



TWISTS
AND TURNS

32 SHORT STORIES

By

Tom Gagey

Twists and Turns

A collection of 32 short, short, stories
that just may not be what they seem to be.

By Tom Gnagey

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STORY ONE
Upon My Passing
Tom Gnagey

From what I know of such things – and even at my age, who among us really knows – I believe my imminent passing will take but moments. The thought of having to leave the familiar, comfortable, and secure confines I have known all my life is intimidating to be sure. I have told myself that it is something that comes to all of us so should be anticipated not with fear and apprehension but with inquisitive resignation.

I will be remembered as Thaddeus Winston Wentworth the third, an impressive name, I suppose, for someone who has really accomplished very little in life. I have done my best to grow in body and mind according to the best laid plans of natural happenings. At this point I feel unqualified to judge if I have truly done my best in those areas. Time will write that chapter.

I follow my brother in this experience by three years – Jerry by name. Thankfully, so far I have not been degraded with diapers the way he was. Our parents – Jake and Thelma – often tended to get upset with him and took most unappealing corrective measures. I can proudly say that has never been the case between them and me. From early on I heard words like precious, beloved, and miracle tossed in my direction.

I have to wonder, though, how they will react to my departure from this place. Recently, mother has become quite emotional. I have heard her sobbing; no, that is not the proper word. I am not good with words. Crying or calling out,

perhaps, or even screaming. Here in my carefully and lovingly prepared sanctuary I have been all quite purposefully shielded from the intensity of sound and emotion. I do believe that just outside I have heard the reassuring tones of my father and others whose voices I do not even recognize. During the past hour, murmur seems to have escalated into hubbub – would that be the right word? They must believe my moment is near. Fully unanticipated, I do believe my own mindset is that of excitement – the expectation that something wonderful lies beyond this final event.

There has always been music in my presence and they have played it often for me during these final days. It plays now. Throughout my life, I have come to love music. In fact, I believe it has surely been the basis for nurturing my synapses and coaxing my mind to develop far beyond what it would have otherwise achieved. There is a structure to music that foreordains a logical progression of mental development and sets a dependable rhythm necessary for a successful life. I thank my parents for having provided that from my earliest days. And just now it provides solace, comfort, and reassurance as I anticipate my trek into the unknown.

Upheaval! My world suddenly seems to be changing – shifting – rapidly. This must, indeed, be my time. I feel queasy. I sense my family's presence. I feel the need to say something profound – memorable – but words fail me as things are progressing too rapidly. I feel adrift in a sea of ever-rising, powerful, surging, waves. Oh, Yes! My being is most certainly on the move to somewhere. I want to open my eyes and check things out but there seems to be some heaviness preventing it.

What is that? Light? Yes, at long last the promised light – blinding light, and bone-chilling cold like I could never have imagined. There is pressure as if my access into the beyond must be forced – labored. I never considered that this process might be an ordeal – that it might be anything but a gentle, easy-flowing, pleasant, evolution. In truth, it is difficult. It is hurtful, even. Clearly, I can't stay, and yet I don't see how I can find the strength to navigate this grueling transition by myself. What am I to do? The child in me cries out. Help me! Mama. Please, help me!

* * *

The doctor smiled down at Thelma as he laid her newborn son in her arms.

“Thaddeus, meet your mother. May you have a long and wonder-filled life with your family – mother Thelma, father Jake, and big brother Jerry – may he seldom lead you too far astray.”

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STORY TWO
A Tale of Three Sisters
By Tom Gnagey

Once upon a time there were three, aging, sisters. Two lived together in a four-room apartment. They had a cat. The third lived down the hall. Her cat had died. Upon their parents' deaths, forty years previously, the three of them shared equally in the inheritance. Pricilla and Maude, hoping to make their share last longer, took an apartment together. Ellie, the youngest, still clinging to hopes of love and marriage, opted to live alone waiting until 'he' came along. In forty years, he hadn't! No man. Dead cat. Things just weren't working out.

Now that the sisters were necessarily looking to decide how they would allot their estates – as insubstantial as they were becoming – discussions about it had grown up among them. Pricilla and Maude were insistent on willing their money to the animal shelter. Ellie was mostly undecided, leaning toward the botanical garden. Pricilla and Maude thought it was an outrage.

"Using our parents' money to spread cow dung on azaleas is an outrage," Pricilla said accompanying her pronouncement with the series of dramatically measured nods for which she was locally famous.

"Abandoning the helpless, homeless, little animals is ungodly," I say," was Maude's take on it. Her trademark reaction was crossed arms to the accompaniment of a greatly over-staged sigh.

The third floor at 812 Benson Street would have lost a significant amount of its character without the regular flaunting of those dependable reactions.

The three-way discussions about the estates always ended in a huff.

One might ask why those three, fully independent, sets of financial resources could not have been split in a two and one manner. That was not something that would have ever even entered the gray old heads of the Bickley sisters. For as long back as anyone could remember, they had not been seen together in public unless dressed in the same basic color. They had not varied the way they arranged themselves in their pew at church for longer than that. Every morning their sunrise constitutional followed the same sidewalk to the park – the wide one so they could all three walk side by side by side – Pricilla, Maude, Ellie. They most certainly would not leave this world without an agreement on the subject of their estates!

They probably loved each other although that would not have jumped out at the casual passer by. Behind their backs, they were referred to as the Bicker Sisters. To have known that would have hurt Pricilla's feelings. Maude would have shrugged it off and forgot it. Ellie, well, Ellie was hard to figure out on such things. She rarely reacted one way or other. She might seethe once behind her locked door but was the master of rosy cheeked deadpan in the halls and on the streets.

The matter came to an impasse and, for several weeks, was not spoken of. Pricilla and Maude treated Ellie with a hollow politeness so sweet that ants would have turned and run. Ellie spoke only on a must speak basis. Bitterness boiled. None of the three was really of a mind to allow this discomforting situation to continue. But how to end it?

One morning over coffee in their small, bright, kitchen with its two windows curtained in blue gingham and their table boasting a matching cloth, Maude broached the topic with Pricilla.

"She's going to leave a permanent blotch on the Bickley name, you know."

Pricilla nodded.

"I do know. Our parents must be so upset."

"They deserve a peaceful eternity, you know."

"Yes. They do deserve that."

"I think we should take steps."

"Steps? What kind of steps?"

"I'm not sure. You're the one with the good ideas, Pricilla."

"Are we talking about the money?"

"Yes, and heading it in the right direction."

"It's Ellie's money. In the end, she can do with hers as she pleases."

"What if it wasn't Ellie's money?"

"I don't understand. It is Ellie's money."

"There are ways so it wouldn't be hers."

"Are you proposing we rob her? That's impossible. She keeps her money in the bank like we do. She never has more than a few dollars on her at any one time. It's a preposterous suggestion!"

"Who would get her money to do with as it should be done with if she left this place?"

"Left 812 Benson Street?"

"No. This big place."

Pricilla put her hand to her mouth.

"Do her in for the inheritance? That's unthinkable. She's a human being."

"Not a very nice one when it comes right down to it. We've spoken about that, you know. So has everybody on the third floor."

"She's our sister."

"Separating herself from us, way down the hall in her fancy apartment? Not sisterly in my book."

Pricilla became quiet, sipping her coffee and cutting off a small piece of sweet roll.

"If we were to work that out, and mind you I'm not agreeing to be a part of it, what would happen to the money?"

"As all of our wills now stand, whatever we have upon our deaths is split among those who remain. Daddy did make us add that clause about treating incarceration like death. His way of keeping us on the straight and narrow even after he's gone, bless his heart."

"You'd get half and I'd get half?" Pricilla asked.

It had been more in the nature of a thoughtful statement than an actual question.

“Yes. Then Ellie’s money would be our money and when we pass on all of it could go to the animal shelter, the way it should.”

“I must admit it is an engaging, even tempting, idea. But to remove her from the living?”

“It’s the only way we can direct her funds appropriately, don’t you see? And with her heart palpitations and diabetes and tender bowel, how long can she really have?”

“If we decided to do that, and mind you I’m still not agreeing to be a part of it, how would we go about it?”

“That part stumps me. Like I said, you’ve always been the one with the clever ideas.”

Pricilla accepted the baton and began thinking it through out loud.

“It would have to be something that could not be connected to us.”

Maude nodded, intending it to encourage Pricilla’s thinking.

“It might involve some everyday thing like food, or soap, or drink.”

Maude got up and refilled her sister’s coffee cup.

“Poison would be the way to go. It’s how all the old ladies do it those mystery magazines.”

“Poison! Sounds right to me.”

“Have to be something that can be easily disguised—taste, color, odor—things like that.”

Maude nodded admiring the creative process that was unfolding there in the kitchen.

“Have to be easy to come by – no prescription or any such thing. Need to be a common, not unusual thing – over the counter stuff. Nothing that would draw any second looks if we were to acquire it.”

Maude finally had a suggestion.

“Rat poison, maybe? I’ve heard rat poison will kill people.”

“Maybe. What color is rat poison? What is its texture?”

“I don’t know but we could go shopping and find out those things.”

“We could. Don’t have to buy it, of course. Just look and see. Like an investigation about it all.”

“Like an investigation. Yes.”

Maude made no attempt to hide her excitement at the prospect. Pricilla became more seriously calculating, weighing the risks against the potential spoils.

The cat jumped up on the table. Maude pushed it off and scolded it.

“Why do you always do that?” Pricilla said, clearly upset at her sister. “He just wanted a few licks of cream. Sometimes I think you don’t really like, Mr. Smudge.”

Maude crossed her arms and mounted her greatly over-stated sigh.

Pricilla turned in her chair and offered her dramatically measured nods.

Mr. Smudge lit on his feet and hissed in Maude’s direction. Pricilla took note with some obvious, raised eyebrow, pleasure.

A Pricilla/Maud snit lasted fifteen minutes—no more, no less. It always had. When Maude would get a date with the boy Pricilla had her eye on the snit would last fifteen minutes. When Maude was elected Prom Queen over Pricilla, the snit lasted fifteen minutes. It was just how snits were between them.

A half hour later they were on their way to the hardware store. Pricilla’s mind had been busy filling in and extending some of the necessary details in the plan. They were soon at the store looking over the extensive line of poisons.

“Morning, Maude, Pricilla. May I help you ladies,” the young man in the blue vest asked.

Pricilla answered.

“Our sister, Ellie, complains that she is having a mouse problem. Since we were going out, she asked us to pick up something to take back to her.”

“Got several kinds. This one supposedly sends them outside in search of water so they don’t die inside. This one kills them outright—I mean bingo—they eat it, they die—but you may have to put up with some odor for a couple of days if they don’t die out in the open where you can find them. We have air freshener, too, if you decide to go that direction. Then there are the traps so you can catch them and then set them free out in the country.”

“Let me see the bingo kind, if you please,” Pricilla said donning her gold, wire rimmed, half-lens, glasses.

He handed her a box and she began to study the label. Maude tried to read over her shoulder but soon gave up. The young man excused himself and went to assist another customer.

“It has a huge poison warning down here,” she said pointing, “So it really must be lethal to people. Do you think we can open it and see what it looks like?”

Pricilla turned the box one way and then another.

“I have this stickpin,” Maude said reaching into her purse. She handed it to Pricilla who, with repeated pricks, soon had a small hole carved through the cardboard. She took her handkerchief from her pocket and shook some of the contents onto it. It was fine, white, granules looking very much like salt or sugar.

“This should do quite nicely,” Pricilla said lifting her hanky to her face and sniffing. There was nothing to sniff. “Yes. This should do quite nicely, indeed. Put this box back and get one that hasn’t been damaged. The idea of a store putting damaged goods like that on the shelves!”

“And poison to boot!”

It was cause for a guarded, quiet, head together, snicker between them.

They were soon back at their apartment both more than a little surprised they had actually made the purchase. They took seats beside each other on the couch. The box was in Pricilla’s lap. She spoke as she picked up the magnifying glass and began scanning the instructions and warnings listed there in fine print.

“It would blend in well with sugar or salt. It says just one taste will kill a rat. I assume it might take what, half a teaspoon, then, to do in a person?”

“I would think half a teaspoon would be enough.”

“Nobody uses a half a teaspoon of salt at one time,” Pricilla said thinking aloud.

“But they do, sugar. Ellie uses two teaspoons in her tea, you know. It’s turning her teeth green. Have you noticed? I keep after her to return to coffee.”

Pricilla nodded, less concerned with Ellie’s dental

hygiene or future drinking habits than the proposal at hand.

"It is for the poor, homeless, little animals, you know," Pricilla said struggling to smooth her wrinkled brow and coerce herself into a final commitment.

"Yes. For the poor, homeless, little animals that will be put down if we don't help them," Maude added hoping that morbid reminder might swing her sister's vote squarely in the right direction.

"And for Mother and Father, and the family name, of course," Pricilla went on.

"Of course. The Bickley family name."

"Now we need a plan," Pricilla said. "I think better while I'm drinking coffee."

They moved to the kitchen and while Pricilla took a seat at the table and began thinking, Maude made coffee. Mr. Smudge jumped into Pricilla's lap and was soon purring contentedly to the gentle strokes from his favorite person. When Maude brought the coffee, he hissed. Maude put on a frown delivering the steaming cup well away from her sister's lap. Pricilla seemed oblivious to what had become, over the years, a rather routine standoff between the two old adversaries.

As if suddenly engaging that comic strip light bulb above her head, Pricilla sat back and smiled to herself, turning it off quickly when she realized Maude was watching her.

"What?" Maude asked. "You think of something?"

"Sugar, like you said. We just have to get it into Ellie's sugar bowl. You will distract her and I will deliver the poison to her apartment."

"When shall we do this?" Maude asked.

"I say we get it over with. No telling when Ellie might change that will, making the dung heap her beneficiary."

Maude nodded.

"So, what's next?"

"In a few minutes, you will phone Ellie and ask if you can borrow two cups of sugar. You'll be in the middle of mixing up a coffee cake and you'll ask her if she will bring it down the hall to our apartment since you're up to your elbows in batter. I'll go visit the Crumps across the hall from her door. When I hear her leave I'll go in and stir the poison into her

sugar bowl then be out and into Mrs. Watson's apartment, across the hall here, before she starts back. You have to keep her in here three minutes. That will give me time."

"But Ellie will be watching her soaps. She will be furious if I interrupt her, now," Maude said.

"I really think the sooner the better," Pricilla insisted as if ignoring the clearly predictable ramifications.

"Let me get the coffee cake started, then, so it will all seem natural and legit."

"Legit?"

"From those mystery magazines."

Pricilla nodded.

At the appropriate moment, Pricilla left to visit with Dan and Doris Crump, both of whom were much the sisters' senior. She carried the poison in the carefully closed brown paper sack from the hardware store, its red lettering carefully hidden, facing her body.

"Come in Pricilla," Dan said.

She entered and stood in the open doorway.

"It's been a long time since you've come to visit. Won't you come in and sit – stay a spell?"

"I can't stay. Only have a minute. I just really dropped by to make sure you were here. Maude is making coffeecake and I thought I'd drop a couple of slices by for you, later on."

"How thoughtful. Yes. We'll be here. Seldom get out anymore."

"I'll have to come by and we'll go down to the park together. It's a shame for you not to be enjoying the beautiful weather we're having. Think about it. We'll make plans when I bring the treat."

The door to Ellie's apartment opened behind her. Pricilla turned around to greet her sister. The Crumps joined her by the door.

"What you got there?" Pricilla asked.

"Maude needs sugar."

It had been a terse, teeth clinched response. Still she expanded on it.

"It's just like her to start a baking project and not have enough of something important. She has done this to me all her life and I'm sick and tired of it! And in the middle of my

programs. I declare!”

Ellie nodded – forcedly polite – at the Crumps. Her irritation about having been interrupted from her programs, however, was undisguised. She moved on down the hall shaking her head and muttering – not at all like her usual public deportment.

“Later, then,” Pricilla said to the old couple.

She pulled the door closed and hurried across the hall and into her sister’s apartment. Pricilla had always admired the place. It had one grand bedroom and a large, pleasingly shaped, rectangular living room. It was a corner apartment with many windows providing cross ventilation. The walls were graced with white wainscoting up three feet and beautiful wallpaper above. Each room had a central light fixture and a baseboard outlet on every wall. Pricilla felt a momentary blush of jealousy. Living alone clearly offered some advantages, she thought, looking around.

Her deed was soon done. She placed the empty sack with the red letters in the trash can. She surveyed the hall. It was empty. She hurried to Mrs. Watson’s door. It was just kitty-cornered across from her apartment. She knocked and was let in. That time she closed the door behind her.

The conversation was pretty much a duplicate of the one she had with the Crumps. After she heard the door open and close out in the hall, and then the second, more distant door open and close, she excused herself and returned to her apartment.

An hour later the coffee cake was finished, cut, and still warm pieces delivered to most appreciative neighbors. Later in the week the promised walks in the park were enjoyed. Pricilla’s life suddenly seemed very good – well except for the loss of her sister. It immediately became the source of unending sympathy and condolence. Food was brought and old friends dropped by.

* * *

The wake was most satisfactory. Pricilla had been concerned that the living room might be too small for the casket and all the visitors. No more than a dozen folks dropped by – the Crumps, Mrs. Watson, and a few others – so crowding had not been a problem. The one mild unpleasantry

came when two policemen lingered in the hall just outside the open door rehashing the arrest they had just helped make in the case.

“Imagine an old woman that age killing her sister? According to eyewitnesses the last time they saw Ellie she was taking sugar down the hall and into her sisters’ apartment, here. She appeared very angry about something. It was just hours before the death occurred. That petty well cinches it, I think. It apparently only took one teaspoon of the poisoned sugar in the beverage. It was identical to a freshly opened box of rat poison found under the perpetrator’s sink. The old gal will spend the rest of her days in prison, you can bet on that.”

Pricilla closed the door and smiled. She picked up Mr. Smudge and together they took one final look down into the coffin before closing it for the last time.

“Don’t be concerned about me, sister. I’m suddenly doing very well, financially. Sleep peacefully through eternity, Maude. Sleep peacefully.”

STORY THREE
The Secret
By Tom Gnagey

Caleb Covington was a very rich old man. Caleb Covington was a very sick old man. Caleb Covington was not a very nice old man. Caleb Covington had a secret.

“Good morning Mr. C.”

It had been the cheery greeting offered by 19-year-old Johnny Smith as he adjusted the curtains in Caleb’s bedroom to let in the morning sun.

Johnny had – how shall it be put – been associated with Caleb since he was twelve. He was a live-in associate who ran errands, kept Caleb on schedule, readied his clothes, fluffed his pillows, drew his bath, and so on. The role of a valet might best describe the services he performed even though he was still a relative youngster.

Johnny Smith was a very nice young man. Johnny Smith was a very poor young man. Johnny Smith shared Caleb’s secret.

Johnny Smith was born Juan Herrera. He lived with his family in central Mexico until his twelfth birthday. On that day he was kidnapped by human traffickers. There were seven boys taken from the area that month. Some were older. Some were younger. None had agreed to the long, hot, terrifying, trip north of the border.

At some point after entering the United States they were sold individually at very private auctions. Caleb purchased Juan – Johnny. He brought him to his isolated villa among the mesas and canyons in the Southwest. His thinking

was that a boy, lifted from poverty, educated, and given a good life, would be appreciative and could be counted on to take good care of his benefactor – his only source of support in the world. It was their secret. It seemed to have worked well.

Johnny learned to tolerate Caleb's erratic temper and acerbic personality. He was appreciative of what Caleb had offered him – a luxurious place to live, an education, and a generous allowance of \$100 a month. He felt lucky. He felt rich. His father had never earned that much money in one month during his entire life.

On Johnny's thirteenth birthday, Caleb received a letter. It stated that the sender knew of the abduction, of the boy's illegal status, and of Caleb's fully illegal role in it all. It could have been from the trafficker himself. It had been known to happen. He said he could offer irrefutable proof of Caleb's illicit involvement. The author of the letter demanded a hefty twenty thousand dollars a month for his silence. For a man of Caleb's great wealth, the amount was rather insignificant. He agreed – the money for silence.

The first Monday morning of every month, Johnny delivered the money on foot in a back pack filled with a random selection of various sized bills. No one knew where the delivery was to be made until Johnny was well away from the villa. The instructions were that he would receive a call on his cell phone. The route and destination would be different each time. It was all well designed to keep him out of sight in case Caleb tried to have the boy followed in an attempt to nab the blackmailer. The backpack would be placed as directed and Johnny would return home. It typically took most of the day. It had been going on that way for years.

Johnny often wished for friends. He was tutored alone at the villa. He often wished for time off. When Caleb was awake, Johnny was expected to be at his side. He often wished for someone with whom he could speak again in Spanish. Only English was allowed at the villa.

What had seemed like a generally good life as a boy gradually became like a prison. The secret maintained his silence, his presence, and his obligatory devotion to the old man. Despite his circumstances, Johnny never forgot about

his family in Mexico. During the first few years he often cried himself to sleep thinking about them, wondering about them, and wanting to share the important moments of his life with them. He had considered running back to them but Caleb had made it clear that if he went missing even overnight his family would be harmed. Between that threat and the secret, Johnny felt he had no alternative but to stay. Surely the sick old man would soon die. Then he would be free. Every night as he lay in bed he delighted in his plans for that day. He hated Caleb but knew better than to show it.

And so it was, that every morning he dispatched his cheery greeting and got on with the unchanging routine of the day. Johnny had seen Caleb's will. His name appeared nowhere in it. Although he couldn't understand that, he was not really surprised. Johnny was like a piece of livestock to the old man. That was made plain every day of his life. It had never entered the old man's thinking that Johnny might deserve some portion of what he would leave behind, and because of Johnny's illegal status the young man would never be able to pursue it through the courts.

Fortunately, the young man's early years had been spent within the embrace of his loving family who taught him his true value as a human being. It was a lesson well learned and Caleb had not broken his spirit. The boy could often even smile to himself as he kowtowed to the man's angry demands and cutting remarks.

Johnny repeated his greeting once more after the curtains were pulled back and tied in place.

"Good morning Mr. C!"

Mr. C. did not respond. Mr. C. did not draw a breath. Mr. C. was dead.

* * *

There was a mariachi band from Los Rios and wonderful, long unsampled food Juan's mother and sisters had prepared for his homecoming. They danced. They sang. They talked until the first rays of morning appeared over the mountains. His brothers and sisters marveled at the fine clothes he wore and at the lavish gifts he brought to them. Clearly his life north of the border had been grand.

Juan smiled, nodded, and left it at that.

“Si, mucho grande!”

Juan had a secret. He would only ever share it with his father. A bank book.

“But how did you earn so much money in so few years, my son?”

“Figure it out, papa. Six years, times twelve months a year, times twenty thousand dollars a month!”

STORY FOUR
Final Preparations
By Tom Gnagey

Alfred and Winston had once been friends, at least that was the lingering rumor there at the Green Hills Home for the Aged – that’s ag-ed fulfilling two syllables of pronunciation. It was a source of immense, ongoing, irritation among the residents – the ag-ed residents – when outsiders insisted on collapsing it into one syllable. It was the kind of thing the residents fumed about, there being nothing more important to maintain their attention – well, nothing until the outlandish competition began.

Alfred and Winston had not been friends for many years. The problem grew up around caskets, but the story will get to that. They lived directly across the hall from each other and each time they met in the hall the bickering continued. Alfred had always had a competitive bent. As boys, when he would beat Winston in a race or get a better grade, or later on, date the prettiest girls, he would relentlessly rub it in to Winston. Alfred was handsome and Winston plain. Alfred was rich and Winston was poor. Alfred was athletic and academically gifted and Winston was not.

On the other side of the coin, however, Winston was kind and gentle and caring and helpful. Alfred was not. Alfred had to win or be the best or what have you. Winston was satisfied with doing as well as he could do. He was brighter than many gave him credit for, but he had found that demonstrating that too often meant there were uncomfortably high expectations from his parents and teachers. He happily

restrained from excelling at anything.

Although there had always been that one-sided competitive element in their relationship, Winston and Alfred considered each other friends. During their adult years, they followed different paths and only reunited a few years before when, in their late eighties, they checked into the Green Hills Home for the Aged. At first there was some amount of civility between them but then there came the casket thing.

Winston had brought up the topic of caskets in an offhand way. Alfred, for some reason took it as a challenge and purchased a casket and set it up in his room. He bragged about how expensive it was and how he was going into eternity in style, the way a man of his distinction deserved. Winston then purchased one for himself – a cut above the one his former friend had selected. It was time, he believed, to do some ‘even getting’ with the less than likeable, Alfred.

“Mine has chrome hand rails,” Winston said. “Yours only has aluminum.”

“Did it come that way?”

“No. I had them exchanged for the chrome.”

“Where did you get the chrome?”

“Eternal Sleep Casket Company, on Second Avenue.”

Several days later workman arrived to install new hand rails for Alfred. They were silver plated.

“I paid fifteen thousand dollars for them. Try and beat that,” Alfred said pointing through the open door at his trophy.

A week passed and Winston had a delivery. He was mechanically inclined and seemed to know how to do such things. He installed the gold-plated hand rails himself. Alfred launched a pout and made another call. Soon his handles were platinum plated.

There being no style of rails that could outdo platinum, Winston ordered silver hinges for his casket. That was met by gold hinges for Alfred, again, the best that were available.

Winston replaced the standard white lining with genuine silk.

Joseph had a special lining created out of spun silver.

Winston replaced the bronze feet on his casket with solid brass.

Joseph topped that with special order platinum plated

feet to match the rails. By that time, Joseph had spent nearly \$250,000 on replacement parts – Winston far less.

One morning Joseph woke up dead – well, you understand.

He looked quite nice at the visitation surrounded as he was by what had become, perhaps, the finest casket since the Egyptian Pharaohs. There may have even been the slightest hint of a smile lingering on his face.

Winston moved to extend his condolences to Alfred's daughter. They hadn't seen each other for more than fifty years.

"And what line of work have you been in all your life?" She asked.

"I own the Eternal Sleep Casket Company down on Second Avenue."

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STORY FIVE
A Convoluted Tale of Curious Comeuppance
By Tom Gnagey
(You may want to take notes!)

Disheveled and bespectacled Oliver Trumble – Oliver, never Ollie – was a gaunt, pallid, mousey man, lacking in scruples and moral fiber. He was long of nose and narrow of eyes, and although a compulsively effective accountant, came up sorely wanting in personality and appearance. For most of the 27 years he had sat in his cubicle at Higgins Accounting punching the calculator, pouring over the tapes, and balancing ledgers, he had seethed inside about the lowly station life had dealt him and the lack of deserved consideration and appreciation it garnered. The dry, thin lips, which defined his mouth, never really configured a smile – they expressed no emotion at all. Minute after minute, year after year, he concealed his all-consuming discontent by cozying up to his ever-maturing malevolent fantasies. One day the moment would be his. He envisioned it as a ruthless three headed, fire breathing, dragon, inflicting revenge, exacting his due and attaining success.

Oliver Trumble was a careful man, brighter than most and cleverer, he figured, than those against whom he was planning his assault. At the end of his finger numbing eight hours on the last day of July he tore the page from his calendar, folded it carefully, and slipped it into his wallet. It was the symbol of his nearly life-long effort. The time had come.

Each month during the previous twenty years he had

clandestinely shifted minuscule amounts of money from three dozen firms into a hidden holding account, doing so in such a manner as to neither add to nor subtract from the crucial ending company balances. He adjusted invoices and bills of lading as only an accounting genius could do. By appropriating a tiny amount from each company during each of those 240 months, a sizeable sum had been siphoned off into the holding account. At random intervals, the accumulated funds were transferred to a personal, numbered, internet based bank account, which he created and managed – the name on the account was Cyrus Wisters.

Cyrus (called Whiskers, locally) was actually a longtime fixture in the homeless community on the lower south side of the city near the wharfs. The man was a loner, seemingly content with his lot and, as homeless folks go, did well enough to survive in style. From abandoned wooden doors and plastic tarps he had assembled his own tiny but sturdy and secure hut atop an abandoned warehouse. Years before, Oliver had all quite deliberately made the man's acquaintance at a soup kitchen. To say he had befriended the old man would stretch the truth but they had spoken often enough for Oliver to obtain the information essential to his plan – social security number, place and date of birth, parents names, and so on. With those he could procure a duplicate Social Security card, birth certificate, wedding license, and school transcript. Using those fully sufficient identification documents Oliver obtained an official state identification card and was able to pass as Cyrus Wisters. He had selected Whiskers for several reasons, some of which revolved around their similar build and hair and eye color. Bottom line, the bank account was legitimate and easily accessible, although Whiskers was unaware of its existence.

Oliver was devoid of conscience so easily moved to do whatever was necessary to achieve his ends, and 'whatever was necessary' had been carefully planned. With the last of the accumulated money extracted from the accounting firm's funds, Oliver resigned after securing a letter of recommendation for him to ostensibly carry with him to a similar firm several states to the south. It made his departure seem legitimate. He moved from his long-time apartment to

another and then to a third to make his whereabouts nearly impossible to trace. The final place was rented in the name of Cyrus Wisters – his new identity.

Late one night he visited Cyrus at his hut and, in a relatively painless fashion, hastened the old man's passing. His plan, which had included a weighted body bag to be sunk some fifty miles out at sea, was interrupted by someone approaching the hut. Oliver dragged the body away from the structure across the dimly lit roof and into the dark shadows. He removed himself from the scene by climbing down the iron ladder on the opposite end of the old three story, brick, building. His plan was to come back later and dispose of the evidence so the death would go unnoticed and he, as Cyrus Wisters, could live on unquestioned.

When he returned later that night the body was gone. During the next several weeks Oliver studied the obituaries and missing person listings at the nearby police station. Nothing surfaced about Cyrus. As the months passed, Oliver (as Cyrus) settled comfortably into his new identity in his recently acquired luxury condo on the upper west side.

Years passed and through wise investments Oliver's fortune multiplied. He lived comfortably. If he saw a downside to any of it, it was that he had done such a good job that his theft from Higgins was never discovered. The full savoring of the intended act of revenge was therefore never fully realized. He learned to live with it.

As was indicated, Oliver was a careful man. He maintained a rented room in a poor area of the old part of the city. It was his safety net in case his new life ever began to unravel. So long as he paid the rent on time, no identification was required and no attempt was made to verify the clearly assumed name he used – John Smith.

Then, eight years into his new life Oliver (at that point, Cyrus, for all intents and purposes) was confronted by an unnerving headline: Cyrus Wisters sought in the murder of Jason Billingsly. Although the physical description only faintly resembled Oliver, the background information given for Cyrus did – birth date, hometown, parents, deceased wife's name, and right on down the list. Billingsly had been a well to do advertising executive and lost his life during a burglary, which

netted the thief several hundred thousand dollars in cash and jewelry from the man's safe. The man known as Cyrus Wisters had been positively identified by a maid hiding in a closet with louvered doors.

(Later, it would become apparent that the jewelry had been converted into cash and all the money had been deposited in an upstate bank account bearing the name Cyrus Wisters.)

Oliver relocated to the rental room while he looked into the matter. He followed the news stories closely.

During the next several weeks' numerous facts came to light. An artist's sketch of the fugitive was printed in the paper. Oliver recognized the man. He had been hanging around outside the soup kitchen at about the time Cyrus was killed. It was Oliver's suspicious nature about the man's standoffishness that made him take note. The man was actually unremarkable in every way except it was reported in the paper that he walked with a limp, dragging his right leg. It sparked a memory. The person who approached the hut and forced Oliver to retreat the night he killed Cyrus, had dragged a leg. He remembered the sound clearly. Thump, scrape. Thump, scrape. What could it all mean?

