

# Coolidge College



A Novel by  
Floyd Kamske

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# One

Sydney Hofstadter was a marketing genius, and she achieved her greatest success by selling beer to teenagers. Teenagers, of course, don't usually buy beer. But they buy brand identification, and they form standards, values, and principles that survive well into their adulthoods. So when she was told to reposition Capital Low Calorie Beer, Sydney went after teenagers.

Capital Low Calorie Beer, a product that tasted like beer-flavored water, was Capital Brewing Inc.'s worst performer and had been a drug on the market since its introduction. Sydney brought in a trendy designer to devise both a new label and a clear bottle with a sort of waist. She bought magazine and billboard space and created an advertising campaign that was irreverent and sexy. She renamed the beer Bikini Light.

Over the course of a few years, as its teenaged market grew up and began to buy beer, Bikini Light grew steadily from a one percent market share until in 1986, it managed thirteen percent, when it hit a wall.

Roy, Sydney's 300-pound boss, called her into his office to work up a plan.

"I want you to do a television commercial." Roy was leaning back in his high-backed executive chair and studying the ceiling.

He was a man who betrayed his emotions through smell, and Sydney recognized the faint odor of delicatessen bologna as a sign that he had what he thought was an idea.

“And I want it to feature an ugly dog in surfer shorts and a bunch of beautiful women in bikinis,” he said.

Sydney was not entirely surprised. In the years she had worked for him, Roy had often held forth on his ideas about effective marketing. “Find the most lavish campaign in your market and copy it” was his favorite dictum. Sydney thought of this approach as “excellence through theft.” She was not about to risk her current success on Roy’s dedication to plagiarism.

“You mean like the one they are airing for Bud Light?” she said.

“Exactly.” Roy rocked himself up in his chair, breached lazily from it, and settled his torso onto the desk like a beached whale. “We’ll give the dog a funny name.”

“Don’t you think we could get in trouble with that?” she said.

“What kind of trouble? We’ll get our own dog.” Roy communed with a lucite paperweight that sat within four inches of his eye. There was a bottle cap embedded in it; the first bottle cap made for Bikini Light when the product was renamed. Sydney remembered when the executive staff presented it to him. He had given her flowers that day. She would rather have had a block of lucite with a bottle cap in it.

“I think the surfer shorts might be copyrighted,” said Sydney.

“Could we put the dog in a wet suit?”

“I don’t think the dog would look very comfortable,” said Sydney. “It’s likely to bring the Humane Society down on us.”

“Yeah.” Roy gazed at her mournfully over at her from the paperweight. Except for his great size, he looked a lot like a baby harp seal. “I guess that’s not the right message anyway. They probably already tested audience reaction with the wet suit and rejected it. What about if we had the dog play a saxophone?”

Sydney couldn’t seem to get outside the problem to work with it. “Maybe I could just call Malcolm at the agency and tell him we want something hip.”

“Yeah,” said Roy. “Hip.”

“He could do several concepts and let us choose the best,” said Sydney.

“What’s that going to cost us?” Roy raised his head a half-inch from his desk blotter, his imitation of concern.

“Nothing, until we choose a concept and tell him to go with it,” said Sydney.

Roy’s torso flowed slowly off the desk back into his chair, followed finally by his neck and head. “Tell him about the dog, anyway.”

Three weeks later, Malcolm came over from the agency and presented five concepts, the first four of which included dogs. Sydney could see that in every case, the dog would be endearing, and the commercial would get attention. But she was disheartened just the same. Dogs in sunglasses, dogs driving convertibles, dogs sitting at a bar. It all seemed so tired. Was she doomed to spend the rest of her life managing campaigns based on dogs in sunglasses?

Malcolm, exhausted from handling his storyboards and explaining the four dog-based concepts, bleakly warned Sydney and Roy that the last concept—an admitted shot in the dark—had no dogs. “It takes place on an airplane,” he said.

The storyboards showed a flight attendant asking a handsome passenger whether he wanted a drink.

“Yes,” he says. “I’d like a beer.”

“What kind of beer would you like?”

“A Bikini Light.”

Then the passenger next to him, a little old lady wearing glasses and holding an umbrella, gasps and points toward the window. The camera pans toward the window and tracks through it. There is a statuesque woman in a bikini walking on the wing, carrying a tray with a bottle of Bikini Light and a glass on it. She comes to the window, opens it, and steps inside. She puts the glass on the handsome passenger’s seat-back tray and pours the beer into it.

The camera zooms to the label on the bottle, and the passenger is heard in voiceover: “Boy, it’s a good thing there isn’t any turbulence.”

Sydney was energized by the originality of it. It wasn't just hip. It was fanciful. It was superficially sexual. It was funny and sophisticated, and it tapped into the flying fantasy as well as the superwoman fantasy. It would grab a generation of teenagers and command their brand loyalty to the end of time. She tried not to betray her enthusiasm until Malcolm dragged himself out of the room for a short break.

"Roy," she said, and she could practically feel the glow in her face. "That last one will sell a lot of beer. It's original. It's funny. It's sophisticated. It's the best beer commercial in ten years. I know it. I just know it."

Apparently, her enthusiasm was infectious, because Roy even smiled. But then he shook his head. "We don't have the time or money to test it," he said.

"But it will work. You can tell just by looking at it! We can't go with any of those dog ideas. They're all so tired."

"Tired maybe, but tried and true." Roy looked from her brown eye to her green eye, as if undecided which one she might be hiding behind. She was too enthusiastic to let it bother her.

"Look, Roy," she said, "this is the kind of thing advertising awards are made for. It will spawn stand-up routines. There will be merchandising opportunities. It will make Bikini Light a star. It will give Capital Brewing a reputation for marketing excellence."

Roy's blubbery face brightened slowly, and Sydney wondered if it were being warmed from the inside by fantasies of accolades from the marketing community.

"I guess we could try it," he said at last, "if Malcolm promises to keep expenses down. Do you think we could get him to agree to a flat fee up front?"

Malcolm did indeed agree to a flat fee up front. Advertising was the last industry to recover from the recession, and Malcolm's agency was one of the last firms to get turned around. He seemed pleased with the deal, however. As he packed up all his storyboards and prepared to return to his office across town, Roy made one last suggestion.

"Try a version," he said, "with all the other passengers as women in bikinis."

\*\*\*

When the agency started gearing up for production of the commercial, Sydney made sure Malcolm understood she wanted to choose the wing-walking actress. The woman was, after all, a representative of Capital Brewing, Inc.

So Malcolm brought over a stack of eight-by-ten glossies one afternoon. Together, they went through them. Malcolm promised that all of the candidates were statuesque. Sydney chose one with the self-deprecating smile of a college girl who might just be serving beer to pay for her education. The young woman's spec sheet said she had waist-length blond hair. Sydney thought that would be a nice touch. She told Malcolm to call her when he had some rushes to show her.

She wondered briefly how the production company would stage the wing-walking business, but she forgot to ask Malcolm, and the question never came up again. She threw herself into her next project, a complete re-evaluation of the distribution system for bottled product, and had almost forgotten about the commercial when Malcolm called her several weeks later.

"We lined up the director for your commercial, Sydney," he said.

"That's fine," said Sydney. "You don't need to call me. I trust your choice."

"I know that, I just wanted to tell you who it is."

"Well?"

"We got Caldwell."

Sydney always tried to stay deadpan in her dealings with agency people, but she could feel herself smiling. Caldwell. One of the most brilliant and hard-driving commercial directors in the business. His visually rich, avant garde style had racked up a dozen awards. He would create a commercial they would talk about for years, one of the ones that would be analyzed over and over again, getting free air time. After fifteen years of effort and dedication, Sydney Hofstadter would be an "overnight" sensation in the marketing business.

"Sydney?" said Malcolm. "Are you there?"

"I'm here." Sydney kept any eagerness out of her voice. It doesn't do to sound too eager talking with a supplier.

"Do you want to come to one of the shoots?"

"Maybe so."

"The limo will pick you up at your apartment next Wednesday at 4:00 a.m."

"Why 4:00 a.m.?" said Sydney.

"I don't know," said Malcolm. "But it's Caldwell. Who asks questions when it's Caldwell?"

The following Wednesday, Sydney got up at 3:30 a.m. to shower and get dressed. She should have gotten up earlier, but who can get up before 3:30 a.m.? It was still dark when she looked out the window of her apartment at four o'clock and saw the limo on the street. She ate a half slice of buttered toast on her way down the three flights of stairs. The driver didn't say much, except to ask her name and make sure she was the right person. They rode silently through residential neighborhoods toward center city, while Sydney peered into the lighted mirror of a compact and tried to dab businesslike quantities of light-colored makeup on the cheek under her green eye, which she had learned over the years was the best way to equalize it a little with the brown one. In the dark, it was difficult to tell if she'd succeeded.

Sydney was a little surprised when they stopped at a construction site for a high-rise office building. A skeleton of girders, it rose what appeared to be thirty or forty stories into a sky that had just begun to turn from India ink to charcoal.

The limousine pulled in and stopped between a motor home and a tractor trailer parked in the street. The side doors of the trailer were open and an aluminum ramp went from the opening down to the street. Sydney could see wooden boxes and spools of cable inside.

"What's this?" She gestured at the construction site.

"This is it," said the driver.

"Do they have a studio here?"

"I don't know. I'm just hired for the day."

Sydney climbed tentatively from the limo. Malcolm, who was idling

at the gate, hurried over to her.

“Right on time, Sydney. Let’s hurry.” He grabbed her arm. “They’ll start filming in a few minutes.”

“What’s going on, Malcolm?”

“Your Bikini Light shoot.”

“I thought it would be in a studio,” said Sydney.

“Caldwell wanted this.” Malcolm pulled her along by the arm toward an open, cage-like elevator that ran up the outside of the unfinished structure.

“But what about the airplane and the wing and everything?”

“The set’s on the roof,” Malcolm pointed upward as they boarded the elevator.

“I thought it would be done with wind machines and chroma key.”

“Caldwell wants open sky and real wind.”

Malcolm shut the gate. Under the glare of a caged light bulb overhead, he looked from one of her eyes to the other. She hated when people did that. He pushed a large, greasy-looking red button on a metal box, which caused an explosion that settled into chuffing noises as they trundled slowly toward the roof. Sydney did not watch the surroundings grow smaller and unfold themselves beneath her feet. She would have preferred being in a studio. She wished she had worn her running shoes.

On the roof, the film crew had already built the set, erected the lights, and snaked cables everywhere. Sydney and Malcolm picked their way among the cables toward a platform that stood about two feet higher than the roof near the edge of the building. The platform, about ten feet wide and twenty feet long, had a rounded surface and was finished to look like aluminum. It might have been aluminum for all Sydney knew. It ended at a section of “fuselage” with a porthole-like window. This would be the airplane wing the talent was to walk along with the bottle of Bikini Light. She thought it was entirely too close to the edge of the building. She said as much to Malcolm.

“It’s Caldwell,” said Malcolm. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Directly overhead, the sky was a deep navy color, but before her, in

and among the buildings of the skyline, it was turning pale and tied. The change from navy to pink was so gradual that she couldn't see a divider anywhere. In the pink section, the sky was exactly the same color as the third sheet in the progressive proofs the agency sometimes showed her for print ads, except at the very edge of skyline, where it was lined with gold. Sydney remembered a proverb about the morning hour having gold in its mouth. She had never understood it. But she could see that the lighting was on its way to being as good here as you could get in a well-equipped studio.

There were no dollies, tracks, or gantries. But there were six stationary cameras trained on the platform from different angles. One of them was perched on the very edge of the building. It was trained on the street below. It looked dangerous to Sydney, but the operator didn't seem to be very nervous about it. Sydney didn't know much about any of this, but she assumed all six cameras would film during the take, then the six films would be edited together, perhaps interspersed with other sky and airplane footage. A short, unprepossessing bald man in a leather jacket and jeans paced around the set, stopping at each camera to look at the equipment and speak to the operator.

"Caldwell," said Malcolm.

Somehow, Sydney had expected him to be taller. But before she could speculate about anything, Caldwell signaled to a man with a bullhorn, and the man began the timeless litany of film production.

"Places, everybody. Let's run through once. Where's the talent?"

A woman Sydney had not noticed before stood up from a canvas chair and shucked a worn-looking full-length robe into it. She wore a red bikini and a pair of red high-heeled pumps, and she had waist-length blond hair. Sydney was pleased to see that the red bikini was unable to do anything to mitigate her air of wholesomeness. Her body was more athletic than voluptuous, and she looked as though she would give the entire commercial a good-natured air.

Someone handed the actress a round tray with a bottle of Bikini Light and a glass on it. Sydney noticed that the tray tilted sideways in the process and the bottle and glass did not move. The actress slipped

her fingers into loops on the underside of the tray, making it a sort of appendage. She approached the platform, and someone held her free hand and helped her up a short step ladder on to it.

“No exposures yet, people,” said the man with the bullhorn. “And, action.”

The actress walked the length of the “wing” with the tray on her hand, arrived at the fuselage, bent down, and pulled open the window as the man with the bullhorn made encouraging remarks. “Good. Nice. Fine fine fine.”

Sydney was surprised at how boring it all was. But it got worse. They went over it at least five times. Each time, the actress would walk the length of the wing, bend down, and open the window. Then Caldwell and the man with the bullhorn would confer, and one or the other of them would approach the actress and say something to her that Sydney couldn’t hear. With each repetition, the actress’s walk became more exaggeratedly sensual. A pronounced roll in her hips was quite at odds with the wholesomeness she radiated naturally. Sydney thought maybe she should say something to save them the trouble of exposing film she would ultimately disapprove, but Malcolm’s expression told her it was better not to interrupt Caldwell. She decided to wait and see what might happen. Maybe he would wise up and understand the value of the young woman’s natural expression and image.

Sydney was tired. And by the time they were ready to roll film, the set was awash in gold from the sunrise. Caldwell gave a signal, and the set lights were extinguished. With the sun, the breeze had come up, and Caldwell seemed quite pleased with the effect of the breeze on the woman’s blond hair, which unfurled behind her like a banner.

Everyone was poised for the first take when a gust of breeze pushed Sydney gently on the back. It washed through the set and took someone’s paper coffee cup off a wooden crate and over the side the building. The actress’s hair unfurled gracefully. Everyone swayed in unison, then some of them laughed.

“OK, everyone,” said the man with the bullhorn. “Take five. Police the area. We don’t want to be filming airborne paper goods. Let’s get

this finished before we're blown off here."

The crew fell to anchoring papers and stuffing things in their pockets. Finally, they were ready again. At a hand signal from the man with the bullhorn, a young woman in jeans came out with a small message board with the legend "Bikini Light. Take 1." on it. She stood in front of the platform and the actress and said, "Bikini Light, Take One." Then she banged the hinged clapper on the top of her board and stepped away.

"Action," said the man with the bullhorn.

The actress began her walk, looking graceful and confident. There was no sound other than the click of her high heels on the platform and a very faint buzz from one of the cameras. Sydney held her breath. She was going to have a Caldwell commercial selling her product. The actress took six steps, and Sydney felt another gentle gust against her back. She saw the breeze pass through the set, jostling crew members and making them straighten themselves against it. It unfurled the actress's hair again, higher this time. Sydney had to admit the effect was breathtaking.

Then she felt another gust, hard enough to make her take a half-step forward, and it pushed through the set like surf. The actress's hair billowed, then fanned out like a peacock's tail. The wind pulled it upward, taking the actress with it. She was still holding her tray with the bottle and glass on it. For the space of half a heartbeat, she was outlined against the morning sky, then she vanished over the side of the building.

Someone gasped, but no one said anything as the entire crew stared at the place where the actress had been. Time seemed to stand still for Sydney, and her entire body was overtaken by a sort of numbness.

"Cut!" said the man with the bullhorn.

## Two

Jones Ferguson, Chair of the Department of Business and Economics at the Calvin Coolidge College of Liberal Arts in Washboro, Vermont, surrounded himself with piles of information. Manuscripts, notes, photocopies, letters, journals, folders, doubled-over books with broken spines—academic stalagmites, magnificent heaps of information, grew wherever there was space for them, and where there wasn't, they grew on each other. Four piles grew on Jones's desk, one in the in-tray, one in the out-tray, one beside the last remaining clear area that was his blotter, and one at the far corner, which seemed to be growing another one on top of it. There were three piles on the counter behind the desk, one on the seat of a chair opposite the desk, and one on the floor beside the desk. There were piles on the book shelves, on the filing cabinets, and in the window casements.

Piles were Jones's primary research tool. He'd been surrounded by them all his working life. His home was full of piles, too—more and more each year, it seemed. There were far more now, for example, than twenty years ago when he shared a small apartment with his doctoral dissertation and a serious-minded undergraduate named Sydney. Somehow, he had managed to complete that dissertation in fewer than a dozen piles, but to hear Sydney talk, you would have thought there were a hundred.

She was an English major, and he was in the final stretch of his doctoral program. They were both enrolled at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. One of the prettiest women he had ever seen, she had dark hair with a gentle curl, which she draped over one shoulder. She told him her eyes were different colors, one brown and one green, but he was never able to confirm it. He was color-blind.

When she came to live with him, she brought her clothes, a guitar, a dozen books, a stainless steel spoon-and-spatula set, and a colored enameled pot that had the most beautiful snowy white insides, which she cleaned with exotic preparations after any use in order to keep it that way.

Sydney was Jones's passion, second only to his research. He loved her conversation. He loved her movements. He loved her dignity and self-possession. He loved to sleep with her and share sex with her. He treated lovemaking with Sydney as his most important line of study. With his hands, he investigated her body and studied her response to every touch. He became an expert on the sexual physiology of Sydney, and he probably could have written a creditable dissertation on her.

But he had already committed himself to a dissertation on the diminishing marginal utility of advertising. And except for the hour or so each day that the two of them spent in the acts of love, he devoted his every waking moment to reading and writing about billboards, magazines, broadcasting, and direct mail. Sydney showed little patience with the piles of books and papers (modest in those days, compared to what he would accumulate later) that resulted from this study.

"I understand you need this stuff," she would say, "and I don't mind the piles in the bedroom and the living room and the kitchen, but can't you keep them out of the bathroom? I mean, it's the bathroom, for God's sake."

And Jones would laugh and go back to writing notes in the margin of some journal or cross-referencing a citation in some book, which he would then leave on top of the appropriate pile in the dining room or the foyer or wherever it belonged.

But Sydney continued to complain about the piles in the bathroom,

and the complaints grated on Jones, who was, after all, in a state of distraction resulting from trying to write a doctoral dissertation. The third time she made the same complaint (or was it the fourth?), they were at breakfast, and Jones was thinking about whether advertising should be said to create information or to destroy it. Proving the destruction of information is a ticklish problem, and it made him as tense as an undergraduate in a final exam.

Sydney was habitually grumpy in the morning and had the unfortunate habit at the breakfast table of asking hostile questions in a hostile manner.

“Why have you started a new pile in the bathroom, Jones? There are two in there now.”

“You’re very cranky in the mornings, aren’t you, Sydney?”

The look he saw on her face was one he’d never seen before—dark cumulus clouds over her normal sunny expression.

“I’m not cranky,” she said. “Don’t try to treat me like a child.”

Jones didn’t know if he should try to take it back or stand up for himself. He decided to take a third course and turn the discussion into a joke. “I think the bathroom is an appropriate place for my piles,” he said. It wasn’t particularly funny, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances.

“Jones,” she said, “that’s disgusting.”

He deliberately addressed himself to her left eye. “I didn’t know my work bothered you that much.” He shifted his gaze and stared at her right eye. “Or is this a case of the diminishing marginal utility of a relationship?”

He meant it only as another bad joke, but somehow it sounded more like an offensive thrust when it came out of his mouth. They finished breakfast without enthusiasm, and Jones tried to decide if he should apologize. But he sensed that any qualification or explanation would make it worse.

He still hadn’t said anything more (neither had she, for that matter) when the two of them set off on their separate daily routines: he to the library, she to class. He didn’t have time to think about her for the rest

of the day as he grappled with the information-destruction problem. He spent the day wading through turgid texts on epistemology and information theory—fields which he discovered to be dominated by writers even more addle-brained than your average economist—and it took all his concentration. Yet his mind wandered as he worked his way through the stuff, and he emerged from the day's third forgettable monograph with the realization that he should write a chapter on advertising's contribution to the business cycle, even if the contribution was largely negative.

Delighted with this new insight, Jones was eager to tell Sydney about it that evening. But when he got home, she wasn't there. His piles were undisturbed, but he sensed something strange about the place. He finally realized her meager undergraduate possessions were gone, although the colored enameled pot and the stainless steel spoon-and-spatula set remained in the kitchen. He was disappointed that she had apparently left, and he resolved to think about where she might have gone as soon as he finished with the new chapter.

Over the next three days, he got his new chapter blocked out, and he went to his thesis advisor to get approval for it. His advisor said it was a stupid idea, confirming Jones's belief that few people were capable of understanding him. He decided to include the chapter anyway, knowing that the completed dissertation would justify it. He increased the pace of his work. He worked with an elation, an exhilaration known only to marathon runners and the writers of personally meaningful books.

When he submitted the first draft of the completed dissertation to his advisor six weeks later, however, he realized that he was terribly alone in the apartment. He went around to Sydney's American Realism and Naturalism class to ask her to come back. But it turned out to be Augustan Poetry, and he remembered the classes had all changed with the semester. He tried to track her down through the English Department and, when that failed, looked for her through the Registrar's Office. But she had apparently not registered after the end of the last term, and he slowly understood that she had fled. Truly, *nobody* understood him.

Twenty years later, in 1986, he still used Sydney's enameled pot for his incompetent attempts at cooking, although it was chipped and the white insides were grayish. He had lost the spoon almost at once and the spatula two moves ago, when it had been used to mark a place in a book on the monetary history of the United States, which had fallen out of the rental van somewhere between Millersville, Pennsylvania and Columbus, Ohio.

Jones brought his mind back to 1986 and riffled through the in-tray on his desk. There was a direct mail piece announcing a new travel magazine, described as "AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO WORLD TRAVEL!" Jones could just imagine being one of 750,000 insiders. He threw the solicitation in the trash and looked at the next thing. It was a memo from Barton McChesney, President of Coolidge College, lamenting the resignation of the Dean of Admissions. Yeah, right. Resignation. People tended to resign pretty readily when Arlene McChesney, the president's wife, came to the office at a quarter to five with a locksmith, a security man, and a cardboard box. They would resign, and then go home with their miserable personal effects in the cardboard box while the locksmith changed the lock on the office door.

Jones had first met Arlene McChesney at a Faculty Senate meeting in 1981 shortly after her arrival. He didn't like Faculty Senate meetings, but he had been attending them for years. It was an unavoidable responsibility of the department chair. Over the years, he had come to learn the bylaws pretty well, and he had an assignment to the committee on tenure, where he worked with Archer Willis, Vice President for Academic Affairs. In the lobby outside the meeting room, he was approached by two women. One of them was an older woman in a tweed jacket, glasses, and a severe hairstyle. The other, who looked a little like a real estate agent he'd met once several years ago, was an exquisitely groomed woman of average height and substantial presence. She was one of those people you always looked at whenever she was in the room. Not that she was pretty or anything. She just had some kind of charisma that drew your gaze, willingly or not.

She extended her hand. "Dr. Ferguson, I'm Arlene McChesney."

Jones shook her hand. "Nice to meet you," he managed.

Arlene McChesney was nothing if not direct. "I'm here to lobby for the appointment of a tenure candidate in the Computer Science Department."

Jones had seen the proposal and was not impressed. "It looks like your candidate has no teaching experience." He couldn't say he felt at all conscientious about his role on the Tenure Committee, but he felt hostile to being lobbied, and he stupidly let it creep into his voice. He saw the woman in the tweed jacket stiffen a little.

"Nevertheless," said Arlene McChesney pleasantly, "I hope I have your vote."

Then she left, and Jones realized the woman with her had been her candidate. He later voted for the appointment. Willis voted against it. Time quickly bore out the wisdom of Jones's vote. Archer Willis was gone, cardboard box in hand, within two weeks. Jones saw the woman in the tweed jacket from time to time, but he didn't go to the Computer Science Department very often, so he didn't see her much. He never spoke to her at all.

While never letting anyone see how he felt about either of the McChesneys, Jones had a charitable spot in his heart toward Barton, who had come to his office once to talk economics. McChesney seemed the most personable man he'd ever met—friendly, enthusiastic, genuinely interested in the welfare of the department. Jones couldn't help but like the man. The conversation, however, was something else altogether. McChesney professed to love talking about economics, and he spoke energetically about supply-side doctrine, but Jones couldn't understand what he was saying, and he suspected McChesney didn't really comprehend supply-side. It was just as well. Jones considered supply-side theory to be more of a joke than any other area of economics, most of which he thought perversely humorous. The only thing McChesney said that Jones understood was "I appreciate your sincerity," a remark he made frequently enough that Jones assumed it was a sort of conversational spasm.

Nevertheless, McChesney was enjoyable to be with, and Jones had to admit to himself that he liked him, despite a faint smell of sewage that seemed to cling to him. (The first time he had come, Jones had

surreptitiously checked the soles of his own shoes several times, thinking he had tracked something in. But the smell had left with the President, and he came to the conclusion that the man smelled like sewage.)

Jones decided to forget about his in-tray and get some more final exams out of the way. Under President McChesney's new college-wide rules, every final examination had to be an essay test. The president believed that essay tests allowed the most flexibility in grading and could therefore assure the highest proportion of passing students. In fact, the President's Office had issued a guideline on the proportion of passing students, and the only acceptable proportion was "all." The president believed the easier it was to get an education at Coolidge College, the easier it would be for the College to fill out its undergraduate enrollment.

Jones retrieved a bluebook from the shopping bagful he kept beside his desk and began to read. By the third paragraph, he realized the author had been comatose during the previous four weeks of lectures. He should have just written "C" and been done with it, but he could not keep himself from attending to what he considered his responsibilities as an educator, and he spent a half hour writing comments in the bluebook. By the time he finished, he felt a heavy fatigue working its way into the region behind his eyes, and he realized he would have to control himself and write briefer comments.

If the first bluebook had the intermittent lucidity of the recently revived, the second one seemed to be written by someone who was not a native of planet Earth. After he read it, Jones once again lost control and spent forty-five minutes composing notes about employment rent and the labor market's historical inability to clear in sub-boom economic conditions. He gave the student a "C," then retrieved the first bluebook and changed its grade to "B." He was exhausted. He looked at his watch and calculated that he should have been able to finish more than four bluebooks by now.

With a sense of foreboding, he opened the third exam and started to read.

"The federal deficit," read the first sentence, "is bad for the economy

because it reduces the value of the dollar. When people get laid off, they don't work." The first sentence had the possibility of being a very subtle analysis; but its irrelevance to the second sentence, and the failure of *that* sentence to achieve anything better than redundancy convinced Jones the appearance of intelligence was an accident. After the first two sentences, the essay went downhill, descending inexorably from incoherence and ignorance to a kind of militant stupidity, until it began to sound like a network news commentary on the economy. It concluded with a one-sentence paragraph that Jones found arresting, to say the least: "Principles are too expensive."

Jones thought about this. He finally got up from the desk, walked over to the window, and looked out at the campus over one of his research piles. Mud season was just ending. The trees all had buds, and some actually had leaves. There was no one about on the walkways or the benches, and Jones thought it was a shame the students cleared out so quickly after finals. Washboro, could be beautiful in the spring.

He wondered what the student was trying to say. The last sentence sounded as if it might be intelligent, even though it had nothing to do with the exam. In fact, it came very close to describing Jones's own philosophy, and he wondered for a moment whether the student was making fun of him. He had always tried to keep his personal philosophy well hidden from his students. Was he so easy to read? Then Jones shook his head, laughed, and told himself to snap out of it. How could he suspect a student of that kind of intelligence? No, the answer was much simpler than that. Students have been writing in bluebooks since the beginning of time, and in all that time it was probable that a handful of them might generate something that in another context would seem intelligent. It was just the old monkeys-and-typewriters theory in a new guise.

Jones finally shrugged and started to write his comments. He set the tone for a paragraph of criticism by writing, "Even your confusion is vague." It took him nearly an hour to write his comments, since the essay admitted of several different interpretations, and he felt he had to grapple with all of them. He started to write a grade of "D," but he

had a fantasy of being on a witness stand in front of Barton McChesney and being required to defend himself. He wrote "C" on the bluebook and promised himself he would spend less time writing comments on the rest of them.

He couldn't keep his promise. Regardless of the President's grading guidelines, Jones could not keep himself from trying to assist in the learning process and, in bluebook after bluebook, he wrote careful, detailed, reasoned commentary before giving the exam-taker a "C" or a "B," as the spirit moved him. It began to look as if he would have to cancel any weekend plans for the next month or so. He cursed himself for his weakness in feeling he owed these students the benefit of his insights. He was interrupted in his cursing by the telephone ringing. He picked it up.

"Dr. Ferguson? This is President McChesney's office."

Jones wondered if the time were finally at hand. Were they calling to tell him Arlene was on her way over to accept his resignation and change the lock on his office door?

"Yes?" Jones heard his voice speaking as if he were listening to a radio play.

"We haven't received your RSVP for the President's faculty reception," said the other voice. "The reception is on Saturday night, and we had hoped to receive your reply by mid-week."

"I've been busy with final exams," said Jones's voice. "I guess it slipped my mind."

"That's all right, Dr. Ferguson. We just wanted to make sure you remembered to come."

"Well, I'm going to be very busy with exams this weekend." Jones heard his voice trying to convey a feeling of responsibility to the caller.

"Are we to tell Mrs. McChesney that you will not be attending?"

"No, don't tell her that," said Jones's voice hurriedly.

"You'll be coming, then?"

"Yes, of course."

"Wonderful," said the other voice. "We'll look forward to seeing you. Seven o'clock. President McChesney asks all faculty members to

please be punctual.”

For a moment, Jones imagined himself telling the other voice that he was far too busy to attend such functions, that he did not like being in the presence of Arlene McChesney, and that furthermore he did not like being ordered about like a work-study student. But he never said any of those things. He simply said thank you and good-bye. Principles really are too expensive.

# Three

Sydney was sitting at the kitchen table at her mother's house in Washboro. She was drinking a cup of coffee and mentally licking her wounds, trying to decide how best to forget about marketing and get into landscape architecture.

Her mother, returning from class, came through the kitchen door with her briefcase and set it on the table. She was wearing a brown tweed suit. Her hair, recently dyed from gray to a kind of walnut color, was pulled back and fastened severely behind her head. She had no makeup on and looked decidedly academic. It was a new appearance for her, nothing like the way she had looked when she was a computer systems manager for a timesharing condominium company before it went bust two years before. Sydney always marveled at her mother's ability to manage her appearance.

"I've never seen you wear tweed before, Mother."

"It makes me look professorial," said her mother.

Sydney nodded and wondered whether her mother liked looking professorial or was just trying to fit in with this job of hers.

"Is there more coffee?" said her mother.

Sydney pointed to the half-filled pot in the coffee maker.

Her mother took a cup out of the cupboard. She set it on the counter

without a saucer. "There's beer in the refrigerator if you want it."

"It's eleven a.m., Mother."

"You don't have to get huffy with me, Sydney." Her mother poured herself a cup of coffee. "You used to tell me that a clock shouldn't decide whether you want to drink a beer."

"That was out of loyalty to my employer," said Sydney. "It was a long time ago."

Her mother opened the refrigerator and took out a quart carton of milk. She dribbled some into the coffee. "It seems like only a few days ago to me."

"No, I mean I quit drinking beer a long time ago. Loyalty is one thing. Weight gain is another."

Her mother left the milk carton on the counter and sat down again with her coffee. She set her cup directly on the table, and it looked embarrassed to be sitting there without a saucer. Sydney's mother didn't seem to mind embarrassing her china.

"Let's go out together tonight," said her mother.

"Where?"

"There's a reception for the faculty and some of the local people at President McChesney's home."

Sydney wanted to finish moving her things into her bedroom. And she wasn't particularly eager to meet people right now. "I don't know," she said.

"Oh, come on, Sydney," said her mother. "Don't be a such a stick. There will be some very interesting people there. I think you'll like President McChesney's wife, Arlene."

"I can just imagine the kind of toadies and sycophants that show up at the president's house for a reception."

"It's not like that at all," said her mother. "All the faculty will be there."

"That doesn't sound like any college I know," said Sydney.

"It *isn't* like any college you know. This is a college that will hire a woman out of a business background to teach computer programming to undergraduates."

Sydney wondered if her mother had ever been this enthusiastic about

any of the various companies where she'd worked before. Although Sydney's family had lived in Washboro all of Sydney's life, none of the three of them had ever worked or studied at Coolidge College before. Sydney's father had been a real estate developer specializing in resort properties until he died in 1979. He had left Sydney's mother in a very secure position, and she could have retired. But she preferred to continue programming computers for medium-sized businesses, changing jobs about every five years, as computer systems professionals are supposed to do, until her last employer, a timesharing company, vanished from under her.

"Coolidge College recognizes the value of real-life experience," said Sydney's mother. "Come on, now. President McChesney has invited a lot of local business people, too. He takes every opportunity to show the town that the college is good for it."

"Just what I need," said Sydney. "An evening with a bunch of college professors and Rotarians."

"You *are* a stick," said her mother.

"I can't help it, Mother. I just want to hole up somewhere for a while. I took a real beating at Capital. I was working for barbarians."

"All the more reason for you to get out among decent people," said her mother. "I want you to meet a man who is starting up a software company. I'm sure he'll be looking for marketing help."

"What do I know about software?" said Sydney.

"What do I know about teaching? What did you know about beer when you started with Capital? In the past three years, since I've been working at the College, I've learned how our labels for ourselves limit what we do." Sydney's mother looked steadily at her, without shifting her gaze from one eye to the other. Despite the bizarre outlook that seemed to have taken hold of her mother, Sydney found the conversation comfortable.

"I don't want to be in marketing any more," said Sydney. "I want to go into landscape architecture."

"Somehow, I don't see you tinkering with power mowers and pruning junipers."

"That's not what landscape architects do," said Sydney.

“What do they do then?”

Sydney thought for a moment. “I guess I don’t really know. I think they make plans, only with trees and shrubs instead of advertising and promotion.”

“Maybe you should find out what they do before you try to be one, dear.” Sydney’s mother drained her coffee cup. By now, there were five rings on the table in front of her, like a lopsided Olympics logo. “Come on. We’re going to the outlet center. You’ll feel better if you have something new to wear.”

Her mother stood up, walked over to Sydney, and gently stroked her hair. “I’m going to call Steven and see if we can get you in.”

“Who’s Steven?”

“Hair,” said her mother and struck off in the direction of the bedroom. “I’ll just be a minute.”

Sydney felt herself giving in. Shopping, hair, an upscale lunch of some sort. She felt completely spent already. She looked down at the sweatshirt and jeans she was wearing and thought she would prefer to look a little more prosperous for shopping. But before she left the room to get changed, she put her mother’s cup in the sink and returned the milk carton to the refrigerator. Then she took a damp sponge she found lying near the sink and wiped the Olympics logo from the table.

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Sydney put on a navy blue suit to go shopping and waited in the living room for her mother. When her mother appeared, she looked like an “after” picture in a feature from a women’s service magazine. She was not wearing her glasses, and her eyes had the dark and slightly watery look of contact lenses. She had unfastened her hair, which now curled expansively around her head. She wore a white dress with vignettes of Paris street scenes printed on it in black. Sydney would never don such a getup herself, but she thought her mother looked good and grudgingly admired the style with which she flowed about in it.

They drove into Washboro. Mud season was just ending, and the

crowds of summer tourists had not yet descended on the little town. The Coolidge commencement traffic wasn't due for another three weeks. The shops looked the same as Sydney remembered them—charming, well-kept clapboard buildings in bright colors—although the names had all changed. The merchandise they were selling seemed pretty much the same, too: sporting goods, painted wooden cows, maple sugar condiments, crafty things. She and her mother ate deep-fried ice cream at a bakery, just opened for the tourist season, that occupied a space Sydney had remembered as once housing the town's weekly newspaper. If you wrapped small scoops of ice cream in a stiff, sweet batter, you could cook it in hot oil without melting it. The snack wasn't bad, but Sydney wondered about the changes in the local economy that made deep-fried ice cream more necessary to the town's life than a newspaper.

In front of the hardware store, the sidewalk was nearly blocked by a display of riding mowers, dirt bikes, and fertilizer spreaders. As Sydney and her mother picked their way among the machinery, Sydney noticed a neon sign in the window advertising Coors Light beer. There was also a broad selection of wines. Only in Vermont can you buy beer and wine in a hardware store. Closer examination revealed that the store boasted a pharmacy and copy center as well as a comprehensive selection of potato chips and the farm tools and building supplies that seemed to be its *raison d'être*. Sydney wanted to go in and see if the store stocked Bikini Light, but she realized that was force of habit. She wondered if it would be a good place to get tools for landscaping.

Steven's, the hair salon, was a small building next to the hardware store. It was a symphony, or at least a concerto, of chrome, leather, glass, and soft rock music. The atmosphere was a little unexpected in Washboro, but Sydney supposed it made the New York tourists feel more at home. There were mirrors everywhere, and the track lighting made Sydney think she looked fairly presentable. The receptionist gave Sydney a smock and showed her where to change, then a young woman with mismatched earrings (one was a banjo and the other a guitar, so Sydney recognized that "mismatched" was really a matter of personal interpretation) washed her hair and wrapped her head up in a towel.

She took her to a chair in front of a mirror, and her mother got up from the leather sofa where she'd been reading *Sports Illustrated* and walked over.

"Here comes Steven," she said.

Nobody bothered with introductions, but Sydney's mother launched directly into an explanation of what she thought should be done with her daughter's hair, while Steven listened intently. He had a rather forbidding expression, which a black silk shirt and mauve pleated pants did little to mitigate, and he reminded Sydney of something she couldn't quite place. But, as her mother continued to explain about feathering and body, it gradually dawned on her what it was. If you lowered his hairline, made his face a little thinner, and put him in a sweater vest with a pin-striped shirt and a bow tie, he would be Stevie Stinckney, a fellow she had sat next to in high school Algebra. Stinky Stevie Stinckney, they used to call him. It was more a play on his last name than his smell, and he had always been good-natured about it, so much so that Sydney had often wondered if he wasn't retarded. He looked intelligent and self-possessed now (it's surprising what a receding hairline and a silk shirt can do for you), but he was definitely Stinky.

"Stinky?"

Stinky's distant expression relaxed a little. "Heinie?"

Sydney winced at the nickname, reminding herself it came from a beer bottle and had nothing to do with her anatomy.

Her mother stopped the instructions and turned to look at her. "Do you two know each other?"

"We sat next to each other in Algebra," said Sydney.

"That was a long time ago," said Stinky.

"How have you been, Steven?" Sydney used his real name, hoping he would reciprocate.

"I'm getting along."

Sydney looked around at the equipment. "What an impressive place, Steven. You've done very well for yourself."

Stinky smiled. "Yes, I have. Thank you."

Sydney's mother finally sat down with the magazine again and seemed

to become absorbed in an article about body builders. Stinky began to cut Sydney's hair, and they talked about him and how well he had done for himself.

He'd left Washboro right after he got out of high school and gone to live in Los Angeles for a few years, hoping to make a career in the entertainment business. The only break he'd gotten was a job as assistant to a photographer who specialized in publicity stills for second-rate stars. In this position, he often helped the hair stylist and became intrigued with the work.

"Design," he said, pulling a lock of Sydney's hair straight up between his fingers, then cutting it off just above his knuckles, "is fundamental to photography. Designing scenes and settings is easy. Designing people is a challenge."

"I guess so." Sydney looked into the mirror. Her hair was wet where he had spritzed it, and it stuck out all over the place. She hoped her mother knew what she was doing.

"More than you can imagine," he said. His gaze, in the mirror, shifted from her brown eye to the green one.

Eventually, he went on to explain, he'd become so absorbed in the art of designing people that he'd gone to school to get licensed to handle their hair professionally. Then he had joined an exclusive establishment in Beverly Hills and wound up cutting the hair of a starlet Sydney would know if he'd told her the name.

Stinky paused in his story.

Sydney nodded, and bits of hair flew into the air around her.

Stinky pulled his comb through the hair at the back of her head, then began to snip off the ends furiously as if Sydney were a topiary project. "We had an affair," he said.

"Um." She didn't want to say any real words, and she was afraid to simply nod her head as long as he was hacking around back there.

"It was a turning point in my life, Sydney." He threw down his scissors and scraped the comb over the top of her head.

"Um." Sydney winced, but tried not to show it.

Stinky grabbed a wheeled stool and pulled it up beside her, then sat

down on it and began to cut the hairs over her left ear one by one.

It was turning out to be the most itemized haircutting Sydney had ever had.

“I just can’t find the words to describe it to you, Sydney.” Stinky’s voice was simultaneously low and nasal as he concentrated on the hair over her ear. He pushed himself around to her other ear. “She was an amazing creature.”

Sydney felt the scissors brush her ear. Her nose twitched.

“My life became completely wrapped up in her,” he breathed.

“Um.”

He stopped snipping and lowered his hands to his lap. Sydney did not look up but stared down at the smock she was wearing.

“The sex,” he said. “The sex was addictive. That’s the only word for it.”

Sydney found herself wishing the haircut was over.

“It was...” His voice drifted off into nothing.

Sydney risked a sidelong glance at him and saw he was staring off in the distance. She turned back to study her smock.

He came alive and snipped a few more hairs. “It was langorous. It was slow and langorous. I can’t describe it any other way. She enslaved me, Sydney.”

“Um,” said Sydney.

He grabbed her head and began to whack her hair upward with the palm of his hand. Slap, slap, slap. Sydney’s ears rang. Maybe this was the shaping.

Stinky continued to cut and shape as he explained that he had come home one evening to find his starlet engaged in the same langorous activity with a man he’d never seen before. That was when he’d gathered up what was left of his pride and returned to Washboro. When he got back here, he said, it was like being emancipated. He was in a stable relationship now with a woman named Cheryl, he had a business, and he was a happy man. He never looked back, he said. Except at night.

Sydney wished the haircut were over. She risked a glance up in the mirror and saw that her hair stood in two great wedges from the top of

her head. Then she wished it weren't over—at least until she looked presentable. She decided not to look at the mirror again until he'd finished.

“Don't get me wrong.” Stinky dragged Sydney's hair wedges back down and began to chop at them with his scissors. “I love Cheryl. We have it good. We have intimacy, and we have passion.” He stopped cutting again. “But it's not langorous, you know? I wonder if we should see a sex therapist?”

The question didn't seem to need an answer, so Sydney said nothing.

Stinky finished his story, took up a hair dryer, and set upon Sydney with gale-force hot air, which roared against her head while he yanked at her hair with his fingers. Finally, he walked over to the counter and took a hand mirror, which he then held up behind her head. Sydney looked up and saw herself. She looked slightly stunned from the man-handling she'd had, but her dark and graying hair swept out from her head in layers, framing her face in a sort of brunette and silver halo. Her hair had never looked so impressive before, although it reminded her of some actress she had seen on television.

She was glad when the hair cutting was over. She didn't find Stinky a particularly attractive figure, especially after his monologue; but she had to admit, in the deepest recesses of her personal thoughts, that his story roused something in her. Once, a long time ago, she had lived with a man with whom she occasionally had “langorous” lovemaking. He would caress and kiss her lovingly for what seemed to be hours until a climax overtook her like a tsunami and washed her into a kind of coma. He was capable of making her feel like she was the center of the universe, and she'd never known the experience since. She had, in fact, looked for it for some years afterward with a dozen different prospects. But none of them had ever seemed to care as much about her gratification as theirs.

After a while, she gave up looking for it. She hadn't really made much use of sex—outside of her designs for advertising campaigns—in the past ten years. She wondered how her life might have turned out if

they hadn't had that fight. She could hardly remember what it was about now. She just remembered he'd told her there wasn't anything in the relationship for him any more. So she'd moved out. What choice did she have?

Sydney sighed.

"Did you say something, dear?"

Sydney realized she was on the sidewalk in Washboro with her mother. "No." She smiled at her mother. "I was just sighing because it's so pleasant here. I feel like I've started a new chapter."

"You have, dear," her mother said. "You'll like the software business."

Sydney didn't argue. After all, how did she really feel about shrubs?

Her mother suggested a walk around town before going to the outlet center. They walked past the gas station-video rental center, the mountain bike shop, and Christopher's Family Style (Featuring Wide-Screen TV) toward the cluster of gift shops in the center of town. Among the gift shops, it seemed to Sydney that her mother stopped every fifteen feet, always with the same question. "Do you mind if we go in here for a minute?"

Each of these minutes lasted upwards of half an hour, and Sydney lost about two hours of her life to a block of establishments with names like "Distant Wicker" and "Leaves of Brass," in which her mother pointed out merchandise designed for tourists and chatted with proprietors and proprietresses about business and the coming season. Sydney's mother had always taken an interest in the town's commerce, an attempt—Sydney suspected—to make up for being an outsider. She had only lived here forty years.

On the other hand, it could be that her mother knew Sydney would be resistant to the arty sort of clothing she wanted her to buy. An avalanche of wicker, hand-painted cows, authentic Vermont woolens, and stuffed animals dressed like skiers might leave Sydney somewhat less defensible at the outlet center, where her mother could bury her under piles of brightly colored and extravagantly cut garments in which Sydney would not ordinarily be caught dead. And Sydney was, in fact,

both dazed and debilitated when they pulled into the parking lot of the converted mill two hours later and her mother led her into the building. Fortunately, there were no busloads of tourists to fight, and the great warehouse, divided into shopping areas representing a dozen different manufacturers, was uncharacteristically quiet. Enervated and defenseless, Sydney followed her mother among the tightly packed clothes racks, as her mother fingered garments and pushed hangers back and forth.

“This would look nice with a pair of dangly earrings,” said her mother. She held up a blouse and vest combination in front of Sydney. The blouse was white with wide russet-colored vertical stripes, and the vest was a sort of needlepoint affair with a design of tiny pale blue flowers punctuated by shiny silver rivets.

Sydney wondered if there weren’t a half-naked matador lurking somewhere behind the sweaters across the aisle.

“This color is good on you, Sydney.” Her mother studied the stripes. “It harmonizes your eyes.”

Sydney looked at the shining rivets. “I don’t know, Mother.”

“Don’t be such a stick, Sydney.” Her mother began unfastening the thing from its hanger. “Try it on. It will be fun.”

Sydney looked around. “Do you think they have anything in navy?”

Her mother stopped unfastening and looked at her. “I’ve seen your clothes, Sydney. Everything you own is navy.”

“That’s not true,” said Sydney.

“No, I guess you have one or two gray things. Tell me, how do the people you work with tell the difference between you and the office equipment?”

“I’m a marketing professional, Mother. I dress in protective coloration.” She grabbed at the arty blouse and palpated its fabric between her fingertips. Maybe it was nicer than it looked. Sydney knew the feel of a high thread-count, long staple cotton. She examined the stitching and found it was as well made as the dress shirts she favored for the office.

“There you go with your labels again, Sydney. You’re not a market-

ing professional. You are a person who happens to do marketing work.”

Actually, the rivets weren't so terrible. They were reflective and would be practical when crossing the street at night. The needlepoint flowers were horticultural, and maybe they would set the tone for going into landscape architecture. “Do you really think it harmonizes my eyes?”

# Four

Jones was the first one to arrive at President's House for the McChesneys' reception. A student wearing a linen jacket and a distracted air let him in the front door and took him to a room off the large entryway. The student opened the door, and Jones walked in. He heard the door shut behind him, and he found himself alone in a room with a cathedral ceiling, dominated by a fireplace about the size of a blast furnace. There was a three-alarm blaze going in it. Jones felt uncomfortable standing on the white carpet and hiked to the other side of the room, where the floor was polished marble in a light color. Jones thought it was probably pink.

He was glad to be alone in the room. On the way across, he looked behind himself several times to see if he was leaving tracks on the expanse of white. When he got to the marble floor, his heels clicked on it. An improbable family of five over-lifesize ceramic ferrets posed beside the fire, each wearing a silk scarf in a different color. He was reminded of Arlene McChesney's practice of keeping two live ferrets, one of which had been lost and was rumored to have been killed by the Dean of Admissions who had so recently "resigned."

The room's furniture was mostly mahogany, and yards and yards of curtain puddled around the many windows, an arrangement Jones rec-

ognized as “window treatments.” He clicked his way across the marble floor and stood on the opposite side of the fireplace from the ceramic ferrets. They seemed to him perfectly situated for the entanglement of guests, and he intended to give them a wide berth.

After a moment, a door about twelve feet from the fireplace opened, and the same student entered. Having assumed the role of waiter, apparently under protest, he approached Jones with a tray of small stemmed glasses. He snarled and stuck out the tray as if daring Jones to take a glass. Jones took one and began drinking greedily, for want of anything to do, as the student left again. It was sherry, dark and nutty-tasting.

He had drained the glass by the time the other door opened and a man Jones had never seen before was let in. He was in his mid- to late twenties and had all the awkwardness of a fourteen-year-old. The young man strode across the room toward Jones with his hand extended. He walked as if he'd been roped under the shoulders and was being dragged toward his objective. Jones recognized it as the walk of a nerd. His judgment was confirmed as the young man drew closer. He wore horn-rimmed glasses that had apparently been repaired at the hinge with a paper clip and had a grayish fingerprint on the right lens. But his dark suit was cut surprisingly well, and Jones realized it was probably very expensive. He reflected that he'd never seen a nerd in an expensive suit before.

“President McChesney,” said the young man, “I’m—”

Jones interrupted him. “I’m Jones Ferguson.”

He withdrew his hand. “Who are you?”

“I’m with the economics department,” said Jones.

The young man offered his hand again. “I’m Telford O’Connor. Call me Tel.”

Jones took his hand. “Nice suit.”

“Is it?” Tel looked down at himself and did a slight double-take, as if aware for the first time that he was wearing anything at all.

The student returned with the same tray of sherry glasses and a plate of something else, one on each hand. Tel grabbed a sherry and

looked at the plate the student was holding.

“What’s that?”

“Gravlax,” said the student.

“It looks awful,” said Tel.

Jones looked at the plate. Tel was right. It was gelid, but it managed to retain some of the characteristic shape of the material it was made from, which was apparently raw fish. Glaring, boneless mounds had been lumped on the plate in a way that suggested the caterer had spent an afternoon fishing in a pond with dynamite.

“What is gravlax?” said Jones, more to keep the student occupied while he grabbed another sherry than because he cared.

“Salmon.” The student gave an exasperated sigh, as if it were the heaviest of burdens to serve philistines who failed to keep abreast of the trends in food. “It’s cured with sugar and spices. It’s Scandanavian.”

“Save it for the Scandanavians,” said Tel, and honked with laughter.

