

Know the Time

1. *Call Me Wimpy*

“What’s that?”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“You got a pillow on your head. Of course you don’t hear anything.”

“Go to sleep, Charles.”

“I can’t sleep with that noise.”

“How much candy did you eat?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“You’re all jacked up on sugar, Charles. Try to relax. Breathe deep. Think boring thoughts.”

“I’m going down to check.”

Doris sighed. “It’s probably just the wind,” she mumbled. Doris rearranged the pillow on her head, pulled the duvet up to her chin.

Maybe I was jacked on candy. With the move from Frogtown to Summit Avenue, we were obliged to step up our Halloween game. Frogtown, sure, Honey-Bits are okay. Sweet Tarts. A fun-size pack of gummy bears. Now we were playing the big leagues. Kids walk up fifty yards of sidewalk to get to a door that could have hung on a castle, they expect a regulation-size candy bar. Snickers. Milky Way. Kit Kat. Drop the ball on the treat and you’re begging for a trick. Like a rock through the window.

I might have had a couple candy bars as I welcomed all the little monsters.

I pulled on one of Duke’s silk robes and stood outside the bedroom door, listening.

There it was again, a tap-tap-tap, like a hammer on the hull of a sunken sub.

The noise was coming from a long way off. Downstairs. Maybe the basement.

I took the steps slowly.

The place still didn’t seem like home to me. I wasn’t sure it ever would.

All that evening I had felt like an impostor, standing at the door with a plastic pumpkin filled to the brim with treats. “What’s your costume?” they wanted to know.

“Wimpy,” I said.

Which drew dull looks of incomprehension.

“Pop-eye? I’d gladly pay you Tuesday?”

In fact I was wearing my everyday clothes and had done nothing more than add a derby hat. Still. My girth was a type of costume in itself. Not for nothing am I known as Fatman.

The steps to the first floor were wide enough for a marching band. The Persian carpet squished between my bare toes. The stairway alone in this place was worth more than my Frogtown cottage. The rail and baluster were carved with vines, squirrels, rabbits, trolls. Baronial, that was the word. Trouble is I’m not a baron at heart.

I got to the first floor and the tapping still seemed distant, albeit increasingly impatient. Whatever it was, it wasn’t the wind.

I opened the basement door.

Closer. Louder. My heart started to pound.

What is it that makes us go forward when all the smart money says, Retreat! Call the cops! Run! We make our own horror movies. We get caught up in the stupid plot.

I turned on the light. Gripped the rail. Descended, step by frightening step.

The basement is like a dungeon. Crumbling limestone walls. Thick beams hewn from old growth forest. Spoils of the robber barons, left behind, improbably, for me, Doris.

“Who’s there?” I called.

In response more banging, harder, faster.

It seemed to be coming from the old coal room. I’d peeked in there once right after we moved. The walls were still dusted black. An incandescent bulb hung from a wire.

The noise came from behind another door at the far end of the room, covered with coal dust, barely visible. I opened it slowly.

Behind it was another door, this one of reinforced steel set in concrete and barred with a thick oak beam.

More tapping, urgent now.

“Who is it? What’s going on?” I don’t know if I said it or thought it.

“For Christ sake, Fatman. Open the God damn door. I don’t have all night.”

“Duke?” I said. “That’s you?”

“You expecting somebody else?”

“You’re dead.”

“No argument there. Open the door.”

“I don’t know.”

“Fatman,” he said. “It’s my house.”

“It was. Now it’s mine.”

“Doris’s.”

“Ours.”

“Okay. Yours. Open the door.”

I never won an argument with Duke. I opened the door.

2. I’m Here to Help

Last time I saw Duke he was being carried off into the afterlife by four Black teenagers in hoodies. It’s a lot to explain.

Now he stood in the coal closet, blinking.

“Kinda bright in here,” he said.

“You kidding?”

The light from the single bulb seemed as dead as Duke was.

“Compared to....”

“The underworld?”

“What else?”

“I thought, maybe...”

“I could have done worse. All things considered.”

“They give you...what do you call it? A sentence?”

“Not how it works.”

“How does it work?”

“Who knows? But you ought to lock the door. Unless you want to run a B and B for the undead.”

Duke and I go back. We went to the same school, got mugged by the same nuns. He went his way, I went mine. His way led to law school, private practice, an office on the two hundred and fifty fourth floor, or so it seemed. A view of the Dakotas, Iowa, a couple other states. He was the lawyer you called when you were guilty but had enough money make “justice” work for you. My way? It’s worked out, you could say, albeit with some twists and turns.

“Looking good, Fatman. Getting your three squares and then some.”

“And you, Duke, you...”

“Don’t lie to me.”

Who wants the truth? Death wasn’t doing Duke any favors. He always wore suits from the top of the rack. He paid more for a sport coat than I paid for a car. His shoes were made by an old Italian guy you had to beg to take you as a customer. Now Duke’s finery was grimed with the gray dust of the underworld. Ditto for his skin. He was dead and he looked it.

“Okay, you looked better. You take everything into account, can you complain?”

“Sure I can complain. You’re the guy who can’t complain.”

Duke and I: Our dealings are complicated. Duke’s thing with Doris, it didn’t work out but it happened. She’s in my bed now. Or, to be one hundred percent accurate about it, I’m in her bed. Duke left her most of his estate, including our mansion. He left her so much money she’s not sure how much there is.

“It’s not like counting the change in your piggybank,” she’s explained. “Depending on the day. We’re up up a few million, down a few million.”

“Get me in hand grenade range.”

“North of thirty-five,” she replied.

For a number of reasons I was startled, not least of which was that Doris had uttered the phrase *north of thirty-five*. She could have been speaking a foreign language.

Perfect, you think, but it wasn’t. Suddenly we had issues. What was hers. What was mine. What was ours. Who was running the show.

I blamed Duke. Quietly.

But who wants to hear you trash talk the guy who left you millions?

“You don’t mind me asking,” I said to him now. “What brings you by?”

“I’m like dead Santa, Fatman. I know when you been sleeping. I know when you’re awake. I know when things aren’t working out.”

“So?”

“I’m here to help.”

To which I thought, oh no.

3. *We’re Not Zombies*

“You put in an underworld portal?”

“Me? No,” said Duke. “It came with the place.”

“Who would do that?”

Duke gave me a look. His eyes didn’t have the old sparkle.

Then again he looked better than the last time I saw him. A year ago Doris and I sat with Duke on a log beside the Mississippi. His time was running out. On Halloween he’d stabbed himself to death on our doorstep.* The way he explained it to us, he had seventy-two hours to wander the Earth, to figure out the meaning of his life. My guess was that he he didn’t get the job done before he collapsed. Then those kids appeared from nowhere in their black hoodies. They hauled Duke away and that was that. Until now.

“Who wants a portal?” Duke said. “Jesus, Fatman. You think Mother Teresa built these joints? We’re talking about the robber barons. Pillagers. Plunderers.”

“I’m not saying they had scruples. But a bunch of zombies in the underworld, what help you get from them? No offense.”

“You set your mind to it, you can get a lot done down there. We’re not zombies. Please.”

“Sorry. Still.”

“How about we have a sit down? You keep the wine cellar?”

“You drinking?”

“The bodily needs, I’m over that. Eating. Breathing. Shitting. Frees up mental space. Plus the supply line questions. You’d go nuts trying to score a bag of Doritos down there. Forget about arugula.”

“Doris still talks about the terrible chow.”

“She’s lucky she got out. Food, that was the least of her problems.”

Duke negotiated that deal. After Doris was abducted by the undead and held for ransom, he went up against the underworld’s deep bench of legal talent to spring her. He lied and double crossed them, which seemed like the best option at the time. **

“The wine cellar, it’s like you left it. Maybe light a couple bottles...”

He motioned for me to follow him. We passed through the boiler room with its maze of pipes linked to an antique furnace that roared and hissed. Duke pulled open a thick door. Inside, a dirt floor. Shelves stacked with dusty bottles. A rough table surrounded by four chairs. Upon it a lantern, a corkscrew and four glasses, these covered with a white napkin and set upside down on a tray.

Duke grabbed a bottle and opened it.

“I thought you were done with that..”

“I am. You’re not.”

I shrugged. He filled a glass and pushed it toward me.

“Fatman,” Duke said. “I feel your pain. You know why I’m here?”

“I got no idea.”

“To make things right, my friend. To make things right.”

* See Duke Is Dead for the complete story.

* * Ditto, Fatman Descends.

4. *He’s Got a Plan*

Duke put his elbows on the table and leaned in toward me. “No point in lying, Fatman,” he said.

“Lying? I barely said hello.”

“I know you got spiders inside your skin. Maybe I put them there. Unintentionally, but all the same. What I want now is, you’re happy.”

“Spiders?”

“Okay, forget about the spiders. Happiness. What life’s all about, right?”

“I don’t know. You got other things. Responsibility. Making a contribution.”

“You feel good because it appears you got something more on your mind than old number one. But it’s still about old number one. Self regard. Happiness.”

“Mother Teresa, would she put it that way?”

“We’ve argued about it,” said Duke.

“You argued with Mother Teresa?”

“The underworld. You’d be surprised.”

“But Mother Teresa?”

“She had issues. Anyway. How’s the wine?”

I gave the glass a swirl and drank. From Duke I got an expectant look.

“What is this?”

“Let’s just say you can’t buy it off the shelf.”

“I’m no connoisseur...”

“I know.”

“I’m not a total low-brow either.”

Duke shrugged.

I looked down into the glass. My tongue went numb. Thoughts occurred. Not the usual slow, waddling procession. A flood, a tsunami. No sensible order. At my mother’s breast. A field of corn swaying in the breeze. Doris. Her lips. Dollar bills blowing down the street. A spinning sensation. Time, unmoored. Too much to register.

Eventually I was able to mutter, “Duke, what’s in this?”

“France by way of a Swiss lab.”

“It can’t be legal.”

“It’s not illegal. But that’s not the point.”

“What is the point?” My tongue felt like a slab of rawhide.

“Dopamine enhancement. Maybe a touch of MDMA. Quick release formulation. Opens the door. Your feelings stroll through.”

“You drugged me.”

“That’s a little dramatic. I’m helping you.”

“I asked for help?”

“Here’s the problem. Your unhappiness makes me unhappy.”

“It’s about you.”

“Let’s not split hairs. You. Doris. Try being honest.”

My feelings. Yes. The door opened. Those feelings strolled through. They turned into a gang, a mob in the street. They flipped cars. They burned buildings. I took Duke’s face in my hands. His skin felt like refrigerated dough but I didn’t care. I pressed my eyes against the shoulder of his suit. It was caked with the dust of the underworld. I didn’t care about that either. Then the tears started. Sobs. Snotty, choking wails.

“Give me the glass,” Duke said, prying it out of my fingers.

“I don’t... I just... I am...”

“I know. I know,” Duke said. “Lucky for both of us, I got a plan.”

5. Va-va, then Voom

“You got a plan?” I said to Duke.

I lifted my head from his shoulder, swiped at my eyes. My tears had turned to mud in the underworld dust that covered Duke’s suit.

“You really are a mess,” said Duke. He took a napkin from the table and rubbed at my face, leaving a smear of gray on the white linen.

I reached for the wine glass again.

“Maybe you had enough,” Duke said.

“The dam,” I croaked. “Burst. Feelings...” I made a vague, fluttering gesture.

“Old story. You bottle it up and then when it blows...”

I tried to speak but all that came out was a low groan.

I lifted Duke’s glass again. Doris’s glass.

Love of his life, or so he claimed as he wandered the Earth after his death.

I had my doubts.

Not to argue against Doris’s talents and charms. If Doris ran the world, all the trains would run on time. If you had a t, it would be crossed. Dependable, dogged, that’s Doris.

All this does not come bundled in plain brown wrapping. With Doris, you get done with the va-va, you still got the voom. She puts a lot of parts in motion. She seems taller than she is. The red hair. The pouty lips. Those heeled boots that she fancies. “*A real firecracker!*” is the common description. True enough. Doris has a volatile side. But if you’re the object of her affection, that’s not necessarily a negative.

More than once — actually, more than a couple hundred times — I’ve heard people wonder out loud, *What is she doing with him?*

Even if I’ve got to say it myself, nonetheless I will.

I’ve got charms. I talk. I listen. I cook. I know I’ve got a good thing going. I try to keep it that way. I appreciate. I flatter, but cunningly, believably.

Then there’s the authority that a big man such as myself brings to romantic activities. You’re running a road crew, you don’t put a featherweight on the jackhammer. If you get my point.

I drained the glass of Duke’s wine before he could stop me.

Doris was not the love of Duke’s life. Duke was the love of Duke’s life. Giving her a pile of cash and a mansion was a display, not a gift.

The wine. Boom. MDMA, if that’s what it was. It’s not called Ecstasy for nothing. The roulette wheel of thoughts started spinning again. Oh. The soft parts of Doris, the fleshy expanses, the crannies and crevices, the humid regions. An avalanche of cash, dollars and coins, up to my knees, my hips, my shoulders, past my nose. Then I was gone, buried.

“Fatman!”

Duke shook my shoulder.

“Wha...?”

“Enough.” Duke pried the glass out of my hand again.

“You see?” he said. “You see the problem? You see the answer?”

“The question was what?”

“All that dough that Doris got.”

“Your money.”

“Her money.”

Hers. Right. Not mine.

“She’s driving the scooter. You’re hanging on in back.”

“That’s...”

“Emasculating.”

“Wrong.”

“Don’t bother arguing. Here’s what we do.”

“On no.”

Duke tapped the back of my hand with a finger. His nails were blue and his skin the color of turnips.

“We make you a pile of your own.”

6. *You’re a Parasite, Right?*

“First order of business,” said Duke. “Definition. What your problem is.”

“Get in line,” I said.

“Among the virtues of being dead. You know things. Privacy. Turns out it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“You know what?”

“What I want. The things that interest me. I’m interested in you, Fatman. In Doris.”

“You spy on us?”

“Spy. That’s harsh. I keep up. I’m here to help. You could use some. This isn’t working out for you.”

Before Duke died, I had my little pot of money. Doris had her job. It was enough. We had our Frogtown pied-à-terre, our 20-year-old cars. Our idea of a splurge was a fifteen dollar bottle of wine. We were happy. Then Duke dropped his money bomb on Doris.

“It’s not mine, baby, it’s ours,” she said.

She kept my stockings stuffed. A Mercedes E-400. A vicuña wool suit that felt like a second skin. Olive oil that seemed to come from a different solar system, so exceptional was its flavor. She wanted to make me feel better and instead I just felt worse.

“You got your economic impotence problem,” Duke said. “The kept dude dilemma.”

“I got my own money.”

“Peanuts. Change.”

“We used to live on it.”

“You call that living.”

“It’s not the worst problem you can have.”

“Compared to the classic impotence problem, the limp dickery and all of that, yeah, I’d rather deal with the four-figure bank account.”

I looked hard at him, tried to figure if he was guessing.

“I know,” he said. He shrugged. “She says, *We’re both getting older, Charles, or, Maybe it’s all the change, or, They make pills for this.* A very understanding woman, Doris. If what you want is understanding.”

“You got more of that wine?” I said.

“Let’s try to focus. You feel like a parasite, right?”

“Parasite.”

“Living off something or somebody else.”

“I got my own dough.”

“I keep trying to tell you. You got peanuts, Fatman. You had a peanut life. Doris, she’s got the full bag of mixed nuts. You need to keep up. You need your own thing.”

“Who says I need my own thing?”

“We got a program.”

“You’re dead. What do you mean you got a program?”

“Graydon. Pimplipper. Me. We organized the underworld talent. Of which there is plenty. Legal. Human resources. Personal development. Life coaching.”

“Life coaching? You’re all dead.”

“You keep saying that. You think just because you die you lose your insight? The dead got as much insight as anyone’s ever going to have. Think about it.”

“Anyway, you’re in the underworld. How do customers get to you? Die?”

“That’s how we scratch each other’s backs, Fatman. We help you and you help us. Let me fill you in.”

7. Everybody wins.

“What we need is a base of operations,” said Duke. “Nothing fancy. Not completely under the radar, not right up in your face.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“Your Frogtown joint. You still own it.”

“Doris keeps saying we got to dump it, get rid of the headaches. The snow, the grass, the upkeep.”

“You were going to will it to the kids across the street, right?”

“They declined. Too much trouble, they said. Easier to rent. Jesus, it’s hard to make people happy.

“Evict them. We’ll take care of the rest.”

“I thought you were trapped down there.”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“There have always been... how to put it? Friends of the dead.”

“What’s that mean, friends?”

“People who see the advantage. They help us. We help them. Win-win.”

“Who does such a thing?”

“Guys with moxie. Guys who aren’t afraid to seize the moment. Guys who got a commitment to living large.”

“The old deal with the devil.”

“I’m not the devil. Or a zombie. Show some respect, okay? It’s an arrangement. Mutually beneficial. That’s what the door in your coal bin is about.”

“A portal?”

“Sure.”

“You were dealing with the dead all along?”

“Let’s say that for many years I had help.”

“You put in the portal?”

“No need. Already there. You think the robber barons made it on their own? These steel doors? Standard equipment in your Summit Avenue mansion. You just got to know where to look.”

“I always thought...”

“Your average person has no idea. So-called meritocracy. Hard work rewarded. If at first you don’t succeed. Your normal schlub laps up the malarkey. Truth is, Fatman, you want to make it, you need friends. Friends who can make things happen. Family that goes back. Inherited wealth.”

Duke pushed the wine back toward me. The house made it’s usual noises, clicking and chattering, settling. “So,” Duke said. “You in or you out?”

8. You’re Client Number One

“I’m in, what’s that mean exactly?” I asked Duke.

“Where’s the trust, Fatman?” He pushed back his chair, made to stand up. “Sure, I’m dead. That doesn’t mean I got time to waste.”

“The basic outline, okay? What I’m getting into.”

Duke sighed and sat down again. “Here’s the deal. You get rid of the tenants. We get our own people in. A nice couple. They’ll turn the lights on and off, mow the grass, shovel the snow, water the flowers.”

“No parties, right?”

“Strictly under the radar, like I said. The deadest people available.”

“It’s a home or an office?”

“A home office. No problem. Strictly in compliance with city ordinances. Pimplipper and I checked it out.”

“Do we have a lease?”

“You want a lease, we’ll write something up. But what you going to do with it? Take us to court?” At that Duke let loose another of his wheezing laughs.

“Forget the lease then.”

“That’s the spirit. Maybe we hang up a shingle. Duke Consulting. Duke Life Systems. Life Insight. Something encouraging. You’re client number one.”

“What do I get?”

“Intake interview. Aptitude assessment. Myers Briggs, Minnesota Multiphasic. Basic stuff. Then we call in Creative. Start working on options for you. Big league options. Major plays. Put a package together. But it’s more than that, Fatman. Our whole team gets behind you. Software, branding, marketing, accounting, social media. You see the depth, your head will spin. You want Michael Jackson doing your jingle, you got Michael.”

“You kidding?”

“Right now he’s not busy, he’s bored. You’d be doing him a favor. Same for the rest of them. Mailer, Pollock, Basquiat. Hell, Picasso. Though between you and me, the artists are more trouble than they’re worth. You want an ad, call an ad man is what I say.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“There’s got to be something in it for us?”

“Duke. We go back. Let me ask again. What’s in it for you?”

“Suspicion, Fatman. I don’t like it so much, but I appreciate it.” He twisted the big Rolex on his wrist.

“They bury you with that?” I asked.

“Wrote it into the will. A little joke. You want it? Here.” He popped the clasp and handed it to me. “Maybe it’ll work for you.”

“A Rolex? It doesn’t work? At the price they ought to be bombproof.”

“The hands froze when I killed myself. Then they fell off.”

I slipped the watch onto my wrist. Something twitched inside it.

“The pay-off on our end,” Duke said. “It’s like this. People like me. We got a big life going. The money, the women, the houses, the planes, the cars, the food, the wine, the vacations, the donations, the board seats, the staff. Which isn’t the half of it. And then bang, it’s over. You run into a concrete wall at two hundred miles an hour. You used to be a player and now there isn’t even a game. You’re sitting in the underworld dust and you don’t have a chair.”

“Maybe that’s the idea,” I said. “Time for reflection. Meditation.”

“Maybe. Maybe you get to that. I’m not there yet. I want to keep a hand in.”

“I’m a puppet.”

“You’re a partner.”

Duke patted my shoulder. He gave me a slow-motion wink.

9. *She groaned at that.*

“What next?” I asked Duke.

“Dump the tenants. We get a crew in, do a reno, hang a shingle, bang, we’re in business.”

“I tell Doris?”

“What?”

“Anything. Everything. We got a portal. You’re strolling through. I’m your... what?”

“Let’s say client.”

“Client then.”

“My advice, Fatman. I shouldn’t presume. Your deal. What I’d do? Tell her. I’m not saying honesty is the best policy. But sometimes, it works.”

I looked into my wine, considered another gulp.

Duke pushed his chair back. "I got to get going," he said.

"You're on a schedule?"

"You think okay, I'm dead, I'm done with meetings. You know what? The meetings never end. Pimplipper, Graydon, they love a sit-down. You'd think they're still billing by the hour. You don't believe it when people say it's not about the money. Then you're dead and it's not about the money. The sound of their own voices, it's like a drug for them."

"For everyone."

"Right." Duke stood slowly. His joints popped, creaked. I followed him back to the coal bin. He opened the portal.

"Lock it up tight again," Duke said. "You don't want every dead Dick and Harry wandering through."

As soon as Duke crossed the threshold I barred the door.

10. *Kama Sutra on the four-poster*

The sun began to rise as I returned to our bedroom. First of November. Day of the Dead. Gray light. Bare trees. Leaves blowing in the street.

Inside Doris's mansion, a few gloomy shadows, dark corners, the usual sounds. Creakings, groanings, a pop and snap, thousands of boards and pipes expanding, contracting, bumping up against each other and pulling away, as if it were a living them.

Doris was a lump under the duvet. The top of her head was visible.

She wiggled around some in Duke's bed. Most of the furniture I didn't care about one way or another. It was period merchandise from the land grab era, all of it carved, dark, heavy. Duke's bed was a custom piece, too elaborate to scrap but too creepy to love. He'd had significant portions of the Kama Sutra carved into the four-poster. The centerpiece of this extravagance was my naked sweetheart, posing Venus-style. It would have been one thing if I had commissioned it. But I hadn't.

"Nnnnuhh," Doris said.

"What?"

"Pies?"

“What do you mean, pies?”

She pushed back the duvet. Doris wasn't a nightgown type of gal. Even after so many years, I had trouble in these circumstances focusing on what she said.

“Pipes. I said, pipes. Was that banging pipes?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Duke,” I said. “He stopped by. There's a portal in the coal bin.”

She groaned. How I was to take that noise I really couldn't say.

11. *I Wanted Rotten Dead*

“A portal in the coal bin?”

Doris sat up. Her hair stuck out in a hundred directions. Her eyes were puffy. She needs a couple cups of coffee to get her started, and even then the sun had better be above the horizon.

“You ever been in the basement?”

“I don't know I've been in all the rooms above ground.”

“A steel door. Set in concrete. Duke says on Summit Avenue it's no big deal. All the old-time rich guys had them. That was him, banging on the door.”

“Duke.” She swiped at her hair. “How does he look?”

“What you mean, how does he look?”

A guy leaves your sweetheart forty or fifty million dollars, you can't help but hope he looks like a monster. Dead isn't enough. Rottingly dead is what you're after.

“He's dead. He could be worse.”

Doris pushed the duvet back and got out of bed. She's a creature of habit. First thing in the morning it's always the same. Onto the scale. Then to the mirror. Self-examination. Hands through her hair. Over her ribs, to her hips. I try to resist. Usually fail. What I want to do is come up behind her, run my hands over her belly, to her breasts. Lift. Separate. As the old bra ads had it. She doesn't love it but she tolerates it. Sometimes she'll lean back against me and I'll nuzzle

her neck. It takes so little to make me happy. Just a bit more and I'm ecstatic. If she says, "Charles, I'm thinking, breakfast can wait," I melt with joy. I lift her up and set her back in bed before she has a chance to change her mind.

Okay, I couldn't resist. I took hold of her hips. She grabbed my hands, focused on my eyes in the mirror.

"What does he want this time?" Doris said.

"He thinks he done me wrong. He wants to make it good."

"He made us rich. How's that bad for you?"

She insists the money is ours. Maybe she feels that way. Everything is in her name. I don't want to say we should get married. It never seemed necessary before. Now it could so easily be interpreted as a grab for the dough. For all she's said about the money being ours, she's never mentioned marriage either.

"Duke says he wants to take me on as a project. With his pals in the underworld. Make me rich. Too."

She pulled my hands tighter around herself and gave me another look. I tried to figure out what it meant. Skeptical? Curious? Doris is not really an open book.

"How's that going to happen?"

"Some aptitude and personality testing for starters. Then we take it from there. He's got all the top people lined up." I paused. "What do you think?"

"The top dead guys? Next time you hear him knocking you should put a pillow over your head."

12. *Why Not Burn It Down?*

Someone operating purely on common sense would have had that steel door in the basement welded shut, maybe added a couple sheets of reinforced steel, a few heavy oak cross beams, some logging chain and sound dampening.

I set off to have a chat with the tenants.

After Doris and I moved to Summit Avenue, I reluctantly rented out my Frogtown home. When the light-rail trains go by you hear that jolly ding, ding, ding. People going places, getting things done.

I poured a lot of love into the place. A perennial garden out front. A picket fence. Plenty of scraping, priming, painting. New roof. Copper pipes. Not to mention the memories. That first time Doris stood on the threshold and gave the place an appraising once-over. Her relieved judgment: *Why it's sweet, Charles. The violets, the doilies. There's the soul of an old lady inside you.* To which I said, later that night, *You want to change your opinion on that old-lady business?* She flopped beside me in my bed and said, *Charles, you got a lot going on.*

I didn't want to sell the place. "We might not be Summit Avenue types," I explained. "We might want to beat a retreat."

"So rent it," she said.

"Tenants," I told Doris. "Everything looks okay, then the boyfriend moves in, and the boyfriend's sister, and the sister's boyfriend, five kids, next thing you know it's the cops, the neighbors, everybody on your back. You're not getting the rent, the toilet's backed up. Totally predictable."

"Here's what's predictable," Doris said. "You leave it empty, first the copper pipes get stolen. Then the wiring. Then those cute stained-glass windows. Followed by the radiators. Followed by the water damage. Then the squatters starting fires in the living room to keep warm. Why don't you just go burn it down right now?"

"Okay, okay."

I did what I could to find responsible tenants. I quizzed the ministers in the churches nearby. I advertised in their church bulletins. Because I am a stupid, soft touch, I rented to a church gal with a little yipping terrier who was sold to me by the Reverend Elijah Hawkins as a decent woman coming off some hard times. Elijah, who I have known for decades, gave me that you-can-save-this-gal's-life-or-you-can-turn-the-page look that he ought to patent. I said yes to the gal and dog. Inevitably the psychopath boyfriend followed. By his reasoning, he needed her money for meth more than I needed her money for rent. We had a few ineffectual conversations regarding priorities.

I pulled up to the old place to terminate their month-to-month lease. That the end was in sight: good. The prospect that it would end well: unlikely.

I knocked on the door. The terrier attacked it from the other side.

“Whosit?” the boyfriend barked.

“Landlord,” I said.

“Ain’t rent day.”

Not that they paid it. “Just came by to chat,” I said.

“Get way from that door,” he yelled at the dog. I heard a yip and a whimper, then the chain rattled against the hasp.

“What you want?” he said, one eye glaring through the narrow slot.

13. *Meth Can Do a Lot*

“How about you open the door?” I suggested.

“How ‘bout it’s open wide enough?”

He was bare-chested. His dirty jeans rode on a ridge of pelvic bone. Part of the money I wasn’t getting in rent was going toward tattoo ink. His teeth were a mess. The eye within view looked like a roadmap — red lines headed in all directions.

“Jennifer home?” I asked.

She was a sweet girl who needed a break when I rented her the place. Furnished, since we had no need of our old stuff in Duke’s mansion. She had a hard luck story, sure, but it didn’t sound hopeless. Her dog got run over. She lost her job when Target downsized. But she landed work at WalMart and got her first check.

“I’ve always been proud of paying my bills on time,” she said. I believed her! There wasn’t a boyfriend in the picture when we shook hands on the deal. Because I am a soft-hearted fool, there was no written lease. Ergo, there was no legal document preventing the boyfriend or the creature now yipping and gnawing on the door.