Upon reflection, there seemed to be but one reasonable explanation. That limping man had also assumed Cyrus Wisters' identity. He could have taken the old man's wallet off the body and found other documents as he rummaged through the hut looking for something of value. He could have disposed of the body before Oliver returned. In the beginning, he had looked upon that as a favor. Now it seemed to be coming back to haunt him.

There had been another development during the previous weeks. More often than could be coincidence, a man in a long, gray, overcoat and fedora appeared to be following Oliver when he left his room. The man kept his collar high, hiding his face. He showed up at the grocery. He showed up at the restaurant where Oliver ate breakfast. He showed up at the internet café from which Oliver conducted his several banking and financial activities. He even appeared outside the library as Oliver exited it with reading material.

If he were a detective, he was certainly inept in so far

as keeping out of sight was concerned. Perhaps, in fact, that was his plan – to let himself be seen thereby panicking Oliver into making some sort of misstep. Clever! Oliver would not panic but he did on occasion outwit the man so he was able to reverse the situation and follow him, instead. ‘Coat Man’ never went close to a police station. Again, reasonable if he suspected he was being tailed. He followed no pattern at all, seemingly content to just wander as if hoping to run onto Oliver (Cyrus) again. It developed into an unsettling situation. Oliver contemplated a move but about that time the long-coated stranger dropped out of sight. A week passed and then two. Perhaps it had been just a coincidence – a man who frequented the same kinds of places as Oliver. It made sense and Oliver convinced himself of the fact.

A new sketch was published. It had changed some – the nose was longer and the eyes set closer. The cheeks were sunken, the skin pale, and the hair unkempt. It looked a lot more like Oliver. But how could that be? It may have reflected growing confusion in the memory of the witness. Perhaps the authorities had located the condo he had purchased in the name of Cyrus Wisters and obtained his description from neighbors. Perhaps it was a combination rendering from both descriptions. Perhaps! Perhaps! Still, Oliver did not panic.

In what he characterized as a stroke of genius, a new plan began to emerge. Since, as it had turned out that he was not wanted for any crime as Oliver Trumble – his actual identity – why not return to using it. He could sell his condo, keep the money safe in his current Cyrus bank account for a time, then eventually buy a new condo in Oliver’s name in a different section of the city, and get on with his life again as Oliver Trumble. His version of Cyrus Wisters could just evaporate. After much thinking and re-thinking, that was the plan which he decided to follow. He rather enjoyed the adventure of his imaginary game of cat and mouse with the authorities. His confidence grew. How delightfully correct – to hide by reassuming his actual identity.

Oliver resurrected his Driver’s license and identity documents. True to his plan, he sold the condo and deposited the money in his Cyrus account for safekeeping. He let the

first rental room go and arranged for another, which he assumed would be a temporary arrangement where he could just lay low for a few months. When he read on page ten of section five of the local paper that a body identified as that of a homeless man, Cyrus Wisters, had washed ashore down at the wharfs, he breathed a sigh of relief. It appeared he had fallen off a pier and drowned while intoxicated. The second bogus Cyrus was officially dead, the Billingsly murder/theft case thereby closed, and Oliver reemerged in all his legal glory.

There remained a mystery of sorts. Another article – summarizing the case cleanup operation – stated that all quite mysteriously two days after the body had been discovered at the wharfs, Cyrus – dead Cyrus – appeared at an upstate bank and cashed out to the tune of well over \$350,000. It all took place before the authorities had located the account, and, later, the man who withdrew the money was nowhere to be found.

Odd as that seemed, Oliver let it be. He suddenly had far bigger things to be concerned about. The police arrived at his door.

“Oliver Trumble, you are under arrest for the murder of Jack Cooper.”

Jack Cooper? Who was Jack Cooper?

It made no sense. Regardless, he soon found himself in jail. No prints or DNA were associated with the crime scene. There were two somewhat shaky eye witnesses who, in the end, identified Oliver both by sight and by the fact that Cooper had pleaded with him by name – Oliver Trumble – the moment before they saw him shot and killed.

Being a loner, Oliver could provide no alibi for the time of the murder. Or could he? The man in the long, gray coat had been present in the park that day at the time of the murder while Oliver was there reading on a park bench. He had even followed Oliver later on his walk up and down Broadway after he had left the park. The police located a man fitting the description but he denied having seen Oliver that day or any other.

Two months later Oliver went on trial, was convicted, and sentenced to death. The case became muddied when on

the day of sentencing a second man named Oliver Trumble (according to his identification), was found viciously murdered in mid-town. The murderer was cornered almost immediately. A tip had led the police to the apartment of Bill Cooper, brother of Jack who the original Oliver had been convicted of killing. With no way out, Bill tuned the gun on himself, any evidence of guilt dying with him.

It was clear to Oliver – and only Oliver – what had happened. After Oliver's calculated disappearance with the embezzled funds, the dead man, also came to be known as Oliver Trumble by assuming his identity (for what reason is really not relevant). The surviving Cooper brother clearly had evidence that Oliver the imposter was the actual killer and figured that with one Oliver already convicted of the crime the real killer would remain free. Therefore, brother Bill Cooper ignored the possibility of pursuing it through the court, hunted down the responsible Oliver Trumble, and killed him in a violent, revenge driven, rage.

On the way out of court – after a hearing for a retrial, which had been denied – Oliver's eyes for the first time met those of the man in the long, gray coat. He immediately knew the man. But how could it be? The old man winked at him, smiled, turned, and left. Had he been followed it would have been discovered that he was, in fact, the original Cyrus Wisters, who had clearly recovered from both the murder attempt and the effort to dispose of his body in the bay. He walked across the street to the bank where he transferred nearly one million dollars from 'his' on-line bank account, which he had discovered by watching Oliver in the internet-café. He also deposited nearly \$350,000 dollars, unknown to the bank as the take from the Billingsly robbery or as that recently withdrawn from the upstate account all quite handily established in his name.

Truth be known, Cyrus 'Whiskers' Wisters was the assumed identity of Thomas Clark who had himself disappeared decades earlier in an effort to escape prosecution for a crime for which he had been framed. That bank account would soon be closed in favor a new one in the name of Thomas Clark and, as has been said so many times before, he lived happily ever after! What a convoluted tale of curious

comeuppance.

STORY SIX
Maggie Brown's Dubious Arrangement
by Tom Gnagey

Maggie Brown was single. Maggie Brown lived alone. Maggie Brown was 71. Maggie Brown had the first serious suitor of her life.

“Now, Maggie, the other girls and I have decided we need to just come right out and say it.”

It was Maggie's neighbor, Sophia, who lived across the hall in the aging brick apartment building where a dozen older ladies made their homes.

“We think you better proceed with caution where Wilfred is concerned.”

“Wilfred P. Bushman,” Maggie offered in a slow, staccato, manner as if to boost his stock by name alone.

“Anyway, just be sure he's not a fortune hunter who will take you for all you're worth.”

“All that I'm worth?”

Maggie chuckled.

“You know we aren't busy bodies and we're just looking out for your welfare, Maggie, but we put our heads together and figured with what you made from the sale of your home, your pension from the Water Department, and your social security, you must be worth at least \$150,000. That's a lot to protect, Maggie, and a pretty good score for a con man.”

“Score for a con man? You been reading those paper back detective books again? Wilfred P. Bushman is a gentleman in every sense of the word. He has more money

than he knows what to do with. He has no need for whatever money I may have. You girls stop worrying about me. I wasn't born yesterday. I can take care of myself."

Sophia had given it her best shot but she had known going in that Maggie was stubborn and single minded about such things. She left Maggie's apartment hands in the air, mumbling to herself, on her way to report her failure to the other girls. Maggie Brown was perhaps the only one who didn't see Maggie Brown as being incredibly gullible.

Maggie and Wilfred had been seeing each other for several months. In truth, although he dressed well, drove a nice car, and brought her expensive gifts, Maggie could only guess about his finances – other than, of course, that he was obviously rather well off.

That evening Wilfred came for dinner.

"Maggie, I've been thinking that it makes no sense for us to live apart. We enjoy each other's company, we have lots of interests in common, and we get along splendidly."

"Are you suggesting we live together in sin?"

"Oh, no, Maggie."

He removed a small, black velvet, box from his pocket. He opened it revealing a diamond ring.

"Will you marry me, love of my life, Maggie Brown?"

"I don't know. I haven't been thinking along those lines. When?"

"As soon as possible. How about Friday? That will give us four days to make whatever preparations we need to make."

"Oh, my! Only four days? I don't know?"

"The way I see it," Wilfred went on in what could have been interpreted as a well-rehearsed litany, "My friend Judge Wilson can perform the ceremony in his chambers. You can leave the apartment and move into my big house – it's so empty with just me there. We can set up a joint bank account and make reservations for a honeymoon in Miami Beach. What else is there to do?"

"You do seem to have things well thought through, Wilfred. It does make sense, I guess. I'm not usually this impulsive but yes, I'll marry you, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

“Wonderful!” You've made me extremely happy, Maggie.”

During dinner, they talked through their plans. Gullible Maggie, always practical in her approach to things, suggested that since they would be leaving for Miami immediately after the wedding it would make sense to make the arrangements at the bank beforehand. Clearly surprised at the suggestion, Wilfred agreed.

For personal and legal reasons, Maggie had decided to keep her own name. She made the case to Wilfred that she wanted to avoid the hassle of changing names on credit cards, social security, her pension, and the small trust fund her parents had set up for her years before. Wilfred understood and offered no objections.

The melding of their assets went this way: Maggie transferred a total of \$175,000 and Wilfred \$325,000. It was an 'either or' account as was the custom of the day.

Afterward, they had lunch at a nice restaurant. Wilfred then dropped Maggie off at her apartment. According to the plan Wilfred would pick her up at one o'clock the next afternoon – Friday – when they would drive to the courthouse for the ceremony and then on to the airport. They needed to work around Wilfred's early Friday morning business meeting at which he said he needed to tie up several loose ends before leaving town. Beyond that, the specifics of the meeting had never been clearly stated.

Not according to the plan, at 9:00 a.m. on Friday, Wilfred appeared at the bank. He requested that the account be closed and asked for the funds in cash. He carried an empty brief case in one hand and a single ticket to Canada in the other. The teller left, returning after a few minutes with the branch manager.

“Mr. Bushman. There seems to be some confusion. At eight o'clock this morning Maggie Brown closed the account. As I recall she said she was beginning an extended European vacation.”

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STORY SEVEN
Blackmail and Juleps
By Tom Gnagey

As sisters go – sisters in their late seventies – Carrie and Millie were quite close. They shared an apartment. They shared a budget. They shared a car. They also shared Agatha, the third and oldest of the sisters. That was more than they wanted to share.

Agatha had treated them badly when they were youngsters. She repeatedly arranged things so one or both of them would be blamed for all occurrences that went awry around the big house in which they had grown up. She would tear Carrie's dress and see that Millie was punished. She would take Millie's homework and see that it turned up in Carrie's sweater drawer. She would break a window and then swear she saw her sisters do the deed. When she babysat them, some disaster always took place and each time her report pointed at one or both of the younger girls. Since she had effectively convinced their parents that Carrie and Millie were habitual liars, they had no way of mounting a constructive defense.

Needless to say, Carrie and Millie did not share an apartment with Agatha. They did not share a budget with Agatha. They did not share a car or anything else with Agatha, who, last time they knew, lived somewhere across the city by herself.

Their parents had left a substantial inheritance after their early deaths. It had been split equally among the sisters. Life for Carrie and Millie was going well. They had no idea

how it was going for Agatha and had no interest in knowing. Nothing about her life was of interest to them – not until that Monday morning in early December.

“Mail, Carrie,” Millie called as she entered their apartment from her walk down to the mailbox in the front entry hall.

It was a compact, two story, white frame, building with four apartments on each floor. The custodian lived in the basement. Carrie and Millie’s four rooms were on the second floor at the rear right as you faced the hall from the front door. It had been their home for over forty years.

Millie took a seat at her place at the kitchen table and sorted the letters while Carrie poured coffee. It was their routine six days a week. Sunday, of course, it was Church. Carrie sat and creamed her cup then handed the little pitcher across the table to her sister. Millie handed Carrie her mail as if in exchange. There were four pieces each that morning; mostly similar. One advertisement from the carwash down the street, one credit card application, and a personal letter each from two of the few people with whom they still corresponded. It wasn’t that they didn’t enjoy letter writing. It was that most of their friends were dead.

“Look here,” Millie said. “Do you recognize this?”

She passed a long, white, envelope across the table. It bore no return address.

“No, but I received one just like it.”

She handed hers to Carrie. They each carefully scrutinized the other’s fully unremarkable envelope before returning them.

“What could they be?” Carrie asked.

“I don’t know what they could be.”

“They’re squishy”

“Soft.”

“Spongy.”

“Springy.”

“I suppose we could open them and find out.”

“I suppose we could. Let’s!”

The envelopes were opened.

“Oh, my!”? Carrie said her hand immediately going to her heart.

“Oh, my, indeed!” Millie said, her hand covering her mouth. “Mine has money in it.”

“So does mine.”

“We should count it,” Millie said.

Carrie nodded.

They counted.

“There are ten, one hundred dollar bills in my envelope.”

“There are ten, one hundred dollar bills in my envelope.”

“Does yours indicate who it’s from?”

“No. Does yours?”

“No.”

They sat in silence for some time, sipping coffee and munching hot buttered, raisin toast. Their brows remained drawn.

“A thousand dollars is a lot of money,” Carrie said.

“Two thousand dollars is a whole lot of money,” Millie said.

“What shall we do with it?”

“We could put it in the bank.”

“We could,” Carrie said. “What if it’s some kind of mistake? Sent to us in error. If we put it in the bank, then we would just have to take it out when that was discovered. We might even be liable for stealing it if we banked it into our account and it was never intended for us.”

“We could hide it here and wait and see if anybody comes to claim it from us,” Millie said.

“Where can we hide it?”

“Let’s search the apartment for a safe place.”

With coffee cups in hand, they examined each room with great care and interest as if it were fully foreign territory.

“The wide based indigo vase in the living room seems best,” Millie said at last.

“Yes. It’s deep and wide and the artificial flowers will keep the envelopes hidden from the most prying set of eyes.”

To keep their intentions above suspicion they placed the money, still in the envelopes, into the vase and replaced the flowers above it. The wide base provided more than sufficient room.

Still, in case it had not been a mistake, and they agreed that it being a mistake was indeed highly unlikely, the way it was addressed to them and all, the source remained a mystery that began eating at them.

They returned to the kitchen table. Carrie warmed up their coffees.

"If it is intended for us, and it probably is, you know what I'm wondering, Carrie."

"I do know what you're wondering, Millie. Did Agatha also receive such a letter?"

There was no need for Millie to verify that Carrie was correct. Millie was fifteen months Carrie's senior and they had been each other's constant companions since childhood. They thought as one mind. It was the first time they had thought about Agatha in years. They assumed she still lived in the same place.

"I suppose she is still alive," Millie said. "Surely the authorities would have found us and informed us if she had passed on."

"Surely they would have."

"Of course, if she died just recently, this could be our inheritance, I suppose. Not much considering the amount of money still remaining in our savings accounts."

"I think there would have been a document if that's what it is, don't you?" Carrie said. "Lawyers always like to send documents."

"It probably would have come registered mail if that's where it came from."

"We could look her up in the phone book and see if she's listed," Carrie suggested.

"If she just died her name might still be in the book."

"Right. We could call the operator and ask if she still has a number."

"We will need her address to do that, I think."

"We can get that from the phone book, unless her new address starts with H and ends in e-l-l," Millie suggested.

It was worth a prolonged snicker between them.

A few minutes later the operator verified that Agatha seemed to still be among the living. At that, the devil would most certainly offer up a sigh of relief. Before sunset on the

day of her arrival in the devil's domain, Agatha would have changed his blazing red color scheme to subdued blue and white gingham, demanded that he shave his goatee, and insisted on, and received, air conditioning.

That was not merely wishful thinking. The sisters knew Agatha's appalling secret!

"How can we find out if Agatha received an envelope like ours?" Carrie asked.

"Do we need to know?" Millie asked.

They sat in silence for some time mulling it over.

"I suppose we can live without knowing," Carrie said.

"Why don't we decide right now to wait one month before we speak of the money again," Millie said. "At that time, we can make decisions about it."

January fifth, then. "I'll mark it on the calendar," Carrie said getting up and walking to where it hung on the broom closet door. She made the mark of a large dollar sign, not wanting to write something that might later be construed as incriminating.

Millie nodded her approval of Carrie's cunning in the matter.

During that month, they stuck to their word and didn't discuss the money between them though they each spent considerable time thinking about it. If it had been a mistake it should have been discovered by then.

January fifth arrived. Millie came back from the entry hall with the mail. Carrie had their coffee waiting. They sorted through it. There were reminder cards from their eye doctors, more credit card applications, a letter from one of Carrie's friends, and two, long, plain white envelopes with no return address.

"They are squishy," Millie said handing Carrie's to her across the table.

"Squishy, indeed! Shall we open them?" Carrie asked.

"I think we have to open them just to be sure it's what we think it is."

"I think you're right."

Using silver knives, they each carefully lifted the flap intact. They each spread the top. They each removed a number of bills.

“Ten hundreds in mine, like before,” Millie said.

“Ten hundreds in mine, too, like before,” Carrie said with a confirming nod.

They sat back and looked at each other. Frown met frown. Several sips of coffee did not relax their expressions. Bites of hot buttered raisin toast did no better. Without many more words between them they knew what to do. The indigo vase received a second set of envelopes adding a second deposit of two thousand dollars.

A similar scenario transpired on the fifth of each month through April – well, one was the fourth, the fifth coming on Sunday that month.

“Twelve thousand dollars. We could live on that for a year, you know,” Carrie said.

“Or six months in style,” Millie added, puffing at her hair and allowing the momentary vision of a Caribbean cruise.

“Or that,” Carrie added her vision being a distinguished, finely dressed, gentleman, a limo, and dinner at a five-star restaurant. Carrie had always thought smaller than Millie.

“It seems somebody is giving us a gift every month,” Carrie said.

“A very generous gift every month,” Millie added.

They sat, nodding and sipping.

“I just have to know who it is,” Carrie said.

“Yes. I know. We have to find out who it is. How do you suppose we could do that?”

While they began thinking together about it, they went to the vase with the two latest envelopes. There was not any more room. They looked around.

“We could spread them out flat under the sheets in the linen closet,” Millie suggested.

Carrie agreed with a nod. While she held the bunch of artificial flowers, Millie reached in and removed the envelopes. She stopped and sniffed. She put the vase up to her nose and sniffed. She moved the vase to her sister’s nose and she sniffed.

“I know that aroma,” Millie said.

“I know that aroma, too.”

As one they said, “Agatha’s Lilly of the Valley toilet water.”

The scent on any one of the envelopes was so slight it had gone unnoticed, but when set together in an enclosed space for so long, it became clear and obvious. Everything about Agatha reeked of Lilly of the Valley. They had forgotten how much they had grown to despise that aroma.

“But why? How?” Carrie said.

“Yes, indeed. Why? How?” Millie said offering it as concurrence rather than actual questions.

“Agatha is not a generous person.”

“Not a generous person at all!”

“It has to be a scheme. Agatha’s whole life has moved forward on schemes.”

It had been Millie’s words but Carrie nodded her agreement, then added:

“Bad schemes. Schemes designed to get people in trouble. Schemes to make herself look good and noble.”

“Should we confront her?” Millie asked.

“Is that what she wants?”

“I don’t know. Do you think that’s what she wants?”

“I don’t know. Why would she want that?”

“Something about getting us in trouble, you can bet on that,” Carrie said.

“What could she possibly get us in trouble about?”

“There really is just that one big trouble, I suppose.”

“But that was not our doing,” Millie pointed out.

“Of course, most of the things we took the fall for were not our doing.”

Millie couldn’t argue with that.

“How could her giving us large amounts of money possibly get us in trouble?”

“I have no idea.”

A long silence ensued.

Presently, Carrie had a question, emerging from long before.

“What was the man’s name Agatha gave the police after Mother and Father were killed – the drifter she said she had befriended?”

“Was it Tommy?” Millie said. “Yes, I think it was Tommy. Tommy what?”

They sat in silence trying to remember.

“Was it Hooper? No, it wasn’t Hooper.”

“Was it Carpenter? No, not Carpenter, either.”

“It was something like those, though.”

“Farmer?” No.

“Baker. It was Tommy Baker,” Carrie said at last.

“Yes, it was. Good thinking. It was Tommy Baker.”

“The police never found him. Nobody was ever convicted in our parent’s murders.”

“They never found him because Agatha made up the name.”

“The name? She made up the whole person! We have the photograph, remember.”

“But we’ve never used it. Never shown it to anyone,” Carrie said.

“It would only put a black mark on the family name, demonstrating to the world what kind of man our father had been.”

Carrie nodded. It was an agreement they had sworn to as teenagers.

Their father had not been a nice man. He drank every evening beginning when he got home from his jewelry store. He became violent and, although the girls were never his target, their mother was. Night after night he beat her in their room upstairs. When they were teenagers – 19, 17, and 15 – the three sisters decided to do something about it. The plan was to climb the trellis to the roof and wait outside their parent’s window so they could take flash pictures of their father in action. Then, they would show him copies and threaten to take it to the police if he didn’t stop. Agatha had earlier fixed the drapes so they would not close. Agatha was very clever that way.

It was a hot summer night. The windows were open. Their father was particularly upset and he went after their mother with a bat, an artifact from his youth. With one swing their mother lay motionless on the floor. An enraged Agatha, entered the room through the window, picked up the bat, and repeatedly hit their father. Agatha then took the money from his wallet, and removed his watch and their mother’s necklace to make it look like robbery. Agatha was very clever that way. The girls left. Agatha invented the story about the drifter and

the police investigation soon drug to a halt.

The first flashbulb had malfunctioned but the second worked perfectly. They did get a picture. It was that picture the two sisters had locked in their safe deposit box thinking someday they might reveal the evil doer and put to rest the mystery of their parents' deaths, well one of them, at least. It was a picture they had not told Agatha about for fear she might take some hotheaded action relative to it. The family name was too precious for that. It was Agatha's belief that the pictures had not turned out.

"I really don't see how any of the parts of this fit together," Millie said.

They stewed over the mystery for several days.

A few mornings later at breakfast Carrie broached a related topic.

"I've been thinking it might be nice to see what we can find out about Agatha. Just a sisterly interest after all these years."

"I suppose we could do that, we being the good sisters."

They went for a drive, not an event positively anticipated by the other drivers of that city. Millie drove and considered the line down the center of the street a mark to straddle in the interest of safety. Cars honked. Carrie waved back appreciating their friendly, though unfamiliar, gestures. Several times she did her best to return them in kind.

She parked across the narrow street, several houses east from Agatha's house; it was red brick, two stories, classy, though small in appearance. It sat up to the sidewalk in front and had a single entrance.

"She's done well for herself it seems," Millie said more pride showing than jealousy or hard feelings.

Carrie nodded.

The door opened. A man, probably their sister's age, though looking some younger, appeared in the door. He turned and kissed Agatha goodbye. Then proceeded down the three steps from the small concrete stoop and headed west.

"Do we follow him or stay here?" Millie asked.

"We know where she is. Let's see where lover boy

goes.”

Millie started the car, and the arduously slow pursuit was underway. Three blocks from the house, the man, using a key from his keychain, entered a very small shop. Above the door was a sign. It read, ‘Tommy Baker’s Pawn Shop’.

Carrie gasped.

Millie, Oh, My’ed.

“So, there was a real, Tommy Baker?” Millie said.

“But why would she mention his name if there was a thing between them?”

“Maybe there wasn’t a thing, back then. Maybe the thing developed later.”

“Why would a man she had accused of murder allow there to be a thing between them in the first place or even in the last place?”

She parked the car, again on the opposite side of the street and several buildings to the east. They got out and walked toward the shop. Their fully unpracticed nonchalance was so obvious it was a wonder they weren’t picked up on suspicion of acting suspiciously. They stopped in front of the single window, which spanned the little building from the door west to the outside wall. They looked inside. The man was counting money into the cash register. It was a puzzle. They returned home to think it through, and think it through, and think it through.

They wouldn’t have to wait long for their answer. The next morning, there was a knock at the door. Carrie, being the closest, went to answer. There stood Agatha decked out in her in her Sunday best wearing a wide brimmed black hat, long black dress, and a long, tightly rolled black umbrella, carried like a walking stick.

“We need to speak,” she said edging Carrie aside and entering the living room.

“How quaint,” she said looking around, pulling her glasses down to the end of her nose and then removing them.

She took a seat in one of the chairs across the coffee table from the settee where Millie had been sitting. Carrie joined her there.

“I will get right to the point. You have been receiving blackmail money from a man named Tommy Baker. You

confronted him at his shop some months ago, and said you had proof he murdered your parents some sixty years ago. I have a picture of the two of you peering into his shop through the front window. You demanded a thousand dollars each and every month, for the rest of your lives. Tommy's bank account will show withdrawals of two thousand dollars cash each month during that period. Your bank accounts will undoubtedly show deposits of one thousand dollars cash each, in every month during that same period. Tommy will go to the police with his accusation if you don't agree to begin paying him two thousand dollars a month for the rest of his life or mine – whichever lasts longest. Tommy is my husband. He can prove he was way across the continent in California at the time of the murder."

"But there was no Tommy Baker. You made Tommy Baker up," Millie said.

"It wasn't difficult to find a Tommy Baker who was willing to get rich when, a few years ago, I decided to assure my comfortable retirement by tapping into yours. I thought you were more inquisitive than you seem to be. Six months to find Tommy? Waiting to get that picture at his shop turned out to be very expensive. I had figured three months, tops."

* * *

"I think this cruise was a simply wonderful way to begin our new, affluent, retirement, don't you, Carrie?"

"I do. I think Mr. Anderson over there has taken a fancy to me. He invited us to sit at his table for dinner this evening."

"It's such a shame about Agatha, you know," Millie said.

"It is a shame," Carrie said shaking her head mimicking genuine concern, "her husband leaving her alone like that and having to sell her house and move into a fourth-floor room in that run-down hotel. But once she saw the picture she was quick, eager even, to change her plans. That was nice of her, I thought."

"Yes, nice of her to agree on the spot to begin doubling the payments she has been making to us. Even in the dark bedroom, that night, she took a fine picture, holding the bat as it crushed our father's head. More julep, Carrie?"

"Yes. More julep would be very nice, Millie."

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STORY EIGHT
Dough, Ray, Me
by Tom Gnagey

Years before, Raymond had placed it there in the living room for one purpose and one purpose only – to taunt his younger brother David. Raymond was the seventy-three-year-old head of the family. David was the sixty-five-year-old underling, gofer, serf, target of Raymond's life-long torment. The object in question was the twelve-inch square glass case with wooden frame, which sat on its own wooden stand in the center of the west wall of the living room in the small two story house the two of them shared. Displayed in the case were two hundred, 1934A, \$1,000 bills – the last ever printed. It represented David's half of the family inheritance.

The parents had been dead almost sixty years. Raymond had received his portion as a young teen, immediately upon their passing. The will stipulated that David would receive his share when Raymond thought the boy had become responsible enough to handle it. Clearly the parents were thinking at age eighteen or so. That was not to be reflected in Raymond's twisted plan.

Often, older siblings harbor some dislike for the younger members of the family. Dislike was too mild a term in the case of Raymond's feelings about David. Resentment, abhorrence, revulsion, malice, desire to take him to the creek and return alone – those better described Raymond's feelings toward David, the cute, helpless, interloper who arrived to usurp his cherished position as his parents' darling.

Years before, big brother had converted David's share

into the currency and placed it as it sat there in the case – the case that was rigged to blow the house apart if an attempt were ever made to open it. So, the money remained in plain sight, yet was all quite unattainable. As long as he continued to hold out hope of receiving what was rightfully his, David was destined to remain both a prisoner of his brother and his slave.

David had recently come to recognize that he would never be allowed to claim his inheritance. His life was miserable. He listed his options.

- Leave home penniless and try to make his way in the world alone.

- Open the glass case and blow both brothers to kingdom come.

If, however, Raymond had been bluffing about the explosion that would be set off by tampering with the case, David would actually be able to obtain his due. If Raymond had not been bluffing both Raymond and David would be killed. In David's state of continuing depression, the second alternative – likelihood, even – did not seem at all distressing. In fact, he would welcome both the relief death would bring and the revenge his act would exact. Raymond's bedroom was directly above the living room. An explosion of the magnitude Raymond had promised would surely consume his brother.

David's mind was made up. As usual, Raymond turned in before David. Thirty minutes passed. David approached the case. For years, he had known how it opened. He slid out the two dowels that secured the glass case to the base. All that remained was to lift it off.

As the moment came upon him, David felt more empowered than he had in all of his sixty plus years. He felt confident and in control. He felt a surge of inner strength that he had never before experienced. If the price for even a single moment of such a magnificent feeling was to be death it would be well worth it. He lifted the case – slowly and deliberately so as to not disturb the pile of bills sitting on the top of the wooden stand. Nothing happened. He set the opened-bottom case aside and waited, thinking it might have been rigged with some delayed triggering mechanism. Still,

nothing happened.

Had David had his wits about him he could have grabbed the bills off the exposed top of the wooden stand and beat a hasty retreat to safety outside. Instead, he stood there dumfounded and, interestingly, he thought, a bit saddened that he was still alive. He had so wanted to take his revenge on William. He took a seat and surveyed the pile of money still sitting there atop the familiar wooden stand. Suddenly, it was his for the taking. It appeared that his brother had, indeed, been bluffing. Things suddenly became clear. It made perfect sense. All those years Raymond must have believed that his weak willed, cowardly, little brother would never take the risk to see if the promised booby trap was real. There even was the off chance that the very act of opening the case might have been the proof Raymond's twisted mind needed to determine his little brother was finally ready to receive the money. Knowing Raymond, nothing so thoughtful was likely.

David stood and approached the wooden stand – the one, which he had dusted so many hundreds of times down through the years – the one that saddened him to his core every time he gazed upon it. There was still the chance that it could be the lifting of the bills that would trip a weight sensitive trigger and cause the explosion. That wouldn't matter. Without hesitation, he reached for the bills. He removed them, secured together as they were by a faded, aging, paper band.

There was no explosion. He had always been curious about the triggering mechanism – if, in fact, one existed – so he searched the groove where the bottom of the glass case fit into the stand. It was something of a surprise when he found a narrow, spring loaded, lever that had clearly been released when the case had been raised. It had flipped up out of the groove, still at a severe angle but rising perhaps a sixteenth of an inch above the surface. In light of the uneventful circumstances he could not explain the reason for its existence unless Raymond had changed his mind about arranging the explosion at some point after he had completed the device. That qualified as a reasonable answer.

Impish inspiration stuck. David tore a sheet from a note pad and printed in bold letters, “GOTTCHA, BIG BROTHER!”

He placed it where the stack of bills had sat all those years, reset the case into the groove, and slipped the dowels back into place.

David went to his room and packed a suitcase with just the essentials – and the pile of uncirculated, thousand dollar bills, which were, by then, worth at least three times their face value as collectibles. He left through the side door. It would be a short walk to the bus station and the northbound would be leaving in less than a half hour.

In one final act of defiance, David, or perhaps the ten-year-old still alive within him, selected a perfect stone and propelled it with the power from sixty years of pent up hatred through Raymond's upstairs window. Bathed in the bright moonlight, he waited out in the open for Raymond to appear at the window, above. It took but a few moments. The angry old man looked down at David and shook his fist. David hitched the suitcase in his brother's direction; it was what he felt was his obligatory indication of goodbye. He then turned and walked away. In his mind's eye, he followed his brother hurrying down stairs and across the room to examine the glass case and discover the note.

