bought a proper car. Then perhaps I would not have had all this responsibility.”

“Yes. I am so sorry to trouble you again. But I need to find out what to do.”

“Pay a visit to your Uncle Charles at The Foundation. He may have some ideas.”

After some pleasantries, and some social bon-mots, Margery left for the family’s foundation.

When properly asked, Charles’ blindness association is capable of charitable works. And it had just been asked. As its founding benefactor, Grandmother Martha had just called Charles at The Whitman Foundation to alert Charles to the urgency of the situation. Margery traveled down

Kensington Parkway to a beautifully restored Victorian from the 1920's. The garden was known for the beautiful old beech and oak trees, the roses on the south side of the house, and the azaleas on the east and north. But this wasn't a tour of Kensington gardens. Margery was dropping in on her dear Uncle Charles, to receive a professional boost.

She began tearfully, "Uncle Charles, what can I do? I have failed at everything. How will I *ever* get a job?" She reached for a Kleenex from the box on the mahogany table by her leather clad chair in the Foundation's Presidential suite.

After wiping her eyes and blowing her nose she continued, "Charles, you know I never got good grades. And to even get a recommendation I am going to have to accomplish this task for Mrs. Bussa. I just *need* to be able to get it done, if only to get a job! Uncle Charles, I need something for my resumé! Something for people to look at it! Like, I'm graduating in December. Mrs. Bussa said I should find out where we can get money for her to get some electronic equipment to help this old, almost blind woman. I hoped the foundation would be able to help me."

As a patron of good causes, and in keeping with the Whitman altruist gene, as well as the urging of Martha, Charles rose to the occasion. "Come, come, Margery. Don't cry. This should not be difficult. Why don't we try to get some help from our retail donors?"

Then not only did he give Margery a list of some retailers and civic associations who might well shower small gifts on the visually impaired, but he even called some of them himself. He made it clear that the association would be happy to match dollar for dollar any gifts that they might be able to secure for her client. He also made a mental note to ask Martha what the Foundation should do if Margery could find no job after graduation.

These simple steps were sufficient to ensure that after the roaches left Apartment 4F, the retailer who donated the newer PC with the latest vision enhancing software was paid full retail price for the relatively large screen, high-definition TV that was included in the bountiful gifts bestowed upon Vera all before the summer had gone. Margery would get her solid recommendations. And Frances? She had yet another story to tell to her children at the kitchen table. Had that been the end of the tale, and had not Professor Buttervogel lived next door to Frances Bussa, all would have been well in this little corner of Montgomery County.

CHAPTER 4: NEIGHBORHOOD TREMORS

Like many of Washington's liberal professionals, Frances lived in the once bucolic suburb of Takoma Park. After its fields morphed into subdivisions, it voted itself a 'nuclear free zone.' Still later its electorate voted to impeach President Bush. Freed of their atomic arsenals, neighbors were able to reach out to help each other in times of need.

Near the County community college, on Tulip Avenue, sit a row of neat Victorian two storied homes, all more than 70 years old. Little more than the frequent passage of nearby rushing metro trains disturb this peaceful neighborhood.

March 2008 and the yard at 106 Tulip was as pregnant with spring as Frances had been years ago with Christopher, her first born. Daffodils pushed gently against the bulging brown belly of the earth. Crocuses punched their heads into its crust to be let out. A bulging purple-headed preemie blossom appeared surrounded by a last patch of snow in the shadow of the big oak tree that dwarfed the front porch. Scattered parts of a disassembled broken child's bicycle on the porch lent the home a Norman Rockwell aura.

For young Christopher and his little sister, Sarah, meal time at 106 was a magical story-telling time with a common plot: Rescuing the needy and the elderly of the County, Super-Mom could do no wrong. The theme never flagged. The two youngsters had learned that the world was a dangerous place in the fortunate care of their mom, Frances.

Directly to the east of 106 was another Victorian: yellow and white, a bit in need of a paint job. Its gutter threatened to disconnect, but otherwise it was quite presentable. The yard was less manicured. No crocuses were waiting to be born. Meal time at 104 tended to be solitary. Professor Buttervogel ate canned and frozen micro-waved food. Meals were alone, often in his underwear, his face covered with days of stubble.

But there too, life had been comfortable back when citizens had faith that banks were stable and good places to put their money. That was also when the old Professor believed the dangerous world was being kept at bay by Julia Burnham.

Burnham was now Lambert. And a mother. But in his mind she was neither. Burnham was an old flame first, a financial advisor second.

Burnham wasn't the Professor's only guardian. Professor Buttervogel's agreeable existence was also supported by his generous neighbor. The professor and the social worker had long gotten along. When Marc moved in, she had invited him over for a supper. That repast served as foundation for an amiable relationship. From time to time, she looked after his houseplants, newspapers and mail. For his part, he collected her packages when they were left on the stoop by the delivery men. He had flirted with her a few times, but nothing was meant to come of it. Marc was more than 30 years her senior. Anyhow, a single mother, Ms. Bussa had her hands full with two children.

Now, quite suddenly the deep foundations of the American political economy were giving birth. And this newborn was not benign. Tremors traveled from street to street accelerating with the aid of the internet. Foundations were developing invisible cracks that would lead to families losing their savings, and then their homes, and even worse. Banks were shaking. The epicenter was Manhattan.

Then, one fateful Friday, 200 miles to the Southwest of Gotham, on Tulip Avenue, the monster showed its head with a sudden outburst.

That same Friday evening, Frances came home from work. She pulled her neat Honda minivan into the driveway she shared with her neighbor. She helped the kids with its doors. Arms laden with groceries, she ambled into the house. Helping the kids off with their jackets, she turned on the evening news. Hanging up her coat, she noticed her newly graying hair in the hall mirror and thought about wheeling the recyclables' bin back from the curb. Lost in her many faceted reality – fresh evidence of aging, what to do about supper, rolling the blue recycle bin down the driveway – Frances absorbed none of the black tidings from the TV. She remained unaware of the tremors from Wall Street.

On the other side of the driveway, the evening headlines arrived to a different audience. Marc sat transfixed by the darkened screen of the television he had just turned off. Real news isn't only about the large scale happenings in the world. It is also about neurological shifts in the minds of those hearing it. Changed expectations. Bear Stearns, a company that headlined the day's news because it collapsed. This news changed Marc's expectations. His entire nest-egg was held in an account at the company.

He began a panicked stream within himself, *"I could lose everything. My money. My home. Everything. All my savings are there. This could be a major disaster! What can I do? How can I get my money out? What's going to happen to me? My finances are unbinged! Bear Stearns! I have to contact Julia."*

Like a squirrel that suddenly stops and changes direction, he snapped his TV back on, to search for more information. Perhaps he hadn't heard right. But no, the same news was repeated – endlessly. Instinctively, he reached for his cell, and dialed his hired financial defender.

"You have reached the office of Julia Burnham Lambert and Associates, Financial Advisors. Our business hours are 9 to 5 Monday through Friday. If you know the extension of the party you wish to reach, you can dial that now. To leave a message . . ."

His blood pressure rose. His anxiety escalated. He slammed down the receiver and screamed to no one, "Shit." Marc searched for her home or cell number. He went on line to find it. Nothing. A panicked minute passed before he realized that he probably had her cell number on his phone. Sure enough there it was.

But she didn't pick up. "Call me, it's urgent," he begged her voice mail.

Hours later he finally heard from her. "Marc?" Remnants of her Texan roots were still audible in her voice. It calmed him. He even gained a short lived smile recognizing her.

"Julia. I'm so glad you called back."

"Sorry about that. I had to put the kids to bed. What's up?"

"The news about Bear Sterns is terrible."

"Right you are."

"I know I have my account with you, but I think my money and savings is being held at Bear Sterns. Is that right?"

"Right. I'm just your advisor. I don't hold anything."

“But Bear Sterns went bankrupt this afternoon. Is my money gone? What can I do? What will you do?”

“Well, don’t we live in interesting times?”

“God damn it, Julia, don’t toy with me. What is going to happen to my savings?”

“Sorry. I wasn’t making light. It just seemed true. We don’t know enough yet to predict what will happen to your money. Your money is probably safe even though they went belly-up. Look on the web - there has been a posting by the SEC or the Federal Reserve - sorry I can’t recall which. It tells you how you can retrieve your securities, or at least your money, from a broker in bankruptcy. The brokers are insured. It’s not the FDIC but there is a process. I’ll help you get any necessary forms, of course. But be warned, if we have to go down this route it could be a long process. You might have to wait months to regain liquidity. Still, there’s some hope. There’s a rumor that the Feds are trying to get JP Morgan to bail them out. That would help a lot. We should know very quickly because any deal will be settled by Monday morning, latest.”

“But I could lose everything.”

“Yes. That’s why I said it’s interesting. But I don’t think that will happen. Try to get some sleep. Nothing can be done till Monday in any case.”

“My finances could be wiped out. I’m not as secure as you, Julia. This means a lot to me. It’s no small matter. You’re going to help me, won’t you?”

“Hon, I’m always here for you. That’s why you pay me. But now, I’ve got to go. Get some sleep, Marc. Things will be brighter and perhaps clearer tomorrow.” And then, Marc heard her hang up.

Marc hung on to his cell, motionless. The call was over, but not his worries. Still staring at the blank TV screen, he ruminated about Julia.

“Julia had been my friend. Friend? What am I thinking? She was my lover. And now? She’s cheated me,” he told himself. But when Marc tried this rewrite of his history the truth trickled in. His mind rebelled and snapped back to reality.

“Reality? what is reality?” he fought back. *“I’ve never been a ‘realist.’ Realism’s just a bull shit justification of the military industrial complex. Truth’s the assertion of a free mind.”* But his mind rebelled and snapped back to images he recalled.

“Reality?” went the other thread in his mind. *“Isn’t reality the loss of your assets? No invented stories give you back your money.”* It won. He reviewed the steps Julia had taken when they made his investment decisions.

He was walking into Julia’s office. When he entered her fancy wood paneled office it reflected success and showed just how far she had come from their wild sexual escapades. That day, as now, he was desperate for money. He wanted her to rebuild his financial foundation.

He had to accept these memories, to reject his lie. She hadn’t cheated him. Fault? He knew the answer as he denied it: he was ashamed of his own decisions. He knew she had passed him a clipboard with a pen attached. She had sat on a chair next to him at her big table. His eye was on her skirt. It had risen above her knees, those same knees he loved to touch. When he changed his gaze to the clipboard it had a paper on it entitled “Risk Tolerance Questionnaire.”

Above all, he remembered his reaction, “Come on, Julia! Fuck risk tolerance! We did it without a condom even though we knew HIV was around. And we weren’t monogamous. Hell, we were seeing each other even when we were both married. We were screwing when I should have been at my wife’s oncologist. Risk tolerance? Just make me a lot of money, fast.”

That’s why he had gone to her. He always had trouble with technical discussions. He had a math block. He suddenly recalled a humiliating faculty meeting more than 15 years ago. Charlie was making some points about the undergraduate program. Something about the grades of majors in philosophy. The average GPA was going up. Marc had asked a simple question, and it was met with a rather long silence.

“How,” he had asked, “can a student get a GPA of 3.6 when we grade with whole numbers. You know, an A gets a 4, and a B gets a 3.” Charlie took the question slowly, and said something about averages and adding and dividing. Marc suddenly became aware of the ignorance he displayed. It was devastating. No one asked him to join them for lunch. For weeks, after the meeting was over, he avoided conversations with his faculty and felt isolated by the public display of his limitations.

So he had dropped into Julia's office. He could never have been so honest with anyone else. He could also have tried to contact his half-brother, Michael. Michael was also a financial advisor. Michael would have given him some assistance. But how could Marc have explained his situation to his younger half-brother? Of course it was his fault that there was no diversity in his portfolio. Surely, he had been myopic. But he went to Julia when he was a desperate soul: retired and suddenly without the financial assets that were needed to sustain his lifestyle.

As he revisited those memories, he recalled the causes of his desperation. *“My first big loss was from Elsa’s sickness and death. The medications weren’t covered and care cost so damn much. And then, after she died, my work just tanked. I couldn’t even make ends meet. Elsa was no longer there to get me grants. How could I save for retirement? Everyone was making money hand over fist in the stock market while my savings dwindled. Did nothing. Zap. It couldn’t be so difficult to make real money – everyone was doing it.”*

So then he had opened a day-trader account at Schwab. Sure enough, he made a pile, and quickly reinvested it in Enron, MCI, and some small high tech companies. By 1997, Marc figured he had enough to retire. He was 66, and set for life. Just after he left the university to start his new life, the tech bubble burst. He was hit hard. Very hard. Suddenly, Marc didn’t have enough to support himself. He went to Julia.

Over the next years, she had done well by him. It was now hard to admit, but he was reaping the rewards of his own overly risky behavior. Owning his own history was depressing of course, but it also calmed him down. And as the evening turned to night, he relaxed, and other memories of Julia came to mind.

September 1974, the semester was beginning and he had barely arrived at the University of Maryland. Julia Burnham walked into his office: blond, buxom, and barely 18. His future wife Elsa was still in Cornell, waiting until the new year to come to Maryland. Boxes of books were lying on the floor of his office, waiting to be shelved. Recalling those days brought him great pleasure. What better to distract a frightened old man than dipping into his youthful conquests. And so as he brought it to mind again he soothed his frazzled state.

“Can I come in, Sir? I don’t want to bother you,” was Julia’s opener, with her Texan twang. “I surely could come back some other time, if you’d like.”

“Certainly, come in. It’s not my office hours. Close the door so others will have to knock. Take a seat and tell me what’s on your mind,” a response triggered as much by her radiant skin as her beautiful cleavage. Even now, almost 35 years later, the memory aroused him. He still held the image of those long legs she draped one over the other as she sat in the heavily upholstered, pea-green velvet arm chair in his office. Her tartan plaid skirt neatly exposed both her knees and their very trim connection to thighs he would grow so fond of.

“I saw your syllabus on ‘The Philosophical Rejection of War and Vietnam’ at the book store. It looks so exciting! I was told it is already oversubscribed and closed to freshman. I just am hoping I can persuade you to let me in. I’d be more motivated than other students. It’s so relevant for me. Back home in Amarillo, no one questions the war. I just really need to be enlightened. I’d probably do *anything* to get in, Sir.” She licked her lips.

“Please, don’t call me ‘Sir.’ Everyone calls me Marc. I prefer it. What’s your name?” Inadvertently Marc also licked his lips.

“Julia, Sir.” she announced with a flashed smile and a flick of her head. The swing of her long blonde hair grabbed his attention.

“Monday’s anti-war rally could give you a quick study about the issues. It’ll be in front of McKeldin Library. I’ll be there and if you still want into the course after that, see me right after the rally. And Julia, it’s ‘Marc,’ not ‘Sir.’”

“I’ll be there Sir.”

“Marc.”

“Yes, Sir. I mean . . . ‘yes, Marc.’” She was smiling broadly, beautifully, enticingly. “I’ll try to use ‘Marc’, Sir but it will be hard for me. In Amarillo,” which from her tongue, now dancing behind and between her pearly teeth, rhymed with vanilla, “people just use ‘Sir’ and ‘Ma’am’ unless they’re real close friends.”

The elongated roll of the ‘real’ made him smile. He answered in the same spirit, “Well Julia, you ought to come to the rally. I am on a first name basis with partisans and students. Who knows, perhaps it’ll be the start of a close friendship. So call me Marc.” How wise, how wrong, how right, was that statement.

It was his inaugural rally at Maryland. At McKeldin he used one of his favorite parables in his anti-war speech. He told of a mule trainer who trained mules with kindness. A farmer came to the trainer to train his favorite mule, and after one or two quick tries to get a harness on the mule, the trainer slugged the mule with a 2x4 right between its eyes. The farmer was shocked. He ran up to the trainer and demanded “Why’d ya hit ‘em? I thought you trained with kindness.”

The trainer responded, “I do. But I had to get his attention first.” The government was like that mule, Marc had argued.

Marc not only had a mellifluous voice, but with his flowing blond beard, long hair, and leather sandals he knew how much he looked and sounded the part of the charismatic hippie leader. The crowd was small, as all had been since Nixon ended the draft. Still, the day was beautiful and after the rally coeds, and a few of the rally’s organizers gathered round to congratulate him for what they called a rousing talk. Marc was gratified to watch Julia there in pink short shorts pushing to the front. When she got by his side she breathlessly told him, “That was inspirational. You gave me so much to think about.”

They walked back to his office. Drawn to his handsome face, and his charismatic voice, she was more certain than ever that she wanted to be in the course. He didn't sit down when they got in the office. Nor did she. She looked at his collection of books, most of which were now shelved. He took a step to stand next to her. "Have you read all of these, Sir?"

"Some more than once. But please, not 'sir.'"

Smiling at her mistake she turned away from the books and toward him, and was surprised at how close he was.

"No one in my family is much of a reader, sss ... I mean Marc. I think I love books. Marc, you already have me thinking about so much and school hasn't even started."

"Now that you're calling me Marc, we could start that friendship," he said, only half teasing.

"Think I could also get into the course?"

"I guess so."

"Does that mean I'm in?"

He smiled in response.

"That's great! I'm in! Thank you, Sir - I mean, Marc!" she said excitedly.

He moved slightly toward his desk, turned, and asked "And what are you studying, Julia?" he had said.

"I hope to be a business major," she said.

So Julia needed a course on political philosophy for her major. Marc was happy to interpret the entire interaction as a suggested trade. "Yup," he concluded, "you can get used to using my name, rather than sir, over the next months."

And she did. For years. Even though when she'd give her invitations she'd throw in an occasional 'Sir,' as in "So, Sir, wouldn't you like to remove my bra?" or "Will there be anything else you might need, Sir?" And so it began, eight semesters of wonderful sex. Sex after class. Sex after anti-war rallies. Sex in the office. Sex in her apartment. And then even after graduation on those rare occasions when they were able to get together.

In his mind, she was still lying there, still young, still beautiful, still waiting for him to caress her again, all wet with her sweat, on her bed. He would trace her legs with one finger, moving up her thigh, playing with her thick pubic hair. The tickling gave her pleasure and some times, such as the time he now imagined, she would hold his hand on her clitoris, slowly working it back and forth. And as these thoughts got him aroused, he thought of the day he brought his camera and had taken pictures, and how before he took pictures he ran his nails teasingly across her nipples. It was easy to arouse her again even after they had spent plenty of time enjoying their mating dances. Her hairs ran thick with their juices as he took her pictures. All this came back. And he thought of the one of those photos that was still on his wall upstairs.

Of course, their relationship changed over time. But the photo never changed. Only reality did. There were brief periods where they stopped seeing each other. They stopped for a short time when Elsa arrived, and when Marc and Elsa married, and again when Julia wed. But reality intruded to end the relationship when, one particular day he used Julia's phone to check his office's answering

tape. That day there was a message from Elsa. And when he thought of Julia, he always came back to that day, that message.

“Where were you today?” At the first sound of her voice, he remembered. He had missed Elsa’s appointment with the doctor. His immediate reaction had been annoyance. He had promised to go with her, because she was worried, but just now she was a bother. Elsa had requested that he go because she had a premonition. But how could he know the weight of that shadow? It had merely slipped his mind, and now there was her accusatory voice on his office phone. Julia had called and suggested that they go to her place. Why should such a flimsy thread as a worry tie him up?

But the substance overwhelmed the annoyance. “Where were you? Why didn’t you come with me? Call me. The doctor said I have to be screened for cancer immediately. I went to an oncology clinic in Wheaton. They indicate the preliminary results are looking serious. You can get me at their clinic - 301 373 4200 . . . If not, I’ll see you at home by 6:30.” He looked at his watch. 5:45p.m. Never had things changed so fast. Julia - Elsa - Julia, his junior by more than 20 years. Elsa, who when she had died of cancer, had been his wife of 13 years. How could he have known that Elsa’s worries were warranted? Over these many years, Marc’s feelings of remorse were relieved by the sweet memories of that pleasure-filled afternoon and his souvenir photo.

And then, soon, as Julia had advised on the phone, he fell asleep. In the chair in front of the TV. Without any answers to the disturbing question of the day: was the money gone?

CHAPTER 5: POSSIBILITIES

Spring passed to summer and the threats from Wall Street became known by all. Pink, yellow, and red roses gave way to orange-brown chrysanthemums on Tulip Avenue. Summer plants bemoaned the loss of warm weather. The bloom had gone from their stems. The yellow and white house that could have used a paint job in the spring, was revealing a heart of gray and brown, peeling and crying for care. Its gutter now dangled free toward the rear. The deterioration of both the house, and its inhabitant caught the somewhat troubled eye of his neighbor.

Banks were no longer unsinkable. The government no longer held evil at bay. In September other financial giants were falling. The large insurance company AIG looked like a goner. The night AIG was on the news, Frances could hear the professor screaming furiously at his TV. She even thought of dropping in to console him. But just then Sarah cut herself and Mother Frances was off to help another injured soul.

Most autumnal Saturdays, Takoma Park children were off on one or another of Montgomery County's sports teams; parents either cheered, coached, or did yard work. On just such a day, Frances was weeding and pruning when her eyes came upon Professor Buttervogel, sitting on his front steps. Unkempt, the dark maroon coffee cup in his hand was askew. A small puddle of coffee lay on the walk beneath him. The professor was softly moaning.

Instinctively, the social worker moved to salve the pain. "Good morning, Professor."

"Oh Frances." And then, after a pause, "You doing OK?"

"Sure, thanks. But you look a bit down in the mouth. Something wrong?"

"I've been better," was the easy answer said with a forced smile.

"Want to talk about it? Sometimes talking can help."

Marc took his time thinking about that. Absent to the moment, he wasn't focused on anything remotely within the neighborhood of Tulip Avenue. Slowly, he gathered himself together and did his best to respond in a friendly manner, "Me? I've got some serious problems now. But you seem OK. Your kids keep growing. Your yard is looking nice. Amazing how you work, raise your kids, and still have time to have the prettiest garden on the block.

Frances sat on the step next to her neighbor. "Want to tell me about the problems? It's my profession you know."

Marc looked at her and believed he saw some genuine interest. "I can't seem to get anything done. I feel frozen by fear. Just unable to move."

"What is it that's got you so fearful and stuck?"

"Oh, Frances. I don't know where to start. It's so hard to explain. I'm desperate . . . maybe terrified. I may go under. But this isn't a job for a social worker. Probably never was. I need a banker. No, a sugar daddy. A Rockefeller." Marc gained a tight, fleeting smile. As it dissolved, he added "I've lost everything. Just about everything."

"Oh, Marc – I am so sorry. But at least your pension and social security are safe."

"Pension? I don't have a pension, Frances. I had an IRA but it's gone. Remember Bear Stearns? I had an account there handled by a woman. When they went belly up, my account was transferred. But it's pretty much worthless now in any case."

“Oh goodness! How did that happen?”

“She cheated me.” As Marc uttered the words he knew they were false. That this blatant distortion was to be his public story surprised him. As when he once simplified his points for political rallies, he wondered at the fragility of truth. What happens to it? Where does it go? How easily correspondence to facts on the table can be abandoned.

As Marc wove in his fictions, his tone became more animated, more emphatic. He worked to suppress the reality he was holding captive. He shifted blame. “She invested everything in one kind of stock: banks, stuff like Citicorp, Countrywide, Bank of America, Bear Stearns, AIG. She did the whole thing. Some advisor! For a while I was doing great. Tripled my money. Things were going my way. I was about to retire my mortgage. You know. Everything’s changed. Now, I’ve lost it all.” The lies absolved him, let him retain his status, and gave him comfort.

He continued, “Here I am, 77, a philosopher. A philosopher with nothing to do. No one wants to hire a philosopher. I’ve been out of a class room so long, I couldn’t even teach at the community college. I could lose my house next month if I can’t pay my taxes or my mortgage. And then what’s going to happen to me? What if the next month I can’t buy food and meds? This is a throw away society, Frances. And I’m lost, ready to be tossed. Not even Walmart would hire old philosophers.” Marc grinned when he thought of that.

“Oh Marc! Let me give you a hug,” Frances offered. Through the coverings of fall outerwear, they embraced. He was expressing desperation, reaching out to her. And Frances was a social worker. Her kids were gone for the afternoon. So she did what she needed to do.

“Let’s brainstorm about this. Who knows, if we think this through, we could think of something. You aren’t alone. Lots of people are in trouble. We’ll be getting a new President. Maybe he’ll help too. If we can just get something working for a while. Let me fix us some coffee. We can sit and chat. See what we can come up with.”

And before he could even think about it, she got up, picked up her trowel, headed for her back door to fix some coffee and gestured for him to follow.

By the time the green wood-framed screen door had slammed twice, Marc was inside her tidy kitchen and the kettle was on. Frances busied herself getting out cups, a coffee filter, sugar, spoons, milk and coffee. With the cups out on the kitchen table, the coffee brewing, and the unexpected suggestion of help, Marc relaxed a bit. All the care and concern gave him pleasure. A peace similar to that gained by a mothered infant spread over him. His facial muscles visibly relaxed. Frances Bussa was doing what she was best at: salving another person’s wounds.

She poured the coffee and sat down. “Thanks, Frances. I needed this – a lot.”

“That’s what neighbors are for.”

“Well, you, anyhow.”

“So let’s figure out what to do, Marc. It can’t be as hard as some of those philosophical puzzles you worked out. Where should we start?”

Those innocent words of his neighbor hit hard. Marc knew overcoming his financial losses wouldn’t be at all like solving philosophical problems. Solving this mess would be far more difficult than analyzing the sorts of philosophical problems he had played with. Philosophers in his fields

don't find solutions: they write discursive paragraphs about how to look at problems. Nothing really needs to fit, to work.

A political philosopher only needs a soupçon of originality and a social era that resonates with his bottom line. What was it Kahneman said? "We have the illusion that we can predict the future because it is so easy to explain the past?" The philosopher needs what one's friends label as 'brilliance' and 'relevance.' With but a few friends one can slough off one's foes who might point to 'narrow minded analytical flaws.'

But Marc wasn't worried about the criticism of philosophical opponents now: it was the potential pit of failure and poverty that had grabbed his attention. No points would be given for bright ideas that didn't solve real problems now. Marc needed something to work. Anyhow, what success did he ever have in philosophy? He hadn't even published. Marc's desperation was real, not philosophical. Its immediate manifestation was all about money.

Putting the warm cup between his palms slowly helped him displace these thoughts, agree with Frances and reach out for all the help he could get.

"OK. Perhaps. We can try. Maybe I can think my way out of this. I've even got the help of my own professional social worker now," he added. They both smiled.

Sipping the coffee, he continued, "You know, this was my second big financial debacle: you'd think I'd have learned some. Seems like my stepfather was right when he said, I'm too stupid to be in finance."

"Why'd he say such a cruel thing?"

"Who knows, maybe he was prescient."

"Were your parents divorced?"

"No, my dad was killed in World War II. I can remember clearly how he left."

"That must be a painful memory. But I do wonder why your stepfather would say you couldn't do finance."

Marc studied the grain in the wooden table. Frances said nothing, knowing the silence could coax out more of his story. After a long pause, he continued, "My stepfather was called Jake. He was a stock broker. He had his own company. He never liked us. They had another kid, Michael. Michael became his business partner. Jake used to say, 'Thank God your brother has more sense.' My stepfather never could understand or forgive me for being angry. When he died, his company was worth millions. I mean millions, but it was all put in some legal hair-ball. No one got it except Michael; he's 15 years younger than me. We've hardly spoken since my stepfather died. I guess the last time we were face to face was at my sister's funeral."

"What a story; I am so sorry Marc!" And again, in keeping with her social worker roots, she stood up to give Marc a hug, but it failed as Marc stayed seated, and given the angle of her reach she ended embracing his head against her belly and bosom. "It must have been very painful – being so disrespected," she said, sitting back down.

"I guess. His judgements keep playing over in my mind. Always did. I can't forget how he never told me I was OK. Neither me nor my sister. That's my story. I remember coming home after I got my PhD. I thought he'd congratulate me. But all he said was, 'Better save it, Buddy. It'll give you something to wipe your ass with, cause you sure aren't gonna afford toilet paper.' We

never did get along. Sorry I talked so long - and we didn't even start figuring how to fix the situation. How did we even get to this subject, Frances?"

"I asked you about why he said you wouldn't make it in finance." Surprised that she had opened such a gusher, she wondered nervously how to move on. Looking at her bright yellow round kitchen clock, Frances was startled by the time. She had kids to pick up, things to tend to, and here was Marc ready to open yet another chapter. "Oh Lord, it's already 5:30. I was supposed to pick up the kids 15 minutes ago. Well, this is a start. Let's both mull this over. Tomorrow's Sunday; we can continue this tomorrow. I'll call you. Sorry, I've got to run. Sit and finish your coffee. Then just let yourself out the back door. Be sure to push the button so it locks. Call me tonight if you get desperate." She grabbed her keys, and headed out.

"Thanks," Marc yelled after her. "I feel much better, really. I'll take you up on the offer to chat tomorrow - and I'll try to come up with some ideas tonight."

"Great, gotta run now," and Frances was gone in a flash.

Marc picked up the cups, coffee pot and filter and put them in the sink. Cleaning them was hardly more than a tiny gesture of gratitude. He thought of writing a small thank you note and leaving it on the table. As he turned on the water, he noticed a nice small silver platter in the sink. He carefully put everything in the rack, dried his hands, and picked up the platter. He turned it over. Two words: "Sterling" "Whiting." Very ornate handles. Nice piece. Not new. Fleeting he thought of slipping it under his shirt; here would be some easy money, possibly a month's expenses.

But the idea was absurd. He couldn't do that. Frances was all he had – his neighbor for more than 10 years. What was he thinking? He sat down and wrote that simple thank you note with a sincerity that Frances would never know. Marc locked the door and crossed the yard.

CHAPTER 6: DINNERS

With renewed hope, Marc shuffled through the fallen leaves, across the driveway and into his yard. The faint chance of redemption energized him sufficiently to gather up some of the unharvested newspapers that had accumulated over the past weeks. Throwing the old, faded, and wet ones in the big blue county recycling box, he brought in a dry, and perhaps current, *Post* to read over dinner.

As always, the small TV was on inside the kitchen. Like the TV, dinner's locale was invariant: the drop-leaf kitchen table with its one repainted spindle chair. These days the meal consisted of microwaved left over beans, a cut up hot dog, and a piece of bread. Once all was ready on his plate, he unfolded the paper and glanced at the front page headlines. There was a violent uprising in Bolivia, more violence between Hamas and Fatah, and a bailout of yet another company. A Senate aide was being accused of bribery. Turning the paper over, below the fold: a feature regarding the mortgage crisis and the economic meltdown. Marc didn't get beyond the headlines. His mind returned to the conversation he had with Frances. Why had he told Frances that Julia, the manager of his investments, had cheated him. Was he ashamed that he had made the decisions?

Julia Burnham, who had been his last great fling. Hadn't he told himself that story and rejected it earlier? And how did he come to tell his neighbor about his step-father? Where had that come from?

His beans were getting cold. He turned back to the paper and the article on the economic meltdown. But reading just the introductory paragraph put him back in his memories. What a mistake it had been to let Julia manage his finances! How could he have thought she would be his best bet? He had gone back to her, after Elsa died: to do what? To go to bed with her again? That didn't happen. She had moved on, was married. How could he have chosen her to handle his investments: she wasn't even smart enough to do well in that course. Why did he pick her as his advisor? Was it because he knew that he could assert his avaricious goals without getting ridiculed?

Marc breathed deeply and tried to refocus on the here and now. But all he perceived were the echoes of his step-father's words. "Incapable. Incompetent. Lazy." And it was all true: Marc never even balanced a checking account. While she was alive, Elsa paid the bills. The extent of Marc's great financial gifts was earning some small salaries, and even that required the help of Elsa. She used her job at the Pentagon to secure the research grants that sustained him and got him tenure - all without publications. Even then, he spent more than he earned. Perpetually out of balance, his bank made the price of doing business the cost of never-ending fees.