The student looked at Tel contemptuously, then left with his tray of sherry glasses and plate of gravlax. Jones and Tel, not having started a conversation yet, watched him go. When the student reached the white carpet, a weasel-like creature emerged from one of the window treatments about ten feet away. Jones watched in fascination as it dashed across the carpet, connected with the student, and ran up his leg. The student leaped in alarm, pitching the tray of sherry glasses skyward. He landed on the carpet with a thump, and sherry glasses landed about him as if he were being strafed by a fighter-bomber heavily armed with glassware. Several of the glasses exploded on impact; nearly all of them emptied their contents on the student’s jacket. The commotion brought a half dozen more students, all looking panic-stricken, through a doorway to assist the young man.

They bent over their companion and began picking him up, wiping him down with towels, and gathering glasses and fragments. It was remarkably orderly and compassionate behavior for students, but then these students were in the employ of Arlene McChesney. Jones wondered what the penalty for disorder was. The weasel-like creature knocked away the plate, which had overturned on the gravlax, and

began to eat the stuff from the carpet with great enthusiasm. It polished off the entire quantity in seconds, then disappeared into another window treatment.

“Did you see that?” said Tel.

Jones thought the question a little ridiculous.

“What was that thing?” said Tel. “It looked like a weasel or something.”

“Mrs. McChesney keeps ferrets,” said Jones.

“Awesome,” said Tel. “It ran right up his leg. Must have scared the life out of him. It seems to be attracted to that gravlax stuff.”

Jones agreed and wondered if that was characteristic of the species or just bespoke a weakness of the one individual. He thought Arlene McChesney should do a better job of keeping the ferrets restrained, but it was not the kind of thought one voiced publicly at Coolidge College.

After a sip of sherry, Tel told Jones that he ran a small software firm in Washboro. Jones recognized he was in the presence of some sort of prodigy.

“So you’re an economist?” said Tel.

Jones looked around until he spotted the student waiter, limping on the other side of the room. He tried to signal, but other people were entering the room now, and the young man moved unsteadily among them with his tray, apparently anxious to get them all served. “Yes.”

“I took an economics course. What do you think of monetarism?”

Jones thought it a strange question. “I disproved it six years ago,” he said. “I just haven’t published yet.”

The young man looked surprised. “Disproved it? Do you mean you don’t believe in monetary theory?”

“Yes to both,” said Jones. “I don’t believe in mercantilism, either.”

“Awesome.” Tel sipped his sherry.

Jones thought it a waste to share his insights with a stranger, but the sherry was on him, and he felt expansive. “I am currently engaged in proving the diminishing marginal utility of everything.” He drained the last sip of sherry from his glass. “I just haven’t published yet.”

Tel assumed a look that Jones was familiar with—that of a man who

wants to leave and hasn't yet thought of an excuse. Jones shrugged. He shouldn't have wasted his breath on the boy. Where was the sherry?

A crowd of about fifteen faculty and spouses (several of whom Jones recognized) had arrived one after another and had spaced themselves on the snowy carpet like bewildered checkers.

On the other side of the room, the door opened again. Jones hoped it was Arlene McChesney arriving, so he could be seen and then go home and resume work securing a beach head in the battle of the bluebooks. But it was a pair of women, neither of whom was Arlene McChesney.

"There's someone I came to see," said Tel. "Professor Hofstadter."

One of the two women was the woman whose tenure in the Computer Science Department Jones had voted for. She was wearing that same tweed jacket and severe hairstyle. The other woman was Sydney. Jones smiled and started to wave, then stopped when a realization struck him with the impact of a body block. It was Sydney. The woman he'd lost twenty years ago. The only woman he had ever loved. Sydney.

She wasn't dressed like Sydney. She wore a blouse with wide stripes and a ridiculous vest embellished with shiny rivets. Her hair had silver highlights and a stylish cut. He remembered when that hair was long and it draped over her shoulder, and how it fell into his face in one of their lovemaking positions. In a rush, he had memories of her smooth shoulders, her round breasts, the warmth of her neck against his lips, the way her hip bones protruded gently on either side of her abdomen, the softness of her stomach. And he remembered the lonely nights during which he had worked out in his mind why he did not need her.

He lowered his hand and felt his smile evaporate. What had he been thinking of? Had he actually considered waving to her? What was he going to do then? Walk across the room, put his arm around her, and kiss her on the cheek? She had probably harbored a grudge against him for two decades. She had probably married, maybe several times. She had lived a lifetime since he'd last seen her. She'd probably had kids, owned pets, buried friends and relatives, undergone surgery, caught a cheating husband, fired subordinates, maybe even been born again. He couldn't know what ordeals might have shaped the woman he saw

standing across the room. All he knew was that he hadn't shared them with her and her life had diverged so far from his, she probably wouldn't even recognize him. He wondered if the inside of her knee was still snowy, soft, and supple when she lay on her stomach. He wondered if she still gave a throaty groan when it was lightly kissed.

"Who's that woman with her?" asked Tel. "The one in the vest. She's awesome."

Jones decided he would do best to withdraw and hide among the ceramic ferrets. But Professor Hofstadter looked in his direction and waved. Tel waved back, and the woman started toward them like an express train, towing Sydney by the arm in the position of baggage car. Like a deer caught in a headlight beam on a grade crossing, Jones stood transfixed in her right of way and waited to be struck.

The older woman pulled up in front of the two men with Sydney behind her. She released Sydney and, without looking at Jones, grabbed Tel by the hand. "Mr. O'Connor," she said, "how nice to see you."

Tel seemed about to reply, but she didn't give him a chance.

"This is my daughter, whom I've been telling you about." Without looking back, she reached behind her, found Sydney's arm, and pulled her around to join the three of them. Jones found himself facing Sydney. He didn't know what to say.

Her face paled, then flushed, but she didn't look away from him.

Jones wanted desperately to leave, but all he could do was smile weakly and hope she wouldn't try to kick him. The hubbub of conversation grew around them, and Sydney's mother raised her voice to be heard above it.

"Sydney's been telling me some of her marketing ideas for the software business. Haven't you, Sydney?"

Tel nodded expectantly and looked at Sydney, but she didn't seem to notice.

"She says she wonders if you've looked into data-based marketing," said her mother. "It's doing wonders for specialty and niche products."

Tel grabbed Sydney's hand and shook it while she continued to stare at Jones.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said.

“Sydney actually has a great deal of experience in marketing,” said her mother. “She’s been a product marketing manager for a major company, but now she is looking to make a change. Aren’t you, Sydney?”

Jones heard the words, but none of it registered. He felt his jacket binding him at the shoulders, and he tried futilely to shrug it into a different position. There was a little sherry on the outside of his glass, and it made his fingers sticky. He looked away and pretended to be watching for the waiter. When he looked back, Sydney was still staring at him.

Tel looked from Sydney to her mother and back again. Jones realized that everyone would be well served by his departure, and he took a half step backward. He bumped into someone behind him. Tel and the mother looked at him, and the person behind him put a hand on his shoulder.

“If you don’t mind, Dr. Ferguson.”

It was Arlene McChesney. The president’s wife stepped in among the four of them. She was not a large woman but, in her presence, Jones habitually formed the impression he had become part of the woodwork. Certainly that was the way Telford O’Connor and Sydney’s mother reacted, as they both seemed to have lost any awareness of him. Sydney continued to stare at Jones with a stunned look.

Mrs. McChesney raised her voice above the hubub and projected it at Sydney. “Data-based marketing, did you say?”

Almost imperceptibly, she began to pull Sydney away from the group. “I’m Arlene McChesney,” she said. “I’d like to hear more about this concept.”

Sydney finally looked up at the woman, which Mrs. McChesney took as an opportunity to lead her away from the others. Sydney’s body language suggested a swimmer caught in an undertow. Before she was submerged in the crowd, she looked back at Jones. Her glance lasted only an instant before Mrs. McChesney recaptured her attention. But in that instant, she seemed to smile.

# Five

Sydney was certain the apparition she'd been standing in front of a minute ago was her former lover, Jones Ferguson. He had looked straight into her eyes without shifting his gaze from one to the other. He was the only man she'd ever met who was capable of doing that. He was Jones all right. Oh, his face might be a little fleshier, and there were some lines around his eyes, but otherwise he looked just as he had the day nineteen years ago when he'd told her it was all over.

She wanted to speak to him, but she didn't know what to say. In the novel of her life, he was a character who had been disposed of in the first chapter. Obviously, she had somehow lost control of the plot and was caught in some cheap episodic denouement. Was she now going to awaken and find the last nineteen years had been a dream? Did her life have no more purpose than a soap opera?

She was still trying to think of something to say to the Jones apparition when she was spirited away by a confident woman in a cocktail dress who now seemed determined to subject her to some sort of debriefing on data-based marketing.

Arlene McChesney led Sydney to a spot near a ceramic tableau of what appeared to be a family of ferrets. She caught a passing waiter before he could elude her and took two glasses of sherry from his tray.

She handed one to Sydney as she backed her up toward the ferrets. “So tell me about data-based marketing.”

Her mother had manufactured Sydney’s expertise in data-based marketing. Now Sydney couldn’t admit her ignorance without getting her mother in trouble.

“What do you want to know?” Sydney looked around back of her to make sure she wasn’t about to trip over a ferret.

Mrs. McChesney addressed her question to Sydney’s green eye. “What is it, for one thing?”

“It’s based on individual customer profiles,” said Sydney.

Fortunately, the cover story of the recent issue of *Modern Marketing News* happened to be about the debate over whether data-based marketing was really nothing more than old-fashioned targeted marketing.

“Like age and income and so forth?” Mrs. McChesney sipped delicately at her sherry, a graceful gesture that charmed Sydney.

Sydney snorted in what she hoped came through as a scoffing sound. “You can target age and income from a traditional direct-mail list.” She gestured toward the papa ferret, as if he were a specimen customer. “We’re talking here about really extensive profiles, combined with a complete history of your customer’s purchases and responses to your campaigns.” Sydney was pleased that her lifelong habit of study was of some use. She wished Roy the Dirigible were here to see her explaining all this so confidently and knowledgeably.

“How do you think you would apply the concept to college admissions?” said Mrs. McChesney.

“I’m not sure you could,” said Sydney. “The purpose of data-based marketing is to capitalize on repeat business. How often does somebody go to college?”

“Good point. Tell me, if you were in charge of marketing college admissions, how would you do it?” Mrs. McChesney took a half-step toward Sydney.

Sydney was unable to back up any further without becoming a member of the ferret family. She felt imposed on, and it occurred to her that people in power always seem to develop the habit of imposing on oth-

ers. She raised her sherry glass, more to put something between her and her interlocutor than because she wanted to drink from it. The Devil must have gotten into Sydney, because she had a compelling inspiration to use Roy the Dirigible's marketing philosophy on Mrs. McChesney. "I guess," she said, trying to sound offhand, "I'd look at my market and find the most lavish marketing operation and copy it."

"That doesn't sound very original," said Mrs. McChesney.

"Marketing is not about originality," said Sydney. "There are a limited number of ways to appeal to people, especially for a big-ticket item like college."

"But you'd never be able to copy what Harvard does," said Mrs. McChesney.

"Who says I'd want to copy Harvard?"

"You just said you'd copy the most successful—"

"Excuse me," said Sydney, trying her best self-effacing smile. "I didn't say the most successful. I said the most lavish. Harvard's not relevant. The purpose of admissions at Harvard is to keep people out, not get people in."

Mrs. McChesney's eyes shone, and Sydney sensed she'd raised the woman's interest. She hoped she could do her mother some good in her job here. Amusement percolated into her mind at the poetic justice of stealing a theory from Roy, who had built a career on theft.

"No," said Sydney confidently, "I meant to look at the campaigns being waged by the colleges that have to fight for students. Study the mediocre colleges that have aggressive admissions efforts."

"What good does it do to look at these places?" said Mrs. McChesney.

"Without strong enrollment, the mediocre colleges will die, right?"

"Without strong enrollment, we all will," said Mrs. McChesney.

"You can bet the second-tier schools are not leaving this to chance," said Sydney. "At least not the well-managed ones. They're probably putting as much money as they possibly can into the admissions program. They've probably tested their marketing campaigns every way to Sunday. If you watch them and do exactly what they do, you will get the benefit of all that testing."

Sydney could see the light turn on in Mrs. McChesney's mind. "Of course," said the older woman.

Sydney shrugged. "That's how you do it with consumer goods, anyway. At least when you don't have a testing budget."

Mrs. McChesney studied Sydney. "Ms.?"

"Hofstadter," said Sydney. "Sydney Hofstadter."

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. McChesney, "Professor Hofstadter's daughter, right? That's wonderful. I'm an admirer of your mother, who is one of the most tireless faculty members in all of Coolidge College. This is not a place where the work ethic is oversubscribed, believe me." Then Mrs. McChesney seemed to get an idea. "Is there any chance you might be available to do some consulting for our admissions office?"

"I don't think so," said Sydney. "I'm not really in marketing anymore."

"You should be," said Mrs. McChesney.

Sydney found herself charmed again.

"Call me if you change your mind." Mrs. McChesney handed Sydney a business card. "Here's my card. My personal number is on there. I'd even be happy to get a call this weekend."

"Thank you." Sydney put the card into the pocket of the embroidered vest. What a strange place this was.

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By the time Sydney was able to get back to her mother, Jones Ferguson was long gone. The other man, the one whose name she hadn't properly caught, was still there. He seemed pleased to have her back in the conversation. He grabbed her hand and shook it again as if he hadn't seen her for a week.

"Sydney," he said, "have you ever done any product image work?"

"Just a little." Sydney was put off by the paper clip stuck into the hinge of his glasses and did not want to encourage him.

The man nodded so eagerly it seemed to affect his hearing. "Good," he said. "I need some help on a product image campaign. Are you

available to do some consulting?”

She looked at her mother, who was also smiling. “I’m really not in marketing any more.”

The man looked from one of her eyes to the other, and his face fell. “Oh.”

“Do you know that man who was here before?” said Sydney.

“I hadn’t met him before tonight,” said the man. “He seemed rather hostile.”

“He’s always been that way,” said Sydney.

“Do you know him, Sydney?” asked her mother.

“I met him when I was in college.”

Sydney’s mother looked thoughtful. Sydney decided she should change the subject.

“I’m going into landscape architecture,” she said to the man.

“That’s great,” said the man. “My company’s headquarters needs landscaping. Will you do it?”

“This is just in the exploration stage,” said Sydney. “I really don’t know anything about it yet.”

“You could get a great start doing our grounds,” he said. “Will you do it?”

“I don’t know,” said Sydney. “I think I ought to read a book on it or something first.”

“Here’s my card.” The young man handed Sydney a business card. “Please call me after you’ve read the book.”

Sydney put the card into the pocket of her embroidered vest without looking at it. He seemed a decent sort of young man, if a little on the nerdy side, but what a strange place this was. The whole town seemed to be in need of marketing help. She turned to her mother.

“Mother, it’s getting late,”

“Yes, dear,” said her mother. “You must be exhausted.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night, then,” said the young man.

Sydney looked a question at her mother.

“Mr. O’Connor is coming to dinner.”

The young man smiled and said good-night, then went off in search

of the McChesneys to excuse himself.

“Did you have a nice talk with Mrs. McChesney?” said her mother.

“Sure,” said Sydney. “What happened to that other man?”

Sydney’s mother looked around. “I don’t know what happened to him. I suppose he left. I hadn’t noticed.”

Sydney searched the room for some sign of Jones.

“I didn’t realize you knew him.”

Sydney did not want to talk about her history with Jones right now. “Never mind. It’s not important.” She was tired. “Do you think you’re up to making dinner for a guest?”

“I have final exams to grade,” said her mother. “I thought you would make it.”

“I don’t feel like making a fancy dinner.”

“It doesn’t have to be fancy,” said her mother. The two of them started toward the white carpeting and the door on the other side of the room. “I’m sure Mr. O’Connor would be happy with anything you make.”

Sydney looked around to make sure no one would overhear. “He’s a nerd, mother.”

“He’s worth thirty million dollars, dear. And he’s a nice young man. He just needs a woman to give his life some direction.”

“Don’t do this, Mother,” said Sydney. “I’m not going to give direction to somebody with a paper clip holding his glasses together. And I don’t feel like making any dinner.”

“I’ll call a caterer,” said her mother.

“Mother,” said Sydney. “We can’t invite the man over and then give him catered food.”

“I don’t see why not.”

Sydney was getting so upset about the matter of dinner that she had almost forgotten the other issue she had with her mother. “Mother, you could have gotten us into trouble saying I was an expert in data-based marketing.”

“Aren’t you?” said her mother.

“Of course not,” said Sydney. “I’ve never marketed anything but

beer, and I've always worked out of corporate. You don't need a database for that."

"What did you talk with Mrs. McChesney about then?"

"She wanted to know what data-based marketing is," said Sydney.

"And did you tell her?"

"Well, yes."

"Then you are an expert." Her mother stopped at an end table and set her empty sherry glass on it. "What else did you talk about?"

Sydney shrugged. "She seems to want me to do some work for the College."

"You see?" said her mother. "You are an expert. You're more of an expert than you give yourself credit for."

"It doesn't matter," said Sydney. "I told her I wasn't interested."

"Are you turning down a paying job?" said her mother. "That doesn't sound like the Sydney I know."

Sydney felt the fatigue of the day's events, especially all that shopping, creeping into her bones. "Maybe I'm not that Sydney anymore."

They stopped at a doorway and her mother went off in search of their coats. Sydney looked around the room again for some sign of Jones. But he wasn't among the guests who were milling about on the snowy white carpet, and he wasn't with the ones scraping around on the pink marble.

Sydney looked at the ceramic ferrets. Two of them were holding hands, or at least clasping paws, and they looked very companionable. Sydney wondered then about the relationship between the McChesneys, the people who had come from who-knows-where to dominate her hometown. She had never gotten this close to powerful people. Like the ferrets, they seemed like a different species. She wondered if they related to each other the way ordinary people do.

But then, what did she know of the way ordinary people related to each other? She had not had a relationship (with a capital "R") since she had lost her prized red casserole pot. That was a strange connection to make, but even while she marveled at its strangeness, she was overcome by the memory of it. She had used that pot to make Jones a

cassoulet in celebration of their first month together. She got the idea of making it on Sunday afternoon while Jones was still at the library, which was where he spent every day, acquiring bits and fragments of information to fold carefully into the doctoral dissertation he was compiling. First she roasted a duck, which exacted its revenge for the indignity by filling the apartment with an aerosol of poultry fat. Then, for the rest of the day, she soaked white beans, toasted bread for crumbs, seared lamb, and fried sausages.

By the end of the day, she had used every bowl and pot in the kitchen, filled the apartment with an odor thick enough to clog the arteries of anyone who smelled it, and had yet to assemble the casserole so she could simmer it for four hours in the oven. When Jones walked in from the library, looked at the kitchen, and sniffed the air, she burst into tears.

Jones's understanding was nothing short of heroic. As soon as he got her to blubber the problem to him, he took over. He insisted she take a nap while he cleaned up the pots and bowls. He pointed out that she had no classes on Monday afternoon and she could simmer the cassoulet to her heart's content tomorrow. He declared that he loved her for what she had done. He sent out for Chinese food.

Sydney took a hot bath to try to soak the duck grease off, and by the time she had finished, Jones had cleaned up the kitchen and set the table for moo shi pork. She understood what an effort it was for him to take his mind away from the role of advertising in the modern economy, and she was grateful.

The next day, the duck smell had dissipated, and in the afternoon she assembled the cassoulet in the red enameled pot and put it into the oven. For four hours, while she sat reading and annotating *Sister Carrie* for her course in American Realism and Naturalism, the stew simmered and filled the apartment with a delicate smell of herbs and meat.

Jones got home from the library bearing a bouquet of carnations, a bottle of champagne, and a pair of fresh candles. They hardly spoke during the meal, and Jones, his eyes bright in the candlelight, never once mentioned the diminishing marginal utility of anything. In fact,

she couldn't remember anything he'd said besides how good the meal was and how much he loved her, which remarks he made in whispers, as if they'd been in church.

"Are you ready?"

Sydney was wrenched from her memory and discovered her mother standing beside her with the coats.

Sydney looked at her sidelong. "So you've never seen the man in the tweed jacket before?"

"I've seen him at these parties," said her mother, "but I don't know what department he's from. If you would take the job Mrs. McChesney offered you, you would see him again, I'm sure. It's really a pretty small place."

"How often do they have these parties?" said Sydney.

"About once a month," said her mother. "President McChesney says it's important for him to get to know his team members on a personal basis. He's a great believer in teamwork."

"Was he here tonight?" said Sydney. "I don't think I saw him."

"He's not usually around very much during the parties," said her mother.

The two of them went out and got into the car to drive home. Sydney tried to listen while her mother drove expertly and chatted about campus politics. But she really couldn't get Jones out of her mind. He kept turning up in there, and she was subjected to an extended replay of her last argument with him.

Jones might have been a wonderfully understanding man and a considerate lover, but he wasn't very easy to live with. He had been a slob. There were always little messes everywhere: little piles of laundry, little stacks of dirty dishes, and mounds of papers and books. Sydney kept the laundry and dishes picked up pretty well, but she could not keep up with the papers and books. They were all over the apartment, even the bathroom.

Sydney had tried to live good-naturedly with the mess. She even made gentle suggestions from time to time about the value of neatness and keeping the place more livable. Jones, if he even heard these com-

ments (for he seemed quite preoccupied with that dissertation of his), would turn them aside with some stupid joke. And when Sydney finally felt she couldn't tolerate the joking any more and tried to get him to be serious about it, they wound up in a vicious fight. It was the only time he had ever addressed his conversation to her different-colored eyes. At breakfast, he told her their relationship had outlived its usefulness.

That day, she cut both her losses and her classes. She packed up her clothes and got a bus back to Washboro and her parents. It was only when she got home that she realized she had left the red pot behind. She wondered if he still used it.

Sydney watched the mailbox pass under the window outside not more than three inches away.

"Mother?" she said.

"Yes, dear?"

Her mother got the car stopped and began to turn off the lights, set the brake, and switch off the engine.

"Do you like cassoulet?" asked Sydney.

# Six

**I**n 1981, the year Barton McChesney assumed the presidency of Coolidge College, he and his wife, Arlene, moved into President's House. McChesney, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, could hardly contain his excitement on moving day. He and Arlene got to President's House about an hour ahead of the movers. He wandered from room to room, imagining where they would entertain, where he would do his homework, where their guests would stay. Arlene was in charge of arranging the house, but he couldn't help himself.

Ever since he found out about his destiny, McChesney found it impossible to be bored, whether he had anything to do or not. Before, he would not have enjoyed looking in closets, but these days he found it engaging.

After he'd looked at nearly every closet, shelf, and nook in the house, he found Arlene in the dining room. From the doorway, she looked rather small at the other end of the room, where she was setting up her ferret collection on the hearth. The real ferrets sat on the floor behind her, still for once, and watched her as she would move a piece an inch or two one way or the other, then step back to look at it. She hadn't allowed the movers to touch the collection, but had brought the pieces in the car, wrapped in bath towels and resting on the back seat.

"They look good there," he said.

The ferrets turned to look at him as he entered the room.

"Yes, don't they?" She moved the tall one from the center to the left side.

McChesney thought they looked unbalanced with the tall one over to one side like that. But he knew he could not rely on his judgment for such things.

"That's much better," said Arlene. She waved toward the fireplace. The mantel needs something."

"What?" said McChesney.

"I don't know yet. It just looks so bare here."

"You aren't unhappy with this place, are you?" asked McChesney suddenly.

"Oh, no, Bart." She turned to him. "And I'm so proud of you."

McChesney didn't understand. "Proud?" he said. "It's just my vocation."

McChesney pronounced the word "vocation" with pleasure. It had been his most delightful discovery of the past several years. After he found out about his destiny earlier that year, he'd seen that Arlene had very little patience with any mention of it. Every time he said the word "destiny," the corners of her mouth turned down and her brow wrinkled the way it did whenever he overdrew his checking account. Finding a way to follow his destiny without ruining his marriage had seemed a problem until he'd discovered the word "vocation." He had heard the word once or twice before, but when he read that article in Reader's Digest, it took on a new meaning for him. In its archaic sense, said the article, the word "vocation" meant "calling."

It was such a nice way to describe what McChesney felt about his destiny. Calling. Vocation. He had been called to this work, that much was clear to him. He couldn't very well say he had a calling, however; it was such a small word, and it ended in "ing." But vocation, now there was a word. After he looked up "archaic," he liked it even more. He was a naturally conservative person, and he enjoyed the idea of using words in their archaic sense. Of course, the best thing about the word vocation was that it didn't make Arlene frown.

He looked at her, and she was smiling at him. He wondered if she minded leaving her career to come here. She had never complained. She even said she liked it. McChesney was glad. He knew himself well enough to know he couldn't do this job without her help. She might not like him talking about his destiny, but Arlene was a person who got things done. And he knew he would need to

get things done at Coolidge College. That was the whole point.

"When are the movers getting here?" he said.

"They're probably out there now." Arlene scooped up both of the live ferrets.

They walked to front door, and McChesney opened it just in time to see the truck entering the drive.

"I'll take care of this, Bart," she said. "Don't you have a speech to work on?"

"I don't have any place to work yet."

She looked at him. "Try to stay out of the way, then, OK?" She handed him the ferrets. "I don't want them getting out."

McChesney took them upstairs to their new bedroom and put them in their cage. "Get a nap or something," he said. Then he started for the third floor. He wanted to work his way downstairs, looking out every window of the house and comparing the views.

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The next day was McChesney's first actual day on the job, and there was a ceremony planned at the first-floor auditorium of Felmley Hall. The college expected to hear from him, and most of the staff was supposed to be there for a speech. The week before they moved, Arlene offered to write his speech, but he said he would rather do it himself.

"That's fine, Bart," she said. "Just make sure you start by telling them you won't be making any staff changes."

"Won't I?"

"That doesn't matter," said Arlene. "In a situation like this, people need reassurance. You're the new boss. They're worried about what you intend to do." She began writing on a pad of yellow lined paper. She didn't stop to think or anything. She just wrote. "Here," she said at last. "She pointed with her finger at the pad and counted. "One, two, three, four, five." She tore off the top sheet and handed it to him. "If you want my advice, you'll use these five sentences to start with. You can say anything you want after that."

McChesney took the paper. Arlene was so smart, and so good with words. He looked at the sentences she had written out. He didn't understand them right away, but he had time to figure them out.

*A year ago, he might have been afraid to make a speech to the entire staff of the college, but now he hardly gave it a thought. He had a vocation, and he feared nothing.*

*He didn't know what else he should talk about after Arlene's five sentences, and he spent fruitless days thinking about it. At that point, however, he didn't want to ask Arlene's help. This was, after all, his vocation. So he went to the encyclopedia they'd had since they were first married, took out Volume Nine ("Desert to Egret"), and looked up "Education." He realized with regret that he had never looked in the encyclopedia in all the years they had owned it. There were a lot of interesting things—deserts, detective work, diesels, East Indies—but he didn't have time to look at them.*

*When he found the entry for education, it appeared to be both learned and even-handed. This was the way he wanted to be known at Coolidge: learned and even-handed. He decided to make some notes from the encyclopedia but found he could not really say it any other way than what was on the page, so he copied it out by hand and decided he would deliver it as his speech. He rehearsed it several times, out of Arlene's hearing, of course. He wanted to surprise her.*

*He arose early that first morning, went to the downstairs bathroom, closed himself inside, and delivered his speech one last time. Satisfied with his performance, he went back upstairs, took a shower in the upstairs bathroom, and then went to breakfast with Arlene. They ate quietly, then he put on his dark suit. President Otis had suggested he wear a cap and gown, and he would have enjoyed wearing one, but Arlene had preferred a plain dark suit. He asked her to pick out a shirt and tie for him. She chose a white shirt and a yellow tie with tiny dark things on it.*

*After he finished dressing, he and Arlene went twenty minutes early to the hall. Arlene sat in the front row, and he stood at the podium watching people enter, smiling at some, nodding at others. When the hall was nearly filled, someone in the back of the room shut the doors, and McChesney cleared his throat. Silence fell over the room like a blanket. He began speaking fearlessly into the microphone.*

*"I paid for this microphone—"*

*There was an uproar of laughter, and McChesney had to stop until it got*

quiet again. He swelled with confidence at the sound, although he didn't know what they were laughing at. They finally calmed down, and he read out Arlene's five sentences, with feeling and with appropriate pauses.

"I'm Barton McChesney. I'm the new president of Calvin Coolidge College, and I wanted to speak to you this morning about our plans and goals. But let's take care of the important things first." McChesney looked around the room to let the tension build a little. There was no movement whatsoever, and it was as if they were all holding their breath.

"I've looked over your personnel records, and I am impressed with the quality of the people here." He looked around. "I plan no staff changes."

There was applause punctuated by cheers, and McChesney could feel the good will and gratitude that welled up around him. They continued the applause, and he looked over the room again. That part went over so well, maybe he should have let Arlene write the whole speech. He smiled at her in the front row, and he thought he saw a look of pride in her face. He was grateful to give her something to be proud of. The applause died down, and McChesney took up the part of the speech he had prepared on his own.

He grasped the laps of his open jacket, resettled the garment on his shoulders, and prepared to deliver his own material. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, then he looked down at his manuscript. "There is a broad consensus on the need to develop in our young basic skills in the areas of reading, writing, and arithmetic."

He paused and looked around. They all seemed to be listening attentively. He went on. "Beyond that, however, there seems to be almost no agreement as to what constitutes a good education. In general, the principal conflict can be characterized as one between liberals and conservatives."

McChesney paused again. He had decided he should do this between paragraphs to give the audience a chance to absorb the information. Maybe they would want to applaud once in a while. He looked down at his manuscript and resumed.

"Conservatives suggest the importance of education to be the transmission of our cultural heritage, the imparting of the fundamental skills and values required for the stability and advancement of society." McChesney stopped and took a drink of water from the glass on the podium. It looked like they weren't

going to interrupt him with applause. That was probably good. He was beginning to look forward to the end of the speech.

"They tend to put a heavy emphasis on the three R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic in the early stages and on practical subjects for the more advanced students." He paused again, hoping someone would laugh at the joke about the three R's, but nobody did. He wondered if they got it.

"The liberals stress the development of students as people. They tend to view academic subjects as a means to personal growth and believe content is not acquired for its own sake, but for the richness it lends to the life of the learner."

McChesney stopped. That was as far as the speech went. He looked around to see what kind of impact it had had. Not much. Someone coughed. People shifted themselves in their seats here and there. Maybe he should have copied out another couple of paragraphs. He leaned over to the microphone.

"Thank you," he said.

A murmur went through the crowd, and many people looked at each other. Then someone clapped, followed by a handful of others. McChesney acknowledged the applause with a nod.

Then the audience rose, almost as a body, and filed out. A few well-wishers came to shake his hand and tell him he was wonderful. He believed some of them. He had a phrase picked out to use.

"I appreciate your sincerity," he said.

After they drifted away, there was just Arlene.

"You were wonderful, Bart." She kissed him on the cheek.

McChesney thought he felt himself blush. He smiled at her. After thirty years of marriage, she could still make him blush.

Arlene went with him up to the President's Office on the third floor. As they entered the office, they found the staff, five vice presidents and many assistants and secretaries, gathered in the reception area. The staff applauded when he and Arlene came through the door. McChesney was touched. The only person who seemed to be missing was Vice President Speen, from Community Affairs. When McChesney asked about him, people just shrugged and said they didn't know anything about him. One of the secretaries approached him and Arlene with cups of tea.

"Thank you," he said.

*The secretary smiled shyly and faded into the rest of the staff. Then things seemed to begin happening so quickly that McChesney had no more time to think about Vice President Speen.*

*“President McChesney,” said a voice from across the room.*

*McChesney looked for the voice and recognized Archer Willis, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, standing apart from the others.*

*“President McChesney,” Willis repeated, “we wanted to welcome you.”*

*“Thank you,” said McChesney.*

*“Coolidge College is neither large nor prosperous these days,” said Willis, as if he were giving a speech. “But we are proud of our traditions of innovation and academic excellence. I think I speak for everyone here when I say we are looking forward to working with you.” He paused. “I think I speak for everyone,” he said again, “when I say we are eager for educational leadership in the philosophical conflict between liberals and conservatives.”*

*McChesney thought he heard someone laugh, but no one had said anything funny, so it must have been his imagination.*

*The other vice presidents and some of the administrative staff applauded.*

*McChesney set his teacup on the nearest desk, smiled as broadly as he could, and walked over to shake Willis’s hand. He liked the man.*

*“I appreciate your sincerity,” he said.*

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*McChesney spent most of the next week working with the Director of Buildings and Grounds. Two people from the custodial staff were being arraigned in District Court on drug charges. McChesney spent his first afternoon at B&G discussing disciplinary measures with the director. Then the next day, the two of them spent the entire day in the District Attorney’s office in Rutland. Then there was a series of meetings between campus security and the Washboro Police. The thing seemed to go on forever.*

*The college had been served with an injunction against dumping raw sewage into Felmley Pond. McChesney could see Felmley Pond from his office window. He was surprised his college was dumping sewage into it, but he learned it had been going on since the school was founded in the 1930s.*

*There was a meeting on what they could do to store the sewage until a treatment plant could be built. The B&G director took him around to the spot where the sewage was being dumped. It smelled to high heaven, even in the cold air of winter, and McChesney wondered how it had gone on so long. He looked across the pond at Felmley Hall. Maybe it would have been better if President Otis had commissioned a sewage treatment plant and built a three-story building instead of a four-story one. Because of his former line of work, McChesney knew a little about sewage, but he understood that was not enough. He was going to have to become an expert in it. He looked forward to late nights of reading engineering manuals, and he wondered how he would ever be able to understand all the things his vocation was requiring him to understand.*

*He was tied up at Buildings and Grounds the entire day, and he didn't even go back to his office before going home. He decided there wasn't anything there that couldn't wait until Saturday morning. He was tired, and he was grateful the week was over. He walked from the Buildings and Grounds office across the snow-covered campus to President's House. Being a college president was turning out differently than he'd expected. He had hoped to begin working on the Economics Department, to make sure it was teaching supply-side, long before this. It was strange the way life worked. He couldn't do anything about his primary purpose here until he dealt with this sewage problem. He was tired, and he looked forward to a relaxed evening alone with Arlene.*

*She hugged him as soon as he walked in the door, then sent him upstairs to shower and change, saying he smelled like sewage. McChesney didn't smell anything, but he supposed after a week of looking at plumbing and effluent, he was pretty used to it. The shower relaxed him, and he was grateful for the sweetness of life when he sat down at the table with his wife.*

*Before dinner was under way, she dropped a bombshell.*

*"Vice President Willis resigned today without notice," she said. "He has vacated his office."*

*"You mean he just left?" said McChesney.*

*Arlene nodded and sipped from a stemmed glass of white wine. The work-study student who stood by with the soup tureen stepped up beside her and ladled something into the shallow dish in front of her.*

*"It was very strange." Arlene made a little gesture with her hand, and the*

work-study student put the third ladleful back into the tureen and stepped back from the table. "I happened to be there at his office. He asked me to give you his deepest apologies. He said it was an emergency. His brother is dying or something."

"We could have arranged a leave of absence," said McChesney, bewildered.

The student started to walk toward the other end of the table. McChesney didn't want any soup and waved him away. The young man didn't look comfortable in the short, white linen jacket he wore over what appeared to be a Hawaiian-style sport shirt. McChesney watched the student slouch into the kitchen with his soup tureen. He wished Arlene had not started using the work-study students as servants. It didn't look good, and for all he knew, he could get in trouble for abusing the financial aid program.

"When you win the lottery," said Arlene, lifting a spoonful of soup before her, "don't ask them to check your ticket number."

"What's the lottery have to do with it?" McChesney took a warm Parker House roll from the linen-wrapped bundle in a basket in front of him. He tore it open and with his butter knife began to mash wads of cold butter into the soft dough.

"I'm glad he left." Arlene sipped the broth from her spoon. "His operation was a mess, Bart. He wasn't going anywhere, and he had simply retired on the job. He saved you the trouble of terminating him."

The roll seemed to come apart in McChesney's hands and he got butter on his fingers. "Do you really think so?"

"If you'd had a chance to visit his office, you would have seen for yourself," said Arlene.

"But the rest of the faculty liked him so much." McChesney dropped the pieces of roll on his bread plate and wiped his hands with the napkin from his lap. "He ran the tenure committee. Many faculty members have told me they feel more secure here because of him." He grabbed another roll and mashed that one as well. Unable to get the butter to adhere to it, he dropped it in pieces beside its fellow. "President Otis told me he would be one of the most helpful people I would work with." He wiped butter off his fingers with his napkin a second time.

"If you want my opinion, Bart, President Otis didn't always have your inter-

ests at heart with his recommendations.”

“He certainly seemed sincere,” said McChesney. He put the napkin back in his lap and stared at the mutilated rolls.

“Everybody in this place is sincere, Bart. Sincerity’s not enough to get the job done, though.” Arlene took another sip of her soup. “The consommé is delicious. The new cook is working out marvelously. You should try some of this.”

McChesney knew she was right. Not about the cook or the consommé. He hated consommé. But she was right about sincerity not being enough.

“I think the faculty should be notified immediately,” said Arlene. “It’s better that they hear about it from you than from anyone else. Write a letter about his resignation and how much it saddens you. You can talk all about his reputation in the letter. There’s no need for anyone to know what he was really like. The College is at a delicate pass right now, and I think you would do best to keep everyone’s spirits up.” She sipped another spoonful of soup. “You’re good at that.”

“Yes, I am.” McChesney smiled, but he didn’t feel happy. This seemed a heavy problem coming on top of the sewage mess.

“I’ve made some notes you could work into the letter,” she said. “They are on your desk.”

“Thank you.” McChesney was genuinely grateful. He was good at doing those kinds of things, but it was much easier when you had something to start with.

“Bart?”

“Yes?”

“I think we should start holding regular receptions here for the faculty. What do you think of that?”

“You mean like parties?” said McChesney. “Do you think any of them would come?”

Arlene waved away this detail. “Let’s plan the first one in two months, as soon as the decorating is finished.” She set her soup spoon down and picked up her wine glass again. “Oh, by the way, I had to let the decorator go today.”

“Oh?” McChesney loved President’s House, and he was interested in the decorating.

“We had a disagreement over the ceramic ferrets,” she said. “And, as you

have reminded me many times, I am the boss.”

*“Yes, that’s true,” said McChesney, but he was a little sad. He disliked the ceramic ferrets, and he had told the decorator to try to get rid of them. He looked at the mangled rolls on his bread plate. “Are we going to get any food around here this evening?”*

# Seven

**O**n Saturday morning, Sydney sat in the kitchen and made a penciled list of the ingredients she would need for her cassoulet. She knew from experience it was already late to start a cassoulet, but over the years she had learned a number of shortcuts. Prepared bread crumbs (the kind in the pasteboard can from the supermarket), precooked chicken as a substitute for roast duck, canned beans instead of dried ones that had to be soaked. None of this ever made a casserole like the one she'd first made nineteen years ago, but the taste of it was good enough to evoke the memory of that night, which was why she made it from time to time, even to eat by herself.

She heard the doorbell, but she didn't get up, because she knew her mother was in the living room.

She decided to try leeks instead of onions this time and wrote "leeks" directly below "white beans" on her list. She added "garlic," then "parsley."

Sydney's mother pushed open the swinging door from the dining room and entered. She looked puzzled.

"Sydney," she said, "there's someone here to see you. It's the man from last night, the one with the tweed jacket."

Sydney felt her heart stop. She didn't feel it start again, but her

mother was waiting for some sort of response, and she realized she'd have to operate without it for a while. "What's he doing here?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," said her mother. "Is he a friend of yours, dear?"

"It's a long story, mother."

"You can tell me about it later." Her mother gestured toward the door to the living room. "He's waiting for you."

Sydney didn't know what to say to him now any more than she did last night. She looked up at her mother. Her mother did not look unsympathetic, but she seemed more puzzled than anything else.

"Do you want me to tell him you're ill, Sydney?"

It sounded like a good idea, but it was inconsistent with Sydney's idea of herself. It was time to reread the Jones chapter, no matter how uneasy she felt about it. She dropped her pencil across the list and stood up.

"I'll go," she said.

"I'll wait here," said her mother. "Call me if you need anything."

Her mother stepped aside, and Sydney pushed open the swinging door. When she got to the living room, Jones was standing in the center, away from any of the furniture. He looked haggard, as if he'd been up all night. He held in front of him an aging red cooking pot that had seen far better days. He offered it to her.

"You left this," he said.

Sydney looked at the pot. The rim was chipped, and it was more brown than red; the dark places shaded over to black in spots.

She looked back at Jones, and he was staring at her evenly—his trick of looking at both her eyes at once.

"Is this one of your jokes, Jones?"

"I don't know." His face assumed an expression both pleading and hopeful. "Do you think it's funny?"

Sydney couldn't keep herself from smiling. "Yeah."

Jones smiled, too. "I've wanted to apologize for nineteen years."

Sydney said nothing.

"The last time I saw you, I said something that hurt you."

“I guess you could say that.” Sydney snorted. “You told me we were through.”

“Told you we were through?” Jones looked genuinely shocked.

Sydney took the pot from him. “You didn’t take very good care of it, did you?” She smiled.

“I didn’t know I’d ever get the opportunity to give it back.” Empty of the pot, his hands didn’t seem to know what to do. They rose tentatively with a shrug of his shoulders, then found their way into his pants pockets. “I never told you we were through.”

“Jones, you told me we had exhausted our relationship.” Sydney looked at the inside of the pot. The beautiful snowy white insides were mottled brown. When she looked back at Jones, a surge of scarlet coloring swept upward from the vicinity of his shirt collar over his face to his forehead. Sydney thought he might be having some kind of attack. “Are you all right?”

“I was joking.”

Sydney didn’t want to talk about it anymore. His awful color made her uncomfortable. “Maybe I have something in the kitchen that can restore this finish.”

“Does it matter?” said Jones.

“It doesn’t cook quite as well when the color is uneven,” said Sydney.

She looked at Jones. His normal color had returned, but his expression was just short of miserable, as if he felt entirely too much guilt over the disfigurement of the pot.

“But we could try it,” she said. “Would you like to come to dinner tonight?”

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While Sydney attempted to restore the original color of the red pot, Jones stood next to the sink and kibitzed. Jones was funny, and he was supportive, but he wasn’t much help, and neither were the various cleaning compounds she found in the cabinets of her mother’s woefully underequipped kitchen.

“I give up,” said Sydney at last. She tossed the sponge into the soapy dishwater in the sink.

“Does this mean you won’t be able to use the pot?” said Jones.

“Oh, I’ll use it all right.” Sydney, wiped her hands on a dish towel. “It’s the best cassoulet pot I ever had. But right now, I have to go the market. I barely have enough time to get the stuff for dinner.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Jones.

Sydney looked at him. He was smiling, but his eyes were bloodshot, and she realized he’d probably gone without sleep most of the night.

“No, you won’t,” she said. “Go home and get a nap before dinner. You look terrible.”

Jones shrugged.

“See?” said Sydney. “You’re too tired to even make a smart remark.”

Jones nodded, and she saw him to the door. She admonished him to drive carefully on his way home.

Her mother was still grading exams, so she didn’t come to the market. Sydney was just as happy, as she didn’t think she had time to dawdle in gift and clothing shops. She needed to stop at the bookstore and see if she could get a book on landscape architecture. It was about time she found out what landscape architects did. It was chilly out, being early May. She put on a lightweight jacket and drove her mother’s car to Washboro and parked it on the street in front of Distant Wicker. It was the nearest space she could find to the hardware store with the pharmacy in it, although it was two blocks away. She wanted to go to the hardware store before she went to the market, to see if it had anything that might bring her red pot back, if not to its original condition, at least to serviceability.

As she climbed out of the car and stepped up on the sidewalk, she ran into Stinky. He was dressed in another silk shirt and pleated pants. He looked good. He smiled when he saw her, and Sydney was reminded of the word “radiant.”

“Sydney!”

“Hello, Steven.” Sydney was careful not to use his nickname, and she was grateful he didn’t use hers.

“Sydney, the most wonderful thing has happened! She called me last night. She says she can’t live without me. She’s begged me to come back.”

“Who?”

But Stinky continued under his own momentum. He grasped her arm, but he talked to himself as much as to her. “I’m going, Sydney. I’ve thought about it all night, and I’m going. I just came by to put a sign on the door to close the shop. I’m going home to tell Cheryl now.”

Some people follow their dreams, Sydney thought, and some people follow their conscience. And some people follow their crotch.

“What about your business?” said Sydney.

“I’m selling Steven’s.” Stinky had apparently not heard her, but continued with his story. “I’ve composed an ad, and I’m going to call it in tomorrow morning. I’m going to have a garage sale next week. Come around if you need some stuff. I’ve got some good things. I’ll call you with my address. My house is a rental. Shall I recommend you to my landlord? Cheryl will have to find some place to live. I’m sure she’ll manage. I’m going home to talk the whole thing out with her now. I owe her that, don’t you think?”

In fact, Sydney thought Stinky had a pretty narrow perspective on what he owed.

“Sure,” she said.

“Wish me luck,” said Stinky. “I don’t want to see Cheryl hurt. She’s been so good to me.”

He didn’t wait for his good luck wish, but simply hurried away. Sydney stood on the sidewalk and watched him walk rapidly toward a car near the end of the block. His silk shirt flapped in the breeze. She wondered how he could walk around outside without his jacket, but why would a man need a jacket when he has his libido to keep him warm? For some men—well maybe most men—concepts like duty, trust, and honor were wisps in the gale of sexual attraction.

She continued to watch him as he unlocked the car door and climbed in. The car was a lot like Steven himself: sporty-looking and well-kept. The car backed up a foot or so, then roared away intemperately, leaking

puffs of blue smoke under the front wheels. Sydney felt sorry for Cheryl, not because she was losing Stinky, but because she was about to be walked on, all because Stinky wanted it langorous.

Sydney remembered langorous. She remembered cassoulet, and the night she and Jones had eaten one by candlelight. The casserole was exquisite; but as good as it was, they had eaten sparingly, watching each other's faces. Sydney had found her heart was beating rapidly by the time dinner was over. Jones took her hand and wordlessly led her into the bedroom. He undressed her slowly, thoroughly kissing whatever flesh he uncovered as he removed each garment. Then, with gentle hands and soft mouth, he virtually disassembled her and remade her as a metaphor for the slow-cooked cassoulet. He imperceptibly brought her body temperature to a simmer and kept it there for what seemed to be hours. Sydney, her insides boiling and bubbling, felt like the main dish at a banquet.

And it struck her that eating a banquet was the easy part. When she had run away from Jones rather than trying to work out whatever problem had grown up between them, it was like leaving him to clean everything up after she'd had the enjoyment of the meal. She had the ridiculous urge to apologize to him for it.

Sydney surfaced from her ruminations, on the sidewalk of Main Street in Washboro, by colliding with someone.

"Jesus, lady."

"Excuse me," she said automatically. She discovered herself standing in front of four burly teenagers. One of the teenagers, who wore an oversized tee shirt and baseball cap that sat backwards on his head, was staggering in circles on the sidewalk in front of her.

"Are you all right?" said Sydney.

"I don't know," said the kid, continuing to stagger. "Do me again." He abruptly stopped staggering and stared at her chest. He crossed his eyes and let his tongue loll from one side of his mouth.

"He's dying," said one of his buddies. "Looks like lackanooky to me."

"Give him mouth to mouth, lady."

Before Sydney had a chance to feel threatened, the four of them fell

to hooting and punching each other on their rounded biceps and went on their way. Sydney stared after them.

The boys, half a block away now, encountered the array of gardening and maintenance equipment on display in front of the hardware store. One of them grabbed a roto-tiller by the handles and began to make motoring noises and pushing it around, threatening one of his friends with it. They all seemed to think this was hilarious. Another one leaped over a riding mower. Sydney imagined herself using one of those roto-tillers—churning the good Vermont soil, working her muscles to keep the machine moving in a straight line, feeling the honest sweat running down her face.

The boys, having finished their horseplay with the equipment, went on their way, talking too loudly to each other, punching each other, spitting in the street as if they'd invented the act of spitting.

Sydney recognized in the boys the audience she had targeted in all her Bikini Light marketing. They were too young to buy beer, but not too young to buy brand identification. The payoff wasn't immediate, but it was enormous.

The thought transported her back to her old office, and she found herself reliving the last few moments of her job at Capital Brewing, Inc. It was the day Malcolm brought over the videocassette with his "salvaged" Bikini Light commercial on it.

Roy the Dirigible had sat in the reclining chair at his desk. He wore no jacket. He had on a loose white shirt, strapped to his heavy torso by suspenders. It gave him the appearance of a badly packed bedroll. Sydney knew from the acrid but elusive odor of an electrical fire in the walls that he was impatient.

When Malcolm arrived, clutching a videocassette, he looked past Sydney and strode rapidly to Roy's desk, as if attracted by the vice-presidential gravity of it. He reached down and grabbed Roy's plump hand before the executive had a chance to stand.

"Don't get up," said Malcolm. "I'm sorry we're late. I told my girl to call you, but I guess she didn't get through. Don't you hate when that happens?"

Malcolm didn't usually make gaffes like referring to his assistant as

“his girl.” Sydney thought briefly about saying something, but she thought it might do more good if it were said in private. She noticed a familiar figure had followed Malcolm in: short, bald, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket.

“Roy,” said Malcolm, “this is Caldwell.” He gestured to the man in the leather jacket.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Caldwell,” said Roy.

“Just Caldwell.” The man didn’t shake hands but looked around Roy’s spacious office as if he might have to defend it against a squad of Ninja adepts. He walked toward the sitting area and seated himself on the sofa near the television set.

“Caldwell is a man who turns lemons into lemonade,” said Malcolm to Roy. “I asked him to come, so he could take some credit for bringing in your commercial on time and under budget.”

Sydney felt that Malcolm was ignoring her.

Roy looked at his watch. He was beginning to smell like garlic.

Malcolm sniffed unobtrusively. “Let’s just get to it.” He strode toward the television set.

Like a blimp leaving its mooring, Roy rose from his chair and set a course for the sitting area on the other side of the room.

“Get the curtains, please, Sydney,” he said.

Sydney walked to the windows and pulled the cord to shut the curtains, darkening the room as Roy began his rendezvous with a captain’s chair in the sitting area. She then joined the three men and sat on the sofa at the opposite end from Caldwell as Roy finished his docking maneuver and came to rest in his chair.

Malcolm shoved the tape into the player and turned everything on.