What happened next, though fully unexpected, became clear to David in a flash (so to speak). The house exploded and was strewn across the entire block. David didn't look back.

“So,” he said out loud, “Through years of disuse, that little spring-loaded lever must have become partially stuck in place the first time it was released. I wonder if there had been time for Raymond to see that his device really worked. That would have been nice.”

STORY NINE
Long Term Solutions
Tom Gnagey

Percival Clarke had not been called Percy for fifty years. He was seldom even called Percival. Percival Clarke was 'Doc' Clarke to everybody in the quiet little village of Cromwell. It sat off the beaten track among the beautiful rolling hills of New England. Those who were born in Cromwell usually lived out their lives in Cromwell.

To be perfectly clear, Doc was not a doctor – medical or otherwise. He was the county coroner, repeatedly elected to that position for a run of more than forty years. In the war, he had been a medic so he was, lamentably, intimately familiar with the doings of the human body – inside and out. Through the years, he had become very good at his job; in Cromwell that mostly consisted of knowing when somebody was dead and issuing death certificates. He had never erred in that pronouncement. Well, there was that one time with Billy Wilson's frozen cat but it really doesn't apply here.

Doc was consumed by his job and his community. He took time to visit the elderly and the infirmed and did what he could – personally and financially – to make their final years or days as comfortable and worry free as possible. Occasionally folks wondered how Doc was able to do so much, considering the small salary he received as Coroner. It was generally believed that he had a secret benefactor but no one would pry. That was not the way in Cromwell.

For example: When old Maude Patton needed a respirator to ease her final months, Doc got her one. When

Tommy Little was hit by a motorcycle and suffered shattered bones and torn muscles, Doc saw to it the boy got the surgery and physical therapy he needed. When widower, George Miller, began wandering off and becoming lost on a regular basis, Doc saw to it that there was in-home care for him.

Everybody loved Doc Clarke. And Doc, obviously, loved them. Years before, he had converted his two-car garage into his office. It opened onto the alley behind his house. (A car was not necessary in that tiny village.) He asked the city council to name the alley like a street so he could receive mail delivery to that building. Aply, the village fathers decided on Clarke Street. His house faced Maple Street. It was a white, two story clapboard, structure with a well-manicured lawn filled with flowering shrubs and small beds of flowers encircled by white rocks. Through the falling leaves in autumn and the ubiquitous snows of winter, his lawn was kept raked and his sidewalks were the first to be shoveled – all by the local youngsters just because they loved the old man.

Twice a month Doc hired a High School boy to drive him to and from the city so he could attend to his personal business: banking, shopping, and such.

Few new families ever moved into Cromwell, so when one did, it was a big event. Bill Dixon, his wife, and her elderly mother bought the Landers house – Jenny Landers had died several months before. Most thought it would just fall into disrepair and live out its years in peeling paint and inner darkness, so the townsfolk were delighted to see it saved. It sat directly across Maple from Doc's house.

Bill, it turned out, was a detective with the state police. Most of the townsfolk welcomed that, feeling it offered some degree of protection in case, for instance, that gang of ruffians on motorcycles ever returned. Doc became uneasy.

As you may have surmised, Doc was single, but there was an older gentleman in his life. Daniel Provost and he had been in the same unit during the war. Daniel had received mortar fragments in his head and never really recovered from the brain damage. He lived on for all those years as a vegetable. Doc provided an appropriately equipped room upstairs and took care of him. There is a story about why Doc

felt it was his obligation to care for his friend, but that is really not germane to this account.

It is germane, however, that Daniel received his mail on Maple Street while Doc received his on Clarke. It might also be noted that Daniel's mail usually was addressed to Cromwell City – the community's former name back in the days it had been mining and lumbering hub of the northeast. 'City' had been dropped from the official name some fifty years earlier. Historically the residents treasured their rural, conservative, easy going lifestyle and had always felt 'City' intruded on that image. There had been no opposition to the change.

Doc received all kinds of mail – the most formal looking invitations to the area galas, official county business related to his office, and the lowest class junk mail. Daniel only ever received mail from one return address – Miss Abby Provost in Toronto, Canada. It warmed the heart of the old Mailman (never, Postal Carrier, in Cromwell) that somebody remembered Daniel even if the man probably wasn't aware of it. Daniel's condition was habitually so grave he was kept in a sterile environment and could not receive visitors – not that anybody in the little town had ever really known him. The mere knowledge of his presence, however, had elevated Doc to near sainthood there in Cromwell.

Despite his misgivings about the new residents, Doc paid them a courtesy call, delivered a loaf of his locally famous banana nut bread, and inquired if there was anything he could do for the aging women in the family. There was. She needed dialysis twice each week and the trip to the nearest hospital, some thirty miles away, posed significant problems for the couple. Doc offered to see if he could help and they gratefully accepted his assistance.

In case he might run into any bureaucratic snags he collected his usual data: full name, date and place of birth, parents' names, social security number, name of insurance company and things like that. Armed with such information, Doc had often – usually – been able to quickly work miracles for others. He'd give Mildred's cause his best effort.

Within the week, Doc had made arrangements with a medical transportation volunteer group. They provided the

vehicle, a driver, and a ride-along aide if required. The patient just paid for the gas. Doc would pick up that expense without the family's knowledge. The Dixon's were delighted. Doc was also delighted that he had been able to arrange another long term solution.

During the following six months' life continued for Doc pretty much as it had during the previous forty or so years. He remained busy, happy, and content. He signed a dozen death certificates and consoled a dozen families. He made new arrangements for new medical problems as they arose. Doc never failed. It wasn't in his makeup. He paid all his bills on time and managed to treat himself to coffee and toast at the café most mornings and dinner at the Steak House on Friday evenings.

Despite the dialysis, Mildred passed away. She was taken back to her home state for burial. A month later, Bill Dixon, asked if could speak with Doc. They met in Doc's den after dinner one evening. It was a small room, which most would describe as cozy. There was a braided rug on the floor and bookcases filled with brightly jacketed books. The several table lamps cast the room in a comfortable, subdued, glow. There was no desk or television set – it was a place for retreat and relaxation not work or further contact with the woes besetting the outside world. He had a fire going in the small, raised, white brick, fireplace. He escorted Bill inside. They took seats in the comfortable, matching chairs, positioned on the slant so as to at once face each other as well as the fire.

“So. What's on your mind, Bill or is it Officer this evening?”

It may seem like an odd question. Bear with me.

“You suspect this is not a neighbor to neighbor visit,” Bill said. His inflection made it a question.

“Just recognizing that you, like I, wear several hats.”

“Something came up after my mother-in-law passed away. Moving a body from one state to another can become complicated.”

Doc nodded. He was well aware of that.

“Was there some problem with the paperwork I provided? That situation has seldom come up for me in the past.”

“No. It was in order and thank you, by the way for your help with that.”

“What, then?” Doc asked feeling certain he knew.

“Her home state requires a disclosure procedure regarding a deceased’s finances, insurance, trusts, and so on – mostly so it can take its greedy share in taxes.”

“I understand.”

“Well, in its investigation into those kinds of things an insurance policy surfaced that neither my wife nor I could explain. Fifteen thousand dollars. Henry Life Insurance Company of Vancouver. Beneficiary one Daniel Provost at an address in Toronto. It turned out to be a mail forwarding service rerouting to this Maple Street Address in Cromwell City. The company had been instructed to use Miss Abby Provost in the return address. The policy posed no processing problem but of course caught our attention. The detective in me couldn’t leave it alone. I have summarized here on this sheet of paper a number of other things I have found. It lead me places I never dreamed it would. Would you prefer to read it or shall I detail for you what I found?”

“You have such a nice speaking voice why don’t you tell me about your findings.”

Bill acknowledged the complement with a quiet nod. This old man was going to go out a consummate gentleman. He set the paper on the lamp table between them and folded his hands onto his crossed legs.

“Daniel Provost is the comatose man you care for or, once cared for, more accurately, I am guessing. If dead, I assume he is buried somewhere here on this property, however there is no record of his death. You forged an ingenious arrangement I must say. You took out inexpensive, term life, policies on the soon to be departed in and around Cromwell, each from a different small insurance company, all requiring no physical exam, and each listing Provost as the beneficiary. With his address, different from your business address at three levels of deception – Toronto, Maple Street, Cromwell City – the insurance companies had no reason to question the arrangement – your name and address on the death certificate and Provost’s on the policy. Since Provost paid – in fact still pays – income taxes, receives mail, and

pays dues to the VFW, he became a fully legitimate payee and was never questioned. There was no reason for the families of the deceased to ever learn about it – until the unique circumstances surrounding Mildred’s death.

“Back in the days when such things could be done, you set up Provost’s bank account by mail – in the city – and cleverly did not become his estate manager so his finances would not be connected with you in any documentable way. You merely posed as Provost when you made the deposits at the bank – no ID required to make a deposit – and eventually everybody there recognized you by sight. All withdrawals were made in cash and all bills paid and purchases made by check, again keeping your name out of the loop. I checked and all the tellers remember you as Provost – it is as if you are one of their best friends and dearest patrons – so no identification was ever required of you for anything you had done there. Very clever and very patient getting it all set up and keeping it working all these years.

“I have tracked down six hundred and seven such policies dating back almost forty years. They average thirteen thousand dollars each and I estimate the premiums you paid, in cashier’s checks, were seldom more than a thousand before the payouts began. At twelve thousand each, times six hundred and seven that comes to nearly seven and a quarter million dollars. His bank accounts, CDs and such, currently carry a balance of well over three million. Having learned what I have about you from the people of Cromwell, I find it hard to believe you have been saving that for yourself.”

Doc stood and walked to a wall safe behind a painting. He returned with a rust-colored, cardboard envelope tied with a sturdy brown string. He handed it to Bill without comment. Bill opened it and read the single, notarized sheet, inside. It stated all quite simply: “I, Daniel Franklin Provost, hereby request that whatever money and other possessions I leave at the time of my death be used by the Cromwell City Council to finance a medical clinic for use by its citizens.” It went on to detail account numbers and such personal data as was required. It was dated forty years earlier, and was signed and notarized at the bank in the city.

“Well, I guess at least I was right about it not being for

you,” Dixon said. “It would seem that you have spent millions of dollars to assist the needy in this community. Upon my thoughtful and soul searching reflection, I have determined that if the beneficiaries you had named had been actual relatives instead of Provost, no fraud would have been involved – the insurance companies would have paid out exactly the same amount of money – although this community and many of its citizens would have suffered in ways you determined they shouldn’t have to.”

Doc spoke.

“So, although I have no intention of corroborating your theory, Officer Dixon, what do you suggest the next step must be?”

Dixon looked at Doc. He looked at the summary sheet he had prepared. He stared deep into the fire then leaned forward and placed the paper into the flames.

“It has been a fascinating chat, Doc. And, oh yes, in my nosiness I discovered it was you who paid the fuel charge for Margery’s trips to the hospital. Please accept this check which should cover it and pass it on to someone who is truly in need. I left the Pay To line blank and promise I’ll not look when the cancelled check is returned.”

He stood and held out his hand to shake. Doc escorted him to the front door hand on the young officer’s shoulder. Bill coughed as he had several times during the course of the meeting.

“You seem to have a serious cough developing there, Bill. That been going on long?”

Not waiting for an answer, he continued, eyes sparkling.

“Do you suppose I could get your date and place of birth, social security number, parent’s names . . .”

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STORY TEN
The Dispatching of the Wretched Richard Slade, JD
by Tom Gnagey

After the life sentence without parole had been pronounced; after attorney Slade had been remanded to the state penal authority; after the eyes of Slade and Dr. Wilson had met and lingered in an exchange of hate and disgust as the handcuffed attorney was being led from the courtroom; after all of that, the doctor and his old friend, prosecuting attorney Baxter, returned to Baxter's office on the fifth floor of the courts building. Baxter offered Wilson a drink. The doctor declined but motioned for Baxter to go ahead.

“Sometimes a clean as a whistle case just feels messy – you understand what I'm saying?”

“Not for sure,” Dr. Wilson said, clearly interested.

“This one bugs me. We had all the necessary evidence – the bullet from Slade's pistol lodged in the body; Slade's print on the casing he had loaded into the gun; a copy of the deceased's house key in the glove compartment of Slade's car; Slade's lack of alibi at the time of death. We had everything we needed and we convicted him.”

“But?” Dr. Wilson asked, accenting his question with furrowed forehead.

“But, it makes no sense that one of the country's most successful defense attorneys could possibly be that sloppy. He would have never used his own gun to commit murder. He would never have left his own prints on the casing found at the scene. He would have never left the casing in the first place. We were unable to establish any plausible motive for Slade to

have wanted to murder his recent client – Russ Black. Slade is a certified sleazeball and his disdain for the legal system is a disgrace to the profession – to our way of life. His infamous courtroom antics have clearly set free a long parade of vicious, guilty, murders and rapists down through the years, so I am pleased he will be unavailable anymore to clear the obviously guilty and flaunt his perverse success in the face of all that is good and just. But it all feels so messy.”

Doctor Wilson shifted in his seat and spoke.

“I suppose there is a possible scenario that wasn't explored by Slade's defense team.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Well, just between you and me, of course – he waited for a nod of agreement – I've been harboring another hypothetical possibility – far out and fully unreasonable, I suppose. It could certainly never be proven.”

“Go on.”

Baxter's growing interest became immediately clear. He suddenly had a fully uncomfortable hunch that 'messy' was about to morph into a fully credible, fully plausible, equally despicable, truth-based account.

Dr. Wilson folded his hands over his crossed knee.

“What if somebody – the actual murderer – who felt it was time for Slade's form of justice to come to an end, had gained access to Slade's office, fired Slade's hand gun into a large pillow, which he later disposed of, cut the pillow open, extracted the bullet and collected the casing, returning the gun to the desk drawer where it was kept. He obtained a copy of the unsavory Russ Black's house key, let himself in and shot Black with another, similar caliber gun. Then, with the skill of an experienced surgeon, and using long, narrow, surgical tweezers he extracted the actual fatal bullet from the body and inserted the bullet removed from the pillow into the exact position of the original slug. What if he secured the original casing and left the one from Slade's gun at the scene? What if he had earlier arranged a clandestine, secluded, rendezvous with Slade for the time of the murder but left him in the lurch, of course. What if Slade had been seen leaving for that meeting and later returning to his house – the time-line easily established? What if he had placed the key in Slade's car?

What if that doctor had been the anonymous tipster that set the authorities on the trail of Mr. Slade?”

The prosecutor understood and continued the scenario.

“What if that doctor had avenged his son's murder in the process?”

“Whatever do you mean, Mr. Prosecuting Attorney? Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean, what if the doctor's son had been murdered by Russ Black – as he had been accused –and the attorney in question had gotten Black off Scott free? What if that doctor had decided enough was enough – the despicable Attorney Slade perennially abusing the judicial system to subvert justice as he became wealthy. What if that doctor had proceeded just as you have described? What if that doctor was named Wilson?”

“So many 'what if's', judge. So many 'what if's'. I think I'll have that drink, now.

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STORY ELEVEN
Time and Time Again!
Tom Gnagey

MY NEW JOURNAL

Day One:

There is a problem – well, an anomaly at least. At noon that first day I was certain it was just a ten-dollar watch gone bad. It had served me well for a year or so. Less than a buck a month to keep me on track seemed like a bargain. Track. I was at the track losing half my social security check when I first noticed the malfunction. At any rate, I tossed it and purchased a new one later that afternoon, moving up to fifteen-dollar quality. I smiled wondering if it would really be a third better and if so how one determined that. I was often the source for such wonders. The combination of fully useless, weird, wonderments and my tendency to make poor investments had pretty well characterized my life. No savings. Few possessions. If it weren't for the SS check I'd be living on the street. All that saddens me if I allow myself to dwell on it, so I don't.

When the new watch developed a problem identical to the first, my wonders began leaning toward concerns. I purchased a third – a twenty-five-dollar investment. Three watches within three days. Again, the problem. It led me to conclude that it was not inherent within the watch but was something within me. An explanation is in order – or at least an accounting if not an explanation.

On Friday noon, I discovered that my watch – that first

one – was running backwards. I joked to myself that it must have been kin to the nag I'd just lost a bundle on. I shook it. I tapped it against the armrest on the seat in the stands, which I undoubtedly occupied all too frequently. I tried resetting it. Nothing helped. It became the same problem with the other two. I have heard of people who produce some sort of electrical energy that magnetizes watches and renders them useless but I have worn watches without incident for sixty years. My first thought was that somebody was horsin' around with me (an unintentional pun).

Since Friday, I have discovered the difficulty with my watch is the least of my problems. Friday was August 31st. Today is Monday, September 3rd. Except it isn't – not for me at least. I am repeating the events of the 28th in every detail, hour by hour, minute by minute. Saturday reverted to the 30th. Sunday the 29th. What I write here in my journal is the only thing in my life that remains constant and unchanging. The electric bill I received Saturday and placed in a stamped envelope on my desk ready for mailing is not there nor is the entry in my checkbook that the payment had been written. The left-over ham that I sliced last night and ate in a sandwich is still in the refrigerator this morning. I am sliding into the past.

If this is really true, then this morning's paper, which I just picked up from the porch of the house where I have a room, will be dated the 28th instead of the 3rd. I hesitate to look but I must. The 28th. My skin prickles and my body ripples with chills. My mind can't grasp what's happening. What is happening? It can't be, of course, and yet it is. Perhaps I am losing my mind. I can fathom no other solution. I believe my Great Aunt Alice lived out her final years in an asylum.

I examine my spotted hands and wonder if the wrinkles and bulging veins will become smooth and young again. That might be nice. I'm seventy. I have figured that I am in my final decade of life. However, if this reversal continues I could instead have seven decades left between now and the time I am born. Odd. Strange. Bizarre. Incomprehensible. More shivers.

I wonder if this is, perhaps, a temporary condition –

situation – whatever? Maybe a cycle – a period of time back and then a period of time forward. Could it be that this has been happening to me for years – one direction in time and then the other? Maybe it is universal and happens to everybody, unbeknownst to anyone but me. It could certainly account for déjà vu. My mind is running rampant. I usually welcome and delight in such mental romps. Today the thoughts are accompanied by unease – fear, even.

Oddly, I remember yesterday and the day before as time progressed through August and sneaking into a new September. It is my presence as a physical being that is retreating through time. My mind retains its experiences – at least that's how it appears. I can use that. Oh, my, how I can use that!

My head is never far from the track. This can make me rich. I just need to work out the details. Let's see. I go to the track. I see who wins. I wait twenty minutes – twenty minutes retreating into the before-of-the-race – go to the window and place my bet. I win, of course, though that presents another problem. As I keep retreating back in time I will never be in the present to collect my winnings. Hmmmm? Seemed perfect, too. I can foretell the future with 100% accuracy but it is of no value to me. Bummer.

Day Seven:

A week has gone by – that's wrong, of course. A week has disappeared. Soon I will be unable to remember exactly what I did on each day past, so my reference point will necessarily diminish to some timely calendar like the newspaper or the date holder gizmo on the table at the bank. That has already begun happening. As things occur they make sense and I remember – if that can be the correct term. But often I can't predict; I don't see or feel things coming, only recognizing them as being correct after the fact, which may well be before the fact. It is all still quite confusing.

Life progresses – regresses – in steps defined by the temporal limits of activities. It is not a second by second backwards 'movement'. I don't walk backwards. I don't speak backwards. For example, when I begin eating breakfast I finish it. When I reach some logical end point in a short-term

activity I shift or jump backwards to the start of the just previous activity entity. I have never characterized life as being composed of such discrete segments. I am often surprised by the defining edges or limits of activities. As long as a series of behaviors (inadequate term) constitute a consistent unit and are purposeful, moving toward an easily definable or observable goal, the sequence continues uninterrupted – forward.

One of the many complaints (observations, at least) voiced by my caretakers at the orphanage where I grew up was that I just bobbed along through life changing my course every time an obstacle or new shiny bauble presented itself – allowing every new wave that came along to swish me this way or that all quite willy-nilly, with no clearly observable stable purpose or goal or socially responsible desire. They were correct, although I've never truly understood that before – not until I began to see things in reverse – to see the results traced back to the forces that preordained them. Hindsight, which is now foresight. Remarkable. I am growing in self-awareness by retreating in time and diminishing physical development (which is actually enhanced physical development, at least at this point).

Historically, my life has been strung together by dollars – always needing them, always seeking them, and always losing them, so always needing them, and so on. It has been an endless loop, which has gotten me nowhere – less than nowhere I suppose as I am now retreating from my freedom – my chance – to arrive at somewhere.

I've been a greedy, self-centered, SOB with no real concept that there was or could be an alternative. I once gave a cigarette to a bum. Sadly, it is the only act of charity I can remember. Oh. It wasn't. I remember now. I gave it to him as pre-payment for yelling 'fire' among the patrons waiting at the betting windows so I could move up in line to put money down on my sure thing. It probably wasn't. I really don't remember.

So, what have I determined about this process? Life is going backwards – not on a continuous path but by 'incident', which I live out before jumping back to the previous 'incident'. I have a good memory of what took place in the days I have now lost. In my memory, it is not as though they did not exist.

Interesting, my former present has now become my past and the past is what lies ahead for me. I am caught between two sets of memories. There is no present. There only the past – pasts, I suppose. It most certainly must be insanity.

Day Fourteen:

So far, I seem unable to effect changes. I merely retrace the path from where I came. It hasn't been long enough to discern for sure if I am recouping my earlier levels of physical wellbeing – youth, I suppose. One interesting thing occurred that does seem to point in that direction. I cut my finger on Tuesday. I went to sleep for the night. When I awoke, the cut was nowhere to be found. It hadn't really healed – it hadn't happened.

Sleep appears to be one of those self-contained incidents that plays out in its entirety before I lapse back in time. I wonder if I regain eight hours toward my future during that time. If so, I am retreating at only two thirds time or would that be half time – sixteen hours in wakeful retreat and then eight, in sleep, moving forward into the future. I was never good with numbers. That may account for why I'm so unlucky at the track.

Tomorrow is my birthday – that is, yesterday was my birthday but I will experience it during my next day. I was, will be, 70. It was the day I came to grips with my mortality and figured I had somewhere between one and ten more years to play the ponies. I was – will become – determined to lap up life in whatever greed-filled, pleasure based, manner comes open to me. "Whatever!" It is one of those descriptors that underscores my lack of well-defined purpose. I've heard of folks who make five-year plans and then try to follow them. That's a fully foreign concept for me. I have seldom planned more than a few minutes or hours ahead, and even so, knew it was likely something would come up to alter my course. Five years! I've struggled to even keep to a course for five hours – often five minutes.

There can be no purpose for me right now. Purpose is irrelevant since I live between two realms of memories. I was never a man with purpose beyond gathering and spending the next few dollars, so why does this lack of purpose bother me

now? Perhaps because it used to remain a possibility even if I chose to ignore or avoid it. Purpose no longer appears to be a possibility. It is something I can't have. On the other hand, I always find ways to find a few bucks. Can finding a purpose be more difficult than that?

Day Twenty-One:

Reconsideration. That's the best word to describe what's been going on inside me. I seem to be obsessing with what I should have done. What I would do if given a second chance. How what I didn't do hurt, or least affected, others. I have developed a plan; one which, all quite surprisingly, has given life to strange, altruistic, feelings within me. It is good. Who knew?

I have contacted Reverend Miller, an acquaintance at the track. His mission seems to be that of subtly influencing the likes of me to give up the ponies and begin pursuing some undertaking that is actually beneficial to others. He never pressures me – never preaches at me. Always offers his friendship. His mere presence sends his message. If I had the capacity to feel guilty I'm sure his being there would make me uncomfortable.

Back to my plan. He has agreed to my proposition. He was initially reluctant because it is based on disbursing my 'ill-gotten' racetrack booty. My logic won him over. My winnings will go to somebody and I'd rather know they were in the hands of a trusted person with good intentions. Here's the deal, although I've told him nothing about my present situation or how I have designed things so I will begin winning big.

I will proceed according to my initial plan – see who wins, wait twenty minutes for time to retreat, place my winning bets and turn over the tickets to Reverend Miller. He has agreed to see that the Orphanage gets three quarters and that he will distribute the other quarter in however he sees fit. I'm finally going to be able to make some positive contribution to the world. I can't believe how good that makes me feel. I mean I really can't believe how good it makes me feel. I have been missing so much. I hope, if the situation allowed me to somehow receive the winnings I would have arrived at this same arrangement. Doubtful, I'm afraid. Interesting, though.

Clearly for me the best next thing to greedy self-interest is altruism.

One interesting aspect of this relationship with the Reverend is that every day I have to convince him all over again because each day it is a brand-new proposition for him – occurring the day before the last time he agreed to it. What I wouldn't give to be able to see it play out in the future. As things are, I must be content with my fantasies.

Day Twenty-eight

I find myself getting aggravated with the Reverend because every day I have to go through the whole hard sell song and dance with him all over again. I have found what seems to be the shortest route to convincing him, so should be happy about that I suppose. Now I'm aggravated with myself for being aggravated at Reverend Miller. There had to be a point – a day in the past – when he first arrived at the track. Once I retreat back past that moment I'm not sure how I'll proceed. He won't yet be around to help. I have begun looking over some possibilities. There is the old priest at the church on Elm and 10th. He should be around for a long time as he appears younger and younger in my sense of things.

It's hard for me to believe I am actually becoming comfortable with this backward life I am living. My lifelong concern over where my next dollar will come from has evaporated. It just shows up because in my past I always found ways of finding funds.

When I was a boy there was a counselor-type person – a social worker, I suppose – who came to the orphanage once a week or so. She was always pushing me to write out a "Life Mission Statement". I could never see the sense in it so never pursued it. Living a life all planned out by a preordained mission seemed fully unattractive. Where would be the excitement of meeting the unknown? Where was the flexibility to follow my dreams however often they changed? It seemed to force a degree of responsibility on me that I certainly didn't want to have following me around.

For some reason, I have begun kicking around several 'mission' related ideas. They are things I think I would include if life were back as it had been – moving into the future. I

realize that any mission statement I write now can never be put into action since the future in which it would become active will never arrive. Still, it is becoming a fascinating exercise.

Clearly, at this point, I am two people living two lives, side by side. One the old life – in reverse – which has been mine all these years, and a second which is as if hovering over the other one, watching and evaluating what is taking place. The most important piece of progress – one I still don't understand – is the thing with the Reverend. It clearly represents my ability to now modify things that occurred in my past. If not modify, then at least add to. Yes, that's more accurate – add to. I can't stop myself from going to the movie on Friday night if on Friday I went to the movies. What I once did, I have to do again. But I seem to be able to insert extra things. Since I understand none of what is happening I don't pretend to understand about the insertion thing. I do know that what I write here and what I have set down so far in my mission statement remain with me even as the rest of my life retreats toward my youth.

I have begun struggling with the first moral/ethical dilemma of my life – in and of itself a sad commentary. I once read a story about a time traveler who made some seemingly insignificant changes in the past – picked a flower, crushed a bug, something like that – and when he returned to his proper place in time the world had been changed because of those acts. I wonder if I am doing such things now. By redistributing funds from the racetrack am I changing the course of history? On the one hand that is exactly what I am trying to do – make things better for people. If what I do, does, in fact, make a better future, what is lost? Hardship. Heartache. Could it be a bad thing to render the future a better, happier place than it was when I was a part of it? Confusion!

The idea of wielding such power is overwhelming. All my life I ran from responsibility. Effecting the future seems to be the ultimate responsibility. It should certainly be somebody more able and talented and farsighted than hapless me brandishing this power.

Day Thirty-Five:

Two remarkable . . . things, for lack of a better term . . .

have occurred. First, I have finished a Life Mission Statement. It is positive, helpful, philanthropic, altruistic, and peace-promoting. It is mostly filled with things I've never really given serious consideration to before. Second, I am reliving yesterday. Let me try that another way. Before I went to bed last night I had just relived a Wednesday. According to how things have been going I fully expected that today I would relive the Tuesday that had occurred just before that. Instead, I am reliving that Wednesday again.

I have been awake since 6:30 and it is now – oh, my. My watch has stopped. It is not moving backward. It is not moving forward. It is dead in the water. Did I do some terrible thing yesterday that stopped time? Let's see; I tipped the waitress at the snack bar after having coffee. I never leave tips. Hmm? That was an insertion, then. How could that have caused this? I suppose that I just need to let the day progress and see what happens.

It is now 9:00 – mid-morning. I went and had coffee according to the life I have been retracing. There was no choice about it, understand. Interesting to me, I left the tip as part of the required replay. What I had previously inserted, stuck, I guess I could say. It became part of my history that I had to relive. Will I be stuck in this Wednesday forever? That would equate to the most boring eternity I can imagine.

I will make some new insertions today so I can examine how they play out during my next day – should my next day be another replay of this Wednesday. I will move out to the curb and speak with the trash collector when he arrives in a few minutes. How I am allowed to veer off the previous course for such short intervals I don't understand, but I can unless I am in the midst of some importantly goal directed activity. Sitting around does not generally seem to be defined in that way. I will deliver my old neighbor's paper up to his porch – the delivery man always tosses it onto his steps.

Day Thirty-Six (evening):

It has been Wednesday again. My watch is still not running. The activities I inserted yesterday – the day before this second repeat of Wednesday – stuck. I have been required to repeat them. I find it fascinating but have no

improved understanding of the change that has come about – the cessation of my retreat in time. It is limbo and yet it is not. My changes of a day ago, have modified my life today. If I am to be stuck in time at this place I can at least make more positive insertions – be helpful, make folks smile or chuckle, talk with the neighborhood kids as they pass out front. We will see what time – or the lack of time – has in store.

Day Forty-Two:

Fascinating! My watch gained an hour today. It crept forward for the first time since all of this began. Perhaps I was correct when I asked if this could be some sort of recurring cycle. I am excited at the prospect of viewing my life as it may have been modified by my arrangement (and arrangement, and arrangement . . .) with Reverend Miller. I am eager to see if this progression in time continues. I have spent many hours considering how I can implement my Life Mission if, in fact, I continue to move forward. My biggest wonder is how it will be at that moment that the me in this retro-life steps across that time boundary into the rest of my life – the part I have not yet experienced – my true future. When I look down at my watch it should still be keeping time – running forward. Will that moment come – that moment that will put all of this behind me? I can hardly contain myself. The anticipation is so filled with questions and possibilities. I must plan for as many contingencies as I can envision.

There is not time for all the things I need to be doing since I must continue to relive my past, although this limbo-like period somehow seems to be allowing me more time. It is as if a day is longer than twenty-four hours. It is impossible to explain. I am surprised that I am able to sleep at night; there is so much going on in my mind. I believe it may be due to the fact that I must relive the period of sleep as I experienced it before. That doesn't allow sleepless meddling by my active second mind. This existing as two beings occupying the time and space allotted for just one is becoming more difficult – more trying – more exasperating – more of a struggle.

Day Forty-nine:

It has been seven weeks. Seven weeks according to

how the calendar in my 'new' head keeps time. Each day my watch continues to gain time. Yesterday it ran forward twelve hours. My behavior did not retreat but relived the day just past – morning to evening. Although my sortie into the past has allowed insightful and life changing restructuring to take place for me, it is my profound hope that this new path into the future continues. I don't seem to be losing these new insights – leaving them in the past.

At the track today, I won big. The Reverend picked up the winnings and gave me a thumbs up as we passed without speaking – the arrangement I insisted on. That is all too nebulous to explain. It is as if a part of all this now takes place behind a veil, which hides it from me or at least distorts it. For example, he seems to have no recollection that I made the same arrangement with him every day over the past month or so. Perhaps with subsequent (previous, actually) incidents, the others faded. I have no idea what I'm proposing but I seem to have a need to explain whatever aspects of all this that I can.