He let it go, and picked at his beans. Regarding the kitchen table he was sitting at, he noticed a resemblance of it to his mother's table. She had that ratty old oil cloth on the table. His was painted. Many coats, all showing through the many chips of paints. But the shape: that was the same. The sudden recognition of the coincidence led him to open boxes he had long held shut in his mind. His fork idly pushed the beans back and forth on the plate. His Mom's kitchen table must have been left behind when they moved to Mulberry Street. Mulberry Street. What a change. That's where everything fell apart. And as he sat hundreds of miles south, and thousands of days away, a door in his mind opened, long lost details came back into focus. Marc was transfixed, reentering his past reliving those moments.

“Just after high school graduation, we celebrated our draft exempt status: none of us were going to fight in Korea. Who was with me? We had some drinks at a bar. Where was that place? It was dark. I remember the long bar. I left. They stayed. It was a boisterous goodbye. I walked home. At the front door of that old building I fished for my key. Inside, there was that small vestibule. The mail boxes were all buried in the wall – on the right. I could see our box, 7E, wasn’t empty but I didn’t pick up the mail. I heard faint screaming, but it didn’t mean anything. No alarm went off in my head. It was just some family’s argument in some apartment upstairs.”

“Entering the lobby, the ruckus got louder. I paid it no mind. I pressed the button for the elevator. The elevator doors were clad in embossed tarnished brass. Inside, the din from the machine’s mechanics masked the screaming. The elevator ascended and the sounds of screaming from above amplified and became identifiable. I recognized the voices of my stepfather, my sister, Michael, and my mother. Realizing that transformed the elevator into a slow moving trap. The elevator held me captive, impotent. On the seventh floor the doors opened. I tumbled out, turned left and raced down the dark corridor.”

“Jake and Melissa are arguing. Michael, my much younger half-brother is wailing. Moans come from the only person left, my mother. I bang on the door. No one comes to unlock it. I fumble with the key. It takes forever to get the fucking door open. And then, there is my family.”

“There’s the short front hall. At the end of it, there’s my mother on the floor, holding her hands over her head. I can’t hear what my stepfather was yelling. He is kicking her. Melissa dives toward Mom to protect her and yells at Jake from the floor. ‘Stop! Stop! Don’t kick her!’ ”

“Jake follows her instructions and delivers the next kick to Melissa. He goes to kick her again. No one notices me. But then I am between my sister and Jake. I am completely calm and resolute. I say, ‘Go ahead, you bastard: kick my sister again. I’ll kill you.’ I clearly want him to kick her one more time. I want to kill him. The surety of my threat took him aback.”

“Jake turned his face quickly to me. He was red with fury. I was the new enemy. It seemed forever, but slowly, he backed off a few inches. Then he turned toward the front door and threatened, ‘Don’t be here when I get back, you son of a bitch!’

“The door slams. I turn toward Mom. She is still on the floor but she slowly sits up. She says nothing. Then I hear Michael’s cries, from off in the far corner of the living room. I have no idea how much time passes. Then Mom says, ‘Marc, you shouldn’t have interfered.’ ”

“ ‘Mom, you’re fucking crazy!’ screams Melissa, who is now sitting up but on the floor. ‘You have to get out of here. We all do.’ ”

“Mom is lost. Beaten. I look for bruises on her but don’t see any. Bruises can take a while to show up. I’ve seen her beaten before, but never down on the floor after an attack.”

“ ‘My god, my god. Are you alright Melissa?’ ” Mom asks.

“ ‘Yes, of course. We have to leave, Mom.’ ”

“But Mom is lost there on the floor, like flotsam on the waves, tossed, broken. No direction. I see her slowly pulling herself from the edge. After another long pause, during which she stayed on the floor, without moving, she adds hesitatingly, ‘I don’t know. There’s Michael too. And, he is my husband. I don’t know’ ”

“I interjected, ‘Mom, you are insane. You have to leave. You have to gather up Melissa and Michael. Get up! Let’s leave!’ ”

“Where would I go? This is my house. My family. He is my husband.”

“Mom, he’ll kill you. If not today, some other day.”

“You don’t know him. You were always angry. You never gave him a chance.”

“What are you talking about, Mom? I heard the screaming in the elevator and ran in here and saw what was going on.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Melissa sits up, bug-eyed, shocked. Michael wails louder. I help my sister get up. I check to see if there are bad bruises. There are a few, but she isn’t bleeding.”

“I’m taking you out of here, Melissa.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll figure that out when we are out of here. Mom, give us money for the bus.”

“I don’t have any.”

“You must.”

“I don’t, a fact I quickly verify by looking in her purse.”

“We’re leaving, Mom. We’ll let you know we are OK. You should come too, but even if you don’t, we are.”

The intensity of the memory declined. Emerging partially from his mind, Marc slipped some beans into his mouth. Then some bread as he recalled the end of the saga. He remembered grabbing some clothing from his sister’s bureau, and his own, and leaving the apartment. He recalled that Melissa said she could walk, and they went down the stairs to a neighbor. With Melissa under his arm, they searched for a safe place to stay. They asked if they could stay at the neighbor. Melissa started to bleed from bruises on her cheek, and then her lip. The neighbors gave the two of them some bandages, but not shelter. Marc asked for money to get a bus and they got to their grandmother’s. She was shocked by how Melissa looked, and was surprised to see them at her door so late at night. She let them stay the night but called her daughter to tell her we were there. The next morning Marc’s mother picked them up. They were back at Mulberry Street.

Mulberry Street. Melissa. Michael. Melissa, now dead. Michael, a half-brother disowned so long ago. Marc sat there stilled by the shards of memory. All appetites gone, he looked at his plate. He rose, scraped the cold food left on his plate into the trash, and put his plate in the sink.

The next afternoon, Marc found himself continuing the conversation with Frances. She sat facing the window so she could observe her children in the yard. Again, there was coffee.

“Tell me once more, what happened? You have a financial advisor and you were telling me about her. You had said she didn’t do things right for you.”

“Right. Julia. She did real well for awhile. But she invested all my money in one kind of company - those big financial institutions. They looked safe to me.”

“All in financials?”

“Well, almost all.”

“Unbelievable. Even I know the first rule is diversify.”

“Well, I guess it’s better to know the rules before the barn door’s left open and the cow has wandered out,” he acknowledged, with a self-deprecating smile. He added, “She’s guilty as hell. I bet she ruined lots of people.”

“Let’s hope not,” answered Frances seriously. “But I’m glad to see you can smile about it. That’s healthy. But what are you going to do? You are going to need to make some money.” But Marc wasn’t responding. “Marc, are you OK?”

“Sorry, my mind wandered. I’ve got so many things I can’t seem to do. You were saying I’ll need to make some money? Probably so. But I can’t even figure out how I am going to pay for things.”

“I guess there are two sides to that problem. Your budget and your income. Your budget will have to get in line with reality,” she said. “Start with income. If you can earn some we’ll have less of a budget problem. So, tell me - what do you think you can do to earn money? We’ll write down a list. What can you do?”

“I can write. But think of all the writers the newspapers are firing. I can’t compete with them.”

“Well, what else? Any handiwork?”

“Like what?”

“You know, plumbing, carpentry, electric?”

“Me? Plumbing, electrical? The philosopher plumber? I never met a philosopher who could use a hammer, much less a wrench. If they could, why would they become philosophers? And I am certainly not the exception that proves that rule. By the way, that is one of the more bizarre aphorisms. How can an exception prove a rule?”

“I’m not going into a philosophical swamp here. We’re looking for money,” she pushed doggedly ahead. “No practical skills?”

“Not that I, nor anyone I ever knew, noticed. But I was a pretty good teacher.”

“What can you teach?”

“Philosophy.”

“Not much of a market for that, I’d think. Nothing else?”

“Well, certainly not plumbing.”

Frances sipped her coffee and watched her kids out the window. After a pause she brightened up, “Wait, didn’t you help me once with the kids’ computer. Didn’t you install some kind of software to protect it? And if you wrote a lot, you must know how to use a word processor.”

“Sure. All the time. Any word processor.”

“So you’re good with Word?”

“Better than Shakespeare with a pen!” They laughed together and clinked coffee cups in a victory sign.

“So you can know some word processing and can do a bit more on PCs than play around with word processors.”

“Yeah, I can do simple things: I once even installed a memory chip. I know how to run some simple tests using Norton, and stuff built into Windows. But so what?”

“Perhaps you could teach classes on computer skills, say for elderly residents in assisted living situations?”

“Aren’t there a whole bunch of people in that market already?”

“Maybe. Maybe so.”

“I could do house calls.”

“To teach about computer use?”

“If needed, or to help. Or to do simple things with their computers for people who aren’t so good at it.”

“Like the Geek Squad?”

“Yeah sort of. I guess they are already established. I would need an angle to find people who need help. How could I do that? I mean the Geek Squad has a name, a cachet, they are known.”

“Well, Marc, I think I might be able to help here. Would you want to do that, if it could bring in some income?”

“Sure, anything that I can do to help me get through these rough spots.”

“Well then, we have a start. Now, I have to get my kids to their friend’s house for a birthday party, but we will plan this out. Things will improve.” And with this Frances picked up her mug and the two raised their mugs for a second time with a sense that victory was at hand.

Surprised by the progress made in such a short time, when the two stood, Marc quite spontaneously and gratefully embraced her in a hug before going out into the fall afternoon.

That evening, Frances was feeling like a pig in mud. With all her energy focused on someone else’s problems she was like a prospector who had just found the mother lode. For years she had developed this side of her being. By now it was her strongest suit.

Dinner was the usual hodge-podge of left overs and macaroni spiced with lively child oriented banter.

“I spent the afternoon with our neighbor Professor Marc,” was Frances’ opener for sharing with the progeny.

“I don’t like him,” Sarah remarked, carefully tipping her glass so she could observe little rivulets of milk flow onto the table.

“He’s weird,” added Christopher.

“Don’t spill your milk,” began the maternal rejoinder. She continued, “He is having some trouble and he asked me to help.”

“Why do you always help everyone?” asked Sarah.

“It’s my job.”

“Professor Marc isn’t your job, Mom. He’s our neighbor,” Christopher observed.

“Maybe I help everyone because of a story my grandmother told me.”

“Tell us Grandma’s story!”

“Not your Grandma. Mine. That’s your great - grandma. You never knew her. Her name was Anna.”

“Tell us Anna’s story.”

“Grandma Anna was old, and couldn’t walk. She had a wheelchair, and I ...”

“Was it electric, like those scooters?” Christopher wanted to know.

“No, power wheelchairs weren’t available to most people until really recently.”

“So how did they move around?”

“Well, Grandma Anna could move her wheels with her arms, but I used to push her wheelchair when I visited. I’d push her close to the window, and together we’d look out at the trees in the yard and watch the children on the street. At the window, Grandma told me lots of stories of her life. She grew up in Italy. Each story had a moral.”

“What’s a moral?” asked Sarah.

“A lesson, stupid,” added Christopher.

“When Grandma Anna was young, she had three long-haired dachshunds she loved dearly. One nice afternoon in summer, her parents let her drive the family car, for the first time, by her self. So she drove a friend and the three dogs to the zoo.”

“When am I going to drive?” demanded Christopher.

“When are we going to get a dog?”

“Or go to the zoo?”

“You can’t drive till you are allowed to when you are much bigger, Christopher. And Sarah, I told you many times, I am really allergic to dogs. Now, let me finish the story. Dogs weren’t allowed in the zoo, so Grandma Anna and her friend left them in the car. They watched the monkeys and had coffee and ice cream. They felt very grown up and had a long afternoon filled with fun. But when they got back to the car, the three dachshunds were dead because it had gotten so hot in the car. Grandma Anna felt terrible. She loved her dogs. And she told me that she learned from that to never underestimate your responsibility for others.”

“You help others because your Grandma Anna’s dogs died in a car in Italy?” Christopher asked skeptically.

Frances had revered her Nanna’s stories even more than her grandmother had loved Frances’ frequent visits. For years, she had accepted this story as her motivating mantra. Certainly other super-heroes must have had similar motivating legacies. With Nanna’s story in mind, Frances understood herself as abandoning pleasurable engagements to exercise what became unending responsibilities.

This was the Force that Frances had brought to Vera when she had been resistant. Helping her get support was a big pick-me-up, a wonderful success. And so it would be again with poor Marc who had overcome such a dysfunctional family to achieve so much: a professorship in philosophy. Marc, whom she imagined to contain such deep ethical concerns that he had devoted his life to teaching people how to be ethical. Of course she could, she would, help.

Since Frances could only understand her son's disbelief as immaturity, she answered, "Eat up your dinner, boy. Some day you will understand." And she got up to go to the sink. Without real purpose, she poured herself some water and sat back down.

"Let me tell you what happened with Professor Marc." Christopher and Sarah Bussa were often the audience for weekend reruns of Super Mom Saves the World. But after the birthday party, at dinner, this Sunday, they encountered a new episode. They found that Mom had been working to save a very local corner of the world: that old guy next door who turned out his lights and locked his door on Halloween. The plot was developed rapidly:

Poor Professor Marc had lost almost all his money. He could lose his house! Christopher quickly calculated that this could lead to a new and friendlier neighbor who would open the door and give him a bigger stash during trick or treat at the end of the month. But Mom was going down a different path; she was focused on saving the old man.

"Can I get some more macaroni?" came Christopher's unexpected station break.

"Me too!" as Sarah took advantage of the pause in the programming.

"Sure. Be careful not to burn yourself, Christopher! The pot is hot. Help Sarah!" intoned Super Mom herself. And then, after a pause, "What should I do?"

"For what?"

"For Marc, I told you. Oh, by the way, Christopher, I had to get a new cell phone yesterday."

"Cool, can I try it?"

"I haven't had a chance to work it yet. It's complicated."

"I'll show you how, I can do all those."

"Me too," chimed in Sarah.

"Professor Marc is good at those things too. He was saying he could make money doing that. But he needed to figure out how to get his name known by people so he can market his services."

"Let me try the cell phone."

"Me too."

"Eat your macaroni."

"Marconi didn't have to eat all his macaroni," was her son's smart-ass comment.

"Who's Marconi?" asked his sister.

"He must have been able to fix phones too, he's old like Professor Marcaroni."

"Who are we talking about?" asked Frances, innocently.

“The professor. Marcaroni macaroni.” And an historian, had one been present, would have been able to identify that moment as the tipping point. Dinner was deteriorating. Even Frances could sense it.

“Don’t play with your marcaroni, Christopher.” And Sarah laughed so hard the macaroni flew out of her mouth onto her brother’s shirt.

“Slob. Stop messing me up. Mom, Sarah spat marconi on my plate.”

“Stop it, both of you!”

“But Mom said ‘Eat your marcaroni.’” And dinner, as a formal family moment was over. “Who’s Marconi?”

“My marconi’s gonna be all over your face!” announced Christopher. Giggling all around, and macaroni beginning to spill on surfaces meant to stay clean.

“No, you know what I meant. Who is Marconi?”

“He helped invent the radio,” said Frances as she began to pick up the singular cheesy macaroni bits that were now randomly scattered on the table and even on the floor.

“That’s a cold name, Bro. How’d you know about him?”

“I read a book.”

“Awesome. Names are boss,” generalized Sarah.

Suddenly Christopher rose to the occasion. He would help his favorite super-hero and also become part of history. “I know names, Mom. And what old Professor Marcaroni needs is a name so people would remember him!” And even as he said it, he knew Halloween at 104 wouldn’t change. But he was on a roll and unstoppable.

Eventually, the kids went to bed and Frances called Marc. Together they developed the idea: he could do house calls for people with IT troubles. Frances knew plenty of elderly, and could even recommend him as a helper. Marc, who might have had more of an impact on history as a salesman than as a philosopher, thought of the moniker “Dr. IT,” and the slogan “Dr. IT Makes IT Happen with House Calls!” Frances told him that the big Kinko’s just a mile down East-West Highway, did nice work on business cards, and a marketing plan was born on the phone.

CHAPTER 7: MIRRORS AND MEMORIES

Hearing Frances's voice that afternoon, the possible felt plausible. The plausible seemed probable. And the future was there for him to mold. But it was night now and the exuberance of the afternoon was disappearing. Sitting in his underwear in his bedroom, Marc was reflected in the mirror hanging on the inside panel of his open closet door. The bed side lamp left him in a dim, yellowish twilight. As he hung up the phone, and was left alone seeing only his reflection, the bulb flickered and a cold shadow of Marc's desperation scampered across his eyes, replacing the fleeting moment of hope. Such heavy shoulders and in the middle - a face with no smile, only the wrinkles of age, reflecting the long etched frown of disappointment between cheeks showing the stubble of sloth.

How old he was. How bent. How beaten. Hunched over, he saw his right sock, the only one still left on his feet. Its most noteworthy feature was the hole around his big toe. Through that window emerged a toe bent by arthritis, a nail yellowed by age and messily cut because of his deteriorating flexibility. Another old person's foot on the left too. The paint around the mirror was cracking, and had begun to peel.

Hanging up the phone had rekindled his sense of abandonment. His mind drifted through unsorted earlier desertions. The chill of the October evening, ran from his gnarled, yellow feet to his crotch. This well worn trajectory for Marc's shivers now brought him back to another cold day, some 30 years earlier, containing a hint of possible infidelity. In the next moment he was recollecting Elsa's face. The face that came to mind wasn't the beautiful, happy face he embraced when they first met. Nor was it the emaciated hairless one she died with. Elsa had hair, long and tantalizing, but her smile was replaced by a jaw set in anger and alienation.

It was soon after Reagan thrashed Carter. His friend Charlie, Professor Domingo, had slipped him a copy of Gogol's stories over what seemed a collegial coffee on campus. Ever since, those stories threatened to amplify any wintry chill. Gogol's portrait of the old man left freezing when his coat is stolen. Gogol's sarcasm regarding the man deserted by his nose. Especially that - *The Nose*. Handing the paperback to Marc, Charlie had laughed about the comic immediacy of *The Nose*. He had said "Read it. It's a chuckle. And you won't believe all you can learn - all you can imagine."

But Marc found nothing comic in Gogol. Was Charlie trying to warn him? Charlie was dating a guy who worked in the Pentagon with Elsa. Marc had read those stories in a frigid January in Takoma Park in their Flower Avenue condo. Elsa was coming home very late those days and the two of them were going through a rough patch. Cold and desperation frequented those memories much as the smell of madeleines did for Proust. After putting down *The Nose*, he had walked from his home along icy streets to Sligo Creek. Recent floods had generated a path of frozen puddles: choppy surfaces of ice. As he carefully sought his footing, he wondered what the nose symbolized.

Of course, for any object to become a symbol it needs illumination to throw shadows along the path of our mind's wanderings. The irregular angles of the walls of Marc's mind insured the illuminations cast shadows at rakish angles. So it came that Gogol's nasal detachment cast just such apparitions for Marc. In the chill of that day, his crotch felt cold, and he had suddenly imagined his penis had been severed. How could the razor of the poor barber's dream become the scalpel for the removal of the philosopher's penis? The fear felt unreasonable but real at the same time. That, of

course, only delayed further worries. What was Charlie trying to tell him that early day in 1981? Seeds for a nightmare were planted. Seeds fertilized by a lack of knowledge, a dearth of information. Gogol's nose appeared in parties in high society, in appropriate attire. Marc envisioned his penis being paraded around the Pentagon. There it was, erect in a full dress uniform, highly decorated, saluted by the clerks and the colonels and being paraded into a conference room where Cap Weinberger was pontificating about the attraction of evil. He had never been able to put these nightmares to rest.

How cold. How alone. How powerless and ignorant and how ignorance breeds suspicion. Now the abandonment he felt after Frances hung up the phone pulled him out toward the cold again: returned him to the banks of that frozen creek in 1981. But Marc fought back to regain the here and now. And with effort he forced Gogol to return to the shelf that held him. But though it took a terrible effort taming Gogol did not calm him.

Instead he focused on his inadequate preparation for this new career, his skimpy knowledge of PCs. Elsa had force fed him technology. With her job in the Pentagon, she had to learn all about computers. At first, he had been totally dependent upon Elsa. But before she died, she had pushed him to learn about word processing and even email. By now, his expertise, if we were to call it that, stretched to the Windows XP frontier. And XP was already two generations gone. He had to learn more. But Elsa was no longer here. There wasn't even a photo of her in the bedroom. There was only that old, small photo of his father next to the mirror.

It was as if, because he knew how to make a salad, he was being pushed to open a restaurant. How could he succeed? It was madness. Of course, he knew most problems were solved by rebooting. And he would be working with the elderly. Maybe tomorrow he'd go to Kinko's but first, he'd better go to the library and see if there were one of those yellow and black 'Dummies' books that could help him.

Now however, he needed sleep. So much had happened; so much had been lost, any promise of a new start, any new roll of the dice should have been welcome. But any feelings of relief were overwhelmed by foreboding. Marc realized that he would have to do something. Whether any action by him really had a chance to right his ship was another question. He turned up the heater in the cold room, turned out the light, and tried to get to sleep.

Sleep did not come easily now that Elsa was buzzing about again. Marc's mind was a walk-in closet of memories. Once in, he could lose himself among the many items there. And now, he stumbled upon a memory of an early meeting of Elsa. She had been the frequent subject of humor and gossip over lunch and coffee among the department's faculty. She had come to Cornell to specialize in logic and the philosophy of language. Events transpired to interrupt her plans. First, Professor Smallwood declared she had absolutely no gift in logic. According to faculty banter she had anticipated Professor Smallwood's devastating evaluation. As Smallwood's secretary put it, when he asked Elsa to make an appointment, "Elsa considered her clothing with care. She wore a white, lacy blouse with the top two buttons open, and applied a drop of perfume between her breasts. But even with all that preparation, Elsa could not successfully persuade the professor."

Then the Department lost its last great player in the field of linguistic metaphysics. Elsa refocused. Following the path of so many lesser talented souls who abandon the high peaks, she hoped to ascend the gentler slopes of ethics and political philosophy. At Cornell, in the early 70's this meant crossing the threshold of Marc's many cartooned door.

Elsa often shared her memories of that decision, and how she planned for the meeting. On that day, in need of a victory, she was satisfied with her strategic analysis of the situation. She smiled when, approaching Marc's closed office door, she saw the caricatures of Lyndon Johnson as the devil incarnate. Someone had told her the path to Marc's good graces was political agreement. To mix her strategies, she had taken care to costume herself a bit like Jane Fonda. She knocked precisely in the center of the "Peace NOW!" bumper sticker affixed at an angle below the name 'Professor Buttervogel.' Her life path was altered as surely as if she were to have enlisted.

Tossing and turning, stewing about his soured marriage with Elsa, fretting about missed opportunities, and worrying about his current financial condition demanded a high price from Professor Buttervogel that night. Dawn didn't promise better. He awoke to find his sheets balled up and damp with his night's demons, wrestling, and sweat. Putting on his clothing, the mirror repeated the visions of defeat and despair. Breakfast did not inspire. NPR began with unintelligible mumbling about things in Europe and China. Marc's coffee helped morph those mumbles from noise to speech. Russians were claiming interference by Georgia. China's free speech zones were a ruse.

Marc waited for news about the markets. What would the millions of anonymous stock holders do this week? Would they restore some equilibrium, or would they keep his safety net in tatters? The economy's spiraling into a black hole generated a permanent sentence of poverty for Marc. Would this sentence prove painful and slow or mercifully fast and lethal? Marc developed his fear of suffering early in life. It was congealed in his earliest memories. Why should the markets give him a reprise when his own family didn't? But now, listen: The speaker is some government spokesman. He is saying the markets are about to stabilize. No one should panic. The President is on top of this. Things can be expected to improve. But how can he trust Bush?

He turned off the radio. He was left with Frances' plan to keep him afloat in some minimal fashion. He would follow it; he would go to the library, and then to Kinko's. He could, indeed he would, rebuild his future. After putting his dishes in the sink, looking at the clock (it was already past ten), and taking the ritual after breakfast stops to take his morning medicines, brush his many-capped teeth, and do his morning habituals, Marc left with new found determination, even if without any real optimism.

It was a gentle downhill walk to the library. One of the blessings of his address on Tulip was that he could go to the library without passing through the corridor of low income housing. That neighborhood always gave him concerns of being accosted, victimized, terrorized. Under the multi-colored maple trees holding on to the last of their fall foliage, Mark started to revive. But a few steps more and the colored leaves weren't enough to hold his attention.

He liked the neighborhood library much more than the University's. Marc hadn't visited the University since retiring some nine years earlier. His career had been humiliating. Going back would only call forth bad memories, especially of the many years after Elsa stopped working: years during which he never got another grant. That record underscored that he had never published. It insured that he never again got a merit raise. It confirmed his professional identity as enabled by nepotistic efforts of his wife: a woman he regularly and easily cheated on. Now it seemed that the markets merely were dealing out justice for those indiscretions and easy pleasures.

The low slung brick library was a throwback to basic 1950's cheap public sector modern. The glass paneled aluminum doors with their wide push rods and their redundant signs of gold lettering

on black background insisting “push” opened easily. Marc was in. The librarian was an attractive bleached blonde. He focused on the cut of her blouse: a thin blue fabric with décolleté. The shape of her breasts reminded him of Julia. Pushing aside his financial ruminations he asked her where he could find computer books. Without even trying to meet his eyes that were still perusing the horizon of the plunging blue neck line, she told him, “Look in adult non-fiction, or, if you prefer, use the computerized catalogue.”

“Could you show me how to do that?” he responded. But she didn’t bite; the blouse was bait for younger game. And so his convoluted thoughts led him to vow to call Julia when he finished his tasks.

He walked off alone toward the few computers that sat idle on the long wooden table in the center of the big hall. While walking, he turned to look at the large room, with its many stacks of books. Most professors, young or emeritus, would feel at home in this setting. But he never had enjoyed libraries. He didn’t love books. Marc never just went into a library to savor a page in an old favorite volume. He never went to a shelf of a favorite author to see what he had missed. How he had chosen to be a ‘scholar’ didn’t fit any of the narratives; no one would call his life planning rational.

He had majored in history to understand why his father had to die. But the answers of historians didn’t satisfy, and he ended up taking a philosophy course. Professor Black’s course in ethics gave him tools to analyze injustices he had felt. The emergent struggles of the 60’s demonstrated others had suffered injustice – perhaps even more than he had. Then Vietnam, and the draft, once again brought to the fore the memories of his father, and pushed him into political activism. Marc came to see himself as a leader for all those students who, like him, had suffered. He was most at home at the rallies and in the classroom. This picture of himself as a teacher and political leader never included a place for himself as scholar; it wasn’t part of his motivation.

There was a sign saying “Adult: Non Fiction.” He didn’t want to use the computer anyhow. A few stacks later, were the shelves laden with computer books. And there were the paperbacks with the familiar black and yellow “Dummies” pattern. He was self scoring himself by passing up some of the other, fatter books that seemed to have less light-hearted fonts on their spines. If he was to start this honestly, he would have to admit his own level: Dummies it was. So many titles, where to start: “The Internet for Dummies,” “Access 97 for Windows for . . .,” “Windows 98 for . . .,” “Web Page Design for . . .,” “Creating Web Pages for . . .,” “Ebay for . . .,” “Google for . . .,” “Word 2000 for Windows for . . .”. He reached for two volumes and looked for a comfortable place to sit and read. The cartoons introducing the chapters distracted him. Printed on a gray page, they were easy to turn to without wasting time in the table of contents. Soon, however, he was nodding off, as page after page of trivial information floated by him without any real hooks to store in his memory.

Fighting sleep, he stood up. He walked back to the blue draped blonde, asked her for a pencil and some paper for some notes. She gave him a cheap ball point and some scrap paper. Returning to his seat, he wrote a list: “1) reboot; 2) rescue disk; 3) backup.” Flipping through the pages, it didn’t take long for him to be yawning again, and he was back on his feet. He drifted to the computers, the internet, and NYTimes.com

Gone were the words of comfort from the ‘government spokespersons.’ Markets were down again. What was he thinking when he made those investments? How could he have imagined that Julia would steer him clear of the dangers? But he couldn’t do it by himself either. He didn’t have a

good enough understanding of numbers. He couldn't even balance his check book. Wallowing in self-deprecation, he sat immobilized staring at the stock symbols and their prices.

His mind moved from one thing to the next: the fear engendered by the markets going down, the doubts regarding his venture into computers, and the need to get his financial advisor to understand his fears. He decided to check out two of the 'Dummy' books, and head to Kinko's. The walk would go by Julia's office and give him the opportunity to tell her how worried he was.

The thought of telling her his worries made him more optimistic. "She's my advisor – and my friend. She'll listen. After that I'll go to Kinko's." He picked up the books, went to the checkout desk, and left the library. A cold breeze had kicked in, and the sun was obscured by a dull gray mass of clouds. He immediately felt chilled. Zipping up his jacket, he headed into the wind, and the falling leaves. Soon he was in the center of the suburban downtown of Silver Spring. Wide sidewalks, surrounded by failing Mom and Pop stores. Multistoried buildings with offices of banks, accountants, lawyers, some with small shops and franchise outlets on the ground floors.

The Everett Building had a marble exterior on the ground floor, aluminum vertical lines that went up to glassed in windows on cubicles above, and five inch bronzed lettering on a blackened background on the marble: "**Julia Burnham Lambert, Financial Advisor.**" Inside it was warmer. He felt sure that this visit would turn out well, even though he felt a bit ridiculous carrying the two "For Dummies" books. After all, Julia would be happy to see him. He took the elevator up to the fourth floor. Suite 406 had the same sign on the door as he had seen at the street level.

Marc immediately noticed the new receptionist: a lithe, handsome man perhaps in his late thirties. He was dressed in a fashionably tailored gray suit with navy pinstripes and a red and white tie on a navy shirt. He could have stepped out of a fashion advertisement. "How can we help you?" he immediately queried although to all appearances there were no others present to pluralize the singular.

"My name is Marc, that's with a 'c', Buttervogel. I am a client of Julia. I don't have an appointment, but I was in the neighborhood and came in to discuss some aspects of my financial portfolio with her."

"Certainly. Let me just check if Julia is free," Nameless responded. He then disappeared through a door. Some light hearted mumbling leaked out to the reception area. A bit of laughter. A pause. The door opened and Nameless returned with a smile. "Marc, was it? Well, Julia seems to have her hands full and will be having to step out for a luncheon conference and then to pick up her children. Perhaps it would be better to make an appointment. Why don't you call us when you are at your calendar?" Marc was too embarrassed to explain that he didn't need a calendar. As he left he knew he had to pee, but couldn't bring himself to ask if he could use the bathroom. Leaving the Everett building, he walked the half block north, went into the McDonald's and entered the men's room. In front of the urinal he reached for his fly, and found it hadn't been closed. So they were laughing at him: the burnt out old man and his open fly. He peed.

CHAPTER 8: TURNING POINTS

Marc zipped up his fly, and thought about the morning. He didn't have the fortitude to go on to Kinko's. The whole project dissolved under the weight of the ridicule he suffered. Leaving the men's room, he entered the overly bright, artificially cheery cathedral of American fast food. He blankly focused on the kid's menu with its picture of the Ronald McDonald clown. He chose a table, but without any purchase he knew he'd be there only a moment. His undoing at Julia's office took the starch out of his resolution.

The walk home seemed far longer and colder than the one that had brought him downtown. Walking down Tulip toward his home he stopped to watch Frances' children playing in their yard. Startled by a honk, he found that he had stopped in her driveway, and was blocking her entry. How long must he have sat at McDonald's? The day had just swirled by.

"What's up Professor?" came Frances' greeting through the open window of the van. "Oh, you don't look so well. Is something wrong?"

"I don't think I can go through with this business idea. I went to the library, but I couldn't get myself to Kinko's."

"There's always tomorrow! Come over after the kids go to bed - say 9 o'clock?" And so it was left. The few hours that hung in the balance left his mind to wander through the failures of the past. They pushed out any positive possibilities of the present. He was sitting in a chair at his kitchen table, without a light on when he was roused from his darkened reveries by Frances' call. Minutes later he was facing her through the Busas' screen door.

"What turned you so gloomy again? You can't go on like this. Did you have dinner?" poured out as she opened the door and he walked in. Her maternal concern touched a sensitive spot; the questions led him to realize he hadn't eaten. He was hungry. In response, she made him a bologna sandwich with a big slice of tomato and lots of mayonnaise.