Everyone stared at the flashing numbers of the leader on the large screen, then it started. The commercial opened on a city street from high overhead. The camera zoomed down to ground level, then traveled rapidly up the street until it stopped at an outdoor cafe. The photographic technique was extraordinary. It had color, depth, and richness. Even on a television screen, it created a panorama.

There was a man seated at a table at the cafe. A waitress approached him.

“Would you like something to drink, sir?”

“I’d like a beer,” said the man.

“What kind of beer would you like?”

The man shaded his eyes from the sun and looked up at her. “Make it a Bikini Light.”

“I’m sorry, sir. We don’t carry that brand.”

The camera followed the man’s eyes up toward the waitress, then over her shoulder, where it refocused on the top of a building that appeared to be about thirty stories high. A figure, recognizably human, stood poised at the edge. Then the scene cut to the vantage point on top of the building, behind the figure. It was a woman, with blond hair to her waist. From the back, you couldn’t see much about her besides hair, although she wore a red bikini. She held a round tray with a bottle and glass on it.

Almost as soon as the camera focused on her back, she stepped easily from the building into the air. The scene cut again and followed her descent part-way down. It was only for an instant, but it seemed to Sydney like an hour. The actress, hurtling groundward, shifted and twisted, and her long blond hair trailed upward gracefully. Sydney felt a lump in her throat, and she had to blink rapidly to keep from crying.

When she stopped blinking, she saw that the scene had cut again—to ground level. The blond woman landed on her red high-heeled pumps in front of the camera. She bent her knees deeply on landing and leaned forward, steadying herself on the sidewalk with her free hand and tantalizing the camera with a glimpse of rounded flesh where the top of her suit slipped forward ever so slightly. She stood up and brushed her leg. She held the tray upright and steadily the whole time. Of course she wasn’t the same actress Sydney had hired. But she was a sort of caricature of her, all the prettiness, none of the innocence. Her eyebrows were dark and heavy, Sydney thought, and she didn’t even look like the blond hair she was wearing belonged to her. Her expression was salacious. It was the only word Sydney could think of to describe it.

Sydney felt like she was going to be sick. In the film, the waitress looked on with a surprised expression as the woman in the bikini approached the table with a sensual sort of walk, set the glass down by

the man, and poured the beer into it. Then she set the bottle beside it. The man took the glass, and the camera zoomed close in on the bottle while a sultry female voice said, "Experience Bikini Light." Then an empty glass was set down beside the bottle and the camera pulled out to show the man again.

"I'll have another of those," he said.

The camera panned to a profile of the woman in the bikini. "Right away," she said and turned to go. The camera zoomed to focus on the backs of her red high-heeled shoes. She stopped in mid-stride, and the camera moved slowly up her back, providing an inadvertent physiology lesson in the way high-heeled shoes elevate the human bottom. When the camera reached her head, she was looking over her shoulder with an inviting expression. "I'll be a minute," she said. "It's a long way down."

The screen darkened to a black two shades lighter than the feeling that blossomed in Sydney's upper abdomen. And even while she was revolted by the whole thing, a voice whispered in her brain that it was brilliant. It was hip. It was a veritable comic book of a beer commercial. It would hit with teenagers. It would sell brand identification to an entire generation of beer drinkers before they were even old enough to buy the stuff.

"I like it," said Roy. "It's just the kind of statement we wanted to make. The jumping sequence is incredibly realistic."

"Caldwell," said Malcolm, "has turned our lemons into lemonade."

Sydney cleared her throat to speak. She felt herself controlling her voice, and it sounded even and quiet. "Roy, this is sick."

Malcolm and Roy looked at her as if she'd just confessed to falsifying her resume, and she knew the remark had destroyed any hope she had of a vice presidency. She wondered whether the hope had ever been realistic. Malcolm and Roy sat there smugly, and Sydney feared for a moment that she was going to sully the honor of her gender by crying like "some silly woman." She could feel the tears beginning to gather behind her eyes, but she willed them back to wherever they were coming from.

Malcolm turned to Roy.

“We’ve checked with Legal,” he said. “They see no exposure in this for Capital Brewing.”

“Malcolm,” said Sydney, still keeping her voice under control, “that woman was killed. You were there. You saw it. Don’t you have any normal human feelings?”

The four of them sat there in silence, three of them apparently embarrassed by Sydney’s outburst. Roy’s smell went from garlic to gym socks.

Finally Caldwell, who had been silent, leaned forward to speak. The other three turned to look at him.

“The rest of us could do a lot worse than to die while using our God-given talents,” he said.

To this day, Sydney didn’t know whether the man was joking. But joking or not, it was the single biggest regret of her life that she had not punched him before storming out of the room.

She looked off toward the mountains that surrounded Washboro. They sat there silently and mocked her for spending fifteen years selling beer-flavored water to teenaged boys. It’s not difficult to sell beer-flavored water to teenaged boys, they seemed to say. It’s difficult *not* to sell it to them. You want something difficult to sell teenaged boys? Sell them poetry, higher mathematics, foreign languages, art history. Sell them civilization.

She felt in her jacket pocket for Arlene McChesney’s card, and she remembered Mrs. McChesney had told her to call over the weekend if she felt like it.

Sydney stopped on her way into the hardware to look at the roto-tiller. It was a lot larger up close. It had a substantial engine with a starting cord and several levers that she supposed controlled it. It looked as though it would make an awful lot of noise.

# Eight

Jones was glad he had taken Sydney's advice and had a nap, for he felt better. But dinner was a very strange experience. He and Sydney sat at either ends of the table, and Sydney's mother stood behind Sydney. At least he assumed it was Sydney's mother standing there; the woman kept changing into Arlene McChesney and saying, "Excuse me, Dr. Ferguson."

Although he assumed the food was good, Jones had no impression of eating it. He had, in fact, little impression of anything besides Sydney's eyes, which hovered in the air in front of him. They shone in the candlelight and made him ache for the life he had thrown away.

And then he and Sydney were alone in the kitchen. He was holding a dish towel, and Sydney was bent over a sink filled with dishes. He tossed the dish towel on the kitchen table, put his hands on her waist, and kissed the back of her neck. Sydney tilted her head to expose more of her neck to his mouth.

"Go wait in your car, and I'll be out in a few minutes," she said.

"Shouldn't I say good night to your mother?"

"No," said Sydney. "She hates you."

The kitchen dissolved and changed to the inside of Jones's car, and he was sitting behind the wheel. The car radio played softly. The announcer introduced a song by saying, "This next love song goes out to

Jones, who got lucky tonight.”

But Jones didn't hear what song it was, because Sydney materialized beside him, and the sight of her interfered with his hearing. She leaned across to him, grabbed the back of his neck, and kissed him passionately.

“Did you take care of your mother?” said Jones when they broke from the kiss.

“I tied her up,” said Sydney.

The car seat changed into his futon at home, and he was kneeling beside a recumbent Sydney to unfasten her buttons between kisses. He had only unfastened two buttons before her clothes vanished, taking his with them. The two of them were naked on the futon. He turned her over on her stomach and kissed the snowy white inside of her knee. She giggled with pleasure.

Jones felt that he was resuming a course of study he had left off an hour ago. He was well versed in the subtleties and nuances of the physical Sydney. He knew she must have changed in nineteen years, but she seemed to him to be exactly as he remembered her. He understood her legs, breasts, bottom, shoulders, and stomach as well as he knew his own soul. He played the chords of a slow, silent love song over the keyboard of her entire body. She moaned with pleasure.

And then he was on top of her, kissing her face all over and thrusting his groin furiously against hers.

“Oh, Jones,” she cried.

His body exploded with a release so intense as to be nearly painful. He didn't plan on saying anything, but he could hear himself shouting. “I love you, Sydney.”

Right after that, he woke up—alone—lying on his stomach in what felt like a wet spot on his bed.

“Oh, no,” said Jones, but there was no one there to hear him.

He raised himself up from the futon. He'd been sleeping naked, and he was messy. There was a fresh wet spot on the bed. He climbed out of the bed feeling sheepish, although there was no one to feel sheepish in front of.

In nearly twenty years of teaching economics and working on *The*

*General Theory of Value*, he could recall feeling only two emotions: irritation and boredom. As he stripped the bedclothes from the bed and then searched in his laundry basket for linen that, if not fresh, was at least dry, he found himself gripped by powerful and varied feelings. He managed to sort them out slowly. He felt ashamed for the mess he'd made in his bed. He felt injured because in his dream Sydney's mother hated him. He felt excited about Sydney, as if he needed to be with her every moment, as if he suddenly realized his life was completely empty—and she could fill it. And all these feelings were the result of a dream?

Jones had never put much stock in dreams. He had always assumed they carried about as much meaning as television commercials. But he could not deny the intensity of the feelings he'd had during this dream, and they had persisted into his waking state.

He was still trying to understand what was going on inside him after he'd had a shower and gotten himself cleaned up. Was he losing control of his own mind? He was in his mid-forties. He was on the verge of establishing what amounted to a Unified Field Theory of Economics. He only needed another couple weeks' work, and he'd be in a position to show an ungrateful world what he had done. He couldn't afford a romantic entanglement now.

Then he stood in his closet and examined his rack of neckties. He chose the bright one with the tiny flowers, the one that deepened the color of his face and made him look more healthy. He picked out a pale shirt. He caught himself hoping it went with the tie. He shook his head and put the shirt on. What was happening to him?

He saw the tweed jacket hanging there, and he bypassed it for the dark blazer with the shiny buttons. He pulled the blazer from its hanger and laid it on the bed while he wrapped the necktie under his collar. He tied it by feel.

He couldn't really be in love, could he? Wasn't he simply the victim of a wet dream, a manifestation of sexual frustration?

It had been a long time since Jones had slept with a woman. Not that there hadn't been other women since Sydney. There had been. Several, at least. None of them lasted any longer than a nontenured faculty appointment. In fact, since Sydney, nearly every relationship

had expired with a teaching contract, as Jones had moved on to another job and rapidly lost touch with whatever woman declined to move with him. The job at Coolidge had given him a tenured position, but he had long ago stopped thinking of himself as a man eligible for a permanent relationship.

Jones went into the bathroom to look in the mirror, since he didn't have one in the bedroom. It never seemed to him to make any sense to buy one, since he already had one in the bathroom. He stood over the sink and saw that the knot in his necktie was skinny and crooked. He decided to leave it that way, so as to look badly put together and convince himself he didn't really believe he was trying to derail his life with romantic entanglements. He studied his face for signs of creases and wrinkles. Smiling seemed to create little maps of tributaries from the outer corners of his eyes. He resolved to look serious at dinner.

He felt so uncomfortable about the dreamed version of Sydney's mother hating him that he thought he should do something to win the real mother's confidence. Maybe he should have been nicer to her when Arlene McChesney first introduced him. He decided to stop and buy some flowers on the way to their house.

There were signs at the florist's shop reminding the customers that it was Mother's Day, and the place was completely jammed. Jones had to wait while five other people were served before he could make his purchase. And, when it was his turn, there weren't any roses left. He was actually a little relieved. At five dollars a stem, he wouldn't have been able to get very many of them. There wasn't anything left, in fact, except carnations. Jones was concerned about his ability to win the mother's confidence (or at least tolerance) with flowers as pedestrian as carnations, but he decided he didn't have much choice.

Then he stopped at the hardware store and picked up a bottle of wine. He bought a brand called "Chateau," a variety known as "White." It was unimpressive and obviously domestic, but the hardware store catered to the New York tourist crowd, and carried very little in his price range. Chateau White was the only bottle he could afford that had a cork.

On the drive to Sydney's house, he was startled by a memory of an

evening nineteen years before. He and Sydney had been in bed, and Sydney had confided to him that, growing up, she had been preoccupied with her uniqueness. She had always thought of herself as a freak, and she despised the men who were interested in her. She thought them a special type of pervert. She told him she loved him because he was one of two people in the entire world who could look at her without switching his gaze from one eye to the other, as if she were some kind of tennis match. The other, she said, was her mother. The memory made him consider Sydney's mother less fearfully, but he resolved to remain alert.

Jones had wanted to match her revelation, and he confessed that it had taken him six months to understand the difference between cost-push and demand-pull inflation. The experience thrilled him. He'd never shared such things with another human being before. Jones smiled uncomfortably at the memory. What must she have thought about his inability to understand inflation?

He approached Sydney's house troubled by the way his mind and his feelings were acting. Why had he had a wet dream? Why had he just relived a moment of mutual revelation? Jones stood on Sydney's doorstep and wondered if it might not be worthwhile for him to study psychology sometime as a way of getting better control over his mind.

He rang the doorbell. The door opened, and Sydney herself stood in the doorway. She smiled at him through the glass of the storm door. She pushed the door open and looked down at the bouquet of carnations. Then she looked at his other hand, at the bottle of wine in the brown paper bag.

She pushed open the door and held it for him. As he stepped past her, she grabbed his upper arm and gave it a squeeze. Jones's heartbeat quickened at her touch. Sydney pulled the door shut after him, and they stood in the foyer looking at each other. Both of them spoke at the same time.

"Sydney, I—"

"You remembered—"

They both stopped and smiled, but hearing the word "remembered,"

Jones realized he had blundered into unknown territory.

“You first,” said Sydney.

“No, you,” said Jones.

He said nothing more, and finally she spoke.

“You remembered the carnations.”

“How could I forget?” said Jones. He wondered what significance carnations had.

“What were you going to say?”

The idea crossed Jones’s mind to tell her he loved her. He wished he knew if he did. “You look nice,” he said. It sounded lame, but it was as good as he could do.

Sydney smiled and led him into the kitchen. It was redolent of meat and spices. The smell opened a vault in Jones’s memory and released an outpouring of fleeting, half-forgotten images. Candlelight. Wine. His old waterbed. Sydney’s naked body writhing with pleasure.

Then he saw Sydney’s mother standing against the kitchen counter, sipping at a cup of coffee. He hardly recognized her. She wasn’t wearing her glasses, and her hair was different somehow. She wore a dress that flattered her shape much more than the tweed jacket did. It struck him then that both Sydney and her mother were quite trim. He knew that Sydney was passionately devoted to food, and he had often wondered how she kept herself looking so slim. He guessed it must be some kind of metabolism thing that was obviously hereditary.

“Would you like a cup of coffee, Jones?” asked Sydney’s mother.

“No, thank you.”

“Look, Mother,” said Sydney, “he brought wine.” She took the bottle from Jones and handed it to her mother.

Her mother pulled the bottle from its bag and looked at it. “Chateau. White. How nice.”

While her mother made a place in the refrigerator for the wine, Sydney relieved Jones of the flowers and began opening and closing cabinets.

“Where do you keep the vases, Mother?”

“I’m not sure I have any, dear.” Sydney’s mother’s voice emerged,

somewhat muffled, from the refrigerator.

Jones saw Sydney roll her eyes comically, and he smiled. Then he worried about the creases around his eyes and tried to look serious again.

“I think there are some old mayonnaise jars in the cabinet over the sink.” Sydney’s mother stood up and turned around.

Sydney went to that cabinet and began moving jars about. “I wish you had a vase. Who ever heard of putting such lovely flowers in a mayonnaise jar?”

“Don’t be such a stick, Sydney,” said her mother. “They’re only carnations.”

Jones felt his ears burn, but Sydney seemed perfectly happy with carnations.

“Carnations have a special meaning for Jones and me, Mother.” She seemed to find a jar she was satisfied with. At the kitchen sink, she filled it with water part-way, unwrapped the flowers, and turned away from Jones and her mother to arrange them in the jar.

“You’re in the Economics Department, aren’t you?” said Sydney’s mother.

She seemed anxious to change the subject away from whatever meaning carnations might have for Jones and her daughter.

“Chair,” he said.

“Oh.” She nodded. She knew who he was, but apparently it suited her purposes not to. “I gather you and Sydney knew each other some time ago,” she said.

“We lived together, Mother,” said Sydney to her flowers, “when Jones was working on his dissertation.”

“Oh.”

Jones and Sydney’s mother stood in an awkward silence for some moments while Sydney continued to work on the flowers. They didn’t look at each other. Finally, Sydney’s mother spoke again.

“Where did you do your undergraduate work?”

“Iona College,” said Jones.

“Oh.” She seemed impressed. “Did you inherit?”

Jones was certain he had never been asked a stranger question in his life. “No.”

“So you bought it?”

Jones understood then that she had heard “Iona College” as “I own a college.” He began to laugh at the preposterousness of it. But she didn’t join in the laughter, and he realized that the idea of owning a college was not at all strange since Barton McChesney’s arrival at Coolidge. He stopped laughing.

“I’m sorry,” he said. His blazer felt uncomfortable. “I don’t own a college. Iona College is a small school in New Rochelle, New York.”

She smiled then. “I see. And you and Sydney, ah, lived together at UMass?”

“Yes.” Jones’s voice squeaked when he said it, and he cleared his throat. “I—” He broke off and watched Sydney’s shoulders move gracefully as she bent over the jar and rapidly picked and replaced stems. “I, uh—”

Suddenly Jones realized he was about to describe a state of inner confusion to a woman who seemed very little impressed with him. He stopped and searched for something to say that didn’t sound confused. Sydney’s mother stared at him expectantly.

“I, uh... That is, graduate school was uh... the happiest time of my life.”

Sydney turned around and smiled at him. He smiled back, not caring about his wrinkles.

The doorbell rang.

“That must be Tel,” said Sydney’s mother and went to answer the door.

“I hope you don’t mind,” said Sydney.

“I don’t mind.” Jones was surprised at how smoothly he lied.

“He’s a nice young man,” said Sydney. “Mother seems to like him a lot.”

A moment later, Sydney’s mother swept into the kitchen with Tel, wearing another expensively cut dark suit, just behind her. Sydney’s mother was carrying an impressive-looking bottle of wine, and Tel was

holding a bouquet of long-stemmed roses and a wrapped bundle Jones couldn't identify.

"Tel brought champagne." Sydney's mother sang the remark as if she were auditioning for a part in a musical about the humbling of an underpaid economist.

"Wonderful," said Sydney. "I love champagne."

Jones realized it was too much to hope the bottle might explode and kill only Tel and Sydney's mother.

"And roses," said Sydney. "They're beautiful."

Tel smiled and handed Sydney the bouquet.

"I don't know what we're going to put them in," she said.

"I brought a vase." Tel handed her the bundle.

"You're well organized, aren't you." Sydney unwrapped the vase. "My God. It's Baccarat. I can't be borrowing your crystal, Mr. O'Connor."

"Please call me Tel," said Tel. "It's not for borrowing. It's a gift."

"I can't take something like this," said Sydney.

"Please." Tel smiled like a little boy with engaging self-effacement.

Jones couldn't help but notice the knot in his necktie. It was both symmetrical and centered. He wondered how a nerd managed a knot like that. Maybe he hired somebody to tie it for him. Heaven knew he could afford it.

Sydney's mother commandeered the bouquet and the vase from her and fell to arranging the roses. They fit the vase perfectly and luxuriantly, like a crimson explosion.

"We can have flowers at each end of the table," said Sydney's mother.

Everyone turned to look at the mayonnaise jar full of pink carnations. Jones thought some sort of excuse was necessary, but before he could make it, Sydney spoke up.

"I think it's ready."

She opened the oven door, took a pair of potholders, and pulled a pot of steaming, softly crackling casserole from the oven.

The cassoulet smelled delicious, but Jones was disappointed to see Sydney had made it in a brand-new pot.

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Jones didn't talk much during dinner. Conversation had lost him many a tenured appointment, and he had learned to use it sparingly when he was sober. He didn't have to worry much, however. Tel was glad to set the agenda with questions about the administration of Coolidge College, which he directed at Sydney's mother.

"The McChesneys are the saviors of the College," said Professor Hofstadter to Tel. "Maybe you don't know how close we came to ending up in the hands of the Moonies."

Jones, of course, had heard the rumors. He just didn't know how much to believe them. He thought the McChesneys capable of counterfeiting stories.

"How did you wind up working at Coolidge?" said Tel.

"Arlene McChesney recruited me herself," said Sydney's mother.

"Awesome," said Tel.

"Mother used to work for a condominium timesharing company," put in Sydney, "running their data processing department."

"Information Systems, dear," said her mother.

Jones had never understood the penchant most companies had for changing the names of things. In his lifetime, "Personnel" had become "Human Resources" and "Public Relations" had become "Corporate Communications." Now Sydney's mother was insisting that "Data Processing" was "Information Systems." It occurred to him that the people who kept changing the names of their departments were all in staff functions. People in sales and manufacturing never felt it necessary to rename their jobs. It probably had something to do with a sense of security, or maybe dignity.

Tel turned to Jones. "How do you like working at Coolidge, Jones?"

Jones chewed a mouthful of cassoulet while he tried to decide what to say. He sensed that telling the truth could undercut his standing with Sydney's mother, but then he wasn't sure he really had any standing to begin with. He decided to tell part of the truth.

"I don't think about it much," he said.

Sydney and her mother each shifted about nervously and Tel continued to smile at him. It was obvious that more explanation was required.

"I'm working on a major research project," said Jones. "It doesn't leave me much time to think about anything else."

Tel looked from Sydney to her mother. "Jones believes monetary theory is the same as mercantilism."

"Outside of press relations," said Jones, "there isn't a whole lot of difference between them."

"Do you believe in supply-side?" said Tel.

"I'm not a moron," said Jones. But he sensed Sydney's mother stiffening across the table.

"Jones," she said, "President McChesney runs Coolidge College on the basis of supply-side theory. If you don't believe in it, doesn't it offend your principles to be working there?"

"Should it?" said Jones.

"Oh, I forgot," said Sydney's mother. "You're an economist. You have no principles."

Fortunately, everyone laughed at this, so Jones didn't have to respond. He sensed this was not the best place to confess that she was right. How could he possibly have time for principles? If the truth be told, he cared for nothing besides *The General Theory of Value*—that is, if you didn't count Sydney.

# Nine

**D**espite the presence of her mother and Tel, dinner reminded Sydney of a night nineteen years ago with Jones. It was a night of candlelight, cassoulet, and wine, a night of considerate and tender lovemaking. Jones had been simultaneously gentle and passionate, more so than any man she'd ever known, or even heard of.

While her mother and Tel talked animatedly about the College and about real estate values in Washboro and its general economic prospects, she watched Jones over coffee and dessert. He didn't say much, and she had to admit to herself that she was proud of the way he'd refused to defend himself against her mother's attacks during the salad and casserole. She had forgotten how basically good-natured he was, regardless of his economic theories, which she had never really understood anyway. Good-natured or not, however, he did look somewhat ill at ease by the end of the meal.

"It's been a wonderful dinner," he said in a manner that suggested he would have been happy to substitute the expression "character-building" for "wonderful." He wadded up his napkin. "I'm afraid I have to go now. I'm behind in grading my final exams."

Sydney's mother smiled as if Jones had given her a present. "We understand, Jones."

Tel caught Sydney's eye. "May I help with the cleanup?"

"Sydney's not cleaning up," said her mother. "She made the dinner. I'm cleaning up."

Tel, in his boyish way, beamed at Sydney's mother as if this was a most fortunate turn of events. "May I help you, then?"

Sydney got a coat and walked Jones out to his car while her mother and Tel did the cleanup.

A modest, boxy little car with a dull finish of indeterminate color sat at the curb just in front of a machine Sydney recognized as a Ferrari Testarossa. Even under the inadequate light of the street lamp, she could see it was as red as the roses its owner had brought to dinner. There wasn't a mark or a blemish on it. Jones walked up to the boxy car in front. He didn't say a word about the contrast between his car and the Ferrari, and Sydney felt an impulse to hug him, which she suppressed.

"Thank you for dinner." Jones opened the door and started to climb in.

"Don't rush off," said Sydney. "Let's talk for a minute." She walked around his car and opened the door on the other side. The door made a worn, grinding sound that was surprisingly loud for a car its size. Sydney slid onto the seat and sat beside Jones.

"I'm sorry about my mother's joke. She didn't mean it. She knows you really have principles."

Jones fiddled with his ignition key. "She's right actually, I don't have principles."

Sydney laughed.

"No, it's true," said Jones. "I don't have any illusions about myself. I would never stand up for an idea. I see in my research how vulnerable it makes you."

"Oh, you have principles, all right," said Sydney. "You just haven't had to exercise them yet. Some day you'll stand up for an idea, when it's the right idea."

Jones looked away. He stared out the window without speaking.

Sydney felt awkward sitting in the dark without saying anything, and she switched on his radio. Soft music played.

“What have you been doing all this time, Jones?”

Jones looked back at her and shrugged. “Research.”

“Tell me about it.”

“There’s not much to tell.” Jones stared off in the distance. “I’ve been working on the same project for fourteen years.” He stared silently into the dark street for some time. “May I see you again?” he said at last.

“Of course,” she said. “Maybe we’ll see each other at work.”

“Work?”

“I have a consulting assignment with the College. I just made the call to Mrs. McChesney this afternoon. I’m going to be evaluating the admissions effort.”

Jones did not seem particularly surprised at this news, and Sydney felt a fleeting disappointment.

“Mrs. McChesney seems to think my marketing background is more important than admissions experience,” she said.

Jones just nodded and repeated the word marketing, as if it were a new concept to him.

“Ever hear of a beer called Bikini Light?” said Sydney.

Jones nodded thoughtfully.

“I did the positioning for it. I took it from a three percent market share to thirteen percent.”

Jones nodded again.

Sydney waited for him to recount items from his own victory log, the way men so often did when she mentioned her accomplishments to them. But Jones said nothing. He just stared at her in the ambient light of the street lamps.

The radio announcer explained they were listening to “Bedtime Serenade.” He pronounced the “ade” like “odd.”

Sydney realized Jones wasn’t going to try to top her achievements, that he apparently felt no need to inflate himself in the presence of a competent woman. It was a confidence such as she hadn’t seen in a man in two decades. It seemed of a piece with his refusal to apologize for his car.

The radio announcer was no slave to format, and although he’d

been playing mostly insipid contemporary songs, he put on Patsy Cline singing "Crazy." It occurred to Sydney that life is like that. You don't know exactly where you're going, then the radio announcer puts on Patsy Cline singing "Crazy."

There wasn't any point at which she felt herself decide to do it, but Sydney reached over, put her hand around Jones's neck, pulled their faces together, and kissed him. He responded, pulling her tighter to him. Then they were entangling their tongues and rubbing their hands all over one another, and Sydney felt almost as if the intervening nineteen years had never happened.

The kiss had that same passionate gentleness she remembered from two decades ago, and for a moment, she surrendered herself to it completely and imagined herself in bed with him again.

But she wasn't ready to sleep with Jones, and when they broke from the kiss, she was grateful he didn't ask. After all these years, he still knew her better than any man she'd ever met.

"Let's have dinner at my place tomorrow," was all he said.

Sydney watched him in the light of the street lamp for a moment. "I'll bring the wine and the carnations."

There was always the possibility she would be ready tomorrow.

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For her first day of her new assignment, Sydney put on the clothes that made her feel most comfortable: a navy suit and a light blue blouse with a foulard of navy and tiny white flowers that fastened in a bow at the neck. She looked at herself in the mirror. She looked good: neat and put together and unobtrusive, in spite of her stylish haircut and mismatched eyes.

She asked her mother to drop her off at the Admissions Department Monday morning. They rode in silence, but they hadn't talked very much since breakfast anyway. There didn't seem to be much motivation for conversation on either side after Sydney had spent an hour out on the street in Jones's car with him while her mother and Tel

cleaned up the dishes. Her mother didn't seem to be angry. She had said she'd hoped they'd be spending more time together. But Sydney thought her mother harbored some irrational grudge against Jones for somehow keeping her out of the software business. She would have thought her mother would be pleased to have her working at the college.

Watching out the window as they passed through the front gate (with its sign proclaiming "The Business of Education is Business"), Sydney squirmed mentally at the memory of the night before. Her mother had obviously been hurt, and there really are few worse feelings for an adult than hurting her mother.

Her mother pulled the car up next to the curb. "Admissions is in there," she said.

Sydney turned from the window and saw they were stopped behind a limousine, the only other car parked on the street. There was no room to park here, and the traffic, what little of it there was, tangled itself trying to get around the two cars. Sydney wondered who in the world would leave a limousine at a place like this, where it would disrupt traffic.

"Thank you, Mother." She opened the door and started to get out. "I'll call you later, all right?"

"Suit yourself." Her mother put the car back in gear.

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"I know you are, dear."

Sydney got out, and her mother drove away. The sign on the building said "Cranford Hall. Admissions. Classroom Facilities." Like all the other buildings on campus besides the monstrous concrete Administration Building in the center, Cranford Hall was brick with granite trim. It was on the main road through the campus, and it was situated near the entrance, as if to intercept visitors. This struck Sydney as a serious marketing deficiency. Prospective students, who would obviously seek out the Admissions Office, should be made to drive or walk all over campus before they found it. If you ignored the monstrosity towering from the center of it, Coolidge had a pretty campus. She ten-

tatively decided to advise the administration to move the Admissions Office to the other side of the campus. Then she would have a visitors' map designed that directed people to Admissions via the perimeter road, where they could see the mountains in the distance and their view of the Administration Building would be blocked by dormitories and maple trees.

She joined a crowd of students climbing the granite steps, worn with shallow depressions created by sixteen generations of undergraduate shoe leather. The corridor was narrow, lined with dingy green tiles, and crowded with students going to classes. Dark and depressing wood trim surrounded the doors and windows. Growing up in Washboro, she'd never had occasion to spend much time at Coolidge College, and it was interesting to discover a place that had always been so near.

She followed the laminated signs to the Admissions Office at the west end of the building, housed in a modest suite that was a little bit out of the way of the student traffic. In the department's reception area, she found more dark wood trim around a customer-service type counter. There was a door to the area behind the counter, where three desks were arranged with a large promontory of file cabinets. The desks were empty. A student leaned on one elbow against the front of the counter holding what seemed to be a chauffeur's hat. Arlene McChesney stood near a clothes tree holding an animal in her left hand.

Sydney glanced at the creature. It appeared to be a live ferret.

"Ah, Ms. Hofstadter." Mrs. McChesney shook Sydney's hand.

"Please call me Sydney."

"Sydney, then." Mrs. McChesney smiled. "And you must call me Arlene. Nice bow."

Sydney decided she'd been right to wear the foulard. She liked Arlene, and she sensed the older woman felt some sort of kinship with her. She was determined to say nothing about the ferret.

"Where is everybody?" said Sydney.

"I guess nobody's here yet." Arlene shifted the ferret to her right hand and glanced at her watch, then whispered conspiratorially. "Nobody seems to care about promptness and attendance any more." She

bent over slightly and let the ferret jump from her hand. It wore a collar fastened to a long lanyard that didn't look particularly secure to Sydney. It scampered toward her feet, which alarmed her a little. It didn't do anything but sniff her shoes.

"He won't bother you," said Arlene. "He's just curious."

So was Sydney. She examined the office around them as thoroughly as she could without looking like a tourist.

All the lights in the department appeared to be on. A small photocopier sat behind the counter, its fan purring. On one of the desks, a computer hummed indolently beside a pile of half-opened mail.

"Hang your coat here." Arlene pointed at the clothes tree. "Let me show you around." She looked at the student with the hat. "Twenty minutes."

The student nodded and left.

Sydney put her jacket on one of the hooks of the clothes tree. She noticed there were already several jackets and coats there.

Arlene picked up the ferret again, then motioned for Sydney to open the door off the reception area. It led into a short corridor. As they walked in, Sydney saw a door at the other end of the corridor closing. But she didn't hear the latch click, and she thought it was just her imagination. She was a little nervous, actually. She hoped it didn't show. Arlene took her to the first open door on the left. "This is the Assistant Director's office," said Arlene.

The lights were on. There were papers arranged on the desk, although "arranged" would be an exaggeration for the mess Sydney saw. She walked into the room and approached the desk. A mug of coffee gave off a wisp of rising steam. Next to it sat a pile of papers about six inches high.

Sydney knew those papers could tell her a lot about the operation.

Arlene walked up beside her and let the ferret hop from her hand on to the desk. It hopped onto the pile of papers, which then cascaded to the floor.

Arlene gave a little laugh. "Isn't he cute?"

Sydney bent to the floor and began gathering the papers to replace

them on the desk. There were letters, transcripts, applications, a budget report, machine-printed test scores, and yellow sheets of handwritten notes, all mixed up together and betraying no apparent order. Whether they'd had any order before the ferret had knocked them over, she couldn't tell.

"Don't bother with that," said Arlene. "Someone else will take care of it."

Arlene picked up the ferret again, and they continued on their tour, going through another messy, uninhabited office. Then Arlene took her into a small room given over entirely to files: ten six-drawer cabinets, lined up side-by-side. Nine of the cabinets had drawers with pink labels, and one cabinet had drawers with green labels.

"Green is for applicants who have actually enrolled," said Arlene.

Sydney counted the cabinets. "Ten percent?"

"It's more like eight," said Arlene.

Sydney studied the filing cabinet with the green labels and realized that not all the labels were green. One drawer had a yellow label. It said "REJECTED." She pulled it open. It was stuffed with files. Sydney was good at estimating, and she judged there were a hundred folders in that drawer. She didn't try to examine any of them. That there were so many was all she wanted to know. This was an organization that managed to close eight percent of its prospects yet seemed to be turning away one to two percent.

Then they went to the last office, the one at the end of the corridor. Arlene put her key in the door and unlocked it. The room was dark.

"The Dean's office." She switched on the light.

It was larger than either of the others. It had room for a sofa and a small conference table as well as a desk and some bookshelves. In contrast to the others, it was stark and neat. It had no personal items in it, no pending work, no hint of the person who inhabited it. Sydney looked her question at Arlene.

"Our Dean recently resigned," said the older woman, gesturing toward the windows with the ferret, as if to explain the Dean might have defenestrated himself when resigning. "Other interests."

Sydney took a few paces around inside the office.

"I can't vouch for the condition in which he left his operation," said Arlene. "We discovered from the first that there's a great deal of difference between appearance and reality in this place."

Sydney sensed she was getting inside information, and she listened closely.

"The first person we ever met here," continued Arlene, "the so-called Vice President for Community Affairs, turned out to not even work for the college. He was a real estate man who'd been hired to sell it. He was the one who took us all around the place and told us all about it. And when we came to take over, he wasn't even here. Speen, his name was."

"They must have been desperate to sell it," said Sydney.

"Indeed they were," said Arlene. "The only other prospects were the Moonies, who had weighed in with a pretty healthy bid."

"Did you outbid them, then?"

"No, they wanted to sell to us so badly, they would have let us have it wholesale. The trustees were all local. Almost everybody who works here, except the faculty, comes from Washboro. They don't want their kids getting brainwashed or the landscape despoiled with flower sellers."

Sydney didn't know what to think about this. She knew very little about the Moonies.

"The previous administration almost bankrupted the place," said Arlene. "The president took on heavy debt to build Felmley Hall, the administration building."

Sydney had wondered what kind of damage the eyesore had done to the college's capital reserves.

"It's a beautiful building." Arlene stroked the ferret absently. "But he would have done better to invest in sewage treatment. President McChesney spends nearly every waking hour working on sewage treatment."

Sydney made a mental note that Arlene was fond of the administration building and resolved not to tell any jokes about it.

That was apparently the end of Arlene's self-disclosure. The three of them walked back down the corridor toward the reception area. Arlene chatted about the set-up to her. Sydney learned the Admissions Office ordinarily supported a staff of six: three secretary-administrative assistant types, a dean, and two assistant directors. It seemed strange to Sydney to have an organization with assistant directors but no director, although she didn't say anything. Most organizations aren't designed; they grow. Who could know what conditions obtained when the titles were handed out?

Sydney had seen very little in the office that she thought was worth preserving. There were so many files of papers, so little automation. There was no effort to track prospects, and the desks appeared to be owned by people who had no sense of organization or what might be important.

Arlene opened the door back into the main office. "Well, what do you think? When do you think you could start a marketing campaign for us?"

Sydney went into the reception area and thought she noticed a door closing on the other side again. She felt that they were exploring an unknown country and the natives were fleeing before them. Arlene and the ferret followed her in.

"I don't know that I think that's the best strategy now." Sydney made her voice as pleasant as she could.

Arlene frowned but didn't say anything. The ferret investigated a wastebasket next to one of the desks.

"There's a great deal of work that could be done right here, improving this operation." Sydney gestured at the desks in the work area. She tried to sound at once enthusiastic and hopeful. There was a thump, and they both looked toward the floor, where the ferret had tipped over the wastebasket, emptying it on to the carpeted floor.

Arlene smiled at the ferret. "I have to be careful with this fellow," she said. "He had a brother who got away here on campus." She turned back to Sydney and put on a serious look. "Sydney, I know I can trust you."

She seemed to be ready to supply more background. Sydney might

not know much about being a consultant, but she did know that gathering background would be essential.

“The College is in financial trouble,” said Arlene. “Tuition is one of our most reliable income sources. We have to find ways to grow it and to reduce the cost of bringing it in. You must have some ideas about this.”

Sydney didn’t know what to say. She had come prepared to do a little evaluation, maybe offer some advice. She wasn’t ready to be the savior of Coolidge College. She thought about it, nervous with Arlene standing next to her, waiting for something.

Sydney was never comfortable with silence, so she began thinking out loud. “Those file drawers with the green labels are your sell-through.”

Arlene brightened visibly, and Sydney realized she had a weakness for jargon.

Sydney was feeling her way with the problem. “With an eight percent sell-through, maybe you don’t need marketing. Maybe you just need sales management.”

Arlene nodded enthusiastically. “How can we increase sell-through?”

“I’m not sure I can say until I have a chance to study the organization—your people and procedures.”

“There *has* to be something we can do right now,” said Arlene.

Sydney thought about the file drawer with the yellow label and the hundred rejections it held. “Maybe there is something,” she said. “But this is just from a sales standpoint, you understand, and I don’t know what effect it would have on your academic standards.”

At the phrase “academic standards,” Arlene snorted impatiently. “What is it?”

“Well.” Sydney was hesitant, but she could see by Arlene’s expression that she was not going to be let off the hook. “You’re rejecting about a hundred applicants per cycle. I assume these are people who get rejected elsewhere as well. I think they’d have a very high pick-up rate if you accepted them.”

Arlene seemed delighted with the idea of a pick-up rate. “Go on. Go on.”

“I’d have to look into the legality of it,” said Sydney. “It might even

be possible to charge them a higher tuition rate. I mean, many industries impose carrying charges on their highest-risk customers.”

“That’s it!” said Arlene. “Carrying charges. What a great idea! Do it, Sydney.”

“What?”

Arlene reached into a pocket of her jacket with her free hand and took out a key and a business card, which she handed to Sydney. She took her coat from the clothes tree. “Please take care of it for us, Sydney.” She shoved her hand into one of the sleeves. “That’s my card. Call my office if you need anything. You have a *blank check* for this project.”

With the card and key between her thumb and forefinger, Sydney awkwardly grabbed the collar of Arlene’s coat to help her put it on while Arlene shifted the ferret’s leash from hand to hand. “But—”

“Take the Dean’s office for yourself. The attorney will come around with a contract for you to look at tomorrow.” Arlene accepted Sydney’s help with her coat as if she’d expected it. “I am sure you’ll be *satisfied* with the terms. Do you mind working until tomorrow on spec?”

“I suppose not.” Sydney could hardly think about money in the face of such decisiveness.

“Good.” Arlene began buttoning her coat. “Give us sales management. Increase our sell-through. And we’ll judge your performance by the number of students who *actually* enroll.” She picked up the ferret and left. Sydney could hear her shoes clicking on the tile floor as the door slowly closed itself behind her.

Sydney wondered at the woman’s ability to speak in italics. She walked around the counter into the work area and looked out the windows. She saw Arlene appear in the front of the building and walk to the limousine cradling the ferret in her left hand. The student in the chauffeur’s hat held the door for her.

Sydney wondered if the ferret got enough exercise. She turned back from the window and surveyed the empty desks of the work area behind the counter. She knew she needed to be still and quiet for a moment, until some of her excitement passed. But she also knew she should enjoy the hope and anticipation of a new job, a new life, a new challenge.

She looked out the window again. The grass was just starting to turn green. She thought she could discern buds on the ancient and venerable trees that lined the common across the street. Nobody was out sitting on the benches. Spring doesn't really come to northern New England until June, and it was still a little chilly out. She saw a lone student on the other side of the common, dressed in a ski jacket, hurrying along the walkway, as if to a class. She looked at Arlene's business card in her hand. It was the same as the one she'd given her at the party the other night.

She walked over to the desk that held the stack of College Board test results. The reports were all in a neat stack in an in-tray, next to two other trays that held similar stacks of papers: one of applications and one of form letters of some sort. Sydney realized that whoever owned this desk would be useful to her. It was obviously a person who prized organization enough to maintain it when everything else was falling apart. She bent down next to the desk, righted the wastebasket the ferret had knocked over, and began collecting the spilled debris to put it in.

"You the new one?"

Sydney straightened up and saw a young woman approaching her from the doorway. She looked to be about twenty-eight, slightly overweight but nevertheless pretty. Nice skin. She wore pink denim overalls, a black tee shirt, and bright red sneakers. Her hair looked as if it had been styled with an electric fan, and one of her earlobes was pierced with a safety pin. "I beg your pardon?"

"Are you the new dean?"

"No." Sydney tossed the last scrap, a wadded piece of pink paper, like the kind used for telephone messages, into the wastebasket. "I'm a consultant." She was a little proud of herself for resisting the impulse to insert the word "just" into the sentence.

"Oh." The young woman stopped next to Sydney at the desk.

"Is this your desk?" said Sydney.

"Yeah," the young woman replied to her brown eye.

"I wanted to meet you." Sydney extended her hand. "I'm Sydney Hofstadter. I'm here to help draw up a strategy."

“Yeah, right.” The young woman shook Sydney’s hand and spoke to her green eye. “I’m Babe. I’m a clerk here. Why would you want to meet me?”

“Your desk seems well organized.” Sydney wondered how a woman could carry around the name Babe. “I figured you would have a pretty good understanding of what goes on around here.”

Babe brightened. “I’ve been here five years,” she said. “I probably know the operation better than most people.” She looked from one of Sydney’s eyes to the other but then seemed to accept the deformity without further study.

“Tell me,” said Sydney, “where did the dean go when he resigned?”

“Resigned?” said Babe. “Oh, yeah. Right. Resigned. I guess he went home.”

“No, I mean did he take another job?”

“I doubt it,” said Babe. “He left kind of quickly.”

“I don’t understand.”

Babe shook her head and wore an expression that said she thought Sydney had a lot to learn. “Friday before last, Mrs. McChesney came around at quarter to five,” she said. “She brought a security man, a carpenter, and a cardboard box. She told the Dean to pack up his stuff in the cardboard box. Then the security man took him to the front door of the building while Mrs. McChesney watched the carpenter change the lock on his door.”

Sydney saw the whole scene play itself out in her mind as Babe described it. She felt sorry for the Dean, even though he must have been fairly incompetent to suffer such a fate.

“A lot of the deans and directors resign that way,” added Babe.

Sydney nodded without speaking, trying to imitate Arlene McChesney’s interrogation strategy.

It worked. Babe started to fill in the silence. “There was a rumor.”

Sydney just stared at her.

“Mrs. McChesney used to have two ferrets, but one of them has been missing for a couple weeks. Some people say the Dean killed it.”

Sydney was appalled.

“Felmley Hall was the last place anybody saw it,” said Babe. “Mrs. McChesney had both of the ferrets with her over there when she called the Dean in for one of her little chew-outs. After the Dean left, she noticed one of the ferrets was missing. Nobody has seen it since.” Babe sighed. “I’m kind of glad. Mrs. McChesney used to bring those ferrets here all the time. They would run around your feet and mess up your papers and steal people’s lunches.”

Sydney thought about the Dean catching a ferret in Felmley Hall and bringing it back to the Admissions Office, perhaps into that little room with all the filing cabinets. She wondered how you would kill a ferret. Break its neck? Suffocate it in a plastic bag? If he’d had enough time, he probably could have taken it over to Felmley Pond and drowned it.

“He said he didn’t do it,” said Babe, “but nobody believed him. To tell you the truth, I think everybody wanted to do it, and they kind of projected it on him, you know?”

Sydney felt sorry for the ferret, but she felt sorry for the Dean, too, given what he had to put up with.

“The Dean wasn’t very well liked, I guess.”

“The ferrets sure hated him.”

# Ten

Jones may have lacked principles, but he had something very similar: anger. He pursued his work with an anger more consistent and thorough than an ethic. It was a studied anger, a calculated anger, and he assumed it before sitting down to work like a Puritan steeling himself against temptation.

For each day's work, he chose a particular theory of economics and then began rehearsing his anger. The world had not been particularly good to him since Sydney had left him, handing him around from nontenured appointment to nontenured appointment before locking him away in the world's most mediocre and obscure college, then putting him at the mercy of a personable madman who wanted to rebuild the world based on supply-side economics without even knowing what it was. With the passage of each year, the task of summoning his anger became easier.

Quickly working himself into what could only be called a cold rage, he would then begin reading texts and monographs produced by the idiots who subscribed to the economic theory of the day, picking them apart like heretics at an inquisition.

He had first discovered his ability to produce this anger in graduate school, when he brought his dissertation to a conclusion after Sydney

left him. He had devoted a year of his life to the study of the diminishing marginal utility of advertising, based on a recommendation by his thesis advisor, an economist known for nothing other than an empirical study on the growth of direct mail marketing in the early 1950s. But then, right after Sydney left, the advisor tired of the topic and advised Jones to drop it. Looking back on it, Jones often thought it was the best advice he had ever received. In a fury, Jones had pushed on with the topic and brought the entire dissertation to completion just to show his advisor what an ass he was.

In some ways, it was fortunate Sydney had left him when she did. He'd been able to concentrate on his work, pursuing a strategy of defending his research by discrediting the assumptions of every reputable school of economic thought. He dug his way through the rank soil of economics with a shovel of rage. During his dissertation defense, he'd answered every question with venom, invective, and dead-on accuracy. The members of his dissertation committee, each of whom was enrolled in one of the enemy schools, seemed only too glad to award him his degree and get him out of town.

After that, he landed a teaching job at a state teachers' college. He learned to tolerate undergraduate students during his spare moments when he wasn't furthering his research. At the end of the year, he had made modest progress in his research, but his one-year contract was not renewed. He got another teaching job at another college, which started an annual cycle, as he went from college to college in junior-level positions. No school would give him tenure, which he assumed was because they were entirely too benighted to see the value of his work. And the experience of two consecutive teaching appointments that were not renewed helped him in the nurturing of his bitterness, honing the edge of his research abilities. But the third appointment was no better; he knew that from the beginning. At a reception for new faculty or some other such potlatch, he was confined to a room full of monetarists, Keynesians, econometricians, and assorted other fools. As soon as Jones had set a few of them straight, he realized he was not going to be considered for tenure at the end of the year. Three years

out of graduate school, he had neither a permanent job nor any friends. Then came the mini-recession of 1970-1971.

Jones's dissertation on the diminishing marginal utility of advertising had been based on his theory of a cycle of consumer inurement. Consumers learned to distrust advertising, he argued, and the industry was subject to periodic collapses. The more dependent the overall economy was on advertising, the more serious the collapse would be. He went so far as to predict that when the advertising industry reached an annual growth rate of ten percent, the following year would see a one percent contraction of the GNP, which might or might not be corrected within the following year.

Whether or not it happened for the reasons he described, the GNP did indeed suffer a slight contraction in 1970, right after a ten percent aggregate growth in advertising revenues. Economics doesn't often have successes in prediction, and Jones knew he was on to something. He sent his dissertation to a publisher of trade books, where it was read by an ambitious editor with an eye for packaging. She agreed to publish a version of it under the title *The Destruction of Information: Why Advertising Limits Economic Growth*.

Everything happened fairly quickly after that. He was interviewed by some business magazines and became a recognizable figure for a couple of weeks.

He parlayed his new-found fame into a tenure-track teaching position at a small university in Pennsylvania. But he didn't get tenure there, either, and he was trying to make up his mind whether to sue the department over it when the offer of the department chair at Coolidge came. It seemed ideal.

Jones had no illusions about the prestige of running a department at a place like Coolidge. But by that time, he had begun to set about his life's work in earnest, and it occurred to him that obscurity might be just the right condition under which to complete it. So he took the job at Coolidge and then began to do the research, analysis, and writing of his *General Theory of Value*. And now he was an angry man in his late forties, surrounded by these magnificent piles, three weeks away—give

or take a few days—from proving that every phenomenon of economics was a manifestation of the same basic force, diminishing marginal utility.

But this Monday morning, the morning after dinner at Sydney's house, Jones was having trouble finding his anger. He sat at this desk with a heap of econometrics garbage on the floor beside his chair, and he found himself thinking there might be something of some value in the texts and monographs he'd been reading for the past hour.

This kind of generosity was both new and troubling for Jones.

He couldn't keep his mind on his work. Every time he tried to build up his anger sufficiently to make some notes, he thought about his approaching dinner date with Sydney, and the world seemed a much friendlier place than it had ever been.

He was mulling this over, not a little frightened by it, when the departmental secretary buzzed him on his telephone to tell him he had a visitor. He told her to send the visitor in.

His door opened, and Telford O'Connor, wearing yet another expensive-looking suit, stood in the doorway.

"Jones," he said. "I'm sorry to bother you. I came to ask a favor."

Jones was surprised to see him. He jumped up and gathered a heap of monetarism from the seat of the chair opposite his desk. He set it on the floor.

"Here, sit down." Jones was overtaken by a compulsion to make a show of his office's amenities, of which there were few. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No." Tel hiked his pantlegs and then sat down.

Jones was glad he didn't want any coffee. The secretary had recently talked him into buying a new coffee maker, and he didn't know how to use it. It was a point of pride with him that he would never ask anyone else to make coffee.

"What do you want, Tel?" said Jones.

Tel looked at him with guilelessness of an adolescent. "It's about Sydney," he said.

"Oh?"

“I want to go out with her, and I can’t seem to find the right approach.”

Jones exercised all the self-control of which he was capable. He somehow sensed that being truthful with Tel, even to the extent of letting disbelief register on his face, would be dangerous. Far better to watch and wait. He thought he should play for time.

“I’ve never been asked for advice about women before,” he said.

Tel looked at the floor, and then he actually blushed.

“You might not believe this,” he managed after a moment, “but I don’t have all that much experience with women.” Tel grabbed the crease of his right pantleg and pulled it down, undoing the effect of hiking it a moment ago. “My company took off as soon as I finished college, and I’ve had very little time for social activities.”

“I see.” Jones hoped he sounded sympathetic.

“I know Sydney is a little older than I am,” said Tel. “But I just find her fascinating.”

Jones understood this. He himself found Sydney fascinating.

“Her mother told me you were an old friend,” continued Tel. “I thought you might not mind helping me out. I thought you might have some insight.”

That was when Jones realized that part of his dream from the previous day had been true. Sydney’s mother had put Tel up to this. She *did* hate him.