That's new as well – the need to understand. Before, I was satisfied to live a life of what was, was. Now, I need to understand the how and why and purpose of everything. It's like a kid with a new toy. I have to determine all its possibilities.

Day Fifty-six:

I retreated – or at least didn't progress forward toward the future – for forty-two days. I have now been on the path back to the future for fourteen. Does that actually make this Day twenty-eight – minus 42 plus 14? Perhaps an inane question. Days continue to be relived in proper progression from morning to night. Having been at each day three times now – the original, the retreat, the moving forward again – I can predict or 'foreknow' what will take place during virtually every minute of every day. It is like being glued to a conveyor belt, passing a familiar scene. I can't stop the progression. I can't get off. I can't change anything. It is as if I am playing a role, which allows no adlibs – no creative deviation.

I'm impatient to reach that moment when it all began. I wonder if at that time all of this will be erased from my

memory. If, as I postulated earlier, I revisit the past in this way frequently – the idea of the loop in time – something has to occur to remove the memory since I certainly have none from previous forays into the past. It may well be the first time, which would be the simplest explanation for why I don't remember. The Occam's Razor thing.

It has been a disturbing trip, surveying the self-centered, useless, hurtful, non-compassionate life I have led. I can blame it on my early years I suppose: abandoned on a church doorstep as a newborn, having had no consistent positive adult models in my life, always made to feel beholding to those who raised me, the riffraff with whom I was forced to run as a boy, a drug addicted mother showing up to proclaim her kinship days before she O.D.ed, and on and on. If I didn't look out for myself nobody else would; that was the single certainly in my life. As a youngster, I came to believe that when I desired something, I just needed to find someone who had it and take it. That, I justified by assuming they were merely holding it for me until I needed it. No guilt. It was just the arrangement life had for me.

I have seldom been unhappy – just never really happy. What happened to me, happened to me. That was that. Not good or bad but just what was. Lifelong, dulled or blunted emotions, I suppose. As I noted previously I have lived from dollar to dollar, pony to pony, and more recently check to check.

Now, my main pleasure is passing the Reverend every day and seeing his smile and feeling important. I don't feel guilty or bad about feeling important. It is merely an acknowledgment that finally I am doing something worthwhile. The stream of money will cease, of course, once I re-encounter my true present – always just a nanosecond away from my future. I would like to offer the explanation to the Reverend but doubt if I will. I'll give up betting. That will please him even if it means the end of the donations.

Interesting to me is that my all-encompassing desire is to get on with my new Life's Mission. I have so many ideas about 'fixing' the program at the orphanage, helping the track-bums turn their lives around, listening to Reverend Miller's take on life and how it should be lived, and finding positive

uses for the money I have been squandering at the track. The anticipation, excitement, and delight are nearly more than I can stand.

Day Eighty-Four:

This is the day that my retro-life meets my present slash future. So far, I have retraced the hours from awakening at 6:30, through breakfast, the bus ride to the track, and coffee and a cinnamon role at the snack bar – all just as they occurred that day – this day. It – this terrifying but now treasured anomaly – all started at noon. One minute away. As required by the life I am retracing, I am sitting in the seat I've occupied so many times here in the stands. My, how I hope that watch keeps ticking.

At this moment, I continue to live in two mental worlds. The one is from my past and is intent on watching the final sprint to the finish line by a half dozen three year olds. The other is this one hovering above that person, observing, as it has been doing these past months during my retreat and then the reversal back toward this moment. In five seconds the hands on my watch will mesh, one atop the other, straight up, twelve o'clock noon.

Five, four, three, two, one . . .

A positively purposeful life drives ahead dynamically and helpfully. A purposeless life stagnates and at best wallows selfishly in the past as it allows the ills of oneself and others to go unattended. Time locks us in its dual clutches: our interpretation of the reality that was and our assessment of what might have been. Time allows neither aspect to impact the other – or does it?

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STORY TWELVE
Dear, Sweet, Annabelle
Tom Gnagey

Lamar Latham loved cats. He had loved cats for 84 years. Lamar Latham hated people. He had hated people for 84 years. Whether or not cats loved Lamar Latham was difficult to ascertain – cats being cats. It was not difficult to ascertain how people felt about Lamar Latham – people being people. They hated him. He wielded a sharp tongue, was ever critical, and delighted in highlighting the mistakes and weaknesses of others. He terrified children and sent them screaming for home by mounting his menacing frown and brandishing his heavy cane in their direction. He kicked dogs just because they came close enough to kick.

Lamar Latham was not a nice person.

There was one exception on the human side of those relationships – Annabelle Mosby, fourteen years his junior. She tolerated both cats and Lamar Latham. Lamar lived in apartment 201 directly above Annabelle in 101. It was a small, three-story, wooden walk up, apartment building with rotting window sills and peeling white paint. In front, it had been built up to the sidewalk in the days before mandated setbacks and building codes, and sat in what had become the transition area between old town and new town in a medium sized, upper Midwestern, city.

Everybody knew Annabelle as a capable, good-hearted, sensible, lady. Nobody could understand how or why she put up with Lamar. “She’s a saint,” some would say apparently easing their guilt through that recognition. “Has the

patience of Job,” others would say, apparently easing their guilt through that recognition. Annabelle remained above it all and never commented as to the why or how of the matter. (Saints with the patience of Job don't have to justify their behavior.)

The aging residents lived from one government check to the next and none had significant income beyond that. Well, it was known that Lamar did receive a pension check but others were not privy to the amount or other details. Rumor had it he was wealthy. His living situation, of course, suggested otherwise. Another belief was that he clandestinely owned the building and lived off their rents. Within that tight knit circle of aging residents, reality never trumped rumor. Many were therefore jealous of Lamar and a few of them figured Annabelle knew something they didn't, and was intending to somehow cash in through her kindness and assistance to the old reprobate. Why else would she be investing so much time and energy on his behalf? Still, none of them demonstrated any inclination to help or comfort him or improve their relationship with 'Old 201' as he was often called.

Annabelle did know things. Annabelle never shared things. She kept Lamar's records – bank book, legal documents – deposited his several sizable checks each month, and wrote and mailed the letters he dictated. She sent cards on relatives' birthdays although Lamar could have cared less. He had alienated them early on and, to his satisfaction, they made no effort to contact him. She made sure he ate well and took his medicines. At least twice a week, weather permitting, she cajoled him into taking walks with her along the aging sidewalks in the ever-changing neighborhood. She assisted him up and down the stairs.

Unbeknownst to the residents, Lamar harbored a second soft spot – other than the one for cats. He had been raised by his grandparents – his very poor grandparents. He had seen them suffer because of it and believed poverty was an unfair fate to foist on the aged generation. In his will, he had therefore remembered each resident with a modest bequest. His estate was to be divided with a large donation to his favorite and only charity – an organization for the care and

treatment of abandoned cats – and a lesser amount for the residents. Annabelle was included for her one share like the others. Annabelle would not complain about that. The charity – C-C.A.T.S (Cat Care and Treatment Services) – had actually been discovered for Lamar by Annabelle many years before when he expressed an interest in finding such an organization. He made sizeable monthly donations. It was the only thing in life that made him feel good inside.

‘Things’ began happening. Unpleasant things. Scary things. Malicious things. At one point the screws in Lamar’s front door knob had been loosened so he was unable to get out of his apartment. The single window leading to the iron fire escape was nailed shut with large, strong, spikes. His morning newspaper was stolen, periodically. His mailbox had been broken into – apparently chiseled open at the lock. There had even been written death threats – three of them mailed to him. They presented no explanation. Each was the same: “Death to Old 201” scrawled with a blue marker on cheap pink stationary.

Lamar wanted to go rapping on doors and root out the scoundrel or scoundrels responsible. Annabelle helped him understand how that would only make matters worse. Being mum about it and not giving the culprit the satisfaction of knowing that it was bothering him would be the best course. If, later on, it became necessary, they could call in the police. She pointed out that if the threats were coming from one of the enfeebled residents, it was doubtful any one of them was capable of causing the old man’s death.

It did, however, lead Lamar to change his will. It was a savvy move for a man whose old brain was as well used as his. In all honesty, the idea may have been prompted by an offhand remark from Annabelle as she expressed her disgust at the unnerving goings on. Lamar had Annabelle prepare a note for each resident. It read in part: “In case of my death from natural causes, one quarter of my estate will go to C-C.A.T.S and the rest will be divided equally among the current residents here in the apartment house. It will be a substantial sum. If, however, my death is caused by accident or suspected foul play, my entire estate will go to C-C.A.T.S.”

The message was clear: Help keep the old man alive

and free from accidents, and you will be rewarded. Fail in that and you will not.

Annabelle arranged for Lamar's attorney to make it all legal and a week later, the new will was signed, notarized, and sealed safely in the attorney's vault.

Unfortunately for the residents, a few days later, Lamar Latham, was found on the floor of the first level entry hall, dead from an obvious fall down the stairs. It came as no surprise. He had experienced difficulty making the climb for years. Annabelle had often privately thought a simple pat on his back would send him tumbling. The coroner ruled it an accident – and accident was not a natural cause. Too bad, residents.

* * *

A week later, as Annabelle was tidying up her apartment – placing into a white trash bag things she wanted to get rid of – she got a call from her bank.

“The C-C.A.T.S. account at our bank, which is in your name, has received a very large deposit from the estate of Lamar Latham – just over one million dollars. Shall we also transfer that into your personal account the way you have instructed us do with his smaller monthly deposits in the past?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Annabelle smiled as she continued to place things into the trash bag – the hammer and small sack of spikes, the Phillips screwdriver, a dozen newspapers still in their yellow plastic sacks, the metal chisel, what was left of a pad of pink stationery, and a large, blue, marker. She wouldn't need them in her new, twelfth floor, luxury, apartment overlooking the pristine sandy beaches of South Florida.

STORY THIRTEEN
The Melding
By Tom Gnagey

"I don't see how this email thing is helping me any, Doctor Wilson.

"Now, Jerry. You agreed to try it once a day for two months. Three days just isn't enough time. Problems such as yours often take years to resolve. I believe this new method will shorten that considerably."

"I guess. Will I ever get to meet this guy, Neil, that I'm corresponding with?"

"After all of this is over I think that would be a great idea. You can meet right here in fact and then see what happens between you from there."

"Sounds good. Can I tell him that?"

"Certainly. Like I said at the outset, you can say anything you want to. I'll never see the emails."

"I assume Neil's also a patient of yours."

"You are free to assume whatever. You might consider asking him."

"Oh, yeah. Dumb me. I see. You want this to be just between him and me. Okay."

* * *

"Are you sure this email process will be of any real value, Doctor Wilson?"

"Now, Neil. We agreed that you'd give it a fair trial period. You understand it often takes years to resolve your type of problem. I think this procedure has a good chance of shortening that considerably."

“I know. But email? To a complete stranger?”

“Jerry had similar feelings for a while but he resolved them. He asked if, after all this over, he could meet you. I suppose that will be up to you. It’s all right with me.”

“We’ll see, I guess. I don’t really know him that well, yet. He may turn out to be a total jerk who I’d never want to talk to again.”

“I understand that. I think it’s wise for you not to rush into any commitments this early.”

* * *

Dear Neil – Doc insists we keep up this email thing a while longer. Hope you’re okay with it. I like Doc okay but sometimes it seems like he’s trying awfully hard to change me in ways I’m not sure I want. You ever feel that way? I sometimes wonder why he has the power to tell me how I should be – how I should want to be, you know? We’re supposed to get to know each other better so let me tell you a bit more about me. I’m six feet, black hair, blue eyes. Since I’ve been feeling down I’ve sort of let myself get out of shape but I’m thinking about going back to the gym. I write short stories – horror, usually. Been moderately successful in the market place. They scare the hell out of me so I assume they do the same for others. Doc never comments about that but he does read them. I like to bike and hike. Dislike fishing and hunting – too tender hearted – odd, I suppose for a writer of horrifically bloody stories. I guess that’s about the dozen lines we’re committed to exchange every day. Tomorrow, then. Jerry (not my pen name, by the way.)

Jerry: I think I can see why our doctor hooked us up. I am also a writer – historical novels mostly – massive, generation long wars. Where you are probably satisfied with five or ten thousand words, I feel unfulfilled with fewer than 200,000. I write every day. How about you? I have six books published and one in the oven. Unlike you I love to hunt and fish but prefer that my SUV takes me into the wild. Not big on either biking or walking except for limited traipsing through the woods during the hunt. Doubt if I could still stay upright on two wheels. You have blue eyes so I assume you’re white – so am I, not that that’s really important to me. I’m no longer

married – my wife of five years said she couldn't tolerate my mood swings and left. Been alone ten years now. I don't blame her. I'm either really up or really down – never suicidal but would sure change places with most anybody when I'm down. Neil

Dear Neil – Sorry about your marriage. I have a similar story. She's better off away from me and I'm probably better off away from her. I guess I've always been pretty set in my ways – so set that sometimes I bother myself (smile). That was nice. I seldom smile anymore. Anyway, I didn't want to keep hurting her. The character I've been writing had his head blow up last night – a nitro pill gone awry. I laughed 'til I cried. Or I laughed so I wouldn't cry. Sometimes I'm not sure. When this correspondence is over, I'd like to read your stuff. I would never have the patience or stamina to keep at a piece through that many words. Ten thousand and I'm out of there. My goldfish died last night. I shed a tear or two. Odd, I guess because I hadn't had him all that long. I've never taken losses well. How about you – are you okay with questions? Tomorrow, then. Jerry.

Jerry: Ask away. If I don't want to answer I won't. Losses pretty well just roll off my back. I don't dwell on things once they're over. Doc says it's my way of not attending to experiences that could help me learn about others and myself. I use my writing for that. Good clashes with Evil. Evil wins right up to the last page where right always triumphs – like most authors write, I guess. Doc thinks I really enjoy contemplating the evil aspects of the human species but then fix it at the end to ease my conscious. You just blow people's heads up so I assume you don't let yourself be bothered by the bad stuff. I never read horror pieces. Can't promise I will later on. My publisher likes what I've written on this new piece so far and predicts it will please my readers. That's important to him - dollars, I suppose. I could care less if I please people. I write pieces I like. I've trashed half-finished novels my publisher liked just because I didn't like how they were going. Neil

Dear Neil – Finished the ‘exploding head’ piece. Started a piece where the victims get impaled on giant spears stuck upright in the ground. My horror is always inflicted by a character with good intentions – goes after illicit evil in his own licit evil ways. I sometimes wonder if I pattern those guys after myself. I don’t like thinking about such a possibility. Do you read? If so what? I seldom read except the newspaper where I get most of my ideas for my horror pieces. It’s everywhere. In a way that front page is a composite of one big, continuing, horror story that’s been going on for generations. You ever consider that? The world is a terrible place and the human race diligently sees to it that it remains that way. I see little kids on the sidewalks and feel so badly that by the time they are my age there probably won’t even be a world left that can sustain any semblance of a civil society. Hope that didn’t bring you down. Jerry

Jerry: You asked. Yes you bring me down. You seem to allow no room for hope. I know that probably sounds strange coming from ‘let it roll off my back, Neil’. But I write about hope – may take the long way around but in the end my stuff represents hope. You seem to write about senseless, revolutive, human desecration. How can that improve the world or give humanity direction toward a positive resolution of its many problems? The more I know about you the more I really don’t like you. Sorry, but that’s how it is and if this interchange between us is to be of any benefit to either receiver or sender, I think we need to be honest. I’m really bothered by the idea that there seems to be a significant number of readers who seek out your kind of bleak and bloody celebration of the horrific annihilation of mankind – even if one at a time. Neil

Dear Neil – You’ll not believe this but I actually started a regular, no decapitations or snake pits, ‘good wins over evil’, piece last night. I think you are being a bad influence on me. (Again, I smile. Nice!) You miss the point that I try to make in my pieces – that even within the horrendous side of man’s nature, good can prevail. I guess you can’t understand that if you’re not willing to read in the horror genre. A cop can arrest

and a judge convict an evildoer or a vigilante can disembowel him on the spot. Both ways justice is served – good wins. In the second case the personal satisfaction is immediate and complete. There is obvious and satisfying closure. Never that way in the courts or civil life. The inordinate amount of time from crime to punishment via the courts typically engenders hardship, heartbreak, frustration, and eventually rage that overflows into more vengeful behavior. I have to wonder how different our audiences really are if yours are willing – eager – to work through four hundred pages of Evil’s many triumphs in order to get to that final page of Good’s single victory. Is it the journey or the arrival at the destination after which they really thirst? We both seem to make the point that evil is easy and good is difficult. It is why mankind’s wisest thinkers down through history invented religion to provide man with an external method of for controlling his basically evil inclinations.
Jerry

Jerry: You better stick to your horror pieces. Your readers will be disappointed with any deviation. I get your point – not to the extent you present – but it has given me sufficient cause for reflection and contemplation. My pieces might well be better served if I provided a series of small victories before the final crushing of the evil force. If your characterization of my audience is accurate, such a modification would probably alienate them. Bummer, as my pizza delivery boy would say. We both may soon be looking for work. I can see it now. The only alternative profession left for those steeped in the devising of evil, self-serving, plots – such as ourselves – will be politics. (My turn to smile.) Your final comment interests me. If man is truly the rational being he purports to be, how can he swallow and allow the fully irrational concepts of religion to control him? Perhaps his evil impulses give rise to an overriding need to be controlled and since he cannot do that himself he is willing to blindly (and irrationally) give himself over to control by the horrific eternal punishments promised for evil deeds by religions. Things to ponder. Neil

Dear Neil – Your pizza boy sounds a lot like mine. I

doubt if that mentality ever reads either of us. (Bummer!) (Smile) Isn't it pathetic that we have to emphasize the few things in our lives that bring us smiles? I suppose that really isn't a question. I have been thinking a lot about what I dislike about myself. I hate it that I'm so concerned about the welfare of others – it seems more important than my own. Wish I could be more like you – 'to hell with you, reader; if you don't like my stuff then just don't read it'. Maybe I write gore because that's how I see man and myself – gore lovers. I feed that to others but then go rescue folks (and dogs and cats) that are abused. I hate it that you enjoy killing animals. You think I just might have some conflicts in that area – me putting humans through excruciatingly painful deaths in my stories and yet I'm on your case for killing rabbits with a clean, single, shot? By the way, I've begun a novel. Won't go more than eighty or a hundred thousand words but what you do intrigues me. Don't know if my ten-year-old male character can find enough teachers to disembowel to fill that many pages or not, but I'm rooting for him. Sorry if I went over the line limit. Jerry

Dear Jerry - Your new storyline sickens me. How can you write such stuff? Do you want to be that little kid doing that horrible stuff? Glad you don't have my address. I was a teacher, briefly, right out of college. You need to see a psychiatrist – Oh, you are. (smile) For some reason – fully foreign to my tried and true approach to human interaction – I want you to know that I only kill what I can eat – never just killing to be killing like you seem to enjoy writing about. I feel superior to you. How do you react to that? Sounds like your pieces are mostly based on revenge motivation. That will lead to the destruction of mankind, you know. In my pieces the good guys just stand up for right – no trying to get back at anybody who 'done them wrong' (or their fathers or father's fathers). This is making me mad. I'm going to stop. Neil

Dear Neil: - I feel superior to you because I only write about killing whereas you actually do it – all in a methodical, cold-hearted, fashion, apparently. On a more interesting note, I was also a teacher years back. I truly doubt if any of my

students wanted to do me in – quickly or otherwise. I must admit I do sort of get a kick out of letting my characters act out their revenge tendencies. Perhaps it's therapeutic for them. (Smile) And, like the rational being I am, yes, I do have to realize that a society based on vengeance will inevitably destroy itself. Perhaps some part of me hopes my readers will ferret that out of my stories on their own – extrapolate the vengeance thing out to its logical conclusion – only one man can be left standing in the end after “the I get him for what he did to me and then he gets me for what I did in retaliation, and then my son . . .” well, you know the unavoidable drill and its certain outcome. At the outset, I had no idea our interchanges would become so heavy. I'm not sure I like that. For some reason through this I have also become mad at you. Jerry

Dear Jerry: You got mad, you know, because you had to admit – at least to yourself – that you enjoy taking revenge. I'll bet you even sit and plan how you're going to get back at folks you think have wronged you. Maybe then you write about it – fictionalize it to pacify your conscious. You like the idea of killing – people, it would seem – but you can't admit it to yourself. I've decided that what I enjoy about hunting is, one, the stalking and tracking – outsmarting the game, and, two, making the accurate shot. I could separate those into two activities: Just track game for the fun of it – maybe even take pictures, and second shoot at targets. I can get meat at the market. I suppose we both understand that the cows, pigs and chickens don't just walk up to the packager and drop dead for him. There is killing involved. Perhaps you are a vegetarian. I should have asked, I suppose. There. We both have something to tell the Doc – I stopped killing and it was largely due to your influence. Unbelievable! Happy? MNeil

Neil – I'm not a vegetarian so I have no grounds for calling you out about your hunting – hunting for food you eat. Hope I didn't inflict some terrible trauma. Have you noticed how we have influenced each other? At times, I think that is a remarkably good thing. At other times, I curse it. What right does the Universe to have make me become like somebody else. Maybe we are getting each other's best traits and giving

up our poorest. Still, can you imagine the two of out there as perfect clones? A fully unacceptable idea. I'm going to suggest to doc that we stop this. Jerald

Jerald – Trying out still another signature name, I see. I, too, see us sharing our good traits and losing our bad ones. Unlike you, I'm not sure it's not a good thing. We could never be clones. I'm fairly pleased with the changes I'm seeing in myself. I figure if later on I don't like them I have the power to change them. Maybe this is what doc intends – for us to explore alternatives and make choices. Maybe that's why he matched such different sorts as us. Don't be concerned about the trauma. I figure that's what therapy is all about. Certainly, you see that – it's the controlled initiation and resolution of one trauma after another. Traumas emerging from or perhaps at the seat of our sicknesses. MNeil

Neil- I'm having difficulty with my writing. That's your fault. My pieces have always scared me but now they also paint me as a sick, twisted man with very thinly veiled, compulsive, desires to inflict unspeakable pain and suffering on others. The last short piece I started scares the hell out of me. It is a writer who, after he stops writing for the night, is attacked by his characters and is subjected to a tortuous death. That has now gone on for over a week. He pleads for them to alleviate his agony by immediately giving him the peace that comes with death. Instead, they let up a bit. His pain lingers and grows. I have no end to write, only the proliferation of more agony and torment. I can't return to write and yet I must find and provide a resolution. Damn you! - G

Jerry: Not to the extent about which you write, but my pieces, too, have developed intense and impossible dilemmas beyond which I cannot move – yet I must. On the surface, Jerry, we may appear very different – you needing to explore the most horrific side of man yet tender hearted and needing to be liked, and I exploring how – because there is hope – good can always triumph, not caring what others think about me, and respecting the rule of law (which, with your vigilante mentality, you clearly don't). Deep inside, however, we are

like two peas in a pod, both struggling to control the same demon while we relish the pursuit of evil and enjoy executing evil deeds all the while privately believing we should be pursuing good. We are both afraid of the person we will find ourselves to be and already understand that we will detest him. No wonder we have allowed ourselves to become mired in words, which keep it all at a distance where it can be more easily allowed and disavowed. Was it not for our penchant for story telling we would both undoubtedly have become fully uncontrolled mass murders perpetrating the most gruesome atrocities on those we, in our warped worlds, believe are in some way fundamentally out of line. Perhaps you actually are such a person away from your keyboard – for all I really know. Perhaps I am, for all you really know. We are unforgiveable bastards at heart, but doc must see some glimmers of hope among the entrails in which we revel. That or he's willing to milk his large fees from anyone unable to defy him. McNeil

Dear Neil – What you say is probably well taken. I was happier – less distraught, I suppose would better characterize it – before you pointed it out. I also see a growing inconsistency within both of us. Doc says inconsistency is a fertile bed in which to grow positive change. I imagine he means that as one gives up the security provided by his irrational certainties – which may not only be ill-advised but also outright harmful – there is an opportunity for reorganization, for a new consistency to evolve based less on absolutes than on reasonable probabilities that morph over time, but which make sense at any given moment. (Don't require me to diagram that sentence!) That allows for positive growth, which can never occur so long as one is chained to his desperate belief in unvarying, unalterable, truths. I feel a large part of myself falling apart – fading away, perhaps. It is scary. How about you? - G

Jerry/Gerald/G, whoever - Interesting. I am having the same experiences that you describe. What doc says makes sense – I don't like it but it makes sense. It's like erasing all the suddenly, clearly, errant entries in a cryptogram solution and reassembling the letters until they provide a meaningful

solution. Tearing down a brittle structure and rebuilding it solid enough yet flexible enough to span the ages. I guess this email thing has been therapeutic for us after all. I know we both expressed reservations at the outset. I had an interesting thought as I sat here wondering how to respond to you this morning. I still dislike you (something I would never have been able to admit three months ago) but it is as if you are also my best friend. I've learned so much from you that has been important in my progress. Part of me never wants to think about you again after this is over – certainly never meet you. Part of me wants to embrace you and set up a regular coffee time on into eternity. MNeil

Neil- So, Doc wants us to make an appointment with him where we can both attend. Like you, I am really resisting the idea. I appreciate you, also, but I really don't know if I can take meeting you. It is fully irrational and I can't explain it. It's as if coming face to face will destroy what secure self I have emerging here. I have a picture of you in my head and it is surely to be inaccurate in most ways. I don't want to replace it. Doc says it is necessary for me to see you as you are. He says my inner picture of you is really not all that different from reality. That in itself causes anxiety to well up within me. Are you ready to meet? I know you've expressed reservations every bit as extreme as mine. What's with the MNeil signature, by the way? You've used it twice. GM.

Jerry/Gerald: My signature things must have been typos. I'm not a proficient typist, keyboarder, whatever it's called these days. I could ask you about changing from Jerry to Gerald to G and last time GM. I doubt they are typos but that's your business. I almost didn't email this morning. I was ready to crawl in a hole and never come out. I hate the idea of meeting you. It's like we have been able to say things through the secure disguises of our email avatars that I'm not sure I want to face up to in person, if that makes any sense. It's like writing somebody a hateful note because you can't bring yourself to say the things in person and then running into them at the grocery. I guess I'm past that now – not the feelings – they just keep getting worse – but doc's been right about

everything else so I've decided I need to trust him on this, as well. I'll be in his office at 10:00 tomorrow morning. I have never so eagerly anticipated such a thoroughly terrifying event in my life. There is bound to be an absolutely horrific story in that. McNeil

A man entered the office – six feet, black hair, blue eyes, just a bit of a bulge around his mid-section.

“Good morning,” Dr. Wilson said. “Have a seat.”

The doctor closed the door and clicked the lock like always then moved to his seat behind his desk.

There were three chairs. The man who had entered took the center one.

“I believe it is the first time you have selected that chair,” the doctor said. “You have always used another – the same one each session.”

The man shrugged.

“It feels right here, today. I'm on time. Did my counterpart chicken out?”

“No. He's here,” the doctor said watching the man's face.

The man tilted his head like an inquisitive puppy. His tightening brow indicated puzzlement.

“Will you state your name, please?” the doctor asked.

The man shrugged, clearly thinking it an odd request. Still, he answered. His smile was forced and suggested discomfort.

“Gerald McNeil. Why do you ask?”

“You tell me. You are ready to finally do that now.”

The man looked around the room, clearly taken by the chair to his right and then the chair to his left. All quite suddenly he clutched the arms of his chair with whitened knuckles. His face indicated distress and confusion. He leaned forward as if to stand, perhaps making ready to leave, then fell back. He set a decided stare into nowhere. All quite gradually his brow relaxed; his frown eased. Tears flowed. He began nodding and sobbing, bending into his lap, and burying his face in his hands.

The doctor waited. The man sobbed. Twenty minutes passed. Eventually, the man looked up, studying the doctor's

white-bearded face over several silent moments.

“I’ve been living as two people, two personalities, haven’t I, Doc? You’ve put us back together. Thank you – Jerry, Neil, and Gerald McNeil all thank you.”

He smiled through his exhaustion. That time, however, it came with a genuine ease.

He folded his hands in his lap, sighed the mother of all sighs, settled back into the chair, and spoke.

“Now, I suppose, the real work begins.”

STORY FOURTEEN
Benny's Risky Wager
By Tom Gnagey

Uncharacteristically, Benny suggested the wager. He was a cautious man. All quite characteristically Calvin not only accepted it but raised the stakes considerably. He was a greedy, unprincipled man. Had it not been for the breaking story about Benny's recent lottery winnings Calvin would have scoffed at his suggestion.

Benny was a thirty-year-old small time magician who worked clubs and birthday parties. He did well enough to maintain the simple life of a bachelor. He had come to Oak Grove six months before and was immediately liked by the folks who lived there. Calvin had lived in the suburban community all his life having inherited the local bank from his father who had done the same from his father. Calvin was not well liked. It was generally believed that he cheated bank patrons in numerous ways from unspecified fees on accounts to hidden, escalating interest rates on loans. He always stayed at least marginally within the law.

Five months before, Calvin had succumbed to a strange malady that had left him confined to a wheelchair. Although the specialists didn't understand the nature of the condition, after an extensive battery of examinations and tests, told him not to expect to ever walk again. He took that news as justification for his increased irritability and whatever it spawned in terms of his deceitful financial dealings.

Just prior to Calvin's misfortune, Benny had approached him at the bank for a business loan. His plan was

to open a magic shop where he would sell the paraphernalia and teach classes. Initially Calvin turned him down – it was his ploy to eventually approve a plan involving hurtfully high interest and assure ultimate foreclosure. It was Calvin's style to be loud and boisterous. It was Benny's style to speak in low tones – a monotone many called it. At that time, Benny rejected the high interest loan offer, saying he would look elsewhere.

It was not the first dealing Benny – at least his family – had undertaken with Calvin's bank. Years before, his father had unwisely made a series of financial transactions with the bank. It had involved first mortgages followed by second mortgages, followed by loans on everything of value the man owned. In the end, his father lost everything. So, one had to wonder why Benny would return to try and use that bank.

Five months later, Benny returned to see Calvin, ostensibly bolstered by his recent winnings to rub his newly found wealth in the old man's face. The conversation became animated and one thing led to another. Nobody seems to know for sure how it came about but before the meeting was over, Benny got caught up in 'betting fever' as it was sometimes called in wagering addicts. He bet Calvin he would be out of his wheelchair within the month. Calvin, having the best medical advice available to back him up, took the bet and raised the stakes as high as Benny would go – a cool million dollars. The essential details were worked out – if Calvin was walking on or before June first, he would pay the million dollars to Benny. If, by then, he were not able to walk, Benny would pay Calvin a million dollars. In any sane adult's judgment, it had been an absurd bet on Benny's part.

The deal was witnessed by the mayor, the chief of police, and both men's attorneys.

On the morning of June first, the same participants gathered in Calvin's office. Calvin was delighted, knowing he was about to best his competition.

Benny moved to a position beside Calvin where he sat in his wheelchair. He leaned down close to the man's ear and whispered in his practiced monotone. "I will count backwards from three to one. At one, the previous hypnotic suggestion will no longer effect you. You will have no memory of it and

will stand and walk. Three, two, one.”

Calvin stood and walked. He frowned.

Benny held out his palm. He smiled.

The others looked from one to another. They looked puzzled.

Many magicians are accomplished hypnotists. Benny was one of the best – at least one of the best who had never won a dime in any lottery.