The good news was that I could evict with thirty days notice.

“Who’s Jennifer?”

“Your girlfriend, maybe? The girl who rents this place.”

“Never heard of no Jennifer.”

“You want to treat me with a little respect? Jennifer. Jen. Jenny. The renter.”

He slammed the door. “J!” he yelled. “Dude at the door. Landlord.”

“Uh,” she said from somewhere out of sight.

I knocked again.

This time Jennifer opened to door as far as the security chain allowed.

“Huh,” she said.

Meth can do a lot in a few months. The formerly sweet, pudgy Jennifer now looked out at me with darting, dilated eyes. Her cheeks were sunken. As far as I could tell she’d just walked to the door but that was enough to work up a sweat.

“Jennifer, you remember me?”

“Course I do. Fatman. Not rent day. Is it?”

I explained how I was evicting her. Upgrade. Remodeling. Had to empty the place out. Toxic dust. Fumes. Etcetera.

She asked if she could get the damage deposit back immediately. At the mention of cash money the boyfriend was at the door again. I told her I’d send her a check if the place was clean and I got a forwarding address. Fat chance.

Jennifer and her Romeo moved out in the middle of the night, taking with them their clothes and toothbrushes. They left behind most of my furniture, such as it was after the dog used it as chew toys. There was the inevitable sink full of dirty dishes and a refrigerator’s worth of spoiled condiments. They also smashed the toilet and bathroom sink with a three pound sledgehammer, which they left standing handle up in the lake that formed in my house.

That night I slipped a note under the steel door in the coal bin. House is empty, it said.

I figured one way or another, Duke would get the message.

14. *She’d Love to Consummate an Agreement!*

I didn't tell Doris about the eviction or the busted up toilet.

Days passed. From the underworld, nothing.

Had Doris been party to this deal, the silence would have driven her nuts.

She's a hustler. Try to get her to sit still. Even after the millions went from Duke's accounts to hers, she kept her job.

Take it from me, it's not glamorous work. Debt collection is Doris's racket.

Within her firm, Alpha Omega Asset Management Services, Doris is the clean-up batter. You've already dealt with the staff thugs, guys who edge up against the letter of the law with their threats of ruination. They haven't made you crack.

Then, finally, Doris gets on the horn. She purrs into your ear. You wonder if it's some misplaced phone-sex call, until she gets to the part where she all-but-whispers that she's from Alpha Omega Asset Management Services and she would love to consummate an agreement.

Consummate!

Well, yes!

She's like a snake charmer. The idea of your money is now mixed up with the urge to satisfy This Voice, to consummate the relationship and collapse into the bed of cash that used to be yours. And so you work out a payment schedule, maybe on the order of one hundred dollars a week for the next, say, seventeen months, since with fees, interest, principal, court costs, a couple hundred other things, you now owe one thousand six hundred and forty-two dollars instead of the original three hundred and thirty seven.

I've pointed out to her that she could afford to retire, she could take on work that might possibly be of greater service to humanity. Raise money for orphans. Feed kids in Africa.

"Charles," she replies. "Reminding people of their obligations. Making them do the things they promised they would do. You twist the dial half a notch, maybe Jesus would be collecting debt. You think about it, what's Judgment all about? Settling out accounts. What you promised versus what you did. The elevator goes up, the elevator goes down. Harsh, really. In comparison, dealing with me? A cakewalk."

As I've said before, no point in arguing with her.

In comparison, I could spend my life rocking on the porch, staring into space. It looks like I'm doing nothing. Okay, I am doing nothing. But my mind is churning. Well, not so much really.

I am what I am. I'm not apologizing.

Doris takes in the sight of me thus occupied and asks, "Charles, do you think you'd be happier if you were doing something?"

"Who says I'm doing nothing?"

"Judging by appearances."

"It only looks that way."

Sometimes my meditations are so profound that I'm unsure of what I've day-dreamed and what has occurred. The continuing silence from Duke slipped into that category. The conversation with my dead friend: a figment and nothing more?

Then late one night, while Doris snored lightly and drooled on her pillow, I sensed a presence.

As if pulled by a ring in my nose, I put on my robe and made my way into the hall.

Creep, creep, creep. Down, down, down, to the basement and the dark coal bin.

There at the foot of the barred steel door, a folded scrap of paper.

Nuns spent years cracking Duke's knuckles for his handwriting and there it was again, like the trail left by a dying insect as it crawled across the paper.

Open the portal at midnight, the message said.

15. *We Got Work to Do*

Fifteen minutes to kill before opening the portal.

The bottle Duke opened during his last visit was still on the table along with my glass. I emptied the last few drops on the stone floor, pulled the cork. Stopped. Considered. Decided, oh, what the hell. And then...

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Next, a muffled roar. "Fatman! Fatman!"

I dropped the glass and watched as it splintered. A purple fog rose from the wine.

“Fatman! Open the door!”

I staggered out of the chair, onto my feet.

“All right,” I mumbled. “All right.”

I pulled back the oak bar on the portal, tugged at the steel bolt. The door grumbled on its hinges. Duke glared at me.

“I give you my Rolex and you still can’t tell time?”

“The wine,” I said, gesturing vaguely. “Plus, the hands just rattle around in there.”

“You heard about watch repair? Plus, drinking alone, my friend. Bad idea. Especially with that stuff.”

“What’s in it?”

“Fairy dust. Poison. You don’t want to know. You ought to dump the rest down the drain. But you won’t.”

“Probably not.”

“I don’t have all night, Fatman. We got work to do.”

I followed him back to the wine cellar. Duke moved awkwardly, as if he might fall to pieces.

“You think a walker would help?” I asked him as he settled into a chair.

“What you mean, a walker?”

“Your gait. It’s not a zombie shuffle, but...”

“Jesus, what would people think?”

“You’re dead. Nobody thinks anything about you.”

“I’m not so sure. All the guys I ever sprung.”

“Maybe they think you got their money and you’re dead. Which they resent.”

“They’d be happy with a bunch of mother-rapers in the joint?”

“You’re telling me your average felon is rational?”

“Okay. Forget it. You got the tenants out?”

“They trashed the place, but they’re out.”

“No problem. We’ll get a crew in. We got people.”

“Living?”

“Not really.”

“They’re up for a full day of work?”

“All day, all night, they don’t care. They move a little slower maybe, but the thing is, they don’t stop. Sleeping, eating, no need.”

“What happened to laying your burden down?”

“People are who they are. I still want to make a deal. That’s me. Our crew, all Mexican roofers.”

“They still want to work?”

“What? You think all of a sudden they want to sing hosannah twenty-four seven? I get it, Fatman, your perspective. You’re not a worker. But these guys? They want a hammer in their hand, *norteña* on the radio.”

“Sounds like racist claptrap. No offense.”

“Call it what you want. All I’m saying is, we’ll get a crew in. Three, four days, your place will look like Mister Clean was living there. We’ll get some desks, hang a shingle.”

“You settle on a name?”

Duke sighed. “It was just me, trust me, I’d have a name. But Pimlipper and Graydon, they’ve got their opinions. Our branding doll, Lacey McNutty, she’s got a notebook full of options. Slogans. Logos. Egbert Lutherson, you remember him?”

“Jumped off the freeway bridge? University professor?”

“After the sex thing, yeah. The dog’s owner would have killed him anyway. He heads up our evaluation unit.”

“Interesting choice.”

“Decision-making in his personal life, okay, there were problems. But he’s got insight. He shines a light into the dark side.”

“That I believe.”

“A few details, we’ll be good to go.”

“I figured there would be details.”

“Don’t get your back up. It’s not going to cost you a cent.”

“So what is it?”

“Getting the guys to the work site. Easiest thing is, you let them through the portal here.

Drive them to the site.”

“I’m running a hearse service? What we call it? Unter?”

“Ha ha. Listen, it’s a one time deal. You get them there, they stay until they’re done.”

“They bring their own tools?”

“Of course. They’re professionals.”

“Materials?”

“You make the order.”

“I thought this wasn’t going to cost me a cent?”

“A few bucks for plaster board, paint, odds and ends. You get the your trashed joint repaired.

And you’re choking me over materials? Please, Fatman.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“When do we start?”

“I got the guys scheduled for tomorrow. Midnight work for you?”

16. *Luigi Threw a Tantrum*

I laid off Duke’s chef shortly after we moved in. He was a *Bon Appetit* type — vegetable foams, sous-vide, artful plating. A pro, in short. He had been the top man at a snotbag restaurant in Minneapolis until Duke hired him away. He said his name was Luigi.

When I mentioned to Doris that I wanted to give Luigi the ax, she gave me a thoughtful look.

“You don’t like his cooking?”

“His cooking is great.”

“Is it the money?”

“I don’t know what he’s making.”

“Ninety-five, I think.”

“It could be the money.”

“But not really?”

“No.”

Doris can be a bulldozer, but when she turns on the concern, the empathy, you feel like you've been hit by a tsunami. Her eyes get big, she locks them on you, she tears up a bit even.

"So what is it, Charles?"

"I considered it my work, baby. Keep the meat and potatoes coming. The planning, the shopping. Bottle of wine breathing on the counter, steaming pots on the stove. Now with Luigi..."

"You do plenty of other things."

"You've got your work."

"Only because I can't stop. It's a sickness, really."

"I liked taking care of you."

"You take care of me in a lot of ways."

A whiff of Mae West accompanied this. She put her arms around me. Not all the way around me, that being quite a stretch. She made some other subtle moves.

"Luigi is better. I know that. But we didn't starve before we had Luigi."

"No we didn't."

Doris gave me a pat around the belt line. Why she's not my size I don't understand. She eats like a football player but it doesn't cost her.

Luigi threw a chef-ish tantrum when I told him it was over. Tossing of the fry pans, waving of the knives. I took it for harmless bluster. When he ran out of steam I handed him a severance check. He counted the zeroes and shut up soon enough. Luigi grabbed his toque, hit the door and I was back in charge.

So when Doris shuffled down the steps in her pink fuzzy slippers, the bacon was jumping in the pan. The buttermilk biscuits steamed on the counter. I had eggs lined up beside the poaching pan.

"What was going on last night?" Doris asked. This was a few more words than she generally manages first thing in the morning.

"Going on?"

"You were wandering around."

I'd have to tell her that Duke was back eventually. She'd find out. The rehab job on the house, whatever plan Duke's undead team would cook up for me. It would come out.

I knew I shouldn't worry about competing with a dead guy. Sure, Duke and Doris had their little thing a couple decades ago. Sure, he'd left her forty million bucks or so. Yeah, we were living in his house, with that carving he'd commissioned of Doris's naked self dominating the four-poster. But Duke resided in the underworld, covered with underworld dust, wearing his underworld pallor.

While I was a man of this world, still eating, drinking, breathing.

And yet... Could his unworldliness be it's own category of attraction? Free from physical need, from the grind of all the various forms of appetite, hunger, desire. Maybe women — so used to be cat-called, pawed, probed — would find appeal in what Duke didn't have to offer.

"Couldn't sleep," I said.

Soon enough I'd need the truth or a better lie.

17. *You Running the Underground Railroad?*

Midnight at the portal door.

In the shadows behind Duke stood three figures. "*Amigos,*" he said. "*Te presento Don Fatman.*"

"*Fatman?*" said the tallest of the bunch. "*Como El Gordo? Verdad?*"

"*Si, esta bien,*" said Duke. "*Un chiste, nada mas.*"

"You speak Spanish?" I asked.

"Now I do. Spanish. Tagalog. Russian. Urdu. You name it. Among the perks. Let me introduce these *caballeros*. *Malito*. *El Raton*. *Y Florito*. You can kind of figure who's who."

A scar ran from the crown of Malito's head to his chin. One eye drooped and his lips were tugged into a permanent sneer. Florito could have been a model in *American Pedophile* magazine. The Rat? You understand.

"*Mucho gusto!*" I said. "*Encantado!*"

“You’re laying it on a little thick now, Fatman,” said Duke. My new amigos grinned at me.
“What you say we get rolling?”

As the police lights throbbed behind me, Florito yipped, “*Immigracion?!?*”

“Malito,” Duke said, “tell him not to worry. You guys are already deported. So to speak.”

The crew traded excited conversation in Spanish in the backseat.

“What are they saying?” I asked Duke.

“The usual. They’re the only people in this country who actually work. For that of course they’re persecuted. All the white people should be sent to Mexico, see how it goes for them. Et Cetera.”

“Can’t argue.”

Duke shrugged. “Life, death, they’re both unfair.”

I pulled over on Summit near one of those big stone churches. In the summer the trees made a canopy. Now a sliver of moon shone through the bare branches. The street was full of dead leaves.

In the rearview mirror I watched the cop hitch up his belt and march toward the Mercedes. I hit the window switch. “What’s the problem, officer?” I said.

He leaned down toward the window.

“Fatman!” he said.

“Roscoe. The graveyard shift? After all these years?”

Roscoe and I have a history. Grew up a couple blocks from each other. Same Catholic grade school as me and Duke. Back then law enforcement didn’t seem like a likely end for him, except that his whole family was in that racket.

“Why you pulling me over?”

“I didn’t know it was you.”

“Still. What are you doing? I’m a white guy driving down Summit Avenue at twenty-eight miles an hour in a Mercedes.”

“Okay, I felt like it. You want to know the truth. It’s like opening a Christmas present. See what’s inside.”

Roscoe shone his flashlight into the backseat.

“What, Fatman. You running the underground railroad here? Little late for yard work, isn’t it?”

He turned the light on Duke.

“Again?” Roscoe said. “How many times we got to bury you?”

Roscoe was in on Duke’s post-death caper. Duke hired Roscoe and a couple other Frogtown oddballs to run me and Doris around in circles.

“What’s the play this time?” Roscoe asked Duke.

“I’ll say this for you, Roscoe. You take it all in stride.”

“This job, you see it all.”

“Still.”

“What’s with the *amigos* in the back seat?” Roscoe asked. “*Hablan ingles, hombres?*”

“*No, no, no hablo,*” they agreed.

“Of course not. They all dead, too?” Roscoe asked Duke.

“Depends on what you mean by dead.”

“It’s not that complicated.”

“In the sense of not breathing, okay. But you want some work done, these are your *hombres.*”

“You don’t mind I ask why you’re driving around with a car full of dead buddies?”

“On our way to a job, Duke replied.”

“I bet this is a good story. How about if I tag along?”

“Shouldn’t you be protecting and serving?” I asked.

“Don’t listen to him, Roscoe. Fall in. Maybe we can work you into the operation.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Roscoe said.

17. *Mugged by Memories*

“*Aqui?*” Malito said. It sounded like a sneer but then I don’t speak Spanish.

“*Si,*” Duke said.

“*Pero, es la oficina central? Otro chiste, no?*”

“What?”

“He wonders if it’s a joke. That this is the main office.”

“Damn Duke, it’s my house. I loved this place.”

The patch of raspberries beside the garage. The July mornings when I waded into the prickly branches, swatting mosquitoes as I filled a cup with fruit for Doris’s breakfast.

My bird feeders, where the fat little sparrows and chickadees bellied up on the cold winter mornings.

Inside, the bright red linoleum on the kitchen floor.

Everything that I had painted, scraped, patched, polished. Okay, not expertly, but if you didn’t look too hard the overall sense was, here was a home that was loved.

We liked to think that we had made a decision. Wit instead of wealth. Sufficient rather than bombastic. But then as soon as we could move into Duke’s Summit Avenue mansion we were rats off the ship.

Malito stepped into the kitchen behind me. He turned on the lights, took a look and said, “*Que lastima!*”

“You got that right,” said Duke. “It is a shame. You remember, Fatman, right after I died? We sat at at your breakfast nook. Watched the snow fall. Cozy. Too bad about all this.”

All this. The dirty dishes piled up in the sink. The scampering roaches. A pot filled with brown goo on the greasy stove.

Florito opened the refrigerator and quickly shut it again. “*Ay, basura,*” he declared. And not the only garbage. A five-gallon bucket overflowed with dirty diapers.

“Couple days,” said Duke, “the boys will have this cleaned up. First thing in the morning, call for a thirty-yard dumpster.”

“*Hay un radio?*” El Raton wondered.

“Food, water, money, sleep — no worries about any of that, Fatman” Duke said. “Just keep the music coming. That’s all these gents require.”

“They left everything else. There must be a radio here.”

I wandered through my old home. It wasn’t much. A parlor. The pee-wee dining room. The bath with its demolished toilet. The bedroom.

The dead were in the kitchen but the ghosts were everywhere. Me, Doris, sleeping in our bed, eating at our table, reading beside our gas fireplace. Humble. Small. It seemed perfect at the time.

Duke called to me. “The minute you turn on the tunes these gents will get to work.”

I grabbed a boom box left behind in the bedroom. Malito plugged it in and found a station.

A minute later they were all singing like my kitchen was the opera.

“No queda nada porque todo se derrumbo...”

“What’s that, Duke?” I asked.

“Roughly? There is nothing because everything has collapsed.”

It’s only a song, I said to myself. All three of them began to sing along.

18. *Enter Roscoe*

“You see Roscoe out there?” I asked Duke.

“Yeah, here he comes.”

He pulled his squad car into my driveway, parked on the lawn, then sauntered to the back door.

“What’s the matter with parking on the street?” I asked him.

“That’s for civilians.” He looked around with his hands on his hips. “Jesus, what a mess,” he said. “Insurance fire, there’s a good idea.”

“A couple days, we’ll have it turned around,” Duke said.

“You got a permit?”

“In Saint Paul?” Duke said. “You kidding me?”

“Right. You get it cleaned up, then what?”

“Office space. We got a business.”

“Who?” said Roscoe. “You and these guys?”

“Me. Some of my associates.”

“Dead guys?”

“They got a lot of insight.”

Things happened on Roscoe's face. Lips, twisted. Eyes, squinting. Suggesting that he was ready to add this to his catalogue of human failure.

"What's business?" Roscoe asked.

"Life coaching. Business development geared toward the individual. Wealth creation, you could say."

Roscoe rocked on his heels and gave Duke a tell-me-another-one look. "You need a catchy name. Dead Life Coaching."

"We're working on the name," Duke said.

"Where the clients come from?"

"You're looking at customer number one. Fatman."

"I thought you were set. Big house. Wheelbarrows full of money. Doris."

"Nobody's happy, Roscoe," Duke said. "You know that."

"You're not happy, Fatman, then he's right," Roscoe said.

"Long and short, none of it's his," Duke said. "It all belongs to Doris."

"Joint property, right?"

"Wrong. Not married," Duke said.

"Bad move, Fatman. I assumed you two were legal."

"It would still be her money."

"I don't see how you change that."

"We don't change," Duke said. "We add."

"Add what?"

"We get Fatman his own revenue stream."

"You ask me, he's avoided more work than he's ever done."

"Everybody changes," Duke said.

"Not really. In my experience." Roscoe gave me a once over. "You never been interested in money, Fatman."

"Not true," I said. "Everybody is. You don't have a choice."

"You been interested in enough to pay the bills. Now you've got all the money in the world and you're worrying about it."

“Perversity of human nature, Roscoe,” Duke said. “Nothing you can do about it.”

“You got that right.”

Roscoe pulled back the blinds and looked out the window.

“What you doing about security?”

“People mess with the dead once, they don’t do it again,” Duke said.

“Still. Maybe you could use a presence.”

It was Roscoe’s turn now to get the once over. Duke said to Roscoe, “How you want to get paid? Cash or coaching?”

“Let me think about that,” Roscoe said.

19. *You’ll Be That Guy*

“Let’s go,” Duke said after Roscoe pulled away in his cruiser.

“We just leave them?” I asked. The three dead Mexicans were ripping up the carpeting with their bare hands.

“You got no worries with these guys. They work until they’re done.”

“*Hasta luego*,” El Raton said, barely looking up.

Duke followed me to the Mercedes.

“Where you want to go?” I asked him.

“Back through the portal. I got meetings with Pimlipper and Graydon, plus the guys in Creative.”

“At this hour?” Sunrise was still a long way off. The night was cold and clear. A breeze rattled the leaves in the gutter.

“You don’t have to sleep. Time doesn’t matter.”

“I’d miss the dreaming.”

“Depends on your dreams.”

We crossed the Victoria bridge over the freeway and headed up the hill. Past the Subway shop and Lee and Dee’s Barbecue Express, past the Baptist church.

Past all those markers that said, We’re striving. We’re rising. At least we hope we are.

Then we made the left onto Summit, where I felt like an impostor. Maybe everyone else did too.

“You felt at home here?” I asked Duke.

He seemed lost in whatever thoughts occupy the dead. “What?” he said.

“In your mansion, you felt like you belonged?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I had the dough. I owned the joint. If I didn’t belong there, who did?”

“I know how you were raised. You, me, Roscoe, same, same, same.”

“The guys who built these places,” Duke said. “You ask them who they want to hang with, somebody like me or their fifth generation relation?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s me every time. J.J. Hill. Weyerhauser. They didn’t have a fortune because somebody wrote them into the will. They stole it, earned it, hustled it. Trust me, I tell them about a scheme I pulled off and their eyes light up. I’m their man. Not some Binky or Muffy sipping a gin and tonic at the tennis club. I’m the guy who belongs. Once we’re done with you, Fatman, you’ll be that guy, too.”

I pulled into the driveway. Duke followed me to the side door. I fumbled with the numbers on the key pad. “I still don’t have the hang of this,” I said.

“Stand aside.” Duke gave the box a few pokes.

Before he finished the door opened. Doris stood there with a baseball bat in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

20. It Bothers Me, That Suspicious Look

“Doris!” Duke said.

It took a while before she said, “Again?”

Doris wore her blue terry robe and fuzzy pink slippers. On her it looked good.

“You could put down the bat,” I said.

She gave me a look.

“Why don’t we go sit down?”

She sighed.

Doris is a deep sleeper. She doesn't wake easily or happily. It takes a while to get through to her. Her hair was a mess. Her eyes were puffed up, half open.

She turned without saying another word. We followed her to the kitchen.

We've got a marble island there that's the size of an Eastern seaboard states. Delaware. Rhode Island. Spot lights shine down on it. Dramatic. Especially in light of the contrast with the cherry cabinets. There's a wine refrigerator below, a trash masher, other appliances with inscrutable functions.

I settled on a stool beside Doris. Duke sat across from us.

The light wasn't doing him any favors. Duke looked like he had been rolling in volcanic dust. Then there was the question of his skin tone.

"Last time," said Doris. "I thought you were dead. Dead dead. Those kids. Down by the river." He had slumped into the sand, wordless for once in his life, then those kids carried him off.

We figured that judgment was at hand.

"Isn't anything ever over?" Doris asked.

"Who knows?" said Duke. "Be here now. I'm making the best of it."

"You always did," Doris replied.

"No point in dwelling on the — what's the word here? — unfortunate? — the unfortunate aspects of the past. We had some good times. Look around yourself. Things worked out."

"You woke me up so I could say thank you?"

"I didn't plan on waking you up. I was on my way back to the portal."

"The portal?"

"I told you about this," I said. "Summit Avenue, it's like Swiss cheese. We got a portal. The neighbors probably got one."

"It's a solid steel door," Duke added. "Locked, chained, barred. It's not like you got the welcome mat out."

The silence went on several beats too long.

"It bothers me, baby. That suspicious look," I said.

Doris set the baseball bat on the counter.

“I gave you my opinion. He knock-knocks, you say, Nobody home. Why won’t you listen to me, Charles?”

21. *Love Shack Exile*

“I knock and nobody answers?” said Duke. “That hurts, Doris. Considering.”

“People have expectations. As in, you live, you die, you’re gone.”

“What’s all the wailing at the cemetery about then? *He was such a beautiful... I don’t know what we’ll do without... All of that?*”

“You don’t see the subtitles. *Last diaper I’ll buy for him. Get rid of the wheel chair. One less thing.*”

“Cold.”

“Complicated.

Doris noticed that her robe was coming undone. I noticed too. She pulled it tighter around herself and said, “My question is, Why are you back? Really.”

“Business,” said Duke. “Your business is my business.”

“I don’t see what business of ours needs your attention.”

“You’re not looking hard enough.”

“What am I missing?”

“You think Fatman is happy?”

Doris can be like the weather on a spring day. The sun is out, the clouds roll in, next thing you know the lightning is taking out the power poles. Then the rainbow and the birds are tweet tweet tweeting again. She looked at me and teared up briefly. An moment later an I-could-kill look worked around her lips and nose.

“Charles,” she said. “What?”

“You’ve been great, baby,” I said. “Generous to a fault. I don’t have a thing to complain about.”

“But...”

“Of course there’s a but,” said Duke. “There’s always a but.”

But, but, but...

It’s easy to confuse the symptoms for the disease.

Regarding the symptoms: Back in the day — oh, back in the day! — back when we occupied our Frogtown love shack, when keeping the roof over our head did not require additional help from the lawn guy, the cleaning crew, the handyman, the chief of staff, some other employees whose function is not entirely clear to me (and which is not to mention the high-priced mechanics for our high-priced vehicles, the gutter man who works only in copper, our painter who is harder to schedule than Rembrandt) anyway, back in the day, in the love department I was Old Faithful. Reliable. Exciting. You have to take my word. No sex tapes circulating in the dusty back rooms of the internet, at least not to my knowledge. Though the big men of this world might have learned a thing or two, had they been able to tune in.

What simple, stupid joy it was, collapsed finally on my back amid the messed-up sheets, watching the ceiling fan spin, listening to the locomotive-like clattering of my heart with Doris’ sweaty head on my chest.

Baby, you sure you’re okay? she said a time or two. *Sounds like a marching band in there.*

And me answering, *I die now, I’m happy. Just like Nelson Rockefeller.*

Not knowing the irony therein, that the price for Nelsonian wealth was the end of blissfully mindless fuckery.

How did it start? How do the worms finally enter the coffin? Not by launching themselves at a hundred miles an hour, clutching tiny pick axes in hands they don’t have. No. It’s an insidious process. Micro-steps, until what started out “looking so natural” inside that satin-lined box is something else entirely.

Excuse the melodramatics. What I’m saying here is that our life in the sack was a defining fact of my self-conception, my happiness.

Not that disaster struck all at once. More like a tire going slowly flat.

There I was in our football-field sized four poster, naked Doris carved into the canopy of Duke's bed, the voluptuous living version snuggled beside me. And mid-act I would experience what (who was it, Marx?) might have expressed as the withering away of the state.

"What is it, baby?" Doris asked later.

"I don't know. The pizza? The beer? Maybe some gluten thing?"

"Oh, Charles. I got to speak to the chef." This was before I fired him. "The anchovies," Doris speculated. "Maybe it's too much salt."

The chef. Damn the chef, I thought. In our Frogtown days I was the chef, not some twerp in his twee toque, offering Doris a taste of this and a smidge of that.

She had to speak to the chef. Luigi was in *her* employ, not mine. Her kitchen, her chef, her Thermador fridge, her LaCornue range. We could have put a kid through college on the price of the appliances, but all I wanted was to sweat again over the Kenmore.

This had not yet turned into a full-blown bill of indictment yet. The worms were just beginning to nudge against the coffin walls. Wormish, my member rested against my thigh. Concerned, my partner, now also my landlord, breathed warmly against my neck. Soon I heard the steady sound her breath and the familiar trickle of her drool against my shoulder.

While I myself felt reduced, receding, a beggar at the gate.

"Always a but," Duke repeated. "Here. Let me explain."

22. *Despite His Air of Ridiculousness...*

"Regardless what you think about death and time, I don't have all night," Duke said. "Let me lay this out for you."

"A dead guy is explaining my life to me," Doris said.

"I'm not brain dead."

"Are you even here? Really?"

"What's here? What's real? You want to get started on this? You want to do the Doubting Thomas thing, go ahead. *Stop doubting and believe*. To quote."

"I don't need to be poking at you," Doris said.

“Okay then. I’ll make this quick. I thought I was setting things right, Doris. I give you the house, the money, the cars. Turns out it’s like everything else. Unintended consequences. I didn’t stop to think what happens if I make you rich but leave Fatman a pauper.”

“I keep saying,” I said. “I got my own money.”

“Sure you do. Enough for your Frogtown shack. For a twenty-year old automobile.”

“They last forever, those Volvos”

“Exactly the problem. Anyway. The inevitable result. Fatman, a kept man. His dignity? In shreds.”

“I...”