"And how about some tea?" she suggested, already taking out a teapot and teabag.

"Sure."

They were quiet as she made the tea in a pot and poured two cups. Then she sat down and watched him eat.

"Now where were we?" she queried as he ate. "You can do this, Marc. It can't be the hardest thing you've ever done."

She sipped her tea and ended a few seconds of silence with, "By the way, what was the hardest thing you ever did?" The question was out of her play book, one she often used when clients were despairing.

The question was a stunner. Marc stopped chewing and stared at her. He resisted going down this road. "Thinking about that brings out a lot of pain, Frances."

"Well, perhaps it would help to unburden some of it so we can separate the mountains from the mole hills." A rather long minute stood silently as he thought about opening up to his neighbor.

“I think I told you my step-father was nasty,” he began. “It was the summer after my high school graduation. One day, when I got home, he was beating my sister and mother. I stopped him. When he left the apartment, I tried to get them to leave the home. I couldn’t convince my Mom. But I did get my sister out of there, at least for the night. That was the hardest thing I’ve done.”

“Where’d you stay?”

“My grandmother’s place, but only a night.” Mark picked up his tea cup and stared at its interior. “She didn’t want us staying more than that night. She called Mom and told her we were there. The next morning Mom picked us up, and we were right back in the battle. It actually was worse ’cause my step-father didn’t feel I had any right to intervene. That translated to no longer having a right to be at home. It was some sort of turning point.”

When Mark picked up his tea cup he was staring at its interior. His hand trembled and he had to hold the cup with both hands to prevent from making a mess.

“Why do you say a turning point, Marc?”

“Well, it was for both my sister and my mother. My mother never seemed herself again. She could never look me straight in the eye after that. Maybe she felt guilty. I always felt sorry for her, but neither I nor my sister ever asked her to leave again. It was sad.”

“And what about your sister? Why was it a turning point for her?”

“Melissa? I think it was that morning, when we were sent back home that she started eating less: much less. She ended up anorexic. I must have told you that.”

“Maybe, but I only remember that she died. You must have suffered greatly. It’s such a dark, terrible story. I didn’t realize. Sorry.”

Marc sat for a time in silence. Then Frances added, “What happened to your Mom?”

“She stayed with Jake. When I was in graduate school, in Chicago, she died from a concussion. My step-father called and said she got it in a fall. Melissa and I were sure she was pushed or hit by him. But what could we prove? The only one who might have witnessed it was my brother, Michael. He was thirteen. That was way back in 1958. Melissa, who was the smartest of us kids was pulled out of her first year of college. Jake demanded that she help out at home. She was told she could go back to school as soon as Jake could arrange things,. But that never happened. I told her she should leave home, but she felt she had to help out with Michael. When Melissa died, here in Maryland, I was so furious I wasn’t even going to tell Michael about her death. I just hated everything Jake had done to the family - including adding that little kid.”

“I’m so sorry for all that you have had to go through, Marc.”

“Yeah, well I don’t think it did a lot of good to talk about all this, but thanks for listening. That sort of answers your question though, doesn’t it?”

“What was the question?”

“The hardest thing.”

“Oh, right, taking your sister to your grandparents.”

“Grandmother. I never knew my grandfather and don’t remember either of my Dad’s parents.”

“Grandparents or Grandmother that was still a hell of a night. You were really strong - a hero that night. To your sister. And then to be sent back. My God. What a painful memory. But what strength! That memory can give you determination. It shows what sort of person you are. It would be worth remembering that taking her out of your home that night was a hell of a lot harder than getting to Kinko’s and following up on any leads I can give you. Want me to nuke the tea hot again? It certainly isn’t steaming.” She watched the tremble in Marc’s hand spill some of the tea on the table as he reached the cup over to her.

They sat without talking as Marc slowly sipped his tea. Then they chatted about this and that. When he left, Marc felt more optimistic. He went home, tuned the radio from its drone of news to a classical music station and sat back. For the first time that day, he felt that just possibly he had hit bottom: he could make a new life for himself. When he went to bed, it was with a lighter heart. And when he awoke, the optimism had been amplified by a restful sleep.

Kinko’s suggested a little red logo of a lap top in the upper left corner, under “Dr. IT.” They gave it a couple of nice fonts, and followed his name by ‘PhD’ without noting that it was in philosophy. On another line, in a smaller font, the card advertised that he did expert PC-tune ups, lap top repairs, and made house calls. The last two lines gave his email address and phone number. All this had been suggested by the clerk at Kinko’s. The cost was \$10 for 100, and picking it up was the only activity of his ‘grand opening.’ Now he was ‘open for business.’

Psychologically, the actual opening came when he could tell Frances that he had the cards. With Frances honesty was his policy, but it had exacted a toll. So it was a few days before he could respond to her daily questions and tell her that yes, he had the business cards.

“Let me bring some over for you,” Marc suggested. A few minutes later, he was at her kitchen table once more, another warm cup of tea in his hands, and some screaming children in the background. Tea done, he had Frances’ promise that she would refer people to him if they needed computer help. For the first time in quite a while, he felt like reciprocating a friend’s hug. A kiss on the cheek and he was out the door.

Halloween found Marc with marshmallows, candy and his lights on. Sarah and Christopher weren’t interested in trick or treating at their moody neighbor’s door and went off with friends in the opposite direction. But when, at the end of the cold night of spooking, they broke away from their pack of friends, the two goblins finally knocked on Marc’s door.

“Boo, - trick or treat” they shouted together. Sarah’s face was showing behind a make shift mask that was beginning to tear. It had been part of a special costume Super-Mom had made.

“Who do we have here? The ghosts of Halloween past? I hope not!” responded Marc. He was surprised that seeing Frances’ kids brought a lump to his throat. It meant more to him than he could have supposed. Why hadn’t he done Halloween the previous years? The pain of not having children of his own came back sharply. And so, for a moment he stood there not moving, a bit stunned. They shouted ‘trick or treat’ a few more times before he handed them the big bowl of treats and said in a very deep voice: “Take as many as you ghosts need, and then you better take a few more. Your Mom needs some too. We wouldn’t want her to starve, would we?”

They laughed and shouted Happy Halloween as they ran across the driveway and disappeared inside their back door.

CHAPTER 9: THE CHARTER HOUSE

Just days after Marc delivered his cards, and Frances had given Marc his hug, Margery Whitman called her Uncle Charles for help. In spite of her stellar record in aiding Vera Tableau, and the ensuing supportive letter that Frances had written for her file, Margery had been unable to secure employment. In this endeavor, even Uncle Charles had been hampered by The Whitman Foundation's declining endowment during this 'great recession.' With its newly acquired dismal fortunes, the board, or more precisely, Grandmother Martha, had imposed a hiring freeze. Thus, when again Margery had appeared at the threshold, loveable, poor and weepy Uncle Charles could offer nothing more than an unpaid internship. And so, Margery had gone back to her saintly former boss, hat in hand.

Economic downturns leave public employers with somewhat different trajectories than their private sector siblings. Being experienced in these things, Frances knew that the County's ever-growing, monstrous budget deficit would soon result in a hiring freeze. So when a bonafide social worker knocked on her door, even one of evidently modest quality, Frances acted with unusual alacrity. After all, any live body would help her agency get through the coming freeze. And thus, even in these tight times, our angel, Frances gained yet another heroic hand to help the county's unfortunate and disabled. Margery started right away.

That the Whitman family avoided embarrassment only came about by the alignment of the stars and the signs of the zodiac. These forces vaulted Margery as a newly minted professional. Those same randomizing powers led some of Marc's business cards to be placed into the very professional, and chic, black briefcase of Margery Whitman.

Even before she went out to do the rounds of her new clients, Margery needed the proper accessories. At the top of the necessity list had been a set of new wheels. The ones she received would have been more appropriate as a realtor's starter vehicle, but they were hers. The car had been the family's gift to her. Martha announced it with her typical tight lips, "You know, my dear, your father would have wanted you to have a BMW, even if these tight times mean that we could only get you the smallest BMW." Characteristically, Martha overlooked the non Whitman half of Margery's parentage. Her parents had died in a late night automobile crash a few years back. Martha had always blamed Margery's parents' ill-considered choice of a cheap, and perhaps flimsy, Japanese import, for their premature eternal incline, and so the gift of the stylish BMW had a proper redemptive, and schoolmarmish character.

Even, or perhaps, especially, when she was completely alone, slipping into the Navy blue leather seat of the new metallic sky blue Beemer was sensuous. In her mind, Margery had already spent her first pay check on eye liner, a mini-dress and boots to go with the coupe's interior colors. The pleasant contact with the dead animal's skin on her thighs felt like a caress.

Margery's first appointment was in Silver Spring, on Fenwick Street: a Ruth Dedrick. She opened her blackberry and checked the notes on Dedrick.

Dedrick: somewhat disoriented. Widow. 87. Two minor strokes. WWII camp survivor. Hearing problems. Suspicious of non-Jews. Moderate paranoia. Check meds, well-being, environment, mental status. Charter House, 1316 Fenwick, SS, apt 1210. 301 659 3763.

She called, spoke to an answering machine, and left word for Mrs. Dedrick. She would be there within the hour. Margery then punched the address into her vehicle's information system. The comforting baritone male voice took over as her companion and guide, leading her effortlessly to her high rise destination.

Fenwick was an anomalous short street, a miniature urban canyon, designed in the 1960s by haplessly displaced New York architects. Near the Charter House, the street level shops included a shoe repair store, a pawnshop, an army surplus store, a cleaner, two banks, and a convenience store. These had entrances both to condos above, and to private underground parking below. She put her leather clad, baritone directed, baby beamer in the paid subterranean lot.

Swinging her legs out of the car, her feet, high heels first, hit the ground. Her shoes were the precise color of the car. Margery imagined herself in a shoe commercial. As she approached the building she recalled the mixed messages about Charter House: that it had a splendid past but that things had slipped a bit. But upon entering the lobby for the first time, she was impressed with the fancy tiled floor and the large marble and wood front desk in the chandeliered lobby.

She looked around for the human she presumed went with that front desk. But no concierge appeared. While leaning against the somewhat dusty, and now that it had her attention, somewhat grimy marble top, an elderly woman came up to her. The woman looked a bit like a New York bag lady, unkempt, wearing a house robe and faded yellow terry cloth slippers over grungy white socks.

"Ya sure are too fancy to have yer mother here, ain't ya? Ya ain't waitin' fer the manager, are ya? No one ever gets round to this desk no more. No one to help. If yer lookin' for someone ya can't use the phones neither. They don't work. Just go up the elevator, sweetie." The woman then shuffled out to the street.

Margery found elevators off to the left, and took one to the 12th floor. Odors in the elevator seemed to be ancient references to various human waste products mixed with potent chemical cleaners. They put miles between her current environment and the vehicle that had transported her to the Charter house. The ride seemed inordinately slow, and the creaky noises led Margery to reflect upon her poor parents' fate and its link to the inevitable deterioration of mechanical objects.

When the door opened she was confronted with a long corridor. In sharp contrast to the lobby it was dark and damp. Holes in the vinyl tile flooring could easily cause one's heel to catch. The hall's odors were related to those in the elevator, minus the cleaning agents. Margery was out of her element.

The door to 1210, like all the others: a chipped dirty cream with a dark red color beneath. It was fitted with a small knocker-bell combination. Using it led to no audible bell and only a soft knock. She could hear some classical music inside and so she banged loudly. After what she took to be far too long, she heard a woman's voice with a thick accent that marked an earlier era of immigration. With all the "w's" disguised as "v's" and the "th's" as "d's" Margery heard a greeting, "For vat is dis?" Formulaic back and forth eventually had the desired effect and Mrs. Dedrick opened the door. "You know, furst you should call . Den I vod be vaiting and could more nicely let you in, ja?"

Overwhelmed by the heat, and the stench, it took Margery a moment to understand and then decode the foreign sounds into comprehensible linguistic signals of somewhat standardized English. The smells indicated that garbage was the main industry in the Dedrick household. And even though it wasn't more than cool outside, the thermostat in the apartment, if there was one, must have been set to 85. Mrs. Dedrick's greeting falsely claimed that Margery hadn't communicated her

arrival. Of these three assaults on her, Margery could only defend against the last one: "I did call, you know. But you didn't pick up, so I left a message on your answering machine."

"Vat?" led to both a repetition of the statement, a bit louder, and a more permanent imprint of the anomalous temperature and smell. As in all of history, eventually, things moved on.

"Vell, an answering machine I don't have. But I vas here and no one called."

Margery took in the small studio apartment. It was all quite neat. But when her eyes settled on a veritable herd of miniature free-range roaches that were quite at home scurrying around the kitchen counter, she experienced a deep-rooted shudder. She saw the telephone /answering machine combination blinking near the bed.

"Isn't that a telephone answering machine, next to the bed?" Margery queried with a raised voice.

"No one told me dat."

"You didn't hear the telephone ring?"

"Dey say I don't hear vell, I vud like to, for then I could hear opera better. And Beethoven. My granddaughter too. She lives in San Diego and calls me on Skype, but I can't hear. And vat is your name?"

"Whitman. Margery Whitman. You are taking some medicines for your blood pressure, aren't you Mrs. Dedrick? Do you have enough medicines?"

"Vitman? Not Jewish, ja? You von't say I have to leave because I can't hear so good, no?"

"Of course not, Mrs. Dedrick. Perhaps you could get a hearing aid. I am just coming to do an evaluation: to see if everything is all right."

"Pitman. That is Catholic, no? De Pope didn't help us in de var."

"Whitman, Mrs. Dedrick. Perhaps we could get you a hearing aid. I am just checking to see if everything is alright."

"Vat is, 'all is right'? Dis place is never right, never good now. Vat, you have a cold? Can't you smell? Dey don't clean. I call de manager but dey don't clean, and ve have roaches. De garbage shoot is closed and so ve can't take de garbage out. So ve got smells. No dis place is not all right now. Never since dey have new owner. Vy not sit down together. Dis is no place to talk vile standing. Maybe der is someone to make de computer's sound louder, so I could hear my kindela in San Diego? Sophie is so young." They sat facing one another in the two old stuffed arm chairs, one dirty maroon, the other faded navy.

"I will put all this in my report."

"Vat report?"

"I will tell the county that the place stinks of garbage."

"And den dey vill take my place away, no?"

"No."

"Of course dey vill."

“No. The county will bring inspectors to look at the building. They will inspect the Charter House.”

“And den I will be in trouble.”

“No.” Margery could not explain how complaining about the filth, the roaches, the garbage smell, and the heat would create problems for management. And Ruth could not get across the possible consequence that management would single her out as a trouble maker. So the stand off just happened. It wasn’t resolved.

“Coffee, Mrs. Vitman?”

“No thank you, Mrs. Dedrick. Do you have enough medicines?” she asked again. Margery was already impatient with Ruth Dedrick.

“In my computer, I have no sound. Are you sure you vud have no coffee?”

“Oh yes, I just had coffee a bit ago. Thank you very much. And how are you fixed for medicine for your blood pressure?”

“Fixed for vat?” Mrs. Dedrick was up, getting two coffees.

“Medicine. I really don’t want coffee.” But Ruth had already turned on her electric percolator.

“Vell, medicine is always too expensive. I can’t buy medicine and pay for my apartment. Cream and sugar or black?” She asked, after pouring the coffee.

“Why don’t we look at what you have, and I will write it down.”

“Cream?”

“Can I look at what you have in medicines?” Ruth handed her the cup of coffee.

“But I don’t have. So vat to look for?” Margery put down the cup on the side table by the chair.

“Do you know what the doctor wanted you to take?”

“My doctor? Vat about my doctor?”

“What did your doctor prescribe?”

“Medicine.”

And so it went. Eventually, with her coffee getting cold on the small side table, by the maroon chair she had been sitting on, Margery decided to look for herself. As she got up, Ruth asked where she was going. Without answering, she entered the bath room and opened the medicine cabinet. Sure enough, there she found the Lasix bottle with about 15 pills left. The date indicated it had been bought more than a year ago. Confronting Mrs. Dedrick led to a clear and thought out answer.

“Vat do I have to live for? No one is left for me. My granddaughter I can’t even talk vit in San Diego. Vy should I have medicine if I can’t even hear my Sophie? Can’t ve have some one get my computer louder?” So Margery left Marc Buttervogel’s card with Mrs. Dedrick, and escaped to the lobby hoping to make tracks toward the underground vault where her metallic sky blue baby lay.

The old bag lady was still in the lobby standing close to the elevators.

“Ya done so soon? Couldn’t ya have more time for yer friend ya was visitin’? I guess ya ain’t like that,” she warmed up as she began to walk with Margery across the vast lobby. “You ain’t got generosity, do ya? Ya probably don’t even care she can’t live fancy like you.”

Margery picked up her pace, trying to ditch the woman. But it wasn’t to be.

“So ya don’t like visitin here do ya? Maybe ya wasn’t visitin. Not really. So what ya doin here no how; sellin something?”

Margery, now quite desperate, was nearing the exit. But the woman tagged right along. Margery hurried her steps for the front door and Fenwick Street. Margery’s stylish heels clicked on the tile floor.

The woman increased her shrill accusations. “I bet ya was just doin’ business, weren’t ya? You ain’t got no friends here. You’re just too good for us, ain’t you?”

Once Margery left the building, she was relieved to note the old woman hovered inside, still muttering her insults and suspicions. Before entering her car, Margery took out a lemon scented disinfectant towlette from her black leather briefcase. After letting the used tissue float to the parking garage floor she sprayed a little lilac scent behind her ears.

Sitting on her leather throne with her baritone, she realized that continuing to do this frustrating work in the environments of roaches, stenches, and confused elderly clients forever would not be suitable. She needed to engineer an exit. She settled back for a moment to regain her calm. It came when in her mind she pictured her baby beamer holding her in its loving embrace.

After the moment of relaxation, Margery opened her Blackberry, and looked at her schedule. Next was Vera Tableau, a couple of miles to the East: the very person who enabled her career to be launched. She programmed her GPS and entered her notes on Ruth Dedrick. Turning on the ignition, the baritone told her precisely how to proceed.

In a different tone, a few floors above, Ruth Dedrick, at that very same moment, was yelling into the telephone to the consternation of a PhD named Buttervogel who promised to make house calls. She was to become his first customer.

CHAPTER 10: HONEYMOONS AND BUSINESS MODELS

Only when Marc anticipated defending his PhD, more than 40 years earlier, had he been as nervous as he now was, anticipating the work he was to do for Ruth Dedrick. The call from one's first customer would have led many other starting entrepreneurs to feel more secure. But not so Marc. Rather, Dedrick's call reminded Marc of all his worries. How could he possibly pull off this new career? How could it lead to any long term savings? What nonsense were the promises that Frances had held out for him? At 77?

This morning, the very day he planned to make his first house call, he had woken up with a toothache. The recurrence of the pain caused all these fears to surface again. Everything had been thrown into disarray by his loss of savings. He couldn't cover emergencies. His current lot was to live on, and never beyond, his social security income. Now: a toothache, just when Marc could not afford to go to a dentist. How could he take care of himself when the consequences of his financial deterioration robbed him of the means to do so?

This led to a laundry list of nagging doubts: Could he pay his mortgage and a dentist? Was there a free dental clinic nearby? What was he to do about the plumber bill from last month? He had already put off paying that bill. Now, when could he pay it? When could he pay his car insurance? How about the roof shingles that had come down? And the gutter?

On the 17th of the month he would receive his social security check. It had to last a month. He tried to figure out if that was possible. An old shopping list was lying on the kitchen table. He turned it over. He wrote and rewrote his budget.

Say he went to the dentist. That would cost 75 dollars if nothing were needed. A filling? Add a hundred. What if it were a root canal? What then? A thousand? This morning he had meant to check the balances in his checking and savings accounts.

But instead, he was distracted. Money problems filled his mind. Two months ago he had a broken faucet. The plumber had come and charged \$220 to fix it. Now instead of a water problem, he had a money problem. He kept crossing out plumber and dentist which led the budget he was writing to look something like this:

Marc focused for a minute on his utility bills. He went to look at his thermostat. Set to 64. Turning down the heat wasn't doing it, he needed to figure out how to pay his bills and have some thing to save for emergencies.

He got up, poured a small bowl of cereal, and boiled some water for coffee. After putting it down on the table, he sat, in his pajamas in the kitchen. The gray light of the overcast winter morning wasn't supplemented.

Scribbling the numbers brought back memories of wrestling with Elsa's expenses. Those were horrible days in expensive nursing homes. She was dying, and all his mind couldn't get beyond his worries of financial ruin. While she withered away, he watched the spending of tens of thousands of

December income:	
2036	Social security

1800	mortgage
450	Heat, water, electric
220	Plumber
175	Dentist
85	medicines
75	telephone
185	car insurance
200	food
40	gas / bus

2835	expenses

-799	shortfall
	dentist ?
	plumber?
	roof?

dollars each month for what passed as ‘cures’ and then ‘cares’ in institutions that gave neither. He tried to get out from under the burden. He begged the insurance companies.

One phone call always came to mind. 1994. He had been at this very table and had similar budget problems. That day they had come from termites. Extermination and carpentry repairs had run above twelve thousand dollars. He couldn’t pay the bills. Staring him in the face had been the pharmacy bills for September and October. September hadn’t been paid, and so it was included in the October bill. It was a total that he still recalled: \$6324. For pills.

He had despaired. What was he to do? What was he to sell? He had called Blue Cross. They put him on hold for an eternity. Finally someone identified himself.

“What am I to do about these bills for my wife’s medicines?”

“You can ask the pharmacy for advice.”

“Isn’t any of it covered?”

“Not once she left the hospital.”

“But she was dismissed to the nursing home.”

“Her insurance covers treatment in the hospital. If you have additional insurance for the medicines in the nursing home you should contact that company.”

“But I don’t.”

“We’re sorry. There is nothing we can do to help you with uncovered expenses. You should have thought about that when you were choosing your insurance options.”

Surely he had hoped to remain empathic and supportive while she lay dying, absorbing all their assets. But how could he?

The long and excruciatingly slow arc of Elsa’s illness led him to despair. Its shadow darkened his current insecurity.

Of course, from the advantage of these years, he would have preferred that he had shown affection, rather than anger. Not that it was all his fault. Elsa had a temper and passions that introduced some seriously bad times after she went to work for the Pentagon. His mind settled on one in early 1981. They were living in a small apartment on Flower Avenue in Takoma Park.

She had gotten up quietly. She had grabbed her glasses and book and come into the living room in the middle of the night.

“Elsa, what’s wrong?” he asked as he wandered into the living room.

“Oh, has Jesus finally come to ask why his parishioners are unhappy?” Her sardonic tone hurt him. When he wore only his briefs, Elsa often called him Jesus. She said Marc’s blond beard and long hair marked him as an academic. But in his underpants, she claimed he could be modeling for a classic painting of Jesus. It had been mid-winter: he was pale as a ghost.

“You mean, why did I get up and come in here?” she continued, “Why do you think? I can’t sleep.”

“Is something wrong? I mean, it’s after two in the morning. You have to work tomorrow.”

“Wrong? Is that a question, or just some delayed observation you’ve recently made? Are you so dumb that you don’t know the answer to that question?”

“What?”

“What?” she echoed.

“What is wrong?”

“You want me to start?”

“There’s a list? Why didn’t you talk about it before we went to bed? Come on let’s go to bed. We can chat about whatever this is in the morning.”

“Forget about the morning. It’s now, and I can’t sleep. I’m too angry. About everything.”

Making a move of submission, he had sat down on the sofa where Elsa was sitting. Elsa immediately stood up to regain her advantage and moved a few feet away.

“I’m not angry, I’m furious, Marc. Don’t you have a clue? Like, everyone gets a honeymoon! Even fucking Reagan is getting a honeymoon. Cronkite has been talking about it all week. And you ask me why I’m pissed? I support you with God-damned grants; I work every day in an enormous bureaucracy just so you can look good at the University, pretending to be a productive scholar. And all the while, you are eyeing the tits of every coed that walks into your office. And me, I get nothing.”

Marc had blushed briefly but, given the dim light at the sofa, it remained his secret. “Is it me ... us? Or is it Reagan that’s got you so pissed?”

“The whole thing. Of course, I can’t believe I am going to have to work for Cap Weinberger.”

“But you’ve known Reagan was going to win for a long time. Carter was toast since April, with that crash of the copters in the desert. Everyone knew. And you knew since the inauguration that your work group at the Pentagon would have shit poured all over it, that he’d probably discontinue your office. It hurts me too. I’ll lose my grants and then what of my tenure at the university?”

“Poor fella. You and all your young coeds who hate war. Do you tell them that it’s your wife’s job to feed you Pentagon money for that sham? Well, now your honey feed is drying up. Maybe if you’d been more of a scholar you would have had a research record for tenure.”

She had him there – squeezing his balls. She was the source of his deadbeat money, his grants. Maryland loved that grant money. He was coasting for life, because she had set him up with projects on Just War Theory. He didn’t need to do anything - just spread the money around the Philosophy Department. Maryland got its share and other professors could hire assistants. That’s the system she was supporting. He had counted on these grants to land him tenure. Tenure without publications.

But he tried to change the subject. “Why are you on me like this? Weinberger and Reagan aren’t everything. What about us?”

“Right, they’re just some of the detritus from Carter’s collapse – they are the annoyances. I have plenty of problems without them. I am married to you, Marc. You are about as exciting as

a brick to come home to. What am I? You treat me like yesterday's garbage. I only exist to feed you grants. Reagan gets his honeymoon, but me? No way."

These issues were buzzing like mosquitoes around her brain that night. The job. The marriage.

"But Elsa, we had that trip to Turkey before we got married, and you said . . ."

"Forget our honeymoon, you don't even remember our anniversary. How many times have you forgotten it? It's easier to count the number of times you remembered. For Christ sake, once? And you ask me what's wrong? I'm married and what do I have from it? Nothing. Not even a supportive husband. And in a few hours I'm off to work to get you more grants. What's wrong with that picture? Where's the professor who explored moral issues? Where's your ambition? What has happened to my life? To my weekend. Burnt to a crisp. That's what."

Skipping over the personal attacks, Marc asked, "Are you just angry that you're married to me?"

"Married? Is that what I am? To call this 'marriage' unfortunate is too kind. You married me because I was pregnant. And you were so embarrassed you only permitted one member of your family to come to the ceremony: your sister, Melissa."

"Whoa, that's a crock, and you know it."

"And then, you went right back to work. When I had my miscarriage you said you never wanted a child anyhow. Maybe you never wanted to get married. Maybe you only wanted to stop your life from falling apart after you couldn't get tenure at Cornell. Maybe you just wanted me to support your lifestyle by fighting for your fucking grants. Every month that's passed has meant more nights out here. And now, I can't sleep; I'm too worried, too overwrought."

Marc never understood why these thoughts were dashing through her head that night. "You're totally distorting what's between us and you know it. Who was I supposed to invite from my family? Which one of my dead parents? Tell me! Come on! Who? My father or my mother? Or was I supposed to invite that son of a bitch step father, or maybe my half-brother, who hates me? Tell me. And I had to go back to teach, you know that."

He remembered the pause. A moment of quiet. And he had gotten up to put his arms around her. Elsa backed off. "Stay away from me. Don't touch me! You just want to hold on to that river of money I get you. I'm sleeping out here."

She stared at him as he stood there, and then, he added in a calm voice, "Maybe we can talk about all this tomorrow night." Elsa, put her glasses back on, picked up her novel, The Tin Drum. Rejected, and chilly, ruminating on some of Elsa's accurate complaints, he put down his arms to go back to the bedroom.

But she didn't let the argument go. "I'll tell you who has it right – Oskar. He had the courage to throw himself down the stairs and beat his drum. Maybe that's what I should have done. Why the hell did I ever dress up like Jane Fonda? To show you my cleavage? To end up sucking your dick? For what? To be a professor? Well, that didn't happen, did it?"

"And now what?" she continued. "God, what's going to be left with my budget? They're going to bury everything that grew from that Frank Church committee. Ethics, bull shit. Move over ethics, give us some room for evil! Grass at least gave Oskar a drum. He could get angry."

As Marc retreated into the bedroom he thought about the new situation. What had he been thinking? The ethics of non-violence? Non-violent war? A pacifist in the defense department? How could he believe that the path he was on, that she was supporting, was stable?

“Give me a drum,” began her last screed, “then I’ll tell you who is guilty: the authors – all of em – frauds. We don’t get drums in life! Who’s my author? Who knows what’s in the heart of an author? That kid Oskar had it right - never grow up. Grow up and you have to go into the army. You taught me wrong: the world is evil. Real people like me can’t throw themselves downstairs. That’s what Grass got wrong. The world gets Pope John Paul and we Reagan - nothing but a dumb actor. What a difference.”

Elsa wasn’t calming down. She put down the book and poured herself a large half glass of scotch. It was like pushing in the clutch in the car: Let the engine idle. Let the brain addle. For a minute she hoped to focus on those few questions she knew she had to focus on: her job; her marriage. But the alcohol was strong, and around three Elsa snuck back to bed. Marc had pretended to sleep when she got there.

Breakfast was overcast by the memory of the night before. It had left a bad taste in his mouth - as if he had eaten rotten food. During his drive to campus, he thought about his professional status, and how it had been supported by Elsa’s philosophy project. Getting money from the devil had seemed to require no compromise. After the Americans were taken hostage in Iran, he had led rallies against racism when Iranian students were targeted on campus. But how much longer would he be able to pursue his anti-bellucose leadership on the tab of the warriors? Obviously, such an agenda had suited both Elsa and himself, but as a project in the Defense Department – it was out of character. It had been forced on the department by the Church committee. Perhaps the bill for his Faustian contract was coming due. Apparently Elsa understood this too.

The next evening Elsa returned much later than normal. Her comportment was greatly altered. Marc remarked that she looked positively radiant. No longer agitated, she opened up to relate her day. She had gotten an idea - the seeds of which she had actually ripened during their fight. At first it had been obscured by the scotch and the anger. Her career, their income, required a stratagem. During her wait on the platform for a metro she tried to recall it. At first she could only pull up last night’s disgust at her 1969 dress-up like Fonda.

But then she suddenly remembered that conjecture of hers that the world was evil. She pondered this in the cold. That was the seed to germinate. When the train arrived she found her luck good: she had a window seat. Watching the world whizz by gave her time to free associate about her new Weltanschauung.

“Look, Marc. If I could win a PhD with the cleavage of Jane Fonda, why not a change of costume to win a profession? Today I drafted a proposal to change the focus for the DARPA Philosophy Project. I’m going to propose a project on the philosophy and nature of Evil. What do you think?”

“Evil? Isn’t that changing sides?” As she hung up her coat, he noticed that most of the buttons on her blouse were undone, and she smelled of scotch.

“Not necessarily. It depends on what I say about it. I already started. Want to hear?”

“Are there going to be grants for me to study evil?”

“Apply and you shall see. I don’t see why not.”

“Let me hear, then.”

“OK - here goes . . .

‘To ... From Subject: Research Opportunities regarding the Nature and Philosophical Understanding of Evil. ...

... Certainly, in such terribly dangerous times, when our own citizens are sent to defend the great values of Freedom, Family, and Fortune, we must increase our understanding of the motives of our enemies: the attraction of evil. ...’ ”

“The words just flowed this morning, Marc. I think you should pour me some wine to celebrate.”

“You sure? You seem to already have had a few.”

“Well, it was a good day and Steve volunteered to take me out for drinks.”

“Steve? Who’s he? Some new guy? You look pretty pleased with yourself? Did you try to seduce him given our argument last night?”

She paused and noticed that Marc was looking at her blouse. She reddened. “Marc . . .”

“A little tit for tat?”

“That’s crude. I was telling you about something we both should be happy about, let’s not start over again. It was a big day for me. If they accept these ideas, maybe you have to change your focus. But you could still get tenure. You couldn’t ask for funding for ‘A Pacifist Defense of the Democratic State’ anymore. But that was ending anyhow. You can reformulate that to ‘A Strong Democratic State Confronting Evil.’ That isn’t such a big shift. I’m not selling my soul, or your concerns. I’m just baiting the hook.”