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STORY FIFTEEN
Private Adams, CSA*
By Tom Gnagey

(*Confederate States of America)

From the moment Daniel Nathaniel Adams showed up on the Wilson's doorstep as a newborn, until . . . well, that would spoil the story. At any rate, Danny was never what one might call a typical kid – not at four, not at eight, not at twelve, and not at seventeen when this tale unfolds.

The Wilson's found him in a basket, on their front porch, on April 9th, only hours after he had been born – the best estimate of Doc. Carter. Accordingly, they set his birthday as the 9th and kept the name for him, which was pinned to the blanket that covered him. John Wilson was an attorney and took care of the adoption details. Peggy was a high school history teacher who took immediate leave so she could care for the young miracle that had entered their lives. In their middle forties, they were overjoyed to receive the child they had never been able to have.

For all his compulsive idiosyncrasies, Danny was always one of those easy to love people. As a small boy, he hugged and kissed and enjoyed lap time and tucking in time. The other children liked him and adults adored him. His broad smile wouldn't stop. His open and eager attitude attracted others to him. As is said of a select few, he never knew a stranger.

As to his quirks, foibles, eccentricities: He was obsessed with the Civil War and from an early age could

quote dates, and battles, and generals, and strategies. He had toy soldiers and armaments set up on a large table in his room where he reenacted battles. He preferred to be called Private Adams but his parents and teachers drew the line at that. He lived with their decision about it but still signed his school papers Danny Adams, PFC, CSA. He consciously and all quite naturally acquired and fostered a southern accent. It was looked upon as quaint by the locals who accepted it as just one more self-imposed peculiarity of that delightful Adams boy.

It may well have been easier to pretend to be a Confederate in the north than to pretend to be a Yankee in the south. Regardless, it seemed to cause no friction there in central Indiana. For his tenth birthday, his mother made Danny a replica, gray, uniform complete right down to hat and canteen. He wore it until neither pants nor jacket could be buttoned. It was then given a place of honor on the wall above his bed.

By the time he was fourteen, Danny could hold his own with any Civil War scholar in the area and enjoyed spending time with the professors of American History out at the university. Initially they accepted him as a curiosity. Soon, however, he was treated as an equal that sent the PhDs scurrying to verify many of his contentions. He seldom stopped at the facts of a matter but would transform them into emotion laden monologs, worthy of a fine historical novelist. Several of his stories had received praise and awards on a national level.

For all intents and purposes, he was Daniel Nathaniel Adams, Sgt., CSA. At fifteen he purchased an fully accurate replica of a Confederate Soldier's uniform from skivvies to the belt and boots. He'd don it when he made the circuit of elementary schools, regaling the students with his one man, Civil War, saga that brought history to life and always inspired applause and invitations to return. There in Bowling Green, Danny had become something of a celebrity.

He didn't have much time for sports though had become an expert marksman with single shot, ball and powder, long guns. He also excelled in cross-country running. He liked girls and dated but never went steady. Whether that

was his preference or that girls in general were put off by his constant references to the smell of gun powder and the agonizing screams of wounded and dying soldiers is a matter for conjecture – well, probably not.

He immersed himself so completely in the Civil War that from the time he entered school he experienced horrendous, battle-centered, nightmares. As unpleasant as they were, he would immediately sit up on the edge of his bed and dutifully record them in detail before they faded from his mind. He kept a pad and pen on his nightstand. Through the years, he had filled many pads. Through the years, he had missed many hours of sleep.

His dietary preference was salt pork and raw potatoes along with seasonal fruit picked locally from trees and bushes. He was resigned, however, to eating whatever his mother sat before him. He preferred jerky to sweets, and sourdough bread and cheese to burgers and fries. His friends allowed it without comment because, as has been said, Danny was an ever loveable, kind, unassuming, and helpful young man.

Danny worked part time at the small, county, Veteran's Museum. During his three years there, he had pretty much single handedly developed the Civil War displays. He had meticulously designed and created dioramas depicting battles and troop movements. He had sought out and restored photographs, tintypes, and paintings of soldiers and the statesmen of the era. He gathered books and documents that brought it all together for those who truly wanted to understand the nature of, and the course of, the War Between the States – as, he often pointed out, it was always referred to in official government documents.

The reddish, soft brick, building in which the museum was housed was a relic of the past. Built as the town's first hospital, it had been the sight of several museums of local interest, a dance hall, innumerable political candidates' campaign headquarters, and even – from time to time to time – a house of ill repute. Because of that history, the attic and basement were brimming with long lost artifacts from the area's past. Danny delighted in rummaging through them. When he would come home sporting a dank, musty, odor, his parents knew where he'd been and what he'd been up to (and

most times they were right!). They listened with genuine interest as he went on endlessly about his finds and the insights or additional questions each provided. He was in every way the delight of his parents' lives.

He always shared his finds. Most recently he had come across a wooden box, stashed away inside a weather tight chest, which dated from the mid-eighteen hundreds. It had sat unnoticed for more than a century on a rock ledge in a far corner of the museum's basement. He immediately recognized it as a fully misplaced oddity. Struck into one of the metal bands that encircled the trunk were the initials, CSA. At first sight it triggered an unimaginable adrenalin rush for the young man.

With the permission of the curator, he opened it, and with great care sorted through its contents. The Confederate trunk could have been a souvenir brought home after the war by some local, Union, soldier. That would have accounted for its presence so far north of the Mason/Dixon line. He removed the wooden box from inside and pried open the lid fastened in place with square, iron, nails. The contents proved to be a treasure trove. There was a complete, woolen, Confederate uniform still soiled with red clay grime and the blackened, dry, blood of battle. There were boots and a hat and gloves and a belt and powder horn. There was a sidearm in a leather holster – a rare find as handguns were unheard of among privates – as was the rank indicated by the insignia on the sleeve of the jacket.

There was a well-used Bible into which several printed sheets had been slipped presumably for safe keeping. There were three books about the founding fathers and early government. There was note paper that folded into an envelope and a quill pen and small, squat, bottle that had once contained ink. There were three pictures: one most likely of the soldier's mother and father, one of a girl in her teens signed with love, and one of three young soldiers standing together on a small rise with rifles at their sides. They were solemn of face and military of posture. The one on the right held the banner of their troop draped from a six-foot pole. There were other odds and ends including a small mirror in a hard leather case, a hair brush, extra boot laces,

high woolen stockings, and a vial of white powder – probably medicine for ague or something to ease foot fungus, Danny surmised. He was drawn to the buttons on the jacket – metal, which still showed fragments of white paint. He ran his fingers across them, going back to them several times. Something about that felt quite special – touching the very buttons that the soldier, himself, had touched.

Later, he examined the picture of the soldiers more closely – mostly to gather details of their clothing and weapons. At first glance they could have been teen boys from any era, one looking very much like the others.

Not exactly!

The one in the middle-caught Danny's eye and deserved further inspection. He looked at it under a magnifying glass.

"Oh, my!"

He scanned it into Photoshop and did this and that to enhance the image. It was nothing he could explain and certainly was nothing he was ready to share. That boy could have been his twin. That boy could have been him. What were the odds?

Apparently good enough, he thought, although he set the picture aside and did not present it to the curator. Initially, he accepted it as nothing more than a grin producing coincidence that joyfully nurtured his bond to the era with which he felt such a connection. Over a period of days, however, that feeling transformed into a state of definite unease.

The photos eventually made their way to his room where he hid them behind books on a shelf. Every night he studied them. Every night he wondered about the boy. On one of those occasions an idea occurred to him; could it be that somehow, he was related to that person. Perhaps the young soldier was his great, great, something, grandfather. It could be. The next day he made his preparations. He pulled a hair from his head and sealed it inside a small plastic bag. From the hairbrush in the museum he removed three hairs, still there all those years later, and sealed them in a second bag. Bag one he labeled "A". Bag two he labeled "B". He delivered them to Dr. Benet, a professor acquaintance in the

medical school at the university. He asked if the DNA of the two samples could be compared. He took the man into his confidence, showing him the enhanced photograph of the soldier, sharing the story about his own unknown parentage, and offering his puppy dog eyes that usually still got him most anything he wanted. In the interest of history, the professor agreed.

On the morning of April 6th, three days before Danny's eighteenth birthday he received a call and by ten o'clock was in the professor's office.

"Was this some kind of joke, Danny?" the professor asked, clearly puzzled.

"Joke? No. What do you mean, joke?"

The professor laid out two DNA charts on the desk and slid them toward the boy.

"I'm afraid that except for what I've learned about these from watching CSI, I don't really understand them very well."

"They are identical – a one hundred percent match. Both samples had to come from your hair unless of course you're your own grampaw."

The professor smiled, quite sure he had the boy's number and that momentarily they would share a 'got-ya' chuckle.

Danny screwed his forehead and mounted a frown.

"Honestly, Sir, it is no joke. The hair samples came from the sources I indicated to you. How can this be?"

Danny's clear sincerity and the obvious depth of his disturbance moved Dr. Benet to reconsider.

"I'll tell you what I will do, then. Sometimes mistakes are made. If you will supply me with a new set of samples, I'll have them run a second time. Make certain you don't touch the hair taken from the brush."

It was an error he had made the first time. His own body oils and flakes of skin could well have contaminated the sample.

Danny agreed and left, puzzled and deeply disturbed that part of him really wanted to believe the truth of that first report. Over the next several days Danny grew uneasy. So obvious was his state of distress that his parents became concerned and confronted him about it. Danny dismissed it

with his wonderful smile and some vague reference to stressing over graduation and beginning college in the fall.

The second DNA comparison verified the first.

There are several things left to relate – not to explain. Just to relate.

The article in the Bowling Green newspaper filled two full columns on the front page. As should be the case with good journalism, the first paragraph told the story.

Local, beloved, teen ager, Daniel (Danny) Nathaniel Adams, disappeared without a trace during the early morning hours of April 9th, his eighteenth birthday. There was no note and no evidence of foul play. Lying open on his bed was a 150-year-old Bible, its cover stamped in gold with the name Daniel Adams. A folded sheet of paper lay on it; the death certificate of a confederate soldier, Daniel Nathaniel Adams, who died in battle near dawn on April 9th, his eighteenth birthday, 1865 – the final day of the Civil War.

There was a second newspaper article of note. That one published on April tenth – the day after Daniel's disappearance. It made page three in the Daily Ledger of Grand Hope, Mississippi, a small town a thousand miles south of Bowling Green.

Dr. and Mrs. David Spencer, longtime residents of Grand Hope, report that early on the morning of April 9th, they discovered a newborn baby boy in a basket on their front steps. Pinned to the blanket that covered him was . . .

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STORY SIXTEEN
Chip off the Old Block
Tom Gnagey

There is no nice way of putting it. Rupert was a violent drunk. Maggie, his wife of fifty years, had lived her life loving him sober and hating him drunk. He seldom hurt her – and then mostly by awkward accident – but his vitriolic tirades and destructive rampages sorely tested her sacred commitment to their union. She told herself she should have known better – he turned out just like his father.

She had learned to turn off his haranguing. She waited out his throwing and smashing. She quietly tended to her own occasional bruises. But the evening he killed Roseanne he had finally gone too far.

Roseanne had been with them for nine years. She had been a good and loyal companion for Maggie – purrfect one might say. Roseanne had been their beloved cat – white with spots of tan and burnt orange. She had often stood between Maggie and Rupert as he would stagger in his wife's direction, hand raised. She would hiss and leap up at him, digging her claws into his chest. Unlike Maggie, Rosanne was not forgiving and would attack Rupert intoxicated or not.

Once Rupert had calmed down that evening, Maggie helped him into his recliner in the living room. She tipped him back so he could rest.

"Supper in twenty minutes," she told him, still teary eyed over her recent loss.

He closed his eyes.

She proceeded to fix the meal opting for sandwiches

and raw veggies with dip. Rupert loved lemonade with shaved ice. On hot summer days, like they were experiencing, he would often go through a gallon or more of the drink in one evening. Maggie kept ten pound blocks of ice in the freezer and chipped off sections to run through the small, portable, shaver that sat on the kitchen counter. The ice cube maker in their old refrigerator would just not keep up with his demands. Anyway, Rupert preferred the crystal-clear ice that came from the larger blocks.

With the table set and the lemonades poured, Maggie donned two oven mitts, went to the freezer, and removed the new block of ice. She carried it into the living room and without so much as a 'here's to ya' or 'good-bye old sot', she raised it high and slammed it down onto Rupert's head. There was nothing dainty about the buxom Maggie Mallory.

She returned the ice to the freezer, went out onto the front porch, broke the window in the door, and, leaving it ajar, returned to the kitchen and removed her mitts. She placed Rosanne in a shoe box and sat it in the cool of the basement steps – only a temporary resting place until a more eternally appropriate casket could be located. She put on her best, newly widowed, weep, and called the police.

"A robber has broken into our house and attacked my husband. I'm afraid he may be dead."

The voice at the other end assured her that a patrol car would be there within a few minutes.

Maggie hung up and moved back to the recliner. She removed Rupert's wallet from his pants pocket and, slipping it into her roomy bra, returned to the kitchen where she sat to enjoy her sandwich and lemonade.

A few minutes later the police arrived.

"I was fixing supper," she began explaining to the two young officers while dabbing at the edges of her eyes with a white, lace handkerchief. "I heard a crash. Rupert had been drinking and often broke things when in that state, so, I didn't think much about it. A few minutes later I entered the living room to call him to supper and saw the broken window in the front door. The glass had fallen into the room so I figured it had not been my husband who had broken it with a flying book or vase. Clearly, it had been broken by an intruder in order to

reach in and work the lock from the inside. Then I saw poor Rupert. His forehead was bruised like you see there and he wasn't breathing. I called you."

The policemen talked back and forth.

"Looks like death via the infamous blunt instrument," the taller one said looking around the room.

"From the huge width and breadth of the bruise it had to have been some mother of a blunt instrument – like a shovel or a dictionary from a library-stand," the shorter one added.

"Doubtful if a robber would have brought something that large with him, would you think?" The taller one said.

"Doubtful, I'd agree."

They both nodded. The shorter one put in a call to the precinct for a Detective and the Coroner.

"Anything missing that you know of, Ma'am?"

"Odd, but nothing so far as I can tell. We don't really have anything worth stealing. We keep our money in his wallet. I have a little in a jar in the kitchen. Like I said, not much here. It was payday today. The robber might have known that."

One of the policemen slipped his hand in behind the body.

"No wallet on him. Would he have had it with him?"

"Oh, yes. He had just arrived back from the bar on his way home from work. He works part time as a greeter at a discount store. It should be there. He never took it out until he undressed for bed."

One of the officers removed his hat and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. He made small talk while they waited, hoping to distract Maggie from her grievous sorrow.

"It's been a scorcher today, I'll tell you that," he said.

"How thoughtless of me," Maggie said. "Let me fix you kind young men a pitcher of lemonade."

"That would be very nice. With your permission, Ma'am, we'll just nose around here and see if we can locate that blunt instrument."

"Yes. Please look around. Do whatever you need to do."

The taller officer accompanied her into the kitchen. He looked here and there as Maggie filled the pitcher with tap

water, a little above the half way mark. She then stirred in the yellow powder. Taking her pick from the drawer, she broke the ice block in two. Half of it was soon shaved and scooped into the pitcher and two waiting glasses. She poured.

"This is wonderful. Never had lemonade with shaved ice before. Really great! I hope there will be enough for the others when they arrive?"

"You just drink up, officer," she said patting his hand. "I'll be most happy to make more."

The detectives' search went for naught. They all did what they could to console, dear, old, sniffling, Maggie in her moment of grief, while she thoughtfully poured refills, cooled for them with scoops of Rupert's favorite, crystal clear, freshly shaved, ice.

STORY SEVENTEEN
Ledger Domain
By Tom Gnagey

It started over a girl, which in the end, neither one of them got. Once the falling-out was in place, however, every little thing between them seemed to feed it. A fifty-year tiff may not be a record between brothers, but it certainly consumed the Carter twins' lives.

Alex, twenty-one minutes Adam's senior – a fact he never let Adam forget – had, by virtue of that, been made company president upon their father's retirement many years before. Adam was vice-president in charge of sales. Each did whatever was necessary to prove he was more valuable to the company than the other; the contention worked to power a very successful business through the years.

Then there was, Sammy, younger by six years, and providing the only issue the Twins had ever really been able to agree on. They hated him with a passion. From the day he entered their lives he intruded on them as an always present, always prying, always tattling, mischievous sprite. Sammy accepted that status since it seemed it was to be the only status he was allowed in the family. If the twins were so eager to define him in that way he would certainly fulfill their expectations. His approach was subtle, often clandestine, never overt, and he could seldom be proved culpable. He mastered the manner of the innocent angel.

At five he told on them for going to swim at the creek unsupervised. Once their mother had drug them home,

Sammy took advantage of the diversion to swim alone for several hours. At ten, sand found its way into the gasoline tank on the car the older boys had just bought together. And then there were those times when homework disappeared, favorite clothes got ripped, and calls from girls were answered with sad news that his brother said he didn't ever want to hear from her again.

And what had the twins done to deserve such retaliation? They once tied him naked to a lamp post down town; handcuffed him to the bumper of the car in the closed garage with the motor running; stole money from their father's wallet seeing that it was later found in Sammy's dresser drawer; hung him by his feet with a rope from a tall oak in the woods – in winter, in his boxers, at night; hit him whenever he was within arm's reach; and other things probably not appropriate for detailing here.

His lot had been to become the company bookkeeper – a position for which he had trained in college. Upon his arrival, he began bringing the company into the computer age.

So it was: Alex and Adam hated Sammy. Alex and Adam hated each other. Alex wanted to show the world that Adam was the bad guy. Adam wanted to show the world that Alex was the bad guy. Sammy, convinced they were both bad guys, didn't hate either of them but wasn't against bettering his position at their expense when such opportunities manifested themselves. Sammy's domain was the ledger. He knew it's every inch, every nuance, and he kept his focus within that province.

Early on, in the interest of the company's well-being, the brothers had agreed to split functions three ways. Alex handled inventory and personnel. Adam was responsible for sales. Sammy kept the books. It had worked well for years – or so it seemed.

"Any irregularities in Sales?" Alex would ask Sammy from time to time, hoping or expecting something suspicious to have arisen within his brother's section.

"None. Everything is ship shape," Sammy would report. Adam would frown as if puzzled. Sammy would smile as if impishly pleased.

On other occasions, it would be:

“Any irregularities in Personnel?” Adam would ask.

“None. Everything is ship shape,” would be Sammy’s response to Alex. Alex would frown as if puzzled. Sammy would smile as if impishly pleased.

Over the years, the seemingly innocent inquiries gradually became more direct and accusatory. Those discussions never came down between the twins. Always twin to Sammy. There was an interesting, not so subtle, change associated with it. Sammy slowly seemed to grow into favor with each of his brothers. It was like kids on a playground. “I’ll be nice to you if you’ll be nice to me.”

It provided hours of entertainment for Sammy.

“I have reason to believe Adam is taking money from the company – hiding it in the books someway. I want you to go over them thoroughly and find out how he’s doing it.”

“But the books always balance, Alex. How could he be stealing?”

Alex would leave in a snit.

“I’m as sure as I can be that Alex is doctoring the books and taking large amounts of money out of the company. Get to work on that. Find it and we’ll give him the boot and begin splitting the profits between just the two of us.”

“But the books always balance. How could he be doing that?”

“I know. I can’t understand that.”

Adam would leave scratching his head.

When they met in the halls, the twins would glare. When they attended necessary meetings together, they positioned themselves so as to not have to look directly into the other’s face. They never addressed the other directly. Sammy sat and smiled freely looking them both in their eyes for extended periods. It seemed to unnerve them. Sammy smiled.

One day it began coming to a head. Adam entered Sammy’s office and closed the door.

“Who is this, Peter Janes, I understand is on Alex’s payroll as a salesman? Have you ever met him?”

“I really don’t know the sales staff very well. Seldom get outside these four walls. If Alex says he’s an employee he must be. I don’t recall cutting him checks, however. Let’s see

here. Give me a moment.”

Sammy punched keys and scrolled through several screens.

“Very strange. Very strange indeed. There is a Peter Janes on the payroll, but it seems he’s never received so much as a penny in salary.”

“He has to have received money. If my information is correct he commands the highest salary of any salesperson.”

“I wouldn’t know about that, of course. All I can tell you is what I see here. Money to cover payroll in; money to pay the payroll out. It all balances. Janes has never received a cent from this company as far as I can tell.”

Adam seemed baffled. He motioned Sammy away from the computer and spent a few minutes searching the records himself. Sammy was impressed – though not really surprised – by how well he knew the bookkeeping system.

“Nothing. Why is his name in there, then, if we aren’t paying him?”

“I only enter the names I’m given on the employee roster, Adam. I must say, I don’t recall his.”

“What about withholding and benefits? See if you can find him there.”

Adam stood and Sammy resumed his seat. Again, he plunked and scrolled.

“Nobody by that name even shows up in this section. We’ve never made a deduction or entered a matching sum for any Peter Janes. It’s a mystery, alright. Shall I call Alex and have him join us?”

“No. No. For the time being, let’s just keep this – mystery, as you call it – between the two of us.”

“Mum’s the word then, Adam. You know I’m not the gossip.”

“Strangely different from when you were a viciously, tattling, little boy, but, yes, I understand that. You still seeing that woman, what’s her name, Bernice?”

“Bonnie, and yes. Been seeing each other for almost ten years now.”

“My God, Sam. Why don’t you marry her?”

“You and Alex have arranged things so my share of the profits is really quite small, Adam. How could I possibly afford

to take on another mouth to feed?”

Sammy's comment, fully unexpected, was met with silence. Then,

“Maybe I can fix that. You know what a cheapskate Alex has always been. We could put you on the payroll for some flat salary in addition to the profit sharing. See if you can figure a way to do that so Alex doesn't have to be bothered by it.”

“Thank you. I'll see what I can figure and get back to you.”

Adam left.

Sammy smiled. He and Bonnie had a fine relationship, married as they had been for the past twenty-nine years. As brothers, Adam and Sammy had really not been close.

Then it was Alex.

“It's come to my attention that there may be some invoicing problems in the sales department. Product shipped and paid for but no paid invoices for it. The payments just aren't showing up as if they may be going into somebody's pocket.”

“I don't believe so, Alex. The books balance. No discrepancies between inventory shipped and payments received as far as I can tell.”

“There has to be. I have it on good authority. Let me in there.”

Sammy gave up his seat and Alex skillfully scanned the invoices and totals and subtotals. He frowned and shook his head.

“I can't figure it. It's a mystery, I'll tell you that. I have a sworn statement. Keep looking. It has to be there, somewhere.”

“It's hard to know where to look, Al. Purchase orders match invoices match funds received. I really don't know where to begin.”

“Well, as a favor to me, keep looking, Okay? By the way how's Betty?”

“My wife, Betty?”

He nodded in automatic detachment, most of his head somewhere other than in the conversation.

“Divorced three years ago, I'm afraid.”

It was a boldfaced falsehood, of course.

“Sorry. Guess I don’t keep up very well. One less mouth to feed. I suppose that’s a good thing.”

“Alimony, Al. Some months I can barely meet my bills. My share of the profits is really quite small the way you and Adam arranged things.”

“Let me see what I can do about that. Say, why not put you on the payroll as well. That should help. See if you can find a way to do that so Adam won’t find out. It’ll just be me helping my little brother, okay?”

“Thank you. A very generous gesture. I’ll get back to you.”

The following month both S. D. Carter and S. David Carter began drawing a monthly salary of \$15,000. It was buried in the convoluted category of consultants and would continue to be paid whether Sammy was there to receive it or not. It had been arranged so the checks would be sent to a Post Office box just across the state line – fifteen minutes away. It really didn’t make up for the money his brothers had cheated him out of in the past but it was a start. Sammy smiled thinking it had been a wonderfully creative plan, having each brother sign off on the hiring of one of the new consultants.

It had been Sammy’s plan to retire from the company when he turned sixty. That would occur on the following Friday. He had two items on his agenda that still needed to be resolved. He requested a meeting with his brothers.

“I have three items to discuss – no, to present to you two. First, I am retiring at the end of the week. I’ve engaged an accounting firm to take my place until you decide what you want to do about it.

Second, I have already taken the money allotted to my retirement fund, a pittance compared to yours but I’m not going to bicker over it.

Third, or maybe third and fourth. Anyway, I feel the need to reveal two long running schemes, which were designed to both defraud the company and entangle each of you in deep legal problems. It seems that years ago, you, Alex, fixed an ongoing entry in the bookkeeping system, that made it appear Adam was pocketing great sums of money

from unreported sales – something he was not, in fact, doing. Your goal was to discredit him – send him to jail if possible – and gain complete control of the company. It was an ingenious plan, perfectly set up except, for some reason that you could never understand, in the end it hadn't worked. You would come into my office after I left, cook the books in the manner I just described, and leave. Recently, when you checked on them, the books remained perfect and didn't reflect your doctoring. Not only could you not understand, you couldn't make your accusations. Something mysterious was happening.

And you, Adam. You planted a fictitious employee who was to get paid a large amount each month. That payment was to be made as an electronic transfer into one of Alex's several bank accounts. Again, it was a perfect set up which, in the end, had not seemed to work. It was a mystery to you.

"You can't prove any of this," Alex said.

"Of course, he can't," Adam agreed. "It's preposterous!"

They pulled at their collars in twin-like precision.

"Oh, I can prove every last cent of it. When you logged on to my computer – I keep it locked, of course – you had to enter your personal code. Those log-ons are always dated and recorded. Each time an entry is made or changed in the ledger, it is also time-dated and recorded. The list, which matches those personalized log-in times with those ledger changes, is safely preserved in a safe deposit box."

The twins looked at each other. Alex spoke.

"But, if as you say, after each entry was made it disappeared, why were the totals and balances not off at the end of each month? What goes in must show up somewhere."

"Oh, the Janes guy's salary stayed in the system but somehow ended up in an obscure subfile, called the 'salary auxiliary fund'. The lost invoice payments seemed to arrive in a similar, 'income auxiliary fund' as well. When I closed out those funds today they totaled almost five million dollars."

"If you closed it out, the books won't balance. We'll catch you red handed," Alex said.

"And as any authorities you may involve trace the origin

of the deposits within the books, how will you explain your documented fraudulent involvement?”

Silence. The twins even glanced at each other and held it – face to face – for a long moment. Alex spoke.

“So, what do you want from us. A bigger cut of the profits? Control of the company?”

“None of those things. I hate this company. The two of you have certainly never done anything to make me very fond of you. I considered several options. Turn you in and get the entire company for myself but like I said, I hate this company. Blackmail you both for the rest of my life, but that would mean some kind of ongoing, unpleasant, contact with you vermin. Or break ties completely and put you two despicable people out of my life forever. Once that third option came to mind, the decision was really not that difficult for me to make.

I have liquidated a large portion of the executive retirement fund – the one kept in your separate, private, ledgers – and converted it into bearer bonds in the amount of the five million dollars, which equals the amount that mysteriously ended up in the auxiliary funds. Each week I transferred your entries out of payroll and receivables into those hidden fields. The transactions therefore figured into the category balances but from a different source. With a minimum of creative bookkeeping the ledger remains balanced.

I do hope the two of you enjoy your retirement. My wife, my three children, and four grand kids are off for three months in the Bahamas to begin mine in style.

STORY EIGHTEEN
Matilda and Mr. Matthews
Tom Gnagey

On the day Matilda James celebrated her 74th birthday, she made herself a promise. She stood up straight and tall in front of the mirror that rose in an ornate frame from the back of her century old dresser. She looked herself directly in the eyes. Her tone was determined.

“By my 75th birthday, I will be Mrs. Paul Mathews. It just isn’t proper for a girl to go through life unmarried and poor as a church mouse.”

Mr. Matthews was almost her match in age though most would have guessed him ten years younger. He was tall and slender with neatly cropped gray hair and a meticulously maintained narrow mustache. Life had been good to him – money, property, health – but he had never married. There had been and continued to be many women in and out of his life but he steadfastly clung to bachelorhood. The source of his wealth was unclear.

He walked in the park every morning. Matilda sat in the park every morning. He tipped his hat politely every morning. She acknowledged it with a nod and smile, coyly averting her eyes – every morning. Mr. Matthews was always pleasant but never made any advances.

Matilda didn’t understand. She was by all measures a nice looking – stately even – older woman. She wore her pure white hair pulled into a firm, tightly turned bun on the back of her head. She used rouge, but sparingly, since her natural complexion still offered a soft rosy glow. Her carriage was

erect and exceptional for her years. She was convinced she was a catch and couldn't understand Mr. Matthews' reluctance to approach her.

'Perhaps he becomes too emotionally involved – uncomfortably so – with all those other women,' she thought. I may have to shed my demure, though proper manner, and approach him more directly. That became her plan – to make herself more alluring and available than those other women.

She began keeping a log.

March 9 – Mr. M appeared at the park this morning walking with a new lady on his arm. Attractive. Wide brim hat. Mid-calf skirt. No glasses, but obviously blind as a bat! I heard him call her Betty. She clung to him like a teenager to the captain of the football team. Clearly needy. Disgusting. Can't be good for him.

March 15 – Mr. M has walked alone for several mornings. He seems sad. I asked if there was anything I could do for him. With some effort, he configured his face into a smile and waved me off politely but without explanation.

April 2 – Mr. M and a woman I have never seen before were walking this morning. She wasn't particularly pretty but was well dressed. Probably after his money. I hope he sees through that.

April 10 – Mr. M has been walking alone again this week. He still refuses to respond to my attempts at conversation. If I weren't such a patient sort, I could be put off.

April 19 – Mr. M was not in the park this morning. I am concerned. I don't know where he lives so can't go check on him. I'm sure I can find out, however. I've become quite good such things.

May 1 – Mr. M was back in the park today with a new, considerably younger woman on his arm. She had a much more modern appearance. The two of them clashed in most every way. I'm sure he could never be happy with the likes of her. He will come to his senses.

May 5 – He was alone again today. I decided I would walk right up to Mr. M and make a case for him and me. As I approached him so did two policemen. From what I could hear they were discussing the suspicious deaths of several

apparently well-to-do women of his recent acquaintance. In the end they required him to go with them.

May 6 – My friend, Wanda, came up to me at the park this morning and sat to chat. She related that Mr. Matthews was suspected of having killed a number of women during the past several months. No motive seemed evident and he had, in fact, been released for lack of evidence tying him to the deaths. I am quite sure he is innocent.

May 8 – Again Mr. M was in the park walking, alone. His face was drawn, his mien distraught. Poor Mr. M. I didn't disturb him but waved and offered a robust but compassionate, 'Good morning.' I wanted him to know I was there for him like a rock if and when he needed me.

May 10 – The paper ran a story detailing the deaths of Mr. M's acquaintances. All by poison – the same poison, no less – somehow traced to the same batch number. A search of his home and premises revealed no such concoction in his possession. I was certain he would come through any investigation clean as a whistle.

May 16 – Mr. M continues to walk in the park every morning. I have taken to walking as well. He comes up behind me on the path – his long strides always overtake me. It has been a good ploy on my part. We speak, sometimes, for several minutes, before he excuses himself and moves on ahead. Wanda says I should be cautious and can't understand why I want to become involved with a suspected murderer. He doesn't have the eyes of a killer.

May 20 – Mr. M continues to walk every morning but has not appeared with a new woman yet. Perhaps he has given up on feminine companionship or perhaps women are afraid of him, considering the publicity. I am not afraid of him.

May 21 – Mr. M approached me where I sat in the park this morning. I invited him to sit. I was surprised that he knew my name.

"Matilda, you are all I have left."

I was startled and confused.

"I don't understand, Mr. Matthews."

"Family. You are the only family I have left."

"Family? I have no idea what you mean."