“There you are. Despite his air of ridiculousness. His idea of himself?” Duke said to Doris. “Hinges on his sense of dignity. Look at the way he carries himself. His reluctance to ask anybody for anything. I’m not saying it makes any sense. But that’s how he is.”

“You are dignified, Charles,” said Doris. “Nobody can say you’re not.”

“Trouble is,” said Duke. “They do. Then you got your other problems.”

“What other problems?” Doris asked.

“I got to spell it out for you?”

“I think you do.”

“Maybe he doesn’t,” I offered.

“Sack time,” said Duke, ignoring me. “Conjugal bliss.” He made some gestures with his hands.

“What do you know about that?” Doris demanded.

“The dead know a lot of things.”

“Charles,” she said, turning to me. “Our private life is...”

I raised up my hands in defense. “I didn’t said anything, baby.”

“Doesn’t need to. You think it’s not obvious?”

“Why would it be obvious?”

“He looks like he’s being pulled under the earth. You get up close, there’s that whiff of defeat.”

“Charles is getting a little older. Everybody slows down. A thousand other things work just fine.”

“A thousand other things are a thousand times less important to our friend.”

Doris sighed.

“I think I need a glass of something,” Doris said.

“What’ll it be, baby? Warm milk? Tea?”

“Whiskey I was thinking.”

“Excellent choice,” said Duke.

23. You Falling for This?

Duke explained the basics to Doris. What the underworld had to offer. The personality and aptitude testing, the life history analysis. The underworld team. Creative, IT, marketing, sales. The dead, finding the fit between my qualities, the marketplace, the product.

“We’re talking major plays,” said Duke. “Big ideas, Break out concepts. Escape velocity stuff.”

Doris pulled her robe tight around herself again and asked, “You’re falling for this, Charles?”

“He’s considering the possibilities,” Duke said.

“I..” I said, then ran out of words.

“Doris announced, “I’m going to bed.”

“My life,” I said to Duke. “It used to be simple.”

“Who wants a simple life?”

“Me. Doris. Our little place was big enough. Two people. How much do we need?”

“How much do you need? The question is, how much can you get? You keep your cart on the low road, how long you think Doris rides along?”

“She never complained.”

“Why would she bother? You ever heard about daring to dream, Fatman? As opposed to coasting along. Let’s make a little effort here, my friend. Let’s get you back in the game. You don’t like it, you can always go back to bottom feeding.”

Duke stepped over the portal threshold and stopped. “We give the crew another day at your place. Day after, eight in the morning, right here at the portal.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. Dust rose behind him as he descended the rock stairs to the underworld.

Maybe Doris was sleeping when I slipped into bed. She turned onto her side. I draped my arm over her ribs, cupped her breast in my hand. This is how I fall asleep. Usually it works.

Not tonight.

An onslaught of ideas, notions, fears: that’s how Duke left me.

Of course I didn’t trust him. No sensible person would.

Duke was the type of kid who would steal tomatoes from your garden and sell them back to you. In his adult life he made his living by muddying the difference between what happened and what might have happened. He was in the doubt business, the business of alternate realities. Now he was the apparition who (that?) was going to remake my life.

What was I thinking?

Doris muttered something in her sleep. I rearranged myself against her.

Duke’s mansion whispered, groaned.

Hours passed. I was surprised to wake up. I was surprised that I had finally slept. I was surprised to wake up in our empty bed.

I pulled on a robe, stepped into my slippers, shuffled down the stairs to the kitchen. Doris was swearing at the coffee maker. She has trouble boiling water. Punching the buttons on the coffee maker isn’t her kind of thing.

“Let me get that, sugar.”

She slapped my hand, said something I didn't understand.

Nothing, really. Too little sleep. No coffee. First thing in the morning.

And yet.

This is not how she behaves. This is not how we behave.

The portal to the underworld was open now and the vapors had infected us.

24. Everything Could Always Be Worse

I got to the portal a few minutes before eight.

When I opened the door Duke was already there, waiting. He bounced on the balls of his feet, impatient.

"The boys are waiting," he said. "Let's go."

"We're going there?"

"What did you think?"

"The underworld, last time it wasn't so great."

"That was a different situation. They had Doris. The whole ransom thing. The signing in blood. Stressful."

"I can still taste the dust in my mouth."

"Sure. The dust. Nothing we can do about that. But this time, you'll get the royal treatment. First client. Everybody on their best behavior. Trust me."

Duke clapped me on the shoulder, gave me a wink.

"What about the door?" I asked. "We're going to leave it unlocked?"

"Pull it shut for now. I put out a NUE."

"What?"

"No Unauthorized Egress."

"The dead care about authorization?"

"Everything always could be worse, Fatman. On that you really can trust me. You ignore a NUE, things get worse."

I followed him down a gray slope. There wasn't an obvious source of light, just a dim glow that seemed squeezed out of the rock.

I don't know how long we walked. Your mind emptied out in the underworld. It was hard to concentrate. Was it ten minutes, an hour, two days? I didn't know.

"We almost there?" I asked.

Duke didn't bother to answer.

Slowly, imperceptibly at first, the walls widened out, then opened into a vast room as broad as a soccer field. Mumbles and murmurs came from all sides. The buzz of a hive, but whoever made the noise was hidden in the gloom. I saw a table made out of a pair of wooden cable spools and a sheet of plywood. As we got closer I made out figures standing and squatting around it.

"Creative!" Duke announced. "Meet the team!"

"These guys look like they're dead," I said.

"Of course they look like they're dead. They're dead."

"I was hoping for... I don't know... more energy."

"Plenty of energy here. You remove all the distractions. Sex. Food. Liquor. Breathing. These guys don't need a thing themselves. One hundred percent, they're focused on your needs. Laser beams, baby."

Duke gave the table a sharp wrap. "Boys," he said. "Meet Fatman."

25. Later You're Going to Thank Me.

"Jesus, Duke. It's Pimplipper and Graydon. This is the team?"

The lawyers looked up from a stack of papers on the plywood desk and nodded at me. "Yeah, old pals," Pimplipper said. "The double cross. More Duke's deal than yours, of course. No hard feelings."

"Plus there's Brimsnod," said Duke. "A new addition."

She held out a hand for me to shake. She wore a power suit, formerly scarlet, dust-dulled now. She looked like a younger version of Hillary Clinton, except for the skin tone. Chemical blonde, thick through the hips, a thin smile that made you wonder what she wasn't telling you.

“Marcella Brimsnod,” she said. “Everyone goes with Brimsnod.”

“We got more people,” Duke said. “This is for starters. Pimplipper and Graydon will handle the contract. Then Brimsnod takes over with the personality assessment, the skills and aptitude work-up. Did I mention, she comes out of the life-coaching industry?”

“What do you mean, the contract?”

“The usual. Whereas and wherefore, party of the first part, party of the second part, blah blah blah. All you got to do is sign.”

“Ink?”

“Well, no.”

“Blood again?”

When I signed the deal for Doris’s ransom, the underworld’s lawyers got out a rusty knife, a syringe and a fountain pen.

“I don’t think so.”

“Don’t be a baby, Fatman. You’re in Rome, we’re Romans, we sign in blood. A minute and we’re done.”

“Let me see the contract.”

“As your attorney, I’m telling you, you got nothing to worry about.”

“You’re not my attorney.”

“Don’t be rash, Fatman. You want somebody taking your interests to heart. Pimplipper, Graydon, sure, they’re part of the team, but you need somebody who’s really in your corner.”

“That’s you?”

“What am I hearing? Cynicism? Doubt? Maybe you ought to go back topside. Take all your problems back to your bed. Work on them yourself. Assuming you know better.”

“Show me the contract at least,” I said.

“Pimplipper,” Duke said, nodding at his colleague.

Pimplipper grabbed what seemed to be a hundred dusty pages and pushed them toward me across the table. “Be my guest,” he said. “We got all day. We got all week. No rush on our end. We’re not going anywhere. Unfortunately.”

Who ever reads a contract except lawyers? I skimmed. *Three missed sessions is a breach of... Losses not limited to personal property... For a period of three years the contractee shall not be in the employ, in any capacity, at a firm in direct...*

I didn't see how a bunch of dead guys were going to sue me anyway.

"Okay, okay, okay, let's get it over with," I said, sliding the paper back toward Pimlipper.

He reached into the breast pocket of his suit and withdrew a leather case. He opened it on the tabletop and said, "Left or right? Just roll up your sleeve. Be done before you know it. Brimsnod, you want to get the dressing?"

She pulled a drab swath of cotton from her suit.

"What's that behind you?" Pimlipper asked.

As soon as I turned around he jabbed me with the scalpel. Blood poured from the wound.

"What! Shit!" I said. "I just got to sign my name. I'm not writing War and Peace."

"You don't want me doing this twice."

Pimlipper took the fountain pen from his case. His yellow fingers worked the pump, sucking blood into the pen.

"Good," he said. "Brimsnod, bandage him up."

She wrapped my arm with the dirty rag. I tried not to think about all the possible diseases.

Pimlipper passed the pen to Duke, who handed it to me. He rifled through the contract.

"Here, here, here and here," he said.

My blood flowed bright red on the paper.

"You're going to look back and you're going to thank me," Duke said.

26. So She Shot You?

"Okay, boys, you can get out of here," Brimsnod said.

"What else we doing?" Graydon said. "Could be interesting."

"Data privacy," Brimsnod said. "Confidentiality. Fatman isn't buying a billboard here. Get lost. That goes for you, too, Duke."

"I'm his lawyer."

"I don't care if you're his mother. All of you, out of here."

“I have to ob...”

“Object all you want, but nothing happens until the client and I are at the table alone.”

Duke gave her a look.

“You know I mean it,” Brimsnod said.

Duke sighed. He gathered up the contract, rolled it into a baton and pointed it at me. “You’re done, let me know, I’ll take you back. Brimsnod, how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

Duke sighed again. Pimlipper and Graydon exchanged a look. “You’re in good hands, Fatman,” Graydon said.

“Yeah,” Pimlipper added. “If you want to get strangled.”

They found that hilarious.

“Just stay with the program,” Duke said.

He and the underworld’s legal team kicked slowly through the dust. I blinked and they were gone.

“You want to stand or sit?” Brimsnod asked.

“I don’t know. Sit?”

“There’s a rock over there. Come on.”

I followed in her tracks, which gave me time to examine the back of her power suit. What looked like three bullet holes were spaced closely between her shoulder blades.

“Natural death?” I asked.

“Sudden,” she said.

“Disagreement?”

“One way to put it.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“That’s my question.”

“Two way street.”

“One of your lover’s triangle situations. So-called open marriage? Turns out his wife wasn’t completely on board.”

“So she shot you.”

“Four times.”

“I’m only counting three bullet holes.”

“The first two pretty much lined up. She wasn’t six inches away.”

“On the street?”

“Her bed, actually. Otherwise, maybe I could have talked her out of it.”

“You had the suit on?”

“That part, yeah.”

A boulder appeared in what was otherwise a sea of dust and twilight.

“Here,” Brimnsnod said. “This is as good as it gets. Have a seat.”

27. Data for the Nerd in Chief

“You want to sit on the rock or lean against it?” I asked Brimnsnod.

“You’re the customer,” she said. “You lean against it, you’re sitting in the dirt. You sit on it, you’re sitting on a rock. Pluses and minuses either way.”

“Is this part of the program? See how I choose?”

“This is just trying to get comfortable.”

“I’m a leaning kind of guy.”

“You go back topside, you can get clean clothes. Not like there’s a wardrobe department in the underworld.”

“You’d rather sit on the rock?”

“If you don’t mind.”

We arranged ourselves on the rock. It was a little high. Our feet dangled.

“You think rocks are harder in the underworld?” I asked.

“Maybe you noticed? Beauty and comfort. Not what this place is about.”

Brimnsnod reached into her suit and pulled some folded paper from the breast pocket.

“You ever take aptitude tests?” she asked.

“Hasn’t come up. I’m busy but I don’t exactly work.”

“Ever?”

“It’s been a while.”

“Trust fund?”

“Inheritance. Uncle had a farm in Eden Prairie. Sold it.”

“Never been out there hustling then?”

“Hustle has not been a major part of my life.”

“Never too late,” Brimnod said. She set a hand on my forearm. A stab at consolation, I thought.

I groaned.

“It’s not that bad.”

“That’s where Pimplipper stabbed me.”

“Let’s just get going here,” Brimnod said. Dead but still she seemed to be on a schedule.

“Abstract thinking. Take a look at this. You’ve got your shapes. Sequences. Your job: figure out the next shape in the sequence. Eight minutes. Here’s a pencil. Go.”

“The light here is terrible.”

“You’re wasting time.”

Circles. Squares. Triangles. I suppose they were arranged in some way. Some way that would be evident to the type of nerd who thought it would be a good idea to arrange squiggles on a piece of paper, create some far-fetched rules, test others and then insist that the results were meaningful, and not simply revealing of a mind similar to that of the Nerd in Chief.

“You’re done,” Brimnod declared.

“Maybe I should review.”

“It’s not that kind of deal.”

She glanced at the sheet. “Two out of eight. Not much of an abstract thinker, are you?”

“Says who? Squiggle Man? I don’t agree with the premise.”

“Are you always argumentative? Doubting of authority? This is the Plotsmear Test. Raymond Plotsmear. Luminary in the field. Let’s move on to verbal.”

“Let’s not. Why don’t we try talking? You ask me some questions, I give you some answers, we discuss.”

“Did you read the contract you signed?”

“Of course I didn’t read the contract. We’re two people sitting on a rock in a dustbowl. Why don’t we act like human beings?”

“Technically. There’s a problem with that.”

“Still.”

“Okay, you want to talk, talk. Tell me. What do you think you want out of life?”

28. *Best Moment of My Life*

“Why don’t we start with you,” I said to Brimsnod. “Maybe you got more perspective. You lived, you died. You’re doing whatever you’re doing here. Atoning?”

“You always judgmental?”

“Who isn’t guilty of something?”

“We could stop here. Get you into a seminary. Fit right in.”

“I’d have a celibacy problem.”

“Again. Fit right in.”

“Let’s get back to the question.”

“What I wanted from life.”

“Exactly.”

“Thrills I suppose. Which I got.”

“Shot four times in the back, that must have been thrilling.”

Brimsnod got a dreamy look, as much as a woman with her features could. To call her hatchet-faced was not unfair. Her face was narrow, her chin and nose were sharp. I doubt she was truly blonde but that was the color of her hair beneath the dust.

“Truth is, it was. You put the whole thing together.”

“Who was the guy?”

“Who says it was a guy?”

“Sorry.”

“Ha ha. Okay. It was. The boss.”

“Not the best idea.”

“Yes and no. You got a relationship with catastrophe, it makes perfect sense. Say everything goes wrong. Lose the man, lose the job, lose the house, maybe the car. Your whole life blows up. *Frisson*, Fatman, that’s what I’m talking about. Blindfold on the tightrope.”

“The sex was worth it?”

“You kidding? By itself? Don’t be ridiculous. Maybe he thought so. I’m a mature woman, not some twenty-year old cheerleader. The sex, taken by itself, okay. He had some tricks up his sleeve. It’s the gestalt. The lies about a meeting we had to attend. That we went back to his house in the middle of the afternoon. That we had an hour and a half before the wife was supposed to be home. That she worked as an instructor at a shooting range. Licensed to carry.”

“You didn’t hear her come in.”

“But I did.”

“And you didn’t...”

“What? Hide in the closet? Maybe if she was Helen Keller. Deaf and blind. She probably heard us when she pulled in the driveway. Sexually, I put out some audio. I heard the door open and my thinking was, we’ll see what comes next.”

“You just kept...”

“Turned it up a notch, in fact. If it’s worth doing....”

“She tried to sneak up on you?”

“An enraged gun instructor? No, she didn’t creep across the shag carpeting. More like a Marine assault. A lot of screaming. Nonetheless I heard her chamber the round, that snick-snick sound.”

“You didn’t turn around?”

“I grabbed him by the neck and held him down.”

“What did you think would...”

“I didn’t think a thing. I was past all that.”

“The shooting...”

“The screaming, the explosion, the smells. Sex, fear, gunpowder. Then the boss, Mister Powerful, Mister Top of the Heap, Prince Cunning, that guy, he shit himself. A torrent.”

Her eyes filled. A tear ran down a gutter that ran from her nose to the corner of her mouth.

“We all make...”

“Mistakes? This was what I lived for. Turned up to ten. Best moment of my life.”

29. *All I Ever Wanted*

“You?” Brimsnod asked.

“Let me think about that,” I said.

Adventures. I’ve had them. Rescuing Doris from the underworld. Chasing after Duke as he played Lazurus for three days post-mortem. But these things *happened* to me. Like a safe dropping from the second floor. Wrong place, wrong time. Bang, right on your head.

Whereas Brimsnod made her own fate. Not the fate I’d choose, what with the bullets in the back. But she grabbed the life she wanted with her teeth and gave it a shake.

Not my style.

My self-justifying explanation is that I live in the now. I accept what life dishes up. I try to appreciate it. I’m not issuing a Five Year Plan. I come across the roses and stop to sniff. Put a glass of wine ahead of me and I’m not worrying about a light head or extra calories. I’m swirling the glass, I’m imagining the hillside from whence the grapes came. I’m dreaming. I’m a dreamer.

It works. Plenty has come my way. I stick out my hand and things land in it.

Doris, for example. A night in a nasty little bar; a brief, brutal fight (her deal, not mine!); next thing you know good fortune is sitting in my lap.

Best moment of my life?

When Doris crossed the threshold of my place for the first time? Late at night. Both a little boozy. She put a hand on the counter to steady herself. The wild mess of hair fills the room. There’s blood on her blouse, this from the lug she clobbered with her pool cue. A grin working on her lips. She knows what’s happening next even if I don’t.

Meanwhile I am gawking, wondering what gods are working overtime on my behalf. Love at first sight? Blinding, annihilating passion! And she hadn’t yet made her way five feet from the door.

Or was it slightly later, when we had made our way from the kitchen table (prosecco, chocolate, strawberries), to the parlor (calvados on the love seat, smooching), and on to the bedroom. I plopped on the edge of the bed and she, looking me straight in the eye (now her grin said, *Let the trouble begin!*), crossed her arms and tugged that blouse over her head. Like a magic trick — shazam! And then this vision, this wonder of nature, was standing naked before me. Oh, I could have wept. Maybe I did.

Or was it somewhat later still, when, spent, sunk into the mattress, the pillows and sheets gone who knows where, she rested her head on my chest, her explosion of hair tickling my ears, running into my nose, draping over half my bare corpus, and she told me about, oh, I don't remember exactly, the words are hardly important, but the sense of it being that this was a door that had opened, that the space beyond was vast and we had forever to explore it. I thought but didn't dare yet say, this is it. This is everything I want. Right here and now. This followed (inevitably, as I was soon to learn) by a charming snore and a rivulet of drool that ran over my arm and onto the bed.

This is all I ever wanted. Not millions of dollars. Not a mansion on Summit Avenue. Not command of my own legion of flunkies and sycophants. Though now I had two out of three, more or less, and was chasing down the third.

“Well,” said Brimsnod, “you going to clue me in, or you going to think about it all day?”

“Hard to explain,” I said.

“Try me,” she said, as she set her hand on my knee.

You're dead, I wanted to say, but I wasn't sure that made much difference to her.

30. *You're Going to Kill*

“You don't mind my asking,” I said. “Duke tells me death kills off the basic impulses. Eating, drinking, breathing. Sex.”

“Yeah? So?”

“Your hand, my knee. What am I supposed to make of that?”

“Old habits. Doesn’t mean anything. It used to be a fifty-fifty proposition. Half the time I got what I wanted, half the time it was just trouble.”

“Life is complicated enough right now.”

“Okay. Back to business. Key issue here, motivation,” said Brimsnod. “Pointless putting you on a path that leads to a forest dark, the straightforward pathway lost, et cetera.”

“I didn’t take you for the poetical type,” I said.

“I’m not. Comes with the territory. Lot of history down here.”

“You got more tests?”

“We can test for eternity. Minnesota Multiphasic. Myers-Briggs. DISC Profile. Wealth Dynamics. But sometimes clients have insight. You don’t need the pencil and paper.”

“Like I was saying, I’m an In-the-Now guy. Not so keen on plotting out the future. Sentimental about the past.”

“Contradictory. You want to be in the Now, you got to let go of the past, right?”

“Did I say it’s logical? Whose life isn’t like a dream?”

“That’s not how most people see it. In my experience.”

“It got me where I am. Mostly it works.”

“Until it doesn’t.”

There seemed to be movement in the distance, vague shapes. Always that low, buzzing noise of a thousand conversations at a distance.

Brimsnod interrupted. “Say the Now is your product.”

“I don’t see how you put it in a package and sell it.”

“Let’s not get hung up on the details right away. People want to live in the Now?”

“Depends on the Now, doesn’t it? Car accident, the gas tank explodes, you’re in flames, we’re talking about a Now most people would rather not fully experience. On the other hand...”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Let the good times roll. What keeps people from the experience of the moment?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re not thinking hard enough.”

“The next second? Wondering what comes next? Things could go to hell. The wife breaks into the bedroom with a loaded gun, for instance.”

“Fear. Fear that whatever comes next is worse, not better.”

“Right. Most people, the biggest fear, what is it?”

“Death? You’re in a better position to judge.”

“It’s like going to jail. Big deal until you’re there. Then you walk through the doors, get yourself settled, it’s one more thing. You deal. Fear is about the unknown.”

“I still don’t see how you put this in a package.”

“That’s why you got help, Fatman. I take what we’ve got here. I get up with Creative. Then IT. I see where this is going. You’re going to kill.”

31. *This Is Going to Be Huge*

Brimsnod bustled off. I hurried to keep up. We walked and walked. Again, I couldn’t say how long or how far, time and distance counting for nothing in the underworld. I followed Brimsnod’s trail of dust, picking up the pace whenever she seemed on the verge of disappearing.

What if she ditched me? I could stumble in circles forever. No compass, no map. Forget about GPS.

“How do you know which way to go?” I called to Brimsnod.

She didn’t bother to slow down. “How do the bees know which way to fly? How do the swallows get to Capistrano?”

“This, it all looks the same.”

“You get tuned in. It’s like anything else.”

“Fatman!”

The voice seemed to come from nowhere.

“Over here.”

Duke sat in the dust. He got to his feet, more limber than I expected.

“You take care of our pal?” Duke said to Brimsnod.

“Just wait. This is going to be like sliced bread and pet rocks combined. Mood rings and the cell phone. Talk about the world beating a path. I’m talking huge. The man. The product.”

“How about you give me a hint?” Duke said.

“No time. Creative is going to go nuts.”

She kicked through the dust without missing a step.

Duke shook his head. “You need a nut in your corner, Brimsnod’s your gal.”

She vanished in the twilight.

“You want to tell me what happened?”

“Duke, I have no idea.”

“No surprise there.”

“I took an aptitude test.”

“Yeah?”

“Fear, death, we talked about that.”

“Brimsnod, she puts one and one together and comes up with seventeen. This ought to be good, Fatman.”

“What next?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be in touch. Come on. I’ll take you back.”

Again I found myself wandering through the vastness of the underworld, until suddenly I stood ahead of the familiar steel door that led to the coal bin in my basement.

32. Conflict of Interest Does Not Apply

“Where have you been?” Doris said.

I blinked. After the underworld, even the kitchen lights seemed bright. Outside it was dark.

“What time is it?” I asked.

She gave me a look. “Six.”

“AM or PM?”

“Supper time.”

Doris looked me over again. “Charles. You’re filthy. Where have you been?”

“An appointment.”

“Inside a vacuum cleaner?”

“With Duke.”

“Not the underworld.”

I shrugged.

“He just took me there, handed me off.”

“Handed you off?”

“To his partners. Pimplipper. Graydon.”

“Blood suckers,” she said.

“You’re telling me.” I pulled up my sleeve. Blood still wept through the filthy rag.

“You didn’t... Not again...” She gave me a hard, appraising look. “What did you sign?”

“No big deal. A contract. Duke looked it over.”

“How about a straight answer?”

“Matching me with the opportunities.”

“You want to be more specific?”

“That’s what we’re working on. The specifics. My personality. Their product development. A match-up. They’ve got a whole team down there.”

“I don’t understand. What do you need from this? More money? A bigger house. A better car.

“You have all those things.”

“You do.”

“I keep saying it’s ours and your refuse to believe me.”

“I want some of it to be truly mine.”

“It is yours! Does the hair in your ears keep you from hearing?”

“The hair in my ears? That’s, I don’t know, insulting, baby.”

“You’re a puppet for a bunch of dead guys. Oh, Charles.”

“Why didn’t you tell me I had hair in my ears?”

“Right now it’s not the most important thing, okay?”

I rubbed a finger lightly over my ear. She was right. Jesus. Another sign. An old crock living off his girlfriend. Me.

“We’re already puppets,” I said. “We’re living in Duke’s house. We’re spending his money. We’re on his string. This is what he wanted.”

“We can walk away.”

“We’re not going to do that.”

“Don’t be so sure. For all I care we can go back to our little house.”

“Not exactly.”

“What?”

“It’s part of the deal. They’re fixing it up. Turning it into a consulting space.”

“A consulting space? You didn’t think you should mention it?”

“Things have been happening fast.”

“Consulting for what?”

“Life coaching. Something like that.”

“By the dead?”

“They know a lot. Really.”

She covered her eyes with her hands and shook her head.

Again she said, “Oh, Charles.”

33. *She’s Not There*

A lot of women, if you had asked at this moment, *You hungry?* might have replied, *How can you think about food at a time like this?*

Doris finally removed her hands from her eyes. I said the first thing that came to mind, which was, “I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

“I had lunch,” Doris said.

“Anything good?”

“That gorgonzola. Some bread. A salad. A few olives. Glass of wine. Okay. A little light.”

“You hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“Let me check the fridge.”

This is how I operate. I open the door. Stare into the cheery cold. Take inventory. This, that, the other thing. Let my thoughts congeal. Those potatoes, sure, grated, the moisture squeezed out of them, pan-fried in butter with garlic and onion. A couple beets in the vegetable bin, also grated, uncooked, the regal color thus preserved, dressed with vinegar and honey, brightened with lemon zest and a sprinkle of parsley. An omelette with a hint of that gorgonzola.

You mind this again, baby? I said, holding up the package, taking in the whiff of decay.

Whatever the chef prefers, she replied, this being an old joke between us.

Thwack, thwack, blade against the cutting board, melted butter sizzling, that happy dance of eggs in a pan. Pop, there goes the cork, a chardonnay courtesy of Duke.

Doris sat with her elbows on the marble countertop, chin resting on her fists, her expression softening as our supper cooked, until I could almost pretend that we were back in our Frogtown shack, that the hammer of wealth not yet fallen upon us, our pleasures still simple and easy and all but free.

“That enough?” Doris asked. “If you didn’t have lunch. Maybe two omelettes. One for each of us.”

I poured a glass of wine for Doris and slid it toward her. She looked at me in a way that was impossible to decode.

She cornered the last scrap of egg and potato, then gathered up our plates. “You go and wash the underworld off yourself,” she said. “I’ll take care of the dishes.”

The water ran gray onto the shower floor. I dried myself, climbed into bed, waited for her to join me.

I waited. And waited.

And then, before she arrived, I fell asleep.

I woke up I don’t know when. Banging. The basement. The portal.

I lifted the duvet quietly, tried to slip out of bed without waking Doris.

Wasted effort. She wasn’t there.

I couldn’t think straight, not with that pounding. Instead of searching the bedrooms for her, I hurried down the stairs.

34. *You Trust Us?*

“Jesus, what took you?” Duke asked.

“You got the whole underworld there?” I asked.

“Relax, relax,” Duke said. “It’s just Brimsnod. Pimplipper. Graydon couldn’t make it. Danny’s back there from IT, Juliette from Creative. Egbert Lutherson, you heard of him?”

“The thing with the dog. Then he jumped off the bridge.”

“Everybody’s life is a bit of a mess, right, Egbert? Top man in evaluation. Major figure at the University.”

“You’re Fatman,” Egbert said, eyeing me as if I were the oddball. His skull was out of kilter. Most likely that had to do with his leap from the Washington Avenue bridge. After the leaked photos, the *samizdat* videos from the animal righters, the newspaper stories, et cetera, the bridge jump probably seemed like a good career move.

“Key people,” Duke said. “Your team.”

“Let’s press some flesh,” Pimplipper said, “then get down to work.”