Elsa smiled for the first time that evening. She didn’t button her blouse. She obviously had made some good moves at work today. Marc, her marriage, that was another deal. She seemed to have a plan to deal with at least one of the problems that had attacked her last night. Hopefully, it would lead to both of them getting a better sleep tonight.

“How will Patricia take to this?” Patricia was her assistant in the next cubicle. Patricia had put violet colored lace on one of her walls to surround some of her family pictures. She had taken the day off, for some family matter, Elsa reported. Elsa also wondered how Patricia would absorb this change in the goals of their mission. Would she object? Never mind, it was Elsa’s call. The real question was not Patricia but how the secretary, Weinberger, and whomever would be appointed by him, would respond.

“Come on Marc, you said I was looking positively radiant and I’ve already given you a head start with my blouse. I feel like I just might have saved a philosopher with that refocus. I need a reward.”

Marc couldn’t get out of his mind that the reward seemed to have already been received from someone else. He imagined the whole interchange. Elsa would go in the ladies’ room to look at herself in the bathroom mirror. Alone in the room, she would have buttoned, and then again unbuttoned, that top button. She would have brushed out some of the kinks in her long

hair. She would have smiled that she had let it grow long again. She would have tossed her head and watched the hair resettle on her shoulders suggestively, and felt a certain satisfaction with the way the day had unfolded. She might have played with undoing more than the top buttons of her blouse. Smiling at her planned seduction.

But Marc couldn't resist the temptation and the pheromones. He was quite close and he noticed how she watched his attention shift toward her cleavage. She smiled and didn't button her blouse. And so it was that Marc RSVP'd her invitation. First turning from ethics to evil, peace to war, and now perhaps something more. She felt his hardening penis as he felt her hardening nipples. Elsa's smile had changed. Her radiance took an edge, and they had walked together to the bedroom.

But after that day, Elsa's program had continued to support him. It had its down side. It led to his long time fixation with Gogol's *'The Nose.'* It required an imaginative rethinking of her office at the Pentagon, and a shift in his own public persona. Happily the co-eds of the Reagan era were just as pleased with his new conservatism as their cohorts of the 70's had been for his liberalism. He had prospered under her guidance. So of course, he should have been more grateful. And when she was ill, why couldn't he have been more of a support. But he knew that was spilled milk. He couldn't change what happened, and now, years later, he was again unable to make ends meet.

Marc had given Frances his cards weeks ago. Since then he had received all of one call. Two days ago? How could this lead to more than chump change. Anyhow, weren't computers a young man's job? How could he make enough money to get him over the hump? He had seen hundreds of thousands of dollars evaporate: all his savings. All the monies that the University had put into his retirement accounts. For what? To make a house call; to look at some computer? How could he know what to do? Why would anyone trust him? What could he charge? Fifty dollars for a house call? And then what? Get two a month? Maybe, three? That wouldn't pay the plumber, or the dentist.

And if he broke a hip or something, and needed real care? What then? How could these house calls fix his problems? This wouldn't get back his lost savings. An occasional house call wouldn't help him support himself. In another black moment Marc realized he could earn more as a steady greeter at Sam's Club. From a highly focused frenzy, his mind slipped into a dull depressive memory bank. Focusing numbly at his old, worn, blue pajamas he saw a loose thread, and picked at it, pulled it. A white button (one of the few still remaining) lost its hold and slipped down to his lap, then the floor. He watched it roll out of sight under a cold radiator.

These ratty old pajamas: his mind slipped back to their origins. It was a cold morning in College Park. Julia urged him to stay in bed rather than wander out into the cold of the room. Suddenly, she had reached over with one arm to the side of the bed and tossed a brown paper bag into the air. She had painted a big heart with lipstick on the bag. She held him close with the other arm and the bag came down squarely on his head. Inside were these flannel pajamas. They had laughed together when she announced that he couldn't put them on until she got another orgasm. And so he reached over, pulled her on top of him, and missed his office hours and the students who were planning to complain about the last exam. It was just a few weeks before Elsa left her urgent message requesting communication: "The doctor says I need cancer screening, immediately."

And when summer came, and Julia went to London, he brought the pajamas home, putting them in his closet. Elsa had already given up her job. The chemo was just too devastating. She

Honeymoons and Business Models

started out tough, as though she was never going to give up life. Every other week he would drive her to the clinic in Gaithersburg: part of a new medical complex that was growing in that exurb.

These were dark drives. Not only did he have little to say, but his resentments were building up. He could foresee that he would no longer have either the luxurious time or the spare cash that his dalliance demanded when Julia would return in the fall. If he only had more money, he could have hired help to get Elsa to and from the clinic, to do the domestic care-taking. But given his lack of publications, the grants that got him tenure didn't yield raises. Pentagon philosophers didn't get top pay. Money was always tight. Now without Elsa's salary, they would be strapped.

As the weeks, and then months passed, things got darker. His carefree ways were replaced by a somber rhythm: cooking, driving, and living on a far more limited income. By the time Julia came back from London, she felt totally out of sync with Marc's newly imposed, darker time. There were still a few lovely afternoons in her bed, and even some exciting memories of passion in his office, but the relationship was doomed.

That winter, after the affair was over, when Elsa was too distracted with her own health to notice the addition to his wardrobe, Marc had begun to wear the pajamas – some twenty years ago. Now only two buttons remained. And one sleeve had a serious hole at the elbow. And how did his planned house calls fit into all this?

Getting up from his chair and paltry breakfast, Marc realized that he needed a different business model. One in which he could charge for far more than the house call. And for more than the work he would perform. Something like that was required if he were to gain sufficient income. Perhaps if the client was too ignorant to see what was wrong with the computer, he could pull a fast one. Over the sink, he fleshed out some possibilities in his mind, and estimated the increase in revenues. If he only got more calls. For the first time he felt that he might be able to regain some semblance of his old life-style. And in this changed mood, he went to take a shower and meet the day.

CHAPTER 11: HOUSE CALLS

Marc left his rusting Cavalier unlocked at a broken meter on Fenwick Street. He looked up. It threatened a cold rain. Walking from there to his client in the Charter House, he passed an old army surplus store. Marc stopped to look at its window full of Christmas decorations. On the left was a rather ornate painted, wooden manger. It had gilded angels hovering above, numerous intricately painted barnyard animals surrounded a seated Mary with baby Jesus in her arms. Mary was wearing an indigo dress. A golden halo hovered above her head. Near it was a carefully laid out table setting for a festive Christmas dinner. In between the two was propped a big sign "Today's Specials." Beneath the sign were the more usual army surplus items: a combat knife, two pistols and an ammo clip. Marc noted that the barrel of one of the pistols was a bluish steel that went nicely with the color of Mary's dress.

A few more steps and he entered the Charter House. Marc was one more newcomer impressed by the great lobby. For him, the lobby's marble and wood oozed money. It brought to the fore his dreams of financial achievement as well as the reality of his failures. He noticed the few people who were milling about, but he failed to observe their forlorn and vacant countenances. He observed none of the clues showing the decimated financial condition of his environment.

His self-deception continued in the elevator. Rather than accurately decoding the fetid smells of decay, they brought positive olfactory memories to mind. Coupled with the accent he had heard on the telephone, the smells unlocked heretofore lost sensory impressions of a happy apartment life that existed before his father left for war, before his step-father arrived. He pictured his mother and grandmother after school, preparing meals for his sister, father and himself. The dark hall going to Dedrick's apartment only reenforced the pleasant rush of sensory memories of those early times. No longer holding real images, he imagined going to the door, ringing the buzzer and seeing his mother open it with a smile. As she had always done, before the bad times rolled in. Although Marc's mother had come from Russia with her parents at the time of the Revolution, she had been raised in a tightly knit community on the lower east side, where everyone, when forced to, spoke English with a Russian or German accent made for vaudeville.

So Marc was almost ready to be disarmed by the smells and the accents that met him once the door opened. Almost because these very unusual moments of inner peace were unexpectedly and immediately interrupted by the high volume of Mrs. Dedrick's greeting. Suddenly he was back in Silver Spring, on Fenwick Street, in the Charter House. And this nasty transport from his reveries came via the same angry voice that had upset him a few days earlier on the telephone. Its shrill tone inverted his mood and metamorphosized him from school child to churlish, newly minted, American businessman.

Using his plumber as a model, Marc had decided to charge a flat show up rate of \$75 for a house call, plus time and expenses. So he was in no rush as Ruth Dedrick complained at length that she couldn't hear her lovely Sophie when using her laptop. Marc asked her to show him how she booted up. He watched her as she put in her password: AUCH145, and wrote it surreptitiously in the little spiral notebook he had placed in his shirt pocket. After all, he also might have to boot up the machine. When the Windows fanfare came on, he asked, "Is the music loud enough, Mrs. Dedrick?"

“Vat? Vat did you say?” she responded to the vague sounds she heard.

Increasing his volume a notch at a time, they eventually communicated. She had no idea that there was a fanfare when the laptop began. Marc began by checking the volume. It was at a max - nothing louder could be cranked out of the tiny speakers in the machine. She obviously needed external speakers or a headphone. These were very inexpensive solutions to a very simple problem and hence of little pecuniary interest to him. Now that he was beginning his professional development he had to admit dependency on house calls to the elderly for any of the ‘joie de vie’ that money might buy. So Marc fished for more than additional audio gear for the laptop. To gain the gravitas to justify a larger bill, Marc thought it best to begin with some questions.

“Where do you use the computer, Mrs. Dedrick?” Marc shouted.

“Right der on de table, but vy should I use it ven I can’t even hear my Sophie, my yengala?”

This didn’t ring true. Marc had seen a few icons on the desktop, one for Mozilla Firefox, another for Works, and still another for Quicken. “Don’t you ever use it for other things besides the telephone?”

“Of course I do,” and then, “Vat is your name?”

“Marc Buttervogel.”

“Vas dat Buttervogel? A funny name. Are your parents German den?”

“Buttervogel it is. Butter-bird. No, both my parents were Jewish; my mother was from Russia and my father’s family came a bit earlier from a part of Germany near the Polish border. Both of their families came in the years after the first world war. They grew up together on the lower east side.”

“Jewish! Not German den. Gut. And a Doctor too!”

“Yes. I was a professor but I have retired.”

“Dat is vonderful. If my son, only . . . but, don’t you vant coffee, Dr. Buttervogel?”

“No thank you, Mrs. Dedrick.”

“Are you sure you vud take no coffee?”

“Well, actually perhaps. Sure. Thanks. That would be lovely. But don’t make it for me if it is any trouble.”

“Trouble? Vy vod it be trouble? My son, God bless him. He vas in Vietnam. Lost. Gone. Und my vonderful man too, in de Korea vor. Herbert. He vas handsome. So who do I have coffee for now if not you?” And she turned toward her percolator, and started cleaning it.

“Well thank you, Mrs. Dedrick.”

“Ruth. Please, Ruth,” she insisted as she opened a fresh can of coffee. “Und something to eat, no?”

“No, I really couldn’t.”

“Some cookie, no?”

“OK. Sure, why not.. You are persuasive. Don’t you ever use your computer for other things besides the telephone?” he asked again. Marc was already noting with some guilty satisfaction that time was passing while the meter was running. But he was also feeling quite comfortable in this throw-back to childhood situation.

“In my computer, I have no sound.”

“Yes, I can see that will need to be repaired.. But don’t you . . .” Marc stopped as he watched Ruth Dedrick go to the sink to get water for coffee. While she turned, he went to the touchpad and double clicked on Quicken. Up popped the window demanding a quicken password. He typed ‘AUCH145’ and opened up a file containing financial information.

Mrs. Dedrick was getting the two coffees and he closed down Quicken.

“Cream und sugar or black?”

“Don’t you ever use it for other things besides the telephone,” he queried again, but now that he had access, he didn’t really need to hear her answer.

“Cream?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

She brought the coffee, and some small cookies on a little tray, and sat down. “Of course,” she began, “I keep all my records on the computer. Only dis vay can I remember ver tings are, and vat I have. I even pay my bills on de computer. You know I may be old, but I learn. It is de twentieth century now you know.”

“Well, the twentieth century was almost a decade ago. These are very nice cookies.”

“Oh ya! I made dem. I know. I am a good baker. But now I have noone to bake for. But of course, it is tventy von now. Did you lose family in de vors?”

“Well, my father was killed in the Second World War. I hardly remember him. This is good coffee, thank you.”

“I have no von left but my granddaughter Sophie. Many died in de camp. My husband in de Army in the next vor.” Ruth was staring out the window now, lost in some reverie. Then she asked almost as an after thought, “Can you fix de sound for me?”

“Sure, but I may have to take the laptop apart to put in an adapter. Can you spare it for a day or two?”

“I could for a day. Can I have it on Tuesday?”

“I’ll certainly try.”

“And den vat vud dat cost?” The question unsettled Marc. His mind had drifted away from the business side of the relationship. He was eager to explore the information on her computer, before actually setting up a pricing schedule and bill.

“I can’t be sure. I charge for the visit, the time, and the parts,” he responded, “and I can’t be sure what is needed until I open the machine. Certainly less than a new laptop of this quality! I will need to test the sound system in your computer to see what can be done to help you. Perhaps we are looking at \$150-\$350.”

“OK den. Do it. And I dank you so much for de trouble, Doctor. Ve Jews know all vor is terrible, no?”

They chatted on a bit, and then he smiled, placing a card in her hand, and like a trusted son stealing his mother’s money for a drug deal, he carefully put her laptop in a carry bag, and left. The corridor to the elevators seemed longer on the exit than it had been on the entering. Waiting for the elevator, he could feel his heart pounding.

Alone, inside the elevator he leaned against the side wall, light headed and somewhat dizzy. The professor realized that his career was taking a drastic turn: not one likely to be appreciated by his social worker sponsor and neighbor. Compared to the great hurdles he had to overcome to establish himself as a philosopher, this career seemed to be his for the taking.

The door opened, and he exited. But his dizziness was such that he had to sit down. He looked around and saw an old couch there in a corner of the lobby by the front door. He walked over, sat down for a moment to regain his balance. Depending upon which way he turned, his view was of either the street or the interior of the lobby. He turned to look inside; the lobby was mostly deserted. Outside, the weather had cleared up. Indeed, it looked to be a beautiful day. He took a deep breath. There was a scruffy old lady carrying a bag, and wearing terry cloth slippers, grayish socks and an old blue house robe. She was coming in from the street.

The old lady noticed him and after entering, took a seat on the couch next to him. She turned to face him. “Ya waitin’ fer a cab? No cab ever gets round to this place no more unless you call. No one to help. Ya new here? I’m Gladys. What’s yer name, sweetie?”

The thought that he might be thought of as a resident of Charter House was sufficiently frightening to motivate Marc to rise.

“No, I was just sitting down for a moment to catch my breath, good day Gladys.”

And with this, carrying his bag, the philosopher exited to Fenwick, walked to his car, and drove home. Moments later, sitting in his own kitchen, he opened the carry bag with Ruth Dedrick’s laptop. He plugged it in and logged in as Ruth Dedrick. Typing AUCH145 led him to think that it could be derivative of something significant. Recalling Ruth’s tale that many of her relatives had died in the camps, he Googled “Auschwitz liberation.” There it was: January 25, 1945. Here it was, almost 64 years later and for Marc, it was a number that could commemorate more than freedom from a Nazi death camp. It also could commemorate his freedom from the financial fate that had befallen him. The thought of this secondary significance brought a shadow of a smile to his lips.

With luck, he opened Quicken and then it took just a quick flick or two of the cursor to uncover all of Derrick’s detailed financial information. And luck held. The same password opened enabled Quicken to access her online accounts. There it was: an account at Chevy Chase Bank with an astounding \$31,412.17 in it. And an investment account at Fidelity with more than \$230,000. His fingers trembled. He stood up to give himself some time to consider his situation. A minute more and he found that both accounts were fully operational electronically. At this point, he had done nothing wrong. He had stolen nothing.

His head was lost in the possibilities of the moment, Marc walked out the side door onto the driveway he shared with Frances. He began to rethink his business model so as to take advantage of his new understandings of the facts. Clearly, Frances’ notion of IT work for the elderly could be tweaked into something far more lucrative. He began spinning out dreams regarding his regained lifestyle, his escape from penury.

And suddenly, there was Frances pulling in with her minivan. He could see one kid in the front seat. He felt guilty even though he had only contemplated, or more accurately, begun to plan, a life divergent from the one Frances had designed. Feelings of guilt led him to act to deflect any appearance that could lead to suspicions. Out came an over-quick, “Hi Christopher, how come you’re home from school early?” Except for the speed, it sounded perfect: no hint of coverup. But he was too eager. The engine hadn’t even been turned off and Frances was still clearly talking to her child.

Then Frances left the van with her own quick greeting: “How’re you doing, Marc? Business start yet? I gotta get Sarah to bed: they called me to pick her up cause she has a fever. We’ll catch up later.”

Was his confusion of the children a hint that something was amiss? Would she think about it and be on to him? He worried, so he didn’t let it rest. “Sorry to hear that, Sarah. Can I help you Frances? Get something from the store? Anything?” But Frances wasn’t listening; she was pushing her way forward, naturally herding the needy member of her brood to the safety of a sick bed.

The unexpected feelings of guilt, brought on by the unexpected proximity of Frances, disturbed Marc. To calm himself he took a walk along the banks of Sligo Creek. Along the trail, he was afraid that his demeanor would give him away. To whom, for what would have been rational questions. But irrationality reigned. He avoided both mouthing and responding to the neighborly greetings that were to be uttered whenever another adult passed by. Momentary thought of being lost in a Gogol story went through his head, but most of the time Marc was lost in developing his plans and the guilt that was oozing from them.

He would purchase speakers, and perhaps a headphone too. And at this point, he wouldn’t overcharge. He first would milk the PC for all it was worth: take off her information - copy the files. That would allow him to regain a degree of the economic security that he had lost. He could then use Dedrick’s assets slowly, with luck, imperceptibly. Why raise the old lady’s suspicions at this time, rather than take advantage, in the future, gradually and safely? Having worked out a plan, the weight of the guilt and risk fell off his back. He now walked back briskly, almost gaily, smiling and saying good day to almost everyone.

The return to the Charter House on Thursday should have been uneventful. Marc had the laptop in his carry bag. He was also carrying a shopping bag from Radio Shack. But the strange old lady who had sat down beside him was again in the lobby, on the same sofa as when he had left her. She appeared as if she had never moved. Indeed, she was still with a shopping bag, and wearing the dirty yellow terry cloth slippers, grayish socks and old blue house robe. When he entered the lobby she jumped up, and walked over to him. She tried to block his easy passage to the elevators.

“Ya remember me, Sweetie? I’m Gladys. Ya know, I know ya from somewhere. Ya been here before. And ya don’t belong here. I don’t trust ya. More than that, I don’t like the way ya look. Whaddya tryin to steal here, mister? I don’t like ya at all. Maybe I should call the police. Whaddaya got in that black bag of yers?”

The tirade took Marc aback. The almost telepathic reading of his guilt, knocked him off balance and gave him a fright. Brushing by her rapidly, he pressed the elevator button, but had to wait by the elevator.

“Who ya gonna steal from? Huh, and anyhow, what’s yer name? Maybe I’ll get the manager.” But the elevator came. Out of fright, Gladys didn’t enter the lift with him.

Gladys' words ricocheted in his brain as the elevator ascended. The effect of her assault prevented him from noticing the elevator's odors. As he exited, he paused and rearranged his emotions to prepare for the ensuing financial and social events. When he finally entered Ruth's apartment, she noticed his agitation. Taking them as a sign that he was not feeling well, she ordered him to sit down.

Ruth began, "I vill make you some tea. Vait, don't get up. You aren't vell Dr. Professor. Even I can see dat. I vill be mitt you in von minute. Are you sick? Vat happened, Dr. Marc? You needn't come to bring de computer ven you aren't vell." Soon she was at his side with a pot of tea. And again, a small saucer of cookies. Marc smiled in gratitude, and relaxed in the chair. After a moment or two, and a portion of the cookies, he took out the computer, set it on the table, and plugged it in. He took out the speakers and headphones from the Radio Shack bag. Finally he plugged in the headphones.

"Why don't you put these headphones on - here I'll show you how. Now let's boot it up, Ruth." And Ruth logged herself in with her password. With the headset on she was surprised to hear, quite loud and clear, the Windows' fanfare.

"Vas dis always here? Dis music?" Marc took pride in her surprise and delight. She sat there beaming and started to stand up to give Marc a hug, but the cord wasn't long enough. Marc lifted the headset off of her very scantily haired skull.

"Vonderful! How vonderful!" Ruth began. "Herr Doctor Professor Marc, I am so happy for vat you have done for me. I hope you don't mind I call you Marc, Herr Doctor Professor. I feel almost you are really family. If my son ver here he wud show me too just dis vay. Now take some cookies for de day, please. For me. I vud vant dat. How can I dank you? Now tell me, vat do I have to do to always hear de computer so?"

Marc showed her how to plug in the headphones, and then sat down to sip his tea.

"You know, Marc, you are a life saver. Now I can talk to my Sophie, my yingala. You know, my son died so horrible, Marc. He vas vonderful. Maybe he vud have been a professor. But he died in de United States Army. I always felt ve had to give back for dey let me come here after the vor. But my son he died in Vietnam and so I have paid. Yes Professor, I have paid a lot. Truly, I paid vit my loves. Herbert und Joseph. So eat."

"Sometimes, it seems war takes away everything we love. So many died in those wars. I had a close friend who never returned from Vietnam. When I heard that he died it brought back all the memories of losing my Dad. I ended up pretty active in the anti-war movement. And it led me to even change what I was studying. I moved from ethics to political philosophy. I spoke at anti-war rallies."

"Vore changes us. It is always a very bad time. Ven de vor is good or bad it is people who are killed." A silence passed as they both got lost in their thoughts. Then with a big intake of breath, Ruth changed the subject to business:

"And vat do I owe for dis repair? Vat did you have to do for me?"

Marc explained that he wasn't sure which she would prefer, the speakers or the headphones. He showed her how the speakers plugged in. He said he overlooked the plug when he first took home the lap top, so all she owed was the \$150 for the two visits plus the time (another \$75), and the cost of either the phones or the speakers. In the end she choose the speakers, and he set them up for

her. He repacked the headphones to return them, and after a bit more tea, some more warm words, and the receipt of the check, he left her, having been given an open invitation to visit whenever he would like. She kept the door open and watched him go to the elevator.

“Dank you once more Professor Marc,” she called.

“And you, Ruth. The cookies were wonderful.”

“I am so glad.”

He could still see her standing there from within the elevator as the doors closed. In the elevator Marc thought about his use of her first name, his enjoyment of the cookies. He felt something fundamental had changed in their relationship.

As a philosopher of ethics he certainly knew what it was. Social distance facilitates the justification of hurting someone. It’s hard to hurt someone to whom you are connected. He had lectured enough about this as evidence against ethical intuition. Hurting someone you don’t hardly know might be easier, but the act is just as bad as hurting someone you know well.

Marc now knew Ruth in a different way. They had shared personal matters. She had taken care of him, accepted him in an unexpected fashion. Wasn’t she more or less his age? Hadn’t they had similar losses? Could he really take away her financial security for his own? All these questions roiled in his mind and the associated feelings made any thought of executing his plans far more problematic.

Of course, he still had the information. His copy of Ruth’s financial information was like a switch: he could use it if needed. He could siphon funds to stabilize his own life. Why not?

Marc was astounded that he once assigned volumes analyzing these sorts of ethical quandaries. There were whole classes in which he discussed thought ‘experiments’ that people ran. In these experiments ethicists inquired why people find it easier to pull a switch that kills one anonymous person but saves five than to push a fat man, who is standing next to you on a bridge, to his death to save the same five. The switch is always much easier. Proximity of any sort emphasizes the moral quandary. And Marc had gotten close to Ruth.

Marc tried to reason that his case was different. Wasn’t he being asked to dive off the bridge himself in a heroic act just so Ruth Dedrick was to be more comfortable? Didn’t his pleasure have the same ethical status as hers? His access to her funds should allow him to share in the comfort they could render. But there were doubts. Just because he could share her wealth, it seemed it would be harder to hurt the woman with whom he had shared so much.

This jumble of thoughts were still in his head as he crossed the lobby’s floor, toward the door where the unobserved Gladys was waiting.

“Ya weren’t here long, were ya? Ya better not come back here, mister. I can tell a crook when I smell one. I got a good nose, I do. Now ya get out a here and don’t ever come back.” Her assault had less effect than earlier. But in his rush to get out, he accidentally brushed up against her going out the door, causing her to lose her balance. He didn’t respond when she fell on her grocery bag. Eggs spilled out onto the floor and soiled her robe. As he left, she cursed him with a rowdy, “Ya fucker!”

Hours later Marc was in the Safeway. Since Elsa died, Marc disliked shopping for food. Mealtime was lonely. Looking for and preparing food to prepare for only himself reenforced the

walls of his solitude. Even the packaging conspired to reenforce this. Except for a few frozen meals, the packaging of foods was made for families. To make a hamburger, he had to buy a pound of chopped meat. Each chicken weighed four or more pounds. It was difficult to find packages for a decent solo diner.

Often the uninspired activity of solitary food shopping would bring Marc's mind back to the early days of his marriage. Then he would hunt in gourmet food stores and choose raspberries, great mustards, prosciutto, and fancy cheeses for Elsa and himself. Meals were different. Breakfasting across from one another at the kitchen table they would read the Post, discuss the news and the day ahead. What were breakfasts now?

As he passed the eggs, he reflected on his last encounter with Gladys and then his confused relations with Ruth. His plans left a distinct foul taste in his mouth, and a fog in his mind: just when he most needed clarity. He wondered if Ruth was the only client he would get. If he had others, perhaps he wouldn't need to borrow from her accounts. He was preoccupied as he stared at the meats.

His cell phone rang. He had to put down his shopping basket, and then fish for it, first in his jacket and then in his pants. But by the time he got it out, the ringing had stopped.

"I don't want beef," he concluded, looking at the myriad of red, blood stained packages in front of him. Finding a small package of chicken thighs and throwing them in his basket, he drifted to coffees and sugar. Why had he undercut his marriage with those affairs? Elsa didn't help either. All those nights when she claimed she was working late at the Pentagon, he thought while looking for the cheapest coffee.

No more coffees at Starbucks. Not even decent home made espresso. Whatever was the bargain of the week. His first big financial pinch came with those prescription bills, those experimental medicines for her treatments. Each pill cost more than a hundred dollars, even after the insurance. He had complained, but what good did that do? Every trip he had made to the drug store drained his will to take care of her. Elsa's cancer was a sponge, soaking up his life savings. And Elsa had stopped working.

The can of coffee he meant to drop into the basket slipped, and fell on to the floor. A slight, and younger, woman picked it up and handed it to him with a smile.

"Thank you so much," came the automatic response of all that he thought he was going to say. But he heard himself continue, "It isn't easy. It's not nice, cooking only for myself. Sitting at home, at the kitchen table. Alone. Going out to buy stuff to cook, only for me. I . . ." The woman's smile disappeared, replaced by a look of unease. The shadow of her invitation to communicate was withdrawn. Marc felt embarrassed by the tumble jumble of words, his lack of self control, his vulnerability, his age. What was he thinking? He turned and hurried further down the aisle for sugar.

He was carrying the bag of groceries to his car when Marc recalled that his cell phone had rung. He put down the groceries and found a message had been left by Margery, Frances' assistant. She had recommended him to a second client. Would he please call the client, a Veritas Tableau. Ms Tableau was sight impaired and needed software to magnify her computer screen. She had the software. The problem was that she wasn't capable of installing it. So they recommended him to do the job and said that he would contact her.

And again, life seemed to take another fortuitous turn. Insoluble problems were put on back burners, reprieves were given. How his fortunes seemed to be on a roller-coaster. His future, now brighter, seemed far less charted than he ever would have supposed.

CHAPTER 12: SPOON

For Marc, Veritas Tableau was not only an unusual name, but one with quite a legacy. ‘Truth Tables’ – perhaps a credible translation – had been his *bête noire* since he first encountered them in graduate school. Indeed, the name recalled those pesky little exercises in logic, each with an opaque structure such as:

Premise 1: Moriarty can commit crimes without leaving any trace of evidence.

Premise 2: Sherlock Holmes can find evidence even when there was none.

To prove: Either Doctor Watson is indispensable or Sherlock always gets his man.

Thus, her name illuminated the tie between Marc’s genuine inadequacies in matters of analysis and their constraining role in his career. Needless to say, the name ignited his imagination. The idea of taking on Truth Table herself, and besting her to achieve his own financial stability, gave him a rare moment of joy. His anticipation of revenge was sweet.

As he reflected on the justice of it all, he recalled the hated logician, John Smallwood. Indeed, the pleasure of planning to fleece Veritas Tableau was heightened by the conceit that any such theft would also be an attack on logic in general and Professor Smallwood in particular. It gave Marc a moment to put a new shine on his career. After all, others also despised Smallwood, or Peckerwood, as Marc preferred to call him, for his cowardly silence on the war in Vietnam. There was his memory of the post Christmas bombing exchange in January of 1973. Peckerwood, in his dark 3 piece suit, had come into Marc’s office, without knocking. Marc had come back from his class and had his feet up on his desk, reading the *Cornell Sun*. He was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt.

“I hear some of our non-tenured professors are dressing inappropriately in class,” the intruder began.

“No! How so?”

“They are going both without coat and tie!”

“Unbelievable! Is there a document that spells out the sartorial regulations?”

“Don’t make light of tradition Buttervogel! It is what makes a university great.”

“Do the traditions have sanctions? If so, what might the punishment be?”

“Tenure time is when discussions of compatibility and fit are raised.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Of course not, just an observation.”

“While we are making observations, let me note that the war is a threat to our nation as a whole. One even more notable than the sloppiness of our junior faculty’s attire. I think all philosophers have to band together to stop Nixon and Kissinger from destroying the world.”

“I believe you meant herd together, as in sheep. I refuse to be one of a crowd, especially a crowd that supports cowardice and communists.”

So it wasn't surprising that Peckerwood, Cornell's senior logician and philosopher of science, spoke up at Marc's tenure review. From Professor Blowman's account, Peckerwood began by asserting that philosophy's singular job was the logical and clear headed analysis of arguments. Smallwood had called Marc's research papers unpublishable, mere thinly veiled, third-rate editorials. He then dredged up Marc's affair with Elsa and his leadership of student rallies against the war. He raised the observation that Marc made mockery of tradition by his habit of going to class in outfits more suitable to mowing one's lawn. His closing comment was that "Professor Buttervogel is totally incapable of solving the simplest freshman level problems in logic." Marc's struggle for tenure was doomed thereafter. Marc's anger was rekindled just thinking about all this again.

In contrast to the logician, Marc understood that the quality of a man, or a philosopher, wasn't determined by analysis: it was disposition, virtue, and knowledge of what must be done. Marc was not wasting his time on narrow linear proofs and publications. He was wrestling with the evils of war, that great scourge of human history. If this noble cause was not to be rewarded, so be it.

Peckerwood may have had his many articles about arcane, foolish details of logic and number theory, and he may have forced Marc to move to Maryland, but Peckerwood never had adoring students line up at his door. Nor could he ever possess the fabulous body of Elsa, the department's most beautiful, and liberated, graduate student. She had marched out of Peckerwood's office, right into Marc's bed. So much for the little logician.

Marc half believed these self-justificatory tales. At this moment, the conclusion of the syllogism came to him clearly: *"Maybe I didn't publish a lot. And maybe I didn't always have coherent arguments. But ask my students. They learned what was right, and what was evil in my classes. During Vietnam, women's lib, fighting the Evil Empire, I spelled it out for them. I was one of those who mobilized the fists that smashed the face of evil, that changed the world! Peckerwood? You sat with your yellow pads to decide if Moriarty could be caught given the premises in the exercise. Your articles were all too soon forgotten. I'm Marc Buttervogel. The organizers of SDS and Direct Action met in my office!"*

As he went through these self-congratulatory memories, images of the large rallies in front of Willard Straight Hall, the Cornell student union, roiled in his mind. He was standing before thousands of aroused and cheering students, urging them to withhold their telephone tax. The illegitimate government's tax used to pay for the war! He could hear his words:

"Don't pay your tax! Stop the war! Bring the troops home, and stop the spread of American evil!"