"I'm sorry I have ignored you all these years but when I

see your face I see our mother's and I am overcome with sadness."

"Really, Mr. Matthews, I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Mother didn't tell you, then? It was a bitter, bitter, ordeal. I am your older brother, Paul. Dad tore me away from you two and took me with him when he divorced our mother. You were just a baby. Mother's new husband adopted you. Honestly, I thought you knew. I want you to know that even though I have remained distant, you have been constantly in my thoughts. I've taken good care of you in my will – my money, the house, and other things."

May 22 – Again, Mr. Matthews came and sat. I had packed a small lunch of sandwiches and wine. We had a very nice talk. He filled me in on much more about our past than I really wanted to know. I was pleased that he clearly enjoyed the wine and the Deviled Ham.

May 24 – Wanda came and sat with me on the park bench. She was full of news. It seemed that Mr. Matthews had also been poisoned – with the same deadly powder as his former women friends.

Again, I had something new to think about.

Let me see, now. There is the widower, Mr. Alexander. He dresses well and seems like a very trusting gentleman and I understand the poor soul has a heart condition. With him there will be fewer obstacles – no women in his life. It continues to amaze me that people will sample food from perfect strangers.

Matilda Alexander will have a nice ring to it – for as long as it is necessary. After I get settled into my new house . . .

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STORY NINETEEN
Adrift in a Sea of Shadows
By Tom Gnagey

Tonight, I sit here at my computer fully intending to write the story that came to me this morning, but like yesterday and the day before and the day before that, the words I will type will stray wildly from that vision. It is as if I am struggling to free myself from some unseen force – some unseen force that compels me to turn left when I intend to turn right, that coerces me to look up when I want to look down, that requires me to follow one path when every fiber of my being seeks another.

And so, I will write – into the wee hours of tomorrow I will write, not what I want to write but what I must write. I have tried not to write, to press the button that turns off the screen and disables the keyboard but I return to write. I have taken my leave and walked miles into the black of the night, but I return to write. I have taken the pill that gives me sleep but awaken in sweat and disordered thought and sit again before the blank, white, virgin screen that compels my attention, and I write.

It is a fearful enterprise that grips me, because what I will write this night I will live tomorrow. I will feel the pain. I will experience the conflict. I will come upon the disagreeable scenes and mingle with the daunting characters. It is as if they are dictating and I am their pawn, their puppet, their hostage. My purpose becomes lost in theirs. My being melds with theirs. My soul leaves its mooring and dances to their arbitrary cadence.

It is as if there is nothing new to describe. It is as if it has all happened before. The line is predictable. The problem, the quandary, the conflict is the same as all those problems and quandaries and conflicts that repeat and repeat from man to man, from generation to generation, from age to age. Nothing is new. Everything is old. Nothing is emergent. Everything is fading. Nothing is dynamic. Everything is stagnant. Nothing is challenging. Everything is commonplace.

If this is a mirror of existence, then I want to have none of it. If this is a reflection of the past, then I want to burn the history books. If this is a prediction of what lies ahead, I want to depart this place before the confrontation consumes me.

I want to write of contests and triumphs, of joy and ecstasy – even of defeat and despair so long as it is honest – but not of the humdrum I am witnessing here in the dark, night after night, and then forced to live out, day after day, in the shrouded grays of next morning's light. I want the capricious, ever-narrowing, sterile whirling inside my head to become quiet. I try to inquire but my questions are met with looks of vacuous puzzlement. I suggest answers but they just float there, unapproached, fully unattached, not viewed as meaningful or relevant – not viewed at all.

A world – like a man – without questions remains inert, stunted by its own unrecognized ignorance. Why am I the only one wondering, inquiring, probing? Why are the others unable to fathom my bewilderment – astonishment – at their passive posture? And yet, I am compelled to do their bidding. I am trapped with no apparent restraints. I am banished from the exercise of free will without any obvious prohibitions. I am adrift amid a sea of meaningless, repetitive, ebb and flow.

But, my mind revs. My fingers tingle. Night encompasses my room. I must write:

* * *

He made his way down the front steps and onto the sidewalk, setting a brisk pace, hoping to transform his walk into a solid twenty minutes of aerobics. For a man of sixty-two he immediately appeared fit. His graying temples, supporting a full head of untouched hair, rendered an air of maturity not age. The spring in his step reflected a degree of physical

prowess atypical of his age and status. His smile and pleasant acknowledgment of those he passed expressed a zest for life that noticeably surpassed that of most folks regardless of their age. Although as a boy Walter Smith had envisioned that he would someday become a famous writer, he had come to be satisfied with himself, his position in life, and especially his important position in the mail room in the basement of Carbondale's Department Store.

As Walter approached an intersection that morning and turned to his right to cross, he smiled and tipped his hat to an elderly woman on his left. The tires screeched. The horns honked. The sound of crumpling metal against crumpling metal announced the collision of vehicles – a collision caused by Walter's pleasantries-driven distraction which had moved him, without due caution, into the crosswalk as traffic passed.

If Walter had a fault it was that he needed people to like him. It was the first thing he thought about when formulating an interaction with another person – what must he do to appear likeable and what must he avoid to appear any other way? He smiled, pointed out the positive, spread legitimate compliments, and, for brief moments, befriended the friendless. There could be no doubt that such an approach to living spread joy and good feelings among those Walter encountered. It was, in fact, later multiplied many fold by those refreshed spirits upon whom Walter had worked his simple magic.

Everybody liked Walter and that had become his double-edged sword. He became surrounded by people that were fully unlikeable – folks to whom nobody else would give the time of day so they clung to Kind Walter like the mangled, rusted, carcasses of abandoned car bodies to the giant magnet at the junk yard. Unlike that magnet with its ability to shed its load at will and rest with no remorse or second thoughts, Walter was doomed to persevere into exhaustion. He maintained his smile but by the end of most days that alone required and depleted his entire store of inner strength. In the evening, it was his front door when at last closed and locked behind him that brought him safety and relief in solitude. That barrier became the sole source of protection that was truly within his control – outside of work.

Having clearly been the cause of the accident, Walter assigned a black mark to his personal worth – a black mark that could never be removed. When younger, he had pondered how it could be that one such blunder could outweigh the dozens and dozens – probably hundreds, if truth be known – of kindly acts he performed every day. But it did! It had long since ceased being a point of contention for him. Should or shouldn't, that was the life fate had given him to live. Once bad, always bad. Amen!

A child had been killed and although his mother had failed to secure him with a seatbelt he was dead and Walter was soon mired in his deep despair. He was acquitted of any wrong doing – the woman had also ignored a red light, distracted, herself, by the demanding child. So, was it the child's fault? His inability to comprehend the fullness of the situation and make predictions based upon it precluded fault. The mother was attending to her child's need, a laudable and too often ignored responsibility. That which was left was Walter, fulfilling his need to be liked by the old lady – a total stranger – and ignoring the safety reality that should have been his focus. Walter declared himself an ego-driven, self-centered, hazard, thrust upon the world by a set of all too young, if well-intentioned, naively oblivious, young parents. How disappointed they would have been had they lived to witness the wake of devastation wrought by their ever, self-focused son.

Walter's life in the mailroom was his salvation. He worked alone there with no one to impress with his worth and likeability. He received the bags of mail. He emptied them into his shallow receiving bin. He sorted the envelopes into the thirty-six cubby holes on the wall. They were his bags, his envelopes, his cubby holes. He felt a sense of loss every time the little doors on the other side of the narrow wall were opened and the contents removed. He moaned, quietly of course. To do otherwise might have put others off – made him less likeable. Which others he could not know, but there were always others – judging, critical, evaluating, others.

As noon approached, Walter neatened up his little room, donned his cardigan, and left the building to soon enter the small café next door. He sat on the same red stool at the

near end of the counter each day and if it were not free, he would wait patiently for it to become available. Each day he ordered a corned beef on rye, light on the mustard. "Well drained sauerkraut, please." A soggy sandwich was disagreeably messy, although he would never complain; thus, the precise specification upfront. Lemonade and chips completed the fare. On a good day, the sandwich would arrive in seven minutes leaving him fifteen in which to enjoy his meal. On his way back to work, he spoke to everyone, of course, spreading good cheer and a sense that all was right with the World. After all, that was his self-appointed – seemingly innately mandated – mission.

Afternoons he stamped envelopes received from the various offices, and packaged small items to be sent through the mail. Most went UPS but that was not his bailiwick. Though not required, he sorted the outgoing by zip code knowing the postal employees would think well of him for having done so. He banded them into three inch bundles and lovingly placed them into the potentially abusive, often all too stiff and scratchy, mail sacks. By the end of each day Walter managed to feel quite good about his work and therefore about himself – his mail-sorting-stamping-Carbondale-employee-self, that is.

His walk home took twenty minutes, give or take only a few. His goal was to deliver four positive encounters each minute – eighty in all. When that count rose close to one hundred (and he did keep count!) he was imbued with a wildly wonderful sense of accomplishment. Once home, as he prepared and drank his daily, after work, cup of hot tea at his kitchen table, he often relived what he determined had likely been the most important encounters – the ones that had delivered the highest level of mutual benefits.

It was at that point in his day that he began feeling the first fingers of dread invade and take their hold on his being. Walter hated the night. Walter had always hated the night – the darkness, the ill-defined sounds, the nameless, threatening, shadows cavorting across the fully drawn window shade, and the loneliness, the terrible and ever-present loneliness. At night, there were no benign, non-threatening, envelopes, no ever-reliable cubby holes, no absolutely

dependable zip codes. There was no red vinyl covered café stool to look forward to. There was no hot sandwich delivered by the rotund, red-cheeked, amply-mascaraed Tillie, Walter's contemporary in every way.

They seldom spoke more than a few words – the same words each day.

“One corned beef on rye, Toots. Enjoy!”

“Thank you. I will, Tillie.”

Still, Walter considered Tillie to be his best friend and each noon looked forward to the exchange like a tyke anticipating Christmas morning. He never added one of his, ‘see how nice I am’ phrases with her. He wanted her to like him for what she saw. He would never know what she saw or how she felt about it because he would never ask. Such asking might put her off, lower his worth in her eyes – a one-sided stand-off, as it were.

Walter had soup for supper – a different kind specific to each of the seven days of the week – and a toasted English muffin with marmalade. He was of slight build and saw to it that he never varied so much as a pound from the 160 that had accompanied him throughout his adult years. Others would notice and would surely be upset at him – not something Walter allowed in his life.

Each evening he donned his night clothes, inserted his earplugs, adjusted his sleep mask across his eyes, and downed his eagerly anticipated, shiny coated, yellow, pill. He was soon asleep and just as soon, it seemed, awakened by the cheek warming, slender rays of sunlight that found their way through the crack between the shade and window trim.

There it was again, initially characterized – as he emerged from his nighttime, pill induced, stupor – as some sort of far too brilliant, unwelcome, early morning admonition. As his head cleared, Walter sighed, rebuilt his smile, and looked up.

* * *

My eyes were tired. My fingertips were tender. My mind inexplicably exhausted. Again, I had written all night, forced on by that undefined compulsion within me. I hated to face the day, the day in which all of that would become reality. How I wished it would remain forever veiled in the shadows of

my mind and leave me unmolested. I pressed the 'print' button, the welcome signal that my troubled night had come to an end.

* * *

"Good morning, Walter," the doctor said upon entering his room as the sun first peeked in through the narrow window high up on the drab green wall. "Looks like you've been at it all night again. Let's see what long lost memories and deeply buried feelings you committed to paper this time. A few more weeks of this and you should have your entire life's story laid out before you. Its contemplation will surely help you recall who you are and the trauma that brought you here to the hospital. We are fortunate that you are such an adept writer. When I count to three you will awaken feeling fine, alert, eager to get on with the day, and willing to begin the task of personal discovery all over again when darkness returns tonight."

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STORY TWENTY
A Tale of Two Brothers
By Tom Gnagey

James and Jonathan – neither ever married – were identical twins and still bore an uncanny resemblance at age 54. They had been born several weeks prematurely while their parents were on safari in Africa, and amid the commotion of their untimely appearance, the order of their birth was lost. Neither could, therefore, claim to be the eldest son. They were short of stature and uncommonly slender, having been described as grotesquely gaunt as adolescents. Their pale skin set an eerie contrast with their still jet black hair and brown eyes. With sharp chins, high foreheads, and long, gangly ears they could in no way be described as pleasantly featured.

They lived – as they always had – a reclusive life in the family mansion atop a mostly barren hill north of Black Water Springs, Kansas. The brothers were – what’s the word – despicable in virtually every dimension. To describe them as overly competitive severely begs the thoroughgoing depth of the relationship. They hated each other and everybody hated them. On his deathbed, their father said that his one great sadness in life was that he had been unable to find a way to divorce them. Not even their great wealth could override their disagreeable personal and physical attributes in the eyes of the ladies.

With their wealthy parents long since departed, the only remnant from earlier family times was Alfred, the long-suffering, forever present, butler. Everybody loved Alfred –

well, everybody but James and Jonathan. They hated him primarily because everybody loved him. Still, they would have been lost without Alfred so dismissing him had never entered their minds. Being thoughtfully, self-centered was perhaps their most positive personal characteristic.

Although neither outdid the other in most of their repulsive qualities, Jonathan was, perhaps, the more conniving of the two. He had always been a manipulative schemer, and as such had delighted in regularly getting James into undeserved trouble. It had been the basis for brutal physical battles between them. Since they had been designed as physically ineffective weaklings, no level of combat ever really inflicted any significant damage. As adults and with the passing of their parents, that had become less of a force in their lives.

As meaningless as it was, the greatest contention between the two of them was who deserved the bulk of the inheritance. Each contended he was the older. Neither of them had so much as a shred of evidence to support his position. So long as they resided together in the huge, old, house and lived on the family fortune most would have thought it fully irrelevant. Not in their minds, however, even though the Will clearly split things equally between them, with Alfred standing in the wings should anything happen to the sons.

Jonathan had a plan, the kernel of which had developed way back prior to puberty. He had revised and honed it down through the years. In some convoluted sense of logic and justice extrapolated from their birth year having been 1955, he designated their 55th birthday as the moment of truth – the moment James would die leaving Jonathan as the sole legitimate heir. It was a matter of fulfilling what he believed was his rightful destiny and Jonathan had not looked beyond that fact – such as it was.

Through the years, it had become a ritual that on the night of their birthday they would climb the stairs to the attic – the fourth floor – and spend time going through the things stored there, rehashing the memories the items rekindled. It was the one dependably civil time between them. As boys, they had preferred the back, spiral, stairway. It became their

private passage to all the places they were not allowed to go. It was too narrow for them to climb side by side even back then. It was steep and dark. The fragile wooden railing that ran along the outside away from the curved wall had become unstable over time. A brisk breeze flowed through its central core from the basement, up and out the fireplace chimney, which sat in the center of the attic. It whistled an eerie air as it played in and out of each crevice. As children, on hot summer nights they would often take pillows and sleep on the third floor landing enjoying the moving air cooled in the deep, rock lined, basement before spiraling past them on its way toward heaven.

Jonathan's plan was straight forward. He loosened the tread board on the top step at the attic landing and tied a large bag of sand by rope through a hole along its outside edge. A rope extending down to Alfred's quarters – on the third floor just above the boys' rooms on the second – was attached to the sand bag which sat on the landing. The lower end of the rope was attached to Alfred's door. When that door was opened, the rope would pull on the bag making it drop, which would raise the loosened tread board, which would send the person (in this case James) who was standing on it over the outer railing to drop to his death on the basement floor forty-five feet below.

Jonathan would arrange for James to climb the stairs well ahead of him. At the crucial point in the ascent Jonathan would tell James to stop. He would call down to Alfred who would open his door to see what the man wanted. The deed would be done. James would be dead and Alfred would be blamed. Jonathan would be the victor. There was also the incriminating matter of hiding the rest of the rope coil in Alfred's room along with the nails, which had been removed from the tread board. Earlier in the week Jonathan had sent Alfred to purchase the rope for him at the local hardware store. The deck had been well stacked against the old gentleman.

There were two more crucial items. Jonathan set up a confrontation between Alfred and James at the grocery store in town that morning. Witnesses would vouch for the fact of bad blood between them. Nobody in Black Water Springs

would hold James's murder against dear old Alfred. The law would, however. Finally, at precisely the proper moment on the night of the fifth, Jonathan would call the sheriff to report the continuation of the altercation – one in which Alfred was making death threats toward Jonathan's dear brother. The timing assured the authorities would arrive close to the moment of the fall and before Alfred would be able to disable the rope and hide the evidence. Jonathan was quite proud of himself.

The night of the 5th arrived. The two began the climb to the attic. Jonathan followed his plan to a T. The mechanics of the plan worked flawlessly.

* * *

Alfred stood on the balcony of his newly acquired penthouse in Miami Beach and greeted a new day – well, a new life, actually. As butlers do, he had known everything that went on in that big old house. He had been well aware of Jonathan's plan for years. When he realized he was being set up in the grocery store, he figured the time was at hand and understood the why and wherefore of the rope purchase. Alfred was, of course, well aware of the birthday ritual. He examined the crucial area of the house and relocated the incriminating evidence to Jonathan's room, running the rope on down to Jonathan's door on the second floor. Alfred arranged to be cleaning that room at the time – having entered from the front stairway according to the police report. When he rushed out the rear door to answer Jonathan's call, the murder was set in motion.

James was dead. Jonathan was in prison. Alfred was the new heir to the family fortune.

STORY TWENTY-ONE
Nuggets
By Tom Gnagey

The young man pulled his horse to a stop at the weather worn, wooden sign beside the dirt road. Nuggets, Colorado. pop. 87. Ahead he could see the dozen or so, mostly unpainted, two story, clapboard buildings that lined both sides of the ever-dusty Main Street. The raised, plank, walkways out front, protected from the relentless winter snows by well supported, gently sloping, roofs, gave the appearance of mirror image porches running the length of the block. It provided a short stretch of authentic Americana as well as mixed memories of the summer Nate and his grandfather had spent there together eleven years before. During the hundred and fifty plus years since the gold rush, the town hadn't really changed in any significant ways. Even the names and faces of its subsequent generations bore unmistakable similarities to those that had been there before.

The horse, a rental from a stable in Rocky Point, ten or so miles to the east, handled the high Colorado altitude much better than Nate, a southern California resident for most of his 23 years. He wiped the sweat from his dust encrusted face, reset his hat, and gently urged his four-legged transportation on into town. The mid-July heat had built a mighty thirst in both of them.

Nate was a recent UCLA graduate and a budding writer following in the noteworthy footsteps of his grandfather, Harry. The summer he turned twelve he and his grandfather had set out together on a grand adventure – prospecting for gold and

living off the land in a valley, which sat a mile or so just south of Nuggets. With saw and axe they built a lean-to, spread sleeping bags on thick beds of dried grass, and laid up a no-mortar, stone, fireplace to warm the cold nights and to cook on. There was a swiftly moving, trout-filled stream that passed in an easy bend no more than fifty feet away. It was the coldest natural water source Nate could have imagined but that didn't keep the two of them from their early morning dip most days.

Harry taught Nate to use a rifle and to set box traps for small game. There were berries and tubers and fruit from trees disfigured by the severe winters. They had wonderful conversations while they dipped their lines waiting for nibbles from the wily, colorful, fish that made the stream their home. It had all the makings of the summer every twelve-year-old boy dreams of – and for the most part, it had been just that.

On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons they went into town and had a home cooked meal at the café slash bar slash gambling hall. They would remain well into the night. As Nate recalled, the community was clearly under populated with women, not a big deal at twelve but of somewhat more importance at 23. He recalled no more than six females out of the entire population back then. There were only a few children and they kept their distance, most likely at the direction of their parents.

Harry was doing research for a historical novel to be set in the area a century before. Under the tutelage of his grandfather, Nate was working on his first, serious, attempt at completing a publishable story aimed at his age mates – Wilderness Summer. The account they circulated in town was that of a grandfather and his grandson spending the summer together, camping, living off the land, and trying their hands at prospecting for gold. No one had reason to suppose otherwise since they clearly were involved in all of those things. They bought picks and chisels and shovels and other essential hand mining paraphernalia at the hardware store. In addition to their two horses, they purchased a mule outfitted with pack gear. Nate named it, Mule – and laughed himself silly whenever he referred to it by name. They had, in fact, more success finding the precious metal than they had ever

anticipated.

They remained mum to the residents about the writing side of their stay. Harry thought they would obtain a more genuine glimpse into the residents' lives that way. He was looking for authentic local idioms, vocabulary variations, and grammatical patterns. He wanted to learn about the give and take, and the emotional interaction of people in such an isolated community. He hoped to hear stories and history about the area that could add authenticity to his piece.

Visitation by outsiders was not encouraged but as long as they demonstrated no disruptive ways, paid their tabs, and left a few bucks a week at the poker table, they would be tolerated – not really befriended. Most of the men were middle aged and beyond. They had lived in Nuggets all their lives and had good enough fortune to find a steady smattering of gold. It was never enough to draw crowds or provide riches but they supported themselves and most were able to put enough away for a comfortable retirement. It was the prospect of that elusive big strike that fed their desire to stay, and as long as gold continued to appear, their dreams remained alive.

They were not a trusting lot. Greedy people aren't. Any one of them would have taken whatever steps were necessary to jump a suddenly productive claim. Fortunately for the stability of the community, no such thing ever seemed to happen. Well, not until Harry and Nate arrived!

Nate recalled the afternoon at the café when he had spilled the beans about their find. Harry had excused himself to run across the street to the hardware/grocery/dry goods store. Nate let the cat out of the bag.

"So, how you and your Grampa doin' out there at Silver Creek?" the waitress asked, making small talk as she slid into a chair across the table from the boy. Nate had discerned that Blaze was the only relatively friendly person in town. In some ways, she reminded him of his mother.

"Doing great. I love it out there. Could stay forever. Can I tell you a secret?"

"Sure."

"We found a cave with a huge vein of gold running though it – a foot top to bottom and twelve feet long. No

telling how deep it runs back into the rock. We're going to be rich! Grampa went over to Rocky Point and registered the claim last Monday. I never dreamed that prospecting was going to be this easy."

"Well, good luck with that," Blaze said raising her eyebrows.

She pushed back from the table.

"I'll go check on your food."

Boasting about a claim was not the thing to do in Nuggets, Colorado, pop. 87. Suddenly the men of the community began showing more of an interest in them. No reference to the reported strike was ever made. Traffic near their campsite picked up, however, and it was not welcome as far as Nate was concerned even though he understood it was important for his grandfather to find ways of getting close to the men in order to carry out his research.

Six weeks into their stay, Harry received a severe beating by three of the townsmen as they tried to force him to divulge the location of the cave. The men left him for dead. Nate had witnessed the incident from behind the lean-to and had the good sense not to get involved. It was late evening and in the darkness, he couldn't identify the assailants who wore bandanas across their faces as if out of a scene from the old west. After the attackers left, grief stricken and terrified young Nate tended to his unconscious grandfather as best he could. He then tied the old man across the saddle of one of the horses and with the mule in tow, set out through the night for Rocky Point where medical help was available. The old man lived but would never fully recover.

That was then.

Nate tied his horse to the hitching rail beside the watering trough in front of the café and entered. He wasn't recognized even though the assortment of occupants had not really changed since before. Those years from 12 to 23 make a big difference in a young man's appearance. He ordered drink and food. Blaze was still waiting tables. He inquired about lodging. Following her suggestion, he acquired a room upstairs above the hardware store. It was a weekly let, understood to be for an indefinite length of time. He was studied from afar by the residents – partly the oddity of having

an outsider in their midst and partly the generally suspicious nature of the locals. He asked if anybody there ever played poker. He was invited to sit in at the nightly game.

After a few days, he intentionally let slip that it had been he and his grandfather who had visited during that summer years earlier. The men took notice. Nate took notice of the men taking notice. The cave had clearly never been found. To assure that Nate stayed long enough so they could nurse information out of him, they let the youngster win big at the table and plied him with free beer to loosen his tongue. (Clearly, they were unaware of the inoculation against such a possibility provided by a four-year college education grounded in fraternity life.)

Nate was befriended by a nine-year-old boy who was an obvious plant to further mine the man for information. Sometimes such strategies don't pan out – so to speak. At the end of Nate's sixth week in Nuggets, the boy came to Nate and informed him he had overheard men talking about stealing back his poker winnings and beating him until he gave up the location of the cave. Nate gathered his things and waited until just past midnight.

So, it was that six weeks to the day from when he had arrived in Nuggets, the grandson again left the area in the wee hours of the morning heading on horseback to Rocky Point. This time, however, something was different. He wore a smile and occasionally found himself chuckling out loud.

Several things pleased Nate about his brief stay in Nuggets. Since, over the course of those weeks, they had been willing to risk their entire life's savings in pursuit of the cave's supposed location, the residents plainly had no hint that there had never really been a cave sporting a huge vein of gold. It had been a ruse to see what kinds of behavior it might stir up among them. Also, he could now finish his grandfather's novel, reflecting the fuller human side of the story in a way that would make the old writer proud. And, of course, there were those saddle bags filled with something over \$250,000 in poker winnings. A secure and relatively comfortable old age would be assured for his grandfather.

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STORY TWENTY-TWO
Don't Waste Funerals on the Dead
By Tom Gnagey

Richard was a writer. He wrote short stories and essays on a variety of topics that seemed to impress him more than publishers. That didn't matter to Richard because he wrote mostly for his own edification and amusement. He also wrote a popular weekly column of home spun philosophy and humor that appeared in a local paper of significant circulation.

He had sold one piece to an online magazine – e-zine – which had received a huge number of reads and had been recirculated across a dozen or more outlets. Its title was, Don't Waste Funerals on the Dead. His premise was that if you had wonderful memories about somebody and nice things to say about him, make all that known while the person was still alive. Dead was too late! The essay went on to postulate the kinds of positive changes that approach might make in the basic fabric of society.

A second piece had done nearly as well, Attendance is Required. It probed and analyzed those social and cultural conditions that required attendance if one were to appropriately demonstrate his role as a 'good' citizen, friend or family member – baptisms, graduations, elections, marriages, and funerals. They were often less than personally interesting or mentally enlightening activities that a person would certainly skip if it weren't for the fact that – by custom and social expectation – attendance was required.

As a young man he had fully believed that the power of his pen would someday change the world. As he entered the

eighth decade of his life he was often known to write a story or passage tailor-made for just one person who he thought would benefit from what it had to say.

Richard was well known, at least locally. He believed he had positively affected many lives with things he had written. That was what he hoped, at least. Those acquaintances were not given to open reflection about his work but were more likely to give him silent thumbs up as they passed on the street when something in his column had tickled their fancy.

* * *

The paper went all out with Richard's obituary – a full color picture, excerpts from his most popular columns and stories, as well as an extensive recounting of his life and achievements. It occupied six column widths and extended half way down page four. It also contained information not generally known about him.

The funeral was held at a large non-denominational church Richard had attended on occasion. He considered himself a religious man but not a spiritual man. Few had ever asked him to explain the difference. The closed casket sat at the front of the large, high arched, room. The half-lid which had covered his head and torso was opened as the service began. The sanctuary overflowed with people who apparently wanted to pay their last respects. A dozen of his closest acquaintances were scheduled to say words. In the end, it was more nearly three dozen who would relate wonderful stories and happy memories.

At the conclusion, the minister addressed the assemblage saying Richard had left a short piece behind, which he specifically requested be read at that time.

“Life is often punctuated by smoke and mirrors. Our beliefs change. Our passions modify, reflecting social conditions and movements and personal needs and desires. What seems unmistakably real at one point is seen to be blatantly absurd at another. Truths that we find difficult to express face to face in the light of day we often proclaim to others or to ourselves in the shadows of the night. I have selected four dozen people who have made significant positive contributions to my life and have extolled my

appreciation in a story, essay, or poem prepared just for them. They will arrive by mail tomorrow. I hope you will each do the same for those you have come to appreciate or love.”

There was head turning and eye contact over knowing nods. A hushed murmur rippled across the large room. Old Richard had found a way to have the last say. No one was surprised; everyone was pleased; most were amused.

The minister raised his arms indicating all rise. A funeral director approached the casket, to close and lock the lid for eternity, everybody thought. Instead he opened the half lid that covered the lower part of the body. Richard sat up.

“Like I’ve been known to say, friends, Don’t Waste Funerals on the Dead. I am going to assume what you expressed here today was sincere. Thank you. No need to come back for the real thing whenever that may be. Coffee and lemon cake in the Community Room in the basement – attendance is required.”

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STORY TWENTY-THREE

Jacob

by Tom Gnagey

Willy had just seen his eighth birthday. He was precocious on many fronts. Most days that was wonderful. Some days it was . . . well. His blond, blue eyed, head was full of questions and had a vivid imagination. He wanted to know how everything worked and why things were the way they were and what would happen if . . . His proclivity was to try things first and ask permission second (if at all). When things went right he took full credit. When things went wrong he was quick to find something or someone else to blame. Willy felt fortunate to be such a bright and continuously successful boy.

His parents had allowed it all, thinking they were encouraging their son's creativity and fostering his inquisitiveness – two things treasured in the home of an artist and a writer. His mother's psychiatrist wasn't so sure.

Willy lived with his parents in a barn remodeled into a wonderfully open living space with a studio for his mother, a writing center for his father and lots and lots of room for him to do with as he pleased. Being home schooled he had few friends, had developed few age appropriate social skills, and was prone to enjoy imaginary companions. His mother, thinking it cute, went so far as to set places for them at the dinner table.

Crash!

Willy approached his mother who was working at her easel.

“A problem?” she asked only mildly concerned.

“It’s Jacob, again. He’s so clumsy. This time he broke the vase on the mantle with my lasso. He’s often rather careless.”

“See if he’ll clean up the mess. If not, please take care of it yourself.”

Recently, the amorphous Jacob had been Willy’s chief scapegoat. He was also eight, according to Willy, and had black hair, brown eyes, was tall for his age, and had quite a temper. He often destroyed things and was reportedly the source of several bruises that had recently showed up on Willy’s arm. Willy’s mother encouraged him to draw pictures of Jacob. His father encouraged him to write stories about their adventures. Willy had done both, taking to the suggestions with great enthusiasm. He was good with both words and charcoal.

As the weeks went by Willy seemed to become nervous – anxious, even.

“Is everything alright?” his father asked him at the dinner table one evening.

“It’s Jacob. He’s becoming pretty hard to live with. He’s selfish and often won’t even let me play with my toys.”

The parents shared a glance, containing their amusement.

His mother addressed the place at the table reserved for Jacob.

“Is that right? Are you not being a good friend, Jacob?”

“Mom! You can’t talk with Jacob. Only I can talk with Jacob.”

“Sorry. Just trying to get things back on an even keel between the two of you.”

“I appreciate the try, but this is something I have to handle by myself.”

The next morning Willy arrived at breakfast with a black eye – a real shiner!

“What on earth did you do to yourself, son,” his father asked.

“Not me. Jacob slugged me when I wouldn’t let him wear my Save the Dolphins shirt today.”

His mother tended to the eye. Willy was unwilling to

speaking about it further.

A few days later, also at breakfast, he complained of back and leg aches. His father examined him.

"Everything seems to be okay. You have any ideas about it?"

"Jacob won't let me sleep in my bed. He hogs all the room for himself and makes me sleep on the floor. I've been waking up stiff and sore every morning."

The usual lighthearted, raised eyebrow, exchange between the parents turned to more concerned, furrowed, brows. They talked together after breakfast – out of their son's earshot. It was time Jacob was confronted for what Jacob was – a figment of Willy's imagination – and sent packing. They weren't sure how to go about that but felt a direct approach would be best.

At bedtime, after Willy had been tucked in and the chapter of Tom Sawyer finished, they talked with him.