“No need,” I said. In my experience it wasn’t so great going skin-to-skin with the dead. A little too soft, a little too cold. Death seemed like a disease you could catch.

“Can’t skip the formalities,” Pimplipper said, pushing Danny and Juliette toward me.

Hipsters, both of them. Considerable facial hair on young Danny, this plus a pork-pie hat, jeans held up by suspenders, a brocade vest and interesting spectacles. On Juliette, two bare arms covered by tattoos, a short, filmy summer dress that might have been sunflower yellow at one time, a pair of cowboy boots and a post through her eyebrow. No evidence of violent death on either one.

“Drugs,” said Pimplipper. “In case you’re wondering. Makes for a pretty corpse.”

“You mind if we come in?” Duke said, this being less than a question. “Mi casa es...mi casa!”

Duke clapped me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. No funny business. We’re here to serve.”

One thing about Duke: your disbelief is often outweighed by the desire to trust him. He inspires you to be stupid in the same way over and over again.

“Okay. The wine cellar,” I said.

Duke waved me toward the door, out of the sooty bin. “After you, sir,” Duke said with a wolfish grin.

The dead made a crowd in the wine cellar. The six of them pulled up to the rough table, sighing as they settled into the plain wooden chairs.

“Another case of not appreciating what you’ve got until it’s gone,” said Pimplipper. “Chairs. You don’t give them a thought. Then pow, you’re squatting in the dust twenty-four seven. You had a dozen chairs in the underworld, you could make a fortune. Not that a fortune would do you any good. But still...”

“Let me get some light in here,” I said. A candelabra, outfitted with a dozen white candles, hung over the table.

“Here’s our agenda,” said Duke. “Brimsnod: key findings. Next up, Juliette, the Creative perspective. We hear from Danny and IT. Egbert wraps up. Any issues, we resolve them now and we get this thing on the road.”

Duke leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. Brimsnod pulled herself up straight, pointing her dagger-like nose in my direction.

“Fatman,” Brimsnod said. “Key facts. The opposite of a long-term planner. Emotional. Intuitive. Claims his principle is to exist in the so-called Now. However, wallows in the past. The past: good. The future: suspect. His attempt to live in the *Now*” — she said this with a sneer — “is about fear of the future. What Fatman calls the Now is his unrealistic view of the past and his reluctance to believe the future might be better. Basically a clinging personality, attempting to hold anxiety at bay.”

Duke eyed me. “Fatman?” he said.

“Seems, I don’t know. Harsh. Makes me sound pathetic. Cowering.”

“Then you look at the sexual issues...” Brimsnod added.

I held up a hand. “Stop,” I said. “We’re talking business here. I didn’t sign up for a team counseling session.”

“Well, you did,” Pimplipper replied. “You check section B seven (a) four, client agrees to personality slash aptitude assessment, which may be discussed among relevant members of the development team, including but not limited to so on and so forth.”

“Let’s not get bogged down in legalese,” Duke said. “We’re here to help. We can’t discuss just half of your case. We need all our cards on the table. It’s a trust issue, Fatman. You trust us?”

35. It Gets in the Way of Life

“Fundamental principal,” Brimsnod said. “In consideration of our understanding, based on years...”

“Centuries,” Pimplipper said.

“Millenia,” Duke added.

“We’ve looked into this is what I’m saying,” Brimsnod said. She tapped her papers on the wine cellar table. “What gets in the way of life?”

“You’re asking me?”

“Go ahead. Take a shot.”

“Thousands of things, right? Procrastination. Lack of ambition. Too much ambition. Unrequited love. Money. Too much. Not enough. You want me to go on?”

“Try again,” Brimsnod said.

“Take it deeper,” Duke suggested.

“Love. Greed. Rage. Deep enough? You get past that and it’s... cosmic. We’re specks of dust, insignificant, and yet we regard ourselves as...”

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” said Pimplipper. He was hard to read. Encouraging, vaguely mocking. Both, maybe.

Lutherson sat there, a blank.

“Trivial beings, large obligations,” I said.

“Obligations,” Pimplipper repeated. “To what? I’d be interested to know.” He offered me another of his inscrutable grins.

“Like I said, to humanity. The cosmos. God. Excuse me for saying.”

“Ha,” said Brimsnod. “That’s the spirit. Going big. Not what we’re talking about here, not really. But what the hell. At least you’re moving to the edge of the box. Danny, Juliette. Thoughts?”

They shrugged simultaneously, like they were wired in parallel.

“Let’s take it back,” Brimsnod said. “Back to the real world.”

“The real world?” I said. “From here that’s a hike.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Brimsnod snapped.

I made a gesture that took in the room. The wine cellar. The stuttering candle light. The six dead guys around my table.

“What? This isn’t real enough?” Brimsnod’s face did things when she was peeved. Her lips pulled downward, her nose tightened. She looked like she could drive that beak of hers through a plank.

“You compare it to the normal day-to-day…”

“The world is strange. Surprising. What else is new?” said Pimplipper.

“Okay. Agreed. Remind me. What was the question?”

“What gets in the way of life?” Duke repeated.

“I get the feeling this is a trick.”

“Not at all,” Pimplipper said. “It’s like any great idea. So simple, once you hear the answer you’re going to say, Jesus, of course.”

“Give it another go,” Brimsnod said.

“We’re brainstorming. No wrong answers,” Duke said.

“Not really true,” said Brimsnod. “We’re not brainstorming. And you’ve already come up with a bunch of dumb answers.”

“How about this. Death. Death gets in the way of life.”

Pimplipper clapped his hands. “Exactly,” he said. “I told you, he looks like a lump but there’s something to work with here.”

“If I were still a drinking man,” said Duke, “I’d propose a toast.”

“Let’s move it along,” Brimsnod said. “Juliette. You’re up.”

36. *It's the Real Real Thing*

“Death: It gets in the way of life. That’s our billion dollar idea,” Juliette said.

She had a jumble of tattoos on her arms. Skull and crossbones. Betty Boop. A butterfly, of all things. The word, LeRoy, in Gothic script, either tears or blood dripping from the letters. Sure, she was dead. But young dead, and in that yellow sundress, dirty though it was, somewhat distracting.

“Like Coke is the real thing,” I said.

“Except Coke isn’t anywhere near as real as dropping over dead. Speaking from experience. No comparison.”

“That’s good?”

“Complicated. Death. It doesn’t turn up in jingles, if you follow me. Normally, you’re trying to sell something, you don’t mention that we’re all going to die, that all products are ultimately useless. I mean, life insurance. The slogan is never, *Insurance. Because everybody croaks.*”

“You got a work-around?”

“You don’t have to sell everything to everybody. You pick your market. Some people, you can’t mumble the word death in their presence. These are not our people. Kaput.” She made a flitting motion with her hands. “They’re dead to us. So to speak.”

“In terms of market share, what are we talking?”

“Fifty percent? We need more research. But for now, let’s just write off half. So we’re down to three and a half billion people, talking world-wide. Including kids, guys in New Delhi without two rupees to rub together, et cetera, but still, enough to work with.”

“So what are we selling them? It isn’t death. And life they got.”

“Hold on, hold on. I’m getting there. The flip side of the coin is life, okay. Your glorious life. Nobody else much cares about it, but it’s a big deal to you. And there’s death, standing in the middle of the road.”

“Not much you can do about that. By my understanding. Unless you’ve got some fountain of youth thing going on. Stop-death elixir.”

“If we were that smart we wouldn’t be this dead.”

“Good point.”

“Here’s our spin. Nothing you can do about death. Trouble is it sneaks up on you. Doesn’t operate on a schedule. Can’t plan around it. Like a bad guest. Arrives in the middle of the night. Has a plane at five a.m. and wants a ride to the airport.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“Think. If you knew when you would die. Spend down to the last nickel and fall into your grave. Put yourself on a sensible schedule. Save the money you need, spend the rest. Maybe spend it on champagne instead of seventy-thousand-mile tires. Depending. Plan for the amount of future you have. Don’t waste valuable time planning for a future that’s not going to happen.”

“People will buy this? Seems to me people would rather pretend they’re going to live forever.”

“You got your dreamers, you got your realists. Our market is the realists.”

Lutherson finally stirred himself. “That’s where you come in,” he said.

37. What Are We Selling?

“Regardless where I come in,” I told Lutherson, “there’s a problem.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“To quote, Ye know not neither the time nor the place.”

“The day nor the hour, actually. But anyway…”

“If we don’t know the day, let alone the hour, what are we selling?”

“There’s a difference between you and us,” Duke said.

“No argument there,” I said. I looked around the table. The dead were missing bits and pieces. Part of Duke’s left ear had fallen off. Pimlipper lacked a pinkie on his right hand. One of Juliette’s eyelids was at half-mast. Then there was the dust, which I’ve mentioned a time or two. To say they looked washed out was to put it kindly. And yet there they were, yapping, animated even, as if death existed in the same category as a sprained ankle, or a mild cold.

“I noticed,” I said to Duke. “A difference or two.”

“I’m not talking about what meets the eye.”

“So, what?”

“We do know the hour and the day. Not to mention the place.”

“I’m finding that hard to believe,” I said.

“You got five dead people sitting in your basement. Your business partners. And the part you find hard to believe is, we know when people are going to die?”

“I think of that as the province of...”

“Go ahead, say it,” Pimlipper said. “We won’t shrivel up.”

“Okay. God.”

Brimsnod sighed. “Fatman. Excuse me. You die, there’s a lot that surprises you. Needless to say. That there’s anything at all, for starters.”

“Most people think there’s something,” I replied. “The afterlife. Heaven. Hell. Purgatory. Limbo. And so forth.”

“But really, Fatman,” said Duke. “In your heart? Didn’t you think it was all crap? Wishful thinking? Grandiosity? People unable to believe that their precious selves would vanish into... Hmm. What?”

“History,” said Brimsnod.

“Not even,” Pimlipper added. “History, people remember. We’re talking something else. Obliteration. Living. Dead. Gone. A couple generations and no one remembers you existed.”

“Then you’ve got reality,” said Juliette. “Such as it is.”

“Kids,” Pimlipper said. “You been dead, what? Five minutes?”

“Nonetheless,” Juliette said, dismissing him. “Some of it, people nailed. Who knows how? Like limbo. Limbo, the underworld. You ask me, same thing.”

“Waiting for something that may or may not occur,” Danny said. “Ascension. Light cutting through the fog.”

“Honey,” said Juliette. “That’s poetical. Not Dante, but still... For a guy in IT...”

“I try, baby.”

“Sure, sure,” said Pimlipper. “The tunnel of light. The chorus of angels. A lot of it bullshit, apparently, but still. Pretty pictures.” He laughed, then choked, then coughed. A bit of flesh flew from his mouth and landed on the table.

“Jesus,” Duke said. He swept it to the floor.

“Heaven?” I asked. “What about that? You’re calling bullshit?”

They looked at each other. Duke cocked a brow. Pimplipper drummed on the table. Brimsnod gave her papers a sharp fold. “Further research is needed,” Pimplipper said.

“The evidence isn’t in,” Duke added. “Not to the best of our knowledge.”

“Hell?” I asked.

“You figure probably. Given how things usually work. The good, hard to come by. The bad, vast supplies. But the data, as I say, lacking. Conjecture, rumor, hypothesizing, yeah, plenty of that. But for sure? There’s the underworld. Limbo, if you will. Of course the one part the Catholic Church got right, that’s the part they deep-sixed.”

“Back to the point. You can tell me when I’ll die?”

38. The Drop Dead Moment

Said Pimplipper, “Your drop dead moment, we know that.”

He focused those almost-living eyes on me. They were still blue, the color of a lake on a brilliant day, but missing some of the old sparkle. “You want to know?” he asked.

“Let me think about that.”

“Don’t think too hard. This is your business. You got to believe in the product.”

“I’m not selling anything yet.”

“You will be. The contract, remember?”

“How do you know? Why?”

“Lot of questions,” Pimplipper said. “Does it matter? We know. Case closed.”

“You want a partner who’s in the dark?”

“Preferably, yeah. Too bad they’re so hard to find.”

“Here’s the deal, Fatman,” said Duke. “I keep saying this. The sun comes up in the morning. Why? Who the hell knows? You drop something, it goes up instead of down. Could go the other way, but that’s not the world we live in. There are explanations, science, but if everything was

topsy-turvy there'd be explanations for that. Reasons why water runs uphill, why the clouds are green and the grass is white. The world could be any damn thing but it happens to be what it is."

"That doesn't explain why you know when I'll die."

"I think it does," said Duke. "It happens to be true. There's your explanation."

"What, there's a list? You look it up in a book? You dial into the main office and give them a social security number? How does it work?"

"You want a demonstration?" said Duke. "That would make you happy?"

"Happy, knowing when someone is going to die? No. That wouldn't make me *happy*. But if I believed you could actually do it..."

"You got a piece of paper?" Duke asked.

"Why?"

"Jesus, enough with the twenty questions! Get me a piece of paper."

I grabbed a tablet from a shelf in the room and handed it to Duke. He yanked out a sheet and tore it in five pieces, then slid a piece in front of himself and his dead pals. "Pick somebody you know. Tell us the name. Give us a minute. We'll each write down his expiration date. Compare and contrast. Though I can tell you already, there's not going to be anything to contrast."

"I don't want to know when anybody's going to die."

"Get over it. We're all dead. You're all going to die. No mystery there. A year here, a decade there, it all comes to the same thing. Dead. Disappeared. Forgotten. Except to your buddies in the underworld."

"Think of somebody you know but don't care about. Makes it easier," Pimplipper said.

"I'm questioning the entire premise."

"It's too late for that. Who delivers your newspaper?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Just tell me his name."

"Artie Schmachel. Delivers papers in his Mercedes. Limpes up to the porch. War injury, he says. Truth be told, I think he was a Nazi. He's eighty-five if he's a day."

"We just need his name, not his biography."

"You guys ready?" Duke asked. "Artie Schmachel."

They closed their eyes. I thought I heard a faint hum but it might have been my imagination.

“Got it?” Duke said to the dead.

He took a pen from his shirt pocket, scribbled something on his scrap on paper and passed the pen to Pimlipper. They took turns making a note.

Duke swept them into a pile and pushed them toward me. “What do they say?” he said.

They each read, January fifteen two thousand twenty three.”

“Better than I thought,” I said. “I wouldn’t have guessed Artie had that long. But how do I know you’re right? That’s still a ways off.”

“We’re never wrong.”

“Everybody thinks they’re never wrong.”

“We can make it happen.”

“Death?”

“Why not?”

“How are you going to prove that?”

“Artie could hang on until twenty twenty five. But Mister Doubting Thomas, because you don’t believe, Artie is going to keel over tomorrow morning between his car and your porch.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Ha. We can. Come on, let’s go,” he said to his companions. They pushed back their chairs and walked single file back to the portal in the coal bin. Without saying another word they disappeared into that gloom.

39. Artie’s Last Delivery

Here’s my morning.

I roll out of bed as quietly as possible so as not to disturb Doris’s slumber. Of course when you remove several hundred pounds from a mattress there’s creaking and groaning, tectonic plate shifting, which causes Doris to grumble lightly until she rolls over, pulls the covers to her chin and begins again to snore.

I slip on my robe, stick my feet in my fleece-lined slippers and pad down the steps. Next stop: the front porch, where the newspaper awaits me, neatly set a few inches from the door with Germanic precision by Artie Schmachel.

In my Frogtown shack I played hide and seek with the paper every morning. Maybe I found it in the bushes. Maybe it wound up in the yard. Maybe it wouldn't arrive at all. It might be dry, it might be soaked. I might as well have complained to the Politburo as to the newspaper company. "What you expect us to do?" the "customer service representative" asked me. "You think I can get my paper delivered?"

But you live on Summit Avenue, you deliver a hundred bucks worth of Yuletide cheer to your paper guy, he's a Mercedes-driving Nazi, you better believe you're reading your paper every morning.

Which explains why I was confused when I opened the front door, looked down toward the neatly swept red tile and, instead of my daily dose of lying, cheating and death — in short, the newspaper — saw exactly nothing.

Then I remembered. Duke. His buddies. Their assertion that Artie, as of this morning, was done for.

I looked toward the tree-lined avenue. The sun had not yet cleared the bare trees. A light layer of snow had fallen during the night. The lights from Artie's idling Mercedes lit the pavement in front of our house. A plume of exhaust rose in the bracing cold.

Footprints led from the car to what appeared to be a bundle of rags halfway up the path to my door.

I knew. I pretended I didn't. I hurried as quickly as I was able. Artie was face down on the cement, my newspaper clutched in one hand, the arm extended toward my porch as though, even in the last moments of his life, he was focused on his final delivery.

I rolled him onto his back, stuck a finger to his neck to feel for a pulse, put my cheek up against his face to check for breath. Artie's eyes were wide open but nothing was behind them.

I took the newspaper from his hand and used it to make a little tent over his face. It seemed like the decent thing to do. Then I left him there while I went inside to find my phone and call the cops.

40. *Why So Prickly?*

“There aren’t any other cops in town?” I asked Roscoe when he pulled up in a cruiser.

“Nice to see you, too, Fatman,” Roscoe said. He hitched his service belt up as he stepped out of the car. It slipped instantly back down the slope of his prodigious gut. “Your name popped up on the screen. I figured you might appreciate a friendly face. But I got that wrong, I got other things I could do.”

“When did you get so prickly?”

“Where’s your stiff this time? Every time I see you there’s a corpse involved.”

Roscoe had been first on the scene when Duke stabbed himself to death on my stoop. Back when the dead dropped my Volvo on my mechanic, Roscoe was first in line there, too. He was in on Duke’s deal to deceive me and Doris about Duke’s so-called murder. A fishy odor was all over Roscoe, but then he had always been that way. Even in the grade school cafeteria, you didn’t figure on getting your nickel back if you fronted him for a box of chocolate milk.

I stepped aside so Roscoe could see Artie’s crumpled remains on the sidewalk. Roscoe glanced at him.

“You sure he’s dead?”

“I flipped him over, felt for a pulse. I’m no doctor but...”

A siren wailed at the intersection. An ambulance headed our way.

“Might as well wait for the professionals,” Roscoe said.

Another pair of squad cars pulled up to the curb. My front yard was suddenly filled with uniformed men. EMTs, cops. Gawkers lined up on the sidewalk — runners, dog walkers, guys holding briefcases, the morning scene. Doris appeared on the porch. She had a down parka over her robe, slippers on her otherwise bare feet. Her hair was usual morning tangle. She blinked in the gathering daylight.

“Charles,” she called. “What’s going on here?”

“Just a minute, baby.”

“Why don’t I come in, get a cup of coffee?” Roscoe asked. “See how the other half lives.”

I didn't see how this would come to any good, didn't see how I could say no. "Promise you won't let jealousy eat you alive."

"It's not the house that bothers me. What I don't understand..."

"Shut up about Doris," I said. I'd heard this from him a couple hundred times before. Her, me, what's up with that? "You got to ask, you'll never understand. Women, however" I said, "they get it. A little consideration, a little conversation, some of this, some of that, I should hold workshops for guys like you."

"A cup of coffee. That's all I'm looking for. Sell the seminar to somebody else."

"Hey Roscoe," Doris said. There was a morning smell that came off her. A whiff of perfume, an animal undertone. It operated on a deep sector of my brain, threw a switch to the sexual rail.

For Roscoe, too, apparently. He stood in our foyer with a stupefied expression as he stared at Doris.

"Artie's dead?" Doris asked.

Roscoe and I nodded.

Doris sighed and said, "What have you two been up to?"

41. *Brand of the Dead*

"What you mean, what have we been up to?" Roscoe replied to Doris.

Doris is not intimidated by authority. That goes double for the type of authority Roscoe represents. From her he got a poker face.

Roscoe broke first.

He clapped his hands, then made a show of eyeballing the main hall. It's lined with quarter-sawn oak that leads to the stairway. If you had a few suits of armor and a herd of stuffed animal heads that's where you'd put them. Instead, Duke, however, left behind oil portraits that look like Dutch masters, except that there's always an inappropriate touch — a hand groping here, a garment gaping there, a priapic cupid tucked in a corner, that sort of thing. Vintage Duke.

"Some joint," Roscoe said, craning his neck.

"Home sweet home," said Doris.

“More like you invite the board of directors over for cocktails. That’s your style now?”

“Our style seems to be open house for the underworld.”

Doris headed for the kitchen.

“You want coffee, right?” she called over her shoulder.

We tagged along behind her.

“Let me handle that, baby,” I said. Our coffee maker looks like a peewee boiler from a steam ship — nozzles, valves, gleaming brass, a lot of hissing and burbling. By the time you get a cup of coffee a lot has happened.

“So the dead drop by?” Roscoe asked.

I shrugged. “Now and then.”

“Any hook up between them and Artie?”

“Charles, if you had anything to do with that poor man’s death...” Doris said.

“I don’t know he was a poor man. For one thing, the Mercedes. Another, he’s lucky he died before Simon Wiesenthal caught up with him.”

“Rumors,” said Doris. “You don’t know that.”

“Artie,” said Roscoe. “There were suspicions. Inquiries. Unsubstantiated. But still. He had enemies. An old guy with a paper route, and he had enemies.” Roscoe shook his head.

“That’s not what killed him,” I said.

“You know?” Roscoe asked.

“I got reason to believe.”

“What?”

Roscoe pulled out a notebook and pen.

“No point in writing this down,” I told Roscoe. “You tell anyone with a straight face and they’ll have you committed.”

Roscoe set down his pen. “So tell me.”

“Duke, his people, they’re developing a brand.”

“Dead guys are working on their brand?”

“Whatever else you say about them, they got some insight.”

“So what’s their breakthrough?”

“Death. It gets between you and living.”

Roscoe gave me that I’ve-heard-it-all cop deadpan. Then he started to laugh.

“That strike you as obvious?”

“The idea is, people would live differently if they knew when they were going to die.”

“Not that I paid much attention. But some of the basics of our education did sink in. ‘Ye know not neither...’”

“You don’t know, I don’t know.”

“So who does.”

“The dead.”

“Duke and his pals know when we’re going to die?”

“I didn’t believe it either.”

“What’s this got to do with Artie?”

“They asked me the name of the paper guy. As a test case.”

“Poor Schmachel. Too bad you get the paper.”

“Artie was scheduled to die this morning?” Doris asked.

“Some time in twenty twenty-one, actually.”

“But he died today. So Duke doesn’t really know.”

“They can intervene. Pull the plug themselves if they want. I didn’t believe them. So they made Artie a case in point.”

“You killed Artie, Charles?” Doris said.

“That’s a little strong,” Roscoe said. “More like Fatman was an accessory to the crime.”

“Show me the statute that covers this,” I declared.

“There’s right and there’s wrong, Charles,” Doris declared. “There doesn’t always have to be a law.”

42. *Money Equals Misery*

“Everybody’s going to die,” I told Doris.

“But on their own schedule,” said Doris. “Not when the dead want to make a point.”

“Artie, he was...”

“What?”

“An exception.”

“Next thing you know, the exception’s the rule.” Doris said. “From now on, let them bang on the basement door. You don’t have to answer. We can live our lives.”

“Except that I signed a contract.”

“Jesus, Fatman,” said Roscoe. “You don’t learn.”

“So you don’t perform. What’s Duke going to do? Sue you?”

“It was a promise.”

“To dead guys.”

“It’s my shot at bringing something to this party,” I said. “I keep saying that but you don’t hear.”

“You always brought plenty to the party,” Doris said.

“I’m talking about dignity. Pride.”

“You want me to leave?” Roscoe said. “This is starting to sound, I don’t know... personal.”

“Maybe you can contribute some common sense,” Doris said. “Remind Charles that it’s only money.”

“It’s a lot of money,” Roscoe offered.

“We could give it away. I don’t care.”

“You care. Look around. You’re living like a queen. So why talk about giving it away?”

“The idea is money makes you happy. But this money is making us miserable.”

“Give me a chance. Let me see what Duke cooks up.”

“It’s not about money. Why don’t you listen to what I’m saying?”

“Why don’t you listen to what *I’m* saying? It’s not about money for you because you’ve got all the money!”

She made a noise, somewhere between a growl and a moan.

“I really got to go,” Roscoe said.

“What would you do?” Doris asked him.

Roscoe looked like someone was twisting his thumb off.

Before he could answer I heard a banging from the basement.

“What the hell is that?” Roscoe asked.

“Duke most likely.”

“You want to ignore him? You want me to go with you?” Roscoe slipped off the stool and hitched up his service belt again.

I looked from him to Doris.

“Go!” she said. “Go! See how it works out!”

Her gown flapped behind her as she stalked out of the kitchen.

Roscoe and I watched her. We stood there dumbly for a while.

Outside, Artie was on a gurney, covered by a sheet. A pair of paramedics rolled him down the sidewalk.

“Not much happening out there,” Roscoe said. “Why don’t I go with you?”

43. We’re Fast-Tracking Now

“Sounds like a gorilla at the door,” Roscoe said as we entered the coal bin.

“Okay, okay, give me a minute,” I yelled.

From the other side Duke called back. “You think I got all day?”

“He’s dead. He doesn’t got all day?” Roscoe asked.

“The dead, the living, you can’t tell anybody anything.”

I lifted the bar on the door, threw the chains and latches. Duke stood there, bouncing on the balls of his feet, ready to go.

“How things going this morning?” he said. “Get your paper?”

“Delivery problems.”

“Surprise.” Duke turned to Roscoe. “You answered the call?”

“In the neighborhood. Figured Fatman could use a friendly face. Cops. They got suspicious minds.”

“Artie was no spring chicken. Heart attack.” Duke shrugged.

“Still,” said Roscoe. “An untimely demise. From what Fatman tells me.”

“Who ever heard of a timely demise?” Duke wondered. “Of course that could change. What you say we sit down, Fatman, resume our conversation.”

“You mind if I sit in?” Roscoe said.

“Mi casa, su casa. Actually Doris’s casa. But what the hell, Roscoe, we go back. My guess is, we find a role for you.”

We got our ears twisted and knuckles whacked by the same nuns. We grew up with the same crazy sense of the spiritual world. Which is to say that the dead linger on in one dimension or another; that we are endlessly atoning for this and that; that our actions are monitored and judged by the living, the dead and various foggy authorities; that, given the unknowability of the whole mess, you ought to hedge your bets, belief-wise, and accept the idea that anything might be true.

Duke sighed as he settled into the rough wooden chair. “Remaining doubts, Fatman? You need another demo?”

“I’m good.”

“So let’s flesh out the rest of the concept.”

“How about Brimsnod, Pimplipper, the rest of them?”

“We’re fast-tracking now. Try to get everybody in one place at one time, we’re talking about the rest of your life.”

“Wait. The rest of my life?”

“Relax. Figure of speech. You got plenty of time.”

“What about me?” Roscoe said.

“Don’t buy Christmas presents,” Duke said.

“You’re telling me...”

“Ha ha, it’s a joke, buddy.” He clapped Roscoe’s shoulder.

“You say so.”

“Here’s where we’re at,” Duke said. “Danny’s finishing up the guts of the app. Juliette’s got the name locked in. Know the Time. Visuals to come. Still a lot of discussion about price point. Go for the consumer buy-in, or work the ad angle with low user investment. Basically broad or deep. You start thinking advertisers and it never ends. Estate planning, investment, auction houses, realtors, probate attorneys. Also convertible sales, travel packages, plastic surgeons, joint

replacement. The possibilities! Endless. Mostly a question of how much money you want to make.”

“I’m out of the loop here,” Roscoe said.

“The big picture,” said Duke. “Enrich Fatman. The means, our Know the Time app. Clues users in on the date of their... We’re still testing the word here. Passing. Transition. Ephemeralization. Expiration. The croak date.”“People want that?”

“Not everybody. But a lot of people will. Once they see the big picture.”

“Doris has some questions.”

“I’ll say,” Roscoe added. “Who wouldn’t?”

“This isn’t about her, Fatman, it’s about you. You in or out? Her money or your money?”

“What about me?” Roscoe asked.

“Plenty for everybody. But number one, I make things right with Fatman. What’s it going to be?” he asked me.

“You’re not going to be killing off people left and right?”

“No need. They die on their own.”

I stopped. I closed my eyes. Maybe I thought that would help me see into the future. All I got out of that was darkness with a few flashes of light.

“I’m in,” I said, not because I thought it was the right answer. Duke was always impossible to resist.

“Full steam ahead then,” said Duke.

When I went back upstairs, Doris was gone.