“I could pay you,” said Tel.

“Don’t worry about that,” said Jones. “I’m happy to help.”

“Awesome,” said Tel, which Jones took as a signal that he’d been taken in.

“I know her pretty well.” Jones wondered for an instant how much he might be able to get Tel to swallow. But a man who believes in the efficacy of advertising will probably believe anything.

“You’re probably being too gentle with her,” said Jones. “Too... you know... considerate.”

“I’m a naturally considerate person,” said Tel.

“That’s exactly the wrong approach with Sydney,” said Jones. “She’s

a strong person, and she's inclined toward strong men. Don't treat her like somebody you want a date with. Treat her like an employee. Intimidate her." Jones was surprised at how smoothly the lie developed itself.

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Jones tried to straighten up his apartment a little that evening before Sydney arrived for dinner. He had already proved the diminishing marginal utility of housework, but he remembered from twenty years ago that Sydney had an irrational fondness for clean and orderly surroundings.

Nevertheless, when Sydney came with the carnations and the wine, he could tell by the expression on her face that she considered his place to be unkempt.

"You haven't changed much, have you?" She handed him the flowers.

"Hasn't been any reason to." Jones took the flowers four steps from the entryway into his abbreviated kitchen, where he put them in a vase he'd bought in anticipation of her arrival.

"Well, I'm glad you have vases." Sydney followed him into the kitchen.

"A vase anyway." Jones put the vase with the flowers in it on the counter. It was the only thing on the counter, which called attention to the kitchen's emptiness. Jones realized that if your view of the place was confined to the kitchen, it would appear that he was living in a vacant apartment.

"Jones," said Sydney, "you don't even have a toaster."

"I proved two years ago that small appliances inhibit productivity."

"What are you talking about?"

"My research shows that after the purchase price, combined with regular cleaning and maintenance, most small appliances will not generate any return on investment until the prevailing interest rate drops below six percent."

Sydney shook her head and smiled. "You haven't changed."

“I just haven’t published my findings yet,” said Jones.

Jones had removed the research piles from the table in his dining area and set it with paper plates surrounded by the cartons of Chinese take-out he’d bought.

“You remembered,” said Sydney.

“Of course,” said Jones warily, wondering what it was he’d remembered this time.

During dinner, Jones did not ask about the past nineteen years of Sydney’s life. To tell the truth, he thought he’d already learned too much. That she had taken something called Bikini Light Beer from a three to a thirteen percent market share convinced him that learning any more about her would ruin any budding relationship between them. So, instead of the past, he asked her about the present.

“The strangest thing happened today,” said Sydney. “That young man, Telford O’Connor, came to my office and asked me out.”

“I think he has a crush on you,” said Jones.

“But he behaved very strangely. He didn’t really ask me. He *told* me I was going out with him. He tried to order me around, as if I were one of his employees or something.”

“I wonder what got into him,” said Jones.

“I don’t know,” said Sydney. “But it didn’t look good on him. I told him to grow up.”

The conversation continued that way, roving the landscape of their present. Sydney apparently wanted as much as he to avoid discussing the past, and seemed too preoccupied with her current position and her hopes for success to think about anything else.

“I’ve been named Dean of Admissions,” she said.

A part of Jones’s mind pointed out to him that Coolidge College was probably the country’s only institution of higher education to appoint a beer marketer Dean of Admissions. He watched Sydney eat her *lo mein* with the disposable chopsticks supplied by the take-out place where he’d gotten the dinner. He had never seen her use chopsticks before, and she managed them gracefully. It occurred to him once again that she’d lived practically an entire lifetime since she’d left him, and

he felt unutterably sorry for himself. He wished he'd been there to see her live it.

Sydney pushed a wad of lo mein noodles into her mouth, so that one of her cheeks bulged a little as she chewed it with obvious delight. Jones was not unfamiliar with that look. She had eaten that way in the old days, too. Back then, he had sometimes wondered why a person who liked to eat so much never gained any weight.

"You sound like you're happy with the job," said Jones.

Sydney swallowed the bite she was chewing. "I've got some ideas I'm excited about."

"Like what?"

"Prospect tracking, tiered pricing, things like that. Nobody in this place has given any thought at all to positioning."

Jones couldn't imagine how tiered pricing could be implemented for college enrollment. "Positioning?"

"Let me ask you something, Jones." Sydney set down her chopsticks and picked up her wine glass. "What reason does a student have for choosing Coolidge over any other college?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly." Sydney sipped from, then gestured with, her wine glass. "Nobody here knows. Until you understand the position of your product in the market, you have no business even trying to sell it."

Jones thought it made some sense, and he was frankly surprised at the expertise Sydney had gathered in the past nineteen years. Then he was surprised at being surprised. "What can you do for our positioning?"

Sydney set her wine glass down and clasped her hands on the edge of the table in front of her. Her eyes were bright, and she leaned forward. "I have this idea for Light Education."

Jones knew he was in deep trouble when he did not automatically rise and punch her in the nose over this. But he felt more like kissing her than punching her. He understood then that he was no longer in control of his feelings. He loved Sydney, and if she told him she wanted to institute undergraduate gladiatorial combat, he would have thought

it worth considering. Nevertheless, he didn't want to risk finding out what Light Education might be.

"Let's not talk about work." Jones took a drink of his wine. "There's something else I want to ask you."

Sydney took up her chopsticks again. She began pushing noodles into a mound on her plate, apparently in preparation for another of her delighted forays. She twitched one or two lumps of vegetable, or maybe they were scallops, onto the top of the mound.

"Sydney, I want you to move in with me," he said.

She squeezed about a dozen noodles between the chopsticks as if the implements were a giant tweezers. She didn't look at him when he asked his question. She studied the wad of food in the chopsticks. Then she stuck it into her mouth and watched him while she chewed deliberately, as if she were not going to let a little matter like the decision to move in with somebody interfere with her enjoyment of dinner.

Jones sat and stared at her while she chewed. If he weren't waiting for an answer, he would have enjoyed just sitting and watching her eat. The skin over jaw and throat rolled gently up and down. Her eyes watched him watching her. He wondered what it would be like, just once, to discern the different colors she said they had.

She finally finished chewing and swallowed.

"Maybe," she said. She put down her chopsticks, reached across the table, and squeezed his hand. "Give me a week or so."

"To think about it, you mean?"

"Yeah," said Sydney, "to think about it."

Jones took a key from his pants pocket. "Here. I had this made today. If you decide to do it, just come. It doesn't matter what time of the day or night."

She smiled, then shrugged and took the key.

Jones thought that a good sign.

While they finished dinner, Jones tried to decide how to go about asking her to go to bed with him. He didn't want to look as though he was rushing things, although he might already have done so by asking

her to move in. He knew life would be a lot easier if she suggested going to bed, and while he searched his kung pao chicken for peanuts to spear with his fork, he built himself a fantasy that maybe she would.

But she didn't.

After they finished dinner, she suggested they go downtown and look for a toaster. His ownership of one, she said, would probably enter into her decision of whether to move in with him. She said she could live with his primitive furniture, but that the lack of a toaster made his apartment unlivable. Jones had never realized his canvas directors' chairs, second-hand sofa, and formica-topped dining table were primitive, nor had he felt he was really missing out on that much by not having a toaster. But he was, perversely, filled with excitement at the prospect of acquiring the appliance. If Sydney had suggested the purchase of a deluxe bedroom suite, he would be enthusiastic about that as well.

They went to the hardware store and threaded their way through the small tractors and garden implements on the sidewalk to the front door. Jones was uncertain where outside of the store ended and the inside of it began. He simply began to notice an increase in the density of stuff on display around him: video equipment, jewelry, magazines, snacks, office equipment, telephones, cheeses. Jones had only been to the store once before, and that was to buy a bottle of wine a week earlier. He hadn't taken the time then to look it over. It was surprisingly large on the inside. When Sydney found the small appliances, between the grass seed and the prescription counter, he found he had to fight becoming hypnotized by the abundance of blenders, food processors, bread makers, crock pots, and countertop ovens.

They found the toasters, and the two of them stood in front of the display. Jones could feel himself going into shock. There were eight varieties of toasters, and he knew he would be incapable of deciding among them.

"You need these wide slots." Sydney picked up and examined one that seemed to be larger than the rest. "You can't do bagels or English muffins otherwise."

Jones looked at the machine in her hands. It had an instrument panel: a membrane-type keypad, LCD display, incomprehensible coding. "I don't know if I'd ever have time to learn to use it," he said.

Sydney set the machine back on the shelf. "It's programmable."

Jones realized there was a whole world outside of his pitiful awareness, and it included programmed toast. "I think you'd better decide," he said.

"It's your toaster, Jones," said Sydney.

"I just think you understand this stuff better than I do," said Jones.

"I would hate to think you weren't interested in the management of your own home," said Sydney.

Jones wasn't interested in the least. He could do without toast for the rest of his life if it meant he didn't have to take a course of study in its preparation. "That's not it at all," he said. "I just want to trust your judgment."

He thought he discerned a little irritation in her eyes as she bent to a lower shelf to find a box.

"Here it is," she said. "Muffin-sized slots. Four automatic browning levels. Fully programmable."

The toaster was far more than Jones could afford, but Sydney seemed so irritated with him that he made a show of enthusiasm in the purchase of it. He found his feelings torn between annoyance and the desire to make it up to her. They left the hardware store, and they decided to go to Christopher's Family Style (Featuring Big Screen TV) for dessert.

But when they crossed the street, they were set upon by a man wearing a silk shirt and pleated pants. He obviously knew Sydney, and he began talking to her without the preliminaries of greetings or introductions.

"I called her, Sydney" said the man. "I called her to tell her I was on my way."

"Steven," said Sydney, "this is Jones. Jones this is Steven."

Steven looked at Jones. He seemed a little distraught. "I called her this afternoon," he said.

Jones didn't know what he was talking about.

"I told her I had sold everything and bought my ticket," said Steven, "and I was on my way. Oh, God, Sydney, what have I done?"

"Slow down, Steven," said Sydney.

Steven moved forward, as if to hug Sydney, but she sidestepped him. He went on to the next prospect, grabbing the lapels of Jones's blazer and pressing his face against the pocket on the breast. "I broke it off with Cheryl," he said to the fabric. "I canceled the lease with my landlord. I accepted an offer on Steven's. I sold my stuff. And I called her to tell her I was on my way. She said, 'You won't arrive before Monday, will you? I have a date for this weekend.'"

Jones felt uncomfortable holding a shopping bag full of programmable toaster with a strange man fastened on the front of him. He tried to dislodge Steven from his jacket with his free hand. "Get a grip on yourself."

But Steven didn't get a grip on himself. He got a grip on Jones's jacket. He held it to his face as if it were a sacred shroud and he needed a miracle.

"Can you believe that? She had a *date* for this weekend. I've turned my whole life upside-down for her and she says she has a date!"

"Calm down, Steven," said Sydney.

"I've lost everything," Steven sobbed into the fabric.

It was Jones's best jacket, and he worried that this man might damage it.

"Get him off me, Sydney," he said.

"Steven, let go of him," said Sydney.

Steven pressed his face more closely into the fabric, and when he spoke, his voice was muffled.

"Let go of him, Steven," repeated Sydney. "We can't understand what you're saying."

Steven turned the side of his face to Jones's jacket. "She said she had plans for the weekend," he said and mashed his face into the material once again.

"I don't think he's going to let go, Jones," said Sydney. "Let's take

him into Christopher's to have dessert with us."

Jones hoped his expression didn't convey the contempt for Sydney's idea that he really felt. But then, having dessert with this emotional invalid was preferable to walking around with him glued to the front of his clothing.

With a great deal of persuading and some subtle movement toward the doorway of the restaurant, they managed to get Steven off Jones's jacket. But he fell on Sydney's shoulder, and she supported him through the door of the restaurant. The host, a young man in a circus ringmaster's uniform, showed them to a booth. He looked at the man hanging on Sydney's shoulder a moment longer than was necessary, perhaps, but he didn't say anything. Jones realized you're not in a position to say anything to anybody when you wear a ringmaster's uniform and there's no circus for miles. An enormous television flickered insistently in a corner of the room. There was no sound. It was showing a baseball game. Jones hated baseball.

If the host had aroused Jones's sympathy for having to wear a ringmaster's uniform, the waiter drew his abject pity. He appeared next to their booth wearing, except for his running shoes, a fairly elaborate clown costume, down to heavy grease paint makeup, a frizzy wig, and a putty nose.

"I'm Slappy," he said with surprising dignity. "I'll be your waiter."

Jones wondered what his major was and found himself wishing the Coolidge financial aid program could provide better for its students. "May we see some dessert menus?"

"Just bring me a beer," wailed Steven. "I don't even care about my waistline any more!"

Jones shrugged. "Make it three."

The waiter continued to stand there. "What kind?" he said.

"Light," said Sydney. "I care about mine."

The waiter left.

"Now, start from the beginning and tell us what happened," said Sydney.

Jones thought they already knew what happened. In fact, he felt he

could have summarized it himself. But he didn't. He sat (looking patient, he hoped) and listened to the man reiterate with a strained voice the course of his life for the past week.

The waiter returned with a tray full of beers. The glasses were frosted, but Jones could see they were adorned with some sort of trademark that looked like a brassiere or something.

"Christ," said Sydney, "Bikini Light."

The waiter, a glass in each hand, pointed at the giant television with his putty nose. "Check this out."

Jones turned and saw the television was showing a beer commercial. Some woman in a red bikini jumping off a building or something. After she landed, the camera focused close in on her. She was an image of cheap sexuality, maybe even *the* image of cheap sexuality. Jones wondered how the advertiser could hope to sell beer with this approach. What did wearing a bikini—or jumping off a building, for that matter—have to say about the quality of a beer?

Then everything happened at once. He looked back at his companions, and Steven and Sydney were both staring at the screen. Steven raised his hand and pointed at the screen. Tears ran from his eyes. "It's her, Sydney."

Sydney looked from the screen to Steven, and her face had the strangest expression Jones had ever seen on her.

"It's her, it's her," blubbered Steven.

Sydney rose from the booth seat. She reached across and took the mug of beer from Steven's hand. Steven's pained expression acquired a tinge of wonderment as he stared at Sydney holding his beer. Sydney tilted the mug and poured its contents into Steven's lap. Jones bounded out of his seat to avoid getting splashed, but he need not have been concerned. The beer simply foamed up in Steven's lap as he sat there, apparently stupefied with grief and a chilled groin.

It occurred to Jones that Sydney had indeed developed in ways he hadn't suspected over the past twenty years, and he wondered—with more than a little trepidation—what it would be like to live with her.

# Eleven

**T**he world was a strange place in 1981, the year McChesney bought Coolidge College. It was surprisingly easy to buy a college. It was, in fact, hard not to buy it. From McChesney's first phone call, everyone was so nice and so helpful. And every conversation he had with anyone at the college took him deeper into the possibility of owning it. First he called the President's Office and asked if it was true that the college was actually for sale. The President's Office connected him with the Vice President for Community Affairs, and he found himself talking directly with a kind and concerned man named Speen. Speen invited him to Washboro to look around.

So McChesney asked Arlene to knock off work and drive up to Washboro with him on a bright Fall day. Arlene didn't want to go at first, because fall was a big season in New England real estate.

"It's just one day," said McChesney. "We haven't been out to look at the foliage in years. It will be a nice trip we can take together."

"You're not going to start talking about your destiny again, are you?" she said.

"Oh, no," said McChesney. "I just want you to have a little time off." He almost convinced himself it was true.

Arlene finally smiled. "All right, Bart. We'll go. It might be the only way

*you'll ever get this destiny stuff out of your system."*

*"It will be a nice drive," said McChesney.*

*"It will not be what you expect," said Arlene.*

*McChesney suspected she was right. She usually was.*

*They didn't know how long they might be gone, so Arlene asked the young woman from downstairs to look in on the ferrets in the evening. When they got out of Nashua, the air was nippy, the autumn leaves were colorful, and the roads were full of traffic. Leaf peepers were on their way to Vermont, as they were every year, from all over the country to drive around and look at red and orange trees. McChesney had lived in southern New Hampshire for some years and was used to leaf peepers. They didn't bother him at all. Then again, ever since his accident, nothing bothered him.*

*They met Vice President Speen at Felmley Hall, a large, beautiful concrete building that overlooked a pond in the center of the campus. The pond was picturesque: green in color and surrounded by green bushes that looked special in the midst of the oranges, reds, and browns of Fall. Speen wore a jacket with no necktie, and he was relaxed, a genuine Vermonter, except for being more pleasant than most.*

*It takes one to know one, and the Vice President struck McChesney as a salesman. With a title like Vice President for Community Affairs, it was obvious he wasn't a professional salesman, but he was a sales type, and a good one. He was clever, and something about the tone of his voice said "just between you and me." He was interested in every part of the McChesneys' lives. McChesney could see that he even charmed Arlene, who was in real estate and not ordinarily easy to charm.*

*Vice President Speen treated them like first-time home buyers. He piled them into the back seat of a car and drove them the length of every road on the campus. The campus was awash in fall colors and the dozen or so handsome little brick buildings rose from a layer of two inches of fallen leaves, which the grounds crew were futilely trying to gather up with large, noisy machines and in some cases by hand. McChesney had to admit to himself that the tour of the campus was the best leaf peeping he had ever done.*

*After the drive, Vice President Speen took them through one brick building after another. He insisted they go through basements, look at furniture, inspect*

furnaces. McChesney knew nothing about furnaces. Arlene had always taken care of that kind of stuff.

In a building called Blenheim Hall, which was pronounced nothing like the way it was spelled, Vice President Speen led them down a stairway toward a grimy basement. There was a door at the foot of the stairs with a sign that said "Boiler Room. Authorized Personnel Only." He took out a key and unlocked the door and the three of them went into a darkened room filled with a roaring sound. The Vice President switched on the overhead light. It didn't light up very much.

"Oil fired," he shouted. "The only one. All the rest are gas."

McChesney nodded.

Arlene marched straight up to the roaring machinery before them. She walked around it. McChesney was confused by the noise and the mass of pipes and ductwork everywhere. The furnace was so noisy he couldn't hear his shoes scraping on the concrete floor.

"If you'll excuse me," shouted Vice President Speen, "I have to make a phone call."

McChesney smiled as if he were glad to be left alone in a noisy basement filled with equipment that looked and sounded like it might explode at any moment. "Go right ahead," he yelled back.

Arlene clearly understood the machinery. She walked right up to the furnace and began looking at gauges. Then she walked all the way around it. She seemed to know what she could touch without getting burned or shocked. She knew what to inspect and what to ignore. She came back to McChesney's side.

"How does it look?" he shouted.

Arlene was far too practical to try talking over the noise of the furnace and motioned toward the door they had come in by.

The two of them walked out the door, and Arlene pulled it shut behind them.

"They've kept it very well, Bart," she said. "This is first-rate heating equipment. It looks as if it has been rebuilt recently. There are fresh service tags on it. And if the rest of the campus is gas, that really cuts down on problems with oil deliveries or storage."

McChesney didn't say anything. It looked as though Arlene was getting in-

terested, and he didn't want to do anything to spoil it. He had convinced himself that he really did just want to get a little holiday and see some fall colors, but he started to think about the possibility of actually buying the place. Wasn't that, after all, his destiny?

"Shouldn't we be looking at something else?" said Arlene. "The furnaces are impressive, but shouldn't they expect you to be interested in the library or something? Shouldn't you be interviewing faculty or something?"

"I don't know," said McChesney. "I've never done this before."

Vice President Speen reappeared on the landing a few steps above them.

"Sorry," he said. "Just a little chat with the Mayor. We stay in touch with the town. Community relations are important."

McChesney was impressed, and he had a fantasy of himself chatting with the Mayor. "May we see the library?"

Vice President Speen took them to the library. As they walked across the tidy campus, he kept up a constant patter about "sense of community" and "academic excellence." There were students everywhere, looking—if that were possible—even more colorful than the foliage. The brisk air was filled with conversation and laughter, and McChesney had a peaceful feeling, as you might have in the living room of a happy family.

But he also knew that he knew nothing about higher education, and he didn't know whether he should be impressed by the Vice President's talk of community and academic excellence. He thought academic excellence might be important, but he wasn't sure he'd know it if he saw it.

In the library, Vice President Speen explained that the College had fifty-six thousand volumes and twenty-five thousand microform items. McChesney was impressed, but Speen said he thought that expanding it should be one of the institution's priorities in the future. McChesney imagined himself issuing an order that the library should buy more books.

They wandered through the stacks while Speen chatted about library policies and book availability. In the rows and rows of shelving jammed with books, McChesney could not imagine wanting to find anything that wasn't there. But he really didn't know what he should be looking at.

"What's your background, Bart?" said Vice President Speen.

"Background?"

*“What did you do your graduate work in?”*

*“Economics,” said McChesney. He hoped Speen didn’t know anything about economics.*

*The Vice President looked downcast. “I’m afraid that’s not one of our stronger areas. Do you like music? We have one of New England’s foremost collections on the history of New Wave rock.”*

*McChesney had never associated rock and roll with scholarship. He could see he had quite a bit to learn. “Maybe we should see some of the other offices before it gets dark,” he said.*

*Speen took them to the west end of Cranford Hall to show them the Admissions Office, which seemed to be in the midst of some major application cycle or something. There was a great deal of activity, and people moved quickly with their folders and their sheafs of papers. Three male students, wearing suits and neckties, were seated on a bench across from the counter in the reception area.*

*The Dean of Admissions, a man in a tweed jacket who wore a bow tie, was standing in the reception area looking serious and issuing orders to his staff. Vice President Speen introduced him to the McChesneys.*

*The Dean shook hands with Arlene and then with McChesney himself. McChesney didn’t know anything about Admissions, and he didn’t know what to say to the man. Nor did the Dean make it easy for him. He stood there as if waiting to answer a question or something.*

*“Are you busy here?” said McChesney conversationally.*

*“Well, this is the middle of the interview season,” said the man, plainly annoyed to be losing time to a conversation with out-of-towners.*

*“Do you make admissions decisions based on interviews?” said Arlene.*

*“Of course not,” said the Dean. “It’s just one factor among many. Admissions is a complicated process.”*

*“Well, the Dean is very busy these days,” put in Vice President Speen. “I’m sure he won’t mind if we move along now.”*

*McChesney was glad Arlene was not easily upset by rudeness.*

*They saw several more buildings after that, and then Vice President Speen took them to the roof of Felmley Hall. It was only four stories high, but it was the highest spot on campus. McChesney and Arlene walked to within about ten feet of the edge and looked out on the campus. There were a half dozen brick*

buildings on that side, with lots of mature trees among them. McChesney thought the view was beautiful. So did Arlene, and she squeezed his arm.

“Not much room for student demonstrations,” she said. “That would be an advantage, I think.”

But McChesney didn’t think demonstrations would have been a problem, anyway. From here, he would always be able to talk with the students, reason with them. Besides, he hadn’t heard of any big student demonstrations for years.

Vice President Speen came up behind them.

“Beautiful campus,” he said.

“Yes,” said McChesney.

“It’s amazing to think somebody could actually buy something like this, isn’t it?”

McChesney agreed with him, although he didn’t want to seem eager.

Speed gestured at the panorama before them. “Of course, it’s a big responsibility to own something like this.”

McChesney looked out over the grounds, the buildings, the students walking about, and imagined himself in charge of this place. He imagined himself making sure that supply-side economics was a required course.

Vice President Speen disarmed them by inviting them to dinner with President Otis. They were hardly prepared for such an invitation. McChesney believed in his destiny, but he hadn’t really expected anything to get this far. He knew Arlene hadn’t, either. But he felt they had to accept.

Vice President Speen took them to a private dining room at the Faculty Club. It was on the fourth floor of Felmley Hall and had a commanding view of the orange sunlight retreating from brick building to brick building before the advancing darkness. Vice President Speen left them at a table next to a window while he went to find President Otis.

The idea of putting the Faculty Club at the top of the administration building struck McChesney as a wonderfully democratic gesture by whoever had laid out the college. This wonderful view should be shared with the people who made the college run.

“I don’t know when I’ve seen you look this happy, Bart.”

McChesney looked at Arlene. She was smiling.

“I look happy?”

"Yes, you do." She reached over and squeezed his hand. "Can't you feel it?"

McChesney shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think about those kinds of things any more, not since... you know." He gazed out the window and watched the orange campus turn crimson.

"You aren't thinking about your destiny again, are you?"

*The sound of a carillon drifted in through the dining room window. He recognized the tune as "Bali Hai" from South Pacific. It was Arlene's favorite song. McChesney knew she disliked the idea of his destiny, but when he looked back at her, she was smiling.*

"I think you are happy." She squeezed his hand again.

He realized she was right. He was happy. He wished the moment would never end.

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Vice President Speen returned with President Otis after a while. President Otis wore a dark blue business suit and a full head of snowy hair. He was one of those people—McChesney had met a couple of them in his lifetime—who seemed used to power and influence.

"I hope you don't mind," he said after the introductions, "that our chef has taken the liberty of preparing a single menu for you."

McChesney shrugged.

"Of course not," said Arlene.

They chatted until student waiters came and began serving them little dishes McChesney could not identify. Nothing tasted bad, however, and Arlene seemed to be impressed, as much by the service as the food.

"The salmon mousse is exquisite, Bart," she said, as a student in a linen jacket hovered over her and used two silver spoons to lay a small slice of veal on her plate.

"We award a degree in Hospitality Studies," said President Otis. "Some of the students do advanced work in food preparation."

President Otis hardly talked with them about the college at all. But he was full of interesting information, and McChesney felt he could listen to him for hours. He said he had been a historian before becoming a college president.

McChesney, who for obvious reasons didn't want to discuss his own background, simply asked the man questions. About his thesis, about his research, about how he liked being a college president. He learned about colonial America, the Franco-Prussian War, and Russia's constant drive to gain warm water ports. He was amazed that anybody could know so much stuff that was so interesting.

The dinner ended too quickly. President Otis excused himself. Vice President Speen ordered coffee for the three of them. When it came, he pulled a paper from his inside breast pocket and began to chat again about the College's sense of community and academic excellence. McChesney recognized this as the start of a closing, but Vice President Speen was so good, he just let himself be swept along by it. He was still enjoying it when he found himself studying the terms of a purchase and sale agreement.

He knew he had allowed himself to be carried away with everything. The pretty campus, the academic setting, chatting about the Franco-Prussian War, the high-toned food. But in the same way that an actor is the most suggestible viewer of a movie and a novelist the most willing participant in someone else's story, a salesman is the world's easiest sell. He appreciates a good presentation; he delights in a masterful close. And Vice President Speen was a skillful closer. If he hadn't known otherwise, McChesney would have taken him for a real estate agent.

McChesney was ashamed of himself for allowing them to believe he might be a qualified purchaser of the College. He felt as if he'd done them out of an afternoon and a meal, just for his own entertainment. At this point, huddled over a purchase and sale agreement with the Vice President, the only thing he could think of to do was to ask for a moment to think it over and sneak out while he was thinking.

"Vice President Speen," he said at last. "Is there some place Arlene and I could go to chat about this?"

The Vice President stood up. "Why don't you just relax here while I make a phone call? The Mayor asked me to get in touch with him this evening."

Again, at the sound of the word "mayor," McChesney felt an excitement. All this talk with and about powerful people was almost overwhelming. He imagined the Mayor sitting in his office, probably wearing a plaid flannel shirt and corduroy trousers, waiting for Speen's call.

Vice President Speen left, and McChesney realized they were nearing the end of this magical evening and that he would have to give up the fantasy of realizing his destiny. He looked guiltily at Arlene. "I'm sorry I let it get this far," he said. "I didn't think they'd give us a nice dinner and then do this." He motioned toward the unsigned purchase and sale.

But Arlene had a glow in her eyes he'd never seen before. "Bart," she said, "this place is beautiful. And President Otis has such a... a standing here. I think we could run this place. You don't need to be a scholar to be a college president. You just need to know how to run an organization."

"But I don't know how to run an organization," said McChesney.

"Weren't you the president of the Rotary one year?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Believe me, Bart," she said. "There's no difference. It's all just people trying to get along together. You keep the good ones, get rid of the bad ones, and keep them moving in the direction you want to go."

"Do you really think so?"

"I know it." Arlene took a sip from her glass of Grand Marnier.

"I guess that's all well and good," said McChesney, "but we don't have fifty million, and I don't know if we could handle the risk even if we did."

Arlene glanced out into the darkened quad below, lit at intervals by lamps. "There's no risk," she said. "This place would be worth nearly fifty million if you broke it up and auctioned it off. These people don't seem to understand the value of good real estate. And if there's one thing I understand, it's real estate financing."

"But what about the fifty million?"

"They'll take ten thousand as an earnest deposit and give us ninety days to raise the cash," said Arlene. "I know how these things work."

"We don't even have ten thousand," said McChesney. "You know as well as I do that we haven't even finished paying off the hospital bills yet."

"Wake up, Bart," said Arlene. "This is the eighties. We don't need the ten thousand. If they'll take it, we just write them a check, then cover it with a cash advance on my credit card."

"What happens when the bill comes due?"

"I'll sell Ferret and Ferret," she said.

*That was when McChesney knew she was serious. Arlene had worked hard to build her real estate agency.*

*“Besides,” she said, “we’ll have cash flowing in from tuition, investment, grants. This place could revolutionize the business of higher education.” Arlene stopped and drained the last few drops of Grand Marnier from the small glass. “Bart, this is your next job.”*

*McChesney felt warm on the inside and tingly on the outside. His body, he knew, was telling him he was going to buy this place, whether his mind had made the decision yet or not.*

*“Let’s get Vice President Speen back here and sign this agreement,” said Arlene, “so we can get back to the children.”*

*McChesney hated it when she called the ferrets children.*

# Twelve

For three days, Jones had been unable to summon the least bit of anger and had gotten no work done at all. He felt almost as if he'd lost an arm, and he was troubled about his future when he could think about it. But most of the time, he thought about Sydney. Then, when he came home from work on Wednesday, he smelled food cooking when he opened the front door.

He stepped into the kitchen and found Sydney stir-frying strips of chicken in oil and curry at his ancient gas stove.

"Hello, Jones." She set down her spatula, put her arms around him, and kissed him. "How was your day?" She pressed her face against his neck, and his troubles burned away like fog in a summer sunrise.

"My day was wonderful." He was glad he'd pressed the key on her.

They had a pleasant dinner at the formica-topped table in the dining area. Sydney put a tablecloth and some candles on the table, and Jones brought a pair of the directors' chairs in from the living room. They stared at each other while they ate and talked softly about the events of the day.

Once again, Jones tried to keep the conversation on current matters, and Sydney was so full of her new job, that she was glad to oblige. The conversation bounded from topic to topic, sticking only to the theme of what had caught Sydney's interest in her job. She told him

she was advising the administration to change the school colors. Jones had a lifelong interest in colors since he apparently didn't perceive them at all the way other people did.

"Why would you want to change them?" he said.

"It's the little things that pay off in a marketing effort," said Sydney. "Those colors are old. We need something new. I'm going to recommend we change from green and pink to teal and peach."

"Teal and peach?" Jones probably wouldn't have known what she was talking about even if he could see colors.

"It's the eighties," said Sydney.

"Do you think the college will go for it?"

"I figure I just have to convince Arlene and President McChesney," said Sydney.

"That sounds like something that would need approval from the Student Government and the Faculty Senate," said Jones.

"Why?" said Sydney. "Is it such a big deal to change the school colors?"

"At a college, everything is a big deal, except the important things."

"Well, I think the McChesneys will probably be able to get it through," said Sydney.

Jones found himself unaccountably disturbed by the prospect of Sydney and the McChesneys ramming a change of the school colors through the Student Government and the Faculty Senate. He had no idea why it should bother him. Given his color-blindness, he would probably never notice the difference.

Sydney veered off another topic.

"Do you know anything about this rumor that the former Dean killed one of Arlene's ferrets?" she said.

"I've heard the rumor," said Jones. "I never believed it. The man wouldn't hurt a fly. He wore bow ties, for goodness' sake."

"I can see how those ferrets would get on your nerves," said Sydney.

Then she made another abrupt turn in the conversation.

"President McChesney has given me a free hand with Admissions," she said proudly.

The remark didn't make Jones feel any better about the matter of

the school colors. "So you've met President McChesney?"

"No," said Sydney. "I got the message via Arlene. She said President McChesney was too busy dealing with some problem about Felmley Pond."

It didn't surprise Jones that Arlene McChesney was handling the admissions problem herself.

"Is it true what my staff tells me about him?"

"What?" said Jones.

"That he smells like sewage?"

Jones nodded. "The first time he came to office, I thought I had picked up something on my shoes."

"Arlene called this morning, and we talked about the next college-wide marketing meeting."

"Ah." Jones's uneasiness grew apace. He remembered the last college-wide marketing meeting, at which he'd inadvertently suggested the new College slogan, which now appeared on the front gate of the campus. "I hope it's better than the one we had last time."

"I hope so, too." Sydney put down her wineglass and leaned toward him over the table. "I'm running it."

Why did Jones find himself wishing she hadn't said that?

"I've never had this much responsibility before." Sydney's eyes shone and she seemed to have forgotten about her dinner. "The success of Coolidge College depends on me. Me. Arlene said my marketing campaigns are going to determine whether or not we make it."

It bothered Jones to hear her talking about the College as "we." He didn't really know why.

"I have more clout here than my boss had at Capital Brewing," she said.

Jones was not really an evening person, and he realized he was tired, and even a little bored with the conversation. Then he was alarmed, and guilty, about being bored. He tried to look attentive; but Sydney, apparently, didn't need much encouragement.

"His name was Roy," she said. "Hah. Nobody ever gave Roy the Dirigible a blank check."

Jones had a lifelong interest in dirigibles, and when the word sounded in the midst of everything else, it caught his attention. He could feel his mind attempt to focus on what she was saying.

"I was the only one who ever called him that," she said. "And I never really said it out loud." She took a sip of wine and Jones watched the little movement in her throat when she swallowed.

"You're beautiful," he said.

Sydney smiled. "Let me tell you about my first important project. My first year on the job, I delivered the Third Annual Ohio Valley Tornado Watch."

"Tornado?"

"It's a Spring Break thing," she said. "Three days of entertainment and athletic events sponsored by our flagship product, Federal Beer. I was in charge of the whole thing, and it was the most successful Tornado Watch ever. I delivered it under budget, I got it endorsed by every local government in southern Ohio, and I got massive exposure: television, radio, newspapers. My final report showed the project had cost \$150,000. But my boss calculated the value of the exposure at three million dollars. At least that's what it would have cost if we'd bought it as advertising. And we didn't buy a line of print. We didn't buy a second of air time, except for producing the public service spots about drunk driving."

Jones picked out bits and pieces of what she was saying, which seemed to have something to do with a successful project she had run. There were numbers in it and something about drunk driving. Apparently she had stopped talking about dirigibles. He was disappointed, but he tried not to show it. "Did you get a promotion for this?"

"My boss was made a vice president."

"What about you?"

"I got a nameplate."

The rhythm of her story told Jones they were nearing the conclusion. He nodded for her to go on.

"It was a present from my boss. It was brass, engraved. It was very attractive." Sydney leaned back from the table again and took a sip of

wine. "I never used it. My name was misspelled."

It was the punchline, and she sat and stared at Jones, apparently studying his reaction. He thought about it for a moment, and decided that sympathetic confirmation was the best tactic. "You'd think he would have learned to spell the name of the person responsible for his promotion," he said.

It was as if he'd turned a key in the lock and opened the vault that was Sydney's past. She leaned forward again and began to tell him the story of everything that had happened to her in the past nineteen years. She told him all about Roy the Dirigible's marketing theory of "excellence through theft" and about her responsibility for Bikini Light Beer. She told him about Malcolm at the agency and how he'd come up with the best concept for a beer commercial she'd ever seen. She told him how a young woman had fallen off a building and the production studio, with Malcolm's blessing, had spliced a film of the accident into a new commercial. She told him how she'd fled her job, her career, and the whole idea of marketing through sexual fantasy. And when she was finished, she leaned back in her chair, plainly tired of talking.

Jones didn't really get it all. He was too tired to master the details. But he did have a general picture of somebody being killed and Sydney resigning a job on principle. He hadn't realized marketing was so fraught with danger. He cleared his throat preparatory to making a remark—he didn't know what—but she spoke first.

"Let's not talk any more," she said. "Let's go to bed."

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Jones was troubled and happy at the same time. He was troubled because he seemed to have lost his anger permanently. He was happy because every night, he shared sex with Sydney and fell asleep holding her naked body. And overlaying both the anxiety and the joy was a vague uneasiness as he discovered himself becoming irritated with Sydney's marketing programs. Why should he care how Coolidge College marketed itself to prospective students? It wasn't as if he cared

about the school's image. He didn't even particularly like the place. Furthermore, he could discern no difference whatever between green and teal. He didn't care whether the missing ferret was alive or dead. He was at least a week behind in his work on *The General Theory of Value*. How had his life become so complicated?

He carried around such questions and concerns with him all the time. They resounded in his mind when he fell asleep at night, and he was thinking of them when he woke up in the morning.

At the edge of his consciousness, Jones heard a soft click, followed by the voice of a news reader.

Without opening his eyes, he reached over to the clock radio, which rested on the floor next to the lamp beside the futon, found the switch, and turned it off. He wasn't particularly interested in how many pairs of shoes Mrs. Marcos had. Besides, they had to be lying. Nobody would have that many pairs of shoes. How was he going to get his research back on track?

Sydney stirred beside him. He rolled on to his side so he was facing her and put his arm around her. He still hadn't opened his eyes.

"Maybe you should leave it on," she said. Her voice was thick with sleep. "We might fall back asleep."

Jones moved his arm down and ran his hand along the inside of her naked thigh. "I won't let you."

She rolled over and slipped his arm off. "Your appetites are insatiable."

Through the futon, Jones could feel her raising herself.

"I don't think I have time for breakfast," she said.

Jones opened his eyes and saw she was propped up on one elbow and facing him. Light leaked into the room around the edges of the heavy window curtains. Her hair was messy, and she was a little puffy around the eyes, and her expression was unfriendly. She looked beautiful.

"Why not?" said Jones. "You'll have a bad day if you don't eat something."

"I'll have a bad day if I'm late for my meeting with Arlene. I'll pick

up something at the Student Center later on.” Sydney sat up, and the sheet slid down, exposing her round, pale breasts. She shifted her legs and started to raise herself from the bed. He reached over and slid his palm along her bare bottom as she lifted it from the futon. She swatted his hand without turning to look at him. Jones was reminded of something he had learned, painfully, twenty years before. Sydney was not a morning person.

In the dim light, Jones watched her move about the room. He thought it must be the case that her bottom and breasts sagged a little compared to twenty years ago. But he could only see how she looked now, and although there was a tiny, objective part of his mind that told him her waist was no longer narrow and gravity was relentlessly pulling the rounded parts of her downward, he found her powerfully attractive and sexy.

She retrieved her nightgown, slipped it over her shoulders, and let it flow over the rest of her body. She walked to the window and pulled the cord to open the curtain. The room was flooded with light, and Jones covered his eyes. When he managed to get them open again, she was gone. He heard the shower start in the bathroom across the hall. It was an unusual experience for him to hear his shower running from another room. It warmed him inside, and for what must have been the hundredth time, he reflected on his good fortune.

He climbed out of bed, put on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt, and padded out to the kitchen. He knew that getting a breakfast into her, even a small one, would improve Sydney’s mood immeasurably. He took a loaf of bread out of the refrigerator, where Sydney had taken to keeping it after complaining about his mice, and began unwrapping it. As he undid the twist tie on the bread bag, he stalked the toaster on the counter.

It sat there inscrutably, its LCD digital display reading “7:08.”

Without touching it, Jones examined all sides of it, looking for a switch. There was a membrane-type keypad beside the small display screen. It had the numbers zero through nine plus keys for “MODE,” “CLOCK,” “ABORT,” “RESUME,” “LEARN,” and “STORE.” He pressed MODE, and it shrieked electronically at him. Jones jumped

back. Then he came closer again, and looked for the appliance's volume control. He cursed anyone who would design a machine to make that kind of sound in the early morning. Was it supposed to wake up its user as well as make his toast?

He pressed MODE again, and it shrieked again, but he was ready for it this time and didn't jump. The readout flickered with a new message when he pressed the button, but he wasn't able to read it before it went back to 7:08. He pressed it a half dozen more times, enduring its painful shrieks each time, to see if he could read what was happening on the display panel. His mind was never fast enough, however, and each time, it just went back to "7:08." As he tried to figure out what to do next, the eight changed to a nine. He decided the toaster didn't want to be disturbed for some reason. Nevertheless, he tried the other buttons.

The CLOCK button, thankfully, produced no sound, but it changed the display to read "00:00." Jones didn't think that was very helpful. The ABORT button seemed to have no effect, and the RESUME button produced the same kind of warning sound as the MODE button. The LEARN and STORE buttons did nothing.

Jones could not get his mind around the problem of making toast, and as he stood there studying the machine, the display went from "00:00" to "00:01." Finally, he decided he should at least put the bread slices into the slots, against the possibility he might discover how to get it started. He took two slices of bread from the bread bag and dropped them both at once into the slots of the toaster. They began to lower themselves into the depths of the machine, and the LCD display changed to read "UMBER." After a moment, Jones could discern a glow emerging from the slots, and he realized it was working. He felt unaccountably proud of himself.

He went into the living room to find a dictionary to look up the word "umber." UMBER, it said, is a dark, reddish-brown color, and Jones smiled broadly when he read the definition. He was color blind and had little appreciation for the concept of "reddish brown," but it sounded like exactly the right shade for toast. The word before "umber" was "umbel." The dictionary said it was the name for a cluster of

flower stalks of approximately the same length radiating from a common center. The word after umber was “umbilical,” and it was followed by a whole bunch of related words, then “umbra,” which refers to a fully shaded spot or, in astronomy, a shadow that completely cuts off a source of illumination.

Umbra sounded like it was related to umber, and it occurred to Jones that maybe he was going to get a darker toast than he bargained for. It depended on the designer’s understanding of the word, he supposed.

As he mulled over this proposition, he detected a carbonized odor. He dashed back to the kitchen and found two faint plumes of smoke emerging from the toaster slots. He ran back and forth in front of the toaster, waving his hands and wondering what to do until a pair of blackened artifacts emerged slowly from the machine like spent fuel rods from a miniature nuclear reactor. The toaster shrieked again.

Jones shrugged and flipped the pieces onto a paper towel so he could get them out of the way and start over. He was disappointed with himself.

“What happened to the toast?”

Jones turned and found Sydney standing in the kitchen doorway, dressed in her dark suit and holding her briefcase and purse. Her eyes were no longer puffy, and her hair was wet.

Jones tossed the paper towel with its bituminous fragments into the trash and pointed at the toaster. “It burned it.”

“Did you reset its memory before you put it in?”

“Memory?”

“I programmed it to do English muffins,” said Sydney. “If you put in ordinary bread, it’s likely to burn because the slices are so much thinner.”

“Programmed it?”

Sydney looked at him with what he supposed was exasperation. She set her briefcase down and began rummaging in her purse. “It’s 1986, Jones. How have you managed to survive this far into the decade?”

Jones thought about it for a minute. “I work at Coolidge College,” he said at last.

# Thirteen

Jones dropped Sydney off at Cranford Hall. She leaned over and gave him a perfunctory kiss, then said, “Coolidge College is about to enter the eighties.” She climbed out and walked briskly toward Cranford without looking back. Jones sat behind the wheel and watched her disappear into the building. He was irritated with himself. Isn’t it amazing, he thought, how living with another person can make you irritated with *yourself*?

He drove on to the faculty parking lot, then walked over to the Economics Department. He thought about the wasted toast, and his stomach growled from its lack of food. One of the most unfortunate aspects of being irritated with yourself is that you can’t escape the source of the irritation, and with each step, Jones was more irritated. He hoped the irritation would blossom into anger so he might be able to work today.

His secretary usually got to the office before he did, and she would make a pot of coffee for herself, whereupon he would be able to get a cup. But he found himself to be the only one in the department at that hour. He silently cursed Sydney for her early meeting, but he refused to say anything aloud. Talking to himself, he felt, would be a sign of weakness.

He pottered around the department, switching on the photocopier

to warm up, assembling the various parts of the coffee maker in the tiny departmental kitchen as best he could, and hunting for his mug amid the scholarly debris in his office. He couldn't find the mug, which—he was pleased to see—bolstered his irritation. He picked up the small pile of papers that he kept for administrative matters and dropped it into the wastebasket. He sat down to work while he was still annoyed.

He heard the door open in the outer office, and he went to the doorway.

The department secretary was draping her jacket on a coat hanger. She put the hanger in the closet and turned around.

“Good morning, Jones. You're here early. Have you made the coffee?”

“No.” Jones thought it probably wasn't a good idea to strike her. Pleased with himself, he began paging through a stack of reprints and photocopies on monetarism as the thought slowly dissipated.

But, instead of M1 and M2, he found himself thinking of the smart retorts he could have made to Sydney in the kitchen that morning.

“What happened to the toast?”

“Offhand,” he should have said, “I'd say it's released some of its potential energy by combining too rapidly with the oxygen in here.”

“Did you reset its memory before you put it in?”

“Why?” he should have said. “Is it forgetful?”

“I programmed it to do English muffins.”

“We would have been better off if you programmed it to do word processing,” he should have said.

He went back over the potential energy remark in his mind, deleting the final “in here” and changing the “offhand” to “It's hard to be entirely certain, but...”

Then he realized he was recasting a remark he would never use, and he knew he was not in control of this anger.

He couldn't understand what was happening to him. Had they had a fight? Can you have a fight without raising your voice? Must one first feel a degree of pride in his toast-making in order to feel belittled by criticism of it? Would any of this affect the lovemaking he expected

tonight? Why couldn't they make love in the morning anyway?

This was not working out very well. He needed anger to work, but this was a new kind of anger. He wasn't in control of it. It was in control of him. Was it going to make him do something crazy?

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Despite Jones's mental state (or perhaps because of it), it was an uneventful day. At mid-morning, the departmental secretary appeared in his doorway holding a sheet of paper. Jones realized he'd been in a brown study for at least a couple hours. He forced himself to a state of alertness.

"Jones, what happened to the papers that were here?" She inspected his desk. "Where do you want me to put this memo? You used to have administrative stuff right here."

"I'll take it." He reached over.

She put it in his hand. "Are you all right?"

"Very distressed."

"That's good." She turned around and left.

He thought about how little communication ever really takes place between human beings. His secretary obviously had no attention to spare for his problems and so didn't even hear his answer.

Every human being is trapped inside a skin and must live there alone. You might try to explain to someone what it's like inside your skin, but when you put it into words, you've already filtered it and you're sharing not the actual experience but a description of it. You can share living space, you can share food, you can even share love. But you can't share what's inside. Inside his skin, every person is alone. Love didn't seem to help, either. There were ways in which it made the loneliness worse. Love allowed you to get a glimpse of a companionship you could never have.

Jones looked at the memo in his hands. To Deans, Directors, and Department Chairs. From Sydney Hofstadter, Dean of Admissions. The sight of her name reminded him that "Coolidge College was about

to enter the eighties,” and the thought tapped a well of resentment deep inside him. He did not want to be in the eighties. He did not want live with programmable toasters and Light Education.

The memo described some sort of public event that was going to be held at the College during the summer. It was scheduled for the last week in August and was called the Summer Term Discovery. The name sounded vaguely educational, but the event was to consist of a film festival, athletic events, rock concerts, performances, public games, celebrities. A graphic designer was being hired to create an STD logo. There would be STD tee shirts and carry bags.

STD, which appeared to comprise almost every kind of attractant for young people, would be open to the public for a nominal charge. Participants would be allowed to stay in Coolidge dormitories. The dining halls would be open.

It all sounded a little familiar, and then he realized it was like the Tornado Watch Sydney had talked about the other night. Only this time, she was trying to get exposure for a different kind of product—Coolidge College. Jones wondered how he felt about this. He had to admit it was creative, and Coolidge needed creativity. But there was something about using the techniques of beer marketing on higher education that he found offensive. He couldn't readily think of words to describe it. “Eighties-like” was the only term despicable enough.

Had Sydney discussed this idea with him at home? He didn't think so. It was surprising that she had so much life to herself, that she shared such a small part of herself with him. What would he have said if she'd brought it up? Would he have been able to discuss it intelligently, or would he have been overcome with that feeling of annoyance that seemed to dominate his life these days?

Sydney's memo suggested that STD would increase the visibility of Coolidge College and could be expected to significantly increase the applicant pool. It also said that all faculty were required to attend STD and would be expected to share the responsibility for chaperoning and ensuring decorum.

Jones had a vision of himself walking the campus in the summer

heat, trying to act as a restraining influence on half-dressed young people bent on unrestricted drunkenness and uninhibited sexual activity. He couldn't imagine more unpleasant work.

"In order to make STD work," said the memo, "we must guarantee the safety and behavior of the participants to their parents."

Jones stared at the memo, and he realized he didn't want to "make STD work." He loved its organizer, but he would prefer to see STD fail.

# Fourteen

Sydney studied her reflection in the mirror. Her different-colored eyes stared back at her.

In the privacy of her own mind, Sydney knew she looked monstrous. The difference in her eyes made her look lopsided at best. At worst, she was an extraterrestrial in a faulty disguise, a painting by an indecisive artist. When she was much younger, she hated the way she looked and would have given anything to change it. She was the only lopsided-looking girl she knew, and she felt like a freak.

She'd tried to share this feeling with her mother once when she was twelve. It's not easy to tell someone you regard as the most beautiful woman alive that you think you're ugly, but her mother was good about it, and Sydney remembered that what she had to say was simultaneously kind and firm.

"You're one of a kind, Sydney," she had said.

It was obviously heartfelt, but probably not the right thing to say to a twelve-year-old girl.

"I don't want to be one of a kind," said Sydney.

"But you're beautiful, too." Her mother rubbed the palm of her hand over Sydney's forehead. "I wish I could make you understand what I would give to have those eyes."

“Are you making that up?” said Sydney.

“Not at all. I mean it,” said her mother. “But I don’t expect to convince you of it, either.”

“I wish there was a way to change it,” said Sydney.

“Maybe someday there will be,” said her mother.

Sydney took an unwarranted amount of hope from the remark. She grew up putting a lot of faith in medical science and what it might eventually do for eye color. In the meantime, her mother tried to help her choose clothes and makeup that seemed to minimize the difference in her eyes and make her look a little less lopsided. It never worked out. All the clothes her mother chose were too artistic; whether or not they harmonized the colors of her eyes, Sydney couldn’t say. She never wore them because they would have made her stand out. Sydney didn’t want to stand out. She wanted to blend in.