"Is Tom Sawyer a real boy?"

"No. He's a character in a story. He probably started out to be a figment of Mark Twain's imagination."

"Like Jacob, you mean. An imaginary person."

"I used to think that but since my birthday he pretty much comes and goes as he pleases. Used to be I'd have to need him, you know. But now it's all different."

"Mother and I think it would be good for you to spend more time with other boys your age. You like to swim so we've signed you up for swimming classes at the Boys Club."

Willy brightened at that idea. He did like to swim and believed himself to be quite expert. The other boys would certainly be impressed. And, being with other guys sounded like fun.

The first several lessons went well. Willy went on and on about them on the way home and through dinner. He clearly enjoyed the activity and asked if one of the boys, Timmy, could come out to play some time. It was arranged. He was a nice boy, much like Willy. Between the two of them there wasn't much left unturned.

A month later Willy arrived for breakfast with bruises on his face, arms and chest.

"How in the world?" his mother said as the two of them

looked him over.

“Jacob. He’s like really jealous of Timmy. Says I can’t have him come anymore or I’ll get it even worse than I did last night.”

“Why didn’t you call us or come and get us?” his father asked.

“Jacob said if I did he’d beat on me all night long. I won’t be going back to swimming either.”

“This has gone far enough, son,” his father said. “Mother and I have decided that if you can’t stop this carrying on about Jacob, we will have to take you to a counselor to help you manage it.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Willy said, much to the amazement of his parents. “Jacob won’t like that so let’s just keep it quiet. He’s upstairs taking a bath right now.”

“You know Jacob isn’t real, don’t you?”

“That’s what you’ve been telling me. Bruises tell me something different. How soon can I talk with the counselor?”

“We have an appointment for tomorrow morning at nine.”

“Great! Remember, hush, hush, about it.”

Once dinner was finished, Willy went off to play. The parents agreed they had made the right decision and probably should have taken the step months before. They blamed themselves for having gone along with the fantasy. They understood how their actions probably even encouraged it.

That night they finished Tom Sawyer. Huckleberry Finn was on the docket next. Willy had already read the book jacket and was excited about beginning the new adventure. They each kissed him on his forehead. His mother pulled the sheet up across his shoulders. She reached to remove the second pillow beside his head.

“That’s not a good idea. Maybe after I see the . . . – well after you know.”

The pillow was left in place.

At two a.m., the parents heard Willy screaming. There were the sounds of a knockdown, drag out, brawl coming from his room. By the time they reached his door things had grown quiet. They knocked, like always, and then entered without waiting for a response. In the dim light of the moon showing

through the windows they approached the bed. It was empty – well, the side Willy always preferred to sleep on was empty. They turned on a light.

He had apparently worked himself to the other side, head covered with the sheet. They were relieved. Willy had most likely had a nightmare and what they had heard had been his thrashing around, which eventually moved him into that position. His mother leaned over the bed to arrange and smooth the tangled sheet. She pulled it down to free his head and place a reassuring kiss on his forehead.

It was not Willy!

“Hi, Mom! I’m your newest son, Jacob, number seven, replacing Willy, number six, the trying, capricious, kid you used to think you’d enjoy having around. As per your current state of mind I’m far less challenging and innovative; more the straight forward and concrete sort in which what you see is what you get. I want something, I take it. I hate something I destroy it. Contemplating me will undoubtedly provide far less for you to talk about with your counselor, but then, after there having been seven of us, I’m sure there’s always something new. And Mom, we really need to talk about getting me a Dad.

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STORY TWENTY-FOUR
Henry and Walter
By Tom Gnagey

Henry and Walter worked six days a week for Bertrand Cartwright, LLC. Henry and Walter seldom joked between themselves but when they did it often referred to those initials – Lucifer, Lowlife, Cartwright, or some such take. Bertrand Cartwright was many things. He was an inconsiderate man. He was a rude man. He was a stingy man. He was not a nice man. He dealt in the buying and selling of gold and diamonds and required all transactions be in cash.

Henry and Walter were accountants. They shared a cramped, dismal, office. Henry was approaching retirement and had seniority by a number of years. He was single, found it easy to slip the truth, and was difficult to work with. If Walter had to miss a day due to illness, Henry would never attempt to take on any of the load – it remained for Walter to handle when he returned. When the situation was reversed, he expected Walter to have things up to date when he got back. Henry was unable to accept his own short comings – of which there were many. His mistakes were always laid at Walter's feet. If Cartwright had a favorite – and it was doubtful he cared enough to contemplate such a thing – it would have been Henry because of the overinflated, positive picture he presented of himself along with his tendency to mislay his own misplaced ineptness to document that Walter was an inferior employee.

Walter lived his life more on the meek side – a diligent

worker but just sat back and took whatever Henry and Cartwright dished out. If there were extra work, he was the one who was required to stay late. He accepted the blame for Henry's errors without comment. His perpetual smile was no true match to the feelings he harbored inside. Walter lived alone – no cat, no dog, not even an African violet. Walter was not a happy man but happiness had really never been his goal; it seemed too risky. If he had a goal it was stability – to maintain the status quo, however unpleasant it might seem. The prospect of change was terrifying – tempting, alluring, but terrifying.

One morning when Henry was taking a sick day, Walter went through the man's desk drawer – the middle one down the right side. It had been locked, but of course his desk used the same key as Walter's.

"Idiot?" Walter said out loud, shaking his head.

It was where he kept his personal things. Walter was looking to find a means of discomfiting his office mate upon his return the following morning. Walter's sole source of exacting justice for himself was the pursuit of those little pranks that became irritations though not major, get-to-the-bottom-of-it, sorts of things. He would change folder labels, chain paperclips together, break pencil lead and wear erasers down to the metal casing. The label changing thing had become old hat. The clips were still chained from the last time. He kept shuffling things here and there, and ran upon a small, brown envelope marked private.

"Idiot!" Walter said out loud a second time. "Labeling something private was just begging for all-comers to investigate it."

He opened the envelope and removed a flash drive.

"I wonder what private things it might reveal?" he said.

He slipped it into his laptop thinking he would scroll through the files and see if anything looked promising. Perhaps he could change a few file names. Interestingly, there was but one file. It was named 'Retirement'. The mere sight of the word immediately elevated Walter's mood. The idea of Henry's retirement was something to celebrate in some wonderful fashion that he had never celebrated anything before. He opened the file. It was a letter to Cartwright. He

assumed a letter of resignation. It turned out to be that and more. It was dated the 15th. That would be the following day – Sunday. His interest was immediately piqued and he read on.

“Cartwright: You will receive this after the fact but that is how it must be.

First, I resign immediately. I recommend you find a new accountant to take my place. Walter is too incompetent to assume my difficult responsibilities.

Second, I hate your guts. You can’t imagine how wonderful it feels to have said that. You are a horrible human being with absolutely no socially or personally redeeming characteristics. You have made life a living hell. Sorry, but all I can think of are trite clichés to describe you. That said, let me move on to the only part of this note that will seem to be of any lasting consequence to you.

Third, when you open the safe this morning it will be empty. If my ledgers are accurate, and you know they always are, I will have lightened your ‘wallet’ by nearly three quarters of a million dollars. I freely admit it. It has been my sole purpose for living these past twenty-five years. It is my way of retrieving the many pounds of my flesh which you have exacted from me through the years. I hope you rot in a refrigerator box under some filthy freeway and that the wild beasts tear the flesh from your bones and devour it. Did I mention how much I have hated you all these years?

Despise you,
Henry Havens

Walter was bright and creative although he had never felt secure enough to reliably demonstrate either.

“Perhaps it is time for old Walter to change things up a bit. I am considerably nicer than the despicable Bertrand Cartwright and far more intelligent than Henry, the idiot, Havens. This may be my final opportunity to set things right. The authorities need to be alerted but the timing must be precise. I need a masterful plan and I need it quickly.”

He removed the flash drive from his laptop, wiped it clean of prints, and returned to its envelope in Henry’s desk drawer. He assumed it had already been printed and probably had in some way been programmed to enter Cartwright’s in-

box the next morning.

“Leaving for lunch, Mr. Cartwright,” Walter called as he passed Cartwright’s always open office door.

It received the expected, “Ahumph,” and Walter was on his way. He contemplated his alternatives over a ham salad sandwich and chips at the deli next door before returning to his desk. He needed to be back by 12:30 because Cartwright left at one o’clock on Saturdays to begin his weekend.

As was his routine six days a week, Walter left at five, locking the front door behind him.

* * *

Although the surroundings were plush, there in Walter’s brand new apartment overlooking Lake Tahoe, it was nowhere nearly as satisfying as the front-page article in Tuesday morning’s newspaper: Henry Haven, the accountant who made off with over \$800,000 from his employer’s safe, admitted to the crime in both a signed letter and an email to his employer. Still, he denies the charge saying that although the theft had been his intention, the safe had been empty when he opened it in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Police say there are no clues to the whereabouts of the money. As a side note, the company’s other accountant also tendered his resignation effective Sunday with only high praise for his employer. No connection is suspected.

STORY TWENTY-FIVE
Lucy's New Hobby
by Tom Gnagey

Lucy was confident, precise, and intelligent – three traits that helped make her a respected and able member of the city's Crime Scene Investigation team. Lucy was plain, nearsighted, and gangly – three traits, which at 34, positioned her on the Plain Jane end of the attractiveness continuum. Lucy was okay with that. She defined herself through her work.

It was late afternoon. A shoeprint had been left behind at a crime scene in loose, fine, soil, but even in such tricky conditions Lucy would render a perfect casting. She held the spray can of clear plastic film higher above the ground than usual. That way the spray would gently waft in its decent and not disturb the sandy soil, which might happen from the more typical short, puffs of spray that she would direct across a firmer area. The surface of the print was soon covered with the thin, tough, film, fixing the soil in place ready to accept the plaster. Slowly and precisely she poured the thick, white, mixture from the can. A rapid or careless pour might disarrange the soil and therefore distort the print it held, rendering it useless as evidence. It might also form air bubbles in the plaster, which would tend to disfigure the imprint. After several minutes, it was set. She lifted the hardened block, peeled back the plastic film, and revealed the flawless, dirt-free, impression. She was pleased.

“Mike. Can you take this back to the lab for me? I'm already off the clock for the day.”

“Sure thing, Luce. You want me to take your bag as well?”

“No thanks. I like to keep it with me.”

“Have a great evening, then. See you in the morning.”

It was Lucy’s full intention to have a great evening. The day had required her to examine a broken skylight on the roof of a tall, downtown, building – heights were not among her favorite venues. She was called to assist the coroner in the morgue – a place that was not high on her list of locations that were likely to yield eligible (that is, breathing) young men. She was also called to pick the lock on a security closet door to extricate a five-year-old boy impounded there in his father’s study by his slightly older brother – Lucy was one of the finest lock experts in the department.

She parked on the street near the art studio where she would have her painting class at seven. After taking care of one last important chore for the day she relaxed over a sandwich and coffee at a café across the street. Contrary to her usual arrive-at-the-last-moment approach, she was in the classroom with her canvas and easel in place well before the other class members began arriving. It was a friendly group of people ranging in age from teens to pensioners. Lucy felt relaxed and confident among them.

The subject for the evening was a still life. It sat already prepared in the middle of the room – a round, draped, table set with a large wooden bowl, an assortment of colorful fruit, and three wine bottles of various shapes, hues, and heights. Lucy set up her pallet while the instructor – Herr Prendergast, a scruffy, pudgy, bespectacled little man with a bushy white moustache and thick German accent – belabored, unnecessarily, the details of the subject matter and fussed over a lamp until he was satisfied with the highlights and shadows of the arrangement. He had an excellent eye for good art and the kind of subject matter it took to assure saleable paintings. He was only a mediocre painter, himself, but was an excellent teacher. As a dealer, he had acquired a less than respectable reputation among the local art aficionados and on numerous occasions had been visited by detectives regarding missing pieces. He had never been found to have been associated with any of them, however,

and dubbed it 'police harassment', blaming it on his ancestry.

That night, Lucy would use a canvas that already held a painting – she was frugal and known to reuse practice canvases in that way. She was less interested in saving and accumulating her paintings than she was in looking for that one perfectly pleasing endeavor. In fact, after class, she often left her work there on a shelf beside the door to Herr Prendergast's private studio so she could use it the following week without having to lug it back and forth. When she arrived that evening she had gone directly to the shelf and selected a particularly large, previously used canvas. She toned it with a special black gesso – a good, opaque, color that completely covered what was underneath.

She worked in acrylic paint. Most of the others preferred oils. A painting done in acrylics would be nearly dry by the end of the two-hour session and that was more to her liking than oils, which might take days to dry and tended to leave telltale streaks of color on the back of the front seat of her car. The gesso was almost dry as she began determining proportions and laying in forms and base colors.

Her interest in painting was relatively recent. Three months before, she had worked a burglary scene in Herr Prendergast's small, private, studio at the rear of the sprawling classroom. The door, which opened out into the classroom, was clearly the only means of entry and after the theft it had been found to be locked, presenting a fascinating conundrum in the case. As she had examined his collection of paintings for fingerprints she became interested in both the man and the style of work he admired. One in particular caught her attention and later she would try to emulate the style in her own pieces.

The incident brought back memories of a break-in and robbery at her home several years before. Her grandfather had left the family a rather valuable painting. Prior to its theft, it had hung over the mantle in their living room. She loved the old painting's soft pastel colors that had so masterfully brought to life a hidden garden with trees, flowers, a high stone wall, and round, marble, birdbath bedecked with cardinals, bluebirds, and canaries – the only truly vivid colors in the picture.

Recently, she decided that it was time she had a hobby. Her colleagues had been telling her that for years. She worked too hard, too long, and too diligently. So, she cut down on overtime and set out to enjoy her hours away from work. Painting had long been on the short list of things she thought she might like to try someday. She considered her investigation of the crime scene at Herr Prendergast's studio, and her simultaneous search for a new pastime, to represent a happy, serendipitous, coincidence. She signed up for the class with him.

By the end of the session that night, Lucy was pleased with what she had accomplished. It might not have been her best work but it was the most personally satisfying piece she had created. She would take it with her.

Twenty minutes later as she entered the living room in the family home – where by then she lived alone – she eyed the long empty space above the mantle. As was her habit, she made a cup of cocoa in the kitchen and then returned to the living room where, out of habit, she turned on the police scanner. The first call amused her. Apparently sometime between five p.m. – when Herr Prendergast left his studio for dinner – and the end of class, another painting from his collection had been stolen. She shook her head knowing exactly where her day would begin the following morning.

She lay her newest painting face up on the table. With the skill of the well-trained CSI agent that she was, she carefully and methodically ran her fingernails along the top edge of the canvas, separating and carefully peeling down a layer of pliable, though tough, plastic film that separated the painting underneath from the layer of black gesso on which she had worked that evening. Lucy set aside her fresh picture. She nodded and smiled as she lifted the newly revealed older painting into place on the mantle. She took a seat on the couch to sip her cocoa and admire the beautiful addition.

She loved the old painting's soft, pastel, colors that had so masterfully brought to life a hidden garden with trees, flowers, a high stone wall and round, marble, birdbath bedecked with cardinals, bluebirds, and canaries – the only truly vivid colors in the picture.

She raised her cup as if offering a toast. “Welcome home, old friend. Welcome home! Or, after all this time in captivity, perhaps the more familiar words would be, Willkommen zu Hause, alter Freund. Willkommen zu Hause!”

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STORY TWENTY-SIX
Just Desserts
by Tom Gnagey

Susan (never Suzy) and Abigail (never Abby) were recently retired, maiden, sisters. Their father had died years before; their mother just days ago. They were awaiting responses from out of town relatives before setting the funeral date. Their uncle (well, great uncle), Samuel, had long been designated as the keeper of the family fortune – sizable even by today's standards. Samuel and their father had owned a bank together. Since their father's death, their mother had lived on what seemed to have been a relatively sufficient trust fund administered by the old man.

Susan and her mother disliked Uncle Samuel. Abigail agreed he was a horrible old man but since his 90th birthday she had mellowed in her approach to him. Samuel was devoid of conscience. He relished foreclosing on those down on their luck and delighted in confiscating the possessions of those who could not pay their loans. According to his dictate, Susan and Abigail were to begin receiving the stipend their mother had been getting – no more, no less.

The two of them sat sipping tea at the kitchen table.

"I suppose if it was good enough for mother . . ." Susan began, as usual commandeering the lead in the discussion. The sisters had shared the same two-bedroom flat throughout their adult years. Being eleven months Abigail's senior – and noticeably more Uncle Samuel-like in her dealings with people – it had always been Susan who had taken the lead and made the major decisions. Abigail dutifully tolerated her older sister.

“Yes, I suppose if it was good enough for mother,” Abigail repeated with a sigh. Abigail often sighed to indicate disagreement with her sister. To her it seemed less disrespectful than using words, which might lead to discord and which seldom made any impact on the outcome, anyway.

“Of course, there was only one of mother,” Susan went on. “There are two of us.”

“What I was thinking – two of us,” Abigail said.

“And things are more expensive these days, Susan added.

“Could we go talk to Uncle Samuel about it?” Abigail asked.

Susan nodded, but with clear, furrowed brow, reluctance, indicating that she understood the idea and was considering it – not that she agreed outright with the concept. Silence ensued.

“I suppose a visit couldn't hurt,” Susan said at last. “He likes you best, you know, Abigail.”

“I know. His birthday is coming up. We could combine our business with his pleasure and take him something – cookies, perhaps. He loves mother's chocolate-vanilla cookies.”

“In the end, he won't agree to giving us more money, you know,” Susan said, “no matter how civil you've been or how many cookies we take him.”

“It was what I was thinking, also. Perhaps he has actually invented a way to take it with him.”

They giggled, a bit embarrassed they had said such a disrespectful thing but clearly enjoying their naughty side. Uncle Samuel was a force to be reckoned with, never one to be trifled with – but then neither were Susan and Abigail.

“He's severely anemic, you know,” Susan went on.

“Yes, I know. You and he are both anemic – a family thing from father's side. The elixir from Dr. Trotter has kept you both going quite well for many years, however.”

“It has, but there are cautions about its use,” Susan said.

“Yes. I'm well aware. You have reminded me every day of my life. No more than one tablespoon a day. More could be toxic. I know how careful you must be.”

"In regards to Uncle Samuel, however, it does present possibilities," Susan said.

She paused. A glance passed between them – it was that glance all sisters share when they suddenly understand and are willing to participate in the malevolent intention of the other.

"I have a new bottle – big and brown and square," Susan said.

She retrieved it from the kitchen cabinet beside the sink and returned to her chair at the table.

"What does the label say – exactly?" Abigail asked.

"Well, let's see," Susan went on, donning and adjusting her gold framed glasses.

"The dose is three teaspoons per day – one at each meal. It says never take more than during a day. That dose contains the maximum safe amount of iron - ferrous fumarate it's called. And this is what's really important: larger doses can become toxic to the system and may cause rapid deterioration of internal organs and the brain and even result in death in less than a week."

"Oh, my. Death!" Abigail said.

"That is what we are speaking of, isn't it, Sister?"

"Death. Well. Yes. I suppose it is. I don't like that word – death. Perhaps easing his passing would be more acceptable."

"Yes. Much more acceptable," Susan agreed.

"But he administers his own doses every day – he is still alert and mentally capable. He won't just overdose because we wish it so."

They sat in silence finishing their tea. Eventually Susan collected the cups and saucers and sat them in the sink. They moved to the living room where they sat side by side on the settee and thought some more. Abigail had a question.

"Will they run tests or do an autopsy do you suppose?"

"I don't know. At his age, probably not if it looks like natural causes. What are you thinking?"

"Well, he does love to nibble at those chocolate-vanilla cookies. We've seen him eat a dozen over the course of a single evening."

"We have seen that, all right," Susan agreed, nodding –

a clear question growing on her forehead.

“Women seldom eat more than one cookie when at a tea or evening get-together,” Abigail went on.

“It just isn't ladylike to eat more,” Susan said, supporting her sister though still not sure where she was going in her thoughts.

“If we added just enough of your elixir to the cookie dough so each cookie would contain, say, a teaspoon, it would be quite harmless to those who ate only one or two – even to you if you skipped your daily dose.”

“Quite harmless, indeed!”

They touched their heads together and giggled like junior high girls readying a rumor about the head cheerleader.

“It sounds like we are planning to actually – how did you put it?” Susan asked.

“Ease his passing.”

“Yes. Ease his passing.”

* * *

Everyone agreed their mother's funeral was a very nice funeral. In all, however, only two other relatives attended – aunts from the east coast. They gathered at Samuel's home that evening. The cookies and punch were enjoyed by everyone – especially Uncle Samuel.

* * *

Everyone agreed their Uncle Samuel's funeral had been a very nice funeral. The aunts did not return for that service.

The next afternoon Susan and Abigail arrived at the office of the family attorney for the reading of their Uncle's will. It was short and to the point.

“In the event of my death, the bank is to be sold to the Thomas Financial Group, as per the long-standing agreement. All of the money from that sale will go to my eldest great niece, Susan.”

* * *

Abigail and Susan were having tea at their apartment the following afternoon. Abigail spoke softly, but with uncharacteristic confidence and strength.

“I baked cookies this morning, Susan. Have several. They are your favorite.”

STORY TWENTY-SEVEN
The Pit and the Petulant
By Tom Gnagey

Once engulfed by the decades of accumulated possessions inside Abigail's second floor apartment, one would not have suspected the outside world had moved into the 21st century. It was a modest, three-room arrangement, a relic from the era of knickers and honky-tonk pianos playing George M. Cohan in backroom speakeasies. It had been a grand place during her childhood and by design not a whole lot had changed since.

The dark wood floor was mostly covered by a half dozen, thread bare, oriental rugs. From years of foot traffic and cleaning the colors had faded, the border frill was gone, and no discernible patterns remained. Heavy, cut lace, curtains, flanked by bulky, floor length, dark green drapes sheltered the room from the light outside – the streetlight, on now for many hours, and the lightning flashes becoming brighter and more closely synchronized with the rumbling heavens as the summer storm moved closer – out of hills and into the valley.

The lights in the apartment flickered – single bulbs on the ends of black, twisted, two strand wires dangling at the center of each room. The high ceiling was capped with ornately embossed metal squares. One could see they were metal, the paint having long ago peeled away leaving but a few, tenacious, cream colored, curling, remnants which still fluttered in the gentle breeze of the slowly oscillating fan.

The red tiffany lamp on her massive, lace-draped, nightstand cast a rippled, rusty, glow across its surface, laden

as it was with combs, brushes, and a teakwood jewelry box with ivory inlay. Tabitha, the most recent of a long line of cats that provided Abigail's only real companionship, was stretched the length of her special place beneath the lamp, licking at that paw that never seemed to come clean to her satisfaction. The light spread across her pure white fur casting it in delicate pink. She wore her years well, but then who among us wouldn't, given the privileged care and pampering she received.

As the storm raged into the night, Abigail arranged things on the dining room table for her Wednesday morning outing – her social security check, her purse, and a babushka to protect her hair against the damp air. She seldom left the apartment other than on Wednesdays – the twenty-two steps up from the entry were just about more than her aging legs could manage. There was really no reason for her to leave. Nothing of personal value remained for her in the outside world – friends in distant rest homes and dozens of funerals had seen to that. She laid out her goulashes in anticipation of morning puddles and stream-filled gutters. How she hated to walk after a rain – the danger of slipping and the discomfort and humiliation of being splashed by inconsiderate drivers.

Morning came. It was hot and sultry for October. She walked the seven blocks to the First National Bank and cashed her check, making small talk with the young teller and laboriously re-counting the bills, which he had just counted out to her, making certain she received every cent due her. Those in line behind her voiced their impatience. Abigail smiled – mostly to herself. That was about the only power she had over anything anymore and she stood her ground savoring it.

On her way home, she paid the rent, electric, water, and gas, all in cash. That left little more than enough for groceries. There were no frills in Abigail's life – well, there was Tabitha.

She stopped at the sole remaining neighborhood market to restock her pantry and Frigidaire – her life-long, generic, term for refrigerators. There would be brand name cream and canned salmon for Tabitha – nothing but the best for the joy of her life. Most everything else was black and

white generic.

As was the long-standing arrangement, the grocer meticulously arranged her purchases in two, equally weighted, paper sacks. With a bag hanging at arm's length from each misshapen hand, she slowly managed the painful four blocks back to her building. On the positive side, she thought, her feet were dry and it had been a splash-free, sun brightened, outing.

At the end of each shopping trip, while she paused to catch her breath inside the entry hall at the base of the staircase, she longingly eyed apartment One-A. It was the large, long time, home of Rupert Ignacio Plotski who was, in Abigail's mind, a fully useless and detestable human being. She had her reasons. He struck pets with his cane, yelled at school children, and swore using the nastiest of words just to be swearing. The story was that he once opened a business to compete with his brother's, and ran him into bankruptcy – a fact that for some twisted reason, clearly filled Rupert with great joy. Also, not generally known, sixty years before, Rupert had maimed and disfigured Abigail's older sister in a hit and run accident – one for which he was never brought to justice and which brought her sister to an early grave.

Abigail sighed as she moved on to the bottom of the staircase and lifted her head to survey that seemingly endless array of steps. She would carry both sacks as far up the flight as she could manage, then leave one behind and return for it after she had rested.

Sometime later, with those several tasks eventually accomplished, she was ready to sip a glass of cold lemonade and relax and recuperate in front of her fan; but first, of course, a bowl of cream for Tabby.

She really needed that first-floor apartment but Rupert gave no appearance of being willing to die anytime soon. Abigail was at the top of the waiting list, should it become available. She had been on that list for nearly a decade. Her mother had lived to 99 and her father to 104. She was certain that eventually One-A would be hers – Rupert was ill and in his late 80s. As she sensed her arthritis settling painfully into every bone and joint, Abigail's impatience grew.

Something else was growing as well. She chuckled to

herself as she cleverly referred to it as the 'seed' of an idea. It had developed slowly – deliberately and carefully, well researched – just waiting for the proper time. For years she had been meticulously laying the requisite groundwork.

“Tabby, I do believe the proper time is now upon us.”

If she didn't understand or agree, Tabatha gave no indication, as she and her talented tongue continued the slow, rhythmic, patient, pursuit of the rich, thick, cream. Cats are typically patient beings – well, either patient or just generally uncaring. Abigail was also patient, but ten years! Time was slipping away. It meant a second trip out of the building that week. She would rest up on Thursday and go out again on Friday. She slipped a slim volume from the nearby bookcase. She would review the process one final time – perhaps the hundredth or five hundredth time. The Underground Poison Cookbook fell open to chapter ten – ‘The Preparation of Cyanide in The Comfort and Privacy of Your Own Kitchen’.

The plan was simple. She would visit Old Town, an area close to the docks where immigrant food vendors sold exotic items native to their countries. She had previously done her reconnaissance and determined which stand would have what she required. Her choice was the Pakistani kiosk of the Bangulzai family. They imported fresh fruit from their homeland and Abigail sought a particular variety of bitter apricots, which, in the entire World, were only grown there. The trip would involve a taxi ride since it was across the city and she needed many pounds of the fruit for her undertaking.

Abigail was no simpleton. She was, in fact, shrewdly far sighted. For a number of years, she had been making and delivering her, by then, locally famous apricot preserves to those who lived in the building. Each year, as fall arrived, it became the buzz of conversation among the residents. Even Rupert managed to allow a civil side in her direction when the leaves began to turn. Abigail believed it was important to the plan to have the preserves as a long-established tradition.

Rupert was a small man – 140 pounds, perhaps less. He had several maladies including a liver problem and was mostly confined to a wheel chair. Unknown to most of the residents Rupert was living out his final years in tremendous pain, but he would give no one the satisfaction of knowing

that. All of those things were crucial elements in Abigail's plan.

It went like this: Bitter apricot kernels – the seeds inside the woody pits – produce toxic levels of cyanide during digestion. Those raised in Pakistan were many times more potent than those grown elsewhere. A mere six ounces of such kernels contain a lethal dose for a man Rupert's size. In healthy individuals, the liver flushes low doses of cyanide from the body so it typically doesn't build up to a harmful level over time. Rupert's malfunctioning liver would not be able to perform that function efficiently. (Hence, cyanide had become Abigail's poison of choice.) With a sufficient amount of pulverized kernels mixed into Rupert's several pint jars of preserves, he should check out rather quickly. It was necessary to add that powder after the apricots had been cooked down, since heating the kernels greatly reduced their cyanide content. Abigail had done her homework.

So, she knew what she was about and had established the tradition, which would keep her from being suspect in the unlikely event of an investigation into the old man's death. Nobody else, of course, would feel any ill effects from their untreated treats. Her conscience was completely eased by her three-part belief that she was exacting the rightful revenge for her sister's death, that she was the one who really needed that apartment, and the thought that she was putting him out of his terrible, hour by hour misery.

Finally, she had initiated the third prong of her plan by befriending the old reprobate. She persisted, despite his plethora of petulant personal peculiarities. The other residents just shook their heads, soothing the guilt about their own sins of omission by mutually elevating Abigail to an early sainthood for her good deeds. During the previous six months, she had visited him regularly – cleaning, doing dishes, getting his mail and so on. He accepted her help but remained crotchety, indicating no evidence of appreciation.

They talked. She learned, that decades earlier, he had disowned his family and had no idea where they might be. He was certain they didn't know his whereabouts, either – all just the way he wanted things. His two, sizeable checks – social security and pension – had been coming to his apartment

through the mail. Continuing in her helpful manner, Abigail arranged for the two of them to be direct deposited into his checking account. He saw the logic in that as it saved him a good deal of hassle – managing to get to the bank and all. She also set up automatic bill paying of his utilities. Of that, he also approved. As Rupert's relationships went, the one with Abigail – albeit one sided – had become far and away the best of his life.

At last, she set the final wheels in motion. For some time, she had been saving back money to cover the taxi, the apricots, and other ingredients. As planned, on Friday she made the tiring trek to the Old Town market and returned with all the necessary ingredients. The nice young taxi driver helped her tote things up to her apartment. His face faded for only a moment as she lovingly folded a quarter tip into his right palm and administered a gentle, old lady, peck to his cheek.

She pitted the fruit. She donned her apron and began to cook and stir, adding powdered artificial sweetener since sugar reduced the potency of the cyanide. While the apricots cooked down she used a nut cracker to separate the kernels from the pit – the pocked, woody, outer covering. She first pulverized the kernels with a tack hammer and then enlisted a rolling pin to transform the bits and pieces into a smooth, fine, burnt orange, powder. The preserves needed to be ladled into the jars while still warm because when cool the mixture would thicken and set. To offset any weakening effect, which the remaining heat might have on the poison, she prepared half again as much powder as should have been required.

Separating out Rupert's three-pint portion, she carefully added the powder, in the end, tasting to make certain the sweetness of the pulp overpowered the bitterness of the kernels. It was perfect and, of course, she was certain the tiny amount she ingested would never harm her. She then filled the other jars having been careful to write 'RIP' on the three lids to designate Rupert Ignacio Plotski's special edition. Seeing those initials written for the first time gave rise to a wry smile and her delightful chuckle all punctuated by the repetitive shaking of her head. As 'must keep' secrets went, that one rated five stars!

As was her custom, she had prepared hand written

labels, which – with some pride – she affixed to everyone’s jars – Abigail’s Apricot Preserves: 2010. She had also prepared an obituary for the newspaper, carefully crafted to merely satisfy the fleeting, headline perusing, curiosity of the man’s neighbors. It contained a bogus address, age, parentage, and place of birth, which she felt would protect her down the road in terms of her larcenous intentions. She baked several dozen sweet citrus muffins – her own recipe, which produced a firm bread of just the right consistency to accept and hold a generous slathering of preserves. They would be reserved for Rupert to entice him to eat well and eat often.