His flowing blond hair and beard were certain to show up charismatically on the front page of the Cornell Sun after each rally. Students said he looked like Jesus.

But as he ran through his ruminations he found himself back in Takoma Park. On a day where those dreams had ended long ago. Perhaps back then, Marc had a real persona. Not now. Then, he *was* somebody. The coeds loved him. He was relevant. But now he was a small time con-man. A parasite on the county's poor elderly welfare clients. And it was in that role he was about to pick up the phone to call a very real Veritas Tableau.

She had been softened up by the helpful magic of the Bussa branch of the County Welfare Bureau. She had much to be thankful for: her new large screen TV, her monthly homemaking service to help her scrub down her small but adequate living quarters. The list went on. During Margery's semi-annual visit, Vera admitted that she didn't use her computer because the software

that enlarged the screen images to readable size hadn't been installed. Margery had immediately taken action and contacted Marc to arrange his services.

And so, when the phone rang, without really ascertaining whether the call was from an eagle scout or a shyster, Vera had picked up the phone, and hearing a request for Veritas Tableau she responded, "Why, no one ever calls me Veritas. I am Mrs. Vera Tableau. Now what is it that you want?" When Marc identified himself as the 'Professor' who would install the software, she urged that Marc come as soon as possible to fix her computer.

The thought of cheating a Veritas Tableau had lost none of its savor when Marc entered his car. He was eager. Eager and early. The route to Vera's place from Takoma Park didn't have to go through downtown Silver Spring, nor past his financier's place in the Everett Building. Perhaps the joyous venom of the moment drove him there inadvertently, and then by the copy shop where he'd gotten his business cards. Marc realized he was early, and so stopped in the Parkway Deli for a coffee and Danish. Getting out of the car it came to him that he hadn't done something this extravagant, this expansive, for months. Within a wink, he remembered Ruth's investment account, and the magic of AUCH145. Even without the pilfering of Veritas, the password gave him the security to treat himself.

Returning to the car, the Cavalier's door lock seemed frozen. It wouldn't turn with the key. Struggling to open the door Marc came to consider it a replaceable piece of junk. With the dreams of income security from his new role, he pictured himself soon in the market for a new car. And thus ended any resistance to his material greed. In front of him was the pot of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow: the all American cornucopia of imagined consumer goods. Materialism was to blow out virtue one more time.

Thirty minutes later, after overcoming the frozen door lock, he found himself at Claridge House – a nicely designed facility with its own landscaping in the front. The rear of the Claridge bordered on a large junk yard. The cheaper apartments, like the one rented by Vera with a little help from the government, were on the lower floors, facing the back. He parked in the landscaped front parking lot, and took the elevator to the fourth floor. Vera opened the door.

With one foot already in the apartment, Marc introduced himself, "Hello, I'm Professor Buttervogel. But please call me Marc. I assume you are Mrs. Tableau."

"Well bless you, Professor, *do* come in!" Vera responded.

He perused both her and the surroundings. Tableau was a bit overweight, with long, sloppily brushed, unevenly cut, gray hair. It held an off-center brown hair comb that still had some of its rhinestones pasted to its spine. She was wearing a florid and long house coat fastened with a dozen or so small buttons. Her thick ankles were laced with blue veins. These led his eyes to a pair of rather old soiled, once-maroon slippers. Her face was set, rock like, and she was looking at him with what he could only identify the forced hospitality of a reluctant Christian. Tableau was the picture of congealed willpower impoverished by the inevitable forces of time. She wore glasses with a thick, bright green, translucent plastic frame.

The apartment presented itself easily: two doors off of the entrance room: presumably to a bath and to a bedroom. A small galley kitchen showed itself along the rear wall. It had a small counter where two could eat comfortably. Everything seemed clean except an old dirty percolator that had its light on. Toward the left of the kitchen area the wall was covered with a floral print wallpaper. They looked like roses. Affixed to them was a wooden three-barred Eastern Orthodox crucifix.

Just at the edge of the kitchen area, hanging on the wall was what appeared to be an old wooden rack holding some spoons. It was attached to the wall near the eating counter.

Off to his right he spied a relatively new, large flat screen, digital TV. It was on. A computer was also near it. Some overstuffed furniture with large flower print coverings and a small table were scattered about in the rest of the room. There were no other decorations on the walls, no pictures.

“Well, well. They have sent me a professor! Just because I can’t see well, I get a professor! I wonder what sort of fella they’d told me to call if I was blind *and* deaf! I didn’t think it would take a professor to solve my computer problems. Now maybe if you were comin’ over to help me with some bigger things: like what to do with my life. But then you’d have to be a sort of philosophy professor, not one of these computer ones. Where do you teach, and how come if you’re a professor you’re fixing my computer? I could tell it wasn’t charity when you told me about that minimum charge. If I could see, I’d surely go out of my way to figure out how to do it so I wouldn’t be paying you.” All of which was said a bit sardonically, but with an impish smile as an accompaniment.

“I’m a retired professor. They call people like me professor emeritus,” he said although this honorific title had not been given to him by the philosophers at Maryland. “I do this to stay busy.”

“Well, this should be a simple job. Want a cup of coffee?”

“Sure, that’d be nice.”

“Sugar? Milk?”

“A bit of sugar, if you have some.” Ambling over to the once white plastic percolator she took out two white coffee cups and mismatched saucers. but, in a gesture to his status as an educated man, she put them both back. She opened the other cabinet, and reached for what appeared to be much fancier cups. Then, as he watched, she leaned over to her little rack for a spoon. She carefully put his coffee, along with the sugar and a paper napkin, on the small table next to the arm chair. Vera then sat down on the sofa with her cup of coffee. “This is going to be an easy job for a professor. When you’re done I’ll be able to see enough of what is on the screen so I can do the rest myself next time. Do you have any kids, professor?”

“None.” Marc was impatient to get this chit-chat over with. He sipped the stale brew that had obviously sat far too long in the machine. Its bitterness led him to reach for the spoon and extra sugar. The spoon had a nice feel, and an old satin finish that instinctively led him to turn it over.

He was surprised to see an old cyrillic imprint of a silver smith, another certifying sterling, and what he took to be the Romanov seal of the Russian tsars. He estimated the spoon to be at least 160 years old. He looked at it again. It was an ornate, floral design, similar to many that were attributed to European silversmiths in the nineteenth century. How easy it would be to pocket the spoon, or even better, get the set off the wall. Marc was momentarily lost trying to develop a plan to gain possession of the spoons. She obviously would miss them.

Vera sat opposite, and although macular degeneration had ravaged her eyesight in the center of her field of vision, it was much kinder at the periphery. So while it appeared that she was watching his face, she actually was watching his hands, and had begun to tell him the story of her spoons: how at the time of the revolution the Tablinskovich family, her husband’s, had left with the spoons and a few gilded, beautiful Russian tea cups. These heirlooms had accompanied the family in their search

for asylum all around the world. “Would you want to see the other cups? They are each painted differently.”

“Sorry,” Marc responded, “What did you say?”

And although she more or less repeated herself, Vera had a notion that something was out of kilter. How could this professor have been so lost in thought over a spoon? “...and so I was wondering if you would want to see the other cups.”

“That would be fun, but I should also take a serious look at your computer, to insure that there is no difficulty in the software installation. Perhaps I should look at the computer first.” With Vera leading, he went over to the PC, carrying his cup and spoon. While he was behind, he slipped the spoon into his pocket. The PC was quite new, and he noted that it was not password protected. It seemed to have nothing on the desktop other than the software that came with it once it was up and running. “The machine doesn’t look like it has seen a lot of heavy use.”

“No it’s not. I can’t really see the screen, so I can’t use it. That’s why I need that vision enhancing software installed.”

“OK, let me just see whether you have a large enough hard drive and enough memory for the software.” After a moment he was able to report that all was ready. “We’re set, but I think I should go out and get some DVDs to make a back up of your system before we install further software. That will help in case something goes wrong.”

The viewing of the cups was thus put aside for the indefinite present and Marc left with a promise of only a short absence. In the elevator, Marc embellished his plan. He’d go to a precious metals or antique dealer to have the spoon assessed. If it was worth what he thought, he’d see where he could pick up similarly styled spoons out of stainless, go back and swap the new for the old when he installed the software. The blind old lady wouldn’t ever even notice the difference.

He decided to take the loop around Laytonsville Road back to downtown. It led him past the Walter Reed Annex. Although a hospital it was still a military base. Many of the personnel were more educated than at other bases, but the installation still had some of the typical properties of any military base. There were the small stores near the gates of the base: coffee shops, luncheon places, used car dealers, a tub reglazer, a small hardware store, a tire store.

And, passing the gate, there it was: the coin dealer, with a big sandwich board sign outside. The sign read, “**Sell Your Gold Here: We Meet Any Advertised Prices!**” Marc pulled over to see if there was someone in the store who could assess the spoon. The door was locked, and when Marc pressed the button, the salesperson inside buzzed him in. She was a brunette, with green eyes, dressed in a pale green cotton tee. The nipples on her perky breasts impressed themselves on the fabric. But he had business to transact. The brunette, however, wasn’t going to be rushed.

“Well, sir, good morning. Or is it already afternoon?” She turned around to look at the electric clock nailed to the dark wooden paneling behind her. “Nope. Just thought I’d sail right into my lunch hour but too early. Anyhow, you came knocking. What can I do for you?”

He pulled the spoon out of his pocket, and put it on a small black velvet pad that was lying on the counter. “I have a small set of these spoons. They are a family heirloom. I think they could be valuable. Could you give me some estimate of what I could get for four of them?”

Behind the counter, the young woman picked up the spoon and turned it over in her hand. “Honey, I could tell you what I’d pay for it, but that wouldn’t make sense. I don’t buy this sort of

thing. We just deal in coins – you know, from the guys at the hospital. For us, any other silver or gold we buy we just buy by weight. But this looks old, and is silver. What’s the story on it? If I was wanting to check it out, I’d go on line, or to an estate auction house. There’s one downtown in Silver Spring. What do you know about the details of this thing?” She put the spoon back on the counter.

A few meaningless pleasantries later, he was leaving the store, with a new destination: the downtown estate dealer. A refurbished sign in the window of the stand alone old house on Fenton Street read ‘Finer’s Estate Auctions and Antiques.’ No perky breasts and soft green tees here. Just Mr. Finer in a carefully tailored suit. Finer was all business, and business was not good.

“It’s a beautiful piece; I’ll look at it,” was Finer’s response when Marc displayed the spoon. Finer took out a small magnifying glass and examined the spoon carefully. Holding both the spoon and the magnifier, he then disappeared into a back room. After a few minutes, he came back with a big catalogue and the spoon. Putting the spoon back on the counter, he opened the catalogue to a page with pictures of spoons.

“Here it is. From Russia, mid 19th century. Sterling. Good condition. One isn’t very useful. A set would be nicer. Of course the listing value in the catalogue is totally out of date. Everyone now wants to sell things, to get cash. But no one wants to buy. I’d say hold it for 3 years and see what happens. You don’t want to sell it in this market.”

“Well, what’s its value in today’s market?”

“Here on the back of the handle, see the small AK?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the mark of a particular silversmith: Andrey Anotonovich Kovalsky. He was working mainly in the first half of the 19th century. Some of his work was for the Tsar’s family. And this seems to be one such spoon - here,” and now Mr. Finer turned the spoon so the light reflected off a small crest, “here you can see the Romanov seal.”

“Yes. That is what my parents told me too.”

“So the spoon has some history, some value.”

“Right.”

“I would assume it was made in about 1840 and, given that it is in good, but not excellent condition, it’s estimated value would be a bit below \$250. Perhaps \$245.”

“Why’d you say not excellent condition?”

“The scratches, and the wear. Excellent means like new.”

“Oh.”

“But as I was saying, no one is buying today. Everyone is a seller. You’d be surprised at the quality of things that you can find in pawn shops as families are trying to get cash for their heirlooms. Melt it down and you’d have about \$50. But even at a good auction today, one spoon like this is likely to fetch less than \$100. In a set it could go for more. But you could wait a long time to move the item. And then, you’d have to pay our commission. You could try to sell it on the internet, of course. Or to a small shop antique dealer like the ones in Kensington. I’d think either of those might work better for you. How long have you had it in the family?”

“Well, I have a small set.”

“Good. But still you have to figure that in the current market you’ll be lucky to get much more than 1/3 it’s catalogue value.”

“I can’t believe that when I am finally needing to sell, I can’t get its value.”

“Right. But everyone’s selling. Now’s the time to buy.”

“My luck. Never the best.”

“Well, if you need the money, you are lucky to have inherited the spoons.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Of course. Take your time. I’m always here.” A few pleasantries and Marc had left.

Marc left the establishment calculating. Almost \$250 each, perhaps more than a grand for a set. Taking Finer’s discount as gospel, he would still easily net \$330. Better than nothing. Marc smiled at his thought of settling in to a career as a petty thief in his retirement.

He proceeded to a pawn shop on Georgia Avenue in search of a cheap spoon of similar pattern. The pawn shops were lined up. One or two still had Christmas decorations in the window. Each had a display of what was available inside. Signs in the windows advertized easy money for just about anything. Just entering one of them put him light years away from the high dreams of riches he once held with Julia Burnham in her swank offices in the Everett Building.

In his second pawn shop he found a reasonably similar spoon. Not sterling, not old, it was made by Oneida. It came in a not so complete set of flatware for 6 table settings: \$12. Not quite the same heft, a tad shorter, rounder in the bowl, and with an unwanted dimple in the handle. Stainless, which had a darker hue than silver. Yet in other ways it wasn’t a bad match. Marc thought about her vision and decided it would do. He put the boxed purchase under his arm, and walked back to the car. In the car he took out 4 spoons from the box, slipped them into his pocket, and put the rest of the box on the back seat. He headed back to Mrs. Tableau concentrating on the details of the planned theft.

Paying attention to driving was beyond him. His hands sweated. He pulled over to quiet his nerves. He had never fully plotted a theft. Was he sure he wanted to go through with this? What if he were caught? But how could that be? He shook off the jitters and started up again.

He hadn’t gone but a few blocks when a cop turned on a siren behind him. He couldn’t believe he was on his way for a heist and the cops were pulling him over. The police woman came to his window.

“Don’t you pay attention to stop signs, old man?”

“Sorry sir, I didn’t see it.” Marc couldn’t believe he addressed her as “Sir.”

“They are bright red, big things at most busy corners. And passing through them is a lot of bucks and a mess of points. Let me have your registration and license.” She left to check him out and then returned.

“I’m so sorry Ma’am, I think I’m just very nervous. Some bad news today in the family, and what with no job to help out.”

“If you’re too nervous to drive safely you ought to pull over and rest. Look, I’ll give you a warning this time. But don’t drive if you can’t pay attention.”

Marc was a puddle of nerves. He couldn’t continue to drive. He pulled over, turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. He immediately felt nauseous. Suddenly it hit him that he was entering an entirely new world. He was for all practical purposes an alien, an outlaw – or planning to be. The police incident demonstrated this new social position upon Marc. This was a new dimension of vulnerability.

The realization was dizzying. Regardless of his lack of money, and his earlier lack of family support, he had never had this feeling of being outside the law, outside of his community. But it wasn’t only at the gut level that things altered. Marc’s new status forced him to reflect on what he had taught, and what he had avoided teaching. At the center of his professional concerns was an understanding of the relationship of the citizen to the state.

As he stood there by the side of the road, it was this understanding that he felt dissolve. Marc suddenly realized he had always focused on the state’s illegitimacy - in war, in segregation, and in sexism. Sure all the classics also dealt with the duties of citizenship, the rights of property, and the legitimacy of community laws. But he had skipped over those sections. He always presumed the perspective of a respected member of the community. The state was always the outlaw. Now he understood his relationship with his community was changing permanently. He had stepped outside the circle, outside the boundaries of the philosophical lessons he taught. As he calmed down he asked himself, *“Should I go through with this? Is it worth it?”*

But even as he asked the question he felt the answer loud and clear. Now was not a time for him to change course. *“If this is what is necessary, so be it,”* he bravely suggested to himself. And then just when he most needed it, a wonderful and refreshing stream of justification came to him from the renegades of political theory - Nietzsche, Genet, Sartre. One can’t be bound by law, by convention; it is necessary to see beyond them. With a new sense of purpose and righteousness he reentered the car. His heart was beating rapidly. His temples pounded and he imagined the sounds could be heard outside the car. He put his fingers on his temples to feel his pulsating arteries.

A bird crapped to the left of the crack in his windshield. It splattered widely. He looked up too late to see the bird. But Marc found the incident humorous and it calmed him.

So many times he had just taken what the world dished out. But this time, God damn it, he was going to fight back. He would grab what he could. Everyone else did. He took the old Chevy back on the road treating its old gears unkindly with a faster and more aggressive clutch. Marc was headed back to 2423 Lyttonville Road, Apt. 4F to get his.

While he drove he realized that his demeanor could make Mrs. Tableau suspicious. He practiced some meaningless pleasantries with a calm tone: “Hello Mrs. Tableau. Here I am, back with the needed media. I can’t believe it, but I found I had slipped your spoon into my pocket with my keys and junk. Well let’s get that old computer so it will be functional for you.”

No, too hurried. “Hi again Mrs. Tableau. I guess I wasn’t gone long enough to be missed! I hope you didn’t hunt for your spoon, cause I found it looped in my key ring when I got to the car. Let me clean it for you.”

“Christ, I need to be calmer.” But then all too soon, he was there, in the elevator of the Claridge house.

A thief, one who is to perform the theft as a magic act, in front of his victim, must be calm. Calm and collected. He must rehearse the conjuring trick until he is sure that the rabbit is certain to come out of the hat. The card he will identify *will* be the right one. Marc wasn't a professional. Indeed, he wasn't even an amateur. Marc was a first-timer. A first timer who was banking on the blindness of his victim, even as he was to be installing software so that she could see her computer screen. Marc wasn't prepared for his magic show.

CHAPTER 13: FIRST TIMERS

Marc had left and Vera had closed the door when she realized there hadn't been a man in her apartment for years: since the plumber came to fix the sink. Vera wondered just how long ago that had been. She turned to pick up the professor's coffee cup. It wasn't on the table, and that left her a bit disoriented. She sat down and tried to reconstruct where the cup might be. Recalling that the Professor had gone to the computer, Vera picked herself up, and walked over to the computer. There it was, her little treasure. Picking it up brought back a rush of memories of Ivan and the life they had shared. These left her so light headed that Vera couldn't make it to the sink. She sat back down on the heavy upholstered chair. Her big bosom heaved as she mourned her Ivan's passing.

On Saturday, she hadn't even thought about Valentine's Day, but now that it had been forgotten, it seemed monumental. How often they had given each other a small box of chocolate in the shape of a heart, and exchanged Hallmark greetings! They would laugh, even dance, in their cozy apartment across town, and have some liquor or a hot tea in these little cups. The dainty golden ropes covering the rims of the cups and the spoons tied her to her Ivan, and the Tablinkoviches. Their continued presence in her life brought her comfort and a sense of continuity.

Seven years ago, when Ivan had died, her sight was already going. Then, without him, she had moved to this apartment. It was smaller, more confining. But also more manageable. Sitting there, she recalled his scar, under his eye, but was a bit dissatisfied with herself when she could recall neither on which side it was nor what had caused it. She closed her eyes to get a clearer image, and dozed off.

When she woke, Vera was startled to find herself in the big chair. As the sleep lifted and her mind cleared, she realized she no longer had the coffee cup in her hand. That gave her at least two conscious reasons not to get up. First, she had no incentive to disturb the pleasant wave that had submerged her while daydreaming of her husband. She was also aware that the cup could be caught in the folds of her robe. So Vera began to check very carefully the acres of floral print clothing wrapped around the chair. There between the faded yellow roses and the still somewhat greenish ferns, she saw the glint of the golden rim: the cup, and a bit further down, with another glint, the saucer. Unharmful. Vera smiled at her luck, picked them up and ventured off toward the sink. But before arriving at her destination, it occurred to her that she didn't have her spoon. So off she went to hunt for it, first in the cushions of the chair and then by the computer, and then back to the big chair and its cushions. She was down on her knees trying to feel under the chair when the door knocker sounded. "One minute. Who is it?"

"It's me, Professor Buttervogel."

"Just a minute," she begged. Holding on to the arm of the chair, she silently thanked Jesus that her knees had held for yet one more trial, and enabled her slow rise to an erect state. "I'm coming, I'm coming," she said with an air of exhaustion. To herself she continued to wonder where that spoon might lie.

There stood the Professor, in the open doorway, a bit disheveled in his old gray poplin jacket that was zipped tight, discolored by dirt and moisture, carrying a black computer bag in what looked like very red, cold hands. His thinning gray hair was wet and he began talking nervously as soon as

the door was opened. "I'm back! Got the DVD, and I'll get to the software right off. Hope you weren't looking for your spoon: it got caught in my stuff, and I found it when I got to the car. Anyhow, I'll get it to you straight away," and with that, Professor Buttervogel began to search his pockets for the spoon, first casually, and then with a bit of agitation. Finally, unzipping his jacket, he searched his shirt pocket. With obvious relief he said "Ah, got it. I'll clean it; it's the least I can do." And with this, he briskly came into the apartment. He placed his bag on the chair by the computer, took off his jacket, hung it over the chair and turned to face her.

Vera, was a bit surprised at the coincidence of the professor immediately mentioning the very spoon she had just gotten on her knees to find. But she was relieved and believed that these good things happened to her because of her fealty. She stood there, unconscious that her house coat was quite open now, and her night gown showed her off in a manner that was clearly not to her advantage.

Since Ivan's death, no eyes, not even hers, had peered behind that house coat. After Ivan's exit, Vera had not found it necessary to keep up appearances. Only her macular degeneration had led her to doctors. Her age had been advancing in any case, but under the housecoat, aging had occurred beyond the visible, like rot behind wallpaper. The Professor, on the other hand, could avoid neither the evidence of her decline nor the reminder her condition triggered regarding his own sad state. It was in this visual assessment that he noticed the cup and saucer, still in Vera's hand. "Oh, let me clean the cup too," he said briskly, and forcefully took them from her grasp.

Unfortunately, as he pulled at the saucer, the cup lost its balance and began its inevitable trajectory obeying Newton's finding that all heavenly bodies attract each other. Its first collision was with the arm of the big chair, and there its gilded rim sparkled beautifully golden in the lamp's light. It ricocheted off the cushion, and thence onto the rug on the floor. For Vera the alteration in her environment couldn't have been more drastic had the door been opened to a thief or a rapist. Within seconds her equilibrium, her quiet seance with her poor deceased Ivan had been replaced by what she projected surely must be the destruction of her heirloom. "How could you? You destroyed it! Why did you grab it from me?"

How indeed, was also in Marc's mind. He had to overcome this nervousness. What was he thinking? Pick up the cup, gently: please don't be broken. "I am sorry. Really. Look, it is fine. I'm going to clean this, and the spoon. Really, nothing broken." He went to the sink, turned on the water, made a splash or two, and put the cup on the counter to dry. He then carefully turned to take the remaining spoons from the spoon rack, and replace them with those that he had purchased at the pawn shop. Ms. Tableau was fully distracted, having now noticed that her robe needed buttoning. Flustered, she had turned her back on the Professor.

Happy with the transaction, and sure that the rabbit had been successfully pulled out of the hat, he moved to the PC with the confidence that had escaped him when he had entered the apartment. A few minutes later, the software installed, he was sitting next to Vera, and instructing her on the use of Magic Lens 5.1. A bit later, he was gone, and Vera was alone. She sat at the PC playing with her newly visible toy. First a game, then the web. The Washington Post. Obama was giving GM a lot more money. \$4 billion. Who knew? She smiled at her renewed connection to the outside world. That professor, he knew what he was doing.

She got up slowly and maneuvered to the big chair. A glint of gold from the rug caught her eye. Carefully she bent down. There it was, most certain: a chip from her cup. She picked it up very gingerly and went over to the counter. Vera turned over the cup and felt with her finger. It always

had chips on the rim, but yes, here was a new one. She felt a wave of sadness roll over her. Everything breaks. Everything dies. Instinctively, she turned to gain solace from her spoons.

They seemed so dark hanging in that wooden rack on the wall. It must be later than she thought. But no, the clock still showed early afternoon. She turned on the light, and looked out the window. The day was actually clearing up a bit. There was some blue sky visible. Whatever rain had come down seemed over. But the spoons still looked dark. Vera couldn't figure out why her eyes were behaving this way. She picked one spoon off the rack, if only to fondle it, to regain the comfort she had lost when she woke up from her nap.

But at that very moment comfort traveled to a different planet. Instead of her beloved spoon, the implement in Vera's hand gave her a strange feeling. Nothing about it felt right. It was too smooth, too cold, too light, too small. The handle didn't feel right. She put it on the counter and took another spoon out. It felt the same. Indeed, it fit right on top of the first spoon: a match. Feeling light-headed, she held on to the edge of the counter. Vera was, perhaps for the first time, doubting her senses.

She turned those spoons over and over trying to make sense of the anomalous input that came from those hands. Slowly a conjecture formed in her mind. Perhaps the anomaly wasn't in her head and hands, but in the spoons themselves. Perhaps these weren't her spoons. And then, as reality began to clarify, she suddenly screamed, "Son of a bitch, he stole my spoons!" loud enough to grab the attention of her ancestors and Ivan, were they up to listening. She picked up the remaining spoons. They were all the same.

Not bothering to get dressed, Vera put on her rain coat. She put the spoons in her pocket, and slammed the door behind her. Methodically she marched down the hall knocking at her neighbor's doors. After 3 failures, Jim was in at 4B. Jim was a bit younger and of good sight. Skipping all pleasantries, displaying her anger, she cut to the chase. "I think I was just robbed. By a damn professor even. Oh, Jesus, please forgive me! I think he took my husband's family's spoons but I can't read with these damn eyes. Oh, Jesus, please forgive this sinner. Can you just read the back of these spoons for me? Do they have a little stamp to show they are silver?"

Jim was an elderly, big, black man. The downturn hadn't treated him kindly. He had lost his part time job as a night time janitor in the Discovery building. Losing one part time janitor meant that the assistants to the deal makers at Discovery no longer got their desks dusted twice a week. But for Jim, it was more serious. Part time meant no benefits. Part time meant no unemployment check. He was stretching everything to live on his Social Security check, and it wasn't working. Every so often his daughter would come over and bring him a big bag of groceries to ease the pressure.

Jim never spoke very much and had certainly learned, back in Alabama, not to initiate conversations with cussingly angry white folk. Seeing the fury in Vera's eyes, his speech was reduced to an exhaled soft whistle. He then gently took one of the spoons from her hand, and slowly examined it. Then speaking slowly, in a tone that showed some self-deprecation and roots, he said, "You know, Vera Mam, I ain't had a lot of silver in my hands. I sure don't know what kinda stamp they'd put on a spoon to show it was silver. But this one sure as hell don't say silver. It says, clear as day 'Stainless' and then 'China.' If you bought em thinking you was buyin' silver you sure enough been robbed, lady. Who done it to you?"

"I didn't buy it, Jim. The spoons were from my husband's family. He was from Russia and they brought it over when they came."

“You don’ say? So this here are spos’d to be old from Russia. But I think these a lot newer than we are. These ain’t them. And if you didn’ buy it, Ms. Vera, how you sayin’ you was robbed?”

So Vera recounted what happened, with all the details, including the chipped cup. Reliving the story, Vera’s anger reached a new pitch. Jim listened to it all, right there at the door. He could both hear and see her tension rising. His naturally protective soul (the essence of being a fine janitor) led him to invite her in. “Why don’t you come in and sit yerself down. You’s really gettin’ yerself riled up right now, Ms. Vera. I’ll make us some coffee. Then you can figure out what to do. You’re sure gonna get your spoons back from that professor. You gonna whip his ass. But not right now. Right now, you needs a seat. You’ve had a bad day.”

She entered, but they didn’t have coffee. The coffee had been a ruse. Jim was too hard done by to have coffee. He had a small bit of stretched bourbon. He was nursing that along, and he wasn’t about to share it. Indeed, he hoped it would not be emptied before he got another job. But coffee came with his daughter, and she hadn’t been to see him for a while. “You been done bad by,” he continued as she sat down. Jim and she had cordial relations, but she’d never been inside his apartment. Vera knew he had a cat; she could smell it. But she didn’t spy the animal.

“So what ’cha gonna do, Ms. Vera?” Jim probed.

“I’ll tell you what I want to do. I’d like to take the gun my good man Ivan left me when he passed and shoot that professor.”

“You got a gun?” was Jim’s surprised response.

“I sure do. And ammunition.”

“You got a license?”

“No, I never got one.”

“You ever shot somethin’?”

“No, but there’s got to be a first time for everything, you know.”

“That’d be a real bad idea, Ms. Vera. I mean, you don’t even see so good, if you don’ mind me statin’ the truth.”

“I know. And like that song says, ‘Jesus don’t like killin’ no matter what the reason for.’ But I sure gotta think about it. I mean, I was robbed blind in my own home. I need to protect myself. What would I do out on the street if he came up to rob me again?”

“Now that would be a nasty situation, Ms. Vera.”

“I need to protect myself.”

“With a gun? You done said that county lady at welfare told you ‘bout that professor. Why don’t you just call that welfare lady up on the telephone and tell her what happened. She’d likely fix him good and get yer spoons back.”

And so it came about that before the afternoon school busses were rolling to pick up the kids from middle school, Frances Bussa’s phone rang. Sitting in her office Frances was consulting with her young assistant, Margery Whitman. Noting that it was a client, she pressed speaker, and with all the speed that our modern era can muster she was talking to the same Mrs. Veritas Tableau who

had so resisted help once upon a long time ago. But today, Mrs. Tableau was not the docile handicapped client who was speaking to her guardian angel.

No, Vera did not sound like the Vera Frances knew at all. Rather she resembled a ball of fury, a firework launched to the sky ready to explode in a memorable display. And when Frances said she would get all the spoons back and get to the bottom of this affair, Vera only screamed, “You better. Cause I’m calling the cops. Now.” And hung up.

The chief of Montgomery County Office of Disability Services was taken aback by this most unexpected information. Frances Bussa hadn’t become a bureau chief without the ability to push emergencies back from the edge. Without batting an eye, she informed Margery that she would take care of the matter, ushered her quickly through the door, and looked at her watch. Frances needed to leave. She had promised the kids that she would be home when they got home from school today. This mess with Vera would have to be handled very quickly. She would straighten it out by going directly to her neighbor. Nothing need escalate.

Frances grabbed her coat and hat, pulled the gloves from her pockets and tore down to her car. She was gone in a flash. Her image of her professorial neighbor was morphing at light speed. Once a needy, elderly, recluse, he had become a predator of the helpless. How could she have fed this wolf names that he used for larceny. How could this bastard dare to tear down her reputation of fifteen years. Fifteen years as an honest, decent, hard working civil servant! How could he? Who the hell does he think he is? She was hoping she wouldn’t need a lawyer. Hopefully nothing else had been stolen. She was winding through traffic on the way home. Almost at the beltway. Hopefully he still had the loot. Her Blackberry was ringing inside her purse. She fumbled with the purse as she drove. Frances was neither a careful nor a safe driver with her attention now totally diverted in three: the phone, the traffic, and the damn neighbor. It rang some more. She had it. Someone honked wildly on her left. She had swerved: almost hit another car. She flicked the phone on. It was Tableau again. “I called the police. You’d better not be his accomplice, cause I’m going to have him strung up, and if you’re involved, I’ll get you too.” Tableau hung up. Things were unraveling.

Frances slowed up, and tried to concentrate on the road and the problems, but she couldn’t. She pulled out at Colesville, and wound her way to home through the small suburban streets that went up and down the hills. Marc’s old Chevy was in the driveway. And she could see him sitting in the car. She pulled into the driveway behind him, and jumped out of the car. Like in the cop movies. She banged on the door. He answered, quite serenely. “What’s the matter,” he wondered.