44. *She Needs Time to Think*

I figured Doris was somewhere in the house.

It took a while to check. The kitchen, the dining room, the pantry. The parlor, the downstairs bath, the library. The office, the crannies in the main hall. The secret passage beneath the stairs with its hidden door. The shaking porch, the side sun room. Nothing and no one.

Then, upstairs. All the while calling her name, my voice absorbed by the carpets, the drapes, the empty place. Four bedrooms. The nursery. The walk-in closets. The bath with its steam room. The second-floor solarium. The linen closet.

You're never alone like you're alone in your mansion.

I ran a finger over the dust on the bannister. Doris had cut the cleaning crew down to a day a week.

Duke's team had worked full-time in his idea of French maid outfits. He put them up in a garden apartment behind the wine cellar. "His fantasy, not mine," Doris announced about thirty seconds after we moved in. She had them costumed in Carrhart work pants and t-shirts. She jacked their pay so they could afford an apartment. I didn't squawk, there being no percentage in that. Though truth be told, it had been like watching a flock of exotic hummingbirds flit through the rooms.

That left the third-floor ballroom. I'd been there once since we moved in. Doris and I were still in the giddy stage, not quite able to believe all this was ours. (The realization that it was actually hers had not weighed on me yet.) We wandered from room to room, laughing at the excess, feeling like impostors who would be discovered soon enough and booted to the sidewalk.

The stairwell was painted with a mural, a Russian aristocracy scene, men in top hats, women in gowns, a haze of smoke, dancers in each others arms. A gilded door that opened to the ballroom. Polished wood floors. Mirrors. Pale blue walls. Cherubs peeking out of the corners at ceiling height.

Empty.

I dropped into a chair pushed against the wall. I groaned. I sat. I stared. I listened to the endless ticks and creaks that came from our heap of bricks.

She could be anywhere. The grocery store. Getting her hair cut. Out for coffee with a friend. The banal alternatives most likely the truth.

And yet...

I pulled myself back to my feet. Each step echoed in this expanse. I made my way back to the kitchen.

There on the counter, finally, I saw her note, scribbled on the back of an insurance offer from AARP.

“Charles,” it said. “I need time to think. We both do. Don’t worry. I’ll be in touch.”

45. *Think?!*

The love of my life disappears and her advice is, don’t worry?

On what planet would that be true?

She would be in touch.

How long would I have to wait?

I tried calling. Her phone went instantly to voice mail.

She would be in touch with me. I would not be in touch with her. Doris held the cards.

She needed time to think.

About what? The quality of my character? I didn’t blame myself for the fact that Artie was dead. I didn’t blame myself for wanting a pile of money that was my own.

Sure, the days of smacking a gazelle and dragging it back to the cave were over, but it was an idea ground into our male bones, to hunt, to provide, to win the gratitude of the little lady in her cute fur get-up.

What was wrong with trying to talk things through? Why couldn’t she offer me that courtesy?

Instead I got a few words scrawled on an envelope. An AARP envelope at that! What was that supposed to mean? I knew I had fifteen years on her. Did she have to rub it in?

She needed time to think.

Well, who doesn’t? I had a lot to think about.

My phone rang.

Maybe it was Doris.

Maybe it wasn’t.

I didn’t bother to look.

I needed time to think.

46. *What You've Got Is an Anvil*

Let's just say time passed.

No need to go into all of it. Alcohol was involved.

There was banging at the cellar door.

I ignored it, until it sounded like Duke was running a freight train against the portal.

I finally went down and yelled at him, "Cut it out!"

He reminded me about the contract signed in blood. He made threats that were increasingly explicit.

I yelled back, "Doris is gone. She says she needs time to think. Damn you, Duke, this is your fault!"

He laughed. "Damn me? Get in line, buddy."

"I can't do anything until I sort this out."

"How long you think that's going to take?"

"I don't know."

"Try forever. I were you, forget about sorting out. Try learning to live with."

"Learn to live without her?"

"I'm saying let it breathe. Get on with your life. Open the damn door."

"Not yet."

"Then read the fine print is all I got to say."

"Go away."

"Based on long association, Fatman. I'm cutting you some slack. Go ahead, sort. Wallow.

Two days, I'll be back. My advice, be ready to pop the hatch."

Then the cryptic messages from Doris, delivered via text.

Love you but need time to consider...

Consider what, I replied.

Nothing in response.

Where are you? I wrote.

Safe. Quiet here. Good for thinking.

When you coming back?

When it's right.

We should talk.

Should know my own mind first.

You even in the country?

Not important where I am.

Not important!

Love you Charles. All for now.

That was it. All I could do was wait.

You see Doris from across the room and you think, Buttercup! That pile of hair, the curls, the big eyes looking up at you, the big lips, the sly smile — you want to believe she's putty in your hands but really what you've got is an anvil. Once Doris makes up her mind the negotiations are over.

I was angry. Angry to find myself in a position of such weakness. Angry that she was so hard-headed. Angry that Duke had me on a leash again.

But that wasn't all of it.

All the idiotic observations I made to her — what to do with those now? All the little taps and pats and kisses — all those reminders that we exist on this earth — oh, without her I felt at the end of the day that I could turn into fog and drift into nothingness.

When Duke banged on the door again I was beside myself. I wondered if now he was all I had.

I should have known better.

But I opened the door.

47. *You Got Wi-Fi?*

“You got wi-fi down here?” Duke asked.

He pushed past me when I opened the portal to the underworld. The kid from Creative, Juliette, was right behind him. She had a laptop tucked under her arm.

“Probably. I don’t know.”

“Let’s set up. Juliette can show you the app. You’re going to love this, Fatman.”

I wasn’t loving much of anything right then.

Juliette followed Duke to the wine cellar. She set her laptop on the table and popped it open.

“Good signal,” she said. “In the underworld, sketchy.”

“You get service?”

“You get leaks under a strong signal. Plus we got guys, IT, what else do they have to do all day but hack, tweak?”

“What about juice?”

“Buried cables, here and there. More hacking. Luckily, electricians die, too. We got power strips, but you can imagine, supply, demand.”

“You want juice, you got to have juice, you know what I mean,” said Duke.

“Duke makes a lot happen,” Juliette said, bathed now in the glow of her laptop.

“Your landing page,” Juliette said. “Simple communication of an elemental idea. Macro. Micro. A lot going on under the radar. Take a look.” She pushed the screen toward me.

A background of storm clouds. An antique alarm clock. But none of the numbers were right. I recognized an omega. The rest of the markings were from languages I couldn’t read. The symbols weren’t properly spaced. The hands — three of them — were bent out of shape. “Know the Time” was the headline. Beneath it in italic was a subhead, “Death: It gets in the way of life.” Then a simple button: “Lift the barrier. Enter.”

“Grabs you by the collar, right? Gives you a shake.”

“This is a shake people want?”

“People don’t know what they want. They’re waiting to be told. Coke. It’s the real thing, right? What the hell did that ever mean? What was real? The fat on your gut from all those empty calories. In the back of your mind. What you’re hoping to find? You want to be part of the mob.

You want to be one of a jillion people pouring Coke down your throat right this very minute. You want to feel that embrace.”

“The embrace we’re talking about,” I said, “it’s icy fingers. Death. People are going to line up to buy it?”

“That’s not what we’re selling. Our product is a full life. You’re going on a trip, say. One version, you know where you’re going, you know when you’ll arrive. So you know how much gas you need, what kind of clothes to take, how long to linger along the way. The other version, you’re on a trip to who-knows-where, it’s going to take who-knows-how-long, you don’t know what the weather will be. Everything’s up in the air, a total crap shoot. The world is uncertain. Our product is certainty.”

“You say so.”

“I know so. My big concern? Price point. We’re talking about your loaded pockets, Fatman.”

48. The Dead Have Time for Surveys

“Your average person, what will they pay to know when the lights go out?” Duke said.

“You think people want to know?”

“We went over this. Concentrate. How much.”

“We surveyed,” Juliette said. She was a good-looking gal, albeit with eccentric tattoos. The longer you looked, the more you noticed. A ship under sail. An armadillo. Betty Boop.

“Surveyed? Who?”

“One thing the dead have. Time for surveys,” she said.

“That seem like a skewed sample?”

“You know what they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty. The dead know things.”

“They’d pay to know this?”

“Would have, sure. That’s our overwhelming conclusion.”

“How much?”

“Tricky. Some of them, their experience of spending money is dated. Like from the Civil War era. You got your native guys thinking in terms of pelts. Before you can even talk price you got to decide what you’re talking about. Premium product or mass consumption item?”

“My feeling,” Duke said. “We roll out on the high end. Tap into the estate planning market. Make it a standard feature of wealth management. What’s ten K in that environment? The more you’ve got to lose, the more you’ll pay. We sell one at ten thousand, it’s the same as selling two hundred at forty-nine ninety-nine.”

“The other hand, it’s easier to pry loose fifty,” said Juliette.

“Two hundred times easier? I know which way I’d go.”

Duke brushed the dust from his suit. I tried not to breathe. Dust to dust and all of that. No telling where Duke’s dust had been.

“What’s the marketing plan?” I asked.

“We really should have Brimsnod here,” Duke said. “Juliette, how about the short version?”

“Our thinking ultimately is upscale print. In consideration of the market. Mature. Professionals. The *Times Magazine*, the *New Yorker*, *Travel and Leisure*, *Vanity Fair*. Later maybe a slightly down-market product. Less counseling. Range of expiration dates instead of pinpoint precision.”

“One costs more than the other?”

“To generate? No. Same deal. But you need distinctions or what’s the point of paying more?”

“Seems shady is all.”

“Business,” Duke said with a shrug. “Shady is our brand.”

“Counseling?” I asked. “I didn’t realize.”

“Why do you think we’re redoing your Frogtown joint?”

“Life coaching, you said.”

“Eventually what we want, occupy all the price points. Sixtieth floor for the high rollers. Suburban office plaza for the mid-range. Frogtown for the proles.”

“Where do we start?”

“Personal contacts. Test marketing. Small scale to get on our feet.”

“Who does that?”

“Who do you think?” Duke said.

“Don’t worry, we got your back,” Juliette said.

She smiled at me and patted my forearm. Sure she was dead. I knew that. But it was the first anyone had touched me since Doris disappeared. I put my hand on hers and smiled in return. She felt cold but given the circumstances it was better than nothing.

49. *Talk About a Handful*

“Optimized for tablet. You got one, right?”

Danny, the IT kid, pulled our website up on his laptop .

The look I got from him told me he knew the answer was no.

“A tablet,” I said.

He took a breath, did his best not to sigh. “Here, buy this,” he said, scribbling on a sheet that he passed to me.

“Let’s look at your contacts,” Duke said.

“Contacts?”

“Whatever. LinkedIn. Facebook friends. Gmail contacts. Whatever you got.”

“An address book, that’s what you want?”

“Sure.”

I pulled out the black booklet in which I’ve been scratching for decades. Lot of history there. Addresses for people I haven’t seen in thirty years. People I don’t know who they are anymore. Names blacked out so thoroughly that they must have committed some crime against me.

“You’re kidding,” Duke said.

“What?”

“Okay. Doesn’t matter. We’re thinking about the fish here, not the hook. What we need is, somebody where you mention he might possibly die some day, he doesn’t wet his pants.”

“Him or her,” Brimsnod interjected.

Like Duke, she only had one suit of clothes. She wore that same red power suit with the formerly white blouse, all of it dust-sodden. Her nail polish was chipped away, revealing another ring of grime beneath her fingernails.

“Male, female, doesn’t matter,” Duke said. “We’re talking frame of mind here. Hard-headed but flexible.”

“An outside-the-box type,” Brimsnod said. “Early innovator.”

“Dionysian, you know what I mean,” Duke added. “Fun-friendly. Knows how to have a good time. Knows people who know how to have a good time. Plus has some extra dough.”

“A connected trend-setter. Country club type, a little golf, a little tennis, maybe a little romp in the hot tub now and then.” A wistful smile came to Brimsnod’s lips. We were talking about memory now more than conjecture.

“The people I know...”

“Think,” Brimsnod commanded. “Doesn’t have to be your closest friend. Just someone you can pick up the phone and they won’t hang up.”

“Jen Litely,” I said.

“Jen Litely!” both Duke and Brimsnod exclaimed.

“Brilliant,” Brimsnod said. “Perfect.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Duke said. “Jesus, she was a handful.”

“You’re telling me,” Brimsnod replied.

They traded a look that made me wonder what I was getting into.

50. They Got a Lot of Hay

Jen Litely. Society babe. Trophy wife. Married to Leo Litely, philanthropist. Another way of saying he was fifth generation inherited wealth, no particular skills except for giving money away. The pile of cash resulting from previous generations that ripped lumber out of the forests, put down rail line, speculated in real estate and so forth. That rapaciousness tidied over and forgotten now in light of Leo’s generosity.

“Leo’s still alive?” I asked Duke.

“Clinging to life, that’s Leo’s main talent. How old you figure he is, Brimsnod?”

“A hundred and eighty?”

“Disappointing for Jen. But she manages to get in a few laughs.”

“So you mentioned.”

While Duke was still alive he and Jen sat together on the Art Institute board. Sitting wasn’t all they did, according to Duke.

Jen was in her late 40s, early 50s. She had a program: yoga, personal trainer, the occasional surgical tune-up, lotions and potions, a colorist, a wardrobe consultant. We shared a table once when Duke hauled me along to an Institute gala.

“You both know her?” I asked.

“She was horsey, I was horsey,” Brimsnod said.

“Horsey?”

“I had a couple, she had a couple. We’d run into each other at the stable. You know how it is, riding boots, jodhpurs.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“We had a roll in the hay a time or two. There’s a lot of hay. In the stable.”

“Sounds...prickly,” Duke observed.

“You don’t really notice.”

“So you both...”

“Not at the same time, if that’s what you’re suggesting,” said Duke.

“Though she wouldn’t have said no.” Brimsnod got lost in thought. “There’s a surprising amount of life you don’t miss at all,” she said. “Then you got your characters like Jen, the jolt you get out of... Oh well. We’re getting off track. What I worry about is, she’s not a real focused-on-mortality type.”

“My bet is she’d spend a lot of Leo’s money to find out when he’s going to pop off,” said Duke.

“You can do that?” I asked.

“Early stages of a business, you got to be flexible,” said Duke.

“Seems like a violation of privacy.”

“So let them arrest us.”

“What about me?”

“You got to relax, Fatman. Take it from me, your counsel, there’s no law you’re violating.

Unlawful revelation of date of death? The legislature hasn’t gotten around to that one.”

“Unethical then.”

“Oh, please,” said Duke.

Just then my phone rang.

“You answering that?” Brimnsnod asked.

It was Doris.

“I’m home, Charles,” she said.

51. Here’s What’s Going to Happen, She Said

“Gotta go,” I told Brimnsnod and Duke after Doris’s call.

“Don’t give away the farm,” Duke said. “She’s got her money. You’re entitled to your own.”

“All due respect? Let me handle this.” I pushed back from the table.

“You intend to lock the portal behind us? Or you want us to leave the door wide open?”

“Right. Sorry for the bum’s rush.”

“This is what I mean. Keep your head on your shoulders. Set up a meeting with Jen.”

Once I got the door barred and chained behind them I hurried up the steps.

Sensible advice — keep my head on my shoulders — except that it felt like it could float away. Each day she’d been gone landed like a boulder on my chest. Five days. I could barely breathe. I didn’t remember eating. A peanut butter sandwich here and there. Some ice cream left over in the freezer. A T-bone at the Best Steak House three days in, when I was so weakened that I could barely walk a straight line. Basically a starvation diet. I couldn’t find energy to change my clothes. What was the point? Without her what was the point of anything? Bathing. Brushing my teeth. My heart wasn’t in it. Flossing? Forget it. My heart wasn’t in anything.

I threw open the door to the kitchen.

She wasn't there.

I called out. "Doris. Baby! Where are you?"

Nothing. And then, "In here, Charles."

I followed her voice to the parlor.

She sat like a queen in one of Duke's leather club chairs. She wore black tights, cossack boots that came to her knees, a wispy blouse. I was a stinking, underfed mess. Doris looked like she was back from a day at the spa. Composed. Appraising. How was it she looked so unaffected?

"You look great, baby, I can't tell you..."

She held up a hand to stop me.

My thoughts were like one of those freeway wrecks in the fog, a lot of things running into each other from a lot of different directions. I dropped to my knees in front of her and set my hands of hers.

"You've been gone so long and I..."

Doris stopped me again, wrinkled her nose. "Charles," she said. "Have you showered? Changed your clothes?"

"Since you left? I don't think so. I don't know."

She patted my hand. I leaned in to kiss her. She put a hand on my shoulder to keep me at arm's length.

"Have a seat, Charles. We need to talk."

It's not so simple, getting from my knees to my feet. There's heavy lifting, creaking of joints, huffing, puffing. I dropped into the other chair.

"You want something?" I asked. "Cup of coffee? Pancakes? Maybe a waffle?"

No, no and no, she said. I braced for the worst. The path to Doris's heart usually ran through her stomach.

"I had time to make some decisions, Charles."

"Decisions, baby?"

"Here's what's going to happen."

52. *You Gave It All Away?*

“We’re a team, right?” I said to Doris. “Partners?”

“Were.”

“Past tense, baby?”

“We could be again.”

“If...”

“Exactly. We make changes.”

“Partners decide together. Usually.”

“I decided.”

I’ve already mentioned this about Doris. For a gal who looks like a kewpie doll — those big eyes! those dimples! — she can be remarkably hard-headed. Once she’s made her mind up, you’d have an easier time diverting a glacier.

“What?”

“I gave this all away.” She made a vague motion with her hands, waving them to take in, apparently, everything.

“When you say all...”

“The house. The money. The cars. I stuck a million in an IRA. Transition funds. No point in being stupid. But the rest of it...”

“Gone?”

“Gone.”

“This is a lot to think about.”

“This is a lot less to think about. Which is the point.”

“You don’t mind I ask? You gave it to...”

“Catholic Church. The Archdiocese.”

“Our mansion? Forty million bucks?”

“Something like that. Depends on the market, the day of the week.”

“You’re not even Catholic. Not really.”

Lapsed. Disaffected. Fallen. Had it. Fed up. There are all sorts of words that apply here to describe Doris. Me, too, for that matter. We were both the product of Catholic education. Blessed insanity. Credulity strained to the max.

“I didn’t want to give it all to someone I love. I know how it goes. More curse than gift. Look what happened to us. My thinking, let them fight over it. Maybe they do some good by accident.”

I looked at her hard for some sign she was joking.

“When do we move out?”

“It’s theirs right now. The movers are coming tomorrow. Most of it, we’ll leave where it is. Take the clothes, some wine from the cellar. A few pieces of furniture.”

“Then what?”

“Move back to Frogtown. We were happy there, Charles.”

“Were. Before we had a point of comparison.”

“We’ll forget this happened. It was a mistake.”

“The old house isn’t really ours anymore.”

“What?”

“Duke. Remember? I signed it over. The life-coaching office.”

“I don’t care what deal you made. I did not make a deal. I thought it was our house.”

It was mine. My name was on the title. I paid the note. This didn’t seem like the time to niggle over details.

“I signed in blood.”

“Blood. It’s just another way to scribble, Charles. Tell Duke the place is ours. He has a problem, he can talk to me.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I’m going to bed,” Doris said.

I wasn’t sure where that left me.

“Are you coming?” she said.

“You know it,” I said, my impulses so quickly defeating my many concerns.

53. *A Thousand Desires*

“Where were you, baby?” I said. “All those days and nights. I worried.”

Doris pulled off her big boots and tossed them toward the closet. She peeled off those tights, slipped the blouse over her head. I’m not saying that all my grievances vanished at once. But close enough. I stared. My mouth probably hung open.

I could go on. This curve, that hollow, the fall of her hair over her shoulders. My mind goes blank.

“You just going to stand there?” she asked.

“Course not.”

“Come over here. Let me help you out.”

She stood on my feet, grabbed hold of my belt with one hand and leaned back to work the buttons on my shirt. She stepped back. The belt went next. My pants hit the floor. I caught a glimpse of us in the mirror. It’s a Mutt and Jeff act, a lot of yin and yang. Charitably speaking, I bring heft to the party. Gravity. Solidity. My head fills with a thousand desires. The possibilities, always, seem endless.

She gave me a shove and boom, I was flat on my back in Duke’s massive bed.

“I had a room at the St. Paul Hotel,” she said. “I figured, when would I have the money again?”

“You knew right away? You’d give it all away?”

“We should have known better.”

“Who says no to being rich?”

“People know. Monks. For instance.”

“Who else?”

“Hmm.”

Doris grabbed a couple hands worth of flesh and started kneading. “I called Duke’s money guys, the planner, the accountant. I told them to get the Archbishop on the line and make it happen.”

“How did we go so quick from monks to the Archbishop?”

“You think it’s simple, giving money away?”

“They didn’t want it?”

“First the argument with Duke’s guys. You can’t just give it away. Yes I can. No you can’t. Yes I can, and if I have to fire you, screw you out of your cut and hire somebody else, I will. Which solved that part of the problem. Then the church. You think beggars can’t be choosers. That’s where you’re wrong.”

“What? They wanted it in Krugerrands?”

“They wanted to off-shore it. An account in St. Kit’s.”

“What do they care? They’re a non-profit. So to speak.”

“The altar boy settlement. Forty million in a domestic account, they figured it would be up for grabs. Altar boys. Altar boy attorneys. Their own attorneys. Better to have it gather mold for a while.”

“You agreed?”

“Like I said, I wouldn’t wish a pile of money on a friend. I figured they deserved it. Or at least they’d know how to deal with the moral ambiguity. Centuries of experience.”

“What can I say?”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

The bed rattled. There was gasping, groaning. She collapsed finally, her head on my chest. I considered what to say next, whether to say anything at all. Before I came up with an answer Doris started to snore.

Parts of me fell asleep. An arm. A leg. This from where Doris pressed against me. But my mind: it roiled.

Back to our old house, our old life.

While I had moped and pouted, Doris had grabbed the reins.

Back to our simple, happy life.

As the minutes and hours ticked by during our last night in Duke’s magnificent bed, the dismal truth settled on me. I could not simply go back.

54. *Get Your Lazy Ass in This Truck*

We picked up a truck at U-Haul. Doris browbeat a couple panhandlers working the freeway ramp at Dale Street into helping us load our belongings.

She dangled a fifty from the truck window and said, "Two hours of work."

He was dressed in fatigues. His beard reached halfway down his torso. His sign said, Kids Need Food.

He glared at Doris. "That ain't a living wage," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Bert."

"You doing better, Bert?"

"Close."

"How about you get your lazy ass in this truck," she said, "and do some legit work?"

It's her tone, the look in her eye. It works. You have to be there.

Bert looked at Doris as if she had just landed from another planet. "Okay, alright. You paying me now?"

"I look stupid?" Doris said. "When we're finished."

He sighed, folded up his sign, and climbed in beside me. Doris drove across Dale. She worked a version of the same routine with a kid staked out there. "How old are you?" she asked him.

"It's your business?" His hair was in his eyes. He wore a pork-pie hat, a sweatshirt a couple sizes too big.

She flapped a fifty at him and he snapped to attention. He made a grab and she snatched it back. "Two hours. Load the truck. Unload it. Hop in back."

"No point arguing with the lady," Bert advised.

We didn't have much. Boxes of clothes, mostly.

When we pulled up to Duke's place, Bert let out a low whistle. "Fifty bucks?" he said. "You living in a place like this and you offer me fifty bucks?"

"Can it until you see where we're headed," Doris said.

“Jesus, lady, I’m sorry,” Bert said once we pulled up at my cottage. “What the hell happened?”

“It’s not so bad,” I said.

“You say so,” Bert replied. “You don’t mind the hooker on the corner, the trash in the alley, yeah, sure, it’s great. Excuse me for saying, this looks like hard times, bad luck.”

“She gave it away,” I said, nodding toward Doris. “The house. The money.”

“Root of all evil,” Doris said. She had both hands on the wheel. She stared straight ahead.

“Don’t know I’d go that far. Trouble, sure, but what isn’t?”

“She’s not a halfway kind of woman,” I said to Bert.

“I’m not,” Doris said.

Lucky for us, Duke hadn’t changed the locks. His dead Mexican crew had piled our furniture in a bedroom and covered it plastic. We got Bert and the kid to help us move it back into place. Then we carried the boxes in from the truck.

Doris handed them each a fifty. Bert looked at the bill, shook his head, pocketed it. “Hope your luck turns better,” he said.

“Already has,” said Doris.

I had doubts.

55. I’m Here to Help, Duke Said

“It looks so... fresh,” Doris decided.

“Duke’s crew,” I said. “Hard workers.”

They had sanded the floors, fixed the cracked walls, painted, washed the windows.

“Dead?”

“Naturally.”

“We owe them?”

“Not money. They don’t care about that.”

Doris was about to say something but stopped herself. “Got an appointment,” she said instead.

“You just got back. You’re leaving?”

“See if I can get my job back.”

There was a lot I could have said. Apologized. Told her I’d find work. Offered to drive her. Instead I said, “Okay.”

Once she was out the door I headed for the cellar.

I don’t know what I expected. A new steel door, maybe. A digital lock, a glowing keypad. A portal to let Duke out, keep the rest of the dead in. I wasn’t sure Duke’s crew had gotten that far, or if it was even possible anymore. The robber barons got away with plenty in their day, but at least some of the rules had changed.

Our cellar: the charitable description is “unfinished.” Concrete floor. Limestone walls. Spider webs drooping from the joists. Bare bulbs. No heat. Pipes covered in asbestos.

As far as I could tell it was the same dingy tomb it had always been.

I was headed back upstairs when I heard a scraping sound, something pushed across the floor.

A wooden slab covers a hole where our water pipe enters from the street. A pair of hands had grabbed the slab from below and were now sliding it across the floor. Duke stuck his head out.

“Surprise!” he said.

“Not really.”

“I am. A little. Giving it all away. Moving back here.”

He brushed dirt off his head.

“Let me get out of here.” Duke hoisted himself out of the hole in the floor and pulled himself to his feet. Bits of sand and dirt clung to his suit.

“Seems... inconvenient,” I said.

“But discreet.”

“No lock?”

“Down below. Out of site. Got a lockbox on it. Keeps everybody where they need to be.”

“Except you.”

“I’m here to help.”

“Like the government.”

“Don’t be that way, Fatman.”

“Word travels.”

“What don’t the dead know? Okay, plenty, to be honest. But this? Yeah.”

“Money. Evil. Hand in glove, according to Doris.”

“She’s a difficult woman. We both know that.”

“You made your own trouble with her.”

“You didn’t? Forty million bucks in the bank, a mansion on Summit Ave. All you had to do was relax and enjoy the ride. Instead you had to be prideful about it. Her money, not yours. You had to push.”

“I had help. As I recall.”

“You blame the bees for buzzing? Better to look within, Fatman.”

56. I’m Prepared to Amend the Contract

“What now?” I asked Duke.

“For starters, you’re living in my place,” Duke said. “The contract. The signature in blood. Maybe you recall. This is our office. Was. Before you moved back in.”

“You want to talk to Doris about that?”

Duke sighed. “I’m prepared to amend the contract.”

“Thanks.”

Making a life with Doris is tough to fully comprehend. Loving? No problem there. The peck on the cheek. The full-court-press sexual wallop. She gets in a mood and well, better hope your ticker is in good shape. Mention that you’re having a problem and she can’t hear enough. Her heart bleeds until she finds a way to make it better. Sit her down at the table with a bottle of wine and a decent meal and brother, stay out of the way.

But cross her? Better to go *mano a mano* with Genghis Khan. Deep down there’s a steeliness, and if you are foolish enough to bump up against it, then God help you, because divine Intervention is your only hope.

“But we still got the app. The development time. The power of the concept itself. I’m not letting you off that hook, Fatman,” Duke said.

“Doris isn’t along for that ride.”

“Doesn’t matter. For R and D purposes, we can keep it close to the vest. But topside, you’re our man.”

“If I’m not?”

“Please, Fatman. Don’t make me go there. Artie, what happened to him. A tragedy. He had good years left.”

“You’d kill me?”

“Everyone is dying. Some more quickly than others. Kill — that seems a little strong. Everybody is with us in the end. You’d be among friends.”

Duke nodded toward the hole in the floor.

“What do I do?”

“We get you out there. Jen Litley. As discussed. Get out your phone, Fatman, dial her up.”