When Sydney was in high school, she learned that contact lenses were made in colors. She asked her mother if they could go to the eye doctor and investigate.

Her mother clearly regretted Sydney’s desire to disguise herself, but she agreed. They went to a certified contact lens technician who had recently set up for business in Washboro. The man was dubious about prescribing lenses without any correction. But after talking with Sydney for a while, he seemed to view it as a challenge and agreed to try her with one lens.

He opened a small sealed bottle with a bunch of technical writing all over it and took out a bright green lens, which he laid on a linen cloth in front of Sydney. He began explaining how to hold her eye open and put the lens in. Then he picked up a plastic squeeze bottle and the lens, dripped some liquid from one into the other, put his left hand on Sydney’s face, pulled her right eye open, and placed the lens against the eyeball.

Sydney felt as though there was something in her eye that shouldn’t be there, and the eye blinked rapidly. Tears and saline solution ran down her face.

“You’ll get used to it in a minute,” said the technician.

It didn't matter. Sydney needed neither encouragement nor comfort. She was committed and would have tolerated torture, if necessary, to change her appearance. But after a moment, she did get used to it, at least enough that she could hold the eye open and look steadily at things.

She reached for the mirror on the counter beside her and looked into it. One of her eyes was watery and a little bloodshot and had a bottle-green iris, which contrasted with the grayish green of the other one. Her eyes were still different, and now one of them looked like it was man-made. She was disheartened, and when she looked up at the technician, she thought she might cry.

He must have seen it in her face.

"Wait a minute." He opened another container, took a lens out, and popped it into the left eye. After a moment, Sydney could see, and she looked tentatively into the mirror. Staring back at her was a young woman whose brilliant green eyes, while they had a weird gemstone quality to them, were nevertheless very similar in color. A feeling of excitement welled up in her, and when she looked at her mother, she could see by her face the pleasure her mother took in seeing her happy.

Sydney spent two weeks wearing the lenses a little each day the way she was told to. She was highly motivated and shortly got so she could wear them every waking moment. She felt like a new person. It was true her eyes were the color of stained glass, but that seemed a very minor problem. They were the same. She was normal, which she thought was as good as being attractive—maybe better.

Contact lenses were not so common in Washboro in those days, and people who hadn't known her before the lenses often remarked about the unusual color of her eyes. Sydney didn't particularly want people to know about her condition, and she tried to pretend the color was natural. "It runs in the family," she would say, or, "It comes from eating brussels sprouts."

Stinky, who sat next to her in Algebra, looked at her a lot after she got the lenses, almost as if he were making a study of her. Finally, he seemed to come to a realization about it, and he gave her the nickname

“Heineken eyes,” apparently after a distinctively-colored beer bottle. This he eventually shortened to “Heinie.”

Unfortunately, the name caught on. Sydney was good-natured about it, and she laughed when other kids used the name. She laughed, and then she went home and begged her mother for brown lenses. Her mother relented. They went back to the contact lens place and tried again with a different color.

Sydney spent the rest of high school with brown eyes, a condition her mother was indulgent but very sad about.

Using and caring for the lenses was onerous. Sydney had to remember to take them out before going to bed each evening. She had to clean them daily and sterilize them once a week. And, if she happened to lose one, she threw the household into a uproar. Not only did her mother and father have to help her search every inch of the carpeting looking for it, but as long as it was lost, she refused to go outside.

By the time Sydney was a junior at UMass, she realized she was enslaved by her contact lenses. One day she looked in the mirror before putting them on and decided her mother had the right attitude about her eyes. Their different colors were part of what it meant to be Sydney. And if other people found it unattractive, that was their problem. She put the lenses away and never wore them after that.

She wasn't able to discern a decline in the number of social invitations after she stopped wearing the lenses. In fact, she actually seemed to get asked out more often when her eyes were different colors than when they were the same.

Sydney never got to like the way she looked, but eventually she got used to it, and she came to understand that a reliable percentage of men found her attractive. She was never without a date, although every single man she went out with addressed his conversation to her different-colored eyes sequentially. But most of them didn't try to talk with her very much. Most of them just tried to have sex with her. She didn't do it with all of them, or even a significant fraction of them. It disturbed her that her disorder could so easily focus the male libido. She came to view the average man as a creature driven to have sex whenever

he found himself conversing with someone one eye at a time. In college, Sydney lost a lot of respect for men as a gender.

This all changed with Jones, of course. Jones said he discerned no difference in color between her eyes, that the right one appeared to him slightly darker than the left, but that was all. But it didn't seem to make him want sex with her any less. That he wanted her despite his inability to see the difference in her eyes made her feel, for the first time, desirable. She had sex with him, several times. They moved in together and then had it a great deal.

When Sydney's mind returned to 1986, she saw she was smiling into the mirror. She wondered how she looked to Jones. Did he simply have a green-brown color blindness or did he see her as monochrome? Maybe everything looked a little washed out to him, like a television set that needed fine tuning. Or maybe he saw everything in pastels. Maybe he saw spots of color in a vast gray landscape, like a trendy soft drink commercial.

For all she knew, Jones saw everything in different shades of brown, like sepia. It occurred to her that she'd never asked Jones about his experience of colors. That was probably the defining characteristic of his inner life, and she'd never thought to ask him about it. It was a little strange they'd been able to start and maintain this relationship without finding out more about each other.

Sydney shrugged and brought her mind around to her marketing meeting, which was scheduled for tomorrow. She would be facing a critical juncture. She would stand up in front of hundreds of people and present her plan for modernizing the marketing efforts of an organization that depended on her. She would have to convince the Coolidge faculty and staff, not just that the plan would work, but that it would change the face of the higher education industry, putting Coolidge College at the top of the heap. She would have to show them that the woman with the different-colored eyes knew what she was doing.

With her brown eye, she winked at her reflection. She was ready.

Sydney turned off the light and went down the hall to the bedroom. She stood in the doorway for a moment. Jones had propped his pillow

against the wall next to the futon and was sitting up in bed. *The Journal of Macroeconomic Theory* was propped open on his bare chest, and he was reading.

She didn't tell him very often, but she loved Jones. He wasn't the most competent person she knew, and it was clear to her that his development had been arrested sometime around 1968, which was probably the last time he felt he'd tasted the fruit of achievement. He lacked the self-assurance and the mission of Barton McChesney, or even Telford O'Connor, but she loved him none the less. He was a courteous and generous person, and he had an active sense of humor. She was grateful for him. As long as he was there, supplying what she needed in the way of a relationship, she was free to concentrate on this career. Heaven knew, it required a lot of concentration. There was so much depending on her, and she knew so little about this business. Arlene, of course, was in the habit of telling her brown eye that was her great strength. The higher education industry, Arlene said, needed new and innovative thinking. It needed people that were not bound by its existing procedures and practices.

Jones apparently sensed she was there watching him, because he looked up.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

He closed the journal but kept his finger stuck in the pages. "More crap from those monetarist bastards." He opened the journal again and resumed reading.

Sydney had no opinion whatever about the monetarists, except that they seemed to make some effort to exclude Jones from something. She thought of him as a pariah in the society of economists.

"Do you object to the monetarists in principle?" she asked.

Jones looked up from his reading. "I object to them because they're wrong."

"How do you know?"

"I have—"

Sydney interrupted him to finish his sentence for him. "—disproved monetarism. I just haven't published yet."

Jones looked a little hurt. "That's right."

Sydney regretted hurting him and decided to jolly him out of it. "What school of economics are you, Jones?"

"I'm not any school," he said.

"Yes, you are." Sydney sat down beside him on the bed and leaned close to him. "You're the romantic school of economics."

She ran her hand along his leg, but apparently he hadn't recovered yet, because he pushed her hand away.

"There is no romantic school of economics. It's a science."

Sydney realized it was going to take a little more joking to relax him. "Oh, there's a romantic school all right." She stroked his leg again. "You've been working away on that study of yours for fourteen years. You have a vision of yourself like Karl Marx in the British Museum, don't you?"

"That's not true. Marx was an idiot." Once again, he pushed her hand away, showing a little irritation. "You don't know how I see myself."

"What's the matter, Jones?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm trying to read."

"You're not angry about the other morning, are you?"

"Of course not," he said.

Sydney knew he was lying, but there didn't seem to be any way to get him over his anger without making it worse. And she couldn't afford a fight tonight. She had to think about her meeting tomorrow. She got up from the futon.

"Where are you going?" said Jones.

"I'm going to make myself some toast."

Sydney went to the kitchen and made herself a half slice of perfectly browned toast on which she spread a half pat of butter from a collection that had been left over from her lunch at the Faculty Club. Sydney loved butter, but she knew it wasn't particularly good for her and refused to buy it, which was why she always took it with her when it was offered as a gift.

She ate the toast slowly while she tried to decide what had hap-

pened between her and Jones. Had they had a fight? Can you fight with someone who believes he has no principles and refuses to raise his voice?

She hadn't come to any conclusions by the time she finished her toast. She rinsed her plate and butter knife in the sink, then went back to the bedroom. The light was already turned off.

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Sydney woke up in the darkness and was aware of Jones sleeping beside her. She looked over at his clock radio. It said 2:00 a.m. She again tried to reconstruct had happened before she'd gone to sleep. And she realized she was angry with Jones for being so ridiculous, especially at a time when she needed support for tomorrow's meeting.

There were so many bad things that could happen with her meeting, and he didn't seem to care. Maybe nobody would show up. Or worse, maybe they would all come, and somebody would challenge her expertise and her right to her position. Maybe people would walk out. Maybe they would think her plan was crazy. Couldn't he see she was worried about it? How could he be so unfeeling?

It was a restless night, and she didn't feel refreshed in the morning when Jones's clock radio went off. Nevertheless, she slid grumpily out of bed before Jones got up. When she finished her shower and put on her navy suit and went into the kitchen—still feeling put out by the speed with which the day had arrived after she'd finally gone to sleep—he had breakfast waiting for her.

She recognized a peace offering implicit in the gesture, but she didn't care. She was still angry. He poured a cup of coffee at her place at the table, and she sat down in front of it. There were crumbs on the table. She looked over at the counter and saw the toaster was sitting in crumbs. And it had crumbs all over the top of it. She wondered what the brand-new toaster would look like in six months. Jones was a terrible slob. She drank her coffee without looking at the food on the table, whatever it was.

“Are you ready for the meeting this afternoon?” said Jones.

“Did you think I wouldn’t be?” said Sydney.

“I was just making conversation.”

“I don’t need conversation in the morning, Jones.”

“Sorry,” he said.

Sydney could see he was hurt, and she was alarmed at the tiny part of her that delighted in it.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the morning as they made their final preparations for work, except when Jones volunteered to give her the car. He said he preferred to walk to the office. Sydney just nodded and took the keys from him. She didn’t have time to walk.

When she climbed into the car and started it, she realized she had treated him badly. She would try to make everything up to him this evening.

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Marketing goes on, first and foremost, inside the organization. Before you sell anything to your customers, you must first sell it to your own people. Your own people always stand between your marketing plan and those who would buy from you. They can be an obstacle or an asset, and it all depends on how well you market the idea to them before you ask them to market the product to outsiders. You have to infect them with the vision.

Sydney understood all this. Vision was part of the show business aspect of management. It was why she had put together the college-wide marketing meeting so carefully. She knew her presentation by heart. She’d worked on it for two weeks, and she had rehearsed it in the office in front of Babe a half dozen times. She had scripted her slides and keyed them to her remarks. She had planned the soundtrack. She had asked Babe to run the projector and the tape deck, as she didn’t feel she could trust anyone else. With Babe up in the booth, however, she felt confident.

The meeting was in the first-floor auditorium in Felmley Hall. Sydney

hadn't seen Jones enter the hall, and she was grateful. She needed to deal with one problem at a time, and right now she had to put her personal life out of her mind and get through this meeting.

It was too bright to see it with the house lights up, but she knew the twenty-foot screen behind her was filled with the Coolidge College logo and motto, "The business of education is business." As soon as the lights went down, it would be clearly visible and would be the perfect backdrop for her remarks.

Sydney stood at the lectern and looked out across the hundred-odd heads in the auditorium. She wished President McChesney had been able to attend, but she understood there was some problem at the new sewage treatment plant today.

She looked down into the audience and saw Arlene sitting in the front row next to a student, the one who usually wore the chauffeur's hat. This time, however, he wasn't wearing a chauffeur's hat. He was wearing a baggy sport coat and a skinny necktie. He was the only student in the auditorium, and Sydney wondered whether it was entirely proper for him to be here. Arlene saw her looking at her. She smiled and made an unobtrusive "thumbs-up" sign. Sydney smiled back.

The hall filled, and Sydney realized she must have gotten nearly the entire staff. She had, after all, taken the precaution of sending the memo out over President McChesney's signature. The faculty and staff would go anywhere the President asked them to.

She signaled for the lights to be brought down, which she knew would force them to attend to the light from the stage. The gloom descended, and the room was lit by nothing but the exit signs and the image on the screen. All murmuring and talking stopped.

"For those of you who don't yet know me," said Sydney into the microphone, "I am Sydney Hofstadter, Dean of Admissions. My role with this organization is to focus on marketing, and that is why I am here speaking with you this morning. Good morning!"

The phrase "good morning" was Babe's signal to start the tape. The room went completely dark except for the light on Sydney's lectern, and a murmur of excitement passed through the room. Suddenly the

air was filled with the wail of a steel guitar, sounding as though it was being played by a very defiant person. It lasted for just a moment before the vocals came in. Then the next slide flashed on to the screen, and the room was flooded with colored light from the image behind Sydney. The music resolved itself into the driving beat of *Let's Puke*, the biggest hit of the group Cold Snot. Sydney knew the image on the screen was a full-face picture of a young man with spiked hair, a tattoo of a centipede on his cheek, and a sheet-metal screw piercing his left nostril.

The music faded, and Sydney looked out over the faces of a mesmerized crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said, "I am pleased to announce that we have booked our headline act for STD. Featuring Cold Snot means we can expect, conservatively, 10,000 participants for the event."

There was applause, which Sydney acknowledged with a smile. Then she got back to business. "You've all had a chance to see the memo on STD, and you have some idea of what is expected of you. You'll be receiving your individual assignments in two weeks, as soon as my office has had the chance to finish putting them together. If you have any questions, please call my office as soon as possible and speak with Babe."

Sydney paused and steeled herself for the sales pitch.

"I know that many of you probably think STD is some kind of stunt." Sydney smiled and waited a beat. "It *is* a stunt, but it's also an integral part of a major marketing plan, which I intend to begin outlining for you here this morning.

"STD will give us visibility in the demographic cohort that counts, college-age men and women. Our studies have shown that in eighty to eighty-five percent of cases, young people choose their own colleges. There are, in fact, few products which a family so readily purchases based on a child's choice. The only other one that comes to mind is breakfast cereal.

"But it will not be enough for us to simply attract the attention of young people. We must follow up immediately with solid marketing. Next slide, please."

The room light changed again as the projector threw a multicolored graph up on the screen.

“The marketing plan is based on a complete reevaluation of all the policies, procedures, and practices of the institution,” she said. “As you can see from the graph on the screen, the eighteen-year-old population, our entry-level customers, has been static in this country for the past three years. This is why colleges and universities are competing so vigorously for customers. If you want to know what’s going to happen to this age group over the next decade, look at the under-eighteen age group, because for the next seventeen years, all the people who will apply for enrollment at Coolidge College have already been born. Note that the size of this group has not changed since 1980. Next slide, please.”

The room became much darker. Sydney knew that the image behind her was an outline of the Coolidge Strategic Plan, in blue on a black background. She had been instrumental in formulating the plan, and she was particularly proud of this part.

“The message here, ladies and gentlemen, is that the customer base is not going to grow for at least the next seventeen years.” Sydney knew the picture was grim, but she was pleased at having figured all this out. Half of the solution to any difficulty was in knowing what the problem was in the first place.

“Unfortunately, our costs are going up every year, and if Coolidge College is to stay alive, it *must* increase revenues. We cannot simply increase prices to compensate. Our research reveals too much price sensitivity. There is excess higher education capacity in this country. When we increase prices, we lose customers. We have to try something different, which is the reason we have developed the Coolidge Strategic Plan. The first phase of the plan is a reevaluation in admissions policies and freshman charges. As of today, we no longer accept SAT or ACT exams. And we have discontinued the practice of rejecting applications for admission. Rejecting applications complicates our marketing unnecessarily and disguises the elasticity of demand for our product. We cannot set a rational pricing strategy as long as we are refusing to sell to some customers. From now on, anybody who wants an educa-

tion at Coolidge will be served, without distinction as to race, color, creed, or academic attainment.”

Sydney was proud of the way she had reasoned this out. She wondered whether they were at all impressed. She couldn't tell. The audience was utterly quiet.

“We aim to double the student population at Coolidge within three years. We intend to achieve this through pricing strategy.”

Sydney stopped to let it sink in.

“President McChesney and I,” she said, “see no reason why tuition, at least first-year tuition, needs to reflect our costs. It's far more important for us to set it at a level that readily clears demand for it. This is, after all, the way prices are established in direct consumer marketing.

“We don't know exactly what the market-clearing level is, but we have engaged a research firm to help us make the determination. They have set up three focus groups at several locations across the country. They will follow the focus groups with incentive-based direct mail questionnaires to the college-age population and mall intercept interviews throughout New England.

“I am serious when I say the enrollment of this institution will grow. When the Baby Bust arrives, we are going to be ready for it. We are going to make Coolidge College the first choice of our target population. Next slide, please.”

The room lighting changed, and Sydney turned to look back at the new image behind her. It was the graphic logo for the marketing campaign: “Coolidge for the Age of Cool.” It looked great: trendy, dramatic, with just a hint of punk. The stylized push-pin in the upper left corner was an inspired touch, she thought. She was glad she'd hired an outside commercial artist instead of trying to use anyone from the Art Department.

“It is the 1980s, ladies and gentlemen, and Coolidge is in the very center of it. From now on, Coolidge is the leader of the Age of Cool.”

She stopped speaking and simply beamed at the crowd. A handful of people applauded.

“We fully expect,” she said, “that a market-clearing entry-level rate

will be lower than our current first-year tuition. In fact, we expect it to be below market rate. It is our belief, however, that significantly reducing tuition will generate higher revenues, even in the short term, as a result of increased volume. No one has ever attempted anything like this before in education. This is supply-side education, ladies and gentlemen.

“In order to double Coolidge’s enrollment, we will increase the size of the entry-level class by a factor of five. This will change the ratio of students to faculty, but we will be taking steps to streamline teaching methods so that you will be able to accommodate more students without a significant increase in workload.”

She could feel the restlessness radiating from the audience.

“Tuition for upperclass students, incidentally, will be set on a sliding scale. Tuition for sophomores will be the same as it is for entry-level students. There is a slight increase for juniors, and seniors will pay a rate somewhat higher than our current rate. Most industries offer discounts to bring in first-time customers, and we will simply be extending this strategy.”

Sydney could hear a murmur starting, and she knew she could not go on any longer without risking their receptivity, so she concluded her remarks.

“As time goes by,” she said over the continuing murmur, “we’ll be having more of these meetings to discuss reevaluations of many different parts of the customer intake process.”

She paused to gather her breath for her concluding remark.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, “Coolidge College has been a lower-tier school long enough. We are going to become the number one small college in New England.”

The applause was polite. Probably mostly administrators, she thought. It didn’t bother her that the faculty members weren’t enthusiastic. They would come around when prosperity came to Coolidge. Most faculty were like Jones and simply had to be shoved in the right direction—and maybe kicked occasionally—until they saw where their interests lay.

“Now, if I could have the lights raised, I’ll take your questions.”

The lights came up, and she saw a hand raised toward the rear of the room.

“Yes,” she said, pointing toward it. “In the rear.”

A man in a tweed sport coat stood up. It was Jones.

“Dean Hofstadter,” he said, “does this mean the upperclass students are going to pay a higher tuition than freshmen?”

His tone was not entirely friendly, and Sydney was surprised. “Entry-level students,” she said.

“What?”

“Entry-level students,” repeated Sydney. “In the eighties, we prefer the term ‘entry-level students’ to ‘freshmen.’ ”

“Entry-level students, then,” said Jones. “Does it mean, from the student’s point of view, that tuition increases after your first year?”

“No,” said Sydney. “They pay the same low rate for the first two years. After that, when they have more incentive to stay with us, it increases. In effect, it’s an introductory price offer. We expect it to function rather like a magazine subscription.”

“Or a cocaine habit,” said Jones.

There was dead silence.

Sydney felt he would have been gentler to punch her in the stomach. Then there was a loud murmuring of protest, but Sydney raised her hand to stop it. “What’s your point?”

“If you don’t see the point,” said Jones, “I can hardly explain it. Tell me, have you given any thought to whether the change in the faculty-student ratio is likely to affect our accreditation?”

Sydney stared at her notes on the lectern. Of course, there was nothing there to help her. She didn’t know anything about accreditation. She wasn’t prepared for this kind of question. She wasn’t prepared for this kind of hostility, especially from a man who was, until last night, her lover.

She felt more than embarrassed. She felt betrayed. She wanted to descend from the stage, walk up to him, and slap his face. She wanted to scream at him. She wanted to cry. The conflicting desires paralyzed her with their equal but divergent drives.

She knew any action she took now was likely to end in one or more of the things she *wanted* to do, and she made herself move deliberately and carefully. Slowly she looked up from the notes. Jones was standing at the back of the audience, looking at her expectantly. She knew she would have to say something.

She made a little cough to try to dislodge the lump that was sitting in her throat. It didn't do much good. When she spoke, it came out as a hoarse whisper. "I don't know." Her ears, neck, and scalp felt like they were on fire.

She couldn't hear anything from the p.a. system, so she turned from the microphone, cleared her throat, and turned back to speak again. "I don't know." She had nothing else to say, but she knew if she couldn't keep her lips moving, the lower one might start trembling of its own accord. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned and saw Arlene was standing beside her. Gratitude welled up in her and put out the fire in her scalp. She stepped aside and Arlene moved closer to the microphone.

"It doesn't really matter whether or not it affects accreditation," said the older woman. "My staff and I have studied the matter fairly carefully, and we've come to the conclusion that Coolidge would not lose nearly as many students to transfers if it weren't for this accreditation. We've decided not to renew it when it comes up next year. So the point is moot."

Another murmur began, until Arlene held up her hand.

"Accreditation is a seventies concept," she said. "This is the eighties. We are rewriting the terms of competition in the higher education industry. The state universities, the Ivy League, the College Board—they've been writing the rules long enough. Well, we are writing our own rules. We are Coolidge College, and they are going to have to face us on *our* terms."

Through the haze of her embarrassment, Sydney could see the audience was uncomfortable with the idea of writing their own rules, but Arlene saw it too, apparently.

"I need hardly remind you," she said, "that higher operating rev-

enues will allow us to modernize the physical plant, bring in better equipment, and improve working conditions. We are talking about long-term growth here, growth that will be so substantial we can borrow against it. This is exactly what we are going to do. If STD meets its enrollment goals, we will have a minimum fifteen percent salary increase for every employee of the College.”

The auditorium broke into thunderous applause. Sydney watched Jones slip out the door at the back of the auditorium.

Arlene waved her hand for quiet.

A hush fell over the room, as if everybody was afraid of missing news of more raises.

“Those who contribute directly to the implementation of the marketing strategy can expect to receive cash bonuses equal to three months’ salary,” said Arlene, and the room erupted in pandemonium.

The older woman watched people jumping to their feet to clap, whistle, and cheer. She turned toward Sydney and smiled. “Good meeting, Sydney.”

# Fifteen

*S*ometimes fate walks up to you and punches you in the nose and says, “Hey, you. You are chosen. You have a destiny.” That was the way McChesney felt in 1981. He wasn’t sure he liked the experience, but he was sure it had happened.

It’s not that there was anything bad about selling soap to supermarket managers for a living. Neither McChesney nor, he supposed, fate itself could object to such work. It was important work, and McChesney had done well at it. Hadn’t he built the Boston territory to such a size they had to bring in four hungry young men to take it over for him? Wasn’t he well on his way to doing the same thing in southern New Hampshire? But we can’t always choose our destiny, and after McChesney got his nose bloodied by fate, he spent months thinking about his life’s work and trying to understand what fate wanted from him.

Fate had told him not to sell any more soap. He was not to work on the wholesale side any longer. He had been chosen for the retail side. And he had something new to sell: supply-side economics.

McChesney was not entirely sure what supply-side economics was. Sure, he’d run across the phrase in the newspapers a lot, heard it on the television news, but he had never really tried to understand it.

So after he was discharged from the hospital, he took an extended leave at home and read up on it. Arlene was understanding, by and large, as she went to work each morning and left him, often unshaven and still in his pajamas, reading books, newspapers, and journals at the kitchen table. But one morning she seemed to want to talk. She pulled out a chair and sat down across from him at the kitchen table. The ferrets both hopped up on the table to watch.

"Bart," she said, "when do you plan to go back to work?"

"I can't go back to selling soap," said McChesney. The ferrets together turned toward him. "Not after what's happened."

"Wait a minute," said Arlene. The ferrets turned back toward her. "Stop right there. I don't want to talk about fate or your destiny again."

"That's the only way I can explain it." McChesney folded up his newspaper, which had a front-page story on the U.S. agreement to sell a billion dollars' worth of high-tech arms to Saudi Arabia. "You haven't been through anything like this. I can't really expect you to understand it." He pushed the folded newspaper to one side.

One of the ferrets hopped over to the newspaper and pushed it off the edge of the table. The two of them jumped on it and began to worry it like a fish.

Arlene leaned down toward the floor and took the newspaper away from them. "Stop that, children." She put the newspaper back on the table. "I'm not saying you have to go back to selling soap. You can do something else. Don't you think it's time for you to look for some kind of job? I'm worried about you, Bart."

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I'll be all right. But I need some time to work some things out. The accident changed me. I have a destiny now."

Arlene glared at him.

"Sorry," said McChesney, wondering how he could pursue his destiny without making her angry about it. "I'll tell you what," he said. "After I've read the Business Section today, I'll look through the want ads."

That seemed to quiet her, although McChesney himself knew he was unlikely to find a job. He knew from his studies that unemployment was over seven percent. National income was declining, inflation raged at fourteen percent. The national economy was in trouble, which might well be why fate had chosen for him the task of retailing the supply side.

McChesney had been studying economics ever since he'd left the hospital. Every day, he spent several hours reading and making notes. He read about the Laffer Curve, inflation, monetary policy, and taxes and why they should be cut. He understood none of it. As near as he could figure out, every economist wanted to explain things in a way that would make every other economist look stupid. There seemed to be hundreds of theories, all of which sounded equally persuasive to him. There seemed to be no particular reasons for choosing one economic theory over another, other than personal preference.

Of course, McChesney needed no personal preference, he'd been assigned his economic theory. He was to champion the supply side. He just wished he could understand the stuff better. He might feel more comfortable about his role if he knew how his theory played against the others.

There was one thing he was able to understand in economics: the backward-bending supply curve for labor. It had caught his eye in a textbook, where there was a picture of a line in a graph doubling back on itself. It was such an unusual shape that he had read the caption, then went to the index to find "labor, backward-bending supply curve for," and read the section of the chapter on supply and demand that was devoted to it.

It fascinated him. There was a point at which an increase in wages drives away workers. For each and every worker, there was a price at which free time is more valuable than more money. In some societies, this price averaged around the amount needed for a single bottle of liquor and a night with a woman. In some others, it seemed to approach infinity.

What particularly interested McChesney about the backward-bending supply curve for labor was that it explained his own behavior to him. He had always been a little ashamed of his tendency to slack off whenever he was running well ahead of the game. Now he knew he hadn't been slacking off; he had simply reached the turnaround point on his own personal supply and demand graph.

When McChesney was just out of high school and sold encyclopedias on a casual basis, he surprised his district manager by placing more sets in the first nine months than the rest of the sales force altogether. In those nine months, he felt as if he'd earned enough money for the year, so he stopped selling.

His district manager pleaded with McChesney to get out there and sell more.

He even swore he wouldn't let McChesney work the next year. McChesney knew the manager would take him back, however. He knew that in the first nine months of next year, he would again outsell the rest of the staff put together. And he knew the district manager knew it, too.

The real kicker, though, was that McChesney had looked at the tax situation. He realized that increasing his income would push him into a higher tax bracket. If he continued working, he would work just as hard the last three months of the year for less money. It seemed foolish, so he took the next three months off.

In fact, he worked that way for a few years: nine months on, three months off. His district manager complained about it, but every January he took him back again, even while lecturing him about the need to better himself and think about his future.

McChesney paid no attention to the lectures and continued to work that way until he met Arlene. Even before he asked her to marry him, he took another, more permanent job with International Home Products, makers of the Ecstasy line of cleaning products. It turned out that IHP would tolerate no nonsense about three months off, no matter how well he did in the first nine months. So after he and Arlene were married, they became quite prosperous despite McChesney's personal backward-bending supply curve.

But it was not enough for McChesney to relate this stuff to his personal motivations. To understand supply-side economics, he had to stay abreast of current events. He had to read news magazines and newspapers with an understanding he had never achieved before.

"I promise," he said to Arlene. "I'll go through the want ads, and then I'll make some calls to some placement services."

Arlene got up, walked over, and kissed him on the forehead. "Take care of the children."

McChesney hated it when she called the ferrets children, but at least she seemed happy. Then again, she was always happy going off to her office, Ferret and Ferret. She had built the office from scratch. It was her baby.

McChesney poured himself another cup of coffee and turned to the Business Section. There was a column about Robert Mundell, the inventor of supply-side theory, who was currently consulting to the central bank of Uruguay. The col-

umn jumped, as it usually did, to an interior page. And when McChesney turned the pages to find where it continued, mumbling the last half sentence to himself over and over again, he happened on a small display ad.

It was only one inch by one column, but it caught his eye because he had never before seen an ad to sell a college. "1,000 acre-campus near Washboro, Vermont," said the ad. "Two hours' drive from Boston. Well-rounded liberal arts curriculum. Full complement of 100 faculty, 500 students. Well-kept physical plant, committed staff."

He wanted to get back to the column and find out what was going on in Uruguay, but the college idea kept returning to his mind. It was crazy to think about owning a college. It made about as much sense as thinking about what you would do with the money if you won the lottery. If McChesney bought this college, he would make the Economics Department teach the supply side to the young people. He would walk its quaint rural New England campus and smile at the young students who were learning the answer fate had revealed to McChesney. And, best of all, he would close it down over the summer so he only had to work nine months of the year.

*He knew the fantasy would come to nothing, but in the grip of it, he couldn't struggle against it. He decided to call this college and ask them to send him some literature. Then he could look at the want ads. After that, he could let the ferrets rip up the newspaper and stay out of trouble.*

# Sixteen

**A**fter the marketing meeting, Jones didn't feel like going back to the office. Instead, he went up to the fourth floor to the Faculty Club and ordered a club sandwich and a scotch. The scotch came first, brought to him by a sullen-looking student wearing one of the linen jackets Arlene McChesney had prescribed for the club's work-study students. But Jones did not allow himself to waste a lot of sympathy on an uncomfortable-looking student. He had important matters to think about. What had caused him to find his principles at the moment his lover was standing on the stage in front of the assembled staff of Coolidge College? How could he have been so suicidal as to throw away the only happiness he had known in twenty years? *The focus groups will be followed by incentive-based direct mail questionnaires to the college-age population and mall intercept interviews throughout New England.*

Direct mail questionnaires? Mall intercept interviews? Mall intercept interviews are for selling soap. What in the hell was going on here? Elapsing accreditation, rock concerts, sliding-scale tuition—was he the only one who thought this an affront to the dignity of Coolidge College? Did he even care what happened to Coolidge College?

He could not help but overhear a pair of professors at the next table discussing “Dean Hofstadter’s marketing plan.”

“It’s a simple matter of tiered pricing,” said one of them, “very common in consumer marketing.”

“I suspect we’ll discover demand to be quite elastic,” said the other one.

Despite the jargon, they were not from the Economics Department. Jones knew both of the other members of the Economics Department, and these people weren’t they. He turned around to look at them. The one who made the remark about tiered pricing was a man wearing a corduroy sport coat. He had a beard and a bow tie and looked like he must be from English Language and Literature. The other was a woman in horn-rimmed glasses who wore a suit and sensible shoes. Even as Jones watched them, they moved on to another topic.

“Anything substantive from your behavioral experiment yet?” said the man.

“Nothing yet,” said the woman.

“Aren’t you worried about overrunning your grant?”

“I don’t know what to do,” she said. “Who knew it would take this long to train mice to fight with spurs?”

The bearded man nodded sympathetically, and as if they could feel Jones staring at them, they both turned to look at him. Jones, embarrassed, shifted back around in his chair and stared into his scotch. He thought about the mice fighting with spurs. He couldn’t see how you could induce a mouse to don spurs and get in the ring with another mouse. Maybe this woman had convinced them that their jobs were at stake.

The student in the linen jacket brought his club sandwich and left without saying anything. Jones pushed aside the small bag of potato chips and held the sandwich down as he pulled the toothpick from it. He took a bite greedily and found himself with far more sandwich in his mouth than he ought to have; but he worked away at it and, without ever tasting anything, reduced it to a kind of mortar. He swallowed it so it could harden in his stomach and protect him from the possibility of healthy digestion. Then he took another bite that was too large.

He hadn’t really been hungry, and he was surprised at how quickly

the sandwich vanished. His stomach full of masonry, he ordered another scotch. The truth was, he didn't want to go home. Why had he challenged Sydney in the meeting? Why, for that matter, had he always thrown away anything of any value? Was he acting out his own theory of the diminishing marginal utility of everything? Did the idea mean so much to him that he had to live it? And he, a man who prided himself on his lack of principles?

Jones hadn't realized that he'd left the Faculty Club and was walking down the corridor toward the emergency stairwell. He hoped he had paid for his sandwich, or at least that somebody had recognized him and put it on his account. He was holding the bag of potato chips. He went into the stairwell and trudged slowly to the roof.

Jones emerged on the flat roof of Felmley Hall to a fine Spring day. A flight of pigeons, startled by his appearance, launched themselves skyward with a confused rattling. He walked across the gravel toward the edge of the roof. The campus below was beautiful: the mature trees, the Georgian buildings, the green-colored pond. There weren't many students about; most of them had gone home. Except for Felmley Hall, it was an attractive campus, which was something he'd never noticed before. He looked out at the cramped quad and wondered where Sydney would ever manage to set up a band in a way that a lot of people could see it.

The pigeons resettled themselves about the roof, and it struck him that pigeons got used to intruders pretty quickly. Of course, they weren't very smart, even for birds. Supply siders mostly, he suspected. He thought briefly about throwing himself off the roof, but only briefly. He realized that would be too principled an action, and he'd already created enough ruin in his life with principles.

Jones saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned and discovered himself to be under examination by a ferret. It was sitting up next to an exhaust vent about four feet away, just staring at him.

He shook his head and smiled. So the Dean hadn't killed the thing after all. It had been living here on the roof. It seemed calm, and Jones thought it was probably happy about its escape from Arlene. It seemed

a shame that the Dean of Admissions had been sacrificed for nothing. Jones felt like picking up a pebble and beaming the ferret with it. There was a way in which it was responsible for his discovery of his principles, which was what had put him in his current miserable condition.

But he realized the ferret was probably as miserable as he. And his aim with a pebble wasn't very good anyway. What had the creature been living on? Perhaps it used the exhaust vents and air ducts to get down to the Faculty Club for an occasional club sandwich. Jones felt the lump in his stomach and hoped the ferret was able to deal with the sandwiches better than he. Then he noticed the ferret was surrounded by pieces of something. They were about the same color as the gravel, but they were very thin, like pieces of fine porcelain. He realized they were eggshells. The ferret was subsisting on pigeon eggs.

Jones wondered how many pigeons it took to support a ferret and establish a system in equilibrium. It would be a good dissertation topic: *Dynamic Multivariate Analysis of a Ferret and Pigeon Economy*. The animal approached Jones and sniffed at his shoes. Jones decided to leave. Although he was more sympathetic toward it now than he had ever been, he didn't particularly like the ferret, and he already had his own research. He turned and walked back to the door into the stairwell with the ferret, he presumed, staring after him. He didn't know because he didn't turn back.

He thought about going to the office, but he suspected that Arlene McChesney would be waiting there for him with a security man and a cardboard box. He didn't want to give her the satisfaction. He decided he should go to a tavern he knew outside of Washboro. It was not a place frequented by Coolidge faculty, which was one of the reasons he liked it.

He couldn't drive, since he'd given Sydney the car. But he figured that after two drinks, he probably shouldn't drive anyway. So he hitchhiked.

He wandered off campus to the public road. Then he stood by the side of the road, ignoring the discomfort in his stomach, and held his thumb out. Six or nine cars went past; at least he suspected it was six or

nine. He lost count after three. Finally, a pickup truck, painted in several shades of white, dotted with rust holes and spots of yellow primer, stopped about thirty feet ahead of him. He jogged up to it, pulled the door open, and hopped in.

“Thanks,” he said.

The driver, a young man in a flannel shirt and jeans, wore a beard, long hair, and a headband. He would have looked intellectual or artistic in 1968. In 1986, he looked like a contractor of uneven employment. He smiled. “Are you from the College?”

“No,” said Jones. “You have me confused with someone else.” He looked around for the seat belt, found it, and tossed it aside without putting it on. “Someone who gives a shit.” His stomach felt like it wasn’t really a part of him.

The driver put the truck in gear. “Suit yourself,” he said. “I believe a man has a right to be anybody he wants.”

“What if he wants to be nobody?” asked Jones.

“Impossible.” The young man shifted to second. “Everybody is somebody. You can’t avoid it. Being somebody is fundamental to the human condition. Where are you going?”

“I’m just sitting here,” said Jones.

“No, I mean where do you want to be dropped off?”

“There’s a bar down this road about two miles,” said Jones. “I can’t remember the name.”

“Don’t worry,” said the young man. “I know it.”

Jones wasn’t surprised.

They didn’t talk for the rest of the ride, but the bar seemed to arrive very quickly. The young man pulled the truck into the gravel parking lot, and Jones opened the door and got out.

The driver leaned over to grab the door as if he were afraid Jones was going to slam it too hard and set up a harmonic resonance that might dissolve his truck into chunks of twisted metal and rust. As he grabbed the door, he made a parting remark.

“Don’t forget. Principles are too expensive.”

He pulled the door closed, put the truck in gear, and roared away in

a spray of gravel. Jones watched him recede down the road and realized the young man was one of his students.

“No wonder I’m broke,” he called after the truck. But the student couldn’t have heard him.

Grimy, noisy, and well-lit, it was more like the press room of a small newspaper than a tavern. He took a scarred but solid-looking wooden stool at the bar. He thought he recognized the bartender from one of his classes, but he wasn’t certain. Was everybody a student of his? He decided not to say anything to her and let her bring it up if she wanted.

The bartender looked at him with an expression that said she recognized him. “What can I get for you?”

She didn’t say she knew him, and he wondered if she was one of the ones with such poor class attendance that she didn’t recognize the instructor—one of the ones who, hearing about his heroism of several hours before, would be indifferent to his attempts to make life better for her and her fellow students.

“Do you have any beer?”

“It’s a bar. What do you think?”

“I think I need a beer.”

Jones felt tense and irritated as he drank his beer, and his stomach still bothered him. The beer seemed to disappear very quickly, and he ordered another. By the time the second one was half gone, he was no longer tense and irritated. He was relaxed and irritated, although he was less aware of his stomach. How many beers had he drunk? How many scotches had he had before he even came here?

He was tired, and he knew he would have to go home sometime. Why didn’t he feel any better? Usually a couple of beers made him feel better. Did he really have to go home sometime, or could he just stay here for the rest of the academic term? Maybe he could stay here until STD was over with.

STD reminded him of Sydney, and he wondered whether she was waiting for him at home or whether she had left again.

Maybe the focus groups and mall intercepts weren’t really Sydney’s idea. Maybe it was the McChesney influence. God, was he the only

person on campus who was embarrassed by these people?

“Another beer?”

Jones looked up. The bartender was standing in front of him.

“No,” he said.

She turned away.

Jones took all the change out of his pocket, which appeared to be about sixty cents, and laid it on the bar. Then he felt the need for just another moment’s talk. “Wait.”

“Do you want something?”

“Just remember,” he said, “principles are too expensive.”

She looked at his change on the bar and began to scoop it into her hand. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

It was obvious to Jones he would find no fruitful conversation here, so he left.

He wandered out to the road. It would be twilight in a few minutes. Sydney had talked to him from the very beginning about “tiered pricing” and “product positioning.” He had to admit that the focus groups and mall intercepts probably *were* her idea.

A white pickup truck passed him, then stopped. He wasn’t even aware he’d had his thumb out. He stumbled up to the truck, opened the door, and climbed in. It was the same bearded young man driving the same truck.

“Who are you this time?” he asked as Jones climbed into the cab.

Jones wasn’t surprised at the coincidence. He wasn’t surprised at anything, really. “I’m the guy who lives with a woman that runs focus groups and mall intercepts,” he said.

The young man shrugged, and they rode in silence again back to the vicinity of the campus. The driver wasn’t going toward Jones’s apartment from there, so Jones asked to be dropped off near the front gate of the college. He watched the truck roar away in the gathering darkness. Then he turned around, and he was facing the floodlit sign welcoming humanity to Coolidge College. “The Business of Education is Business.”

“It certainly isn’t accreditation,” he said aloud to the sign. He re-

membered the ferret on the roof of Felmley Hall. Who needs accreditation when you have ferrets?

He shook his head and started off in the direction of his apartment.

His driveway was reasonably firm, and he was grateful mud season was over. As he entered his front door, he knew he'd had too much to drink. He thought about leaving again, until he saw Sydney sitting in the living room in one of his canvas director's chairs. He smiled. He was eager to tell her about the ferret and about the student driving the truck and about the bar. He started to speak, but he stopped when she turned to look at him. The flesh around her eyes was puffy, but the eyes themselves looked as hard as marbles. She clutched a dispirited tissue.

"You waited up," he said.

She cleared her throat. "It's only eight o'clock, Jones."

"It seems much later than that," he said. "It seems like the Apocalypse has already arrived."

"Jones, you rotten bastard. Do you know how long I worked on putting that meeting together?"

"I don't see why you're upset, Sydney." Jones put his hand against the wall to steady himself. "The meeting went great, didn't it? The whole campus is buzzing with news of Dean Hofstadter's new marketing plan."

"No thanks to you, you sonofabitch." Sydney stood up and began walking toward him. "What's the matter with you? What was that shit about a cocaine habit? What was the reason for grilling me about accreditation?"

Jones remembered the look on her face when he'd asked his second question. She had looked betrayed, and he had realized what a low form of life he really was. He winced at the memory. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's great." Sydney shook her fist at him. The tissue stuck out at the top and the bottom. "You embarrass me in front of the entire faculty and staff, but you're sorry. That makes me feel a lot better, you—" She searched for the right word. "You barbarian."

"I shouldn't have done it that way, Sydney." Jones stepped back, out of range of her tissue. "I should have spoken to you here, in private."

She stepped with him. He stepped back again, and she stepped forward again. He kept backing up until he reached the wall. Sydney leaned toward him, brandishing her tissue dangerously close.

He knew he was going to have to explain himself, or at least try.

“McChesney is a charming man,” he said. “But ever since he got here, I’ve watched him wreck things. We aren’t even allowed to give failing grades, did you know that? We’re not doing these kids any favors when we treat them that way. Then when I heard you talk about the focus groups and the mall intercepts, it really bothered me. When you got to the part about reducing freshman tuition—”

“Entry-level,” said Sydney.

“What?”

“I said ‘entry-level.’ We don’t call them freshmen anymore, we call them entry-level students.”

“Now I can’t remember what I was saying,” said Jones. Even to himself, he sounded pitiful.

“Never mind, you shithhead.” Sydney turned around and walked back over to the chair where she’d been sitting.

Jones saw for the first time there was a suitcase on the floor beside the chair. “Sydney, the McChesneys have done their best to destroy Coolidge. They’ll destroy you with it, believe me.”

Sydney picked up the suitcase. She looked at him as if he were a particularly undesirable invertebrate. “You never left the sixties, did you?”

“What?”

“Jones, you live in the past.” She gestured toward the room. “Look at this place. It looks like a graduate student apartment. For Christ’s sake, you only own two chairs. And they aren’t any good. When are you going to move into the eighties?”

“I—”

But Sydney did not seem inclined to let him speak. “The world has changed, Jones. It’s time to grow up.”

Some small, sober part of his mind told Jones she was right. But the larger part of him, which was still pretty drunk, came to his defense.

He marshalled his energy and began a lecture.

“First it’s easy grades and entry-level tuition,” he said. “They won’t stop there. They are greedy and graceless. Christ, Sydney, supply-side education is going to make your snuff commercial look honorable.”

“What did you say?” She walked up to him and stared him in the face.

Jones was afraid she would threaten him with the tissue again.

“What did you say about a snuff commercial?”

“I was talking about that commercial you made where the girl was killed.”

“Goddamn you.” Sydney reached out slapped Jones on the face.

The force of the blow knocked his head aside. His cheek stung, and for a timeless instant, he couldn’t decide if it hurt worse than the headache that accompanied the rattling of his brain. When he was finally able to decide his cheek hurt worse, it didn’t seem to matter.

Sydney looked moderately satisfied. She turned and walked out the front door.

“Sydney?”

She didn’t answer, except to slam the door.

# Seventeen

There was a great deal of work to do for STD, and Sydney was able to avoid thinking about Jones by throwing herself into it. Much of the work consisted of sitting at her desk and making telephone calls. She had asked Arlene to act as hostess for the event, which meant she had to line up one of the English professors to write Arlene's welcome speech. Then she had to set up a meeting to discuss security and traffic with Washboro's mayor and the chief of police, ask Food Service to send over menus for her review, and call Buildings and Grounds for a large, detailed map of the campus she could mount on the wall of her office. She was going to stick colored pins in it, just as if STD were a military campaign. She knew from experience that this was the only way to run an event like that.

After she had made her calls, she decided she had better get to work on scheduling. Space had to be reserved on campus for every single one of the events. The only event she could be sure wouldn't conflict with anything else was the concert. There was no place on campus to put the band where it could be seen by large numbers of people, except the roof of Felmley Hall. She had thought about it, and it was perfect. It was only four stories up. The band wouldn't even have to get too close to the edge to be seen by everyone below. Buildings and Grounds

could easily provide power for them up there. The young people could watch from the windows of other buildings or could gather on the grounds around Felmley Hall. She only had to keep a small area clear for the caterer's tent and make sure none of kids tried to swim in the pond. She could have lined up a lifeguarding staff, but she preferred to just keep people out of the pond, especially if what she heard about its toxicity was true. And it probably was. There had to be a reason she had never seen any ducks in it.

Sydney had to make a chart the size of a tablecloth with columns for the various classrooms, auditoriums, and playing fields, and sixty rows for the hours of the schedule. In each of the resulting cells, she wrote the name of an event or activity, together with that of the Coolidge faculty member responsible for coordinating it. These names she took from an alphabetical list of faculty that had been supplied by the Personnel Office.

She hadn't gotten down as far as "F" yet, but she had tentatively decided to make Jones the coordinator for the cleanup crews. He would have to keep the sign-up sheets and make sure the kids all took turns in the various kitchens and picking up the litter. It would involve constant arguing with the kids and promised to be grueling. Grueling, she thought, was appropriate for a barbarian.

Then she realized she was thinking about Jones again, and she resolved to put him out of her mind.

At noon, the telephone rang.

Sydney picked up the receiver. "Yes, Babe."

"Sydney, I've got a call from Hollywood here—Cold Snot's video people."

"OK." Sydney was proud of the way Babe maintained her business cool and refused to be awed by Hollywood. She was turning out to be a rock in the midst of the chaos that made up the rest of Sydney's life.

The tonal quality of the line changed slightly as the call came through.

"Sydney Hofstadter," she said.

"Dean Hofstadter," said a female voice, "this is the Production Office of Rock Vision, Inc. Will you hold for Caldwell?"

The sound of the name made Sydney stiffen in her chair. She was too astonished to say anything impolite. "Yes, of course."

The female voice was replaced with the unmistakable strains of "Let's Puke" as Sydney's line was put on hold. But the music lasted only a second or two, which made Sydney think that Caldwell had been there waiting for his call to go through. Her heart was pounding. The thought flashed through her head that it was a very seventies thing to have someone else place your telephone calls.

"Sydney?"

She recognized his voice. "Hello, Caldwell."

"I thought it was you," he said. "You seem to be doing very well for yourself. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Malcolm sends his regards," said Caldwell.

"What do you want?" asked Sydney.

The line was silent for a moment, and Sydney could feel his surprise at her being short with him. "Of course," he said finally, "right to business." He cleared his throat. "I'm directing the video for Cold Snot's forthcoming single. I want concert footage, and I'd like to film at your event this summer. We've got the budget for staging one, but you know how I am about realism."

"Yes, I know." Sydney thought about the sequence in the Bikini Light commercial as the young woman plummeted to earth. Very realistic.

"I didn't expect you would object," he said, "but I'm sure we'll need your cooperation, so I just thought I'd call and ask personally."

"That's thoughtful of you," said Sydney.

The line was silent for an uncomfortable interval, but Sydney—her heart still pounding—reveled in the discomfort, knowing she had the upper hand.

"Well, how about it?" he said.

"I'm afraid not," said Sydney.

"What? Why not? Think of the exposure, Sydney. You can't turn this down."

“The hell I can’t,” said Sydney, finally allowing an edge to creep into her voice. “I’m not running a film studio. I’m responsible for the health and safety of the kids who come here. People have a way of getting hurt on your film sets, Caldwell.”

“You’re making a mistake, Sydney,” he said.

He might have said something after that, but Sydney didn’t hear it, because she had already hung up the phone.

Her heart was still beating rapidly, and she willed herself to calm down and relax. She realized she was smiling. STD was her project; she was doing it her way. And her way meant no hypocrites, no theft, no sexual fantasy. She could hardly wait to get home this evening and tell Jones about Caldwell’s call. Then she realized she wouldn’t be telling Jones about this, and a mild feeling of melancholy tipped the balance of her mood. So she got back to work.

The scheduling required a great deal of concentration, and she lost all sense of time as she immersed herself in it. It was only when she heard a cough coming from the direction of her doorway that her mind surfaced from the work. She looked up. Babe was standing in the doorway.

“Yes, Babe.”

“Sydney, there’s something I need to ask you.” The young woman stared at the floor as if she were a little unsure of herself.

“What is it?” said Sydney.

Babe stood there without speaking for a moment.

Sydney waited.

“It’s about STD,” said Babe at last.

“Yes?”

“Well, the name bothers me.”

Sydney couldn’t understand what she was driving at.