Wonder is ephemeral and this wonder didn’t last long. Frances was a pit bull, not a policewoman. There were no Miranda rights. The rage of betrayal made sure of that. After laying out the charges, and regaining the spoons, she announced any cordial relations between her and this scurrilous rat that just happened most unfortunately to be her neighbor were well over and done with. “And did you steal from anyone else, you low scum? No? Well that had better be true or believe me I’ll make sure you aren’t ever around again to be a predator on my county’s helpless. A professor of ethics? Bull shit! Even Jesus Christ himself would shun you.” And yes, he could assume that anything he had told her would go to the police if Mrs Tableau’s charges were pressed even though the spoons were repossessed.

By the time his neighbor finished delivering her message and stormed off into her house, the old Professor was devastated. He was as alone as when his mother told him that his father wouldn’t be coming home from the war. The center did not hold. Maybe it never did. How he wished for a

companion, a community, someone to speak to. Someone who would tell him it would be all right. Melissa. Elsa. Julia. Someone. And now he had burned his bridges with the one live connection to his community. That was clear enough. He was alone.

And what did he have to show for it? He had stolen a few old spoons – a petty theft. He hadn't even broken into the accounts of that other woman. Ruth Dedrick. Unbelievable bad luck. He had been stigmatized prematurely. What was he to do? How could he fight back? The fixers on Wall Street had taken away his lifetime's earnings. He wouldn't be able to hire a lawyer. He felt adrift like a piece of flotsam. In the past, when the currents took him away from his moorings, he had saved himself by clinging to some other floating scrap: a student about to fail and now needing support, or a department chair who knew Marc couldn't deliver research but who needed the moneys from his grants.

Now in this moment of despair, Marc grieved for his lack of support. Others had a family. His mother and father were dead. His sister too. As he bemoaned his sorry state, he knew that there was only one relative left whom he could call: his half-brother. This sibling whom Marc had long ago discarded. Now, at the end of his rope, Marc would have to plead for help from this long spurned relative. And although Marc at first refused to admit that he would be reduced to this outreach, he began to rehearse the conversation in his mind. Marc searched for phrasing that could preserve his dignity. The task occupied him fully. Night fell on the small house on Tulip Avenue in Takoma Park before he reluctantly picked up the phone to contact Michael Trowley.

After a restless night, he awoke to another gray dawn cold enough to be on the cusp of snow, but more likely to lead to one of those ice storms Washington residents so hate. Marc felt a strange pounding in his head. He didn't bother turning on the radio. Nor did he slip something on over his dirty briefs. He shuffled into the kitchen, now much more certainly the old beaten man than he had been only a day earlier. Marc had left a phone message asking Michael to call back, but Michael hadn't answered the phone. Nothing yet.

He put together some edibles charitably labeled breakfast: burnt toast, bitter boiled coffee, some cheap mixed fruit jelly. Wondering how he would fill his day, waiting for his brother's call, he ate slowly. Strange thoughts ran through his head, *"What is prison food like? Does a prisoner get breakfast? Is it served in the cell, or in a dining hall? No call. Fuck Michael!"*

"What happens to old prisoners? Do they get released early? Still no call. Where was Michael now that he was needed? Just like him: never answers when one of the family calls for help. He didn't even speak up when we asked what caused Mom's fall. Jake said she had slipped down the stairs and Michael stood silent. Right. Slipped or pushed? Ask Jake about that one. He'd know. Tell me, Michael! She was your Mom too. You owe me, God damn it. Call."

But the phone didn't ring and Marc got up and got dressed before sitting down again with a second cup of coffee at the kitchen table by the phone. And the phone didn't ring. He turned on the radio. One minute worth of noise and he turned it off. Anger welled up in him like hot lava pushing to get out. The building pressure was intense. How he had been screwed! And there was absolutely no one to help.

The phone! The phone was ringing. Marc grabbed the offering. His brother was tossing him a lifeline. "Hello, Michael?"

“Michael? I’m not Michael, who ever he is. This is Mrs. Tableau, you son of a bitch. Excuse me, Jesus. I just wanted to tell you I called the police, and I hope they hang you from a God damn lamp post. Oh, excuse me Jesus!”

“Mrs. Tableau, please listen to ...”

“Why should I do that?”

“Mrs. Tableau, please. I gave your spoons back to Mrs Bussa. You will have them again. I don’t know what came over me. I didn’t mean to steal them.”

“Like shit you didn’t you bastard. Oh Lord Jesus, forgive me. Protect my tongue from evil, dear Lord. You will be going straight down, Professor. Yes sir. One hell of a professor you must have been. To hell, that’s where you’ll be going.”

“Mrs. Tableau, please...” But she slammed down the receiver and Marc was left in his kitchen, again alone. His heart was pounding. His temples throbbed worse than ever. He looked for his blood pressure medicine, but didn’t see it in the mess that was his kitchen. “Please, Michael. Please! Just this once, help me. Please Michael.” He was shouting at the phone – full volume now. “I’m not staying here for the cops to get me. I am not going to prison. I gotta get out of here. Michael, Michael, please don’t ignore me!”

He dialed Michael again in New York. No answer. Michael’s desperate half-brother left another desperate message. He grabbed his old jacket and pulled his keys out of the pocket. Storming out of the house, he went into his old Chevy slamming the door on the seat belt’s buckle. The violent collision of the door and the car knocked some slush and rust off the frame. He turned on the motor, the radio, and the wipers, and sat there. Where was he going? What was he going to do? He didn’t have any idea. But he was getting the hell out of Takoma Park. And fast.

Up New Hampshire Avenue, he turned to get on the Beltway, West, then north on 270. And as the traffic thinned he gunned the little car. It vibrated a bit. The wheels weren’t properly balanced. The tires were bald. The road was surfaced with the usual wintry mix and it slid a bit on the slick. Marc may have been desperate, but he wasn’t suicidal. He slowed up. Thirty miles and he saw a sign for Frederick. Shepherdstown was down the road. He found comfort in that. It gave him a tentative destination.

The notion that perhaps he knew where he was going calmed him down. He tried once again to identify his options. In the freezing drizzle, his car was cold. The visibility wasn’t great. A big rig was in front of him, pulling away from a stop sign. He pulled up and stopped. His head throbbed. In front of him, off to the left was a big sign. Like the road, it was all familiar, but he had never paid attention to it before. The sign took his breath away:

SHARPSBURG ARSENAL!

LAST CHANCE!

BEST PRICES IN MARYLAND!

GUNS, AMMO, CIVIL WAR MEMORABILIA!

300 YARDS ON YOUR LEFT

He tried to shake off the pain in his head. His mind tried to focus on the sign, the promise of guns. It brought back early memories with Elsa, in Turkey. Magnetically, he was drawn, first to the

left, then down the drive and finally, into the parking lot. Marc stayed focused on his memories even as the tension rose within him and the pain in his head increased.

He tried to orient himself by just looking out the windshield. But the raindrops obfuscated his reality. The radio's music was frenetic, some modern piece that began to dissolve into noise. He turned on the windshield wipers. The pressures from his reality were magnified and transformed into the throbbing in his head as he was getting out of the car. His mind seemed under attack: not only from his outlaw state, but also from the pressure building in his head. He felt dizzy and he held onto the door handle of the car to steady himself. But still he turned and walked up to the Arsenal's door.

The phone in Marc's kitchen rang. No one answered it. It rolled over to the answering machine. Michael said, "Well, old bro, just got your messages, and called right away, but you aren't there. Wonder where you are. Its been so long not hearing from you. And now you aren't there. I'll call you back in fifteen minutes. You sound pretty upset. Try to get a grip. If there's anything I can do, you can count on me. I'm glad you called. It's been far too many years." In fifteen minutes Michael left the next message, "Well, call me when you get in." During the next ten hours or so, Michael didn't leave any more messages, but he called very often. Then he called the State Police.

CHAPTER 14: SINKING

Gene Austermann did not change out of his US Park Ranger uniform when he left his job as night watchman at Harper's Ferry. He had put his sidearm and his holster, along with his hat, in his locker at headquarters. For someone in security, trained to use a gun, to deal with medical emergencies, to handle a car in dangerous on and off road chases, his was the easiest of jobs. Five nights a week in the back country of West Virginia, Gene patrolled the deserted streets of the historical site in a converted electric golf cart. The worst that ever happened had occurred late one warm autumn night.

A bear stood its ground on the road. It hadn't been frightened by the quiet golf cart. When Gene honked, the bear was attracted by the high pitched 'BEEP BEEP' of the horn. Gene was scared as the bear ambled closer to the golf cart. He knew one shouldn't run from a bear. And even if he turned the cart around and floored it, the bear could easily beat the cart. He also knew that as a park ranger he couldn't shoot the bear and keep his job.

Without hesitation Gene did the next best thing. He threw the bear his last Payday candy bar. Thus distracting the bear with peanuts and caramel, Gene was able to hightail it (at about 15 mph) to the headquarters' building and lock himself inside. The bear hung around long enough for Gene to take a snooze. In the morning the bear had gone and Gene did one more patrol of the park. When he arrived back at headquarters he was happy to see the next guard ready to relieve him. When she asked if there were any notable events on his watch he didn't identify any. Gene made no entry in the event log. But the next night when Murphy Longstreet, the guard for weekend nights, took his rounds, the bear was more aggressive. And Murphy, a part timer with less training, wasn't in the habit of carrying a candy bar. The shooting of the bear was in all the local newspapers. It got a big play on a local PETA website. Murphy lost his job. But everyone else would know "nothing ever happened" on Gene's watch.

This morning he was looking forward to getting back to his cozy double-wide home in the Sharpsburg woods. He'd make himself an omelet and, if he could catch an early sleep, he would get a start on his taxes before going back to work. Gene exited the Park's headquarters and took a sip of chicken soup from his thermos. Walking to his Jeep he didn't look forward to scraping the thin film of ice from its windshield. Ranger Austermann could not know that he was well on his way toward his first heroic act as a security guard, even if it was to occur off duty.

Gene pulled out of the employee parking lot and headed East into Maryland and then North to Maryland 34. With icy roads he was not rushing home, and when he got to the old Arsenal's sign he glanced as he always did toward the parking lot on his left. The beat up Chevy in the lot caught his eye but it wasn't until he had driven about half a mile further down the road that it registered that he had seen exhaust coming out of the tail pipe and wipers on in the car. He checked his watch. Wednesday, 10:15. No way anyone should be in the lot today: the store was closed. So Gene turned his Jeep around and made it back to the lot.

Pulling next to the old Cavalier, Gene could see for certain that something was wrong. The windows were steamed up, wipers on, motor running. Gene honked but got no response. He got out of the Jeep and knocked on the window of the beat-up Chevy. An elderly man was slumped over the wheel, motionless, wedged in an awkward position against the driver's door. The old man's only response to the knocking was an awkward twitch. Gene went over to the passenger side,

smashed the window and gained entrance. The old driver was unshaven, twitching, and mouthing some unintelligible guttural sounds but otherwise quite unresponsive. Gene turned off the motor and, pulling out his cell, called for an ambulance.

Earlier, Marc had stared at the weathered plastic sign with the bold lettering next to the door. He was shocked to find that he couldn't decipher the meaning of the sign which to others clearly stated, "Sharpsburg Arsenal: Guns, Civil War Memorabilia. Prices you can't beat. Closed Wednesday." Certainly this was strange. Something was dreadfully wrong. Those very linear squiggles on the plastic were carefully printed to communicate something. He knew that. He knew that he was being called on to read, but for some reason, he couldn't. He tried the door, but it didn't open. As he turned, frustrated to go toward the car, he was surprised that his right leg didn't want to facilitate his rotation.

Rather quickly, Marc's perception of reality was changing into something very new, very threatening. His body seemed to detach from his mind. He found it increasingly difficult to summon the will to get his arms and legs to help him move toward his car. When he had gone the few yards to the car, he worked hard to recall what he was doing in this place. What had he planned to do, now that he was back in the car? With tremendous effort he forced himself to remember that this was not where he was to stay. The car would get him to a place where he could get help. But only a Herculean effort over many minutes allowed him to get the key in the lock and to turn on the motor.

The task exhausted him, and he slumped against the door. In this state, he began inadvertently to recapture early memories. He relived his father leaving for war. And then the entrance of his stepfather in his life. Then thought seemed to leave him. Time oozed by until he came to hear a knocking somewhere in his environment.

Why would someone knock so persistently? What ever it was, the knocker didn't seem threatening and so Marc concluded that he was to greet the intruder. He tried to say something friendly but his own unintelligible utterings frightened him. And what were these loud sounds coming from this stranger's face? Marc came to realize that his mind was slipping toward uncontrolled dissolution.

The ambulance took Marc to the ER at the Seventh Day Adventist hospital in Gaithersburg. Gene and the crew had gotten Marc's wallet out of his pocket before placing him on the ambulance's gurney. And although all the identifying and insurance information was in the wallet, the admission staff accosted Marc with a bunch of questions before admitting him as a stroke patient.

To Marc, all this activity appeared purposeless. People were loudly demanding many things of him. Words were being thrown at him and his mind was having increasing trouble fending off their rude sounds. In his fragile mind, the torrent of words crashed like bricks through window panes. They appeared as aggressive actions without intelligible purpose. When asked his name he tried to give it. Hearing his own unintelligible response so terrified him that he vowed not to utter any further sounds.

He was rushed from one room to another, from one big machine to another. Blood was taken from him, tubes inserted. He could make no sense of this. But he did come to believe that these people were trying to help him. At each new turn, there were new faces demanding new things, not

waiting for the answers he couldn't, and wouldn't give. Time seemed to move ever so slowly. Finally, he fell into a long sleep.

In New Rochelle, not far from the streets mentioned in Ragtime, Michael Trowley had eaten his dinner in silence with his third wife, Mary: a pretty blonde almost thirty years his junior. He sat, as was the custom of his father Jake, at the head of the table, in an armed dining chair. She sat at the foot of the table, closer to the door to the kitchen on a slightly less formal chair.

His daily desire for meat conflicted with her natural predilection for vegetables and her expressed compassion for the fate of cows. Not that the citified Mary had ever petted a live cow. But from the many hearings of Ella Jenkins singing *Did You Milk the Cow* in her Manhattan living room, Mary had absorbed an empathy for this beatific mammal and her other domesticated brethren. Michael, on the other hand, had divorced two other shapely damsels for less annoying traits than her meatless cuisine. But tonight domestic spats gave way to the far weightier question of fraternal obligations.

Mary had never met Marc, and had heard very little about him until Michael had called her from his office to inform her of Marc's two desperate messages on his office's answering machine. From her point of view, as the potential privileged inheritor of the Trowley fortune, the sudden intrusion of what sounded like a very needy sibling was not a positive development. Michael, on the other hand, was affected by the calls in a different direction.

"What did you do about those two phone calls you got from your half-brother?" Mary now inquired. Michael heard a strongly self-interested and defensive tone in the question. He had been feeling regrets all day. Without children of his own, Marc was the only relative he had left. He looked around at the dining room, where he had eaten so many meals. He recalled sitting here with his parents and his two siblings, Melissa, and Marc. Time oozed through the space and formed a barrier between the two Trowleys. Mary waited and then asked again, "Did you reach Marc?"

"I called a few times, but no one picked up. Finally, I got upset enough to call the Maryland police, but last I heard, they knew nothing. They'll call once they know his whereabouts."

"How do you feel about those calls? I mean you never really talked about Marc."

"Yeah, I know. I've been remembering him sitting right here, around this table. In my memory he was so often angry and in trouble with Father. They never really got along. That's why I have the house, and the business. Somehow, today, I realized how upset Marc must be to have called. I mean, even when Melissa died he didn't call. Imagine, he was so angry that he had the funeral home call me to announce my own sister's death. I can't get over it. I can't understand it."

"It sounds like you don't owe him anything."

"Maybe. But that's so simplistic. I am upset about the relationship. It wasn't because of me or something I had done: it was Dad and Marc who never got along. Still I feel guilty. I can't do anything about Marc's memories of *his* father or *my* Dad. Certainly, the old man wasn't easy. Mom and we kids took a lot of beatings from him. I didn't like him either. But I didn't know any other household. Marc and Melissa must have been completely alienated. But they didn't confide in me. They kept to themselves. I was out there all alone."

"Well, the only story I know about him, is when he and Melissa left you when your mother had been badly beaten by your father. You recall that you begged Marc to take you with him."

“Right. Sort of. Marc was pretty short changed. Look. I got everything. The business, the house, even the fucking dining room table. And what did Marc or Melissa get? Nothing.” For a few minutes silence reigned around the big table. Then Michael continued.

“Actually, the thing about Melissa was much worse. She had come home to help after Mom died. She helped raise me. For years, she was the main adult in my life. She paid a terrible cost for this. Dad’s violence, and the loss of much of her youth. I was worried sick about Melissa’s anorexia. Later, for years, I begged her to go for treatment. And then, when Marc realized she was going to die of anorexia, he didn’t tell me. I didn’t know.”

“Looks to me that you don’t owe the bastard anything.”

“That’s pretty one-sided. He *is* my half-brother. The only rel I have left. And he is begging me for help.” Michael looked at his watch.

“I’m worried. Marc hasn’t called me back, and I have heard diddly from the police. I guess I’ll call once more before it’s too late. Then let’s go to bed. In the worst case, we’ll have to see what happens in the morning.”

Breakfast was never a time for sharing. What with Michael in his blue suit, striped tie, rushing down his black coffee and bagel, with the Journal’s Markets section spread in front of him and keys to the Jag in his hand. Michael’s head was already involved in the problems of the day and the commute. Heaven forbid that something alter that schedule - such as misplaced keys or a delayed paper delivery.

And these days it didn’t take any outside alteration to create problems. The problems of the market drops had crashed down on Michael’s small business like an avalanche. There was no indication that things were going to get better. Michael knew that in this climate, there was no market for his business. No one would buy it. Surely, no bookie would bet even on his firm’s survival. The downward thrust of the market was digging the grave of his clients and his firm prematurely. Luckily it was a grave he was sure he had avoided.

Way before the opening bell and the market’s first moments, phones were ringing. Customers were worried and not eager to hear him say “try to hold the course” another time. By lunch time he was worn out. He told his secretary to hold all calls - he was going out for lunch and a drink.

But no sooner had he put down the phone when it rang again. His secretary, who had in his mind, most unfortunately aged over the years, apologized, “It’s the Maryland State Police.”

Michael sat down heavily, and took the call. His brother had been admitted to some Adventist hospital in Gaithersburg with a stroke. He took this in slowly, and then quietly hung up. He exhaled and thought back to all those days as a child, all those days he had wanted to have a big brother or sister who would protect him from the violence at home and do things with him.

These longings were too old to be fulfilled, but the communications regarding Marc’s distress had reawakened them. His mind turned to his sister. Almost a quarter century ago Marc hadn’t bothered to tell him about his sister’s death. So much – on top of that first abandonment. Still there lay the long dormant hope for a tie to his big brother. This brother who had the courage to stand up to his brutal father. The brother who lifted his sister out of the room of violence. The brother who Michael had always hoped would shelter him from the storm.

But the hopes were never realized. Picking up the phone had rekindled the memory of that other phone call announcing Melissa’s death. He could hear the indifferent voice of the director of

the Collins Funeral Home greeting him from Maryland And then intoning “Your brother Marc has asked me to extend my condolences for the passing of your sister, Melissa.” The message had driven his anger to a pitch theretofore not known. Michael took it for what it was: an ugly effort by Marc to push him out of the family. Melissa had dropped dead, emaciated, on an elliptical trainer at a gym when she was with Marc. Heart attack. His sister.

Now, his brother: incapacitated with a stroke. All these thoughts rushed through and then a sudden sense of great loneliness, sadness, and self-pity. Placing his elbows on his large oak desk and cradling his head in his large hands he closed his eyes.

After a period, he regained some equilibrium and tried to think through the situation. Marc had called for him to reconnect – to rejoin the family to help him get out of some jam. Perhaps Michael should be generous. The losses couldn’t be helped. His family history was set. But the future, that might be Michael’s to shape.

Pulling himself together was what Michael was best at. It had supported his success in business and now led him to plan a response to his brother’s calls for help. He asked his secretary to call to inform Mary of the details. Late Thursday night found Michael in a Holiday Inn Express near the hospital. His secretary had set up meetings with the attending neurologist and nurse of the stroke section of the hospital.

Before Friday noon, Marc was staring into another stranger’s face. But instead of being accosted once again by impatience and yelling, he was happy to experience a soft warmth, and a welcoming voice. The voice was encouraging Marc to believe that this man was different. Rather than just screaming words to communicate the impossible, this man had given him a long hug and a kiss on his cheek. Marc found the man holding his hand, and even massaging it. It gave Marc comfort, and hope. Marc felt that this was a friend he could trust. After piecing some hints and facial expressions together, Marc believed that this man would come again to love, to help him.

Michael let Marc sleep, and talked to the nurses to figure out what needed to be done. When Marc woke from his nap, there he was: this same elegant man, in a blue dress shirt, wearing a striped tie. Only early on Monday did Michael leave. And then he left so early as to be able to arrive directly at his office in time for the market opening. Even during those first days Michael had seen improvement. Physiotherapists had demanded that Marc walk, albeit with a walker, and only a very few steps. Marc, though unable to talk, seemed to be regaining the recognition of some words, and with them, perhaps, some access to memory. But how, and even where, Marc would survive was difficult to pin down.

Michael took these days as if they were given to him by Providence. It was to be his opportunity to repair the dozens of years of misunderstandings that had passed between the two brothers.

Everyone who drives regularly on that great eastern highway, I-95, can give witness to Maryland’s state mottos and slogans. For years “Maryland: More Than You Can Imagine” adorned the signs welcoming drivers from Delaware. But since, over time, the imaginations of Americans were increasingly impaired, the implications of the slogan began to diminish in importance. Indeed, eventually, the slogan implied nothing.

So in February, 2007, Governor Ehrlich took it upon himself to replace the broken slogan. Not an intellectual fly-weight, Ehrlich knew that to raise Maryland’s rank as a tourist destination the slogan was more manipulable than the State’s lack of gorges, glaciers, volcanoes and exotic black

sand beaches. So he authored the slogan's change to "Seize the Day off – Maryland." Although Maryland is surrounded by hordes of people, the expected bulge in tourism never developed. The empty hotel rooms in the grand destinations of Baltimore, Rockville and Landover caused by such ineffective sloganeering, were understood to be a political threat by the reigning politicians. Indeed, eventually, faced with such poor wordsmanship, the voters of the great state kicked Governor Ehrlich out of office. They replaced him by what could only be hoped to be a more talented man of words: Martin O'Malley. O'Malley was a renowned policy wonk. Everyone expected the new governor could author phrases to bait Maryland's renowned tourist traps and capture the tourist dollars of Americana.

But at the very hour the governor was drafting his proposal to replace the brilliant official motto of the state (*Fatti Maschii, Parole Femine* – or loosely translated: "Manly Deeds, Womanly Words"), John Doe, the State Director of Senior Services Planning and Budgeting entered the Governor's office in Annapolis with a dire warning. Budget cuts brought about by the economic downturn were projected to hurt many seniors, and this could have horrible political consequences.

Being quick witted, the Governor recognized this immediate crisis required his attention. In light of the recession, the rewording of the state motto and slogans had to be postponed. The Governor put aside his pen and legal pad, and questioned his director of services.

To the Governor's horror, this bureaucrat had not yet developed a ready solution to deal with the problems he was reporting upon. Time weighed heavily, and no amount of their brain storming seemed to clarify plausible alternative policy implications. Finally, after what the Governor's log shows to be more than 12 minutes of discussion, O'Malley choose a course of action: He would find a new director. The hapless bureaucrat, John Doe, would be sacked. Fortunately, John Doe had conveniently discovered a need to spend more time with his family and sacking was unnecessary.

In what appeared to be another far removed universe, on that same gray morning of February 19, 2009 Frances entered the County Welfare Department. She folded her umbrella and knocked her feet on the mat to loosen the slush she picked up in the parking lot. She was in a rush to get to her desk. Frances was determined to put down in writing her understanding of Vera Tableau's complaint. Further she planned to speak to a lawyer in the legal division about possible actions that might have to be taken.

But in the real world where chaos reigns and the wings of butterflies can affect the course of revolutions, an unexpected telephone call from Annapolis came. It changed both the career trajectory of Frances Bussa and the fate of Marc Buttervogel. Needless to say, with the great excitement of being plucked out of the drab job of a high ranking county bureaucrat, Frances put aside pressing matters. Instead of writing down a complaint, she considered her obligation to recommend Margery Whitman for a promotion as her temporary replacement.

Word processors in both Annapolis and Rockville were quickly employed to write the requisite memos. Press conferences were planned to mark the elevation of Frances Bussa to the post of Director of Senior Services Planning and Budgeting. She would report directly to the state's Deputy Assistant Undersecretary for Planning and Budgeting at the Maryland Department of Health and Human Services. What a title! Soon to be on her fabulous new business card, complete with an embossed illustration of the state seal and motto. She was on her way.

CHAPTER 15: CAT BURGLAR

As Marc's condition stabilized, the contours of his newly reduced self clarified for the doctors, nurses, and Michael. All could see how much had been lost. Along with his general motor disabilities, Marc maintained an almost complete inability to communicate.

One wet and cold afternoon in late winter, Michael tried to gain access to 104 Tulip. He was testing the windows to find a non-destructive path of entry. Michael was seeking information to identify his brother assets. Dressed, as usual, in his New York navy blue pin stripes, tie and Gucci shoes, with his rented new red Cadillac in the driveway, he was a conspicuous sight for the young members of the Bussa family as they arrived home in their van. "Look Mom, there's a dog thief, going to break into Professor Marconi's window!"

"You mean cat burglar, dummy," corrected Christopher.

"I am not dumb."

"Are too. Anyhow, he isn't Marconi."

Frances first glanced in the back to ascertain that the kids were still belted in, and not on the verge of an era of war. She then looked toward the neighbor's house as she turned in her driveway. Instinctively, she interrupted the burglar: "Hey, you! Just what do you think you are doing over there?" she hollered out of her window toward the pin striped burglar. Embarrassed by the sudden attention, Michael turned around a bit too quickly and felt his left jacket sleeve catch, and then rip, on a protruding object.

"Hi! I'm Marc's brother, Michael. This must look suspicious but its innocent. Your neighbor, Marc, has had a stroke. He is in the hospital up in Gaithersburg. I am trying to get inside to get some papers and things for him, but don't have a key." Thus began Michael's introduction to the neighborhood super hero.

"So, that's where he's been! We haven't seen him for awhile. I had no idea what had happened. I have a key, so you won't need to break in and cause someone, like me, to call the police." After parking the van and getting the kids out, Frances turned to deal with this alleged brother. "You have some ID, don't you?" Frances said coolly. Inwardly, she was trying to recall if she had actually filed a memo about Vera's complaint. Marc's violation of her trust was fresh. It still rankled.

"Sure, here's my driver's license."

"New York: Michael Trowley. Not the name I might have expected. Can you do better than this? Perhaps you have some details to give me or another ID?"

"Actually, I'm Marc's half-brother. He kept his father's name: Buttervogel. I got the name of my father. We also had a sister (my half-sister) Melissa. She died quite some time back."

"Right, sorry, I forgot. That squares with what he has told me. I'll get you the key. Just wait out here, and one of the kids will bring it out. Christopher! Sarah! Let's get inside now!" But the last exclamation wasn't received by the intended audience. The kids were running around the front

yard playing tag: their school bags and papers now strewn over the muddy yard. “Hey, Christopher, Sarah! Grab your things! Pick up those papers! You are going inside! Now! And scrape off the mud on your shoes!” Soon, under the watchful eye of Frances, Christopher had handed the pin striped man the key.

Now gaining easy entry, with only a torn suit to show for his efforts, Michael walked into the darkened house. The warmth of the interior was testament to the robotics of the thermostat. He picked up the pile of mail that had accumulated under the mail slot and turned on a hall light. Moving now down the hall with his stash of mail, he found himself at the kitchen. In the corner was a small table with one chair. Both were painted many times, and both were chipped so one could see their many generations of finish. He put the mail on the table and sat down. Michael began by moving a dirty coffee cup and a half emptied cereal bowl to the side. Thickening layers of grayish-green and pinkish molds were growing on the surfaces of the coffee and a carbohydrate that might have once been shredded wheat.

Turning his attention to the mail he was still clutching in one hand, Michael began separating out the junk. The junk pile grew steadily. But there were a few keepers: a bank statement, a credit card bill, and an envelope from a “Julia Burnham Lambert, Financial Advisor, Suite 406 The Everett Building, Silver Spring.” Nothing personal. Opening the bills and bank statement, he began to comprehend his brother’s financial situation. The exploratory moves revealed evidence of a ship wreck: an electric bill with January charges of \$136 but which with unpaid balances and fees, totaled \$385. A similar gas bill. And the mortgage. The total was astounding. Large debts, limited cash in his checking account and virtually no savings. Were finances what he had called about that morning in February? But then, what was he doing in the parking lot of a gun shop more than 60 miles away? Suicide? Michael had no other clues, but suicide didn’t fit his understanding of his brother’s character.

Perhaps he could get some information from the neighbor. He’d go over and return the key. Turning on the porch light and leaving the front door unlocked, Michael walked across the drive to the neighbor’s house. When Christopher answered, Michael asked to see his mother. And soon an apparently over-tasked, impatient, and harassed lady came to the door.

As she opened the storm door, he handed her the key and began what he thought might be a neighborly conversation. “Thanks so much, Mrs. . . . I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“Frances Bussa”

“The key really helped. Probably saved me a tear in my slacks. Would you like it back, or can I keep it for awhile?”

“No, I don’t want it. keep it,” she retorted with aggravation and began to close the door.

“Can I just ask you for one more favor?” But noting that she was aggravated, and needing an answer, he continued, “Marc hadn’t called me for years. Then suddenly, a couple of weeks ago, he called me two or more times in the space of an hour. Each time he was sounding increasingly desperate. When I called him back, he wasn’t there. Now that he has had this stroke he can’t communicate. Do you have any idea what was going on? Is there anything you can tell me, that would let me help him?”

“Mr. Trowley, I am not going to get involved,” she began now showing an animosity that he had not previously witnessed. “Your brother and I had a very serious falling out. He had been extraordinarily worried about his finances. I mean, we all are, the economy being what it is. But he

was especially upset. I tried, as best I could to help him regain his footing – indeed, I helped him get started in something new. But he messed himself. He stole some silver from an elderly, blind lady who had been a client of the County office for senior services. I was the county social worker in charge and he did it all at my expense. Maybe he did it out of desperation. But he crossed a bridge of no return with me. My belief? When a dog bites the hand that feeds it, it is time to put the dog down. I won't be involved further with that brother of yours.” And she forcefully closed door. Turning towards Marc's abandoned home, Michael began to understand the gravitas of those phone calls.

Reentering his brother's home, he turned on more lights. Was his brother now a common thief? He sat down and tried to square his memories with his brother's supposed status. Nothing seemed to fit. His brother had heroically swooped up Melissa, had led anti-war and other political activists. In Michael's mind, his brother was an established activist. And now a thief? It didn't add up.

Michael looked around. What could he discover to uncover the true nature of Michael by examining his burrow? He got up and went into the hall. The once light beige paint was now spottily darkened by dirt. It was lit by a single, low wattage bare light bulb in a ceiling fixture. A few feet down the hall, toward the back bathroom and kitchen, under a discolored and cracked plexiglass cover were some old photos mounted on paper, pasted on some particle board. The whole thing was jerry-built but there they were: Marc's photo album.

Michael's eye came to rest on a black and white, formal shot of his mother with the three kids. Mom was sitting on a big upholstered chair in some photography studio. She looked older than Michael remembered. Her hair was up in a bouffant that he could not recall seeing. A flower was in her hair. She was wearing a blouse with an elasticized neck that had been pulled down over one shoulder.

Michael was on his mother's knee with bulging pants over his diapers. He looked maybe one and a half or a bit older. His puffed up face revealed the fit or cry he must have had just prior to the snap of the camera. To the left stood Melissa, perhaps nine years old. She was wearing a polka dotted dress and was the only child who appeared to be happy. Looking at her, Michael realized suddenly that he had no memories of how she looked before the onslaught of her anorexia. Here she looked well fed. He didn't digest the feelings under this observation, but rather kept scanning the picture. And there was a much older Marc was standing off to the left, pouting, and uncomfortable. He was wearing an obviously over-starched shirt. Marc was resisting any friendly facial expression beneath what can only politely be called a messy growth of hair.