She made her deliveries to appreciative oohs and ahs at each door in the building. She left Rupert alone to devour his basket of goodies. Tabatha seemed to appreciate those sudden extra hours of attention.

* * *

Two weeks later, Abigail and Tabatha were settled comfortably down stairs in the larger and more easily accessible apartment, One-A. Word was spread that Rupert had passed away and had been immediately taken for burial back to his unspecified home state; nobody really cared. Thanks to the misdirection in the obituary and the fact there was no death certificate, both the government and his bank remained none the wiser.

Abigail and Tabatha suddenly began enjoying a plush and well-appointed life style. Three checks proved to be considerably better than one. And, oh yes, there was a single new rule there in apartment One-A: Never open the freezer!

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STORY TWENTY-EIGHT
The Incredible Mien of Old Mr. Bertrand Barns
A Halloween Tale
By Tom Gnagey

To say that old Mr. Bertrand Barns was eccentric would fall far short of the truth. To say that old Mr. Bertrand Barns was bizarre would also fall short. To say that old Mr. Bertrand Barns was creepy, eerie, and spooky, in absolutely every sense of the words would come closer to characterizing him.

Younger children ran from him. Teen boys taunted him – from a safe distance. Mothers moved with their offspring to the other side of the street when he approached them on the sidewalk. For old Mr. Bertrand Barns, everyday was – well, I’m just going to say it – Halloween.

The man dressed in shiny, black, leather boots and a long, bulky, black wool coat. Hot or cold, sunny or rainy he dressed in shiny, black leather boots and a long, bulky, black wool coat. His high, crisply starched white collar sat atop his coat. That was all that sat atop his coat. Mr. Bertrand Barns carried his head under his left arm.

Many speculated about how he did it but nobody knew for sure. The eyes moved and blinked and the mouth and tongue appeared lifelike in every way. The face smiled and frowned and on occasion had been reported to shed what, to all intents and purposes, seemed to be real tears. Strangest of all, of course, the head talked. If you wanted – scratch that – if you needed to speak with him you looked down and spoke to his head. His hair was long and white – always combed, clean, and neat. His eyebrows were bushy and had clearly

been left to their own devices. His cheeks were ruddy like those of a stereotypical Irishman too long at the pub. His voice was low and gravely – not really unpleasant, even, although the circumstances from which it originated rendered it unnerving if not outright frightening. There were no verifiable reports that he had ever accosted, threatened, or even intentionally startled anybody but his essence made those possibilities seem persistently imminent.

Small children just accepted as fact that old Mr. Bertrand Barns carried his head under his arm and considered it no further. Teens figured he was a master ventriloquist and the lifelike, artificial head was fitted out with strings to move its various parts. Many of the townsfolk agreed with that take on it. Fathers weren't sure but warned their families to keep their distance. Any man who would go to such extremes to appear offensively unnatural was certainly not sane and not to be trusted. Mothers reserved opinion, but were happy to heed the obvious wisdom of their husband's advice.

Mr. Bertrand Barns stood right at six feet tall – without the head on his shoulders. It was understood that some paraphernalia under his jacket provided artificial shoulders, all of which was concealed under the long black wool coat.

Mr. Bertrand Barns was the last in the line of a very wealthy family known for its reclusive tendencies, generation after generation. In fact, Bertrand was the first of the clan that any of the oldest old timers in the little town could remember ever appeared in public. The newspaper archives carried no articles about them and had published no pictures of his predecessors. The massive, brown stone, family home sat atop a hill at the north edge of town. The base of the hill was ringed by a high stone wall. The bravest of the teen boys ventured no closer to the house than sitting atop that wall, legs dangling inside, as they looked to determine what they might see or learn.

No one could ever remember him having had a visitor – they would have had to have passed through the front gate, which was in clear view down the entire length of Main Street. Examination of the hinges on the huge wrought iron gate that spanned the driveway suggested it had been rusted shut for decades.

There was a rumor – generally believed although not necessarily verified – that Mr. Bertrand Barns had, as a young man, determined that he would be the last of the line, so he never married. The reason for his decision was not clear and, interestingly, very little speculation had been offered about it. Whether or not that contributed to his need to approach the world in such an unconventional manner was, of course, not known.

He walked wherever he went – the grocery store, his attorney’s office, the bank – that was about all. The head never left its place at his side, cradled there in his left arm. He made no Halloween appearances, although the young people wished he had, after all it was about the only thing he really seemed to be cut out for. Why would he waste such a wonderful opportunity when it appeared it was just such an occasion for which he had prepared himself?

One morning, while approaching the checkout counter at the small grocery, Mr. Bertrand Barns clutched his chest with his right hand and fell to the floor, dead.

The coroner issued his findings: “Mr. Bertrand Barns died of a heart attack at the age of 89. He is survived by no relatives.”

But, there was something else he decided to never reveal. The coroner believed it explained the reclusive tendencies of the Barns family, generation after generation. There was no shoulder ‘paraphernalia’ and atop Mr. Bertrand Barns’ shoulders, there was no head.

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STORY TWENTY-NINE
Fifteen Blocks
By Tom Gnagey

My name is Thomas. It doesn't matter if that's first or last. I just sign my pieces, Thomas. I'm a writer. Tonight, I'm a writer with a great story but no finish. It has choice charismatic characters, a perfect plot, a sensational setting, and an overabundance of alluring, if altogether absurd, alliterations. But it won't find its finish. That happens for me sometimes. My stories get so caught up in description and feelings that things take on lives of their own, and lives, I have found – mine or others – almost never want to come to a conclusion. I need something mysterious – suspenseful, even. It needs to come out of nowhere and yet be a perfect fit. From just the right conclusion I can even work backward and fix the other things to accommodate it. I've done it before. So far, however, nada, zilch, nil, naught, el zippo.

So, I've set aside the yellow pad. I clicked the pen closed and cozied it into my shirt pocket. I left my hot corner room on the fourth floor in the old hotel where the roaches and I have been living this summer, and find myself walking west on 37th street, making my way the fifteen blocks toward The Corner Bar. It sits in the center of a block so I have no real idea how it came by that name. My fantasy is that it was started by a guy named Corner. It seems logical. Of course, it could have been started by two guys – Corneilous and Nerbert. Unlikely. I'll stick with the first.

It's the old part of the city, a kind epithet for 'slum' or 'ghetto' or 'a good place to stay away from if you value life and

limb'. I do, but on a budget that allows fifty bucks a week for a room and fifty cents a day for a shot of whiskey, these fifteen blocks – risks aside – connect those two dots nicely. There are two streetlights for every seemingly endless block – dark canyons more aptly describe the area at night. There is only one functioning bulb for every two or three fixtures. It's dark. It's filthy. Tonight, it's wet with puddles left from a late afternoon downpour. Dank is usually the word of choice, I suppose – wet and pungently musty. These fifteen danger-ridden blocks are worse than dank. The moist filth reeks of a putrid odor. I've lived down here for several months and still haven't grown accustomed to it. It is one of those things a person learns to endure in order to obtain necessities – a drink when I'm in my room and my room when I've finished my drink.

The best thing about rain is that it washes traces of blood from the sidewalks and moves the refuse into the gutters to be swallowed by the sewers. It is perhaps understandable that by the time I reach the bar I am more in need of the shot than when I started, and that the journey back home is somewhat less filled with fright once the alcohol has seeped its way through the nooks and crannies of my brain.

I am in block two of the fifteen. It doesn't really matter that a building may have been built of brick or stone or cement. It doesn't matter if the surface was designed as etched or art deco or Baroque. A century of filth clinging to their surfaces gives them all the same, smooth face – the face of neglect and poverty and despair. It has become their unsought badge of brotherhood.

What's that? A noise behind me! Faint, but there, nevertheless. More than a noise, a sharp noise, a clicking noise – a sharp, clicking, rhythmic noise. The soles and heels of boots, perhaps. Expensive boots with leather soles and metal taps sunk into the pretentious, elevated, heels. Not the noise from the hole-riddled tennies of the homeless and riffraff that occupy the alleys and cellars here; but the noise from the boots of the well to do – the ones who have made it, the ones who have found a way to run roughshod over the rest of us down here and take what they want, when they want it, from

whom they want. Shiny leather soles and high, tap-laden heels are the predictable companions of brass knuckles and stilettos and hand guns, long bereft of serial numbers.

Click Click Click As I slow, they slow. As I speed up, they speed up. The one directing them must have emerged from the alley I just passed. I seldom peer into the blackness of the alleys for fear I might see what is there – what I know must be there – the drunkards, the addicts, and the lowlifes who prey upon them. Those who lay there among the stench and squalor are better off to have drunk or injected themselves into unconsciousness. Those who cannot finger their attackers are more likely to live and those whose throats get slashed go with less pain and terror when not awake to confront their end.

I adjust my gait to a steady pace. My theory is that it's best to appear oblivious to his presence so as to not lead him to panic and hasten his move on me. Another street light. Another light bulb. Another dingy cross-street well known by the masses that it leads toward distress, so no traffic braves it after sundown. I cross in a circuitous route, stepping around puddles and upended cobblestones.

The clicks stop. I mount the curb and continue on, picking up my pace just a bit. If only one of the buildings were lit. I know there are no such sanctuaries at least until block ten. That is still some distance ahead. I note a shiver and wonder how that could be on a mid-August evening in the city. It appeared to have been of the body. Surely it was of the mind or the emotion. Perhaps a well-conditioned muscular reaction from some childhood fright.

The next several streetlights are unlit. The streets narrow ahead and a predictable, hot, breeze comes at me from the west. I have never found the low whir of its sound pleasing although it sometimes muffles the moans arising from the alleys and that provides a positive service of sorts. I cock my head and listen intently but the clicks are no longer evident. I sigh and try to shake it off.

I look on up the street along the path I will be following. A man in a long dark coat emerges from an alley and leans against the corner of the building, his knee bent, foot resting back against the bricks. Should I proceed? Should I cross the

street? That would be too obvious. It might be taken as an affront by somebody who otherwise would have showed no interest in me. I suck it in and move ahead. As I near the man he turns his head and looks me over. His hair is long and he may have worn a mustache and perhaps a goatee. I only got a glimpse and was not about to linger in my glance. I hope that I look both harmless and penniless. He flicks his spent cigarette at my feet as I come even with him. I move on without looking in his direction. He makes no response. I am soon a half block beyond him. My how I want to look back. I don't.

Click . . . Click . . . Click . . . Is that he or has the first man caught up? I have no way of knowing. Quite clearly, however, I do have a way of becoming more frightened. I begin breathing more rapidly. My heart begins to race. I want to run but I don't. I tell myself again to keep to a steady pace. Hold myself erect. Exude confidence. Yeah, right! My legs won't mind me and soon I'm moving along at a pretty good clip. I wonder if my increased speed has been noticed. Of course, it has.

At last I come upon a few lighted windows and doors. By block thirteen they are most all lighted. I slow down a bit and then a bit more. There are a few other people on the street. The lights all contain working bulbs. Many doors have their own lights above them.

As I start up block fifteen, the clicks grow louder and I realize he is no more than a few feet behind me. Would he be so brazen as to thrust his pick into my back there among the others? Of course, he would and when the police arrive – if they arrive – no one will have seen what happened.

Actually, those who had been on the street a few moments before have entered cabs and buildings and I am there alone again. The sounds change. Click, click. Click, click. Click, click. The clicks are coming in tandem. There are two of them, now. Perhaps the first has joined forces with the man at the alley. I must not panic.

As will happen sometimes in moments of crisis, a stroke of genius comes over me. I reach for my rear left pants pocket. I unbutton it and slip out my wallet letting it fall to the sidewalk as I move on quickly toward the tavern door, just

twenty yards ahead. If money will satisfy them, they are welcome to it.

“Sir,” comes a gravelly male voice from behind me.

This is it. They missed seeing the wallet. As one distracts me with conversation the other will slip the shiv between my ribs. I stop and look around, more for help than to confront those who would accost me. The one speaking continues.

“Sir.”

“What?” I manage, as I turn, wondering if a stab wound to the front of my abdomen would be more or less devastating than one to the back.

“Well, two things, actually,” comes the reply. “First, you dropped your wallet. Here. And, second, we're scouts looking for the all city meet tonight but we got lost. Can you tell us where Grace Methodist Church is?”

Tan uniforms. Colorful scarfs. Berets. Mountain boots. Painful death apparently averted.

* * *

Two things, actually.

First, I directed them to the church.

And second, I had the perfect ending for my story.

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STORY THIRTY
THE PATH OF LOST PLOTS
By Tom Gnagey
(It just might be true!)

I'm an old guy. I'm a writer guy. I'm a walker guy. I've made my way along essentially the same route every morning for the past twenty years. I think as I walk. I devise plots as I walk. I develop characters as I walk. There is a particularly pretty area along the path – bushes a yard or so back, with trees behind and low wild flowers up close. A scene as magnificent as that should present no problems, but, in fact, it does.

Frequently, my old gray head has some wonderful new story brewing as I approach that area, but the beauty of the foliage and the wonder at the tiny creatures scampering here and there beneath my feet work to clear my mind of such less important things as plots. For a man my age, Nature's plan seems to be, 'once gone, gone forever'. Sometimes, when I have something remarkable brewing inside my head I will pause before entering that little stretch of Eden and jot down the essentials on a small spiral pad I always carry. When I don't, well as I stated, once gone . . . It amuses me more than irritates me, I suppose – that not only do I forget the story ideas but that I, also, often forget to jot them down.

I have lovingly, and somewhat humorously, come to think of the area as, The Path of Lost Plots. In my own warped way that situation seems to provide a feeling of kinship – investment – between me and the path, me and the Earth. I figure the ether there is well populated by ideas I

have unwittingly let slip from my memory. I actually believe I can feel the considerable bulk they add to the very air as I pass through it. I invite them to return to me but they never seem to. I do hope it is not possible to overload the firmament, there.

Recently, that stretch has begun forcing a fully unfamiliar feeling of tension – anxiety even – as I pass along the path. It is as if some conflict has arisen – a conflict just out of my reach, out of sight and sound and full recognition. This morning – how can I describe the experience – it broke through, I suppose. At first, I figured the sound had its source in the breeze – it often plays among the branches and moans or cries or laughs as I pass that way. This, however, was different. It had a human-like quality – an intense, human-like quality as might accompany a crucial, earnest, life or death plea.

“Find me. Accept me. Take me. Save me. Help me. Complete me. Retrieve me.”

It was as if my own mind were running through – trying out – a litany of possibilities on its way to finding the perfect phrase for some specific spot in a sentence or paragraph or story. I felt more intrigued than frightened – perhaps not the most reasonable reaction when the air itself begins reaching out to you in words and emotions.

Presently, the spoken words were joined by images – just flashes, too rapid at first to be clear or complete. The first to come into focus and remain long enough for me to comprehend was a book cover – one I remembered envisioning there years before. It had several advantages over the one I had come to use. That original design had escaped my memory. There was also a sequence of pictures representing the bare bones of a children’s story I had contemplated but long forgotten. There was a vivid image of an injured old man and a boy, perhaps ten, bending over him in an isolated forest setting. I had, in fact, begun that book and as I recall it started with a well-crafted bang, but was soon going nowhere so I sat it aside. It clearly offered the most intense impact of all the images, that morning, in terms of attached emotions – unreasonable, uncertainty, and hurtful; there may even have been some inkling of revenge that

transcended its essence.

I couldn't put out of mind the distress on the old man's face and the terror in the eyes of the boy. It was as if I had set some terrifying event in motion but had failed to move it on to some positive resolution. The characters were stuck there with nowhere to go and no next step to take. All they could do was remain there, experiencing the worst sort of fear and pain – forever.

And, there was the boy in the hospital bed, strung with tubes and supported by oxygen, a respirator strapped across his chest. His parents stood by his bed, tears streaming down their faces, watching the monitors and the doctor as he shook his head. Had I condemned them to eternal anguish because I had shirked my duty and left the situation incomplete?

There were more – lots more. Some that I had apparently thought through rather completely were happy, like the little girl leaving her wheelchair and joining the other young ballerinas on stage, and the father who, after weeks of searching, found his son and daughter safe and sound in the wilds of a National Park. But most were just languishing there in eternity something short of resolution.

What had I done? What could I do? And if there were something I could do for them, what about those I was still unable to recall? My creative bent clearly came with responsibilities that went far beyond anything I had ever imagined. It suddenly seemed incontrovertible that incomplete ideas, once spun, take on lives of their own. I had to wonder if I were the first to understand that. Surely, if others had discovered it they would have alerted the rest of us. Or would they? Perhaps there would develop inescapable, debilitating guilt. Perhaps it explained why writers as a group take their own lives more often than other professionals.

Only one, clearly irrational, solution came to mind. I must finish those stories that I had abandoned either through choice or forgetfulness. I imagined I had left hundreds and hundreds of stories in the land of limbo along that path. I was old. Would I even have time to right my many misdeeds?

I hurried home and took what had usually been a very comfortable seat in front of my keyboard. There was no comfort that day – only anguish and an unquenchable urgency

to right the wrongs I had unintentionally inflicted. Would I live long enough? Where to begin?

One of the unfinished story ideas that immediately came to mind was about a teenage writer, with great skill and motivation but the plot had gone nowhere after establishing the personal characteristics and hopes and dreams of the young lady. I often began work on a story with a good deal less than that. I would define a character and place it in a setting, provide a problem to resolve and just let the story write itself. It is likely the manner in which that story had developed, such as it had or hadn't.

I wrote well into the night. The teen in that story emerged as a fine writer who very much enjoyed helping others complete stories that needed some expert assistance (I never interject my own needs, desires or imperatives into my pieces, you see!). She became very good at it. The process became her passion – all that mattered to her. When she found herself without a project she was bored, and sad, and life became unpleasant.

As I neared the end of the story, it hit me. I believed I had discovered the solution to all the horrific problems my inconsideration had caused for those characters and plots that now found themselves wandering aimlessly through a timeless – if confined – eternity. Before I created the final scene, before I formed the final, story sealing sentence, before I resolved the crucial issue, I printed out what I had and set it aside to await my ingenious follow-up the next morning.

At sunup, I left for my walk with the manuscript, such as it was, in a large, brown, envelope. Halfway through the most beautiful section of my path I stopped, placed the manuscript on the dew dampened grass, doused it with lighter fluid, and lit it on fire. I watched it into ashes and continued on my way.

The following morning I returned to the spot. Even before I reached it I sensed the difference – no more tension, no more anxiety, no more fear in the air. I was met by a chorus of joyful voices soaring on the breeze and a collage of smiling faces looking down on me from every leaf and every cloud. I could clearly see the teen writing. In a line, which extended for blocks behind her, were hundreds of my undeveloped characters and unfinished plots waiting patiently

for her to finish them. Life was suddenly good again on both sides of the veil, there on The Path of Lost Plots.

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STORY THIRTY-ONE
Long Suffering Paul
Tom Gnagey

One would not guess that young men named Paul and Zach would be twins. Nor would Paul's blond hair and blue eyes and Zach's black hair and brown eyes suggest a twinship. They were male. They were twenty-seven. They had the same set of parents. It was there the resemblance stopped. They didn't even share the same birthdate, Zach having arrived at 11:49 pm on the fifth and Paul at 12:01 am on the sixth.

Well before they started preschool it was obvious how different they were. Paul was quiet, contemplative, compassionate, and timid. Zach was rambunctious, apathetic, unpleasant, and mean spirited. Paul was eager to work for what he got and was proud of his achievements. Zach connived, deceived and even stole to get what he wanted. Paul was generous – perhaps to a fault. Zach was selfish and greedy and covetous.

Earlier that year when their parents met an untimely, early, death in an automobile accident the boys found the inheritance was substantial. There was a sizable outright amount plus a large yearly stipend from a trust fund. Paul was pleased he would receive half. Zach could only think about how to get his hands on all of it. The Will contained an unusual executor clause: The eldest surviving child had the right to apportion the inheritance among the surviving offspring according to their needs. It had been added to give Richard,

the level headed, first born by ten years, the right to protect any other children from Zach's predictable, unscrupulous disposition.

Unfortunately for Paul, Richard had died along with the parents leaving Zach as the eldest by twelve minutes. In the end, the rights to ninety-five percent of the money and holdings were gathered in by Zach. Paul contested, in court, how the matter had been handled, but the Judge said, that although it had been a despicable act, it had been Zach's legal right.

It was to have been expected, actually. As children, Zach would take what he wanted of Paul's possessions. When Paul would complain to his parents, the item, whatever it had been, would be found destroyed. Paul soon gave up on the little things, believing someday his time would come.

Paul was an Emergency Medical Technician and volunteered for ambulance runs into the most unsavory parts of the city – no one else would go, and he believed everybody deserved the best possible service in time of need. It was on one of those dangerous runs that his fortunes seemed to begin changing.

His team came up shorthanded one night, so Paul was obliged to handle the 'back' – the patient area behind the driver – by himself. It was the responsibility of those in the back to keep the patients stable, take vitals, and alert the emergency room about what to expect when they arrived.

His team was one of three that had responded to the bloody scene characterized by a series of shootings – perhaps gang related, although that information had not been available at the outset. The policeman on site directed Paul and his driver to the most seriously wounded – late thirties, several slugs to his upper abdomen, lots of blood loss.

Immediately upon securing the rear door the driver assumed his place and sped toward the hospital, siren screaming into the night. Clearly the man in Paul's care was near death. Paul arranged the IV and applied pressure bandages to slow the bleeding. He knew it would all be in vain, but made every possible effort to do what needed to be done.

The man opened his eyes and spoke in slow labored

phrases.

“My jacket. Lining. Cloth bag. Must get to Denzel Jackson. 2247 Sixth.”

He closed his eyes and died.

Paul wrestled with whether or not he should hand over the bag to the authorities or take care of the matter himself. By not refusing to help, he had, he figured, at least tacitly agreed to do what had been asked of him by the man who clearly knew he was dying.

On his next day off, Paul ventured back into the area of the gun battle – it had taken place in the 2000 block of Sixth Street. The short version of the search was that Denzel had also died in the shootout. Further information suggested that neither the man who died in the ambulance nor Denzel had any family. That posed a new quandary.

Back in his apartment, Paul placed the cloth bag in front of him on the kitchen table. He had not yet looked inside. Should he? After weighing the pros and cons he untied the drawstring and dumped the contents onto the table. It was, as he had suspected from the feel of the bag, jewelry. It appeared to be a matching set – diamond necklace, diamond earrings, diamond broach, and diamond ring. They could not be described as skimpy and, in fact, looked huge to Paul who, admittedly, was not really familiar with such things.

He returned them to the bag and placed the bag back under his mattress where it had resided since it had come into his protection the week before. They weren't his, of course. They had clearly been designated as belonging to Denzel. Denzel was dead. The diamonds were in Paul's possession. He had been designated as the rightful intermediary. Were they actually his, perhaps? It became his question with which to struggle.

He decided to research the possibility – likelihood – they had been stolen, so stopped by the precinct to talk with the desk Sergeant – the older brother of a friend from high school. It was a touchy subject to broach – so to speak – without spilling the beans. Paul had always been good with words and when younger had finessed himself out of many unpleasant situations into which Zach had mired them. Perhaps it was the one good thing that had come from his

relationship with his brother – developing that skill.

He had soon ascertained that the jewels in his possession had indeed been stolen, taken from an elderly woman on the Upper East Side. The description of the set left absolutely no doubt. On the way home, a plan began coming together in his mind. It gave him great joy and produced days of smiles and chuckles and even rose to the level of euphoria on occasions.

Paul invited Zach to his apartment on the pretense of needing to discuss family financial business. Chances were he would not have come had it been announced as merely family business but add the ‘financial’ and it was a lock big bro would show. Once Zach arrived, Paul laid out the quandary about the jewels that were in his possession. He didn’t show them or speak of how they had come into his possession – just asked for advice about how to proceed. Zach offered to take them to a fence he knew who would give them a fair price. Paul made it clear that was not the road he wanted to follow. His line was that he just wanted to make sure if he turned them into the police he wouldn’t be considered a suspect in their theft. Since Zach had far more experience dealing with the authorities, it should seem to be a legitimate inquiry. Zach left in a snit.

* * *

Paul parked his brand-new BMW in the private garage and rode the private elevator to his penthouse on the very private top floor. Several things had recently changed for the better in his life. Predictably, Zach had come back and taken the jewels from Paul’s apartment. Less predictably, perhaps, Paul had made an anonymous call to the police telling them where they could find the stolen merchandise if they acted quickly. Zach was found guilty and went to prison. That, according to another clause in the Will, made him forever ineligible to receive or control the inheritance. After a time, which Paul would eventually determine was sufficient to teach his brother a lesson – by any stretch of the imagination a doubtful outcome, of course – he would anonymously provide the real scoop on the theft to the police, Zach would be released and have to live on the pittance Paul, the new executor of the estate, would dole out.

Life was suddenly good – euphoric, even – for the newly independently wealthy EMT, permanently assigned, by choice, to the most unsavory portion of the city.

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STORY THIRTY-TWO
RESCUE
By Tom Gnagey

“Leave me alone, old man.”

“You’re shivering, kid.”

“So. Ain’t you ever shivered?”

The old man ignored the question, which had clearly been formulated by the kid to get the stranger out of his hair.

“You live on the street, kid?”

“You put your nose into everybody’s business or just kids who ain’t hurtin’ nobody?”

“I’m not your enemy, you know?”

“And how am I supposed to know that, old man?”

The old man grew silent sensing the truth in the kid’s question. He looked up and down the alley. The rear of two dozen old brick buildings adorned with rusting fire escapes met across the ancient, cobblestone pavement – as if in a century old standoff – looking somehow ashamed of the disagreeable scene over which they presided. Most of the old, grime covered, wood-frame windows had never been graced by a ray of sunshine – narrow as the alley was.

The old man pulled the collar of his long, dark coat tightly around his neck and took a seat, sliding his back down the dumpster which, sometime before, had become the kid’s back rest. He opened the shiny new suitcase he had been carrying and removed a dark blue, knee length, kid sized, wool coat – probably overly large for that winter but perhaps a good fit for the next. He laid it across the kid’s extended legs and

closed the suitcase, setting it aside. The kid's jeans were ripped and soiled and damp from the clammy surroundings.

"You some kind of do-gooder?" the kid asked, briefly surveying the old man's face for the first time.

"Would it matter if I was?"

The kid moved his legs as if he had been made uncomfortable by the unexpected question. He shrugged his scrawny, narrow shoulders, covered as they were by a flimsy, fall jacket, its collar secured tightly around his chin and pulled high against the back of his neck.

"I suppose you'd help out somebody who seemed to be in need if you could, right, kid?"

There was another quick glance up at the old man. His slight head movement suggested something akin to a nod. For whatever reason, it seemed to give him leave to slip into the heavy garment. It was quickly arranged beneath him and buttoned top to bottom up the front. He managed another nod. It meant thanks, words for some reason the kid couldn't or wouldn't bring himself to say.

"So, back to my original question – you live on the street?"

"If you gotta ask you're dumber than most old men I've met."

The old man stifled a smile. The lad had an intelligent way about him – evasive and cautious, but intelligent. Maybe street smarts. Maybe something more.

"A point well taken. Sorry. I didn't mean my question as any sort of put down."

There was a third glance – that time held for several moments. The kid was thinking but nothing spilled out across his tongue to indicate just what it might be. The old man was patient. He reached into his coat pocket and removed a small parcel wrapped in foil. He sat it in his lap but said nothing. Clearly it had caught the kid's attention.

"Smells like chicken – KFC maybe – from up on Jackson."

"Good nose," the old man said reaching down and peeling back the covering.

He slid his hand under the foil and lifted it in the kid's direction.

“I share – if that’s not a put down or meddling.”

There may have been the slightest break of a quick smile along one side of the kid’s mouth. He reached out and took a wing.

The old man acted uncomfortable.

“Wings are my favorite. Would you mind taking the breast instead?”

The exchange was made.

“I don’t get you, old man.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nobody in God’s whole universe prefers wings to breasts.”

It was the old man’s turn to shrug and ignore the comment. The kid thought he might have caught a brief twinkle in his eyes and allowed a legitimate smile about it – if only for a few seconds. Halfway through the piece of extra crispy, the kid was moved to initiate a piece of conversation.

“So, you live on the street, Old Man?”

The kid had skillfully turned the tables and his smirk suggested he knew it.

“Touché!” the old man offered. “You know the term – touché.”

“Just ‘cause I’m sittin’ in a alley shiverin’ don’t mean I’m stupid, old man.”

“It seems I am unable to say anything that meets with your approval, young man. Let me try again. What if I was living on the street?”

“I might know a place – a shelter that just had a opening – a druggie died in his sleep last night.”

“Oh,my! How terrible. I’m sorry.”

“No need to tell me you’re sorry. Didn’t know the guy. Just tellin’ you what’s what. I know how hard it is to get into a place outta the cold come winter.”

“I wouldn’t feel right taking the place if you need it.”

“Who said I need it? Anyway, a kid showin’ up askin’ for it would just stir up a whole hive of Social Welfare workers swarming all over him. No thanks to that!”

“I might be interested, then. Who runs the place?”

“Persnickety, are you?”

“Persnickety? That’s a word out of my generation.

“I know other old men. But, to answer your question, it’s run by Reverend Jimmy – the church on fifteenth and Adams.”

“Unitarian, I believe.”

“You know stuff.”

“I certainly hope so. I’ve been walking this earth for seventy years.”

“It wasn’t meant to be a put down – as somebody I recently met might say.”

The smile was clearly directed into the old man’s face. It was returned in kind.

“So, you want me to introduce you. I’ll vouch for you. You seem to be harmless and I see no evidence of drugs or booze – eyes clear and breath fresh. The city’s coming into a really cold spell during the next few weeks. Saw it on the weather channel – in the window at the TV repair shop down on fifteenth.”

“Your ‘vouch’ carries weight there, does it?”

The kid rolled his eyes at the old man as if to say, ‘Here we go again. Do you also carry seventy years’ worth of dumb questions with you?’

Words were not working very well for the old man so he stood and gave the kid a hand up. He noticed he had no supplies – not even a gunny sack. He had it stashed some place safe, no doubt. He was clearly a savvy youngster. They were soon headed down Adams. The shelter was in a once abandoned store front. Over the door, it said, ‘Happiness Lives Within’. The kid noted that the old man nodded his approval upon reading it.

“Reverend Jimmy. This is my new friend. Goes by O. M.”

The old man understood – O. M. for Old Man. It brought a smile and he placed his hand on the kid’s shoulder.

“O. M.’s a good guy. If you got work, he could sure use it. He’ll do right by you – no drugs, no booze, and a generous outlook on life.”

A look passed between the two men, sealed by a mutual nod.

Reverend Jimmy offered his hand.

“We actually have a new opening as of a few hours

ago. No waiting list here – strictly first come, first served. If the kid vouches for you, you're in. Follow the rules for a week and I think there may be a job if you're interested."

"Oh, yes sir, I'm interested."

During their conversation, the kid disappeared. Upon realizing it, the old man looked around and frowned. Reverend Jimmy noted his puzzlement.

"This was your very fortunate day, O. M. The kid – Jeffery Allen Wentworth the fourth, more officially – is always very careful about who he selects to bring us. You must have demonstrated some clearly sincere and compassionate gesture toward him. That's how he works. Been doing it ever since his mother died about a year ago. Several dozen have passed through our door due to his efforts.

He urged the old man toward the front window. The kid was ducking into the back of the longest limousine O. M. had ever seen. The dark blue, knee length, wool coat hung on a parking meter. Clearly it would need to find a new young occupant.