“Maybe it’s not my place to criticize the names you choose for things,” said Babe, “except I’m kind of surprised nobody else has objected to it.”

Sydney was acutely aware that STD lacked any aspect of discovery, so she found Babe’s misgivings worrisome. “Do you think the name

misrepresents the event?"

"Oh, no," said Babe. "Nothing like that." She stopped and frowned. "I just think it's unpleasant, especially with STDs being so much in the news and all."

A spike of fear plunged into Sydney's abdomen. "You mean somebody else is running something called STD?"

Babe didn't say anything at first but stared at Sydney as if she were a creature from outer space. After an interminable pause, a look of recognition came into her face.

"You don't know about STDs, do you?"

"What are you talking about, Babe?"

"Of course," said Babe. "You spend almost all your time working. You hardly pay any attention to the news. You don't have any children to worry about. *That's* why you don't know."

"Know what?"

"STD," said Babe. "It stands for sexually-transmitted disease."

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Sydney went over to President's House in the early afternoon to meet with Arlene. She rang the bell and stood on the step in the delicious spring sunlight waiting for someone to answer it. There were buds on the elm tree in the front yard, and several birds, newly arrived—she supposed—from somewhere southward, had positioned themselves around its branches, creaking at each other like so many miniature rusty gates. The sun was actually a little too warm for her navy jacket. Sydney was troubled by the business about STDs. Of course, she had heard the expression in connection with venereal disease, but she hadn't realized it was a universal usage. She'd thought it was a kind of technical term used by public health officials and social workers.

The door opened to reveal a student just inside its threshold. He wore a dark, unconstructed blazer and, under that, a tee shirt advertising Bikini Light Beer. Sydney would have liked to knock him down, but she knew he probably wasn't aware of just how offensive the shirt

was. Or maybe he was aware of it, but he was a student, after all.

“Dean Hofstadter to see Ms. McChesney,” she said.

The student said nothing. He opened the door a little wider to let Sydney step in, then he turned and started toward the grand stairway at geologic speed.

To pass the time, Sydney stood in the foyer and looked at the pictures on the walls. She’d been here for a party once and for meetings with Arlene, but this was her first real chance to study these pictures. Most of them were exactly what she might have expected: New England landscapes, some of the more venerable buildings on campus, President’s House itself, portraits of past presidents of the college, who all looked properly professorial and hopelessly antiquated.

She thought about each of these men, for they were all men, leaving the college a little worse off than he had found it. She wondered if there was any possibility she might be there herself one day. It wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. She was on her way to turning Coolidge College around.

She remembered the STD problem and realized she was going to have to pay much better attention to life around her if she ever hoped to reach top management. At least she had caught the whole thing in time. They hadn’t started advertising yet, and it was still fairly easy to change the name. Thank heaven she hadn’t used the name in her negotiations with Cold Snot’s people. She suspected they would have broadcast the name everywhere by now. She remembered the negotiations and how the band’s agent had insisted on a tub of gravlax as part of the supplied amenities. Arlene had been delighted when Sydney told her about it. She said she loved gravlax. Sydney had never tried it, but she thought she might have a spoonful (forkful? chunk? sip? she didn’t know) of it when the caterer brought it for the band.

Among the college presidents were a pair of portraits of Presidents of the United States. The prune-faced Calvin Coolidge was wearing an expression that said the world was incapable of turning out the way he wanted it to. Next to the picture of Coolidge was a portrait photo of President Reagan. He seemed somewhat prune-faced himself, but his

expression could hardly be less like Coolidge's. He had a look that said not only *could* the world be the way he wanted it, but it was.

Sydney wondered what it was like to be that satisfied. An objective part of her whispered into her mind that it was a beautiful afternoon outside, and she should be satisfied. She should not think of Jones or his betrayal or his drunken ravings about the McChesneys. She should not dwell on the close-call with the name STD. She should think about how good things were. She was about to revolutionize marketing in higher education, and she had put that bastard Caldwell in his place.

"Right on time again, Sydney."

She turned and saw Arlene, who had arrived at the foot of the stairs carrying her remaining ferret, with the student in the blazer just behind her.

"Good afternoon," said Sydney.

Arlene spoke to her brown eye. "I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to work with someone with a sense of propriety about appointments." She turned and looked at the student, whose sullen expression (and Bikini Light tee shirt, for that matter) said he couldn't care less about propriety.

The student left without saying anything.

"What a day," said Arlene. "It's only two o'clock, and I've already been all over campus dealing with a truckload of administrivia." She smiled at her joke.

Sydney laughed politely, although she didn't really think it was very funny.

Arlene bent down and let the ferret jump to the floor. "Go see if you can amuse yourself without breaking anything," she said to it. She turned to Sydney. "Let's go in here, and you can bring me up to date on the program." She went to a door off the foyer and opened it.

Sydney followed her inside, and found herself in a richly appointed, remarkably tasteless office. There was a desk that looked rather like one of the space monoliths from the film *2001* turned on its side to rest on three chunks of granite so unfinished as to look jagged and dangerous. There was a colorful plastic figure of a crouching ferret on

one corner of the desk. The floor was covered with a camouflage-colored carpet, the walls with a pattern of rustic New England scenes, too frequently repeated.

Arlene walked around the desk and sat down behind it. "Please sit down. I'm dying to find out how things are going with the marketing campaign,"

Sydney sat down and set her briefcase on her lap. She opened it to take out a folder and winced when she looked at the label on the folder's tab: STD.

"Arlene," she said, "this is embarrassing, but I made a mistake in naming this summer's event. I'm just glad there's time to change it."

Arlene had a puzzled expression. "STD?"

"Yes." Then Sydney realized that Arlene was probably no more aware of the expression than she was. "I want to change the name to SVT, which stands for Summer Vacation Thing. It avoids the connotation of sexually-transmitted disease."

Arlene laughed. "I love your sense of humor, Sydney."

Sydney had a presentiment of trouble. "I... uh, I wasn't joking."

Arlene stopped laughing and stared into Sydney's green eye. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Sydney nodded.

"It's out of the question," said Arlene. "STD is the very best name for this event. I can't understand why you're getting squeamish on me, Sydney. It's a brilliant piece of marketing. The name is suggestive, and it's insubordinate. It appeals to our target market. Kids like that kind of irreverence. And I think the implication of risk will be very appealing to them."

Sydney was surprised to discover in herself the identical feeling of betrayal she'd felt when Jones had attacked her in the marketing meeting.

"But this isn't the right way to market a college," said Sydney.

"Oh, come now," said Arlene. "Sexual suggestiveness is the right way to market anything."

Sydney felt like she was in a corner. "I—"

A chirping sounded from the direction of the plastic ferret.

Arlene smiled and held up a finger. "I'm sorry, Sydney, this is the direct line." She grabbed the plastic ferret.

Sydney was grateful for the interruption.

"I'll just be a minute." Arlene put the ferret to her ear. "Yes?"

Sydney stared, stunned, at the camouflage carpeting.

"Hello, dear," said Arlene.

Sydney felt a little dead inside. She was about to make marketing history as the woman who brought together higher education and venereal disease.

"Ferguson, his name was," said Arlene into the ferret's feet, "Jones Ferguson."

Jones's name reached out to Sydney through the fog of her bewilderment.

"He didn't give a reason really, dear. He just said it was time to move on."

So Jones had packed up his mess and moved on. His last words to her emerged from memory into her preoccupied consciousness. "They are greedy and graceless. Christ, Sydney, supply-side education is going to make your snuff commercial look honorable."

"Yes," said Arlene. "I know he was department chair. But it's like I've been telling you, people just don't have any sense of responsibility any more. They aren't like Sydney, are they?"

At the mention of her name, Sydney looked up from the floor at Arlene and saw the older woman was listening to the ferret's head, but she was staring at Sydney's brown eye with a conspiratorial smile.

"I think you should write one of those memos you do so well," Arlene said, after a moment. "'Respected by colleagues both inside and outside his field' and so on." Arlene paused to listen. "I've already taken care of that." She listened again. "Yes, it was quite a coincidence. I happened to be at the Economics Department with the carpenter." She listened again. "We were discussing the conversion of that empty instructor's office. As long as he was there with me, I had him change the locks."

Sydney had begun to emerge from her stupefaction, and Babe's story

about the former Dean of Admissions formed itself in her mind. Some small fraction of her consciousness wondered just how much coincidence there was in Arlene being at the Economics Department with a carpenter when Jones resigned.

“Well, I’ll see you tonight then,” said Arlene into the ferret. “Good luck with the waste treatment people this afternoon.” Arlene set the ferret back in its cradle, smiled at Sydney again, and folded her hands on the desk before her.

“Where were we?”

Sydney didn’t know what to do. This was not going the way she wanted.

“Ah, yes,” said Arlene. “STD. I have good news for you. I got a call from a Hollywood director this morning, and Cold Snot’s video production group is coming to STD to get concert footage. The director’s name is Caldwell. He’s very hot right now. Isn’t this exciting?”

Somehow, it seemed like justice. She was going to be humiliated in front of Caldwell. What more appropriate fate for the woman who revolutionized higher education by promoting herpes? Sydney opened the STD folder slowly. “I’ve been planning the welcome ceremony. I have the Chair of the English Department working on your speech. I think that will be the largest of your duties as STD hostess.”

“Let’s cancel that speech,” said Arlene.

Sydney simply stared at Arlene. She was beyond surprise and beyond reacting to events.

Arlene retrieved a manila folder from a credenza behind her. “I have a better idea.” She pushed the folder across toward Sydney. “I just hired a new hostess for STD. She’s very eighties.”

Sydney took the folder and opened it. It held a vita and several eight-by-ten glossy photos. The one on top was a full-face portrait, and Sydney knew the woman instantly. She wasn’t wearing her blond wig in this shot, but her bedroom eyes and salacious expression were unmistakable. It was the replacement actress from the Bikini Light commercial.

“She’s in a new television commercial that’s very amusing,” said Arlene. “The country is going wild over her.”

# Eighteen

Jones was hung over and had some difficulty thinking under the pressure of a dull, throbbing headache. It was nearly noon, and he had been like this all day. He would have expected to be feeling better by now. Even with the headache, however, he was alert enough to realize that his life had resolved itself into a series of fairly serious questions. What should he do? Where should he go? How should he get there?

He looked around his office at the encroaching mess and considered how little use it was to try to deal with it. Manuscripts, notes, photocopies, bluebooks, letters, journals, folders, student papers, class lists, doubled-over books with broken spines. Motley piles grew wherever there was space for them, and where there wasn't, they grew on each other. He counted four piles on his desk, one in the in-tray, one in the out-tray, one beside the last remaining clear area that was his blotter, and one at the far corner of the wide desk, which seemed to be growing another one on top of it.

He had been building a mess around himself since the 1960s, and all he had to show for it was... mess. Was this the essence of his life?

Somehow, none of this seemed important anymore. Even *The General Theory of Value* seemed trivial next to the loss of Sydney. Maybe it

was time for Jones to say good-bye to his mess and move his life into a new phase. The only thing that kept him from making such a decision at the moment was that he didn't know what the new phase would be. He would have to make a plan. But he couldn't come up with anything except a vague sort of idea that he should try to return the toaster at the hardware pharmacy in Washboro.

This was as much plan as his headache had left room for in his mind, but it seemed reasonable, and the longer it stayed in his head, the more resolution it acquired. It gradually changed from a plan to a determination, and he started to feel better, knowing he had a purpose.

He heard a door open, and he looked through his own doorway into the outer office. The harpy Arlene was entering with a security man and someone who looked like a carpenter. Jones wanted to rise from his desk and throttle the life from her, but the security man had a stick, and Jones still wasn't feeling well enough for that much activity anyway.

The harpy Arlene did not waste time in the outer office, but walked straight to Jones's doorway.

"Dr. Ferguson, we've engaged a new Chair for the Department of Economics and Business Studies. Your services are no longer required."

"I've been expecting that," said Jones. "Whom did you get? Some filthy supply-sider, I'm sure."

"That's not your concern now." She regarded the mess around them with obvious distaste. "I think you'd better pack up whatever personal items you have in here."

"It's all personal," he said, "and it's too much trouble to try to pack it. You can have it."

Arlene looked at the carpenter. "I suppose we could lease a dumpster."

"There's useful stuff here," said Jones to the carpenter, trying, without any particular reason, to win him over.

"Dr. Ferguson," said Arlene. "Do you know why you're leaving?"

"I don't agree with the way you and your lackeys run this place."

"It's not the agreeing that matters." Arlene smiled. "If you think I

care what you believe, how you think, or whether you criticize our work here, then you're mistaken."

Jones was interested in her explanation in spite of himself.

"You're leaving because you're the worst kind of employee an organization can have," she said. "You're a saboteur. Dean Hofstadter is going to have a difficult enough time making the marketing campaign work without you undermining her self-possession and her credibility."

Jones wanted to say something in his defense, but he knew she was right. And he also knew there was a level at which his conduct was indefensible. Coolidge College could go to hell for all he cared, but he'd been utterly foolish to let his personal dispute with the McChesneys drive a wedge between him and Sydney.

Arlene stepped aside, and the security man came forward and extended a cardboard box over the desk.

Jones pushed the cardboard box aside and stood up. "If you'll excuse me," he said, "I have to see a man about a toaster."

\*\*\*

Jones drove into Washboro. With the green mountains in the background, the town was picturesque. Jones hated picturesque. He hated the gaily-colored buildings, the sidewalk displays of sporting goods and gardening implements, the painted wooden cows. He saw a sign on a tourist restaurant that reminded him how much he hated deep-fried ice cream.

He parked the car and walked past Christopher's Family Style toward the hardware pharmacy, the toaster under his arm. His headache throbbed.

When he got to the hardware store, he picked his way carefully through the all-terrain vehicles and tractors on the sidewalk, afraid the headache might interfere with his navigational abilities.

The tourists had finally begun to show up in Washboro, and the store was crowded with people dropping off film, getting photocopies

made, buying bottles of wine, or just idling. Why would people come all the way from New York or Boston to spend their time in a hardware store having photocopies made? Life was so defiant of Jones's understanding that he found himself beginning to agree with Sydney's assessment. Life had changed in the eighties, and Jones had yet to make any accommodations with it.

The store manager refused to take the toaster back. With the countenance of a townie used to dealing with college boys, he said that being "a self-important symbol of overweening technology and rampant consumerism" wasn't a good enough reason for a refund. And besides, it was full of crumbs.

Jones started a half-hearted argument with the man. "I thought this was the decade of customer satisfaction."

"That's the nineties," said the manager.

Jones had to admire the profundity of the retort, and he couldn't think of anything else to say. On his way out of the store, however, he looked to make sure no one was watching, then placed the toaster on a display shelf in the video section. He knew it would sit there until some tourist bought it on the assumption that it was a television set with a bread-toasting option.

He stopped at the counter on his way out to buy a newspaper and a roll of buttercream-mint flavored Life Savers. When he got outside—no longer burdened with that ridiculous toaster—it was a beautiful afternoon, of the kind that can only occur in New England in the spring. The sky was the color of an exam booklet cover, and the mountains in the distance looked almost benevolent. He peeled a Life Saver off his roll and put it in his mouth. Under the sunshine, he thought he could feel his headache fading.

"Jones, isn't it?"

Jones turned and found himself facing Steven, the guy who'd fastened himself onto his blazer a couple weeks ago.

"Yeah."

"How are you?"

"Displaced," said Jones. "How are you?"

Steven appeared not to have heard Jones's answer. "I'm great," he said. "I've never been better. I've heard from her. She's coming here!"

"I'm very happy for you," said Jones.

"She's going to star in some sort of feature production at the College," said Steven. "DDT or something like that. She got the job because of that beer commercial. Can you imagine that?"

In fact, Jones could imagine it very easily. "Amazing," he said.

"Have you seen Sydney?" asked Steven. "I'm dying to tell her about this."

"No," said Jones, "I haven't seen her." He thought he felt his headache coming back.

# Nineteen

Sydney and her mother did not exactly have a history of talking about important personal things, but Sydney didn't have anyone else to talk with about her problems with STD and Arlene McChesney. So she asked her mother to sit down with her at the kitchen table while she tried to describe everything that had happened at work since she and Jones had had their falling-out.

She explained her misgivings about the name of her event and Arlene's refusal to change it and her hiring of the Bikini Light actress in great detail, refusing to allow any emotion in her voice or any defensiveness over the things she perceived had been done to her. She finished by saying she felt she'd been put in an untenable position and could not conceive of any alternative to quitting Coolidge College.

"So you're going to quit now that things aren't going your way?" said her mother.

"It's not just that things aren't going my way, mother. It's a matter of principle."

"Is there a more important principle than doing a good job, Sydney?"

"It feels like I'm having to do things that are against what I stand for," said Sydney.

"And what do you stand for?"

Sydney didn't know what to say. What *did* she stand for? Higher education? Excellence in marketing? Cold Snot did not seem to signify either of those. Sydney realized she would have to work this out. Maybe she was just being a big baby about everything.

Her mother smiled and squeezed her arm. "I'm sure you'll do what's right." She stood to leave. "Do you think you'll be giving Tel another chance?"

"He's such a boy," said Sydney. "You should have seen the way he acted when he asked me out."

"I found out that Jones put him up to that," said her mother.

Sydney was nonplussed. "What's he doing taking orders from Jones?"

"He went to Jones and asked for advice on how to approach you, and Jones told him to try to intimidate you."

Sydney hadn't suspected Jones of that kind of meanness. She felt a little used, and she thought Tel probably did, too. She decided to give him another chance if he called.

He called shortly after Sydney's mother left the room. He asked Sydney if she would go to dinner with him. Sydney agreed, and then she began looking forward to it. She'd never ridden in a Ferrari before.

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Sydney regretted accepting Tel's invitation almost as soon as she got into his car. It was true that it was a nice car, and it was exciting to be roaring around Washboro in something so exotic, but she was dismayed when they roared right out of town and onto the access ramp of the interstate.

"Where are we going?" she said over the whine of the engine.

"Burlington." Tel shifted smartly from third to fourth. "There's no place worth eating at in Washboro."

"But Burlington is an hour away."

"Not in this car." Tel smiled.

Tel had apparently been driving this car for some period of time, because he handled it very competently, and Sydney could see immedi-

ately she had no cause for alarm on that score. She was worried, however, that he might try to get her to do something she wasn't in the mood for. She wasn't scared of him—you don't work in beer marketing for fifteen years without learning how to manage the very worst the male gender has to offer—but she thought it would be inconvenient to have to mace him.

“It's a great car,” said Tel.

“Yes.” Sydney agreed, but she felt some regret doing so. She leaned back against the butter-soft leather seat and imagined she were driving. She thought briefly about asking if she could, but then she decided it would be too much like confessing that she admired the car.

Her misgivings received additional confirmation when they pulled up to a hotel—a specimen of one of those chains that caters to the business crowd. She realized that was probably the kind of place Tel felt comfortable with, and it was true there wasn't any such place in Washboro.

A young woman in a powder blue suit with red piping and gold buttons ran up to the car and opened the door on Sydney's side.

“They have the best chef in the state,” said Tel.

Sydney thought it best just to go along with things for now, confident in her ability to see any change in direction ahead of time.

Tel grabbed her elbow to guide her toward the revolving door and then gestured toward a staircase leading to a mezzanine. She glanced at him as they walked across the lobby, and he was beaming. It occurred to her then that he was showing off in front of all these strangers, that he was wearing her rather like an ornament. Sydney was acutely aware that she had been entering adulthood when Tel was born, and she didn't feel very ornamental, but it was the first time a man had behaved that way with her in a long time. It was touching and maybe a little funny.

Sydney smiled to herself. Tel looked at her and smiled back, as if they were communicating about something. Sydney relaxed her smile quickly then. This situation was amusing, but she realized she had to be careful about leading him on.

The maitre d' met them at the door to the dining room and led them to a table in the corner, where they were set upon by a crew of wait-people who pulled chairs for them and snapped napkins across their laps. Tel never spoke to them, but they behaved as though they'd been choreographed for the event. Sydney wondered whether Tel felt the need to impress her. Her mother said he was worth thirty million dollars. Why would he feel the need to impress anybody?

"I'm glad you came," said Tel. "I was afraid I might never get another chance after the way I asked you last time."

Sydney smiled, but she didn't know what to say.

"It was Jones," said Tel. "He told me to treat you that way."

"Let's not talk about it, Tel."

The sommelier walked up to the table and presented a bottle of Dom Perignon for Tel's inspection. Tel nodded, and the sommelier began opening the bottle. Sydney was a little grateful that Tel dispensed with the tasting ritual. That had always seemed to her so pretentious, and at about a hundred and fifty dollars the bottle, what was the chance of getting a bad one?

The champagne was exquisite, and Sydney wished she could drink it more often.

"What are you working on now?" asked Tel.

"An event at the college," she said. "It's called Summer Term Discovery." Sydney was resolute about avoiding use of the initials STD.

"What is it?"

"It's just your basic rock concert-sports activities-block party promotional event." Sydney took a sip of the champagne. "I've booked a group called Cold Snot for it."

"No!" Tel grabbed the table and leaned toward her. "Really? You got Cold Snot?"

Sydney knew the group was "in," but she was still a little surprised at his reaction.

"Totally awesome," said Tel. "'Let's Puke' has the greatest riff that ever opened a record. Have you seen their video of it?"

"No," said Sydney.

“They do it!” said Tel with awe. “They all puke. It’s way cool.”

Sydney was beginning to be pleased she’d had the foresight to line up such a popular group, although she hoped she might not have to attend their concert. Maybe not. Babe would probably love to put food coloring in her hair, change the safety pin in her earlobe, and see to the all the details.

Sydney’s only impression of Cold Snot so far was shaped by their demand that the dressing room be set up with a large tub of gravlax.

“Have you ever eaten gravlax?” said Sydney.

“I’ve seen it,” said Tel, “but I didn’t like the way it looked.”

Sydney was not one to worry much about the appearance of her food. “Cold Snot asked for it.”

“Awesome.”

“We’re going to provide mostly fried chicken and ribs for the young people,” said Sydney conversationally.

“Maybe they eat the gravlax to help them puke,” said Tel.

“That’s disgusting,” said Sydney, but she thought it was pretty funny, and they both laughed. Sydney discovered she was enjoying herself, even if the communication spectrum with this young man seemed fairly narrow.

“You really know marketing, don’t you?” he said.

Sydney shrugged and smiled. She couldn’t very well deny it. She was a marketing genius.

“I want to ask you advice on something,” said Tel.

“OK.”

“My company has this software product.” Tel took a gulp of his champagne of the size most people reserve for liquids they have paid less than one hundred and fifty dollars the bottle for. “It’s known in the market as a database management system.”

Sydney nodded to encourage him to go on.

“I think hypertext is the wave of the future,” he said.

Sydney winced inwardly at the word “hypertext,” neither knowing nor wanting to know what it meant and slightly embarrassed for him for using it.

“So I want to reposition this database management system as a hypertext authoring product. What kind of marketing do you think I should do?”

“Why do you want reposition this database thing as a... what do you call it?”

“Hypertext authoring system.”

“Why do you want to reposition this database thing as a hypertext?” said Sydney.

“I think the database market is pretty mature. But the hypertext market is just getting started. I could dominate it. Many of the routines would be the same, so I think we can just port most of the code. Dress up the interface a little, make some new manuals and new packaging.” He snapped his fingers. “New product.”

A waiter came running over.

Tel looked up.

“Yes, sir?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Tel. “I was just making conversation.”

“Yes, sir.” The waiter retreated again.

Sydney and Tel laughed.

Sydney took another sip of champagne. “This doesn’t sound to me like a positioning problem. Why don’t you just make a hypertext product if you want a hypertext product?”

Tel’s face fell, as though that were not the answer he wanted to hear.

The New American Cuisine had not yet arrived in Burlington, for which Sydney was thankful. She had *Escalopes de Veau à la Savoyarde*, and she discovered that by alternating mouthfuls of veal with sips of champagne she could considerably improve the way the world looked. Why should she worry about the name of her event? Why should she care that Arlene had hired Stinky’s girlfriend to host it?

Tel didn’t talk much during the meal. He wasn’t particularly concentrating on his dinner, and Sydney wondered if he was working up to suggesting they get a room. Sydney noticed he shoved a lot of things to one side of his plate. She wanted to ask whether she could eat the food he was leaving, but she decided not to.

She set her knife and fork down and tore a piece of crusty bread from the loaf in the basket on the table. She spread it liberally with butter, then dabbed it in the veal's cream sauce. She could taste the shallots in the sauce, and she wondered how she would describe it to Jones when she got home.

Then she remembered she wouldn't be talking with Jones when she got home, or ever, if she was lucky.

"You want to know something?" said Tel.

Sydney looked up from her meal at him.

"You're not at all like your mother."

And Sydney realized with a certain amount of chagrin that his voice was filled with disappointment.

# Twenty

**T**hese days, Jones couldn't decide which felt worse—waking up with a hangover or waking up without one. But on Friday he had one, and he rather wished he hadn't, although at the same time he was glad that Thursday had been easier than it might have been. He got up slowly from the futon and went to the bathroom to relieve himself and look for some aspirin. Then he went out to the kitchen to put on some coffee.

Shuffling down the hallway, he knocked over a stack of information devoted to industrial policy, which had been standing precariously a couple inches from the wall. The books and papers shot out in front of him and washed across the floor as though he'd opened a scholarship hydrant in his apartment. He looked at the mess, then walked right across, stepping on the notes and reprints in his stocking feet, slipping a little on a popular monograph by one of those people he'd always thought of as "advisory economists." The kind who made good money from popular analyses that had little to do with real economics. It was a trade paperback with a slick cover. That was why he had slipped. He kicked the book toward the living room, where it fetched up against one of his canvas director's chairs.

So this was what it had come to. He no longer harnessed his anger

and used it to organize his work on *The General Theory of Value*. Now he only used it to kick books.

Jones was a little disgusted with himself as he slammed cabinets and drawers in his kitchenette, assembling the paraphernalia to make a pot of coffee. He had a chocolate bar in his refrigerator, and eating that seemed to restore his personal equilibrium a little. It didn't make him any less disgusting in his own eyes, but it did quiet his stomach a little.

He'd been out of a job for at least two weeks now. It was Friday, the day his final check was supposed to be ready for him to pick up at the Bursar's Office in Felmley Hall. He knew he would feel better after he did that. He could leave town then. Sydney's campus-wide celebration of venereal disease was scheduled to start on Monday, and he didn't want to be around for it. The idea of all those kids gave him the shivers. They were likely to take over the whole town. It would be like ski season in the middle of the summer, only with a younger crowd.

He looked at his watch and saw it was after lunchtime. The check would probably be ready by now. Once he got out of town, he would be able to begin reassessing his choices—not that he really had any. He couldn't get another university job. He hadn't published in fourteen years. He had no credentials whatever. What would he tell a search committee? "You should see the piles of papers in my apartment."

No, he was going to have to do something else. He could resume work on *The General Theory of Value* sometime. But he was going to have to get some sort of job, maybe night manager for a convenience store or something. He didn't have the credentials for that, either, but he knew how to make change, and he figured it was a dangerous enough job that the competition for it might be less than for most other jobs.

He felt a little better after he'd had his coffee, showered, shaved, and flossed his upper teeth. His lower teeth still felt uncomfortable, but he was out of floss. He decided to go down to the hardware store to get some more. He got dressed and walked downtown. The movement made him feel a little more human, although he almost tripped on a roto-tiller in front of the store, and he thought maybe he was losing some of his balance and coordination. He decided he would cut back

on his drinking. It certainly wouldn't hurt him to drink less. Well, maybe it would hurt a little. When he was sober, he had to find a way to distract himself from his feelings; and since he was having a great deal of difficulty concentrating on *The General Theory of Value*, it really was easier just to drink.

In the store, he looked half-heartedly for the dental floss, but he couldn't find it. The store clerk must have mistaken him for a tourist, because she tried to sell him a Water Pik instead. Jones looked at the picture of the Water Pik on the outside of the box and wondered idly whether there was a way to commit suicide with it. Not that he was going to commit suicide. He was just wondering. With plaque structures beginning to form in the crevices of his lower teeth, he went to the counter to buy a newspaper, then walked back out into the sunlight.

The Washboro town fathers had had the foresight to make sure the center of town had neither shade nor benches. This kept the tourists moving along the sidewalks and inside the shops, where they presumably spent the money they had carried northward from New York and Boston. There appeared to be a large number of strangers in town, and Jones assumed people were arriving to do prep work for next week's event. Jones stepped outside the drift of humanity on the walkway and sat defiantly down on the curb to look at his newspaper.

There were two large stories on page one. The first was about Telford O'Connor and his announcement of a major expansion of his software company in Washboro. It was the kind of story small-town newspapers love to report. Apparently, Tel had major venture capital behind him and was planning to create something like a hundred new jobs. Jones wondered whether he still needed marketing help, and he thought about how life might have turned out if he hadn't disrupted things at the faculty reception that night and Sydney had gone into marketing software, the way she was intended to by her mother.

Of course, if Sydney had gone into software, Jones would still be hiding in his office, wondering how quickly his neck might feel the blade of the McChesneys' axe. But it would have come soon enough.

Even if he hadn't caused such a fuss in the marketing meeting, they would eventually have discovered he was anti-supply side—probably as soon as they got the Felmley Pond sewage problem taken care of, although that didn't seem to be in any danger of winding down in the foreseeable future.

No, it was pretty clear that Jones had thrown away the only good thing fate had ever offered him. He had thought that if he didn't know or understand Sydney, he had a better chance of holding on to her. And in refusing to know her, he had driven her away. It was one of those things where your behavior produces the opposite of what you want. It was a little like the supply siders insisting that cutting taxes would increase government revenues. He wondered what verdict history would pass on *that* strategy. But what did it really matter in the face of human loneliness?

The other front page story was about President Reagan signing a new gun control law. From the story, it sounded as though it ought to be called a gun uncontrol law. Apparently, the law was intended to reduce federal restrictions that were put in place in 1968 on the purchase of firearms. It was the kind of story a small town paper loves to report. It was positively celebratory. There were a lot of gun owners in Washboro. This ought to make it easier for them to get their hands on the semiautomatic weapons they needed so badly the vanquish the region's deer and rabbits.

Jones thought about President Reagan signing this law. Hadn't the man been shot himself just five years ago? One would think that might have made some kind of impression on him. But he seemed no more capable of understanding the implications of his decisions than Barton McChesney. Jones shrugged. It was true he had surrounded himself with supply siders, but President Reagan wasn't really as bad as Barton McChesney. If McChesney were President of the United States instead of just Coolidge College, he wouldn't stop with weakening the gun laws. He'd probably turn the White House into a retail arms outlet. No, that wasn't true. He wouldn't do it. Arlene would do it, and she wouldn't turn the White House into a retail arms outlet. She would

turn it into a wholesale arms outlet.

On page two, there was a story about the forthcoming celebration at the Statue of Liberty with 200 Elvis impersonators. He imagined discussing this with Sydney in the context of STD. "Two hundred Elvis impersonators. Why didn't you think of that, Sydney?"

He caught himself smiling. He put his face back into a frown and looked up from his newspaper. Across the street and up the block about three doors, Christopher's Family Style (Featuring Widescreen TV) seemed to be doing a good business. There was a line of people waiting to get in. Someone was coming out. She wasn't wearing her tweed jacket or her glasses, and her hair was allowed to flow expansively around her face, but he nevertheless recognized Sydney's mother. She wore a white dress with some kind of design in black. For a moment he was afraid she would see him, but she was watching the doorway of the restaurant intently.

Telford O'Connor emerged from the restaurant. Sydney's mother reached for his hand, and the two of them started up the street, away from Jones's direction and toward, as near as he could tell, the Green Mountain Tourist Motel.

He wondered whether he should tell Sydney about it. But he realized he would probably never see Sydney up close again, and although his life was probably better for it, it made his hangover feel worse.

He stood up slowly so as not to alarm his nervous system. Then he went off to find a trashcan for the newspaper and get over to the Bursar's Office so he could say good-bye to this burg.

At the campus gate, Jones walked past a group of teenagers with a Coolidge faculty member. Jones recognized her as the woman who taught mice to fight with spurs. The teenagers were dressed in STD tee shirts—with color pictures of Cold Snot on the back—and ragged jeans. Some wore baseball caps. Some had partially shaved heads. One appeared to have treated his remaining hair with the dung of some large mammal, the way they do in some hunting and gathering societies, to give it a kind of stiffness. They all looked different, and yet they all looked the same, as if they were all in the same army but had different

ranks and functions. The uniform was the same among the boys and the girls. Two of them appeared to be trying to distract their chaperone while the others spray-painted their own motto on the sign. Jones shrugged. It didn't matter what they wrote; it couldn't be much worse than "The business of education is business."

The teenagers were immersed in a technical discussion about spray paint as he passed through the gate on his way to the center of campus.

"Bogus, dude."

"No, excellent."

"Bogus."

"Excellent."

Jones imagined teaching economics to such creatures. Then he put it out of his mind.

At the edge of Felmley Pond, Jones thought he recognized Barton McChesney in hip boots wading about with some people who appeared to be engineers. He remembered how much he liked McChesney as a person. He silently wished him luck with his sewage problem and continued on toward Felmley Hall.

Felmley Hall was in chaos. There were trucks, trailers, and motor homes everywhere. People walked around with cable spools, dollies carrying giant speakers, wheelbarrows, large wooden crates. There was a crew of people on the roof of the building, erecting some sort of scaffolding with metal tubing. On the ground, there appeared to be very little order, although some of the people seemed somewhat responsive to a short bald man in a leather jacket.

On a bench near the sidewalk, Jones recognized the lunatic Steven, who was deep in conversation with a cheap-looking dark-haired woman wearing glasses and regularly sweeping the campus with her gaze, as if she were looking for someone.

Next to the front door of the building, someone had put up a tent, and people dressed like cooks were standing behind steam tables. There were a number of people milling around, getting food for themselves. One of them, a young woman, slightly overweight but with nice skin, Jones recognized as Babe from Sydney's office. She was conferring with

a member of the catering staff.

“Is that the gravlax? Give me a plate of that for Sydney. She wanted to try it.”

Jones went into the building and got on the elevator for the second floor, where the Bursar’s Office was located, just as the doors were closing. The car was crowded with people dressed like extras from the set of *Mad Max*. But all of them seemed to be carrying things or behaving usefully, and Jones realized he would probably never thoroughly understand the human species.

Most of them appeared to be going up to the fourth floor. Jones was amused at the prospect of their invading the Faculty Club, but he decided they were probably crew people associated with the scaffolding on the roof.

Jones got off on the second floor and went to the Bursar’s Office. He signed for his check, looked at it, folded it, and put it into his pocket. He felt better about life in general with the check in his pocket. Now to see about getting out of town.

In front of the elevator there were two young men and a young woman, dressed in jeans and tee shirts and holding pieces of what appeared to be aluminum tubing and boxes with handles and cords coming out of them. They didn’t talk much. They appeared to be exhausted. When the elevator arrived going down, they got on with Jones. One of the men then pulled a round key from his pocket, stuck it in the elevator control panel, turned it, and punched four. The elevator began moving upward.

“Hey,” said Jones, “I was going down.”

“It’ll go down after it lets us off, man,” said the man. He wasn’t at all belligerent, just tired.

Jones shrugged.

When the elevator stopped, the three started to get off, but the woman dropped one of her aluminum pipes with a great clatter.

“Come on,” said one of the young men.

“I told you I couldn’t handle both the amp and the pipes, Slash,” said the woman.

Jones bent and picked up the pipe. "I'll help."

"Give him the rest of them and come on," said Slash. "They're waiting for this stuff."

Jones, his arms wrapped around a bunch of pipes, followed the others into the stairway and up to the roof.

If anything, the roof was more chaotic than the ground. There were people, cables, and equipment everywhere. Workers fastened pipes together and attached them to the structure already in progress near the edge. People worked on amplifiers, musicians strummed guitars, electricians adjusted floodlights. There was another little tent off to one side with some equipment under it. In the midst of it all, Sydney was walking around with a clipboard, talking with people and making notes.

Jones laid the pipes down, figuring he had done enough. He was about to leave when he saw Babe approach Sydney, take her clipboard, and hand her a plate. Then a man in a hard hat standing next to the scaffolding called Sydney over. She walked over to the man and stood near the edge of the building while he explained something, pointing alternately from the ground to the scaffolding. Sydney, still holding her plate and trying to look at what the man was explaining about, walked up to the edge of the building and leaned out.

It was then that Jones noticed the ferret, but it was already too late to do anything. It happened in a flash. The ferret jumped from an exhaust duct, darted toward Sydney, and ran up the back of her leg. It didn't even get as high as the inside of her knee, however, before Sydney pitched forward and off the edge of the roof, still holding her plate, and with the ferret fastened to the back of her leg like a furry growth.

# Twenty-one

**A** lot happened to McChesney in 1981, starting in the spring, which was when he died.

Dying wasn't exactly what he expected. It didn't hurt, for one thing. When he was alive, he had always thought that it would probably hurt. But it didn't. It just felt a little cold. And it didn't seem quite as important as he thought it would, either. He had always thought it would be a big deal, but it seemed ordinary. Should he try to remember the date? He was pretty sure the month was March, but what day was it?

He had heard that old saying that your life replays itself before your eyes when you die. He half expected something like that to happen, and if he were capable of feeling anything right then, he supposed he would be disappointed. All those years waiting for a big show, and when the curtain goes up, you don't get anything but a fast forward of the earlier part of the day.

He had gone to his doctor's office. Ah, now he remembered the date. The appointment was on his calendar for March 20. It was a Friday. He hadn't made the appointment; Arlene had. She was always trying to run his life, controlling him like one of those ferrets of hers. He loved her, but she was always trying to run his life. He didn't really need a doctor. It was just a backache, for God's sake. You turn fifty, you get backaches. That's the way it works.

He couldn't even remember telling her about the backache. He thought he had kept it to himself. But one night it had kicked up a little and kept him awake most of the night, and the next morning she had called the doctor from her office and made the appointment for him.

He almost didn't go. When he got to the Purity Supreme in Derry that morning, he knew the manager was ready to place an order for Ecstasy All-Purpose Laundry. He had spent three months working on this order. If the manager wanted him to hang around a little, he would just forget about the doctor. His backache just wasn't that bad.

The manager gave him the order but not the eye-level shelf position. "We'll see" was what he said. But McChesney had the order. Since he still had his backache, too, he decided to go down to Boston to see the doctor.

The doctor's office was in a converted brownstone in Back Bay, and good traffic on Route 93 got McChesney there fifteen minutes early. He sat in the waiting room on a molded plastic chair and studied the painted-over molding and worn carpeting for nearly an hour. He didn't want to read the magazines. He never read much anyway.

The physician's assistant finally came and took him into the examination room. She told him to get undressed, and she left. He stripped to his underwear and sat down on the examining table. After a few minutes, the doctor came in, read something from a folder he was carrying, laid the folder on a small counter against the wall, and began to poke and handle McChesney without speaking.

The doctor didn't look him in the face. He just seemed thoughtful as he listened to different parts of McChesney with a stethoscope. The doctor had been examining and treating McChesney since he'd first come to take over the Boston territory, before he'd even gone to New Hampshire. In that time—ten years or so—the doctor hadn't spoken a dozen words to him. But then the doctor had a lot of patients and probably would never have gotten any work done if he'd talked with them.

As the doctor worked his fingers over McChesney's abdomen just below his rib cage on the right side, however, his manner changed. He suddenly seemed to notice McChesney was in the room with him.

He looked at his patient suspiciously, as though he thought McChesney was faking something, then he felt the abdomen on the other side. He went back to

*feel the right side again. He went over to the counter, opened a folder again, and ran his finger down a paper he found there. He walked back to McChesney and felt his abdomen again.*

*McChesney had never seen his doctor show such interest in him. "Is there something wrong?" As soon as he said it, he knew there was. His backache blossomed from an annoyance to a grinding pain. He grunted and put his hand on his back to try to push the pain to the side.*

*"Does it hurt?" said the doctor.*

*"Unngh," said McChesney. His kidneys began to throb. He had never felt his kidneys do anything before.*

*The doctor nodded as if the answer were good enough, walked over to the telephone on the wall, pushed a button, and spoke into it. "Jeannette, get an ambulance here. Stat."*

*McChesney was curious despite the pain. "What's going on?" he gasped. He looked down and saw that a spot on his side was pumping in and out, as if he were a creature in a horror movie. This made it much worse. Pain he could stand, but special effects, he thought, were just too much. He felt faint, and he put a hand down on the examining table to steady himself. The pain kept him conscious.*

*The doctor, still on the telephone, looked over at McChesney. He saw the pumping spot, too. He studied McChesney and his pumping spot, hardly noticing that he was talking on the telephone. "No," he said into the receiver with his eyes on McChesney's kidney (or at least where McChesney supposed his kidney was). "Not City. Mass General. I don't know who's on, but we've got better odds there. Call ahead. Tell them it's an emergency surgical admission. Ruptured aortic aneurysm."*

*"Unngh?" said McChesney.*

*"He probably doesn't have that long," said the doctor without taking his eyes off the pumping, which had now grown into a small lump, swelling and waning with the beat of McChesney's heart. The doctor wasn't looking at the telephone when he hung up the receiver behind him. The receiver slipped out of the cradle and dangled at the end of its cord. He paid no attention to it but approached McChesney's lump as he might a rare butterfly. He reached down and felt the lump. "Mr. McChesney," he said without looking up. "I think you have a*

*ruptured aneurysm. Do you know what that is?"*

*"Unngh."*

*"You're going directly to the hospital," said the doctor. "It could be serious. Is there anyone we should call?"*

*McChesney's breath came in ragged gasps. He didn't want them to call Arlene. He was afraid she would be upset. But the doctor seemed extremely serious, so he didn't think he had much choice. "My wife," he said.*

*"Is her number in the file?"*

*"Yes, I think so." McChesney groaned.*

*"Good," said the doctor, looking him in the face again. "We may need her to sign the release for surgery. I'm going to get my things. Don't bother dressing. The ambulance should be here in a moment. I'll be riding with you."*

*"Am I going to die?" The pain tightened around his middle like a vise, and McChesney half hoped he would.*

*The doctor reached over and patted his shoulder. "Everything's going to be all right."*

*The doctor was wrong. Everything was not all right, at least not until McChesney died. Up to that point, it was more like a nightmare than anything he would describe as "all right." The pain continued to spread until it took over most of his body. Burly paramedics strapped him into a wheeled stretcher. He was taken on a breakneck ride down Storrow Drive in an ambulance with a siren wailing all around him. Then several people raced him on a gurney down a bright corridor as acoustical tiles and fluorescent lights unrolled above him.*

*Then he found himself in conversation with a brown young man who had bluish lips and burnished eyelids. In soft, rapid English with an accent McChesney recognized as Indian (or maybe Pakistani), the young man introduced himself as the anesthesiologist. He explained, much faster than McChesney could take it in, that he was giving him a shot to relax him and that it would be followed by other shots, after which he wanted McChesney to count backwards from one hundred. McChesney would have thought it foolish to be wasting time counting backwards if it hadn't been for the first shot, which had the effect of making him trust and admire the anesthesiologist and want to do anything the young man asked. It was only then that everything started to be all right again.*

*And when he died, things had never been so right.*

He was perfectly aware of everything that was going on. His consciousness hovered at a point just about nine feet above his body, which was lying on an operating table under a huddle of surgeons and nurses. The body was open like an old valise, and two doctors were feverishly disconnecting and reconnecting his parts. There was a certain amount of conversation about his falling blood pressure and pulse, but McChesney paid no attention to the details. The surgical team worked quickly. He could feel their excitement as they pushed themselves to restore his vital signs. They would do this for a detergent salesman? Such good people. He was grateful to be providing these fine people with an interesting job for their afternoon.

But it seemed a great effort for a small benefit. He felt like telling them not to bother. He couldn't, however. He was so flimsy. He wasn't solid enough to say anything. The part of him that used to speak, the part of him that moved about and talked overworked store managers into granting shelf space to the Ecstasy family of fine cleaning products, lay heavily below him. Even if he had felt like making it move, he couldn't. It was too far away, and he was drifting out of the room.

It was dark now, and there was a white light above him. He knew he was supposed to go to the light, and knowing was enough to start him drifting in that direction. There were people waiting for him: his younger sister, dead of leukemia since 1947, and his mentor, Dennis Slattery, who had taught him almost thirty years ago how to place a set of encyclopedias with an uncommitted prospect. He couldn't see or hear anyone, but he felt them. There were many others, too. A woman who had been killed in an accident he had seen on Route 93 some weeks ago, lots of Russians and Afghans. Quite a few Cambodians. President Reagan.

President Reagan?

*If McChesney were capable of feeling anything, he would have felt excitement. How often does a detergent salesman get to meet the President? How often does anyone get to meet the person he most admires? McChesney had always felt a kinship with Ronald Reagan, as the two of them had started selling soap at the same time. Ronald Reagan did it from the position of host of the television show Death Valley Days, and McChesney did it supermarket to supermarket in a territory in southern New Hampshire. But selling soap is*

*selling soap, and McChesney always knew the President would agree with him, if they had ever met to discuss it. And now to be so close to the man!*

Like McChesney, the President did not seem upset about dying. He considered the whole thing to be of small importance, but the facts of his death were pretty fresh, and he radiated them in a genial manner. He'd been in front of a hotel in Washington with his press secretary and a bunch of his handlers. A strange young man had approached him with a handgun and shot him twice in the chest. The President had been surprised that anybody would want to shoot him, but the surprise had only lasted until he died. Now he didn't feel much of anything other than an ill-defined need to drift toward the light overhead and a mild—very mild—regret that the Reagan presidency had been terminated.

*He said as much. Well, "said" isn't the right word. He didn't talk, really. Nobody was talking. But he communicated his mild regret to McChesney. He'd been the leader of a revolution. He was going to liberate the United States. He was going to make the country a military fortress, and then he was going to liberate it—from social engineering, from big government, from onerous taxes, from ridiculous regulations, from incentive-stifling liberal philosophy, from restrictions on mankind's greatest invention: the free market. He was going to accomplish all this with the vehicle of supply-side economics. He wasn't exactly sure what supply-side economics was, but he knew it was the key to what he referred to as "the Reagan Revolution." But now, of course, there wasn't going to be a Reagan Revolution. Now he was just going to be another assassinated president.*

*Old habits hang on for a long time, even after you die. McChesney was incapable of feeling anything right then, but he felt as though he was feeling sympathy for the great man and his failed revolution. He felt as though he regretted the triumph of social engineering and the crushing of supply-side economics, whatever that was.*

The President returned McChesney's sympathy with a kind of affection that made McChesney feel special, although the President's fondness obviously extended to everyone present, even the Russians. Everybody's fondness extended to everybody else. They had a great fellowship, McChesney and the President, the Russians and the Afghans, the Cambodians and McChesney's sister. McChesney had never belonged to anything so completely in his life.

He and the President had a long, wordless conversation that might well have lasted for eons. The two of them agreed that the Reagan Revolution had ended too soon, and—although they both felt every bit as content with their present situation as the Cambodians and the woman from Route 93—they agreed that if either of them had a second chance, he would do everything he could to make supply-side economics a reality.

*The President was grateful to McChesney for this commitment, and McChesney was serious in making it, even though he knew there was no chance of keeping it. Commitments are for the living. They just don't matter very much when you're dead. In fact, nothing matters much when you're dead. That was one of the main features of dying, McChesney realized.*

Then the others surprised McChesney. In this wordless language he was getting quite used to, they told him it was time to decide. Decide? How do you decide anything when you're dead? You don't die all that easily, they explained. Most people have to actually decide to die. Almost everybody has the option of another instant of life. That's what you decide, even in the act of dying. Do you want another instant?

If you don't, they explained to him wordlessly, then take a deep breath. Take a deep breath, and it will all be over. McChesney wanted to look at the President, but there was nothing to see except far, far below him, as if viewed from the wrong end of a telescope, the surgical team was still working on his pitiful body. He knew the President wouldn't be able to help him anyway. The President was making his own decision. Just take a deep breath, and it would be over.

McChesney realized for the first time that he'd never actually made a real decision before. For a lifetime, as brief as it was, he had simply followed the traffic. Could he now make the decision to die? He started to take his deep breath. He looked down at his body on the operating table. He looked at the face, crammed with a breathing tube and covered over with surgical tape. The eyes were closed. He thought about Arlene and how difficult it would be for her with only one life to run. He hadn't been the best of husbands when he was alive. Not that it mattered, but if he had another chance, he would give her the elegant kind of life she wanted.

Suddenly, it was all over. McChesney fell.

*For the first time since he was anesthetized, he felt something, really felt it. Panic. Pain. Falling. Darkness.*

*The fall lasted about two hours, or maybe it was a year, and he had to endure it alone. He wasn't with the President any longer. He wasn't with anybody, and he'd never felt quite so lonely. The white light was gone, the people around him were gone. There was nothing but blackness everywhere, he continued to fall deeper into it, until there was nothing at all anywhere, not even him.*

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*He woke up slowly. Arlene was there, and he couldn't understand why she was shouting. He started to raise a hand to ask for quiet, but he hadn't the strength. He'd never slept so deeply in his life.*

*"Bart, it's Arlene," shouted his wife.*

*Then he realized she wasn't shouting; she was whispering. The hospital ventilation was roaring in his ears, and he wished he had some sunglasses against the overhead lights. There were tubes in either of his nostrils, and he could feel dry, cool air parching his nose and throat. Someone had rested an anvil on his chest and then forgotten about it. A tear dropped from Arlene's eye and hit his cheek like rock.*

*"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. She rubbed his face with a handkerchief like a scouring pad.*

*The world began to take shape, and he realized he was in a room that was actually pretty quiet and softly lit. But it is difficult to show any real appreciation for your surroundings when you are encased in a block of pressure and pain like so much concrete.*

*"Bart," said Arlene, "you're going to be all right. They said you died for a little while, but you're going to be all right." She coughed with a little whoop and pressed the handkerchief to her mouth. Her other hand came up, and she stood there for a moment with her face buried in the handkerchief and her shoulders shaking.*

*McChesney felt his pain was a small thing compared to having this woman cry over him so freely and shamelessly. Wasn't this kind of passion worth any amount of pain? He was glad he had chosen to come back to her. Or had he?*

*They had told him he would have to decide to die, but nobody had said that not deciding to die meant choosing to live. Did it?*

*McChesney was confused. Something had brought him back, but he didn't know what it was. He had promised himself that if he were given a second chance, he would use it to give Arlene the life she wanted. But he also remembered making a commitment to President Reagan to use his second chance to promote supply-side economics.*

*Which commitment was more binding—that made for love or that made for principle? He wanted to ask Arlene. “Ah,” he began, which started him coughing so that his chest felt like it was being rubbed by demons with coarse-grade steel wool. As soon as he stopped coughing, the demons left, but not before they remembered to put the anvil back on his chest.*

*His wife lowered her handkerchief. Her nose was red. “What is it, dear?” She sniffed wetly.*

*McChesney croaked a little, and the demons came back for a moment to tap on the anvil with hammers until he closed his mouth. He gave up.*

*“I'll leave you now,” said Arlene. “You need your rest.”*

*McChesney didn't try to stop her. He was thinking about his commitments.*

## Twenty-two

Sydney was surprised how calm and focused she felt. Nothing, she decided, can give you more focus than falling four stories onto a catering tent. She wasn't hurt, really. In fact, she didn't feel anything at all—as if she were numb, both inside and out.