Next to the first picture was a color enlargement of Melissa and Marc. This photo resonated: Michael hadn't ever seen a picture of his sister as he remembered her at the funeral. Here Melissa was wearing jeans and a sweat shirt and her face appeared horribly thin. But she was smiling broadly. Marc has his arm around her waist. Melissa was so emaciated that Marc's arm looked bloated. They are in front of a university library. To one side there is a big bronze turtle. Michael leans back against the wall behind him for support and sinks into a vortex of memories settling on the image of his emaciated sister in her casket. He recalls the horror of hearing the voice of the funeral director, “Your brother asked me to call you to tell you that your sister, Melissa Buttervogel has passed. The funeral will be tomorrow.” Melissa, who had taken care of him after his mother had died. Why didn't Marc let him know that Melissa was in danger? How could Marc have let this stranger relate the news? How could he have done this to his own brother? These questions which he has so often asked himself resurfaced as he stood in front of the pictures.

Michael coped by standing up straight, and buttoning his Brooks Brother's suit jacket. He readjusted his tie. The costume, even with its now flawed cuff, gives him the strength of status. The problems here, no matter how close they cut to the bone, are historical – no longer his. His brother may have picked up Melissa and carried her to safety, and Michael may have often had to face the terrors alone, but he was strengthened by these ordeals. He turned back to the photos.

The next picture showed an early pre-marital scene with a happy Elsa and Marc. They were in front of a mosque, somewhere. Then comes a picture of a head shot of a bearded and long haired Marc with a sexy young blonde in a mirror. The mirror has a dark frame, but the picture is of a very messy bedroom, filled by the bed. Lingerie and underpants lie helter-skelter on the bed. Marc and the blonde look very happy - indeed, like they had just both come and aren't dressed yet. The picture celebrates the occasion. Michael looked at the blonde, and then back at his sister. The memories brought forth by the picture gallery exhausted Michael and he turned away.

Once again at the kitchen table, Michael turned over the financial advisor's unopened envelope. The return address, embossed in golden ink and a neat 'script' font, invoked a sense of riches. He didn't really want to see what was inside, knowing what it would reveal; it would reflect the realized nightmares of so many of his own customers. Just holding it brought back the many angry calls from the suckers who had stayed with the market. The vast majority never sold short, never understood it to be a house of cards until too late. What would he have told his brother, had Marc been his client? Michael hoped he would have told him to get out in late 2007, when Michael did. But Michael had told none of his clients to sell. And so, Michael sat there, wondering about his good fortune: his tens of millions, his fancy cars, his summer house, his yacht. It was a familiar list. But at that moment, not one that comforted him.

Michael opened the envelope, and noted the portfolio - one that must have experienced total devastation. He refolded the statement, and put it in the vest pocket of his torn jacket. Going upstairs into Marc's bedroom he found Marc's laptop on a small table. Next to it there sat an almost full box of business cards. Under the box was a purple note book. Michael took out one of the business cards. It was attractive, with a little red logo of a fancy script "Dr. I. T." and there was "Marc Buttervogel, PhD."

Michael's mind went back to the non-sequitur: "What desperation could have led Marc to steal from a blind woman?" No answer appeared. Michael opened the laptop. After its boot-up it asked for a password. Michael tried a couple: Marc's birthday, Elsa, some combinations of birthdays and names and phone numbers, but they didn't work. So he put it down and sitting on the side of the bed, he picked up the purple note book.

While reaching for the note book, Michael noticed the full length mirror. Showing its age the mirror's silver had developed cracks and wrinkles. Its patina synchronizing with the aging of the humans it reflected. Tucked into its frame were a couple of small sepia pictures. One was recognizable: Marc's father. Another: Michael's father and mother. Marc's father looks younger, and happier than Michael remembered him from other photos. He was wearing a military uniform, but casually, with an open collar. The second photo has Michael's parents standing in front of a hay stack. An unfamiliar barn is off to the left. The whole composition is strange and Michael gets up to take a closer look. Wondering when it was taken, he pulled it out from the mirror frame but when he did so, a corner tears off, making the picture look still older. Turning it over, he noted the date, 1946, and the inscription "For my new children, with love, Jake." The photo signaled the formation of the new family. Michael was not yet a member.

Michael slipped the picture in his shirt pocket and examined the notebook. Frances Bussa's contact information faced him on the first page. This was the woman next door; the woman who gave him the key. Just below that information, Marc had taped a copy of his business card and put a title to the book: "IT work." Two other pages followed with writing on them. Each was topped with a name and contact information. The first was headed: "Ruth Dedrick. Deaf Widow. Charter House, 1316 Fenwick (unit 1210), Silver Spring, 659 3763." Below that is written "p/w = AUCH145, Chevy Chase Bk (bal=\$31,412.17) and a/c at Fidelity (>\$150,000). Can't hear." On a new line he had, "Charged: 2.5 hours @ \$75; house call \$75. 12/10/08" And finally a note: "See d:\AUCH.DOC for details."

The second page was similarly headed by a name and address: "Veritas Tableau. Almost blind. Widow. Claridge House, 2423 Lytonnsville Road, Apt. 4F." Then came another notation, on another line, "Installed big screen and magnifying software. Down one more line "12/17/08. But following this there was no accounting of services and charges. But there again was the note: "See d:\AUCH.DOC."

The other pages were blank. Michael took out the photo of his father and looked at it again. He slipped the photo of his father into the notebook and took another look around the room. On a small shelf to the right of the mirror lay a few old paperbacks in a varied state of disintegration: The Tin Drum, with some pages clearly slipping out of the binding, two library books "Computers for Dummies," and a notably used thin volume, "The Overcoat and Other Stories" by Gogol. Michael opened the library books. They were long overdue, and Michael took them, the notebook, and the computer in his hand. Loading his loot in the Cadillac, he drove off to his hotel, hoping that the sterility of the hotel room would be a comforting contrast to the disquieting mementoes of the house.

But sleep did not come easily. The images of his family remained with him during the night, causing him to toss about. He awoke every few hours to find himself filled with anxiety. Finally he fell into a long yet fitful sleep. But then he was visited by a nightmare dormant since childhood. He is a young boy, sitting in a corner of the room witnessing a ferocious fight. His father has knocked down his mother and his sister. They are being pummeled when his much older brother enters. Heroically, Marc stands up to his father and stops the fight.

Then Marc picks up his sister from the floor and is about to leave the apartment. Michael finds himself suddenly without voice. He screams yet is unheard and is abandoned in the corner alone in the apartment with his mother. Michael's attention is on the front door. He hears a key turn the lock. Now he is in a house. His mother is at the head of stairs. His father comes at her with a bat in his hand. He starts to beat his mother and then pushes his mother down the stairs and turns to face Michael in the corner. Michael waits for Marc to reenter, to come and get him but he never does. And Michael is now alone, small and defenseless. Jake approaches him now in fury. Try as he may, Michael is unable to move, unable to scream. Then he wakes.

Michael awoke covered in sweat. He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. He recalled the dream and in its many visitations and variations. In them, his father always is hitting someone in the family, but never hits Michael. Different people are hurt in different dreams. His father is always dressed in a pin striped suit and a tie. Michael tries to crawl into a corner to be left alone. But as the violence grows, he begs Marc for protection. But in these dreams, Michael can never vocalize and Marc never even notices him. No one can hear him: Marc always picks up Melissa in his arms and leaves for safety. Michael is left alone in the room. Sometimes his father turns into a wild animal. And then trying to scream, Michael wakes up again and again.

Michael lay back down and slept till dawn. When the sun came up hidden behind clouds, Michael returned to Marc's house. Walking back down the hall, he looked at neither the images of his sister, nor his mother. But on his way to the kitchen he did look again at the blonde. Were she more than a photo, he imagined that she would have returned his glance with an inviting wink. The imagined come on caused his first smile of the day. In the refrigerator he found coffee, threw out some very limp broccoli and some moldy cut tomatoes. There was a bad odor in the meat drawer, and so he searched for garbage bags. When he found them, he dumped all the spoiled contents of the refrigerator. After these domestic chores, he cleaned up the room a bit, and brewed the coffee. But even with plenty of caffeine, without more clues, Michael couldn't identify an easy way to patch things together to get an understanding of his brother.

His mind moved to the problem at hand. What was to be done to support Marc? Of course, he could just set up an account with his own money. But what local would look after Marc's everyday affairs?

Carrying his cup of coffee, he wandered into the living room, and looked around. No real library. Not much sign of a lifetime in academe. Noticing a wall clock, he was surprised to see it was already after 9:30. The lateness of the hour gave him a jolt and led him to plan his day. He would undertake two minor tasks before going back to the hospital: return the books to the Takoma Park library and get an appointment with Julia Lambert to develop a financial plan with Ms. Lambert to support Marc's post-stroke living. Then, hopefully tonight, he would return for a few days to New Rochelle.

CHAPTER 16: GIVING AND TAKING

A bright and warming late winter sun brought some relief from the depressing gray dampness that often hangs over Washington's Februaries. And during just such a sunny moment Michael walked past pawn shops, small ethnic groceries and eateries and into the lobby of The Everett Building. "A local shop. Not a swank New York financial address," flitted through his mind. Indeed, there were many clues to let any amateur Sherlock conclude Silver Spring was no financial hub. But the building was serviceable, and Michael could imagine a local financial firm of some reputation locating there.

Once through the gold lettered glass doors of Suite 402, greetings were exchanged and the elderly lady who apparently was the secretary or office manager, mumbled, "Ms. Burnham will be right with you." She then escorted Michael to a darkly paneled conference room. It had an expansive but not overly costly table of polished mahogany veneer. Michael took a seat in one of the set of eight black Aeron chairs around it. Facing him on the long paneled wall was a large, modernistic oil of bulls and bears somewhat in the style of "Guernica."

"Nice touch," thought Michael. He also noted the thick, multi-hued patterned brown carpet, the overhead projector for presentations, the small bar cabinet in the corner, and the translucent earth toned drapes. A door behind him opened and a new female voice with a residual Texan drawl said, "Michael? I'm Julia Burnham. It's so nice to meet you. I must apologize, but my secretary said you were here about Marc Buttervogel. I didn't get your last name."

Consider now the instant of standing up and turning around, and break it down to its essentials, as Michael would often do in the future. It began with swiveling and standing during which he first saw a tan, rather tight wool skirt. Glancing beneath its hem as was his wont, he was pleased to see well shaped knees, and muscular yet slim calves, narrow ankles, in attractive stockings, and then shoes. A nice pair of tan business heels that went perfectly with the suit. On the way up, he passed a slim waist, a nice bust, and took in that he was about her height. Now erect, he was startled to confront a familiar face. Although some twenty years older, and now with makeup, and most certainly not containing the satisfied look he had seen over coffee, Julia looked every bit as alluring as he remembered from the photograph on Marc's wall. Graceful and businesslike, she extended a long bejeweled hand with a wrist ringed in a heavy, elegant silver bracelet. The surprise of recognition momentarily so confused Michael that he couldn't process Julia's question. So she repeated it. Only then, after his answer, did Julia come to understand that this was not likely to be a normal new client intake interview.

"You are a relation of Marc Buttervogel? ... Half-brother? Really? You don't remind me of your brother at all. He was a philosopher. At the University of Maryland. He is a client of mine. But you must know that. Actually, I was a student of his once. And ...," there was some hesitation, "and what do you do?" As she processed his relation to Marc, she was astounded by the contrast between Michael and his brother. She slowly closed the door behind her, and chose a chair across from him.

"I'm in finance. Not very different from your operation. But in New York." From her vantage point, Michael Trowley, in his dark blue cashmere sweater (he had avoided his torn suit jacket), paisley tie, red pin striped button down, and gold Rolex, was the image of casual success, vigor and

command. He appeared to be the type of man she had always fantasized would swoop her up: good looking, strong, mature, and quite possibly rich.

From the moment Michael recognized her face, which he had seen so sexualized in the photo, his prior objectives regarding the meeting morphed. Although Michael's aura of success was enticing for Julia, his relation to her derisive client put an edge on her expectations regarding the meeting. She stood and closed the door to the front office. Slowly returning to the table, she processed the implications of the complex mixed possibilities. She chose a closer chair catty-corner from Michael.

Some further introductions and then Michael discussed a bit of his brother's stroke.

"My Lord, this is just horrid. I am so sorry for him, and for the entire family," she replied.

"The family is pretty much just me, and the two of us haven't been very close over the years."

"Still, this must be a terrible shock, Mr. Trowley."

"Michael, please," he insisted, realizing that the picture of her had exposed more than enough of her to warrant the use of first names. 'Michael, please,' instantly brought back Julia's memories of 'Marc, please.' So long ago, so seductive at the time. Suddenly those first moments of attraction to his blond Jesus-like brother who gave truth from the mountain came back. And then almost simultaneously she thought of the diminished old man who her assistant had described as coming in with his fly open. What time squeezes from us all!

"Certainly, it was a terrible change to have my only family member so taken down. But everyone has reversals."

"Still, at the very least, this must have created quite a disruption in your life."

"Definitely. It has been. I've taken off more than a few days from the office. But what with a cell and the internet, I am usually fully connected anyhow."

"Yes, these new toys surely help us in our line of work, don't they, Michael? You know, Marc had come in to see me just a few weeks ago. I was busy with a client, but my assistant reported that he looked shockingly disheveled. I requested that he set up an appointment, but Marc never got back to us to set one up."

"Julia, let me cut to why I am here. I am concerned by the combination of Marc's prognosis and his lack of resources. They imply a future of financial dependency – quite probably on some combination of the government and me."

Julia was relieved that there was no hint of blame: no criticism of her fiduciary relationship in her client's undoing. She heard no threatening tone, nor any explicit implication that she had not done her best by her client. Perhaps this understanding reflected empathy of one financier for a fellow-traveler. After all, there were tremendous complexities inherent in the grave responsibilities and heavy loads financial advisors must bear. With Julia no longer contemplating suits and lawyers, the conversation quickly proceeded to a mutual concern for securing Marc's financial well-being.

Indicating that he had funds adequate to any support task, Michael wondered whether he could legally support Marc and have Marc eligible for Medicaid. He also wondered whether Marc's home must be foreclosed or whether he, Michael, should pay the back mortgage payments.

“You know, these types of choices are never on my radar. I just don’t hardly worry ‘bout issues of limited means,” Julia answered. Rising to the occasion, she volunteered that they could work together with a very fine local estate attorney, whom she was happy to introduce to Michael. Michael was pleased with the proposal.

For Julia, this additional dash of unlimited green to Michael’s wardrobe of blues and reds increased his splendor and her attraction. Coupled with what Julia took as Michael’s forgiveness, her mind shifted focus from the direct latent threats, to a spot closer to that which Michael had seen in the photograph. Of course, these mental wanderings were private. To consummate the deal, and reflecting the loss of traffic in financiers’ offices, she offered a drink. They toasted to the quick and complete rehabilitation of his brother.

Sealing the toast with a little squeeze of his hand in a disappointingly motherly fashion, and mouthing something about hopes for Marc’s felicity, the major business was transacted. But the late morning dip from the bar, the meeting of hands and the fraternal toast, magically led to another agenda. As their conversation took on an even more friendly turn, their chairs were found to be edging closer together. And thus, eventually Michael brought up the matter that had monopolized his mind since she walked into the room.

“I knew your face because yesterday, when I was at Marc’s house, I saw a beautiful picture of you on his wall. Well, that’s not fully accurate: I saw a picture of a beautiful you on his wall. I couldn’t help but notice how alluring you were. So when you walked into the room, I was totally surprised to see this same face come to life and smile at me.”

“No kidding? What did the photo look like?” she asked calmly but the sudden blush on her neck and cheeks reflected her internal commotion.

“It was a picture of the two of you shot in a mirror in a bedroom,”

“Oh, that one!” And her blush left. “Glad to hear it is the one shot in the mirror. I don’t think he still had any of the others.” This relaxed banter led to a refresher of their glasses, and to her laughter, welcoming the new subject. She tossed her head provocatively. “So you know, I already have quite a relation with your family. Your brother and I have had rather good times together.”

“That is certainly the way it looks in the picture.”

“But it sure didn’t end with proper, shall I say ‘closure.’ He dissolved into some sizeable puddle of guilt and grief when his wife was diagnosed with cancer. Then he sort of blamed me for his lack of caring about her cancer. After that we saw each other very rarely. But years later – way after his wife’s death and my marriage and kids, and after I began this business, one day he burst in and demanded that I make lots of money for him. Well, you can imagine how I told him such goals are risky. I gave him our risk tolerance profile to fill out. I remember his response: he came back saying how our affair was risky and I shouldn’t worry about any risks he was taking. In exchange, I asked him to return some of his photos.” While she was saying this, she couldn’t help thinking about the great diminution of Marc over time. Suddenly, she became self-conscious at how much she had just told Marc’s brother. So she altered course. “But tell me about yourself! What has life dealt you while your brother whiled away at Maryland in philosophy and then retired into a virtual bankruptcy?”

Not unhappy with the turn to personal matters, Michael responded “Nothing as beautiful as you, if I may say.”

The words worked their charm and sharpened the contrasting appeal of this handsome, younger brother. Michael, content with the change in conversational tone added to his quip by giving her a peak at his accomplishments - senior partner at Virtuality Financial Services, along with a scanty list of mergers and IPO's that he had engineered. Without mentioning his nepotistic climb on to Daddy's lap, the achievements had a heroic ring to those with an MBA in finance. He crafted his abbreviated list of possessions and achievements to bait a hook and indicate his interest in fishing in her pond. She liked the bait.

"Perhaps we should make another toast to our continued relationship with the goal of helping your brother?" she said, again putting her warm hand on his. She got up slowly and, looking him straight in the eye with her soft gray-green eyes, she smiled coquettishly and asked what he'd like to imbibe this time.

With still more alcohol and a conveniently closed door, the paneled room helped incubate a verbal intercourse that promised other dimensions. She returned from the bar with tumblers containing more single malt and he stood up to intercept her trajectory. Standing, now far closer than their chairs had been, he made the toast, "to our working and other relationship dedicated to the felicity of members of both your and my families."

"I like these contracts. They contain the promise of fulfillment: of both a giving and a taking." she said with a big smile and more of the light laughter that she was so good at bringing to the negotiations. So the conference room came to host a second, more intense and fervent exploratory meeting. He began it by putting his hand on her shoulder and saying, while looking into her eyes, "Is this company all your accomplishment?" ... "It is? You must be very proud of it. You must be very good at your work." Noticing that she didn't move away, he put down his drink and placed his other hand at her waist. She moved closer to thank him, in a rather quiet voice.

Slowly, and gently, he pulled her to him in a fashion pregnant with promises. She gave him a light kiss on the cheek saying, "I like you." His hand slipped from her waist to her ass, pulling her thighs to him, so she could feel the hardness and heat. As she also tabled her drink, the light kiss turned to something far more serious. He could feel her tighten the muscles beneath his hand and faintly push forward to rub against his crotch.

She reached for pants, and he added his hand to hers, pressing it more tightly to him. Smiling, he let go of her hand, and moved his to undo her suit jacket. With it falling open he gained access to a sheer white silken blouse covering a visibly lacy bra, through which he began to gently massage her nipples. As they responded, she leaned against the edge of the table and searched for the top of his fly. "Let's go into my office where we won't be interrupted," she said and led him through the door she closed. He stood next to her as she sat at her office desk and called her receptionist. "This meeting is continuing in my office, and don't interrupt. I'll get back to you when it is over."

She swivelled her chair back in his direction, and now her head was at precisely the right height to peruse the fly she had yet to open. He pressed it gently into her face, and she pushed him away enough to continue the play. "We're lucky it's almost lunch time, and I have a good appetite," she said, licking her lips. And after a moment she was playing with her food most deliciously with her tongue, her lips, and her hands. As he became more aroused and swayed to her pulses he caressed her head and began to moan. Just before he would have come, he pulled away and suggested moving to her couch, where she might enjoy some role reversal.

"You've also worked up an appetite?"

“Nothing better.”

“Great! It’s always best to eat when you’re hungry,” she quipped.

And he came down on her, licking first her very erect nipples, and then her beautiful belly while she caressed his head. And as he moved down the aroma of a very aroused Julia egged him on, and lead him to the nub of the project. Clearly, the two of them found there was ample room for mutual satisfaction in the contracts they were considering.

Spent, Julia was putting her bra back on, with that same expression that Michael had observed in the photo. But he could now also observe her long legs, and tight fanny still without panties on. Her blonde bush was dripping from their fluids and he smiled as he took her back in his arms, “Let’s not mess up your carpeted office.” And he wiped their fluids onto his hand with a slow, and sensual brush of her crotch, just tickling the tip of her clitoris. It sent a final tremor through her spine, and put another smile on her face. Flexing her thigh muscles she trapped his hand where she wanted it, and wiggled on it a bit, kissing him deeply. When she relaxed a bit, he let her lick off one finger, and did the other.

Walking over toward her desk, still with only her bra, in front of what he presumed to be tinted or mirrored windows, “We still haven’t gotten to any of the details to secure a financial future for your brother. That might require a second visit,” she said with a coy sound in her voice.

“Well we could do that after I visit Marc - say late this afternoon or this evening.”

“That might be arranged. I have a couple of kids, and could tell my husband that I have some late work to finish up in the office after they go to bed. We could meet here.”

“Or my hotel.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s the Holiday Inn up near the Seventh Day Adventist hospital in Gaithersburg.”

“That’s better. I’d like that. A bed might be more fun than a couch. I presume the room comes with a bed, no? I could be there around 7 or 7:30. I’ll call you from my cell after I make the arrangements. How often are you going to have to come down here to help your brother?”

Michael would swear that she had winked at that last question. “It looks like it will take more work than I had figured. Anyhow tonight would be great. But we will have to discuss my brother’s finances so it would help to meet the lawyer you mentioned for us to work with.”

“Want me to bring her along tonight?”

“Is she young and beautiful.”

“No, sorry. She’s about sixty, and heavy set and rather set in her ways.”

“Well then why not wait until normal business hours - even another trip,” he said as he put on his shirt.

“I think we have begun a nice working relation, don’t you? We should be able to sustain a pleasurable business relationship.”

CHAPTER 17: SIBLING RIVALRY

In the next weeks, Michael's responsibilities in Montgomery county grew. Not only did he have to come down to see Marc, but he had to set up a fiduciary account with the help of his new, long legged, soft eyed friend. Everything took time and attention to detail.

For example, to have Medicaid accept responsibility for Marc's nursing home bills, Marc could have no more than \$2000 in assets. That meant no home and no car. The car was a junker in any case. And given the fall in home prices and the mortgage, the home had no value for Marc. Michael took out the few things of personal interest such as the family photos and had them framed for Marc's room at the hospital. The photo of Julia, he put in his briefcase to be taken out only on special occasions. Julia sold the assets left in Marc's investment account at what everyone could later identify as fire sale prices and used the change to pay off some of his smaller bills. Bankruptcy court would dispose of most of the rest. All Marc would be left with to show of his earlier life would be some clothing, and a few personal pictures. Even his big benefit, his health insurance inherited from Elsa's long employ at Defense had no value if he couldn't pay the premiums.

Marc's prognosis was not promising. Soon Marc would have to be moved to a rehab facility. The doctors made it clear that Marc would continue to need heavily assisted care, even if the most optimistic scenarios for rehab were obtained. Marc needed a suitable place to continue his life. The task was difficult, and time consuming. Such needs bred responsibilities and Michael had to take sufficient trips and time from home to make sure the arrangements were right.

These frequent dalliances with Julia, meant more familiarity. And so Michael's ardor, induced by his initial introduction to Marc's sexualized past was diminished but hardly extinguished. And for Julia, the path to the real green, to the money beyond the simple commission for handling the assets Michael put into the fiduciary account, was getting ever less visible. With that shrinking monetized allure, Michael, though still attractive, lost some of his immediate eroticism. But there remained pleasure enough, and whenever he was in town, he and Julia settled into a quiet routine of meeting at his hotel for a nightcap.

The erotic can be improved by elements of surprise, and Michael developed a fantasy that, even before being carried out, put an edge back into their meetings. Michael considered reintroducing Julia to Marc. Julia would, of course, be introduced as Marc's lover. Just thinking about winning this form of sibling competition increased the pleasure of their sexual encounters. The knowledge that no one could judge this fraternal competition as fair, perversely aroused Michael even more.

So it was that one afternoon, after the two of them had spent a couple of hours looking for a nursing home for Marc, Julia and Michael were discussing this plan in her silver Mercedes, parking at the National Rehabilitation Hospital in downtown DC. Turning off the motor, Julia began, "You know, I hope you're right that Marc doesn't recognize me. It would be a terrible shock if he did. Don't introduce me as your lover or partner. At least wait until we really establish that he doesn't know me. Just say I am an ex-student of his. I am after all. OK?"

Michael laughed. "Sure, beautiful. But I get an extra kick out of knowing that you were sleeping with my brother. It gives my helping him a certain edge."

"This isn't your nicest side, you know."

"Sorry."

“Where do you think you picked it up?” with a tone that didn’t disapprove and was touched with some sexual arousal. She also found sleeping with the brother of her ex-lover added a boost to her arousal. But she wasn’t about to admit it.

“You know, my family wasn’t all peaches and cream. It didn’t help that Marc didn’t always treat me right. And when he didn’t even call me to tell me that Melissa was dying, I mean come on!” Color came to Michael’s neck as the anger brought up by the memory swelled in him.

“My sister was virtually my only support after our mother died. She came home from college to take care of me. Marc had some cockamamie idea that I should tell him how my mother died – even worse – how my father had killed her. I had no idea what he was thinking, and when our sister died, he took it out on me.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about. What was Marc concerned about?”

“He thought my father pushed my mother down and that caused her to die. He was sure I knew the truth.”

“Did he?”

“What?”

“Push her?”

“How would I know?”

“You have no idea?”

“No, of course not.”

“So what happened?”

“I told him I didn’t know, and he held it against me. I think he felt I was protecting my Dad.”

“Could your father have done that? I mean could he have killed your mother? Was he that sort of guy?”

“Sure, he maybe could have done it. But what did I know?”

“Are you saying that was the sort of person he was?”

“Look, when she died I was only 13. I didn’t really know what he could do in anger. Marc had no business being pissed at me. I didn’t do anything. I was a little kid.”

“And tell me how this relates to the death of your sister?”

“My sister died at a gym they went to one time when she was visiting Marc. When . . .”

“How did she die at a gym? And when did all this happen?” Julia interrupted.

“Died. That’s a gentle way of putting it. She had gone down to see Marc, in 1984. He had asked her to go down because his marriage seemed to be falling apart. I’m not sure exactly how things happened down there – but from what I recall from Marc, Melissa asked to go to a gym to work out. They went to the Y. You know, I’d not seen her in gym clothes, or a bathing suit in years, so I didn’t know. They went; she came out of the locker room looking terrible. Marc said she looked like a skeleton in a gym suit. You know what I mean. You’ve seen anorexics at gyms. Sunken cheeks. Knee bones sticking out. All her bones were right out there. She went over to this

tread mill and started jogging. She just kept running on the machine. Marc apparently told her she had to stop and that they have to get to a doctor. But she told him to mind his own business. She had a massive heart attack right there on the tread mill – she never regained consciousness."

"Jesus. What a story."

"Right, my sister died, and he was so pissed at me he didn't even tell me. His actions still eat into me."

"That isn't why you are now wanting to introduce me to Marc is it – to get back at your brother?"

Michael reached over to her side of the car and put his hand on her knee. "Of course not. You've got the wrong impression, you and I aren't about Marc. You are one of the very best things that's happened in my life."

Julia took her time taking this in before reacting.

"OK, let's go in." When they got out of the car they were hit by a blustery late March wind. They buttoned up their jackets and started walking into the wind.

"You know, I got an idea this morning. You're having some trouble finding a good place. I had the same problem looking for a nursing home for my father. I got in touch with some woman at the County Senior Services Office. She was super. They gave me two or three names, and they were all really good. So maybe that's the place to go for help. They have no dog in this fight and could give us a better screening as to where to look."

"OK, I can do that tomorrow. But for today, it's Marc and then, are you going home to your kids, or can we have a little supper?"

"Is this an invitation only for supper?"

"I didn't think we needed a public discussion of the menu."

"Supper could be arranged," she said with some of the old coquettish erotic references and flamboyance that had marked their passionate beginning. Stepping out of the elevator; they were quickly in Marc's room.

"Hi, bro! It's me," was Michael's greeting.

Julia, who had not been to the rehab center before, was stepping in the small room behind Michael. She was taken aback by the sight of the man that she last considered a laughing stock. Here he was immobilized in a wheel chair. With an effort, he could raise his head a bit from a slumping position on his chest. This movement allowed Marc a field of vision beyond the floor. He didn't speak.

Michael sped on, "How is the big guy doing?" Still no reply. "I wonder if you recall this beautiful lady here?" Marc couldn't move his head enough to see her. Michael put his arm around Julia's waist and moved her to be visible. "Can you see her now Marc? Remember her?" Julia thought she saw a small shudder pass through Marc's face.

Marc couldn't get his head to go more vertical. All he was seeing were legs in trousers. Judging by the shoes, one set was masculine, the other feminine. His visitor had always come alone: a routine that had becalmed his tumultuous brain. The second pair of legs led Marc to feel uneasy. But he

had no way to communicate any of his internal world, and so, in every way, he was unable to master any of the details of his environment. He felt himself an inert object being acted upon.

Michael took no note. “Tell him who you are, hon!” Michael’s use of “hon” violated her understanding of the bargain: she was to be introduced as an ex student, not as Michael’s partner.

Although Marc took in most of the words as pure noise, he did understand them to be a communication attempt. He was regaining passive language recognition but speakers had to slow their speech for Marc to understand any of it.

And now the other person was talking to him. She was kneeling down. Her face came into view. A face that he recognized as coming from his past. More noise, “Hello Professor Buttervogel. I used to be a philosophy student of yours. Do you remember, you were a professor at the University of Maryland?”

Marc wanted to ask who she was. He wanted her to speak more slowly. He wanted time to study her face, to give him time to understand. He tried to say something. All that came out was a sound combining a moan and a soft grunt. It was his first verbal communication since they had come in the room.

“You do?” said Julia with mock excitement. Silence. Julia could no longer imagine how she and this old man had related. What was their connection to those two passionate lovers who, so long ago at the University of Maryland, fucked away their afternoons as if there was no tomorrow? And what was going on in the head of his brother? The answer to that last question was answered rather quickly.

The man was speaking. “Surprise of all times, Marc. Your ex-student and I are in love. We’re partners, trying to set up a home for you, and to take care of you. She is wonderful - in lots of ways. I wish you could imagine. Anyhow, maybe you’d like her to give you a kiss?” But Marc could not turn his head to see him. And he was speaking slowly now, deliberately. Marc understood the words ‘love’ and ‘home.’ He wanted to tell the man to speak slower. But of course that wasn’t possible.

Dutifully, Julia leaned forward, held on to the arm of the wheel chair, and kissed him on the cheek. But Marc’s head had drooped back down on his chest. Julia took his head in her hands and moved it so they could look in each others’ eyes. Again, although Marc couldn’t identify her face, he knew she came from his past.

Standing a bit apart, Michael observed that if Marc had just been able to move his head, to look in the right direction, he would have been able to see the swell of Julia’s heavenly breasts down the front of her scoop-necked blouse. The blouse had been put on to tease Michael. It gave him a thrill that she could have been tantalizing his brother, that her breasts were inches from him, and yet, totally out of his reach.

CHAPTER 18: A HOME FOR LAZARUS

Following Julia's advice, Michael tried to phone the director of the Montgomery County Senior Services Office. For weeks he never got past the friendly robotic answering message, "At the tone, please leave your message for the Director." Of course he tried to do this. But the same friendly robot responded, "We are sorry. The Director's voice mail box is full. Try again later." Eventually, giving up on the possibility of directly communicating with a fellow human, Michael sent a rather detailed email. Having no expectations of a switch in personnel, he was confident of a prompt response to help secure a quality place for Marc.