I did as I was told.

Jen answered on the third ring with that hard-to-place accent of hers, like she learned to speak halfway between New York and London. My guess is phony, but these aren’t my people.

“Oh, Charles,” she said. “Of course I remember. Duke always said so much about you.”

Duke gave me a thumbs up. Jen and I made an appointment.

57. Leo’s Glass Is Not Half Full

The brass knocker landed like a battering ram on Jen’s oak door.

“Charles,” she said, getting up on her toes to plant a kiss on my cheek.

Jen was prepped for the post-Leo portion of life. She had one of those yoga-Pilates-Zumba figures. I figured botox and silicone played a part in her not-entirely-plausible appearance. Her expression — amused! — got across the notion that we were both in on a little joke; that this creation was Jen Litley and not really Jen Litley at all. No problem. For a woman of her age, Jen was an eyeful.

“Come in,” she said. “Sit!”

She had a bottle of champagne resting in ice on the coffee table. Sparkling flutes. Cheese. Grapes. Sunlight pouring in through a wall of windows. Money: sure it’s the root of evil, it pierces us with many sorrows, so on and so forth, but the consolation is you’re not drinking beer out of jelly jars.

I felt like a million bucks again, sitting in Jen’s leather chesterfield.

“Leo’s out?”

“Napping. The dear needs his rest after lunch. It wears him out, eating.”

“How old is Leo?”

“It’s not the number. More a question of abilities. Leo is old. You don’t want to be that old.”

“How does Leo feel about that?”

“Leo’s glass is not half full. It’s full to the brim. He can’t get enough of being alive. He wakes up, claps his hands. ‘Another day,’ he says. Which has to come as a surprise.”

“Will he be able to join us?” I wanted to be prepared.

“No, no, he’ll sleep until dinner, then wake up to eat.”

“Predictable.”

“To a fault, you could say.”

Jen pulled the bottle out of the ice and filled both glasses. “Make a toast,” she said. “Something cheerful.”

“To a full life,” I said.

We touched our glasses together and they rang like a pair of bells.

“No less and no more,” Jen added.

Another peal of pricey crystal.

“I’ll most surely drink to that,” said Jen.

She gave me a pat on the leg that was not strictly collegial.

58. 'Til Death Do We Part. But Really...”

Jen drained her flute. Not much lady-like going on there. She filled hers again and topped off mine. The bottle rattled in the ice. She had a fire going in the hearth.

“Really. Leo is how old?”

“Actually? Or what it seems like?”

“Birth certificate.”

“Eighty-six.”

“How long you been married?”

“Ten years. Give or take a century.”

I made a guess on the math. In her fifties, most likely.

“I know. What was I thinking. I met him, he was seventy-two. Back then Leo was... *vigorous*. Pharmaceutically enhanced, but still. We had some good times.”

“You don’t mind my saying, the age gap...”

She gave me another pat, this time on the hand, and leaned in closer to me.

“The life I wanted, Leo could deliver. He didn’t earn a penny of his money, but when you’re spending it who asks about that? It’s a liberation, never worrying about a penny, having the things you want when you want them, the exhilaration of it. It was exciting, back then.”

“You grew up...”

“Poor? No. Everybody wants to say they were middle class. We never lacked for the essentials. The Mercedes in the garage. The vacations to Italy. The pool. The private schools. I had expectations.”

“Leo. He’s your father’s age, right?”

“Older. Thank God my father died before the wedding. It would have been a lot to explain. Leo’s ex-wives were bad enough. A coven of witches, all of them casting spells.”

“But you married him.”

“After the first heart attack. He insisted.”

“His life wasn’t complicated enough?”

“He wanted to be sure somebody would be at his bedside. Leo had burned a lot of bridges by then.”

“Forgive me, Jen. But since we’re being honest? I don’t feature you as the Florence Nightingale type.”

“I told him it was a ’til death do we part deal and I meant it. But I never thought...”

“Eighty six. It’s not really that old. Not anymore.”

“I didn’t mention the second heart attack.”

“Before the wedding?”

“Of course.”

Jen filled her glass again. I put a hand over mine when she moved in with the bottle.

“Have a little fun,” she said.

“Later,” I said. “I have something serious to discuss.”

“About Leo? I don’t see where this is going.”

“About Leo. About you.”

“I’m not sure we know each other that well.”

“Duke. I’ve had some business with him lately.”

“I thought he was finally...”

Jen had been in on his post-death caper, when Duke was on the prowl for his so-called killer. She helped him mislead me and Doris during that absurd investigation.

“Duke doesn’t go down easy. As you know.”

“What is it this time?”

“He’s got a product. We’ve got a product.”

“What does he want with money now?”

“It’s complicated.”

“With Duke it’s always complicated.”

“He’s privy to certain information. Being dead.”

“I can’t say you know how to charm a girl. But go on.”

“Ye know not neither the day nor the hour? Rings a bell?”

“Sure, I did my time in a pew.”

“What if you did?”

“Know the hour? I’m not sure I want to know. I have to think about that.”

“How about for Leo?”

“I don’t have to think about that at all.”

59. Just Click on Accept

“I can find out when Leo will die?”

“You buy the app. You plug in some data. Name. Social Security number. Date of birth. Swipe your credit card and boom. There’s a verification process. Consulting the database. An ethics review, depending. Twenty-four hour turn-around and you know.”

“The day and the hour.”

“Exactly. Mostly the set-up is for self-knowledge, personal planning, estate prep. But in special cases...”

“The Leo scenario...”

“For instance.”

“Where do I sign up?”

“You got your phone?”

“Let me find my purse.”

Jen stood up, took a moment to steady herself. I’d lost track. Was that three or four glasses she had put down?

What the hell, I said to myself. As she tottered off I filled my glass.

Snuggled again in luxury. Leo snoring somewhere upstairs. Late autumn sun beating through the windows. Fire in the hearth. The smell of warm leather from the chair beneath me. Those champagne butterflies flitting inside my skull. Ah, money. I’d get it back. Like all the cavemen before me, I would provide.

“Here,” Jen said, handing over her phone. She perched on the arm of my chair. Her hair brushed against my cheek. I held her phone, swiped, stabbed. I had some trouble thinking it was the most important thing at the moment.

“Let’s get the app installed,” I said.

Jen made a purring noise.

I hit Open and there it was, the labor of Duke's IT kids. The image of an old alarm clock against a stormy sky, the second hand ticking in jerks until it stopped suddenly. Lightning flashed in the background clouds, and then the hand went into motion again.

A little corny, I said at the unveiling, offending everyone. "We're not selling toothpaste here," Duke had countered. "There's a line between dramatic and corny. We're on the right side of the line."

"You say so," I replied.

The language that Pimplipper and the rest of the crew in Legal had dreamed up crowded the screen in six-point type.

"Mumbo-jumbo," I told Jen. "Just hit Agree."

"I'm not really a dot-the-i type," she said.

"Just as well."

"More of a bold strokes gal," she said, sliding a hand beneath my shirt collar.

"Let's get down to business, Jen," I said.

60. How Do You Put a Price on That?

I passed the phone to Jen so she could start filling in the blanks. That forced her to get her hand out of my shirt.

Jen attacked the keypad like a teenager, her thumbs a blur.

"I hit Submit and that's it?" she asked.

"Depends. You want personal consultation or email response?"

"Email. Does that seem cold?"

"Might be good to talk it through. Either way. Leo could be dead tomorrow. He could hang on for twenty years."

"Don't say that."

She drew figures with her finger on the top of my head.

"Who does the consult? One of Duke's dead pals?"

“I’ll come by myself. We’re in the research phase, Jen. Best practices. Sorting ourselves out. We’re grateful for your help.”

“What’s the charge? Not that I care. Not that Leo will know. Curiosity, that’s all.”

“For you, free. As I said, research. But in your opinion? What’s it worth?”

“How do you put a price on it? Ten thousand? Leo’s money. Sure, I’d pay that. More, probably. We’re talking about Leo’s life. But it’s my life, too.”

She got a hand under the collar of my shirt again and laid in to the muscles there.

“One thing about a big man,” she said. “Substance. Momentum. Bing bang boom. Whereas, Leo. Excuse me. He feels like a played-out laying hen. Gristle and bone.”

I was trying to figure out which way to go — retreat? advance? — when a thumping noise came from the hallway.

Jen sighed. “Leo.”

“Personal consult,” she said, stabbing at the phone again and turning off the screen. She slid off the chair and straightened out her blouse.

“Leo, are you alright?” she called.

The aluminum walker came into view first, then the heir and philanthropist himself. He gripped the walker tightly with both hands. His white hair was stiff and wild, like a war bonnet. Big, crazy blue eyes. Plus a grin filled out with a set of false choppers, all of this laid atop a face so withered that it seemed like a sheet of parchment set over a skull.

“I heard voices.” Leo said.

“You remember Charles,” Jen said. “Old friend of Duke’s.”

“Duke Black,” said Leo. “The Black Box. That performance space. At the Institute.”

“Exactly. You were on the board together.”

“Young guy. He’s dead.”

Leo laughed.

When it came to ghoulishness, he beat out Duke by a large margin.

“My God, beautiful day!” he announced. “Let me tell you this, Charles. You’re younger, you think your life has to be filled to the brim. Strength, vigor. Can’t live without those things. Then

you don't have them anymore, you're still alive, and you think, well, what the hell. Damn, it's still a beautiful day!"

He spotted the champagne in the ice bucket and pointed to it with a long, crooked finger.

"Don't mind if I do," he said. "How does an old man get a glass around here?"

61. *Let's Move Somewhere Quiet*

Leo plopped into the seat of his walker with a loud groan. He grabbed the glass Jen offered him.

The champagne bubbles rose toward his withered lips. His knotty fingers clutched the crystal.

I tried to get a grip on my feelings. Look at a baby and what you see is potential. Look at Leo and you get a reminder of the inevitable descent to the grave. The vanity of life! The slippery nature of earthly ambitions! *Memento mori!*

And merely eighty six! With the money Leo had the docs could keep him going forever. A pacemaker, new hips, maybe some knees, valves, pumps, lenses for the peepers, the best hearing aids money can buy, FloMax, Viagra by the shovelful, Lipitor, warfarin.

"What brings you by?" Leo asked.

Before I could come up with a lie, Leo waved his hand and said, "What the hell, doesn't matter. This, that. The other thing. Most of it crap. Be here now, that's what I say. I'm here. What about you, Charles?"

"Present."

"What brings you by?" he said again. Then, "Asked that. Still doesn't matter. Fill your glass, boy! Jen, you too. Let's have a toast."

Jen grabbed the bottle and sloshed more champagne into each of our glasses.

"To life, gad man it. God damn it, that's what I mean."

"Gad man it," I said.

"What?" Leo asked. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"To life," I said.

“Beginning to end,” Jen added.

We tapped our glasses against Leo’s. He drained his in a couple gulps. Jen grabbed the glass from his hand before he had a chance to drop it on the floor.

“Why don’t we move you to the sofa?” Jen said.

Leo was focused on a point beyond the room. He put on that macabre grin again.

“He’s so cranked up on meds, alcohol puts him over the moon. Five minutes and he’ll be snoring again,” Jen said. “Give me a hand, will you?”

Leo got a hand on Jen’s Pilated glutes and squeezed. “Ha ha. Never gets old,” he said.

Within minutes Leo’s head drooped onto the sofa cushion.

“Let’s move somewhere quiet to finish up,” Jen said.

I followed her into the library. Everything heavy and dark. The desk. The drapes. The leather sofa. A wall of books.

Finishing up. Jen had ideas about what that meant. No need for all the details. I protested, not that it mattered. “You want me signed on the dotted line or what?” she asked.

“It’s just part of the deal?”

“More or less.”

“He won’t...?”

“Hear? Don’t worry.”

Of course I did. Leo was the least of it.

62. Baby You Don’t Look So Good

Slumber of the innocent!

Leo’s head was still tipped back against the cushion. His mouth hung open, exposing those brilliant fake teeth.

Jen glanced at him and whispered, “Jesus, I wonder if he’s...”

“No, no, his eyes are twitching,” I said. “He’s dreaming.”

Not that I would have traded with Leo. But in certain respects he had a leg up. The guilt file, for instance. What would Leo feel guilty about? Sleeping away the day? Banging up the

woodwork with his walker? Forgetting to take his pills? Whereas my guilt file had this latest addition: adultery.

Jen didn't love me and I didn't love her. That was the problem with Doris. The complexity. The mess of sex and money, the mismatch in the beauty department. The doubters on all sides with their endless question: What *is* she doing with him? Whereas Jen was doing a version of what she always did.

We crept down the hall, back to the castle door. She pecked at one of my chins and said, "Thanks for that." She looked like she had just run up a couple flights of stairs. She pulled at my shirt to straighten it out.

"Tomorrow?" she said.

My expression must have been unusually blank.

"The day and the hour," she said. "Leo."

"Of course. Same time? Does that work?"

"Same time," she said as she closed the door.

I didn't go directly home. I drove west on Pierce Butler. East on University. To the Capitol. Back to Pennsylvania.

Jen Litely. What was I thinking? How long before she told her best pal, whoever that was, who told her best pal, who dumped the news in an email she accidentally sent to half the free world? What remained private anymore? What ever had?

Despair.

The last of the afternoon light faded. I parked outside our Frogtown cottage. Our hovel. Forget about the carved Cupids fluttering in the dining room. Adios to the marble counters, to the Zero King side-by-side, to the carpets hand-knotted by enslaved children. The money was gone, the house was gone, we were once again the bottom feeders we had always been.

Doris was at the kitchen table, a glass of wine in her hand.

"You okay, baby?" she said. "You don't look so good."

"I think I'm coming down with something."

No point in lingering on my condition. I didn't trust myself. I could end up confessing before she suspected a thing.

"What you been doing?" I asked.

"Called about getting my old job back."

"Oh no, sugar, I never..."

"There's justice in it. Making people pay what they owe."

She gave me a look. Maybe I just thought she gave me a look.

"I feel terrible," I said, which was true. I felt terrible. A sickness of the conscience.

Then again... There was no denying... Hmm. How to put it? Jen, the yogi, knew certain tricks had never previously occurred to me as physically possible.

"I think I should take a shower and get in bed."

Doris pressed a hand to my forehead. "You feel hot."

I thought I caught her sniffing at me, trying to identify a scent. Jen's perfume. Stray pheromones.

"I don't feel well at all," I said.

As soon as I pulled the covers up to my chin, I heard a thumping in the basement.

Duke. I pulled the pillow over my head.

63. Of Course You Almost Always Get Caught

Doris shook me. "I'm going out for groceries," she said.

"I'll go with you."

She put a hand on my forehead. "You still feel hot. Stay."

She pulled the covers back up to my chin.

"You hear that noise?" she said.

"What?"

I pretended I didn't know what she meant.

"Knocking?"

"Air in the pipes. Could be that. Tomorrow. I'll check it out."

She pulled the duvet up to my chin again.

She's a saint. I've said that. She drives me crazy with her saintliness. Giving all that money away. It's like living with Mother Teresa, if Mother Teresa owned a wardrobe that was heavy on black leather, spike heels, Doc Marten's and odd lingerie. Who gives away forty million? In comparison...

Oh, why get started?

As soon as I heard her drive away I slipped on my robe and headed for the basement.

Duke was sitting on the steps.

"Fatman, my friend. What you been up to?"

"Jen Lively. Leo. Quite a confab."

"Quite! Lots of non-verbal communication."

"What do you..."

"The dead. We know a lot. When you're sleeping. When you're awake. When you've been bad or good." He laughed. "Fatman. Be good for goodness sake. You're in sales now, sure, but to the extent possible, try to keep your pants on."

"That was a mistake."

"Only if you get caught. Of course you almost always get caught. You feel guilty. You look guilty. You smell guilty. Might as well put it on Facebook, pal."

"I wasn't thinking."

"Needless to say."

"How you going to explain it?"

"Maybe I won't have to?"

"Ha, ha. You been listening to me? Two paths here. Abject groveling apology, crawling on the floor, licking her shoes and so forth. Or your best-defense-is-a-good-offense play. What did you expect, baby, we been dead in the love department, the running off, the leaving me alone, the cold shoulder."

"What's your recommendation?"

“None of it works. You got to live through it. Time. Heals all wounds. Not really. You forget and you don’t forget. You work around it. You’re lucky, maybe she’ll have a fling herself. Your classic balance-of-terror deal.”

“Thanks.”

“The truth. Nobody wants to hear it.”

“Jen. She might go for the truth. Depending on the expiration date on Leo.”

“Tough luck all around, Fatman. Our records, Leo is good until twenty-twenty-nine.”

“You’re joking.”

“About this, no.”

“Leo is going to hit one hundred.”

“Data privacy, HIPPA, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but Leo’s going to put Jen in her grave. Not that he’ll know it. But he’ll be breathing long after she stops.”

“Jesus.”

“We all make bad deals.”

“Still. Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“Interesting you should mention that. We’ve been in discussions. Pimplipper. Graydon. Some of the crew in Interventions. About extending the product features.”

“What does that mean?”

“Sit down, Fatman,” Duke said.

64. It’s Complicated

Again, the tangle town streets, the whiff of greenbacks, that big oak door, the racket when the knocker fell. And then, Jen. Hopeful. Big-eyed. Dressed again in tights that could have been sprayed on, but that’s what the gals are wearing these days. Not gals of Jen’s age, generally speaking, though so few have kept themselves up to the same extent.

“Charles,” she said. “No need to say. I’ve been waiting.”

“Leo. He’s sleeping?”

“He’s up but he’ll be down. Not much steam there.”

More than she knew.

Leo looked like he been dumped on the sofa from an airplane. He wore that delirious grin — mask of a madman! — though in fairness to him it was just the bum deal of old age. The sagging ears and nose, the hang of the jowls, the bugged out eyes and thin lips, all of it together makes a man of Leo's age look nuts. He deserved something better. We all do.

“Leo,” I said.

“We met?” he replied.

“A time or two.”

Jen rolled her eyes.

I should have asked Duke how long she had. Everyone will be dead some day, no surprise there. But that certainty seems — what's the word here? Odd? Contradictory? Oppositional? — no way to put this delicately! — that certainty seems bizarrely opposed to the messy, panting reality of having been inside the living body of another, to have felt the pulse and quiver and then to understand that she will be a — oh, why mince words?! — a lifeless slab of meat sooner or later. Sooner in Jen's case. Sooner than Leo at any rate.

“I wonder. If our guest would care for a drink?” Leo said. “I myself, this hour of the day. I am not opposed. What time is it, dear?”

“Eleven thirty.”

“Ah. This hour of the day. I do not say no to blackberry brandy. And you, sir?”

“Eleven thirty. That's a ...”

“Perfect time for a small glass,” said Jen.

“Exactly,” I said.

She took a bottle and three glasses from the sideboard. She filled Leo's glass and handed it to him.

“Put him back to sleep at least,” she whispered to me.

Leo held the glass up to the light. He nodded appreciatively and emptied it. “The warmth,” he said. “That's what...” He stopped and stared at me. “Who are you?”

“Charles,” said Jen. “It's Charles.”

“The warmth, Charles. It reminds you. You have a soul. The glow. Of course it’s only alcohol. Still. I’m talking about a dark room, and dark room and then this flame. This burning. It suggests, Charles. It suggest the etern...”

The glass slipped out of Leo’s fingers. It took a while for his eyes to close. For a moment I thought that Duke had it wrong. We all held our breath, waiting. Then Leo gasped, snorted and began, gently, to snore.

“You want to move him to his bed?” I asked Jen.

“Best to leave him. He can sleep anywhere.”

She moved in closer to me.

“About Leo,” she said. “What did you find out?”

“You want to go to another room?”

“Doesn’t matter. He barely understands when he’s awake. But if it makes you more comfortable.”

“It would.”

“Is this good news or bad?” She took hold of my elbow and steered me toward the library again.

“Jen,” I said. “It’s complicated.”

65. You Can't Get Enough Help

Jen pulled the door shut and leaned against it. “Should I sit down?” she said.

“That’s a little dramatic. But it might not hurt.”

She settled onto the leather sofa. I sat beside her. She put a hand on my knee.

“My guess, this isn’t good. What? Five more years?”

“Five? Maybe more than that.”

“Maybe? I thought this was an inside line.”

“Okay, more.”

“God. I don’t know that I’m good for one more year. Five?”

“You could leave him.”

“The pre-nup. I leave, I get a couple cans of dog food.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“But not much better. So how many. Years.”

“Maybe you don’t want to concentrate on the exact number. Instead, concentrate on what you want from your life. Regardless where Leo is in it.”

“I want the life to which I am accustomed. The house. The bottomless bank account. The BMW. Paris for clothes. New York. The maid. The trainer. All that. Except no Leo.”

“You get a personal attendant. Somebody to prop him up in the morning. Get him his glass of brandy. Wake him up for lunch. How much do you have to be involved?”

“Spoken like a man who’s never cared for anyone. No offense. But you can’t ignore it, Charles. It’s like listening to water drip in your house. You can’t pretend it’s not happening. Dripping water, you call a plumber. But this...”

“That’s what I’m saying. You call in help.”

“You can’t get enough help. The only help is...”

“What?”

“He’s dead. So how many years.”

“A drink might not be a bad idea. You keep a bottle in here?”

“Just tell me.”

“Okay. Sixteen.”

She laughed. She squeezed my knee hard with one hand. With the other she covered her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears. What a joke this was turning out to be! Then her laughter turned into sobbing that grew louder, and the tears rolled down her cheeks in a gray torrent (thanks to her mascara), and despite the botox that had generally transformed her brow into a smooth slate, now, as if an emotional earthquake were unleashing deep facial tectonics, a pair of gullies rose toward her hairline from the bridge of her nose.

“Sixteen years! I won’t last that long myself. Not if I have to wake up every day to...to...this *thing*. He barely seems like a person now. Not the person I met. Not the man I married. He’s a bag of sinew. A stinking bag of sinew. How can he live sixteen more years? I’ll be...” She stopped to do the math, then thought again. “I’ll be old.”

She wouldn't be, but I didn't mention that.

"There must be something. Something I can do."

"This is his hour and day. To be exact December seventh, ten fifty-four pm, twenty thirty-one."

"Anything."

"There is a premium product. Still in beta. More from the marketing end than the operational side."

Jen squeezed my thigh again. She focused through that muddy flood on mascara.

"Tell me," she demanded.

"From the guys in Interventions. Branding is an issue. Sweet Relief, we're kicking that around. Right Time. Preferred Passage. They've got a dozen options. It's in testing now."

"I don't care what you call it. What are we talking about here?"

"Let me explain."

66. Sneeze Around Them, They'd Fly to Pieces

"Generally what happens is what's supposed to happen," I told Jen. "You got your day, your hour. That's that."

"I'm hearing a but. Like this isn't written in stone."

"In certain cases. Like I said, Interventions is working on it."

"Certain cases?"

"Mostly the dead don't care when you die. You ask any dead guy, he or she can tell you when you're going to pop off, but it doesn't really interest them. It's not like there's a shortage of dead guys.

"There are people the dead would like to kill, sure, but it's the same old revenge and retribution deal. They got a beef, they want to settle it, preferably by twisting your head off, but there's nothing they can do about it because they're trapped in the underworld. They're powerless. Meaning they're bitter and full of complaints."

"I know the feeling."

“In fairness, Jen? You’re not squatting in the gloom and dust all day and all night.”

“Still. What’s with Interventions?”

“What I know is what Duke tells me. You got the deadest of the dead guys in a cave way off the main room. Sitting in the dust like everybody else. They don’t have any idea when they were born, that’s how old they are. You sneeze around them, they’d fly to pieces. They hum at each other. They’re on a different plane.”

“They don’t talk?”

“Stone Age stuff. Grunts. Yodeling. Noises you can’t make out. They have interpreters. You need layers of interpreters to get down as deep as these guys are. Then it’s like playing Telephone. Who knows what errors creep in? You’re going from the Stone Age to Bronze Age to Iron Age. And even then you’re just getting started. You want to build an accurate system but it’s based on approximate knowledge.”

“What a mess.”

“But these are your guys. They’re one step removed from the Garden of Eden. You want a rewrite on the day and the hour, they can make it happen. You give them a name. Then you wait. Might be an hour. Might be days. When they’re ready, when they feel like it, they change the day, they change the hour.”

“This is the premium product?”

“What are your alternatives? Put a pillow over Leo’s face?”

“How different would that be?”

“It would be murder, to name one difference.”

“This isn’t?”

“This is engaging the cosmic forces. We’ve all got to die. Leo will die of natural causes. Only earlier.”

“What do I have to do?”

“They’ve got to be interested. You’ve got to make it worth their while.”

“How do you make anything worthwhile for the deadest guys in the underworld? What do they care about anything?”

“Here’s my understanding,” I said.

67. There Goes the Course of History

Jen grabbed hold of my cheeks with both hands and stared at me. Eyes, sure, they're the windows of the soul. Right then Jen's eyes opened on an interior of desperate and crazy. "You're not just making this up?"

"I wouldn't. I couldn't. Who could make this up?"

"Duke. He made up stories for a living."

"Check for yourself. Verify."

"How am I supposed to check?"

"You've got to go anyway."

"Go where?"

"You want to get the old dead guys interested, you've got to convince them. You appear. You make your case. They listen. They decide. Your story is good enough, maybe they're willing to exert themselves."

"I don't want to change the course of history. I just want Leo..."

The silence lingered. I heard Leo snoring in the living room.

"Dead," I said. "You want him dead."

She shrugged. "What you said. We've all got to die eventually. What purpose is he serving now anyway?"

"A mystery, right? Leo's not around, things that would have happened don't. Things that wouldn't have happened do. Who knows what they are."

"The old guys?"

"Maybe."

"What's my story? What do they want to hear?"

"It's got to come from within, Jen. I can't tell you what it is. You've got to know."

"The truth?"

"They sniff out a lie in a heartbeat."

“I don’t want to save babies in Africa. I don’t care about the whales. My life. I want to enjoy it. Without Leo.”

“What I’d do? I’d think of a better way to put it.”

“When do we go?”

“Now?”

“I can’t just leave Leo.”

“Jen. You can. The way things stand, he’s good for sixteen years.”

“I know. If I’m so worried...”

“I didn’t want to say.”

“I’m dressed okay?”

“It’s the underworld.”

“I’m trying to make an impression.”

“You’re fine.”

She glanced at herself in the mirror hung over the fireplace.

“Trust me,” I said. “You’ll be the best thing they’ve seen in a couple thousand years.”

“Let’s go,” she said.

She patted Leo on the head when we passed him on our way out the door.

68. The Usual Calculations

“The underworld,” Jen said. “You’ve got a key or what? How do we get there?”

“A portal. More of them than you’d think. There’s one in my basement. Hidden. Basic. You’ll see.”

It’s a long drive in a lot of ways from Jen’s neighborhood to mine. She must have had questions but kept them to herself. She stared at the road.

I hoped Doris wasn’t home. She had her book group, an eccentric bunch of gals. Don’t mention Oprah in their presence. Forget about uplifting. They tilted more toward murder and mayhem. Jo Nesbo. Henning Mankell. Nordic noir.

The sun had already set. Lights were on in the houses we passed. Same with our place when I pulled up in the driveway. Doris watched from the window as I ushered Jen toward the door. Doris was already in her coat with a book clutched in her hand.

I introduced her to Jen. They did a quick head-to-toe on each other, made the usual calculations.

How much could Doris know at a glance? More than I could imagine, that was my assumption. Previously she had no reason to doubt my devotion, my faithfulness. But now? I felt like an antenna broadcasting guilt. How could she not know?

“Something to drink?” Doris offered. “Wine? Coffee? I’ve got to go but I can get you something.”

“Go ahead, baby. We got a little business.”

“Business?” Doris said. If you didn’t know her this sounded innocent. Doris lives in the territory between trust and suspicion. She wants to believe but it also offends her nature.

“About my husband,” Jen said quickly, before I had a chance to dig a hole for myself. “Leo. Leo Litely. Maybe you’ve heard of him.”

“Leo. Duke Black’s friend. Friend. Maybe that’s a little strong. They were on the Institute board. We met at a gala or two, back when Duke and I...”

“You and Duke were...”

“Who wasn’t Duke...”

“True enough.”

“Leo was old *then*. He’s still alive?”

“You could say that.”

“Nursing home?”

“Should be. But no, he won’t hear of it.”

“And Charles is...?”