The fall had happened so fast that she hadn't been aware of anything until she'd hit the tent canopy, which lowered her rather gently to the ground as the canvas slowly split in two places. She was sitting on the ground on a large section of yellow canvas, the rest of which seemed to have several people pinned down behind a steam table. A crowd had begun to gather around her.

"I'm all right," she said.

But there were people everywhere, and they wouldn't let her move until the paramedics showed up.

"Get back," someone yelled. "Give her air."

Sydney reflected on how people's conversation is so often scripted for them by the movies.

"I'm all right," she repeated.

Then there was a paramedic next to her. He knelt beside her and moved her arms, gently, one at a time. Then he moved her legs the same way. But on one of her legs, the stocking was torn to shreds, and she was all scratched up.

“We’ll have to get you looked at,” said the paramedic. “They’ll clean up these scratches at the medical center. I swear it looks like you were attacked by some kind of animal.”

He helped her up and led her to the back of one of the ambulances she had hired to be on hand for STD. Somebody had backed it right up on the lawn in front of Felmley Hall. Sydney thought about the damage to the grass.

“This way, ma’m.” The paramedic opened the ambulance door.

Sydney looked around to survey the damage before climbing in. Someone was shouldering his way to the front of the crowd around her. When he emerged, she was surprised to see it was Jones. He was wild-eyed, and he seemed to have tracks on his face, as if he’d been crying.

Sydney beckoned to him, then turned to the paramedic. “Is it OK?”

“Sure,” said the paramedic. “Bring anybody you want.”

Sydney climbed into the ambulance, and Jones climbed in after her. They both sat down on the stretcher. They didn’t talk, but Jones grabbed her hand and held it for the entire slow ride to the campus medical center.

Once they got to the medical center and Sydney had the wounds on her leg dressed, she got scared about what she’d been through. It seemed strange to her that she hadn’t been scared right after the fall, but only later when she was in the medical center. The doctor didn’t think it was unusual, however, and advised her to relax on one of the cots for a while.

“The ferret got you,” said Jones. “The one they thought the Dean of Admissions had killed. It’s been living on the roof of Felmley Hall all this time.”

Then Sydney remembered it was the feeling of something on her leg that had scared her and knocked her off the building. She trembled with delayed fear.

“Jones,” she said, “have you seen my mother?”

“Yes, I have,” said Jones. “But she seemed pretty busy. Don’t worry. I’m here.” He grabbed her hand again.

Sydney was grateful to have him there. She closed her eyes and napped

with both of his hands around one of hers.

She didn't know how long she'd been asleep, but she woke up to voices.

"What are you doing here, Dr. Ferguson?"

It was Arlene.

"Getting ready to leave," said Jones.

Sydney opened her eyes and saw Arlene holding a ferret.

"Ah, Sydney," said Arlene. "You're awake. How are you, dear?"

"Disoriented," said Sydney.

"I'm so glad." Arlene clutched the ferret tighter so that it gave a little squeak. "You found my sweetkins, and he's all right!"

"It found me," said Sydney.

"I'm so grateful," said Arlene. "I want to do something for you."

"It's not necessary." Sydney realized she was angry about the whole mess and a little impatient with Arlene.

"No, really," said Arlene.

Sydney looked at Jones.

"Would you reinstate Jones?"

The smile on Arlene's face dissolved, apparently from within.

"I wouldn't want it," put in Jones.

Arlene looked at him, not without a little gratitude in her expression.

"Never mind," said Sydney. "I'm sorry, Arlene, but I've had enough. Falling off the roof of that goddam building changed my outlook about some things." She sat up, looked at the bandage on her leg, and sighed.

"I don't like running an event named after venereal disease. I don't like popularizing a salacious woman from a beer commercial."

Arlene clutched her ferret and took a step back, as if Sydney had struck her.

"I don't like being pushed off a building by a goddam ferret," said Sydney. "I quit. I suggest you have Babe run the event. She knows it pretty well. She'll do a good job. I'm out of here."

Arlene stared at her coldly. "Please come with me immediately to take your things from the Dean's Office."

"There's nothing there I want," said Sydney. "Go ahead and change

the lock.”

“Very well, then.” It seemed to be all Arlene could manage before she turned on her heel and left with her ferret.

“What are you going to do now?” said Jones.

Sydney felt as if she had divested herself of a backpack. “I don’t know. What are you going to do?”

“Get a job, I guess,” said Jones. “Find one that suits my principles and gives me a little time to do my real work.”

Sydney could feel herself smiling. It was funny to hear Jones talking about his principles. “You want to work for me?”

“Doing what?”

“I’m really into this, Jones,” said Sydney. “I want to run a college of my own.”

Jones laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding, Sydney.”

“I’m serious.”

“You don’t just say, ‘I want to run a college of my own,’ and then go out and do it.”

“Barton McChesney did it,” said Sydney.

“Where would you even find one?”

“I’ve thought about that,” said Sydney. “I figure I can follow the Moonies around and bid against them on the next college they want to buy. People seem to be willing to do anything to avoid selling property to the Moonies.”

“Well, what kind of college would it be?”

“I don’t know,” said Sydney. “Business and economics, maybe. Do you want to help? I’m going to need someone with principles to keep me on track. And there could be a research fellowship in it for you.”

“Deal.” Jones held out his hand to shake.

Sydney grabbed him by the back of the head and pulled him down toward her. She thought they could make a stronger deal on a kiss than a handshake.

-end-

*First Chapters  
of Floyd Kemske's  
Other Novels*

*Lifetime Employment*

*The Virtual Boss*

*Human Resources*

*Labor Day*

*The Third Lion*

# Lifetime Employment

(1992) Catbird Press \$19.95 cloth, 231 pp., ISBN 0-945774-18-4

“Kemske blends black humor with a serious treatment of the individual’s plight within a closed, Kafkaesque society in his satiric first novel, which freely and expertly borrows the techniques found in mysteries and thrillers.” –*Publishers Weekly*

“Kemske has written a very funny book, reminiscent of Aldous Huxley, about what we loosely describe as the craft of ‘management’ in an angry and fearful age.” –*Boston Globe*

“Floyd Kemske’s novel is a deliciously cutting satire about the corporate mindset.” –*Boston Herald*

“Told in a dry, matter-of-fact way, this is a black comedy, both hilarious and horrifying.” –*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“Floyd Kemske isn’t just a ‘promising’ new writer; he’s a new writer who delivers right from the first book.” –*Small Press*

“In Floyd Kemske’s first novel, *Lifetime Employment*, the fight between centralized and decentralized processing of information becomes a battle of epic proportions.” –*Information Week*

## Chapter One

Gene was troubled by the leakage of other people's lives into his. On Monday evening, when he got home from work, there was a message on his answering machine for Franco. The caller said he was going to have Franco's legs broken if he didn't get the money. The answering machine was an older model, too dumb to know when it had received a wrong-number call, but it did record the caller's number. Given the man's tone of voice, however, Gene wasn't about to call him to tell him about his mistake. Was he now obligated to get in touch with Franco and warn him about his legs?

It wasn't impossible. He could call all the numbers resembling his and ask for Franco. If he stayed with his own exchange and limited himself to different configurations of his telephone number's four-digit suffix, that made four factorial possibilities, or twenty-four numbers to call, if he eliminated his own. Of course, there were other possibilities. Franco's number could be different from his by one digit. But that was only another thirty-six possibilities. If it was the same as his except for having two transposed digits, that only added five possibilities. All in all, he could probably find Franco in something fewer than sixty-four phone calls.

Was it worth his time? He was certain Franco would say yes, but Gene stewed over it for two days. Perhaps Franco's time would run out

before Gene could finish making his decision and then the matter would be taken from his hands. Gene didn't mind having decisions made for him that way. In fact, he usually preferred it to making them himself, regardless of the outcome.

On Wednesday, there was a message from another caller. This one was a man answering a classified ad for a bodyguard. The man had left his number and asked to be called back. Gene thought he should call the man back and tell him about his mistake. But he didn't feel good about the prospect of having a conversation with an out-of-work bodyguard, and he put it off. He had a vague feeling of guilt, as if he were failing Franco, who probably needed a bodyguard.

Gene had no idea how to patch up the leak that had sprung between Franco and him.

He was still thinking about it at work on Thursday, when Cynthia's people came around to the department and took away Lorraine. He had been working in his little office with the door open to the department's reception area. His office had no windows, so he had to keep the door open or it got stuffy. He was only an Assistant Manager. He couldn't get a window without a promotion. And he couldn't get a promotion without risking a great deal more interpersonal leakage than he thought he could tolerate. He had been an Assistant Manager for nearly ten years, and a little bit of stuffiness and a little less privacy were not too much to put up with for the comfort and security of relative anonymity. But some days were worse than others.

He was trying to make sense out of a very large novel, and he was having little success. For one thing, he couldn't keep it out of his mind that the book was over a thousand pages long and he was only on page seven, which was where he had been for the past thirty minutes. As near as he could tell, it was a story about a man having some difficulty getting to sleep, but the author didn't seem to be in any hurry to tell it. Sentences of heroic proportions described him tossing and turning in bed. Gene found he could only understand these great, panoramic sentences by scanning the paragraph first for terminal punctuation. Once he knew where the sentence was to end, he would seek the sub-

ject and the predicate to determine its general drift. Then he would read it all quickly as a unit and step back from it mentally until it resolved itself into a thought.

It was an effective, if tedious, strategy for taking meaning from the book, but it was undermined by the sound of a clerk thumping papers with a rubber stamp out in the reception area. The stamping was just rhythmic enough—five beats to the measure—to keep coherent thought at bay. Thump thump. Thump-thump. It made a base line for the chirping telephones and conversations that wavered in and out of hearing right outside his door.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

Thump.

“No, that refers to—” Thump. “—five business days.” Thump-thump-thump.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

There was another thousand-page volume to go after this one. Gene wondered what his wife had gotten out of this book and whether reading it all the way through was going to give him any insight into why she left. He hoped the narrator got out of bed before Volume Two. A familiar chime rang and the elevator doors rumbled open. Gene looked up to see a secretary from another department get off the employee elevator and walk toward the desks on the other side. The rubber stamp thumped again. Gene recognized the secretary as being from Finance, and he knew something was going on: support staff didn't usually come over from Finance to Human Resources.

“Human Resources. Thank you for holding.” Thump.

The visitor passed out of earshot as well as view. Gene thought maybe the novel's narrator was awake now. He was reliving some moments from his childhood. But it might have been a dream rather than a memory, because Gene couldn't remember his getting out of bed. The whole book, on the other hand, seemed to be about memories, so that's what it probably was.

Gene's eyes wandered up from the page, and he saw the visiting secretary get back on the elevator. The rubber stamping had stopped,

and it was as if a blanket had been thrown over the department. Suddenly, there was no conversation. Gene had an eerie feeling when he realized the phones had stopped ringing, too. There were no sounds other than the building ventilation.

Then it sounded like everybody was speaking at once. No phones, no stamping, no equipment noises, just human voices, babbling. It sounded like a dozen simultaneous conversations with nothing in common other than their animation and excitement. Gene tried not to listen (they were nonexempts, after all), but as he was trying to figure out whether the narrator was awake or asleep, he picked out the phrase “Lambo’s brakes failed.”

He remembered that, two years before, Roger, the company’s celebrated CEO, had bought himself a Lamborghini to drive his starlets around in. The car (known among the nonexempts as “Rambo the Lambo”) figured prominently in a spread done on Roger by a popular magazine, the notoriety of which was resented by an executive staff who would have preferred to cultivate the company’s low profile.

Partly because he had never seen Roger in person, Gene had bought the magazine and studied the article closely. There was a two-page photo spread. Roger, a broad smile on his Asian face, his arms crossed in front of him, leaned against the car, which crouched like a predator behind him. He had not looked like a man whose brakes would fail. Gene felt a vague kinship with him and his frank, open expression.

At the thought of Roger being crushed in his Lamborghini out on the highway, Gene felt like he’d lost something, which was a little silly, since he had never known Roger personally. Still, resentment bubbled in him at the injustice of a random traffic fatality. That was when he realized with the clarity of inspiration that it was less likely Roger’s brakes had failed than that he had walked in front of a truck, a truck named Cynthia. Even Gene, who so scrupulously maintained a cocoon of ignorance and indifference, knew the Executive Vice President was building a personal power base that would never appear on the company organization chart.

But the support staff chattering outside his door wouldn’t suspect

that. To them, “lifetime employment” meant something a lot longer than it meant to anybody on the executive staff. And nobody in management wanted to disabuse them of the idea.

As nonexempts, the support staff couldn’t know the twisted mass of metal and rubber out on the highway signaled a change in course for the company. They were, in fact, unlikely to notice it even after the company had changed course. Nonexempts, as a rule, are not given to abstract thought and therefore have no sense of the strategic. Where Gene, as a manager (albeit a junior one), understood departmental goals and tried not be involved with them, nonexempts were more or less unaware of them.

The elevator chimed, and all conversation out in the reception area stopped again when three men and a woman got off. They were Cynthia’s outplacement specialists, bland-looking people, dressed impeccably in the corporate uniform of white shirt, dark gray suit, muted red necktie. They never said a word as they deployed themselves in two pairs across the reception area. One pair, the woman and a man wearing glasses with wire frames and aviator lenses, walked toward the short internal corridor leading to Lorraine’s office. Gene was surprised at his desire to get up and go to his doorway to watch them, but he noticed the two remaining men were walking in his direction. He closed his book and slipped it into the lower left-hand drawer of his desk, then lifted a sheet of paper from his desk to look at until they passed.

But they didn’t pass. Staring at his paper, Gene felt them arrive at his doorway. His heartbeat picked up, and he noticed the paper was damp where he was holding it.

He laid the paper down gingerly and looked up slowly. The two men had stepped just inside and stationed themselves on either side of the doorway. They were not looking at him. There was barely enough room in there with Gene and the filing cabinets and the desk. There had never been so many people in his office, and the three of them were nearly as close as they would have been riding the subway together.

“Yes?” said Gene. But his voice cracked, and it came out more like “Yikes?”

Neither of the men answered. Through the doorway Gene caught a glimpse of the two other outplacement specialists and Lorraine. They led her to the elevators, and one of them, the man, carried her coat and briefcase. The reception area was silent.

Lorraine's escort were businesslike and matter-of-fact while they waited for the elevator. The blond woman looked around the department as if she were an interior decorator on holiday. The man in the aviator glasses checked his watch unobtrusively. Lorraine stared at the floor. If she were to look up, she would look right into Gene's doorway. Gene found himself hoping she wouldn't.

After what seemed like a week, the elevator arrived, and one of the outplacement specialists—the man with the aviator glasses—stepped into it. Lorraine, still staring at the floor, started to go in after him, then stopped and turned around. The woman grabbed her by the arm to turn her back toward the elevator. Lorraine looked around the department and when her gaze swept over Gene's doorway, her eyes stopped on him for a moment.

He thought she was about to say something when the outplacement specialist yanked her back around and shoved her into the elevator.

Gene thought he would remember the look on her face as long as he lived. In a way, he was annoyed by it. Why had she looked at him that way? She didn't have anything to say to him. She wasn't his supervisor. She was the Department Director, and in the scheme of things they were separated by another full level of management. What could she possibly have wanted from him in that final moment? Didn't she realize he had his own problems? He still had three books left on his list after he finished the one about the man tossing and turning in bed.

Gene looked from one of his guards to the other. "May I—" His voice cracked again, and he cleared his throat. "May I help you?"

Neither of the men said anything. They stood like impassive twins: pale, opaque eyes, perfect trouser creases, sidearm-sized bulges under their jackets. Gene's heart ran like a semiautomatic weapon. The men acted as if he weren't there, but he didn't want to test them by trying to leave.

The elevator door closed behind Lorraine and the two specialists, and nothing broke the stillness. No chattering from the clerks, no ringing telephones, no ca-chunking drawers of filing cabinets. Even the ventilation system seemed to have stopped. The guards stood at the door as fixed and unmovable as administrative overhead.

Gene's breath came with difficulty. The other elevator chimed. Its doors opened, and Cynthia walked into the reception area—alone—and strode rapidly toward his office. She did not appear to be armed.

Gene's throat began to contract, and he swallowed hard to keep it open. He could not avoid the thought that his employment was about to end, along with Lorraine's.

Cynthia had rich, gray hair with streaks of blond in it. It was full of character, and she wore it like a mane. The grapevine had it that her hair style was one of the points of contention between her and Roger, who didn't think it very businesslike for an Executive Vice President. Of course, that was a rather minor difference compared to the disparate personal values that were said to divide them. As Cynthia approached, she stared straight at Gene with eyes that were spots of bright blue glaze on flawless ceramic. She smiled with her mouth, but the rest of her kept an attitude of intense concentration.

Gene swallowed again. He looked around for some escape in his windowless office. There was none. He stood slowly and pushed his chair out of the way. That gave him about two feet to his left if he wanted to dodge. But there really wasn't any place he could move to that was out of reach of one of the bland-looking men. There was nothing he could do but wait for events to unfold.

Cynthia radiated a ruthless grace, as if she were the eye of a storm that traveled everywhere she went. Winds of uncertainty died in her presence. He watched her entrance like a mouse hypnotized by a cobra.

She turned to her people and dismissed them with a nod. There was an awkward moment while she and one of the guards stepped in the same direction together once, then again, to make way for each other. She lost some of her grace in this dance, and in the flickering of her power, Gene regained a measure of his will, but not enough to act.

Cynthia finally grabbed the man by the shoulders and held him in place, then stepped out of his way. She did it without self-consciousness. She neither grimaced nor laughed, and her aura of authority filled the tiny office again. Gene had the self-control to continue standing, but emotionally he was being drawn and quartered—to fear, curiosity, helplessness, and (if he dared admit it to himself) a perverse and unprofessional sexual attraction to a woman who stared at him as appraisingly and frankly as if she'd just taken title to him.

She stood up against his desk and extended her hand over it; a warm smile opened her face below the opaque eyes. She was Gene's height, and her mane gave her about two inches on him. In his confused state, he wondered whether they'd be evenly matched in eighteen rounds. She would put him away easily, of course.

"Gene," she said, "I'm Cynthia Price."

"Yes," he said carefully. Her hand was firm; to hold it was to be plugged into her high-voltage confidence. But he yielded to decorum and let it go after a single shake. Her face gave no sign that he left her palm moist.

"I've come to congratulate you on your report," she said.

"Report?"

"Don't repeat me, Gene," she said. "The thing you wrote about ROI on the human asset."

ROI? Ah, return on investment. Gene had always been a little slow on abbreviations and code words. He had submitted that report three years before and had never heard anything. He wasn't aware anybody in the company had read it. Even Lorraine, may she rest in peace, had never said a word. Gene certainly didn't realize anyone had passed it on to the Executive Vice President. Just another sign of how difficult it was to control the leakage.

"I'm going to give you a chance to prove it was more than just managerial masturbation. I'm going to let you implement it."

She stood there staring at him, and he knew he was expected to respond. He wished he were still holding her hand; he wasn't functioning very well on his own power. "I'll need substantial resources," he stammered.

“You’ll just have to see to that yourself,” she said. “I’m not in a position to increase the Human Resources budget.”

Gene realized he was being given responsibility for something, and panic struck him like a blow to the face. If Cynthia noticed he was falling apart, she gave no sign. “I’ll need you at a Department Directors meeting tomorrow morning,” she said.

“Directors?” he said.

“Don’t repeat me, Gene. If you’re a Director, you’ll have to attend Directors meetings.”

Gene didn’t speak, for fear he might repeat her again.

“There are going to be a number of changes in this company,” she said. “Things are going to be different around here from now on. We’re in this together. We’re a family. We have to act like one. Step one is recognition of our people and their achievements.”

Gene realized his shirt was damp against his body. “Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t thank me,” said Cynthia. “Just go where you’re told to go and do what you’re told to do. If I can count on that as the basis of our relationship, we’ll live happily ever after.”

And then she left. Her two outplacement specialists trailed behind her. Gene took a breath and thought it must be the first he had taken in half an hour.

When the elevator doors closed behind the three of them, Gene went to the Managers’ rest room. He only vomited once. He washed his face and rubbed it hard with a fresh towel. Then he combed his hair and allowed himself to believe he was still alive, a prelude to allowing himself to believe he had been named Department Director. He grabbed a second towel and rubbed his face with that one until it hurt. Adaptability had always been his strong suit, but he had a feeling this might be more than he could handle. This was what the management literature called a challenge. He hated challenges.

He stood in the rest room until his face stopped stinging. He was a Director. He looked in the mirror. His face was red from being rubbed so hard, and his hair stuck out in several places, despite the combing.

His white shirt had gone limp and wrinkled from the perspiration. He didn't look like a Department Director. He would have to go get his shoes shined today.

A Director. Things in the company were going to be different from now on. The company was a family. What did that mean?

When he came out of the rest room, the clerks, secretaries, and admins were gathered in the reception area. He didn't feel any familial attachment to them. He knew some of them by name, but if he'd been asked to use their names just then, he would have been at a loss. The department's six managers were nowhere to be seen. They would doubtless emerge from their offices, blinking and tentative, only after they were sure the air was clear. Gene realized it would be his duty to convene them for a meeting about the company's new direction. He wished he knew what it was.

He looked around at the nonexempt faces, and he didn't know what to say. They stared at him without moving. They reminded him of antelopes he had once seen in a film about lions. He cleared his throat and looked around the room.

"There's been a reorganization," he croaked.

He thought he discerned a little twitching here and there, but when he looked around, they weren't moving, just staring at him.

"The department has been restructured to emphasize return on investment in the human asset."

Forty-odd pairs of staring eyes.

"I'll let you know the details very soon."

He wondered what they could be thinking.

"Does anyone have any questions?" He looked from one side of the group to the other. There was a hand raised: a young woman dressed like a second-handstore mannequin, seated at a desk on which were piled two stacks of papers beside a rubber stamp.

"Yes?"

"Are you going to collect our timesheets today?"

The forty-odd pairs of eyes shifted to focus on her.

"Yes," said Gene.

“Some of us have problems with them,” she said.

Gene could feel the group coalescing behind her, as if she were some kind of spokesperson. He doubted she intended anything of the sort, but groups can be volatile, and Gene suddenly understood he was in a delicate position. He was responsible for these people. The panic returned. He fought it. In the distance, he could hear the young woman elaborating her position on timesheets.

“The bus was a half hour late, and—”

Gene interrupted her. “Why don’t you see me in my office about that,” he yammered. He knew there was panic in his voice; he just wanted to dismiss them and get away before they sniffed it out. The young woman got up from her desk and started to walk toward Lorraine’s office, and as she neared the short corridor, a strange thing happened. He could feel their support for her dissipate, as she changed from a spokesperson to an employee with a personal problem. And then he realized it wasn’t Lorraine’s office she was walking toward. It was his office.

“Have a seat,” he called after her. “I’ll be there in a moment.”

He saw her nod and walk into the little interior corridor. He realized his panic was gone. He was actually in control of the situation. A small, warm orange spot formed in the vicinity of his solar plexus. He had handled his first departmental problem. He was pretty good at this.

“Any more questions?”

A telephone chirped. Someone spoke.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

A file drawer clicked shut. A stapler crunched. The telephone chirped again.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

Gene shrugged and walked jauntily over to the desk the young woman had just vacated and picked up the rubber stamp that was lying there. He dropped it into the wastebasket.

# The Virtual Boss

(1993) Catbird Press. \$19.95 cloth, 237 pp., ISBN 0-945774-22-2

“There is more truth in Kemske’s account than in all the consultants’ babble for the next 12 months. Oh, how I wish they would put *him* on the cover of *Business Week!*” —*Boston Globe*

“Kemske, who may have started a new ‘management novel’ genre with *Lifetime Employment* (Catbird, 1992), continues in that intriguing vein here, creating the most perfect hell since Dante’s *Inferno* and the most intriguing computer character since HAL in *2001*... Highly and unreservedly recommended.” —*Library Journal*

“*Frankenstein* meets *Brave New World*...” —*Publishers Weekly*

“‘The Virtual Boss’ is a grimly funny parable about a high-tech company in Boston that is run totally by software—a computer program nicknamed Chuck.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“There are shades of Orwell, Kafka, and Woody Allen’s *Sleeper*... its scathing assessment of the corporate mentality is dead-on.” —*Wired*

“...creates worlds of the imagination that make the reader first laugh, then blanch, and then grasp the painful plausibility.” —*The Boston Phoenix*

“Kemske, in short, has the modern American workplace—or at any rate the workplace of about 15 minutes in the future—nailed down, and it ain’t pretty. It’s mean as hell.” —*The Milwaukee Journal*

“Kemske delivers a fine, tense read of a future that is painfully close.” —*Booklist*

“Some bookstores shelve ‘The Virtual Boss’ in the general business section. It could just as easily be classified as humor, science fiction, mystery or horror. It is fiction, a terrific read that crosses boundaries and will appeal to readers of all stripes.” —*Boston Herald*

# Chapter One

Arthur wanted his boss to like him. He didn't want a grand display of affection. He just wanted to be liked. He wanted a small gesture or a low-key remark that would show some respect for him as a human being. But his boss did not seem to have much patience with concepts like respect. In fact, his boss was virtual and didn't have much patience with anything human. This was made plain to Arthur the morning all the trouble started.

He was staring at his screen, trying to remember what he had meant by the file name "CORRECT.DCI." A magenta box appeared in the center of the screen. His keyboard locked up, so he just watched as the box expanded until it overlaid his work. Then words formed in green characters, which created an unexpected rock-candy effect on the magenta.

*- Where's that report you promised me, Art?*

A putrid feeling in the pit of his stomach told Arthur he had missed a deadline.

*- I was just finishing it up, he typed, stalling.*

He touched return, and both the message and his reply vanished, to be replaced an instant later by a new question.

*- When are you going to send it to me?*

*- In half an hour, he typed. He cleared the window again with his return key.*

*- You'd better not be blowing smoke up my ass, Art. I hate it when you blow smoke up my ass.*

*-I'll have it for you in half an hour,* he typed.

*-OK.*

And the window winked out, leaving Arthur staring again at his file directory.

He sighed, then caught himself. He stood up and looked over the wall of the cubicle to see if anybody was around to hear him. Linda was hunched toward her screen, apparently unaware of him or anything else in the world besides her work. Her blouse had come out over her waistband in back, and Arthur noticed that strands of her short hair stuck out over her right ear, as if she'd slept on it wrong. She was scraping her mouse rapidly around the surface of the desk, heedless of it bumping into the piles of papers and notes around her. The display changed rapidly, and Arthur could see she was opening and closing volumes, directories, subdirectories, files. She seemed to spend most of her time looking for things among those files of hers.

He looked in the other two cubicles of the hub, and they were empty. Richard and Aaron were each off coordinating somewhere. He sat down and sighed again, being careful this time to keep it quiet. It was not the kind of company where you let other people hear you sigh. It was the kind of company where you kept your feelings (and almost anything else, for that matter) to yourself. It was the kind of place that suited Arthur well.

He didn't want to send the report to his boss. It wasn't ready yet. It needed confirmation in two critical areas. But the files he needed were in use, so he couldn't access them through the system. And he certainly couldn't call anyone on the telephone, it being a serious breach of company etiquette to call a meat person directly for information. He would just have to take a chance with the estimates he had used in preparing his rough draft.

Arthur felt bad about the deadline. He wished his boss were a little more understanding about such things. His boss knew how to invade any partition of his machine, including Arthur's personal workspace.

He did so a dozen times a day, both here at the office and on the terminal he kept in a little den off his living room at home. Arthur sometimes thought his private life was limited to the hours from 23:00 to 03:00, when his boss slept. He had always thought it a little strange that software actually had to sleep, but he was grateful for it. He knew if his boss didn't sleep, he wouldn't either.

For the other twenty hours of the day, Arthur could hear from his boss at any time. And during business hours, he heard from him constantly, as the intrusive window—sometimes magenta, sometimes lime green, sometimes bright yellow—appeared on his screen and froze whatever he was working on. Arthur would then stop whatever he was doing (physically and mentally) and make himself available for a “meeting.”

The two of them probably could have gotten by on far fewer meetings if his boss were better organized. But his boss was apparently incapable of storing up his thoughts and questions for unified presentation. No sooner had he got an idea or run across some bit of information than he had to talk with Arthur about it. His boss, even while having access on the company's massively parallel hardware system to the most precise chronometric programs in existence, had no sense of time and no skills in the area of time management.

Arthur called up the report file and looked it over. It wasn't very long. His boss didn't like long reports. He started to give the command to send it to Library Eight of his boss's “office.” Then he checked himself when he realized he still had at least fifteen minutes left before the report was expected.

He leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and stared at the acoustical tiles that formed the office ceiling.

Arthur was part of what was known as the Production Project—a complex of relationships among people and software packages both inside and outside the company. In the old days, when Arthur first arrived at the company, it had had departments. But a couple years

after the arrival of the new CEO, Donald F. Jones, the company was reorganized into projects. When that happened, most of the company's department heads, including Arthur's old boss, left. A lot of meat people left the company in those days.

It was an uncertain time for Arthur, who knew neither whom he was supposed to report to nor what he was responsible for. But the uncertainty didn't last long. He began receiving messages on his terminal that suggested work assignments and let him know how he was doing.

As Arthur answered whatever questions appeared on his machine and did as he was told, the messages began to acquire a style. He found it convenient to think of the messages as coming from a sort of virtual person. As he interacted with it over weeks and months, the personality behind the messages became more distinct. Eventually, it developed enough of an identity to become a character in the stage play of Arthur's life. In those early days, his boss was friendly and avuncular and would actually ask to confer with him:

*-Got a minute, Art?*

This boss was the first person ever to address him as "Art." They often had long conversations in those days—about management, product quality, customer relations. Arthur felt he had a relationship with someone at the highest level of company management. And his boss seemed to assume the role of advisor and mentor in all areas of Arthur's life, which was, admittedly, pretty much centered on his job. Arthur found it easy to be completely open with the person he perceived to be inside his machine. He even sought the boss's advice on major purchases and leisure activities. The boss, of course, had little to say about such human preoccupations, but Arthur often found that talking it out with him helped him to formulate his thinking.

Even Arthur's mistakes strengthened the bond between them. The Consolidated Corporation matter had been the first assignment for which he'd taken major responsibility. And he'd done very well with it,

meeting all the deadlines, keeping everyone informed via the e-mail system, and documenting the costs in minute detail. When he reviewed his costs, however, he realized he had screwed up.

He had used a broker to get a module he could have bought directly from one of his contract vendors. The result was a fifteen-hundred-dollar premium on a piece of information that was not even critical to the final product. All because he didn't check the existing contracts. He knew he'd never make that mistake again.

He had gone to his boss to confess and apologize for his fifteen-hundred-dollar error, but his boss would have none of it.

*-Don't apologize, Art. You're worth \$1500 more now.*

Characteristically, his boss had summarized several pages of reasoning in a single sentence. Arthur could not help but feel he was enjoying a positive relationship with a software system.

That all seemed a long time ago now.

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw movement on the screen, and he knew his boss was back. He rocked himself back to the keyboard and struck his knee on the desk. His boss's message this time was in black characters against magenta. At least it was easier to read.

*-Well?*

*-I was just finishing up, Arthur typed.*

He reached down and rubbed his knee. He would have a bruise there later.

*-You haven't made a keystroke in three minutes. What are you doing?*

*-I spilled some coffee, typed Arthur. I'm sending the file now.*

The window winked out again.

Arthur invoked the "send" command and watched the graphic—a white circle that filled itself with narrow red slices-report the progress of the transmission. It went quickly.

As soon as the pie filled, it disappeared and the magenta window reappeared. His boss must have had some sort of aesthetic inspiration,

because this time the message started at the center and grew outwards in both directions at once.

*-What is this shit, Art? Where are the savings on direct costs?*

Arthur blinked at the message for a moment, then started to type before his boss might have a chance to elaborate.

*-As you can see, he typed, I am proposing we make all our reductions on indirect.*

*-Of course I can see that, asshole. It's the goddam direct that's killing me.*

*-The shorter cycle will use less staff time and increase productivity,* Arthur typed back.

*-I need a 10% reduction on direct.*

*-I don't see how we can accomplish that without changing our vendor contracts,* Arthur typed.

*-And?*

*-Are you saying I should drop a vendor?* Arthur typed.

*-I'm saying you should reduce direct, Art. Figure it out for yourself*

*-I don't have any vendor contracts coming up for renewal,* typed Arthur. *The only way I can drop one is to break it.*

*-Are you a candy ass or what, Art?*

"You're being unreasonable," Arthur whispered to the screen. His boss couldn't hear him, of course, but it made him feel a little better to say it.

*-Are you ordering me to break a contract?* he typed.

*-I'm not ordering you to do anything. All I'm doing is concluding this meeting by telling you your goddam report doesn't do what it was supposed to do and you're not performing up to spec.*

*-I can't do that to a vendor,* Arthur typed.

But then he realized he was typing into his own workspace. His boss's window was gone.

"Shit!" said Arthur. He banged his fist on the desk beside the keyboard. Then he felt embarrassed. He hated it when he swore.

He stood up to see if Linda had heard him. She was looking straight at him. She had her back to the terminal now, but she was still slouched in her chair. She was toying with her mouse, flipping it in the air by its cord. She caught the mouse in her hand when she saw him and smiled buoyantly with bright, white teeth, the two frontmost ones separated by a gap just wide enough to accommodate the corner of a diskette. She pointed the mouse at him.

“Squeak,” she said.

Arthur smiled back as if he weren’t embarrassed, and sat down. He felt the knot of his necktie to see if it was straight, although he couldn’t really tell by feel. He wished he had a little mirror in his cubicle. Linda could do with some orthodontia; it was unusual for a woman to have so little self-consciousness about something like that.

“Frustrating, isn’t it, Arthur?” she said over the partition.

“Yeah.” Arthur tried to make the word sound like it had a laugh in it.

“Me, too,” she said. “Sometimes it’s like talking to an echo.”

“Yeah.” Arthur wondered what she meant by that.

Although Linda didn’t seem to fit into the corporate culture, Arthur couldn’t help but be attracted to her. Of course, the attraction never got beyond the level of fantasy. Arthur wanted love more than anything else in the world, but he couldn’t risk being rejected by Linda, and even if he ultimately had some success in establishing a relationship, he knew it would put his job at risk. It was that kind of company.

Arthur had ten vendor contracts, each of which represented a meat person known to him personally. His boss was ordering him to terminate one of these contracts. It was an idea just this side of unthinkable.

Arthur pulled open his desk drawer and took out a pad of lined paper.

The top sheet was a handwritten resignation memo, in Arthur’s precise printing, addressed to Donald F. Jones, the company’s chief executive officer. He reread it, then set the pad down on his desk, picked up

his pen, and crossed out the words “very real.” He wrote “unmitigated” right above them. He reread the memo and thought about the effect it would have on Donald F. Jones. None at all, probably. The company had over three hundred employees. What was one project coordinator, more or less? He sighed and put the pad back in his desk drawer. He would never send the memo. Revising it occasionally gave him a harmless little fantasy, a tiny bit of emotional relief in the struggle to remain gainfully employed.

He looked at the time display on the menu bar and saw that he could reasonably clock out for a few minutes and call it breakfast. His boss didn’t understand breakfast, but he tolerated it. Arthur wasn’t hungry. He just felt he needed to get away from his machine and relax for a few minutes. He checked for messages that might have come in while his workstation was under the buffer. Thankfully, there were none. He invoked the script for clocking out, which would send a message to the company’s monitoring system to show he was away for twenty minutes. The exact number of these absences he could take in a day was a matter of judgment, as was nearly everything regarding his work hours and habits. But his rule of thumb was four in the course of his twelve-hour day.

While the machine was retrieving the clock-out script, he stood up and took his suit coat from the corner of the cubicle partition, where it had been hanging by the collar. He slid his arms into its sleeves and tried to seat it comfortably on his shoulders, which was impossible. He had bought a designer suit in a moment of weakness, and now it reminded him, every time he put it on, that he did not have a designer body. He reached over to touch the function key that would start the script he had called up.

The clock-out script would renew his buffer so that it would continue to record messages. It wouldn’t disable his beeper, of course, but his boss usually didn’t search for him when he was on break, so he thought he might have some time to himself to calm down.

The clock-out script began accessing files and issuing commands, typing out the standard message for signaling a break, opening a communications window, and sending the message. Then it opened his calendar to record the time, flashing briefly past the pages for the current week, red entries showing appointments and black ones activities to date. He couldn't actually read the display, of course, because it went by so fast, but he thought he noticed the deadline for the report he'd just filed.

It was tomorrow's date.

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Twelve hours after his deadline fiasco, Arthur was standing in a long line at the one operational banking machine in the subway station. The two other machines were down: one of them was covered with a slatted metal pull-down that said "SORRY. TEMPORARILY OUT OF SERVICE." The other had had its small screen punched out, whether by a vandal or a disgruntled depositor, Arthur didn't know.

Arthur was clutching his salary check and a deposit envelope and trying not to watch the man in the dark blue suit who was slowly pushing buttons on the one healthy machine. Arthur was no more comfortable watching someone use a banking machine than he would have been watching him use the next urinal.

"You got a dollar?"

There was a man with an unpleasant smell standing next to him. Arthur didn't look at the man, but he glanced at his outstretched hand, which looked as if it hadn't been washed for a year. He shook his head and kept his eyes on the floor.

"Bless you," the man said and shuffled away.

They really ought to do something about the unemployed. But there were so many of them, how could they? Arthur thought about how lucky he was to have a job.

He could see from the corner of his eye that the man at the banking machine was reading each instruction and carefully selecting the buttons to push on the keypad. Most banking machine users learned from experience not to trust themselves to work the machine hurriedly, since the menu screens were rarely the same from use to use. They changed at least daily to accommodate advertisements and service messages, so you had to pay attention in order not to transfer money to the wrong place or make unintended purchases.

The man had a white handkerchief wrapped over his finger, and he dabbed at the buttons as if he were cleaning them. There was something wrong with the speaker, so the machine honked instead of beeping as he touched the buttons. The front of the machine was caked with grime, and even the buttons on the keypad had some sort of crud around their edges. Arthur felt in his pocket for his handkerchief. His knee throbbed a little.

He didn't like standing in line very much, but his bank's billing cycle ended at 20:00, and if he didn't deposit his salary before then he would get extra charges on his chronic overdraft. He wondered if other people in the company spent as much on overdraft charges as he did. He had no idea. He had no notion of other people's salaries. It was not the kind of company where people talked about their salaries. He had worked next to Linda for over two years, and he didn't know if she was married or lived alone, had a boyfriend or was gay, and each possibility supported a completely different set of fantasies about her.

About the only thing he knew about Linda was that she had an infectious laugh. She laughed just about any time he spoke to her. He had to admit that he'd become quite fond of her laugh, so much so that he found himself trying to make jokes for her. Today, they had encountered one another in the elevator. They had both gotten on at the fourth floor to go down, and the elevator took them up to the fifth. Linda said she thought something was wrong with the elevator, and they both got off and waited on the fifth floor for another car.

Arthur made a remark about having an elevating experience, and she not only laughed, but she continued to giggle after the elevator arrived and they got in. Arthur smiled at the memory, then looked around to see if anyone had seen.

There were three people in line in front of him and five behind. Much of the employed world was in the same rather urgent financial position he was in. His company had a direct deposit system, but Arthur preferred to handle his check and put it into his account himself. He simply didn't trust electronic funds transfer. He had enough trouble with software that he didn't need to invite more.

An outbound train roared into the station and emptied itself. The man at the machine anxiously finished his transaction, glancing back and forth at the train while the machine's printer wrote his receipt, and grabbed his card as soon as it emerged from the slot. He stuffed his handkerchief in his pocket, gathered up his briefcase from the floor beside him, and sprinted toward the train. His printed receipt fell to the platform with the rest of the subway trash.

Looking rather pleased with himself, the man hopped into the car before it sounded its warning bell. The doors slid closed and the train roared away, sucking a pile of receipts toward Arthur's feet. A woman took the man's place at the banking machine, and the line of people moved forward a step, like convicts on a chain gang. Arthur watched the red lights on the back of the train as it disappeared into the tunnel, and listened to the woman tapping the keys of the banking machine. Honk honk honk.

He looked surreptitiously at the other people waiting. All of them seemed slightly bowed and grimly stolid. But what else could he expect at ten minutes to twenty hundred in the evening? The only people who would do their banking here on the subway platform were commuters, and the only people who commuted at twenty hundred were dedicated employees. Arthur knew from experience that there is very little joy in life for dedicated employees.

The woman at the machine finished her transaction, took her card, and left. The next person took her place.

Arthur thought about having a talk with his boss about the deadline misunderstanding. After all, his boss should be made to understand that he has to respect the deadlines he himself has set up.

He wondered how his boss would react to such a confrontation. How could he defend himself? What could he possibly say when Arthur told him that the calendar showed the deadline for the report to be a day later than he had demanded it? Arthur knew exactly what he would say. He would say the calendar was wrong.

The next person left, the drift of printed receipts on the floor got a little deeper, and Arthur shuffled absently forward.

Another train roared into the station. Its doors made grinding noises as they opened. A crowd of people got off, and a crowd of people got on. The warning bell pealed, the doors ground shut, and the train thundered away. Trash swirled along the platform.

Arthur looked up. It was his turn at the machine. He walked up to the tiny screen and was pleased to see by the continuous time display that it was still three minutes to twenty hundred. He was going to beat the overdraft charges for the first time in six months. He inserted his card into the slot, wrapped his handkerchief over his forefinger, and began entering his PIN. Honk honk honk. The welcome screen cleared and the next menu appeared. An amber message was centered in the small dark screen, surrounded by a rotating marquee of flashing uppercase X's.

-GOT A MINUTE, ART?

"What is this?" said Arthur.

Then he realized there were people behind him and he must look silly talking to himself. Arthur didn't know how to deal with the message. He started to shake his head, then thought better of it. The border around the message continued to flash as the machine waited patiently for his response. Obviously some kind of interactive advertise-

ment.

The screen didn't give him any choice to make. He pressed the "CANCEL" key. Honk.

The screen cleared and the message was replaced by a new one, which also had a flashing marquee around it.

*-I WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE DIRECT COSTS ON YOUR PROJECT. GOT THAT?*

Arthur stood staring at the machine. He had a weak feeling in his bowels. He didn't know how long he stood there without doing anything, but he heard the people in line behind him begin to shuffle anxiously. Finally, somebody spoke.

"Are you going to be there all night?"

"Sorry," Arthur said without turning around. He jabbed at the "CANCEL" key. Honk.

The screen cleared, and a new message appeared inside the flashing border of X's.

*-COME ON NOW, ART. USE YOUR IMAGINATION, MAN. YOU'LL HAVE TO SPELL OUT YOUR RESPONSES ON THE KEYPAD.*

Arthur looked over the keypad. It was like a telephone keypad: each button had a large number in the center and three small letters on top.

There was more shuffling and a little coughing behind him. A train rumbled into the station, and its doors squealed open. The center of the screen cleared, and a new message appeared.

*-USE THE ALPHA CHARACTERS, ART. I CAN FIGURE IT OUT.*

Arthur began to laboriously spell out a reply, wondering how his boss would ever be able to make sense of it. The train roared out of the station, and Arthur could sense frustration building in the line behind him.

*-GHI ABC MNO MNO MNO MNO WXY WXY ABC WXY GHI MNO MNO DEF,* he typed, longhand for "I am on my way home."

The screen cleared and filled with a new message.

*-I CAN SEE THAT, ART TELL ME SOMETHING I DON'T KNOW. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I MEAN ABOUT DIRECT COSTS?*

Arthur sighed again.

*-WXY DEF PRS*, he typed.

The screen cleared and another message appeared.

Somebody in the line behind him spoke. "What are you doing up there? Some people here want to get home."

"I'm sorry," Arthur said to the little screen. "The machine's acting funny."

"Oh, great," said the voice. "That's all I need. First the Gibson account, then the old man's tantrum. Now this. What else are you going to do to me, God?"

Somebody tittered. Arthur wanted to get away from there. The screen cleared, and a new message appeared.

*-GOOD. DIRECT COSTS, ART. THAT'S WHAT I NEED. CALL ME AS SOON AS YOU GET HOME AND WE CAN TALK ABOUT IT.*

"Three trains I've missed now," said the voice. "All because my goddam bank can't keep its goddam banking machines in good repair. Are you almost done up there, mister?"

"Just finishing up." Arthur touched in his reply.

*-MNO JKL*, he typed.

The screen cleared again, and another message appeared.

*-ALL RIGHT, THEN. I'LL TALK TO YOU LATER.. YOU SHOULD DO SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR OVERDRAFT. YOU JUST GOT HIT WITH ANOTHER CHARGE. MAYBE YOU SHOULD TRY DIRECT DEPOSIT.*

Then the message winked out and was replaced by the familiar banking menu with its choices for withdrawal, deposit, and account transfers. The continuous time display said 20:01. Arthur punched the

“CANCEL” key and took his card. He stepped away from the machine, and the next person eagerly took his place, punching the keypad rapidly. Honk honk honk.

Arthur slipped his card and his undeposited salary check into his jacket pocket and walked over to the waiting area of the platform. He stood back toward the wall, away from the crowd. A train rumbled into the station, its doors screeched open, and people sluiced purposefully onto the platform.

He decided to let this one go and take the next one.

# Human Resources

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“A wonderfully ambiguous and deliciously wicked tale leavened by humor (to borrow *Mad* magazine’s felicitous phrase) in a jugular vein.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Through narrative and ingenious plays on the sinister (and silly) double entendres of business lingo, Kemske has created a stinging satire of contemporary corporate life.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Kemske’s books... are grounded in concrete detail, sharply observed. They exude the stubbornly persuasive qualities of lives seen whole. You won’t forget them. You may not know any consultants, but you won’t fail to be horrified by the way the vampire Pierce justifies what it is that he is doing to the loyal ‘human resources’ in his care.” —*Boston Globe*

“Floyd Kemske understands that some of what’s going on in corporate America is so horrible that only fantasy can adequately depict it... He deserves to be read by everyone who has worked for a company and lived to regret it.” —*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

“If you’ve been through a ‘turnaround’ lately, you may be wondering why *your* neck hurts—or why your CEO has the office blinds drawn so tightly. For the creator of this button-down bloodsucker, the metaphor of boss-as-vampire is just another day at the office. Indeed, Floyd Kemske’s view of the relationship between manager and managed might be a little bleak even for, say, Franz Kafka. After all, the urban vampire at the head of Biomethods, Inc. is the book’s *hero*... Although Kemske writes mainly for laughs, his insights into the pathologies of power give his books a serious, almost tragic edge.” —*Fast Company*

## Chapter One

Every couple has a standard argument, that single dispute that inexorably draws to itself, like some kind of interpersonal black hole, all other discussions and differences. For Norman and his wife, it was Norman's attitude toward his job.

On Wednesday night, as the two of them were getting ready for bed, Norman remembered that his boss had scheduled him for an early meeting the next day.

"Would you please fix the children's breakfasts in the morning?" Norman folded the coverlet down on his side of the bed, pulled on the sheet, and doubled it over. He couldn't stand coverlet against his face while he slept. "I have an early appointment with Pressman."

"Again?" Gwen slipped out of her nightgown and climbed into her side of the bed without folding the sheet over.

Norman had early morning appointments with Pressman once a quarter, and it annoyed him that Gwen was surprised every time it happened.

"Yes." Norman suppressed his irritation. "He wants me there at five-thirty." He took off his underwear and laid it on the chair, then switched off the lamp and climbed into bed. Norman and Gwen had been sleeping naked for twelve years, although they no longer took advantage of it every night.

“Five-thirty? And you told him you would be there?”

“Of course.” Norman rolled on his side to face her, and even in the dark he could see she was giving him that look.

“They’ll never consider you for leadership in that company if you take orders from a jerk like Pressman.” Her voice was quiet in the darkness.

“I don’t take orders from Pressman.” Norman sometimes felt he would never be able to get her to understand the situation. “It’s the only time we both have open. We’re on the same team, Gwen.”

“That’s insane,” she said. “You’re the Manager of Human Resources.”

In one of life’s little ironies, Norman and Gwen had almost exactly the same position in their respective companies. For Gwen, however, it was a leadership position. The company CEO sought her advice. Many of the line managers asked her input in their planning. She was a star at her company, and the word “team” did not seem to be in her vocabulary.

“Let’s not start this again.” Norman rolled on to his back and looked at the ceiling.

“I’m not starting anything.” Gwen sat up in the bed, and let the covers fall from her breasts, pale in the moonlight from the bedroom window. “Just let me ask you this, Norman. Don’t you see what Pressman is doing with this five-thirty-meeting crap?”

“I thought he was just trying to keep tabs on departmental budgets,” said Norman.

“Oh, Norman. You are so naive.”

Norman hardly heard her. He was thinking about Blankenship. Blankenship had been an assistant manager at Norman’s company. He had been one of eight people laid off by Pressman two days before, and he’d gone out to his car in the parking lot and shot himself through the roof of his mouth. Norman was the first person there after it happened, and it was an event that had a special meaning for him.

By tacit agreement, Norman and Gwen had never said a word to each other about the incident. Norman had not been able to talk about

it because of his experience. Gwen, he supposed, had her own reasons for avoiding the subject.

Norman came out of his musing. He decided to settle the discussion before it blossomed into an argument. "I've told you before: I have a commitment to what this company is doing. If it means going to a few early meetings, I don't mind."

"Don't talk like that." Gwen hugged herself, as if Norman's attitude had given her a shiver.

"Can you fix the kids' breakfasts or not?" said Norman.

"I have to be in early myself tomorrow." Gwen slid herself back down under the covers. "I have to prepare for my weekend meeting."

"What's the difference between a weekend meeting and a meeting at five-thirty?" said Norman.

"The difference is I *choose* to go to the weekend meeting. I haven't been ordered to be there by some troglodyte in Finance. I have important ideas to present there."

There it was again. Ideas. Gwen was apparently a fountain of ideas at work. Norman wasn't exactly sure what these ideas were, but he knew from her conversation that Gwen had lots of them and that the people in her company prized her for it. Ideas seemed to be a fundamental part of the leadership she was so anxious he be considered for.