On the other end of the wire, over almost the same period, Margery had settled into her new salary (and office). She checked her email weekly. More to the point, a rectangular electronic slave displayed color photographs on the corner of her desk. Her Droid was always on Pandora streaming her favorite techno to her wireless headset. And most wonderfully, she had a reserved space for her metallic blue BMW. These upgrades gave her considerable comfort. Margery had so gained in self-confidence that her uncle Charles had not been consulted since her promotion. And with the 2009 flowering of crocuses and daffodils and the budding of azaleas, Margery had been forced to take time to cull out last year's mini-skirts, and sort some of the lighter items in her wardrobe. On rare occasions she still called Frances for help, but most of the time, Margery felt she could handle her job. Frances, after all, had left meticulous records.

After years of recreational drug use at fraternity parties Margery did not have Frances' laser-like ability to retrieve details of cases. Nor was she a careful librarian of records. But one Friday, she was checking her email, and one of them caught her attention when she saw the name 'Buttervogel' in the subject line. His brother wanted information regarding a quality assisted living facility. Although she could not recall how she knew the name, seeing the name generated unsympathetic vibes. Given all the events of the last months, she felt it unimportant that she could not recall the details. She dismissed the idea of going into her computerized notes to explore what might be leading to this feeling of alienation. But she did search a few of Frances' notes. Finding nothing, Margery respected her own lack of enthusiasm for helping this 'Buttervogel,' and moved on to the next email. A few weeks later, however, she reread the email. Now the still extant, negative valence regarding Buttervogel was considerably faded. A vague pull to action occurred. She responded to Mr. Trowley by directing him to Phillip Thompson, the manager of the Charter House.

And so Michael made an appointment to visit The Charter House, which he hoped would be a most suitable place for his brother. Michael's initiation to the Charter House was not totally unlike those who had preceded him. It happened on one of those trips to Silver Spring, squeezed between other urgent business meetings with Marc's financial advisor. Men are relatively relaxed after sex, and so Michael was daydreaming about other things when he arrived at the Charter House. Not being very attentive to the matters at hand, the cobwebs on the chandeliers never attracted his attention. Nor did the dust on the leaves of the plastic plants. He didn't even notice the woman approaching him from the side. What did occupy his mind, was the very sexy removal of those red lacy panties Julia had been wearing and how her hips subsequently felt under his hand as he lay next to her on her couch.

These thoughts were interrupted when an apparent bag lady screeched, “Whatcha doin’ in here, mister? Waitin fer a manager, huh? Well he ain’t coming, that for sure.” The woman asking those questions was only inches from him. Where she came from wasn’t clear although she looked as if she had just left panhandling. Her breath smelled like an overripe garbage dump.

“Scared? You don’t belong here do you? Why don’t you give me some of that money you got in yer fancy suit and I’ll get me a meal.”

“Gladys, please; Gladys, please!” yelled a cheap suited man, running through an office door behind the large marble and wood front reception area. The presumed Gladys wandered off toward the front door. Not stopping to regain his breath, the man continued, “You must be Mr. Trowley. Phil Thompson here. Don’t mind Gladys. She’s had a number of minor strokes. She’s harmless. But she doesn’t put our best foot forward, does she?” Mr. Thompson stuck out his hand. But when Michael did not take it, Phil withdrew it to his pocket. “Why don’t we retire to my office where we won’t be disturbed.” They walked through a door to a serviceable, paneled office. It reminded Michael of the sorts of offices given to the salesmen at his Cadillac dealer. On the wall were some photographs and a few certificates of merit from the Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce. There was a large picture entitled ‘The Charter House Community, 2002.’ To its right hung an award complete with a photo of Mr. Thompson. It was captioned, ‘Mr. Thompson, Manager of the Year, 2003 – First Centrum, LLC.’ The next line, in a bold italicized red font: *‘America’s Most Experienced Developers of Senior Housing.’*

Thompson sat behind his desk, and motioned Michael to a large, over-stuffed leather club chair. Next to it was an ‘aged’ wooden table and a lamp. “Now, Mr. Trowley, can I get you a cup of coffee? Anything? . . . No? . . . Well, if I recall from our phone conversation you were looking to place your brother here. He had a major stroke, no? I presume you were thinking of something like an assisted living arrangement. Why don’t you give me some idea of his medical and financial situation.”

And so Michael began with the latest prognosis. “Of course, I can’t say for sure. But the doctors are telling us that my brother, Marc, will probably never walk again, even with a walker. But he may become quite capable of ‘transferring’ from a wheel chair to a bed or toilet. He is beginning to vocalize a bit, but I don’t think he’ll regain a fluency in his speech. So he will have difficulty articulating his interests to aides even were they patient. He is continent now and, unless there is another stroke, the doctors believe he will be able to maintain this. He seems quite optimistic about life as long as he gets his meds.”

“You know, God works in such strange ways, Mr. Trolley.”

“Trowley”

“Yes, of course. But as I was saying, we can’t give up hope. Jesus is always there waiting to help the willing. When did he have the stroke, and where is he now?”

“My brother’s Jewish.”

“Oh, I’m sure Jesus wouldn’t discriminate, Mr. Trowley.”

“In any case, the stroke was a couple of months ago: February 19. He’s now at the National Rehab Hospital in DC.”

“Given what you have told me, but keep in mind, please, I am no doctor, I believe your brother would be happier in a full care nursing home. Even if he isn’t needing full care right away you

would be comforted knowing that he had medical care available 24 / 7, wouldn't you? I mean the number one killer of people who survive a stroke is another stroke. He would do better at the sort of facility where there was medical care on premise, don't you agree? I can recommend some of the area's finest nursing facilities to you if that would be helpful." Mr. Thompson didn't rush, but he fingered the wooden pull of his desk's right hand drawer, where he kept the list of recommended homes annotated with their referral payments. "Do you know if Marc, that was your brother's name, wasn't it? Would Marc be eligible for Medicaid upon leaving the rehab hospital?"

"My brother's bankruptcy is now being processed. He has lost his home, and has virtually nothing left. So I am assuming Medicaid will go through for him."

"But excuse me sir, then how would he have paid rent here? We aren't a Medicaid facility."

"I am setting up a support fund for him to be managed by a local attorney and financial advisor. It will be sufficient to purchase all the additional services, equipment, and help that could make his life more comfortable."

"So you are thinking that you might place him here and purchase, privately, the medical support services? Medicaid won't pay toward his expenses here. So I think that could be prohibitive. As I mentioned, if you want, I can give you a referral. You can imagine we have good working relations with a number of excellent homes in the neighborhood since many of our residents come to need more intensive care from time to time."

Running out of patience with this lack of closure, and not wanting to invest the time himself, Michael asked if he might just call his brother's financial advisor. "Certainly, and to give you some privacy, why don't you do this from our conference room next door."

No sooner in the conference room Michael contacted Julia, "Hi, sweets. We got a no-winner from the Senior Services Lady."

"Who was she?"

"I don't recall, some ditz called Williams or Wittman. I'm pretty sure it began with a W."

"Well that's not who helped me. My helpful lady must have left."

"Well I can save a bundle by putting him in a nursing home. They are going to give me a list of outstanding homes, and if you don't mind, you could check them out before my next trip."

"This ain't the recreational portion of our relation, Honey." She cooed in a sarcastic tone. "So if I do some checking, someone will have to pay."

"Of course, Julia. Are we getting together tonight? I gotta get back to New York first thing tomorrow morning."

"Did you think I was going to let you off so easy as a simple tussle on the couch late this morning? I'm a high maintenance lady."

"Or broad."

"Let's not get fresh."

"OK, I'll get his list of referrals. See you as usual, around 9?" And then flicked off his phone and went back into Thompson's office. Less than half an hour later he was leaving the Charter

House with the referrals. Walking across the lobby, he stepped briskly to avoid any possibility of the bag lady who was moving to intercept his passage.

And so it came about that in May, Marc was placed in a nursing home around the corner from the Charter House. Michael had put aside enough money to insure his comfort, and more importantly, to insure the nursing home had an interest in his continued welfare. He soon recovered sufficiently to be able to be taken out for occasional strolls in his wheel chair. Michael, Julia, and sometimes even the two of them, came to visit. Soon after, he was given an electric wheel chair, courtesy of Michael and his funds. Eventually, as a higher-functioning resident, Marc was able to use it to have some limited control of his whereabouts in the facility. On beautiful days, the three of them could be seen taking a walk together outside and enjoying the weather.

By now, he was used to his brother's woman friend. Marc never grew comfortable with Julia. Some unsettling thread of recognition was still in tact. It led him to feel anger and victimhood. Their relationship put him on edge. Without the guidance of an intact memory, Marc couldn't locate these two in his past. Of course, he had been told that Michael was his brother. Were he to take this for knowledge, then so be it. But Marc was insecure in factual conjectures. Not that he felt Michael a stranger. He had some understanding of what it would feel like to have a brother, and to be with one. But he never arrived comfortably to such a place in the presence of Michael. His mind rarely felt as it ought to when Michael was there. So, although he was told Michael was his brother, he never was secure enough to own the relationship. But in most other respects, Marc was fortunate. Unlike other patients in the home, he was neither regularly over-drugged, nor neglected.

The doubts went deeper than angst regarding the relationship. Marc understood that he had a brain disease. The disease threatened his comprehension of who and what he once was. Since, a man without a past doesn't have a full present, there was little depth to his every-day life. These two visitors often told him that he had once been a professor. He had been Julia's teacher. What precisely that meant, he couldn't grasp. Though he couldn't remember or really comprehend the meaning of these things, he did have deep-seated feelings regarding both of these people. Marc knew and felt that he had some relation with Julia, and also with Michael. But the labels didn't fit his feelings and so he didn't comprehend the situation. It led him to further question his own cognitive capabilities.

In any case, Marc liked that they came to visit. This, even though every time he noticed the physical intimacy of the two of them, he was uncomfortable, even angry. When they hugged, or kissed an alarm went off in his mind, signaling an unrecoverable distant memory. This jarring was always distasteful.

By June, when Julia and Michael walked with Marc, his condition had improved sufficiently so he was given control of the wheelchair's joystick outside. He rejoiced in the sense of power and freedom this gave him.

Though watchful, Julia and Michael were at some distance, talking on their own. Cracks in the sidewalks rolled under the wheels, lampposts rolled by and Marc felt exhilarated. This ability to propel himself around the block with his joystick controller gave him some release. The use of the joystick usually required all his concentration. But this beautiful June afternoon he was sufficiently alert to shift some attention to a heavily accented woman's voice calling out his name. Her call to him caused him to let go of the joystick. The scooter stopped.

“Mister Buttervogel! Ja, Herr Professor Doktor Buttervogel, ist dat you?” rang out a loud voice from somewhere in front of him. Marc tried hard to raise his head and did so well enough to see in front of him. There coming, and with some effort yelling, was a frail looking elderly woman.

Another lost memory. *“Was it from childhood?”* She evoked mother.

“Ja den, vat has happened vid you? Why is dis new chair for you?”

Still not fully capable of raising his head, Marc couldn't fully see Ruth Dedrick, but her thick German accent brought on a smile. Marc smiled. For the first time in his new life. He smiled. Michael and Julia, were behind the wheel chair, and couldn't see the smile. They moved forward to introduce themselves. But they were stopped by Marc, who tried to utter a response. Only some of the words came out properly formed. “Egh hap see too. Egh hap hear too! Who you?”

Quickly striding to be at his side, Michael questioned the old woman, “You know Marc? Were you a student of his?” But he couldn't really fathom that possibility, given her age. So he quickly followed with “How do you know my brother?”

“Ja. Your broder has helped me you know. De professor helped me vit my Skype to talk to my yengala. You ver vonderful, ja? Herr Professor. Unt. Unt. Now look at you vid all dis tisoris. Terrible. And who are you two?”

“I'm his brother, Michael. And this is Julia, my friend. Professor Buttervogel's first name is Marc. He's no longer himself.”

“Nice meeting you, Julia Burnham-Lambert,” added Julia with her hand extended. But the proffered handshake was overlooked.

“Vat did you say? I can't hear so good.” The greetings were repeated, without the extended hand, and a friendly protocol was established. “Vat den happened to de Professor?”

“He had a stroke,” boomed Michael, who decided that without further evidence, he should assume he needed to yell as loudly as she did to communicate. “And who are you?”

“I am sorry.”

“Who are you?” repeated Michael. Julia gave Michael a knowing look, putting her doubts regarding the sanity of the proceeding on the table.

“Ruth Dedrick from de Charter House, right here. But ver do you go? I can valk vid you for a bit, no?”

And so the 4 of them walked, two by two. First it was Michael and Ruth taking the lead, but after the initial interview, Ruth reclaimed her Professor. They went around the block a second time, until they found themselves on the sidewalk, once again, directly outside the Charter House.

“Good bye Mrs. Dedrick,” began Julia. “You know Marc lives practically across the street, at the WonderCare Home right on First Avenue.”

“Vell I vill visit Herr Doctor. Tell him. Unt maybe ve can also take valks, no?”

Michael and Julia walked Marc in, and told him of his newly found old friend. For the first time, there was a positive response, a smile of recognition and understanding. And then, they left him in the care of WonderCare to retire for part of the night.

What would one expect from a lonely, elderly woman who finds an acquaintance that needs help? Ruth Dedrick soon found her way across the street. First she came during visiting hours, and then also during meal times. The meals were magically paid for by whomever was picking up Marc Buttervogel's tab. They were a variety welcome to the limited palette of her own cooking. And Marc took to her as a child reuniting with a mother. She even came to understand some of his babbles, which she could then turn into conversations. Lunches would typically end with a discussion of the possibility of a walk. For example,

“Can't egh fast. Slow go.”

“Vat is dat?” And miraculously,

Marc would repeat himself in a louder voice, “Can't egh fast.”

“Vell den, here is von more shpoonvol ov soup. . . . Dat better?”

“K”

“Vood you want to go for a valk? Oder no?”

“Want.”

“Gut den after the soup, unt lunch, ja?”

“K.” Marc was definitely improving.

And they slowly expanded their walks to more of Silver Spring, enjoying the late summer and early autumn days as two friends, or from Marc's point of view, as Mother and son.

CHAPTER 19: BULL'S-EYE

Life had improved for Marc, even if he couldn't fully understand his situation. Gone were his financial problems. The threat of criminal prosecution was history. Even his solitary existence had been spiced up by the occasional visits of his surviving relative. But most surprisingly, his mother miraculously repeatedly returned to check in on him. She even took him for outings. These positive changes had given him a reason to work harder at his physical therapy. His improvement had been noted and his doctors substantially cut back his anti-depressants. Although others might describe him as sitting immobile, this Friday in November, he was excitedly anticipating the unfolding of the day. Looking out of the window in the television lounge, he was fully aware that the good weather could bring another visit from his mother.

If Auschwitz had insured one thing, it guaranteed that Ruth Dedrick wasn't superstitious. Indeed, on that fateful Friday, November 13th, she was feeling most fortunate. Yesterday's call, from Sophie, put her in a wonderful mood. They had shared a long conversation. Sophie was planning a rare visit to the East coast. At last, she was seeing a wonderful man. What could be better. And this morning, with its bright blue sky, and unusually warm breezes the idea of a walk around Silver Spring put a smile in her heart. She would share her joy when she visited Marc at WonderCare. Marc had been an unexpected blessing, sending her back to times so many years ago: before the death of her only son. Her frequent visits with Marc and their slow perambulations through the quiet streets of the neighborhood brought her a feeling of completion. After putting on her worn, but serviceable, brown coat she stood in front of her small frame mirror, and tied a silk scarf to keep her ears warm and her hair in place. She felt for her cozy gloves in the coat pockets. They were there. All was well in the world.

Down the elevator then, and across the foyer toward the street. There remained but one obstacle, her encounter with Gladys. Long ago, Ruth had learned that a preemptive greeting could defuse her neighbor's anger. "Gut morning, Gladys! It is so gut to see you are vel, unt up unt about, today, ja?"

"Course. Waddy think I am? Gotta go get my keep. Top of the mornin' to you too. But watch out for all de thieves, Ruth. Dem guys are all around now. And everyone is packin'. You gotta be careful," Gladys' replied.

"I most certainly vill. You be careful too! Tank you so much." And then it was out the door, to the right, and over to WonderCare. Entering WonderCare was always bureaucratic. The first obstacle was the 'Welcome Desk.' The Welcome Desk woman was in essence a corporate security officer. Corporate security, for the WonderCare facility was part of the eponymous national chain of nursing homes, was the *raison d'être* of the welcome desk, required a careful handling of any visitor on the premises. After all, the company wouldn't want the visitor to see an overly drugged patient, or a soiled bed.

The Welcome Lady, and it was always a lady, invariably dressed gayly in a fully accessorized, bright suit, had color coordinated makeup, and displayed a large font identification tag. Today, the woman in the red suit and pink scarf was Sally Perkins. Sally knew Mrs. Dedrick. Sally knew this visitor to be harmless and so her greeting was enthusiastic and not particularly security oriented. Today's Welcome Lady checked on Marc's whereabouts, discovered it to be the TV lounge, and

called over an escort nurse's assistant to accompany Ruth to the lounge. Of course, by now Ruth knew the routine, as well as the route. She was even used to the faint smell of chloroform in the elevator. When exiting she looked to the left, and sure enough, there was Marc, in his wheelchair. As she hailed Marc, the escort took the elevator back down.

"It is vonderbar outside, Herr Doktor. Vye not ve go now outside unt valk in town, and get a cookie, ja?" Although almost motionless, and still with only rudimentary speech, Marc had the internal reaction of a happy child, who just was reunited with his long absent mother. One of the few places the observant could see his happiness was in the wrinkles around his eyes. "So ve go now unt get your svetter, ja?" Somehow, Ruth's accent and locution made her speech more comprehensible to Marc than the English of native speakers. Marc responded by pushing on the joystick that controlled the wheelchair. But it hadn't been turned on. Ruth bent down, turned the switch on and gave him a welcome hug. He beamed.

Soon, he was outside, with his warm blue sweater. There he was joining Ruth on one of their ritual walks around Silver Spring. They turned right at Georgia Avenue, toward downtown, and she talked slowly, always ever so slowly, of recipes: what she used to cook for Thanksgiving when her son was still with her. And then some more banter, what did Marc like to eat? With patience, and Ruth had plenty of this, they communicated. He could get the gist and she could decode his guttural expressions. He liked sweet potatoes and stuffing. So like Ruth's husband, which led Ruth to talk of him again. Again, he died in the war, tying Marc's vision of his mother's return a bit closer to his subconscious expectations. "My vonderful man, he vod have loved Danksgiving, ja? But that vas not to be. So Marc, am I so like your Mutti? I vonder vat she vas, ja?"

Marc too wondered about this question. Why would his mother ask him such a question? What did it mean about who he was, what was his reality? But then he relaxed again into the enjoyment of the stroll. So they went, down Georgia, crossing over to stop to get a cookie at a small pastry shop, and then hanging a left on Wayne Avenue. Just after the turn, Marc stopped the wheelchair. It was just prior to the Everett Building by a sign for a Fortune Teller. He did that some times. It was tiring to press on the joystick all the time to go forward. "You vant a rest? Ve can shtop here, ja? Ve have no such rush. Vat a spot to shtop; here is die Fortune Teller. She can tell von de future. You pay ten dollar unt she tell you vat vill come vor you. Is it true? Vat you tink, Marc? Can she tell de future, oder nicht?"

"Who tell? What tell?" came the intelligible, if still gutturally annunciated questions.

"Maybe she is a gypsy in dis store here, Marc. Dis sign tells us she gives us de future for only ten dollars."

"Mine?" was the clear question from Marc.

"Ja, dat is vat a gypsy says. She tells about you. It is a magic."

"Here?" was all that Marc uttered. But behind the stroke's mask of difficult speech a desperate thought took shape in a mind baffled by the simplest facts of existence. Was his mother saying that the fortune teller would uncover the answers that eluded him? Would she make intelligible the world he could no longer understand? The sign told of a chance to regain some grasp as to who he was, is, and will be. It gave him a hope that he could understand who his brother was. Who his mother is. What it meant to be a professor. Who was that student? Why was he always angry in their presence? The magnitude of the promise overwhelmed and frightened him.

"Ja, here."

Marc leaned on the joy stick without conviction. He moved further down the sidewalk. He was reluctant but he was choosing against knowledge. Against rebirth. A slow twenty five feet or so further down the sidewalk and they were in front of the Everett Building. The big bronze letters with the name "Julia Burnham Lambert" could have put a link in place in Ruth's mind, telling her this financial advisor was the partner of Marc's brother. But the bronze on black tie wasn't sufficiently interesting to be stored in her mind.

In a far more opaque and fuzzy fashion those same bronzes had significance for Marc. And with his slow improvement some old connections were regenerated inside Marc. They caused a memory to stir. By themselves, the letters were unintelligible. But in combination with the quivering memories, they stirred up still unclear but long uncovered and almost lost emotional connections that had once been central in his mind. Bits of unintelligible history came bubbling up. As he stared at the Everett Building, once Silver Spring's most ambitious construction, its black marble exterior and strong aluminum vertical lines evoked something positively primitive within him.

Somehow, those bronzed letters brought to mind his brother's partner more clearly than if he had been able to read the sign. Although not tied to any internal narrative, free floating from any factual environment, they tied that woman who claimed to be his student to complicated feelings: feelings of desperation and fury. But Marc could make no sense of it. Patterns were restructuring themselves into shapes that though new, echoed something old. What those shapes were and how they tied to his past wasn't clear. Images of a beautiful woman next to him, remembrances of sexuality, and then a sense of deep betrayal by Michael all came up a jumble.

Feelings of anger and some vague apparition of a gun all came to his mind, in a tangle of immediate madness. Nothing fully made sense, but neither had those very recently acquired images of Michael as a caring brother and those of Michael's lover. As he wrestled with this monstrosity he turned to his mother to explain that something was terribly wrong and deeply troubling. Overwrought, he was unable to spare the energy required to form speech. He couldn't verbalize his frustration. Instead a primitive instinct to flee welled up in him.

Upstairs in the Everett Building, on the fourth floor, Julia stopped working at her computer, and slowly rotated in her chair. She looked at her watch. A bit after noon; time to get some lunch. She was hungry. Without a luncheon appointment, she decided to browse the many sandwich shops located in the new plaza across the street from her building. Looking out the window wall of her office she saw the sun was bright; people were dressed for a slight chill in the air. She stood up, stretched, and put on her coat. She checked to make sure she had her wallet. She looked in the small mirror she kept in her purse and smiled. Life was good. Michael was generous with her, business was picking up again. And she was happy that her husband and children didn't have a clue that she was having this affair. She put on a fresh coat of her burgundy colored lipstick, and blotted it on a tissue. She exited her office and told the receptionist that she'd return in less than an hour.

Tearing at his joystick with a hitherto unknown determination, Marc jerkily turned the wheel chair around, back down the block. He was speeding toward the fortune teller: toward promised knowledge, no longer rejecting his speculative rebirth. The chair raced forward and his foot rests hit the entrance door of the small shop with a substantial thud. An overweight, late middle-aged woman came to the door and opened it. As she stood to the side, Marc went in. Although he was clearly not overdressed, and it was somewhat chilly, he was now sweating profusely. Hardly half a minute behind, Ruth followed him into the store. Marc excitedly tried to express his desire to know his future. But he was too excited to articulate the words. What came out was gibberish. Further,

his uncertain control of his tongue and facial muscles, so important in speech, led him to drool as he got excited.

The woman had returned to her position. She was seated behind a small table which had a low wattage bulb in a highly decorated but small lamp. The lamp had a translucent shade that gave the off-white walls an amber glow. The fortune teller took in the attributes of her clients as a high quality private sleuth might observe a crime scene.

As a camp survivor, Ruth also had honed her skills of observation. Ruth noticed the gypsy-like costume, the heavy make up on the fortune teller's face, the many cheap but heavy rings. To the right of the entry was an overstuffed chair, with the requisite black cat reclining, methodically licking its right front paw. Its tail flicked as if ticking off the seconds, as on a fuse that might lead a bomb to explode. The ceiling was pressed tin. The room was darkened by a padded deep purple muslin curtain that hung over the plate glass front of the store. The whole shop was clearly an elaborate stage set, but one quite imperfectly designed. For starters there was the iPad with headphones on the table near the lamp. A cell phone lay on a rather out of place fashionable leather purse. The incongruities led Ruth to realize this gypsy fortune teller had no magic. Rather, she had a second persona.

Noting the difficulty that Marc was having articulating his desires, Ruth tried to intuit the meaning of his utterings for the fortune teller. "He vod vant you to tell his fortune to him."

The gypsy wannabe took in her client slowly. She watched his spittle drip from the gray stubble on his chin. She looked at his rigid upper torso, his seatbelt, and his untied left shoe. She took in the agitated guttural sounds representing his diminished capacity to speak. She watched as his chest heaved, as the sweat beaded on his brow. And she made up her mind.

"Here, here ist ten dollars, ja?" Ruth volunteered as she opened her purse. But Ruth did not see the gypsy's grimace. She did not see the flicker of anger fly across the woman's face as the money was mentioned, indicating a deep and sudden alienation with this staged role she repeated for a living. "Does dis make it den, ja? Can you do it?"

Stepping out of her role, no longer playing a central European Romani, out came a dense New York tirade, "He don't need me to tell him his fuckin' fortune. He knows his future. Anyone can see that. I don't sell people their own worst nightmares. Whadya bring him in for, lady? I gotta look in de mirror at night, lady. I ain't hard up. I got principles too. I'm not some cheap whore on de street. You take him back oudda here. You take back your ten bucks and get him oudda my store."

It was fast, and loud, but Marc absorbed what was an obvious refusal. A refusal of help, of knowledge, of rebirth. As he took it in, it reverberated in his mind as an enormous explosion. He suddenly imagined seeing himself in a mirror: drooling in a wheel chair. He saw, for an instant, what the black eyes of this gypsy woman took in. And through those eyes he realized his worst fears: his reality. He jerked at his joystick, and almost backed up into Ruth. The gypsy stood and opened the door. Marc's first thrust for the door hit the frame, and chipped a piece of the wood to the floor. His hit was hard enough to rattle the window behind the curtain to the left. The black cat leapt off the chair into the darkened back of the store. Ruth picked up the ten dollars and put it carefully back in her purse, trying to think of what this was going to do to her companion's self-confidence and willingness to struggle for an improved future.

Ruth stepped out of the shop and looked back toward Georgia Avenue and then in the other direction, toward the Everett Building. Her mind was busy considering the knots in the net that had

been suddenly thrown over Marc's mind. Why had they gone into the store? What had upset him so in front of the Everett Building? Should she bring up the gypsy in conversation with Marc? Or would that threaten his condition? Preoccupied, she was no longer beside her companion.

Marc was now in his wheel chair about thirty feet past the entrance to the Everett Building. He was going toward the bus stop. There a big elderly woman was carrying an old style canvas shopping bag with a wooden frame. She was standing in the path of the wheel chair. She seemed flushed red, and was staring intensely at Marc.

Vera had been waiting for the J2 bus. She was carrying a shopping bag laden with groceries. The bus was running late. Since she couldn't read the bus numbers, she had asked a man who was also waiting for a bus to tell her when the J2 arrived. But the man had left on the 37 bus a few minutes ago, and now she was silently praying that someone would come to take his place. Was this man coming quickly in a wheel chair the answer to her prayers? Was Jesus still watching over her? The possibility made her feel all was right in the world.

He stopped not far from her. She turned so as to greet the man, and then to make her request of aid. But as she did so, she thought she recognized the face. It brought up some very hostile urges. This invalid definitely appeared familiar and loathsome. Slowly her memories put the puzzle together. He was that guy who stole her spoons. He was the professor. She turned so as to get a better look; she was sure it was him. Vera's fury welled up, and led to a righteous calm. She had knowledge that justice was on her side.

She quickly discounted the wheel chair as evidence of his diminished state. A scoundrel would use such paraphernalia to diminish suspicion of his would be victims. How dare this thief show up here on the street after robbing her? Did he intend to steal from her again? Disregarding any evidence of the Professor's handicaps, she lunged forward and let out the banshee cry of the aggrieved.

Ruth, who was still trying to collect her thoughts, suddenly was alerted by the shriek. Ruth turned to see an unknown heavy set woman, taking off to attack Marc in the wheel chair. As she moved, Vera was quite a sight. She had hurried out to catch the shuttle from the Claridge House and had not replaced her slippers. As she ran, one of her slippers fell off and her thick, powerful, lower legs impelled her toward her prey. Her long gray hair came undone in her move, and was now flailing in the air.

With memories of her fight with Ralph McBride at the school bike racks, Vera grabbed Marc's head and slapped him in the face. She yelled and her spit flew onto his forehead. But by this time, Ruth had reached the wheel chair and with all the strength of a loyal, but small dog attacking the foe of his master, she screamed for Vera to stop. She grabbed at the arm that was striking Marc in the face. Vera swung at her new pint-sized assailant with her other hand that still held her bag. The bag came down with a painful crunch on Ruth's head. Staggering back, Ruth called for a cop. Ruth's scream carried down the block, and into the ear of Gladys who was panhandling at the far corner of the Everett Building; her most profitable venue during lunch hour. Gladys had few equals when it came to elderly fighters and she moved in to protect her only friend in the Charter House.

Within seconds Gladys arrived. "I told ya ta watch for thieves didn't I. Now move back. I'll get her."

But Vera was not about to go down. A mighty swing of the shopping bag and Gladys' knees buckled. She dropped to the ground. Her foes' defenders now 'taken out' Vera now set up to do in

her nemesis. Reaching into the shopping bag she produced the precise item that had felled the two champions of the invalid. She pulled out her gun.

“Ah no can shoot me.” cried Marc, with almost decent syntax. He leaned on the wheelchair joystick and it lurched to the side. But shoot Vera could. And with neither her youthful eyesight, nor her strong sense of balance the bullet sailed passed the chair, toward the entrance of the Everett Building.

Who can fathom how it came about that the bullet's arrival should arrive so precisely timed with the exiting of Julia. When it entered her calf, blood pushed out of the entry onto the street; blood flowed down her leg and into her fabulous Guccis. Pieces of flesh tore from the skin next to the exit hole. Her scream would have curdled the milk in young mothers' breasts.

Only Ruth did not process the sounds well. With her acutely diminished hearing and with her focus on Marc, she had not followed the sound, and never turned to see the unintended target. But she had taken in the gun. Not since the camps had she seen a gun being shot so close to her. The noise of the report sent feverish shudders through her frame.

Julia fell to the ground. The fall and cry of the more youthful and attractive blonde victim brought an immediate response from a rushing policeman, who grabbed Vera. Vera, realizing that she had not yet destroyed her prey was not defenseless and bit deeply into the hand of the policeman who had grabbed at her gun hand. He screamed and smashed his truncheon on her head. Silent now, on the sidewalk, Vera was handcuffed.

As he rushed past the fallen Gladys and headed toward Julia, he called for ambulances and police backup. Bending down to Julia's face, he said “Don't move; you will be all right. You were shot in the leg. It's a flesh wound. I don't think it hit a bone. You'll be all right. We're going to get you to a hospital.”

Julia was in substantial pain but was very aware that this policeman had saved her life. “Thank you so much,” she said in a wobbly drawl, too Texan for anyone native to Maryland. He held her head, and kept an eye on his downed, handcuffed criminal up the street. “Do you know why that woman wanted to shoot you?”

“I have no idea. I never saw her before in my life.”

Marc had heard the cry, and turned to see Julia supine on the pavement. Watching the policeman cradle her head, he now knew he also had held her head close. His past rushed together as in a slow motion rewind of a movie showing a glass being unbroken. For reasons he couldn't fathom, he took satisfaction that she was shot. And when his mother came to him, and hugged him and said “I vas so afraid. Come let us leaf dis crazy place,” he assented.

Slowly, as was their wont, he rolled next to her as she walked. The weather was changing. A wintry breeze was blowing in from the North. The sky was clouding over as they headed back toward WonderCare and the Charter House, silently and privately unable to come to grips with the storm that had destroyed their equilibria.

The wails of police sirens came in from the East and the South, and those of the ambulances from the North and the West.