“This may come as a surprise. Their association being so tangential. Leo and Charles met years ago. Institute gala. Inconsequential chatter I thought at the time. Who understands the whys and wherefores? But Charles made an impression on my Leo. My hope is now that I can

persuade Charles to undertake some research. Assisted living. Nursing care. What have you. And discuss them with Leo while he's still more or less in his right mind."

"I had no idea," said Doris.

"What isn't mysterious in the end?" Jen said.

This seemed too easy. Doris flashed her book at Jen, said, "Sorry. Have to run. Book group."

"We won't be long," Jen said. "A few details."

"Business," I said with a shrug. "Hurry home."

I gave Doris a minute to get down the street.

Then I opened the basement door.

69. *You Didn't Prep Her?*

I pulled back the wooden trap door on the basement floor. Duke had a ladder leaned up against the concrete floor. The ladder rungs disappeared into the dark dirt pit.

"Let me go first," I said.

"You're kidding, right?" Jen said. "A hole in the floor?"

"What did you expect? It's the underworld, Jen. It's not the Ritz."

"I didn't expect *Silence of the Lambs* is what I'm saying."

"We can't phone it in. It's this or you leave Leo to Nature's course."

"Okay," Jen said finally. "Let's go."

Onto the ladder. A narrow passage downward through crumbling dirt, then sand, then clay. That odor of earth, the smell of an open grave. At the bottom a closet-sized room with a steel door set in concrete. An illuminated dial pad that gave off a sickly green light.

I stared at it. I had no idea what numbers to punch.

Before my ignorance was exposed the door swung open.

Brimsnod and Duke stood in the pale glow of the underworld.

"Jen!" they said simultaneously.

The breeding of the wealthy leaves them ready, apparently, for all types of social intercourse.

“Look at you two!” Jen declared. “You’re looking great. All things considered.”

“Aging,” said Brimnod. “Death puts an end to that.”

“Forget about us,” said Duke. “You look better than ever. You got a pact with Satan going on, Jen?”

“That’s possible?” Jen said.

“Who knows? Probably. We could get Research on it. But that’s not why you’re here, right?”

“Related to Leo.”

“We know,” said Brimnod. “We made the arrangements on our end. You want to follow along?”

Brimnod pulled the door shut behind us.

“That sounds awfully final,” Jen said.

“For you it’s a two-way street,” said Duke.

The usual march through the underworld. Dust. Gloom. The faint buzz of a thousand distant conversations. The inability to scope out the limits of the space. You assume you’re in a room but you can never see the walls.

Duke, Brimnod and Jen chattered like they were strolling down Main Street on a sunny day. The good old days! In the stable, plucking straw out of their jodhpurs. That romp in the storage vault at the Institute, stared at by a bank of blank marble eyes. Society notes from above and below.

“You want the tour or do we go straight to work?” Duke asked.

“The tour?” Jen said.

“Ha ha, a joke. It’s all the same. We’re almost there.”

Almost there. In the underworld that’s a slippery notion. I couldn’t tell you how much longer or further we walked. Your mind goes blank. You lose all sense.

Finally I heard a thrumming noise. Duke and Brimnod pulled up beside a low opening in a wall that appeared out of nowhere.

“This is them,” Duke said.

Brimnod took Jen by the shoulders and squared her up, flounced her hair, wiped away a smudge of dust above her brow. “You ready?” she asked.

“Of course I’m not ready. How do you get ready for something like this? What do I say?”

“Fatman,” said Duke. “You didn’t prep her?”

“Yes and no. I said tell the truth.”

“Jesus,” said Brimsnod.

“Okay, Jen,” Duke said. “Let’s have a sit-down here. Let’s give this our best shot.”

70. Stick to the Basics

“First thing,” said Duke. “They’re old. Okay.”

“Ancient, actually,” Brimsnod added. “Dead before the pyramids got built.”

“No point in mentioning your smartphone, your car.”

“Stick to the basic emotions,” said Brimsnod. “Fear. Hatred. Revenge. Loyalty. Family. Clan. Survival.”

“That’s our key, you get right down to it. Survival,” Duke said. “You need a strong man. Instead you’ve got Leo. Can he protect you? Leo can barely drool. He slows you down. He’s a hindrance, not a help.”

“If he were any kind of man at all he’d walk out on an ice floe and drift away,” Brimsnod said.

“But I don’t need him to protect me. I just need him...”

“Out of the way. Sure. We understand. But them?”

Brimsnod nodded toward the opening to the cave. That humming noise waned and waxed, interrupted by excited jabbering.

“You’re at the crossroads here. Loyalty and survival,” said Duke. “Clan loyalty. Big component of survival. But you get down to the basics, personal survival trumps loyalty. That’s our sell point here.”

“This sounds like we’re running around in fur with spears in our hands.”

“Who says we aren’t?” Brimsnod asked.

She grinned, revealing a line up of sharp little teeth, then patted Jen on the shoulder. Jen did her best not to cringe.

“You’ll kill it,” Brimnod said. “Stay out of the weeds. Talking points. Survival. Leo’s obligations to the clan.”

“The clan? Leo’s kids just spend his money. They don’t hang around the fire pit and roast mastodon together.”

“Your message is, Leo owes it to everyone to stay out of the way. But he won’t do that.”

“Why not? What’s his reason?” Jen wondered.

“Evil spirits, that’s good. Possession. Self versus the tribe. You can run with all that,” said Duke. “You’re not dealing with the scientific mind here.”

“You ready?” Brimnod asked.

Jen shrugged.

“Let’s go,” Duke said. He strode through the cave entryway like the big man of warrior cult.

Flattering: not what you would call underworld lighting. In the cave of the ancients it was worse.

How many of them were there? Hard to tell.

My eyes adjusted to the new level of gloom. I saw the dull shine of a jaundiced eye, a yellowed tooth, eccentric costuming. A fireman’s helmet, a top hat, a gingham dress, a baseball uniform that would have fit in a Cooperstown museum.

“What is this?” I whispered to Duke. “Halloween?”

“Their clothes rotted centuries ago. What they get their hands on, that’s what they wear.”

“Ladies! Gentlemen!” Duke announced. “Great to be here!”

In return, that humming, rising and falling like the noise of crickets on a summer night. Except that here it was mingled with a Tower of Babel squawking, layers of language stacked on top of each other, until finally a figure stepped forward from among them.

“He looks like Abe Lincoln,” I said to Duke.

“He is Abe Lincoln.”

“I don’t...”

“He gets closer, check out the back of his head.”

“Despite the fact that we are and continue to be gathered here,” Abe said, “it remains our unwavering belief that this is neither a great nor fitting conclusion to our labors upon the earth.”

“Far be it from me to arg...” Duke began.

”Shall we proceed to the point? What do you want?”

Duke pulled himself to his full height in the presence of the great man. “We represent Mrs. Jen Lately in a matter of unnecessary and potentially harmful extension of existence, sir.”

Abe turned and muttered into the gloom, unleashing another volley of interpretation.

“The ancients ask you to proceed,” Abe said. “They remind you that they don’t have all day.”

“They do, but never mind,” Duke whispered to me and Brimsnod.

He gave Jen a push forward. She stood frozen for a moment, like Dorothy contemplating Oz.

“Well?” Abe said.

She took a breath. “This is the thing,” Jen began.

71. Poison Straight from the Bottle

You send a lawyer to argue before the Supreme Court. Some of them rise to the occasion. Others go to pieces, awed by the history, the solemnity, the authoritarian, hierarchical weirdness of the situation.

Jen rose. It was something to see. She felt in her bones that what she said was less important than how she said it. She looked like a voodoo princess, animating the words, swaying, gesturing, her hands sweeping through the dismal air, her fingers doing their own little dances, her eyes cutting through the sub-sub-basement dreariness.

When she met Leo, as she told it, he was powerful, rich, respected, feared. As if poor drooling Leo had ever in his life been some kind of kahn, rather than the pampered product of inherited wealth. She herself, who was no willow in the wind, had trembled before him.

“You think she’s laying it on a little thick?” I whispered to Duke.

“Hell, no,” he said. “This is brilliant. These guys don’t want meta claptrap. They want their poison straight from the bottle.”

Leo, by Jen's account, sired children by women who he wore out with his vigor. He led his loyal followers on campaigns to guild his massive white castle, the Institute of Arts. He filled it with riches that people travel immense distances to ogle. The earth all but shook when Leo walked upon it.

I couldn't tell what Abe made of this. He had a face made for a scowl. The yapping and humming of the interpreters and ancients went on non-stop.

The tragedy that Jen now sought to prevent was the humiliation of Leo's decline. That god, Leo, now tottered meaninglessly from bed to throne room, heavy on his cane, lost in his thoughts, barely able to express them, bringing sadness to friends and encouragement to his enemies.

As if Leo possessed either at this point of his life.

Though it tore at her heart, though she could barely imagine a life without his majesty, Leo, still she knew it was greedy to wish that he would remain among the living. And to think that he would go on for another sixteen years, that he would remain to become so additionally eroded, well, it was like watching the Himalayas be turned into wretched molehills by the cruelty of time.

She could not bear it. Leo would not want it. This was another of those twists of history, of fate, of whatever you wanted to call it, that simply should not be allowed to stand.

By now Jen was in tears. She knelt in the dust. She pounded at the dirt with her fists. She rent a few garments. At one point she went for her hair and seemed about to yank out a handful before she giving the matter some thought and patting it back into place.

"Jesus," said Brimsnod. "The depth. You see something like this once in a lifetime and you're blessed."

Lincoln slowly approached Jen and pulled her to her feet.

"We have all of us experienced the harshness of circumstance, albeit to greater and lesser degrees," Abe said. "For those who rise to the heights, the fall is more painful to all of those who must observe."

"You get past the idea that this is Lincoln and the guy wears you out," Duke said. "A windbag. Never two words if he can get out twelve."

“Sour grapes,” Brimsnod hissed.

“You go for this?”

“Compared to what? Provincial lawyers?”

“That’s how he got started.”

“Abe took it to a different level.”

“And look where we all are now.”

“You needed more evidence that the world isn’t fair?”

“Perhaps we could allow silence to descend once again from the province of our visitors,” Abe said, barely deigning to glance at us, “and bestow upon the ancients the respect and consideration to which they are entitled.”

Jen took a swipe at her dress, rearranging the filth.

“How’d I do?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Baby, you nailed it,” said Duke.

“We got to wait for a decision,” Brimsnod said. “But there’s only one way this is going to go.”

72. Why Twiddle Our Thumbs?

“What’s best for you?” Duke asked Jen after Abe delivered the ancients’ verdict.

“What are my options?”

“Whatever. He passes in his sleep. He jumps off a bridge. Heart attack.”

“Not how. When. That’s mostly what I was thinking.”

“Couple weeks? Some time to pull things into shape.”

“What about sooner?”

“A week?”

“Tomorrow?”

“I don’t want to use the word unseemly...”

“Why twiddle our thumbs?”

“Let’s say three days. Call your lawyer today, make sure Leo’s affairs are in order. He needs to sign anything, get it signed.”

“He could just go in his sleep. Simple.”

“My advice, put an exclamation mark on it. Car accident. Settles a lot of questions. You know who’s to blame. Insurance settlement, so you got some dough to cover the funeral.”

“Not really a problem.”

“Nonetheless.”

“We can arrange an accident?”

“A clause in the deal with the ancients. Not like there’s a shortage of people dying. Car wreck, cancer, the ancients don’t care. A little tweaking, they’re not opposed. Leo still drive?”

“He shouldn’t. But try to take away the keys.”

“Perfect,” Duke said. “Get him in a ride you don’t want to see again. Three days.”

Duke gave us the day (Friday), the hour (one fifteen) and place (intersection of Thomas and Hamline), so we could get a window seat at the coffee shop there and watch the catastrophe.

Jen put her watch on the tabletop, between her coffee cup and a slice of carrot cake.

“The cake,” she said. “I wouldn’t normally. But this seems special.”

“You sure you want to be here?” I asked.

“Duke’s advice. Pain and suffering. Emotional distress. Makes a better claim.”

I checked my watch. A minute left. I turned my chair to get a better view.

A silver Jaguar pulled up to the stop light. Leo, with his wild hair and wild eyes, was behind the wheel. His walker was stuffed into the passenger seat.

“Too bad about the Jag,” I said.

“That or the Mercedes,” Jen said.

“XJ12?”

“I didn’t take you for a car buff.”

“Not really.”

“Anyway, the electrical system is junk. You want a car, the Germans.”

The light changed. Leo pulled out slowly. He looked both ways, those crazy eyes passing over us.

A cement truck. Forty-five miles per hour. Maybe faster. Weaving in the road. The ancients were apparently having some laughs with this. The excess. Like taking a sledgehammer to a mouse. The solution way out of proportion to the problem.

The Jag flipped, rolled, burst into flames. A fireball rose through the bare branches above, setting them on fire. The cement truck went sideways, tipped, oozed gray cement onto the Jag's undercarriage, then ignited as well. The driver staggered across the pavement, living, drunk, guilty, unaware.

Jen pushed back her chair. It crashed on the floor. Before she hit the door the tears had already reached her chin. "Leo! Leo!" she cried. If you didn't know better you'd think her heart had been torn out.

I followed her out the door. Even on a winter day the heat from the fire pushed us back. Blacktop bubbled around the wreck. The Jag's paint blistered. The tires sent up a dense tower of black smoke.

I was not so surprised when Roscoe appeared, the first cop on the scene.

73. Jesus, What a Mess

Roscoe parked his squad car in the middle of the street with the lights on.

First thing, he collared the cement truck driver as he staggered away from the wreck. A couple quick moves and Roscoe had him in cuffs. He opened the rear door of his car, gave him a shove inside and slammed the door. Then Roscoe sauntered over to where I stood.

"Jesus, what a mess," he said.

"Leo's inside the car."

"I know. I hate that smell."

"Funny. It was a barbecue, you'd..."

"It is and it isn't."

"You plan to do anything?"

“Like what?”

“You’re the cop.”

“Get within twenty five feet of that kind of fire and the gold melts out of your molars,”

Roscoe said.

The trees were in full flame now, like candles. “That hero crap is for the movies. Give it a minute, the hose jockeys will be here. You hear that?”

Fire truck sirens wailed somewhere toward Lexington.

“Anyway, Leo’s dead. I talked to Duke. He asked me to stop by.”

“You know?”

“He figured it would be best. Somebody on the team to keep an eye on Jen.”

“On the team?”

Roscoe shrugged. “Duke says there’ll be so much money you won’t miss a couple percent.”

“How many percent?”

“Let’s talk about it when everything isn’t on fire.”

Jen stood back from the blaze, screaming, sobbing. The cook from the coffee shop grabbed her by the shoulders to comfort her.

“My husband!” she cried. “He’s... I’m going to...” She started toward the car but let the cook pull her back.

“Best I look like I’m doing the job,” Roscoe said.

He strolled toward Jen. I followed him.

Dozens of people lined the sidewalk now, mesmerized by the flames.

More cops arrived.

The first firefighters pulled up. They looked like giants in their gear.

“What’s with the vehicles?” one of them shouted at Roscoe.

“Truck’s empty,” he said. “Dead guy in the Jag.”

They laid some hose, gave Leo’s car a spray. Steam rose into the flaming trees. After they blasted the cement truck and hosed the trees the street went dark again, except for the emergency lights.

An ambulance showed up.

“Come with me, Jen,” Roscoe said.

“It’s Leo, Leo is...”

“Duke filled me in. You can give it a rest.”

Jen daubed at her eyes with the back of both hands. Her mascara smeared. She looked awful, she looked perfect.

“You’re doing the report?” Jen asked.

“It’s all taken care of.”

“He knows, Jen,” I said. “He’s part of the team.”

“Everybody gets a piece of the pie. Everybody’s happy,” Roscoe said. “Generosity. Cheaper than the alternatives a lot of times.”

The cops moved in with portable lights. They trained them on Leo’s Jag. The fire was out but the car was still smoking.

When the seat belt melted away, Leo had crumpled up against the driver’s side glass, like a fish pushing its face up against the aquarium wall. His clothes had burned off. Same for his hair and his eyelids. His eyes, however, stared out at us.

“Can we get out of here?” Jen asked.

74. Sometimes You Just Can't Sleep

I didn’t sleep so great that night.

Leo, dead.

The cement truck driver, imprisoned.

Trees, scorched, maybe killed.

For all I knew some by-stander kid permanently traumatized by the sight of the cinder that had once been Leo.

Jen... Well, who knew? Elated, probably. Guilt didn’t seem to be her style.

It was mine.

Doris made her usual snuffling, snoring sounds, like a little engine. I tried to keep my tossing to a minimum. I folded my hands over my chest and stared at the ceiling, resigned to the anxiety that chokes so hard in the dead of night.

I had waded into the flow of history and diverted it. Who knows all that I had changed by setting in motion Leo's death? Sure, it was one thing versus another. Leo lives for sixteen more miserable years and one set of things happens. He dies today and a different set of events unfold. In the end the oceans rise anyway. The sun turns into a red giant and cooks the Earth. Even the cockroaches die. Vanity, vanity, of course I get it.

But we live on our petty plateau and act as if our lives have meaning.

As soon as you step back from the cosmic, billion-year view, oh, yes, it all means too much. The meaning smacks you down steamroller flat.

What about the drunk in the cement truck? Was he just collateral damage, a sacrificial chump who served our greater purpose? Our greater purpose being to free Jen from her minimal responsibilities to another human being who had, incidentally, smothered her in riches for decades?

Or had we spared someone else from the time-bomb that a drunk behind the wheel of a cement truck represents? A mom with three kids on her way to soccer practice. One of the kids the future inventor of practical fusion power or the cure for cancer.

Old useless Leo being, in this happy scenario, the means by which the lethal drunk is dumped in prison and prevented from causing even more awful future damage.

Maybe I rubbed at my face. I might have made some whimpering sounds.

"You awake?" Doris mumbled.

"Can't sleep."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know," I lied. "Sometimes you just can't sleep."

"You're just old." She rubbed my chest for a few seconds. She fell asleep again.

What was wrong, really wrong, was that Doris was not the type to deal in shades of gray. Artie, first. Now Leo.

I couldn't tell her.

I couldn't let her find out.

Revealing the day and hour was one thing. Bad enough, but probably not a deal-breaker.

Changing the day and hour? I already knew her opinion about that.

Those romps with Jen? I'd rather get a house call from the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse than to let Doris know about that.

As I stared at the dark ceiling, the picture in my mind was of me, mincing across a freshly frozen pond, the thin ice flexing beneath my considerable weight.

75. Blood Money

What happened next? No need for all the details, being that they are of the money-hand-over-fist variety, which no one really wants to contemplate unless you're talking about their hand and their fist.

First, Jen. Delirious, like a teenager with dad's money, dad's car, dad's house. She called me over to her castle, saying, "Charles, I've got something for you."

I figured I'd find out once I got there.

Boom boom boom. That brass knocker on the oak door again. Jen, radiant, apparently full of life. Though I knew via Duke that was only temporarily the case. Her clock was winding down.

The sunroom, the sofa, the champagne.

"Second thoughts?" I asked, having so many myself.

"I don't believe in them."

"It's a choice?"

"Luck, maybe."

She reached for a small porcelain trinket box on the coffee table. "I know you said this was market research. I thought you deserved something."

The check she handed me was made out for ten thousand dollars.

"I can't possibly..."

"Of course you can."

"It feels like..."

“What?”

“Not be be insulting.”

“I’m past that.”

“Okay. Blood money.”

“Or the price of deliverance. For everyone. Poor Leo, dangling on for years. Raving, probably. Prisoner of a wheelchair if he was lucky. Nursing home bed more likely. A dead man strapped to a horse. El Cid. The horse being modern medicine. A different form of intervention than yours. A worse one at that.”

“Your clarity. I envy it.”

I looked at the check, the trail of zeroes.

“Believe me, it’s a token. Considering.”

She moved closer to me on the sofa.

“You understand, Jen. We can’t be broadcasting this.”

“I doubt it’s illegal. What’s the charge? The prosecutor would sound like a nut case. Anyway, I know him.”

“Nonetheless.”

“Have it your way.”

Next her thigh pressed against mine. Her hand here, then there. A quick push and she had me on my back. This, which led to that. The flesh, as always, weak.

A champagne flute, shattered. Clothing stretched, torn, scattered.

Later she said with a sly smile, “Don’t worry, Charles. Your secret is safe with me.”

Of course I worried. What secret was ever safe?

A few days passed. My phone started to ring. A trickle of email, then a stream.

“Word of mouth,” Duke said. “Everybody wants it. You can’t buy it.”

“I told Jen to be discreet.”

“Information wants to be free,” Duke said. He laughed.

Policies and procedures? We made them up on the fly. Consults, free, conducted in the home, depending. Further services provided using a seat-of-the-pants algorithm. Meaning, my judgment. Wavering, imprecise, easily influenced.

The ten thousand dollars Jen so easily handed over became the base price for the day and hour. Nobody squawked, the clientele being *ricos* within Jen's web of gossip.

Interventions in the Leo style? At first I denied it could be done. Then I allowed that under certain circumstances there existed a possibility. Neither willy nor nilly, of course. The suffering old. The demented. As an escape from the clutches of dead-end treatments, the expectations that one would conduct a courageous battle with this or that disease to suit the needs of clinging relations or hubris-ridden MDs.

The fee being give-or-take fifty thousand, or half the price of year's worth of chemotherapy. On one hand, nausea, retching, weakness, impoverishment, the cold hand of death resting on your shoulder. On the other a merciful end at comparatively low everyday prices.

Or so Duke explained to me.

Money poured in. Duke's underworld team turned it into Bitcoins.

"That's legal?" I wondered.

He shrugged. "You want to try putting it on a Schedule C and explaining it to the IRS?"

When Duke showed me the numbers it was like a fireworks show inside my skull.

"You deserve it," Duke said. "We're doing God's work here. If God hadn't been kicked to the curb by the damn doctors."

"I don't think we should presume..."

"Trust me."

I wanted to.

Until Doris found out.

76. They Broke My Heart

One thing about money.

To quote the Beatles: It can't buy everything it's true. But in fact it doesn't have to buy anything at all.

Knowing that it was there, that it was mine, that I had earned it, that was enough.

I *did* earn it, despite all the accusations I heard later. I became a confessor, a grief counselor, a sounding board for the venal, the sociopathic, the understandably weary, the selflessly loving, the insane. That was me.

Me as an elegant version of Death itself, knocking on the door, on time to the minute, dripping with gravitas.

On Duke's advice, I dressed like an undertaker to the stars. Zegna suit, sumptuous wool, hand stitched, silk lined. Shoes concocted by Duke's mad Italian cobbler, rescued from his closet before Doris cast us back into the wilderness. Shirts that could have been spun from clouds, so bright did they appear, so soft against the skin.

Not that many men would have known the difference. However, my customers were for the most part women. They'd run a hand over my shoulder, slide two fingers down my lapel, sizing me up in a manner that became, soon enough, familiar, expected even. Were they not to lay a hand upon me, feel for whatever it was they needed to confirm, I would have been surprised, suspicious even.

Next their circling around the question, the predictable indirection. I never intervened. I had all the time in the world. An interview a day, never more. However long it took was how long it took.

The stories, oh, they broke my heart, they appalled me, they turned me tearful and they made me want to run for the door. The world is an engine that will run on baby's tears or gobs of shit, never losing steam to the contradiction.

I heard, again and again, tales of love that would make you think we are all of us the product of a generous god who is not happy unless his children wallow in love. The courtships, the long march through child-rearing, those years — golden! yes! — when the children have gone, work is over, the house is quiet, when you enjoy the luxury of looking back over a life together, free of so much, at last, except for the final question. When? Too soon or not soon enough? Asked too often with demented howling in the background, with the hum of an oxygen machine or that falsely cheerful chattering of a home health aide in the next room.

And I heard, again and again, the story of a life of abuses large and small. The casual diminishment, the studied insults, the knife slipped so artfully between the ribs. The hand raised,

the blow landed. And now, the question: was there not something that could be done? Had she not heard from a friend who knew a friend who knew, well, Jen; who understood that there were steps that could be taken? There were possibilities, weren't there? The score could be settled, no? Upon a finally-powerless crock stuck in a wheelchair, to name one example, or upon a still-inflated titan of industry, bellowing in his Armani suit, hurling directives this way and that. Could I not arrange to... what was the word exactly, they wondered... *silence* him, in the permanent sense of the word?

I became a significant figure. Money, so often, was no object. And when it was, I was not particularly concerned. There was enough. There was more than enough. The Bitcoins, ephemeral as they might be, imaginary even for all I knew, were a Midas-worthy pile in Duke's telling.

The idea was enough.

Enough to restore my swagger, domestically speaking. I squeezed those episodes with Jen out of my mind, pretended they didn't happen. Though it may be true that they were another part of rebuilding what had fallen.

"You're bouncing, baby," Doris observed. "I told you."

"Told me what?"

"We don't need Duke's loot. We're happier without it."

She stepped on my toes, grabbed my belt, leaned back and laughed. "We're happy," she declared.

Which, as I mentioned, was true until it wasn't.

77. More Impossible than Keeping a Secret?

How did Doris find out about... everything?

Word of mouth, as Duke said.

What is more impossible than keeping a secret?

Jen told her closest friend, pledged her to secrecy, whispered in her ear, regretted, briefly, the indiscretion and was, simultaneously, relieved. The burden of secrecy, shared! Let's raise a glass

to that. Let's get a little weepy. Another glass of wine might be the antidote to the sadness, no? Poor Leo, gone before his time. For once the cliché being true. Leo was indeed gone before his time.

Jen's friend is no more in her car before the weight of secrecy presses the air out of her lungs. And what was whispered into her ear is now jabbered over the phone to *her* friend, who is of course pledged to the silence of the tomb. Absurd.

Before the week is over five people know. In a month it's one hundred. Give it a year and people in China will be talking about the woman who took the hand of God in hers and managed to make a deal.

The mystery was not that Doris found out. The mystery was that I thought, even for a moment, that she would not. The mystery was that it took as long as it did.

A friend told a friend who told a friend who... et cetera, et cetera.

Until finally someone pushed aside Doris' mess of curls and whispered into *her* ear a jumble of fact, speculation, falsehoods, opinions. Some Santa Claus-like *character*, if in fact he was a human being and not a type of spiritual presence, had appeared on the doorstep of that man, that poor man, what was his name?, who was eventually... there is no good way to say this... *barbecued* inside his Rolls Royce after he was hit by — some kind of truck — a lumber truck? No! a gas tanker, that's it! You remember? A river of flaming gas poured down, oh, some street in Saint Paul. Snelling Avenue, maybe, near the Capitol? No, no, he wasn't wearing a red suit, more like an undertaker. Black, like you could fall into it and disappear.

I am as perceptive as most men. Which is to say, not very. Days may have passed. Weeks. And though I felt that I was walking around with an unpinned grenade in my pocket — the deal with Duke that Doris so bitterly opposed, the escapade or two with Jen — I was not unduly anxious. Or to be more accurate, my anxiety was dulled by my pile of Bitcoins. I was like a puppy, ignorant, exhilarated. Pleased with my secret money. Satisfied that I was a significant figure to that network, still small but stinking rich, of people who dared to stare mortality in the face. Romping with Doris amidst the duvets and pillows. Swagger restored.

And yet and yet and yet. What was that side-long glance from her? Why that intake of breath, that sense that she was about to say something. And then, when I raised a brow and said, “Well?” she would respond with, “Oh, nothing. Whatever it was, I forgot.”

Until one evening, after supper, as I sat on our love seat, the paper spread out beside me. The blue and yellow flames leapt about in our modest gas fireplace. Compared to the hearth in Duke’s library it was like holding up a match. No matter. I was happier than I had ever been while we were bunked up in his joint.

Doris handed me a glass of brandy. She held one for herself. I moved the paper so she could sit but she took the chair across from me instead.

Doris crossed her legs and stared at the fire for a moment. Then she said, “Charles, I believe we need to have a talk.”

78. She Knows Tricks

“People gossip,” Doris said.

“I know they do, baby. Lot of half-truths out there. No-truths, even.”

“Sometimes what they say is true. Or there’s a kernel of truth.”

“That happens.”

I didn’t like the sound of this.

“After Artie died. After I gave Duke’s money away. We had an understanding.”

“You made decisions,” I said.

“We made decisions.”

Sometimes silence is the best response.

Sometimes it’s not.

I waited her out. It wasn’t easy, being stared at like that.

Finally she said, “The idea was we go back to where we were. We were happy. Remember?”