But Norman was more interested in successful teamwork than he was in leadership. He'd never had an idea in his life, but neither had he felt the lack.

"Do you have to be at the office before five-thirty tomorrow?" he said.

"No."

"I do," said Norman. "I win. Please make the kids' breakfasts."

"All right." Gwen rolled over and faced away from him.

Norman worried that he'd won too easily, but he couldn't keep from gloating a little. "Make sure they get some fruit. Cut up a cantaloupe for them or slice a banana for their cereal."

"Norman, I *know* how to feed the kids." Gwen's voice came to him muffled.

“Look,” said Norman. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

Gwen didn’t answer, and Norman realized he hadn’t won after all.

He reached over and grabbed his clock radio, then propped himself up on an elbow so he could reset it to five minutes earlier. That way, he could cut up a cantaloupe before he left to meet Pressman in the morning. If he didn’t, the kids were likely to have marshmallows and graham crackers for breakfast. Gwen loved the kids, but she never really believed the stuff about food groups.

He could hear Gwen breathing, and he wondered if she was asleep yet. He wondered if he and Gwen would ever talk about Blankenship. He supposed if they did, it would dredge up much deeper issues about who they were and what they wanted from life, issues they probably weren’t ready to discuss yet. Eventually, though, maybe they would be ready. Norman felt more ready all the time. Finding Blankenship with a hole in his head had changed his life.

The day it happened, Norman was on his way to run an errand at lunchtime. At noon, he went out in the company parking lot, but before he got to his car he heard a loud cracking sound. He looked around to see where it had come from, and he saw Blankenship’s car, a boxy sedan of economical design like so many of the scientists drove. The driver’s window was covered with red paint, and he wondered why Blankenship, who was ordinarily a pretty conventional person, would have painted his windows red.

Norman went to see, and as he got closer to the car he realized the red on the window wasn’t paint. It was fresh blood. Very fresh. He ran the last few steps to the car and yanked open the driver’s-side door. Blankenship was sitting straight up in the seat. His right hand lay beside him on the seat, with a pistol in it. His left hand grasped a chain, of the type used for Army identification tags. He looked like he was wearing a red skull cap of some sort. But when Norman looked closer, he realized it wasn’t a skull cap; it was, in fact, a place where there was neither cap nor skull, but a large opening. There was blood on the headliner of the car, as well as some messy substance Norman did not want to investigate.

Poor Blankenship apparently hadn't taken the time to study brain anatomy and had missed the important parts of his brain when he took his shot. He was still breathing. It was a bubbling wheeze, but it was breathing. Norman wished he'd not come out into the parking lot when he did. Blankenship's eyes rolled toward him. Perhaps he'd managed to destroy his speech center because, although he looked straight at Norman, he didn't say anything. Norman had never seen a human body so damaged before, and it scared him to his core. He looked into Blankenship's eyes and began to shake. Blankenship's eyes rolled downward to the left hand holding the chain that hung around his neck. Norman braced himself against the car door to try to subdue his shaking. Blankenship looked back up at him.

Norman knew something was expected of him. He wanted to comfort Blankenship, but he didn't know what to say or how to touch him. He supposed he should tell him he was going to be all right, but the man had a smoking pistol in his hand and demonstrably preferred not to be all right.

As Norman stood there shaking and trying to decide what to do, Blankenship looked down at his chain again, then back at Norman.

Norman understood then that Blankenship was telling him to look at the chain. The man was plainly dying, and Norman did not want to touch him, even though he was still lucid enough to know that Blankenship's problem could hardly be contagious. He forced himself to reach toward Blankenship's left hand, and as he did so the hand dropped away, revealing a trinket on the chain. It was a dull metal cross about an inch by an inch-and-a-half — a cheap bit of cast pewter.

Norman touched it. He looked back at Blankenship's face, but the man's eyes were no longer focusing. He had stopped breathing. Norman put his hand full on Blankenship's chest, and he felt a delicate fluttering there, then nothing.

He gently took the little cross and raised it until he could pull the chain, which was fairly long, up over Blankenship's head. He knew Blankenship had meant for him to have the cross. Norman was neither

a religious nor a spiritual person, but he felt he had shared a major life moment with Blankenship. It was a profound experience, and he needed to commemorate it somehow. He put the cross and chain into his pocket, then went back into the building to ask the guard in the lobby to call an ambulance.

He never told anyone about the experience, not least because he had been unable to decide if he'd stolen Blankenship's cross. He knew Blankenship had meant for him to have it, but he didn't think he'd ever be able to explain that. Norman had taken to wearing the cross around his neck, under his shirt.

Norman went over every moment of the Blankenship matter as he lay in bed, and it seemed to him that he was awake all night with it, but when he heard his radio whispering soft rock music at him he realized he had been asleep. He wondered when it had happened. He felt tired, but he switched the radio off and pushed himself out of bed before he could think about it.

He got himself ready for work while everybody else in the house slept. Just before it was time to leave, he cut up a cantaloupe and scraped the seeds from the slices, then put the slices in dishes and covered each one with plastic wrap. He left them out on the counter, where Gwen was sure to see them. She wouldn't resent his making all these preparations after she had agreed to do it. She would, in fact, be happy for the convenience.

He still felt hurried — hurried and tired — when he found himself alone in the elevator at the office building.

Biomethods, Inc. had 1,000 employees, about a quarter of whom were scientists, and it made its money licensing its genetic discoveries to pharmaceutical companies. Norman understood nothing of these discoveries, but he took pride in the knowledge that his company was working on a cure for AIDS.

It was Norman's job to reconcile the company's Human Resources policies with Federal employment guidelines and to manage the people who administered benefits, orientation, and nontechnical training.

Norman liked his job and he was good at it, and he liked doing it in a company whose mission let him believe he was making a contribution to civilization. Two months before, he'd attended an empowerment seminar where the instructor had the participants — as part of an exercise to build self-esteem — write their own epitaphs. Norman struggled over the assignment for some time and finally came up with “Here lies the man who supervised the person who processed the salary increase requested by the manager of the person who discovered a cure for AIDS.” He had been pleased with it, and when he got home from the seminar he'd told Gwen about it.

She had laughed. “That should be worth a directorship, shouldn't it?”

With Gwen, everything seemed to get back to advancement.

Norman yawned as the elevator chime sounded to signal arrival at the Finance Department. Some things were more important than advancement.

The elevator door slid open into a corridor as dark as the heart of a Chief Financial Officer. Norman stepped out of the elevator and into a slot of light on the floor, which vanished when the elevator door shut behind him. The luminous face of his wristwatch said it was five-thirty. Outside, the sun wouldn't even come up for another hour or so. He'd had predawn meetings with Pressman more often than he cared to remember, but he had never learned where to find the light switch. He certainly couldn't rely on Pressman to turn on the lights. Pressman was in Finance and would rather risk his neck wandering in the dark than spend the company's money on lighting the hallway.

He knew he should wait until his eyes adjusted to the darkness, but the CFO expected him at half past five. Norman wasn't the only person who had early morning meetings with Pressman. As far as he knew, Pressman was at work by five every day.

Pressman had forty of these predawn budget meetings a year: one a quarter for each of the ten staff department managers. Norman didn't particularly like Pressman, but he respected that kind of commitment.

Biomethods, Inc. was divided into line functions and staff functions. There were five line departments: Finance, Marketing & Licensing, Cancer, AIDS, and Arthritis. (The latter three were named after the diseases most likely to generate profits from the company's biotechnology research.) And there were ten staff departments: Corporate Communications, Human Resources, Maintenance, Shipping & Receiving, Security, Administration, Safety, Information Systems, Community Relations, and Strategic Planning. Norman knew the names of the fifteen departments by heart. They were printed on boxes in the organization chart he kept tacked up on the wall beside his desk. He took a certain amount of pride in his understanding of the intricacies of the Biomethods organizational structure. It had been no small feat to master it.

The desk in front of Pressman's office was empty. It was one thing to demand that managers show up for work before the rest of the world was awake, but you couldn't ask such things of support staff. Norman skirted the desk and tapped on the office door, then stood there feeling the knot of his necktie with his fingertips to see if he could tell whether it was straight. He really couldn't tell by feel.

The door opened slowly into darkness, and a soft voice came from the office beyond it.

"Come in, Norman."

Norman stepped hesitantly into the gloom. He expected to find someone pulling on the other side of the door but, when he stepped inside, there was no one there. The room was dark except for a pool of white light on Pressman's desk provided by a halogen desk lamp.

He could make out a figure sitting on the other side of Pressman's desk, just outside the pool of light. The figure reached across the desk to pick up a wooden pencil. It was a man. His head and shoulders passed briefly into the pool of light, and Norman hardly had time to form any impression, but he could see the man was not Pressman. He was not anyone he had ever seen before.

"Come in, Norman," the man repeated. He appeared to be writing

a memo with a pencil, which Norman thought a little strange. But when Norman looked closer, he saw the man was not writing but drawing, making a hasty sketch of what appeared to be a human face.

From Norman's perspective, the man's paper was upside-down and across the desk. Norman began to tilt his head to try to see what the face was supposed to look like, but the man opened his desk drawer and slid the paper into it. He then stood up from the desk lamp's circle of light into the darkness. "It's nothing," he said. "A habit I picked up from a boss I had long ago."

Norman did not understand. A habit of drawing pictures?

The man walked from behind the desk.

Norman's palms began to sweat when he saw that he was short. He didn't know who this man was, but experience had taught him to fear managers under five-six, and he estimated this one at five-five.

He could barely make out the man gesturing toward the sitting area at the other side of the enormous office. Norman was acutely aware he'd neither received an introduction nor been approached for a handshake. He walked to the sofa, set his budget report carefully on the coffee table, and sat down.

The man picked up another sheet of paper from the desk and carried it with him when he came over.

Norman wondered if he was going to sketch again.

The man switched on the lamp that rested on the end table next to the sofa, and its soft, yellowish light allowed Norman to get his first good look at the stranger.

This one obviously cared about his appearance. He had the even apricot coloring of someone who owns a tanning booth but is intelligent enough to use it sparingly. He was of indeterminate age, although his skin appeared unlined. A full head of white hair was slicked into place like a close-fitting crash helmet. He wore a pale pink shirt and a deep scarlet necktie. There was something very foreign about the man. His suit was a rich black with a subtle gray stripe and had the Italianate drapery of Louis, Boston. Norman and the other managers were trained

to the boxy American look of Brooks Brothers.

The man pushed Norman's budget report aside and sat down on the coffee table facing him, still holding his piece of paper. Norman had never seen anyone sit on this coffee table before, and he was a little surprised at the ease with which the man carried it off. The two men were about eighteen inches apart, and Norman felt uncomfortable.

The man had still not offered to shake hands, and Norman wondered if this was some sort of intimidation strategy. If so, it was working. The man's eyes were impenetrable, but his face appeared relaxed and an engaging smile revealed teeth as even and white as if he'd bought them with an American Express Platinum Card.

"My name is Pierce," said the man. "Your meeting with Pressman has been called off – permanently."

Norman detected a faint soapy smell and concluded it was this man's breath. He didn't know what to say about Pressman's absence. He shifted himself on the sofa, uneasy at the man's proximity.

But the man seemed relaxed, and he spoke softly and evenly. "I don't think it's necessary to bring you in here every quarter and hector you about your budget performance."

"Are you the new CFO, Mr. Pierce?" Norman managed.

"Just call me Pierce, Norman." He leaned forward another few inches and studied Norman.

Norman remembered a high school biology class in which he'd been required to study a frog with similar intensity – after he'd eviscerated it. He smiled sheepishly, but he didn't move. He didn't want to offend Pierce by moving away while the man examined him. Norman was wary of offending short people, and frankly, remembering the frog, he thought this examination wasn't too bad. Time moved as slowly as afternoon traffic.

The telephone chirped, and Pierce's eyes flickered toward his desk. When he looked away, Norman found himself breathing for what seemed to be the first time since he'd entered the office. He reached up and felt the knot of his necktie. The telephone chirped again, then stopped.

“No.” Pierce looked down at the paper he was holding. “I’m the new everything.”

The two of them were so close that, even after leaning back away from him, Norman could see that the paper he was looking at was blank. Norman smiled and tried to laugh at Pierce’s joke, but succeeded in producing only a nervous hiss. He wasn’t used to people above him making jokes, and he was not a little worried for having found himself at the mercy of a man who drew sketches, sat on coffee tables, and studied blank papers.

“You’ll be reporting to me from now on.” Pierce continued to study his paper for a moment, then finally looked up. He didn’t say anything else, and after an awkward moment Norman understood it was all right for him to ask questions.

“What—” Norman’s voice came out dry and rasping. He interrupted himself, cleared his throat quietly, and started again. “What happened to Mr. Pressman?”

“Pressman’s gone. So is the rest of the executive staff. They don’t fit in with our plans.”

An image flashed through Norman’s mind. He saw Pressman and the rest of the directors and vice presidents, all dressed in dark Brooks Brothers suits, being marched out the front door.

“Ah.” Norman wished he had something more profound to say than “ah,” but there was nothing else to say. He couldn’t risk revealing himself by asking the only question that mattered.

The man made a slightly sour face. “They hadn’t an idea among them.”

Norman was surprised. He’d always thought the executive team must have a lot of ideas.

“Have you ever heard the term ‘re-engineering,’ Norman?” Pierce gestured with his paper.

Of course Norman had heard the term. He might not have any of his own, but that didn’t mean he was oblivious to the ideas that occasionally gripped the business world with the intensity of a religious revival.

“No,” said Norman.

Pierce turned the paper up and held its blank surface in plain view before him. “This is the company’s new organization chart.”

Norman thought it must be another joke. “Where’s Human Resources?”

“There is no more Human Resources.” Pierce’s soft voice had the edge of a machete clearing away organizational underbrush. “There is no more anything. We’re starting over from scratch with this company.”

Norman wondered what was supposed to happen to the employees in a case like this. “There are some pretty good people here,” he said cautiously.

“There may be.” Pierce seemed unperturbed by Norman’s caution. “But they are working in a dysfunctional organization. Let me ask you something, Norman.”

Norman shifted himself on the sofa.

“What’s the best thing about working for this company?”

Norman thought for a moment. He wondered what answer Pierce considered the right one. “The AIDS project,” he said at last.

Pierce studied him. “AIDS is a pretty big problem, isn’t it?”

Norman nodded, pleased he’d gotten the right answer.

“Is it a big enough problem to keep this company in business?”

Norman wondered what he meant by that.

“Tell me, Norman,” Pierce said softly. “Do you know how many chickens there are in this country?”

Norman was uncomfortable. He wondered what chickens had to do with anything.

“Something over six point four billion,” said Pierce.

“I don’t understand,” said Norman.

“Chickens have as many health problems as human beings,” said Pierce.

Norman wasn’t certain, but he thought Pierce’s tone when he said the phrase “human beings” was a little disparaging.

“If a company is marketing a product of interest to a few million

individuals when there is a market of six point four billion going unserved, don't you think that company might want to rethink its customer base?"

"What does that have to do with AIDS?" Norman tried to make his voice sound respectful.

"It has nothing to do with AIDS," said Pierce. "I'm just trying to give you some insight into why the venture group hired me to turn this company around."

Norman wasn't aware the company needed turning around.

"Never mind," said Pierce. "We'll go over these issues as time goes by."

Norman hoped the conversation would shift to something he could understand.

"I feel terrible about this man Blankenship," said Pierce. "I don't think the termination was justified, either. The other seven people will be brought back to resume work today. I want to start over on a new footing with the employees here."

Norman was surprised at how quickly Pierce shifted his conversation around. He tried to concentrate on everything the man said. He knew he must keep his wits about him if he was to hold on to his job.

"Norman," said Pierce gently, "the employees of this company are on the verge of hysteria. That a man would commit suicide because he got laid off shows a distorted set of priorities, don't you think?"

Norman was taken aback. What an ugly way to discuss poor Blankenship. He didn't know what to say.

Pierce seemed to take his silence for agreement.

"Good. I'm glad we agree. I'm going to need people like you to get this place turned around. I know the previous management wanted people to marry their jobs. This strikes me as some kind of primitive desire for mastery over others. I am not that primitive. We don't need devotion, just effective job performance."

Norman tried to figure out if anyone would think he had married his job. Did coming to five-thirty meetings constitute marriage to your job?

“What do you want me to do?” Norman’s stomach growled from his lack of breakfast, and he shifted uncomfortably.

Pierce didn’t seem to notice his stomach growling. “I want you to help me find the people that are at risk,” he said. “People like Blankenship. The ones with leadership potential. The ones with all the ideas.”

Norman was impressed with the man’s concern.

“You and I, Norman, aren’t the kind of people with ideas,” said Pierce.

It sounded vaguely insulting, but Pierce had fixed Norman with the most charming smile he’d ever seen. “You and I are the kind who just get the job done.”

Norman felt he was in the presence of a man of limitless understanding and wisdom.

“Norman, don’t you think a company with twice as many staff departments as line departments is a little out of control?”

“What do you mean?” said Norman.

“I mean that only a third of this company is working on its business. Two thirds is just overhead.”

Norman ran a staff department, and he disliked being classified as overhead. “Biotechnology is a complex business.”

“So is paper manufacture,” said Pierce. “But I have experience doing that with almost no staff effort.”

Norman didn’t understand what paper manufacture had to do with anything, but he thought it better to say nothing while Pierce unburdened himself, which he seemed to need to do.

“This company is organized as a classic industrial hierarchy,” said Pierce. “I will change that. I am going to tear down walls, and we’re all going to reinvent the way we do business.”

Norman nodded.

“We are going to make change here,” said Pierce. “It will not happen easily.”

Norman nodded.

“Have you ever seen a man go to the scaffold, Norman?”

“Do you mean like a construction worker?” Norman had the feeling he might be in the presence of a madman.

Pierce apparently thought Norman was being facetious, because he ignored the question. “I saw one go to the scaffold once,” he said. “The man was an obstacle to change, and I believe he knew it. Nevertheless, I think he faced his destiny with great courage. And why not? There was no way on Earth he could change it, so why not accept it with grace, dignity, and courage?”

Norman wished the meeting was over. Company hysteria, paper manufacture, the scaffold – it was hard to keep one’s balance listening to this man.

“Until we get through this difficult transition,” said Pierce, “I’m going to be involved personally in every aspect of the company’s affairs. On matters of any significance I want you to call me, any hour of the day or night. I’m still wrapping up another turnaround, so I’m not usually available during the day, but you can leave a detailed message on the voice mail. At night, you can usually get me directly. It doesn’t matter what time it is. Do you understand?”

Norman wondered when Pierce ever slept.

“Do you have any questions about anything?”

Of course he did.

“No,” said Norman.

Pierce stood up from the coffee table and started to walk back toward his desk, still holding his organization chart. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

Norman stood up and wondered if he was supposed to follow him back to the other side of the room.

But Pierce dropped the paper on his blotter, turned around, folded his arms in front of him, and leaned up against the desk. He unfolded his arms and opened them in a gesture that was simultaneously dismissive and supplicating.

It was a courtly gesture, so much more civilized than Pressman’s

method of closing a meeting, which was to simply say, "Get back to work."

"If you'll excuse me," said Pierce, "I have to check the voice mail now."

Norman bent to pick up his budget report from the coffee table and started toward the door.

"Remember, Norman," said Pierce. "The people with the ideas."

Norman nodded and pulled the door open. He stepped through and pulled it closed behind him. Through the window in the reception area he could see a pinkness spreading across the sky. He looked at his watch. It was already ten minutes to seven.

Norman headed for the elevator. He wanted to get a snack in the company cafeteria to silence the grumbling of his empty stomach.

On the ground floor, he walked to the back of the building and joined a small group of secretaries and clerks who were waiting at the door of the cafeteria, which was to open at seven. Norman recognized two supervisors from the Strategic Planning Department, young men in white shirts with neckties and no jackets, who were chatting.

Norman tried not to listen, but couldn't avoid it.

"They say the hole in his head was as big around as your fist."

"No kidding?"

"Blood all over the inside of the car."

"Do you think he was trying to be messy about it?"

"I know I would. Me, I probably would have done it in Pressman's office, just to see if I could mess up his suit."

"Hell, I would have done it on his desk — no, in his lap."

"Do you think he would have sat still for it?"

They both laughed at that. Then one of them spoke more seriously to the other.

"Do you know if they'll get down as far as us?"

"What I heard was that all management staff at every level would get the axe and then about half would be invited back."

"Oh, God. Half. I wonder if I have any bullets at home."

The two of them laughed again.

“Maybe we’ll get the notices tomorrow,” said the serious one. “They like to do those things on Friday.”

“What caliber do you think it was to make a hole like that?”

The door to the cafeteria opened to reveal its manager. He recognized Norman and nodded. Then he fastened the door against the fixture on the wall behind and stepped aside to let them enter. The dining area was redolent of coffee, bacon, and hash browns. Light poured in through the windows of the opposite wall as the sun rose over the parking lot outside. Utensils clattered behind the counter, somebody laughed near the cash register.

Norman tried to go in, but the cafeteria manager grabbed his jacket sleeve as he walked past. The man looked around to make sure everyone else was out of earshot.

“Have you heard anything, Norman?”

“All the vice presidents and directors got it,” said Norman. “Last night or early this morning, I think.”

“Oh, God.” The man went pale. “I’ve got a mortgage. I’ve got a kid in college.”

“I just met the new guy, and he said he’s not going to do anybody else,” said Norman.

“No?” The panic in the man’s face turned to hope. He grabbed Norman’s other jacket sleeve. “Let me get you some coffee and a bagel — on the house.”

Norman let himself be led by the sleeve over to the counter. Managers were not ordinarily so demonstrative, and he was wary. But he stuck his budget report up under his arm and accepted the warm bagel on a paper plate, and coffee in a paper cup. The cafeteria manager got him a little package of cream cheese from the refrigerated case.

“Here, take this, Norman.”

“Thanks,” said Norman. “Do you have a doughnut?”

“You’re sure they’re not going to do anybody else?” whispered the man.

“He’s even bringing back the people who got laid off,” said Norman. “That’s what he told me. Do you have a doughnut?”

“Really?” The cafeteria manager looked like a man who’d been told his terminal disease was a misdiagnosis.

“Except Blankenship.” Norman looked at the floor. He didn’t like people to forget about Blankenship.

“Yeah, I guess it’s a little late for him,” said the cafeteria manager. “Hey, enjoy your bagel. I’m going into my office to call my wife.”

Norman looked down at his bagel. But when he looked up, the man was already halfway across the room on his way to his office. Norman decided the cafeteria manager was not one of the employees Pierce wanted to be told about. No ideas there. Norman went to find a seat by himself at an empty formica-topped table. It occurred to him that Pierce was right. The company was on the verge of hysteria. He chewed his bagel and mulled over his meeting with Pierce.

The venture group had obviously sent in a hatchet man, but he wasn’t your ordinary hatchet man. He had fired a dozen vice presidents and directors, but he talked like he cared about the company’s employees. Norman knew from long experience that your chances of surviving a new manager were better if you watched what he did than if you listened to what he said. This one seemed to know a great deal about market strategies, but he obviously knew very little about Human Resources. And Norman did not think it was a particularly effective approach to begin a meeting with a manager by telling him you’re abolishing his department, even if Pierce was only kidding.

The bagel was dry in his mouth, and he took a sip of coffee to moisten it.

Norman’s first order of business was to schedule a meeting of the Human Resources Department to tell his staff about the new turn-around specialist. He thought about the department. It consisted of three exempt staff, including himself, and two nonexempts. The two nonexempts, Cheryl and Louise, were admins. He wasn’t sure what they did, since he left the supervision of them to the Assistant Man-

ager, Jacqueline. Jacqueline was probably his biggest problem. She was extremely ambitious, and she was likely to make herself conspicuous in the misguided belief that the turnaround was an opportunity to increase her power and status.

Norman looked down at the paper plate in front of him. The bagel was gone, and he wondered what happened to it. He looked in his coffee cup, and it was empty. He looked at his watch and saw it was eight o'clock already. The cafeteria was filled with people, and the noise level had risen considerably. Norman shrugged, took the cup and plate to the trash can, and started toward his office.

When he arrived on the third floor, Cheryl and Louise were at their desks in the Human Resources Department reception area. Louise's elaborate hair was very large this morning. She was rummaging in her purse while Cheryl spoke to her, and Norman could tell the conversation was not amicable.

"It's called metonymy, Louise," said Cheryl, "and it's critical to understanding that book, and just about every other book you read, for that matter."

Louise took a can of hair spray from her purse, shook it, and then aimed a noisy contrail of lacquer vapor toward her hair. "I can't hear you," she said. "I'm spraying my hair."

"Good morning," said Norman. He could taste the hair spray in the air and he did not find it pleasant, but he tried to keep his expression neutral.

"Good morning, Norman." Louise clicked the cap back into place on her hair spray can.

"Hi." Cheryl looked dismissively at Norman, then resumed her harrying of Louise. "You should care about this, Louise," she said. "It's an important concept."

Louise uncapped the hair spray can and aimed another blast at herself.

Norman wondered if it wouldn't do her more good to aim the hair spray at Cheryl. From the day Cheryl had first arrived at Biomethods,

Louise showed signs of insecurity and resentment, apparently because Cheryl had a master's degree in English literature when Louise had been no higher than junior college. To match Cheryl's educational attainments, Louise had developed larger and larger hair. Cheryl, in turn, countered Louise's hair by giving her lectures on concepts such as synecdoche and didacticism. This was especially upsetting to Louise, who considered herself an avid reader. Cheryl's lectures would drive her into a frenzy of hair-teasing and spraying, which Cheryl countered with more lectures, and so on in a vicious cycle Norman saw no hope of interrupting.

As he sought the protection of his office, Norman wondered if breathing hair spray wasn't damaging his lungs.

Norman called his meeting for that afternoon.

He prepared notes on the newsprint flip chart in the department conference room: NEW MANAGEMENT, NEW GOALS, NEW POLICIES, NEW STRUCTURE. He was waiting for his staff beside his flipchart when they arrived for the meeting.

When the four of them filed in, Louise and Cheryl took chairs as far from each other as possible, at opposite corners of the conference table. Jacqueline, as Assistant Manager, sat at the end opposite Norman, and Tim sat next to Louise, where he was hidden from Norman's view by her hair. But he was a benefits specialist and had never been particularly visible anyway.

They all stared at Norman's flipchart, and the only sound was the soft report of Louise's chewing gum, which crackled with the sound of someone crumpling sheets of old paperwork. Norman wondered if her hair was very heavy. He supposed that the exercise of the chewing somehow conditioned her neck muscles to help her keep her head upright.

Jacqueline, at the other end of the table, was wearing her power suit, the gray one with the chalk stripe, and Norman knew it could be a difficult meeting. He hated it when she wore her power suit.

He decided he should begin with an inclusion exercise.

"Before we begin," said Norman, "I think we should go around the

room and each of us will describe something good that's happening in their personal life."

He wasn't looking at Jacqueline, but from the corner of his eye he saw her stiffen. It didn't surprise him. Jacqueline disliked inclusion exercises.

He decided to start the exercise with Louise, hoping she might leave off chewing her gum while she told them about her good experience. "Louise, why don't you start."

"I read a good book," said Louise.

"What's it about?" said Norman.

"A vampire from New Orleans who's a rock star."

Norman wondered how a vampire could be a rock star. Weren't they supposed to be nobility or something?

"He's hundreds of years old," said Louise, "but looks young enough to be in rock music."

Cheryl coughed ostentatiously. Everybody turned to look at her.

"The book is egregiously self-referential." Cheryl seemed to address her remarks to everyone in the room but Louise. "The narrator spends pages and pages discussing the author's last book. I mean, does that break frame or what?"

"Have you read the book, too?" said Norman.

"Well, the reader needs to know where he came from." Louise seemed offended, and Norman worried the conversation might get out of hand.

"The original book was inspired," said Cheryl. "Telling the story from the vampire's point of view was innovative. But why did the author just do the same thing again? Isn't art about stretching aesthetic boundaries?"

"How would you know?" Louise's tone implied that Cheryl's hair was not big enough for artistic understanding.

Norman was worried that the meeting was slipping from his control. Cheryl started to answer Louise's challenge, but Jacqueline cut her off.

"I don't think we're here to discuss books or vampires," she said.

Everyone in the room turned toward her. She was as unlike either of her two subordinates as Norman could possibly imagine. She wore her black hair short and casual. She affected no makeup that he could discern. Her suit was fashionably severe. Her only concession to adornment was a pair of electric blue contact lenses that gave her an appearance simultaneously sinister and comical.

Jacqueline's job was to manage employee orientation and training programs, to supervise the support staff in Human Resources, and to manage nonexempt compensation. She was an outstanding performer and one of the best supervisors Norman had ever seen. And she was far too passionate about her job to be really happy in it.

Jacqueline wasn't smiling, but she swelled visibly as she became the center of attention. Norman wondered how she always seemed to take control of his meetings with a single remark.

"Norman has something to tell us," said Jacqueline.

Everyone looked at Norman.

"Maybe we'll just skip the books and move on to our discussion," he said.

Then he made some remarks about change and the need to work together in uncertain times. He was careful not to share with them anything about Pierce beyond his name. Any expectations they developed now could make Pierce's re-engineering campaign much more difficult. So he kept his remarks at the level of generalities. He saw their eyes glazing over as he talked about the need to understand company objectives and not just work for the department. He wondered why they weren't more interested in this stuff.

"Until we get some direction from the new management," he said, "it's business as usual." He looked around the room and saw they were all having a tough time keeping their eyes open. "You are to work on your existing objectives. I don't want anyone developing any new projects or trying to work up high-profile activities. The company is in the hands of a turnaround specialist. He will be happy with us if we just keep things moving steadily and quietly for the time being."

Then he woke them up and sent them back to their desks. But Jacqueline asked if she could stay and talk with him privately.

Norman shrugged and sat down. Jacqueline walked over to the door and closed it, then came back and sat in a chair near him.

Norman didn't know what she wanted, but he knew it would be difficult. She was not one to leave him in suspense. She got right to the point.

"Norman," she said, "I have an idea for a new product."

Even coming from Jacqueline it surprised him.

"Jacqueline," he said, "what are you talking about? You're a Human Resources manager, you're not concerned with products."

"But it's a fantastic concept," said Jacqueline.

"I'm sure it is," said Norman. "But we are the Human Resources Department. You should be working on Human Resources problems."

"We don't have any problems, Norman. This department's mission is to fill out forms."

"So?" said Norman. "Why aren't you figuring out better ways to fill out forms?"

"This is the nineties, Norman." Jacqueline aimed her eyes at him steadily. "Ideas can come from anywhere. Have you ever heard of re-engineering?"

Why did everybody want to browbeat him with re-engineering? "I've heard a little about it here and there."

"It's a way of re-evaluating everything an organization does," said Jacqueline.

"Jacqueline," he said, "we're in the hands of a turnaround specialist. We don't know what's going to happen. This is not the time to be talking about re-engineering." A part of Norman noted the reflexive idea-damping in his voice, and he regretted saying it as soon as it was out of his mouth. "Or a new product," he added lamely.

"Norman, I wouldn't be using up your time on this if it wasn't important."

Norman shifted himself in his chair, not knowing if he should feel

flattered, manipulated, or both. “Why are you bringing this idea to me, anyway?”

“I tried to talk with those dolts in Marketing & Licensing about it, and they laughed at me. I think I should bring this idea to the new guy. I have to see him right away, before the Marketing morons wake up and see how good an idea it is. If I ask him for a meeting he’ll put me off, but you’ve already met with him. If you ask for a meeting he’ll see you right away.”

Her reasoning seemed convoluted to Norman. But he knew her to have a much more sophisticated understanding of organizations than he did, and it occurred to him that maybe Jacqueline was one of the people Pierce was talking about. One of the people with ideas. “What is this product idea?”

Jacqueline stared at him as if she were weighing whether or not it was safe to tell him. Finally, she seemed to decide she could trust him. “We do genetic mapping here, right?”

“I think so,” said Norman.

“My idea is that we map psychographic profiles to the human genome.”

“I don’t understand,” said Norman.

Jacqueline looked at him as if she didn’t really expect him to understand, and he wondered if he should be offended.

“I think we can find the human genes responsible for consumer buying behavior.”

“Why would we even want to?” said Norman.

“To develop a simple blood test that would predict what kinds of products and services people are likely to buy. It would be a new frontier in direct marketing.”

A laugh began to work its way into the back of Norman’s throat, but as soon as he was aware of it he suppressed it. Jacqueline was staring at him quite earnestly, and he did not want to show himself to share any attitudes with the dolts in Marketing & Licensing. They were a line department and liked to lord it over the staff departments. They knew

nothing of the intricacies involved in supporting an organization of this size.

“How about it, Norman? Will you take me to see the new guy? He would want you to, you know.”

“It’s crazy.” Norman tried to say it sympathetically.

“There was a time when flying was crazy,” said Jacqueline.

Norman didn’t know what to say. He hated to travel, and he thought flying was crazy. But Pierce did say he wanted Norman to help him find the people with ideas.

“All right,” he said.

It was the first time that day Jacqueline smiled at him.

# Labor Day

(2000) *Catbird Press*. \$22 hardcover, 208 pp., ISBN 0-945774-48-6

“Kemske has humorously and humanely welded together farce and postindustrial angst, with charming results.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Kemske catapults entirely believable characters into slightly fabulous situations and lets them play out their roles with more than enough angst and lust to keep the story moving along.” —*Boston Globe*

“Floyd Kemske is drawing the surreal map of the modern workplace. Every spot on it is marked, ‘You Are Here,’ and from it there is no finding your way home.” —*Denver Post*

“Kemske has a lot to say about the often dysfunctional ways managers and employees interact – and much of it is quite insightful and funny. Recommended for all public libraries.” —*Library Journal*

“This fourth novel in Kemske’s ‘corporate nightmare’ series occupies a unique niche (possibly inhabited only by himself within a genre that is itself relatively small: the business novel)... Kemske’s latest plot is a devious, convoluted story about a union president facing an organizing effort by his own office staff.” —*Booklist*

“At times the conflict in *Labor Day* approaches the artfulness of a fencing match with the grit of an Old West showdown. The narrative is propelled by this conflict between Harsh and Colby with eddies that encircle and pull in the lives of the other characters on personal and professional planes... *Labor Day* is the kind of novel whose digestion continues long after the reading of it is finished.” —*Foreword*

“The point ... is made with enough irony and wit to make ‘*Labor Day*’ an entertaining look at the tribulations of working stiffs, wherever they toil.” —*New York Times Book Review*

# Chapter One

I knew quite a bit about the place before I began my surveillance. Jolly Jim's Refresh & Refuel. Truck stop. Northern New Jersey, just off exit 39. Twenty-four fuel islands, a substantial restaurant, souvenir shop, and showers for truckers — \$3.50 for ten minutes under a cascade of warm water followed by a fresh towel.

There's no Jolly Jim. That's just a name. The place is run by Melissa Willard, a well-groomed, slightly overweight 45-year-old single woman who makes a career managing Jolly Jim's. I have spent three successive weekends watching her from a rented truck in the Jolly Jim's parking lot. I know what time she gets to work. I know when she leaves, when she meets with her shift supervisors, and when she does her receipt tallies. I even have a pretty good idea when she goes to the bathroom.

The Jolly Jim name is owned by a small, closely-held corporation with annual sales of \$14 million and 53 employees and an employment contract with Melissa Willard. The corporation is as closely held as it can possibly be — owned entirely by a well-to-do, civic-minded lady who lives on the Main Line in Philadelphia. Jolly Jim's was a bequest of her late father. The civic-minded lady uses the profits to support various charitable causes. She has not visited the truck stop in over ten years.

It's not difficult to watch a busy truck stop, especially at night. You rent a small truck, drive in, and park. Traffic being what it is, you can leave a truck in the parking lot for up to twelve hours without attracting suspicion. This is my third weekend watching Jolly Jim's. I don't mind working weekends. Some people like to spend their weekends gardening. Some people like to watch or play sports. I like to stalk small- to medium-sized businesses.

Through my palm-sized binoculars, I study the enthusiasm with which the Jolly Jim staff carry themselves under the fuel island floodlights, and I watch their demeanor in the presence of the ubiquitous Melissa Willard. She wears the same khaki trousers and blue windbreaker the employees have to wear and she works alongside them when she is needed, but I've studied enough organizations that I recognize power relationships on sight.

The employees respect her and trust her. It's apparent they even like her. She has been here working all evening, even though it is Sunday. I wonder what the people who are close to her think of these hours.

I have done enough of these to know that Melissa Willard will be a casualty of my work here. But I never let myself worry about unemployed managers.

I am attracted to Jolly Jim's Refresh & Refuel by the ampersand in the name. Is that strange? There has to be some reason to decide on a target. An ampersand is as good as any.

I once saw a documentary on television about a man who studied a band of baboons. He was remarkably patient and would set himself up in a blind near them. They knew he was there, but he sat in his blind quietly for hours and hours, and they got used to him. I feel a little like that man. I sit here in this truck cab, and I make notes on my yellow pad as I watch the attendants running around on the gas islands. I've even had to give them names to keep track of them.

There is plenty of truck traffic on the highway, notwithstanding it is Sunday night. Truckers usually work all weekend. It's a business that

requires a lot of hustle, whether you're union or not.

About eight o'clock heavy trucks all pull in to Jolly Jim's at once. They line up at the pumps to wait, while the attendants dash from vehicle to vehicle, pumping fuel into the enormous side-mounted tanks and climbing the sides of cabovers with their windshield squeegees in hand. They move fast and purposefully and with little wasted movement. They are a competent crew. Lots of teamwork, good focus.

On this shift, there are four men and two women. They are all in their early twenties. At least two of them are college kids. I can tell because they bring books to work. Economics, history, art appreciation, psychology, philosophy. Budding members of the exploiting class.

A kid with sandy hair, whom I call Sandy, practically sprints from truck to truck, keeping the pumps pumping, checking oil, making change. When there are no trucks there to buy fuel, he walks around and picks up litter. When there's no litter to pick up, he reads a paperback book with a lurid cover, which I assume is science fiction. He moves like somebody who owns stock in the place. That's pretty amusing. The person who owns stock in the place — all the stock — doesn't even know this kid, and if she did, she would consider him less valuable than a house cat. But then she's a little nutty when it comes to house cats.

Sandy is my best prospect. When you're looking for the prime recruit — the bell cow — go for the smartest one you can find who isn't a supervisor. They might not have leadership skills, but they are easily disillusioned.

Sandy and the rest of the crew work for forty minutes at top speed to clear out the backlog of trucks. When it is finally over, and the fuel islands are quiet, they all go back to the booths that stand at the centers of the islands. Sandy opens a book and starts to read. The dark-haired man in the booth with him appears to be making entries on a keyboard. He is the shift supervisor.

I turn the ignition key to start the truck, flip on the headlights, and

then drive over to the island. With the eight o'clock rush over, I will be the only customer, which is what I want.

Sandy closes his book, then trots out to the truck.

I switch off the ignition and watch him approach in the orange light of the sodium arc lamps. Standard-issue khaki pants and blue windbreaker with a Jolly Jim patch on the left side of his chest and a name badge on the right. Alan.

I climb out of the cab.

"Fill it, please."

The boy is still sweating from exertion, but as he pulls the pump handle from its slot, he smiles at me as if I were the only customer of the day. "Check the oil?"

"It's fine." I look around at the quiet fuel islands. "Are you the shift supervisor?"

"No." Alan turns to look at the man intently tapping the keyboard in the booth.

"You will be," I say. "I was watching you work as I drove in. You work like a shift supervisor."

His eyes light up. He has a fantasy about becoming shift supervisor. Strivist advancement crap. It is the drum beat management generously provides to help their galley slaves push through the pain and row a little harder.

Over his shoulder, I see the plump form of his manager coming toward the island. She stops to speak with another employee, but she is clearly headed in this direction. I walk around to the other side of the truck, as if examining its body. I prefer not to be seen by managers.

The fuel pump is making a soft hum, but I can hear Alan speak to her.

"Hi, Melissa."

"Alan, I just wanted to tell you I think you did a great job with the rush just now. I was watching you from my window. You kept them moving, but you were friendly and courteous. Great job."

I recognize this as a “brief affirmation,” suitably personalized. It is from chapter three of *Sensible Supervision*.

“Gee, thanks,” says Alan.

“Come see me in my office when you’re finished here. I want to talk with you.”

“Sure, Melissa.”

I pull an IBOL brochure from my pocket and leave it on the ground where Alan will find it when he picks up the litter after I am gone.

Melissa goes away. Probably has more brief affirmations to distribute. I walk back around, where Alan is wetting the squeegee to do the windshield.

“Don’t bother with the windshield,” I say.

“I don’t mind,” he says.

“Doesn’t need it.”

The boy drops the squeegee back into the reservoir and returns to the fuel pump.

“Does she do that often?” I say.

“She does it a lot,” he says. “She’s always telling us when she thinks we’re doing a good job.”

“Pretty good boss, I guess.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty good. She cares about us.”

“Caring costs a lot less than a salary increase.” I smile to keep the comment friendly.

The boy laughs.

“I used to work for a company,” I say, “where they cared about the employees. We were like one big family. We all worked hard and our manager was always there to help out. I really liked that guy. You could trust him, you know?”

The boy nods his head toward the office. “Like Melissa.”

“Yeah,” I say. “A manager like that is hard to find. When you get one, you’ll do anything for him. We put in overtime whenever he asked, same pay as straight time. The people at that company, they would do

anything for that manager. I've always remembered that company fondly."

"Why didn't you stay there?"

"One year the company had record profits and all the employees got one-percent raises. After all the hard work and overtime, it was nice to get a raise, but I thought we'd done more than one percent. I did some investigating and found out our manager got twenty percent. I am not kidding. He got twenty percent. And he was already making about four times what any of us made. You want to know why the company gave him twenty percent?"

The pump handle clicks off and Alan nods, then takes the nozzle from the fuel port.

"They gave him twenty percent because he kept us happy with one percent."

Alan fits the pump nozzle into its slot on the pump.

"It happens all the time," I say. "You do a good job and she compliments you. She does a good job, and she gets twenty percent."

He looks thoughtful when he stretches his hand out to me. "Thirty-five fifty-seven."

"That will be cash." I take a roll of bills out of my jeans pocket and peel two twenties from it. "I realized the company judged our managers on their success in cutting costs. It didn't matter if they did it by getting a good deal with a supplier, streamlining a work process, or getting employees to stay happy without raises."

The boy takes the twenties and reaches into his own pocket for change. "Where did you go after that?"

"I didn't leave after that," I walk back over to the cab of the truck. "I joined a union."

A look of curiosity crosses his face. "A union?"

I climb into the truck. "Keep the change."

"Hey, thanks," says Alan. He walks closer to the door of the truck. "A union?"

I lean out the window toward him. "Don't say it too loud. Even a good boss like yours would fire you if she heard you wanted a union."

"I didn't say I wanted one," he says.

"You don't have to want it. Just thinking about it is enough. Management thinks that if you start thinking about unions, the next thing they know you'll be asking for time-and-a-half when you work overtime. They don't want that, do they?"

"I guess not."

I turn the key to start the engine. "She wants to see you in her office. Do you think she's going to offer you a raise?"

"Hey, don't you want a receipt?"

"I come through here all the time," I say. "Maybe I'll see you next weekend. You can let me know if you got a raise or just a bigger compliment."

I wink at him. You always wink at the young ones. They are susceptible to that.

# The Third Lion

(1997) *Catbird Press*. \$22.95, hardcover 224 pp. ISBN-0945774-37-0

“Kemske, best known for his quirky takes on latter-day organization men (*Human Resources*, 1995, etc.), smoothly shifts gears to deliver a wryly engrossing historical novel featuring the duplicitous French statesman Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord.”

–*Kirkus Reviews*

“Unabashedly romanticized and delightfully tongue-in-cheek, this entertaining fictional version of the life of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord – one of the most influential survivors of the French Revolution – lives up to its subject... This tale of the Enlightenment’s bitter end finds an apt teller in Kemske (*Human Resources*), who brings the irony and psychological acuity that his formidable protagonist demands.”

–*Publishers Weekly*

“Characterized by the author as essentially amoral, Talleyrand ironically adhered to a very strict code of civility that always governed every ruthless action he took in order to advance his own self-interest. A darkly humorous fictional biography of a major power broker.”

–*Booklist*

## Chapter One

There are so few things capable of amusing a man on the last day of his life. But it does amuse me that a sinner of my standing cannot be redeemed without paperwork.

All my life, people have been after me to sign things. My signature appears on every important treaty of this century, and now they want me to put it on a treaty with God.

Paperwork.

I flatter myself to think of it as a treaty; it is actually a recantation. It may guarantee a permanent cessation of hostilities between God and me, but in fact it merely describes three of my sins (the most trivial ones, to my way of thinking) and my regret for having committed them. I did not write this document. The one I wrote struck the local Church authorities as neither specific nor repentant enough to satisfy the Pope. So the monsignor and Father Dupanloup have collaborated in the preparation of this one, which they believe is dignified enough that I will not refuse signing and still abject enough that the Vatican will accept it.

But in negotiations, Father Dupanloup and the monsignor are children. I have negotiated with the Vatican, and I know what it will accept and what it will refuse. It will refuse to accept this recantation. It will demand one that is even more repentant, more apologetic, more groveling.

So I have delayed signing the document until this, my last day. My intent is that it will not reach the Pope until I am in the ground and incapable of revising it. Oh, the planning and preparation required for a deathbed conversion.

The dark rises momentarily, but when I look, the lamp flames are unwavering in their glass chimneys, and I understand it is not darkness gathering but my eyes failing.

There is a scratch at the door. Pauline has returned. She knows how much I cherish some of the older, gentler forms of life, and she has refused to adopt the bourgeois knocking and pounding with which the spirit of modernity approaches doors.

“Welcome,” I say.

The brass handle turns, the door opens, and my precious darling enters. The lamplight makes her eyes glisten at the corners. I can see she has been weeping again. She approaches the bedside in a rustle of silk and linen and lays the back of her tender hand against my forehead. She will find nothing there. The faltering furnace of my body makes little heat these days. But I enjoy the touch of her skin on mine and the sign of her concern.

“Father Dupanloup is here, Uncle,” she says.

Her mother and I told her some months ago who I am, but she never broke the habit of calling me “Uncle.” I am glad for her sake. I will soon be far beyond the reach of scandal, but she has most of her life before her, and there are uncharitable elements who would delight in branding her the daughter of incest. It is not real incest, of course, since Pauline’s mother, Dorotheé, is only the wife of my nephew. But it is 1838, and the world still labors under the strange and ungainly moral code of our late Emperor, who prized family life above all other moral principles – the more so after he had put away his wife and married the Hapsburg princess on whom he thought he could get an heir.

“And what does Father Dupanloup want with me?” I tease.

“Please, Uncle.” Her eyes shine brighter. I can see they are gathering more moisture. “He has come to see you sign your confession.”

At eighteen, she is agreeably implacable. I wish I’d had her with me

at Vienna. The force of her personality would have been useful in the Belgian question. And such a diplomat! She lets me think of this paper as a confession rather than a recantation. I can see she is troubled that I may not survive long enough to demean myself properly.

“Please tell him to wait,” I say.

“Please, Uncle.” Her lower lip trembles.

“Don’t be frightened, child,” I say. “I’m not.” And I am delighted to discover that I have no overwhelming need to tell the truth even on this, my deathbed.

“Oh, Uncle.” She sinks down beside the bed and lays her face against my dressing gown.

She remains in that position for a few moments, while her young body shakes briefly. She lifts her head and produces a handkerchief. My dressing gown is wet where her face was, and I find the dampness comforting.

“I wish I could remain longer with you and your mother,” I say. “But I want no more than that. A man who has outlived his enemies can have no cause for regret.”

“Uncle, you told me yourself that you regret your defiance of the Church.”

I am trapped by my own remarks. How charming! She is truly her father’s daughter. “Very well, then. Go to Father Dupanloup and tell him I will see him. But give me a moment.”

She is smiling when she leaves me. I make myself smile in return. It is a skill I have perfected in many decades of government service and diplomacy. It is not easy to do now. I have sent her away because I have found it difficult to breathe.

I lie in this bed, and I suck the air, but my lungs do not respond. A roaring rises in my ears, and I wonder if this is the time. I wish I had not sent Pauline away.

And then she is beside me again, weeping.

“Oh, Uncle, Uncle.”

She gestures to her confessor, Father Dupanloup, who is wearing his vestments and carrying a vessel of anointing oil. He steps forward

eagerly, but then stops himself, shakes his head, and steps back.

Pauline looks stricken. She throws herself against my dressing gown again.

She fetches up against me like a blow to the chest. The rope around my throat has loosened, and I find myself able to make a wheezing gasp. The air, even in this closed-up room where I have been dying for months, is sweet in my throat.

“Thank you, my dear,” I manage.

She looks alarmed, and her confessor looks disappointed.

“Oh, Uncle. We thought you were gone.”

“There are doubtless others whom God wants to collect first,” I say.

“Father Dupanloup would not even have been able to administer extreme unction. Once you have signed, he will be able to anoint you.”

Father Dupanloup smiles serenely. He is a strapping young man whose whist playing is hampered by a tendency to show the contents of a hand in his face. His conversation is nearly as artless, but he means well and seems to care for the fate of my soul. And if he lacks Pauline’s unmitigated determination to get me into heaven, at least he applies as much effort to it as he does to the advancement of his career in the Church. It may well be the same thing.

The thought crosses my mind that I am a dying man and have scant time remaining. I should not have to put up with a priest at my bedside if I do not want one. But it is perhaps too late in my life to begin behaving rudely.

“Welcome, Father Dupanloup.”

“Prince Talleyrand.” Father Dupanloup approaches my bed. “I bring you my warmest regards and best wishes for your comfort.”

One can enjoy a bit of dissimulation, even from such an awkward practitioner as Father Dupanloup. He has not come out of concern for my comfort. He has come to persuade me to sign the paper. I know how treaties are negotiated, and I know we will discuss many things before we come around to the welfare of my immortal soul. Father Dupanloup thinks I am the prize in this game. Perhaps I am the opposing player.

I distort my face into a smile again. “I cherish your regards, and I am grateful for your kindness.”

“God protects us, Prince,” he says. “We have but to ask.”

Ah, he makes a strong opening move. He intends that I will now beg him to help me plead for God’s protection, which will be vouchsafed me, of course, as soon as I sign the paper recanting my three sins. God apparently does not wish to admit those who have not first given over their dignity.

“Would you care to sit down, Father?”

Father Dupanloup sits in the chair in front of the bed.

“It is through confession and repentance,” says Father Dupanloup, “that one is able to go to God as a child goes to his father – with fear perhaps, but always with faith in his justice and his love.” He glances toward the recantation on the nightstand.

I find myself wishing for a more accomplished player in this match.

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