“We’re happy now.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“We’re back home. You got your job back. We’re working things out.”

“I don’t want this to be an interrogation, Charles.”

The truth is, a chat with Doris can be like a chat with the police. She knows tricks.

I sloshed the brandy in my glass. I waited.

“I thought you were done with Duke. We’re up here. He’s down there. His schemes, we were going to ignore them.”

“What do you mean?”

She examined the floor, as if something interesting was going on there. She looked at me, took a breath. She said two words.

“Jen Litely.”

I closed my eyes. I pictured two paths. In one I dropped to my knees, crawled across the floor, sobbed, begged, confessed to everything and then some, prayed that I could salvage the rest of my life.

The other? Do my best to still my heart, to continue to breathe. Then open my eyes, put on a look of confusion, and say, “What about Jen Litely?”

Which is what I did.

Other options did not occur to me.

Doris looked down into her glass briefly. She lifted it over her head and threw it at the wall, where it exploded.

She stayed in her chair. I stayed in mine. I looked at the flames in the fireplace. The thoughts that came to me were of purgatory, hell.

She said, “Let me tell you what I heard.”

She paused. I let myself be distracted by the sweet smell of the brandy that dripped down the wall and ran to the floor.

So accurate was her account that I wondered if she had heard it from Jen herself.

The day and the hour. The adjustment thereof. The hand of the ancients in the underworld. So fantastical. So ridiculous as a description of reality. Yet true.

“Is that all?” I said.

Hoping that it was.

“Is there more?” Doris asked.

Not that I intended to admit to.

Instead I said, “Can I try to explain?”

79. I Been a Butterfly

I said that it wasn't the money, not really. The house, the car, the boat, the suit, the shoes, so on and so forth — don't get me wrong, Temptations of Satan, sure. But it's not the lens through which I truly see.

“Temptations,” said Doris. “Interesting choice of words. We made a deal. You snuck around. Money isn't the temptation? What is?”

“What does money mean?” I asked her.

“Money doesn't mean anything,” she said. “You got a dollar bill, you got a way to snort coke. That's what it means.”

“Baby, I been like a butterfly, all these years.”

“Charles. You are many things. But a butterfly?”

“I mean, down there is the world and the things of the world. And I'm fluttering above them. The house, the car, all of that. I have not been participating.”

“You wanted to participate? I never got that impression.”

“I never did. Not as long as we were in it together.”

“We're in it together. I keep saying that.”

“You got the money.”

“I gave it away.”

“That's the point. You could give it away.”

“I never would have taken it.”

“Who's that smart?”

“You mind me saying, Charles? How was I to know that being rich would be a problem for you?”

“It's the symbolism, baby. What money represents. That you can have the things you want. That you can provide them for others.”

“Money can’t buy the things you want.”

“The power. The authority.”

“You cared about that? Since when?”

“Since you had them and I didn’t.”

“We’re talking in circles now,” she said.

We sat quietly. “You want another glass of brandy?” I asked her.

She thought about that for a while. “Why not?”

I got up, went to the kitchen. A bottle we had looted from Duke’s cellar was on the counter. I got out another snifter for Doris, hoped there would not be reason for her to smash this one, too.

A second later I had my doubts.

A TV news truck pulled up to the curb. A blond in a fur-trimmed ski coat slipped out of the cab and scrambled over the snow-plowed ridge at the curb. She stood on the sidewalk and studied our house. Next came a car. Two rumpled middle-aged guys, one with a camera around his neck and a bag over his shoulder. Print.

Trouble.

I got the brandy to Doris before the reporters had a chance to knock on the door.

“Down the hatch, sweetheart,” I said. “Maybe you want to make it quick.”

“What’s the hurry?”

“Go ahead. Bottoms up.”

I nodded toward the street.

“Reporters,” I said.

“You told them?”

“You kidding?”

“Then what?”

“They found out.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“Nothing if I can help it.”

“They’ll knock on the door all night. We leave the house, they’ll stick cameras in our faces.”

“We don’t have to play it their way.”

“I’m waiting to hear what you have in mind.”

“Come on,” I said.

I led Doris down the basement steps.

80. You Couldn't Drag Me There

“We can’t hide out here forever,” Doris said.

A bare bulb lit the basement’s limestone walls. “We won’t.”

I slid the cover off the hole in the floor.

“What?” Doris said.

“Follow me.”

“Where does it go?”

She peered down. There wasn’t much to see. The first few ladder rungs. The rough edge of dirt around the opening. Then, darkness.

“Charles?”

“The underworld.”

“You couldn’t drag me. Not again.”

“It won’t be like last time.”

“How will it be different?”

“The dead haven’t kidnapped you. They’re not holding you for ransom. We’re deciding.”

“Maybe it’s a decision. But it’s crazy.”

“We’ll make a deal before we go in. A visitor’s pass. We’re in, we’re out.”

“A deal with the dead? They’ll double cross us for laughs.”

“We’ll work it out with Duke.”

“Duke.”

“We got to trust somebody. It’s him or those reporters. You expect the milk of human kindness from them?”

“You go first,” she said after a long pause. “I hate heights.”

“It’s more of a depth, baby,” I said.

I got on my hands and knees and eased my weight onto the ladder. It creaked, flexed. Clumps of dirt broke off and landed eventually with a thunk. I descended.

Finally my foot hit dirt. The dim green light from Duke's security lock pad glowed against the wall.

I held the ladder for Doris, listened to her slow progress. She stepped off the ladder and grabbed my arm.

"You know the code?" she said.

"I don't think it matters."

"If we've got an underworld portal standing wide open..."

"That's not it," I said.

The security pad beeped and blinked before I touched it. The door opened.

Brimsnod said, "Don't worry. Duke is waiting."

"Don't worry," Doris repeated.

It didn't matter how dark it was. I could imagine the look on her face.

81. *Somebody Wasn't Clued In*

"Let me introduce you two," I said.

"Brimsnod?" Doris asked. "I should call you that?"

"Unless you got a better idea."

They weren't off to a great start, but I wasn't sure it mattered.

Brimsnod wore her usual red power suit. She looked like Hillary Clinton, if Hillary's cheeks had been clamped in a vice and squeezed. She hustled ahead of us in the underworld dust.

"You heard?" I asked. "Reporters. By now they've got the house surrounded."

"It had to happen," Brimsnod said. "Part of the marketing plan. Word of mouth. Underground buzz. Strategic leaks. Lifestyle bloggers, that kind of thing. Influencers. Then, bang, viral. Not that you can put it on a schedule. But inevitable."

"What?" Doris said. "Marketing plan? Bloggers?"

"Sounds like somebody wasn't clued in," Brimsnod said.

I couldn't see Brimsnod's face, but the nasty smile was easy to imagine.

"No need to get into everything right now," I said. "Let's hold on until we find Duke."

"That's going to make it right?" Doris asked.

"Brimsnod," I said. "How long 'til we get there?"

She shrugged.

We made the usual underworld slog. Time, space, all unhinged down there. What's an hour? What's a mile? You're wandering. That gray glow, the gray dust, the indeterminate dimension of the space — how far up is the ceiling? how distant are the walls? — in total it removes you from, hmm, a lot. It's not that your mind goes blank. The distinction between inside and outside your skull grows hazy. The past and the present blur together. Your thoughts drift into the realm of regret. The nature of the place, I take it. The underworld isn't about close consideration of the things you've done right in life. Exactly the opposite. You get started and you've opened a door to a tsunami.

Brimsnod kicked up the standard low cloud of dust. As always, figures appeared, squatting in the dust by themselves, yapping in small circles, acknowledging us sometimes with a nod or a limp wave, sometimes ignoring us completely.

"What's that?" Doris asked. She pointed at two opposing gangs, squared off against each other at each end of a court scraped clean down to the bedrock.

"Shuffleboard," said Brimsnod. "National pastime of the underworld."

"Wait, I know those guys," I said.

"The seniors?" Brimsnod asked.

"No the kids in the hoodies. The ones who carried off Duke when he died on the river bank."

"Angels of death," Brimsnod said. "To go poetic. Not really angels, but you get the idea.

They get around."

"Lads!" I called.

The tall kid served as their main mouthpiece. They all wore their pants low, their sneakers loose, their hoods up and pulled far forward. I never got much of a look at their faces. They were eyeballs mostly, gleaming teeth. I assumed they were kids, but there was no way to be sure.

“Yo, Squire Fatman,” the tall kid said. They spoke all the languages of the Earth. Ebonics. Scholarly English. A note of affectionate mockery, I chose to believe, with me.

“You made the downward scene without our intervention.”

“Just visiting, gentlemen. You remember Doris, right?”

“From the banks of the River Mississippi, Your Obesity. Your significantly better half. No forgetting.”

“This is your home court?”

“We always win, no matter where we play.”

“Carry on, fellows. Brimsnod waits for no man.”

“Chuckles for you, Large One. We wait for no man either. We’ll be seeing you.”

“Not too soon, I hope.”

“Hope all you want, El Grande!”

I chose not to think about that too deeply.

Though of course I should have.

82. *Give Me Some Space, Girl*

Brimsnod stopped abruptly for no reason I could see. Doris banged into her.

“Give me some space, girl,” Brimsnod said.

Doris said nothing in return, which was just as well.

“My two favorite Lives,” Duke said. He was barely visible in the gloom. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, in the middle of what seemed to be nowhere. How Brimsnod navigated to him I didn’t understand.

“Lives?” Doris asked.

“As opposed to Deads. Of which I got plenty in my life.”

“We’re living when we’re in the underworld?” Doris wondered.

“Technically-speaking, I don’t know. But you’re not dead,” Duke said. “Not yet.”

“You know why we’re here?” Doris said.

“I’m hurt,” Duke replied. “That tone.”

“The tone of somebody whose house is surrounded by reporters. Camera trucks. Of somebody who’s been lied to. Betrayed.”

“Misled? Betrayed?” Duke replied. “Maybe not fully informed.”

“Charles and I had an agreement.”

“I had an agreement with Fatman. Signed in blood. That’s what I call an agreement. You want to show me yours?”

“We didn’t need it in writing. The difference between love and business.”

“People like to think that,” said Brimsnod.

“Baby, she…” I started to say.

I wasn’t sure where I was going with this but it seemed important to get some words in the air.

“Stop, Fatman,” Duke said, holding up a hand. “As your counsel, let me handle this.”

“Charles,” Doris said. “We’re talking to each other through lawyers now?”

“Of course not. What I…”

Duke stopped me again. “Let’s forget about the legalisms,” he said. “You already lost on that. Let’s just talk about who’s doing what for who.”

“Whom,” said Brimsnod.

Duke gave her a sharp glance. “Give it a rest,” he said.

“Let’s calm down,” I said.

“Sure, that’s what you want. I’m not feeling calm right now, Charles. I want the truth about what’s been going on. Behind my back.”

“A lot,” said Brimsnod. Her expression stuck between sneer and leer. “A lot’s been going on behind your back.”

“That means what?”

Loving gaze did not describe the look Doris shot from me to Brimsnod and back again.

“You didn’t mention?” Brimsnod said to me.

“Brimsnod!” said Duke. “We’re here to help.”

“Sometimes, sure. Other times, just to make trouble. To quote.”

“There’s more?” Doris asked to my dismay.

Duke put a hand to his head, rubbed his temples. "Let's start with the business. One thing at a time. Brimsnod, why don't you give us some space?"

"That's okay. I'm fine," she said.

Duke sighed.

83. Please Shut the Hell Up

"What we're talking about here?" said Duke.

"I'm listening," Doris said.

"What it means to be a man."

"I hope this isn't sexist malarky."

"This is dawn-of-time understanding. Like all the big ideas. Simple. You forget how simple."

"If it's so simple then why is our life a complicated mess? Reporters driving us out of our home. Hiding out in the underworld. You can't tell me whether we're dead or alive. My man a lying, betraying..."

She stopped.

"A what?" said Brimsnod.

"Will you please shut the hell up?" Duke asked.

"I do what I want," she replied. "You know that."

"Back to the basics," said Duke. He turned his back to Brimsnod. "I explained this before. We're past swinging through the trees, clobbering wooly mammoths. Modern man. Jesus, it's pathetic. Instead of a bloody club, what does a guy like Fatman have?"

"What he had was a loving home," said Doris. "An understanding mate. Quiet. Contentment."

"Yeah, that's great," said Duke. "As far as it goes."

"It went a long way," I said, more to Doris than to Duke.

"Let me handle this, okay? Could you all give me some room? I'm saying love, contentment, great, fine. So the glass is half full. But the glass is half full."

"I thought what we had was enough," Doris said.

Her look teetered between outrage and hurt. Her eyes watered up, but not enough for a tear to fall. I choked back a sob. Duke pulled a dusty handkerchief from his pocket and tossed it at me.

“Sorry to break this to you, but it’s not. Not enough,” Duke said. “Nothing is enough, not anymore. Fatman can’t drag the meat back to the cave. So what’s the marker? What makes him a man?”

“There was a lot.”

“I’d like to hear,” said Brimsnod. Again, that leer from her.

I feared Doris would lunge for her, hoped that she wouldn’t. The dead are stronger than you think. You see the aftermath of a twist-off and you know. Head here, body there. A mess.

“Okay,” said Duke. He set a hand on each of them.

“Money. Money is the marker. Tragically. Ridiculously. A stack of gold and jewels in a treasure room, that was lame back when. It’s not even that anymore. Pixels floating around in the nothingness. Numbers flickering on a screen. Occasionally converted to a marginally real object. A car. Your luxury automobile. Which is to say, a glob of steel and plastic that we accept as vastly more valuable than a slightly different glob of steel and plastic. A house with more useless rooms than a house with slightly fewer useless rooms. Do I need to go on?”

“Can we stop you?” Doris asked.

“He misses the courtroom,” Brimsnod said *sotto voce*.

“Our tools are imperfect but they’re what we got to work with,” said Duke. “Money. The accumulation thereof. Buying a place in the world. A seat at the table with the other big knockers. Donations to this, acquisitions of that. Which and what, doesn’t matter. it’s not a chunk of warm bloody liver hacked out of a fresh-killed beast. Not even close. But it’s what we got at hand.”

“Is this how you feel, Charles?” Doris asked. She could have asked, *Is this dog shit on my shoe?* given her expression.

“Yes,” I said. “No. It’s not easy to explain.”

“It is and it isn’t,” Duke continued. “You want to tell me you haven’t noticed more swagger in the Fatman’s step of late? The pride in his stride? More junk in the bunk? That’s what a million five in Bitcoins will do for a man. And that’s, what, three weeks of business? A month?”

After the reporters get done, do you think we're going to be able to keep up? It's going to be a spray of dough. A volcano."

"I gave it away once. Charles can do the same. It's here. It's gone. It's not like cancer. You can get rid of it."

"If you want to," said Brimsnod. "If you're not distracted."

"Distracted? By what?" Doris asked.

"Or who."

"Whom."

"Jesus, give it a rest."

"You're dying to tell me something."

"I'm dead. But yeah."

Duke made a grab for Brimsnod's mouth. She bit his finger. It came off in her teeth. She spit it into the dust while he yelped and cursed.

"Let me tell you," Brimsnod said.

She looked pleased to be perched on this ledge.

84. *Gray Blubbery Mass of My Heart*

Maybe you've driven on icy roads.

Say you're in a monster car of the Seventies. A Plymouth Gran Fury, a Chrysler Newport, a Caddy. Huge engine up front, rear-wheel drive, nothing to speak of over the tires. You know you're driving on ice, you're taking it easy, maybe not quite easy enough, but still there are maniacs passing you, so you're not the stupidest person on the road. Then for no reason, except that you're driving faster than zero miles per hour on glare ice, the rear wheels are determined to overtake the front wheels. You're sliding sideways down a two-lane road. Then you're sliding backwards. Wait! Now, briefly you seem to be in control, front bumper pointed forward. Except that the steering wheel spins loosely in your hand. And what's that? Why, yes, it's a curve in the road. A stand of trees. Big, healthy, going-nowhere-if-you-hit-them trees. Oak, it seems, from the look of those gnarled branches clawing toward the sky like the very fingers of death. And now,

oddly, though you've got no time at all before you inevitably smack into a stand of oak at fifty or sixty miles per hour, you've also apparently got time in abundance. Time to note the dust on the dash. Time to notice those few cotton-candy clouds in an otherwise blue sky, with the sun, so low in the south, nonetheless blazing against the untrammelled snow. Time to run through those people in your life that you will genuinely miss, who will perhaps genuinely miss you as well. Love! Regret! A few thousand other emotions, compressed into a few seconds, the emotional equivalent of a cosmic event, on the order of a star collapsing upon itself and then exploding again.

I was not the powerless driver at the wheel of a Gran Fury on a winter's day. I stood in the perpetual dusk of the underworld, focused on the movement of Brimsnod's lips. As I've said, she's got a hatchet face, all angles, plenty of cheekbone, big eyes with those hooded lids that she could have bought from Charlotte Rampling. Brimsnod might have made a runway model for a certain kind of designer. One with a SM-inspired fall collection, who was revisiting in fashion terms the Nazi occupation of Paris. Her lips were a peculiar combination of narrow and plump, like cherries from a diseased tree.

Now those lips were in motion. "Let me tell you something," she said to Doris.

"Jen Lately." The words simultaneously oozed from her lips and shot like a rocket. My heart felt as if it had turned to a gray blubbery mass that limply flapped instead of beat.

"Jen Lately," Brimsnod repeated. "Not really a spring chicken, not anymore. But nicely kept up, you got to admit." This she directed to Doris. "Money in the bank, especially after Leo's not-so-untimely death. Happy to reward her liberator, isn't that so, Mister Fatman? Financially and, how do I put this? Corporally? Related to the body. *Corpus*. To go Latin on you."

Duke put what remained of his hand to his forehead again. As much as anything gleamed in the underworld, Brimsnod's eyes gleamed.

Doris turned to me. "Charles?" she said. This was not quite a question and not quite, yet, an accusation.

"Jen and Leo. Poor, dead Leo," said Brimsnod with a sigh.

I exhaled. I drew a deep breath. I counted to three and said, "Baby, it's like this."

85. *Nixon Said That*

"Mistakes were made," I admitted.

"Nixon said that," Duke remembered. Not helpfully, though it gave me another moment to think. Which was not helpful either.

"Let's start at the beginning," Doris said. This was not warmly put. "Leo and Jen."

"Let's not forget your Nazi paper boy."

"Artie? You killed Leo like you killed Artie?"

"He didn't kill Artie," said Duke. "No one *killed* Artie. Artie died. Maybe a little earlier than he might have. Leo, same. He wasn't going to live forever."

"Let's define murder," Doris said. "Somebody does something to you. You die earlier than you would have. Sounds like murder to me. Like what happened to Artie, to Leo."

"Extremely narrow definition," Duke said.

"I thought I was talking to Charles."

"Let the man explain himself," Brimsnod said.

"What's going on here?" In the wretched light I had no idea where the voice came from.

"Pimplipper," Duke said.

The dead attorney emerged from the murk.

"You have a meeting, you don't invite your partners?"

"Not really a meeting," Duke said. "Fatman's got issues. House surrounded by reporters. Other odds and ends."

"Reporters!" said Pimplipper. "According to plan. Excellent!"

"Murder is excellent, Charles? This is what you've come to?"

"Of course not, baby. But if you saw Leo..."

"What about him? I want to hear."

"Barely walking. Barely thinking. A shell of his former self. Chaff. Who wants to live like that?"

"You're edging God out of the office? Taking over?"

“What’s all this about?” Pimplipper asked. “We’re even talking about this?”

He pulled folded papers out of his suit pocket. Our contract.

“Section three (D) seven a,” Pimplipper read. “Activities including but not limited to redefinition of life span, so forth and so on, blah blah blah, shall be at the discretion of the parties of the first part, meaning me, Graydon, our friend Duke. Our associate Fatman not being included for the purposes of the contract.”

“I don’t care what’s in the contract.” Doris said.

“I understand the sentiment, nonetheless, it’s signed in blood,” said Pimplipper. “You want to take a look?” For a dead lawyer, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

“We had an understanding, Charles. After what happened to Artie. Then you decided that didn’t mean anything. What else doesn’t mean anything?”

“Faithfulness,” said Brimsnod. “Such an old-fashioned word. Or, constancy. That’s another. Or, let’s just say, keeping your dick in your trousers. ”

“Why don’t you just spit it out?” Doris said. “Get it over with.”

“Jen was...”

“Grateful,” said Duke. “Appropriately? We can discuss that.”

“There’s a lot to talk about here.” Pimplipper rubbed his hands together.

“Not so much, I think,” Doris replied.

“How many times was Jen *grateful*, Charles.”

There was a lot to look at down around my shoes.

“Once,” I said. “Maybe twice.”

“It’s that hard to count to two? Or is it more like four? Or ten? How long have you played me for a fool, Charles? Why should I believe anything you say now? I gave away I don’t even know how much money so you would be happy. I gave away a mansion. A pair of Mercedes. I went back to collecting from deadbeats. All to make you happy. While you’re killing off senior citizens and fucking their trophy wives? Not that I expect an honest answer. But Jen Litely, is she the baton girl at the head of the parade? How many more grateful wives are out there?”

She kicked at the dust. A cloud rose like a tiny Hiroshima from beneath her boot.

“You think you should tell her?” Pimplipper said to Duke.

“Tell him?”

“Tell me what?” Doris said.

Had tears started to flow from Doris I might have been relieved. Not much, but a bit. Instead I got an icy glare.

“What?” said Brimsnod.

Duke nodded at Pimplipper. “In consideration of...”

“Exactly.”

They traded another look that I couldn’t decode.

“You two stay here,” Duke said to me and Brimsnod.

“Doris,” he said. “I understand. You don’t want to listen to me right now. Nonetheless. Come with me and Pimplipper. We got matters to discuss.”

86. *Players Always Playin’*

A few steps and Doris, Duke and Pimplipper had disappeared.

“Where they going?” I asked Brimsnod.

“Does it matter? It’s all the same.”

She went quiet. Her eyes lost their focus, like she wasn’t there.

I didn’t want to be with her, but I didn’t want to be alone.

“Brimsnod!” I said.

She shook her head, snapped back into the here and now.

“Sleeping? I thought you didn’t need to.”

“More like suspended animation. Dreaming without the sleep. We got a lot of time down here. Wakefulness, consciousness, whatever you want to call it, it wears you out. You’ll see.”

“Not so soon, I hope.”

She shrugged.

“You know something I don’t?”

“Where would I start on that?” she said.

Brimsnod looked like she was drifting off again.

I heard a murmur like the noise from a distant stream. Whispers. Conversation at a remove. Screams from a long way off. Where it all came from was impossible to say.

“Brimsnod!”

“Jesus, what?”

“Why did they haul Doris off?”

“I’m the junior partner. They don’t tell me everything. You’ll find out soon enough. We both will.” Again, silence.

“Brimsnod.”

“A minute of quiet. It wouldn’t kill us,” she said.

“I got to ask. Why did you rat me out? Jen Litely. Doris didn’t need to know.”

“Solidarity. Woman to woman.”

“Seriously?”

“Not really. Let sleeping dogs lie, you heard of that?”

“Sure.”

“You believe it?”

“I don’t know. Depends.”

“I’ve kicked sleeping dogs. Just to hear them yelp.”

“I still don’t see why you turned on me.”

“It’s not about you.”

“Sure it is.”

“Okay then. It’s mischief. Pure. Simple. Occupy the time. Separate one moment from the next. You’ll see.”

“You keep saying that.”

I heard shuffling, foot dragging. Voices. “Your Greatness!” someone called.

Those kids in their hoodies appeared again.

“Gentlemen. A pleasure, as always. Game over?”

“Game’s never over.”

“Players always playin’. To quote.”

“Who?”

“Everybody.”

“I could go for a game myself at the moment,” I said. “I’m killing time.”

“So we hear.”

“Really?”

“Word travels. Word trots right along.”

“You leave your cues back at the court?”

“Your Immensity. Begging your forgiveness. At the moment we find ourselves pressed for time.”

“That seems surprising, boys.”

“Could be worse. Trust us on that.”

They scuffled off. I thought of rousing Brimsnod again.

87. The Only Real Question

I looked around. I closed my eyes. Not much difference there, underworld visuals being what they are.

Brimsnod stood stock still beside me, staring into the immense gray void, not blinking, not breathing. Suddenly she shook herself.

“Here they come,” said Brimsnod.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“You’re not tuned in. Not yet.”

Finally I made out the sound of footsteps swishing through the grime.

Doris was bracketed by Pimlipper and Duke.

All I expected from Duke and Pimlipper was deception, that being their line of work. Alternative theories, possible versions of reality. But Doris. I imagined that after all these years I could sense her line of thought. An arc of her brow, a tug at her lips, a next-to-imperceptible squint — there were a thousand clues. So subtle that I did not read them so much as feel them.

Maybe I had always been flattering myself, claiming powers that I did not possess. Now I looked at her and all I saw was a blank.

“Fatman,” said Duke. “We got certain matters to discuss.”

“Related you could say to due diligence,” Pimplipper added. “Matters that maybe didn’t receive as much attention up front as they should have.”

“I didn’t come here to solve a long-term problem,” I said. “Those reporters. We wanted to escape. We pop down here, we pop up somewhere else. Under our old Summit Avenue joint, for instance.”

“Sometimes the short term and the long term aren’t so different,” said Duke.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s ease into this,” said Pimplipper. “You think about your big time product reps. Charlie the Tuna. Mister Clean. Aunt Jemima. Betty Crocker. Mister Whipple.”

“Not Mister Whipple. He was an actual guy.”

“You get the point.”

“What do they have in common?” Duke asked.

“They’re all corporate tools?” I said.

“I suppose,” said Duke. “But that’s not what we’re getting at here.”

“They’re not real. Except Whipple. The toilet-paper squeezer. Forget about Whipple. The rest of them, they’re illustrations. Cartoons,” said Pimplipper.

“No offense,” I said. “But what’s the point?”

“Maybe Pimplipper’s not putting it right,” Duke said.

“Your big time operations use cartoons for a reason. Your Tiger Woods, your OJs, your Lance Armstrongs, you got their face on your product and in the end what do they give you but grief?” said Pimplipper.

“You know what these guys are talking about?” I asked Doris.

I studied her face again for the familiar signs. A tic, a grimace, a grin, anything.

Nothing.

She looked at me like she had never truly seen me before.

“The thing about cartoons,” said Pimlipper. “They’re never living, they’re never dead. Betty Crocker, she’s forty years old forever. You give her a new hairdo every ten years, you’re still in business. Aunt Jemima, one year she’s a husky gal with a scarf wrapped around her head, next thing you know she’s got an Afro and she’s dropped fifty pounds.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m being thick-headed. I don’t see...”

“Think!” Doris said suddenly. “What the difference between you and a cartoon?”

“I’m three D, baby, I’m not a piece of paper. I’m human. Mistakes, sure, I make them. But I get some things right. I’m the usual human mess.”

“You live,” said Duke.

“You die,” Pimlipper added.

“Sooner than we thought, unfortunately.”

“We didn’t think to check, that’s what we’re getting to.”

“Ironic,” said Duke. “Considering the product line.”

“As much as we got an excuse, it’s that you’re a healthy looking guy. Overweight maybe.”

“Obese even.”

“But you carry it well.”

“So it slipped our minds,” said Duke. “Embarrassing. But there you have it.”

“Are you telling me...?”

“For the public face of Know the Time, we could have made a better choice,” Pimlipper said.

“At least we haven’t ramped up the media campaign.”

I felt my stomach drop, which is saying a lot.

“You know my time? My day and hour?”

“Of course we do.”

“And it’s...”

“What’s a day?” Duke asked. “How long is an hour? It flies by. It lasts forever. It’s definite, it’s arbitrary. You’ve got to free up your mind here, Fatman. That’s my advice.”

“Five minutes?” I said. “Five years?”

“You want to know?” Pimlipper asked. As usual his expression was stuck between amusement and disgust.

“Charles!” Doris said. She threw herself at me. She grabbed my lapels. She pulled herself up off her feet and gave me a shake.

She said, “It’s a heartbeat. It’s a lifetime. We can use it. We can waste it.”

“What are we...?”

“Thirteen days. There! Thirteen days!”

“That figures,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, almost viciously now. “It doesn’t matter. The question is the same as ever.”

“What is the question?” I asked her.

She pulled herself up further now, right into my face.

“Charles,” she said. “How do you want to live?”